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CORVUS REVIEW

SPRING/SUMMER - 2023

Artist Bio (Cover Art)

Anthony Acri

Anthony Acri is a cartoonist, illustrator and a social critic, in the terms of Croce or Vidal, who lives in the suburbia of Pittsburgh Pa, with his sister and brother and are all that is left of a family of Italians who had coddled and both warned him of the quagmire that he was going to be dealing in and with as a boy.

Artist Bio (Within Our Pages)

Mamta Wathare Germany

Mamta Wathare is a writer, poet and visual artist. She is inspired by the subtle dimensions of life. As a poet and storyteller, she engages in the natural flow of creativity where the process allows her to look beyond pain and struggle. Abstract art for her is the space where even poetry cannot reach. She enjoys observing the geometry that forms around and understands deeply how it flows. Her interest is in creating hybrid forms using haiku as a tool, working with mixed media, charcoal and digital mediums. Mamta is a cross between several spiritual traditions and it reflects in her words and art. Instagram - @sufimysticart

Words published - Jade Plant Project, Huffington Post India, Femina India, Allpoetry.com and others

Art collection titled Tribe available at G Art Gallery

Editor

Janine Mercer is a magpie, editor, and enthusiastic weirdo who delights in bringing other weirdoes together within the pages of Corvus Review. A Canadian expat, Janine currently resides in Milwaukee, WI. Janine's work has appeared in Sinister Wisdom, Satan Speaks, and The Quint. The ODDentity Podcast, one of many weird passion projects, can be found here (or wherever you binge): <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-oddentiy-podcast/id1229525500>

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DEDICATION

Shabreka Chapman, a member of our flock, tragically lost her life on February 11th, 2023. She was 35 years old. Sincere condolence to all who knew and loved her. Her lyrical writing voice, contagious smile, and warmth will be sorely missed. Shabreka's work was featured in the very first issue of our journal.

Fly high, Magpie.



Special Feature

The Hero Complex

Taylor Thomas

Trauma had an interesting impact on myself and my family. You either became 1) an angry, bitter person, 2) a doormat, or 3) the hero. In my family, however, the hero is very closely related to the doormat: both strive to please others. The difference is that the doormat often passively gives in to other's demands. They are often taken from. They don't complain or speak up but see themselves as victims. The hero on the other hand is too busy saving, enabling, and giving to others to see themselves as a victim. Both, however, are operating from the same umbrella: people pleasing. Both ignoring their own needs for the sake of others. Both feeling stuck in the roles that they created to protect themselves from the trauma of their childhood.

Assuming the role of hero was a seamless and quick process for me. My mother worked endless hours or slept the day away, rarely having time for us. The chain of command should have fallen to Paul, 10 years older than me, but he lacked patience, care, and most of all, popularity amongst the siblings. In a word, Paul was mean. I do not remember him smiling much; instead, he always looked as if he smelled something unpleasant in the room. Next in line was Adam, 9 years older than me and 1 year younger than Paul. Adam was a favorite among us younger kids because he was silly. He smiled often and laughed even more. His laugh was loud and absolutely ridiculous - causing you to want to join in his laughter - and he regularly played silly games usually involving endless tickles. Unfortunately, there was a dark side to Adam, a sadness he attempted to hide, and he spent more time with drugs, alcohol, and anywhere that wasn't home. Lastly, there was Amanda, the first girl and 7 years older than me. She hated having younger sisters following her around. She openly whined about us tagging along to any social events and having to share a room with children (girls in one room, boys in the other). Mostly, Amanda was very self-involved and hated anyone else getting attention. Each of my older siblings lacked the patience necessary to be the hero and so I assumed the role.

As the hero, I took care of everyone: I mediated arguments, comforted during high stress times, provided money to help pay bills. When Amanda became seriously interested in boys, I was the person she told about kissing and all the intricate details of your first time getting felt up. When our mother had her heartbroken by yet another man, she often told me of her troubles. When Paul was in a bad mood, I kept the younger kids away, making sure he was left alone and unbothered. "Taylor's so smart," my grandmother would say. "Taylor's so mature," my mother would say. "Taylor's the good child," our babysitters would say. Taylor just loved to feel useful.

My first taste of freedom came when I went away to college. Although I picked a school only a few minutes away from our place, I rarely came home. I loved the idea that I could be anyone and anything I wanted to other college students. Most of all I loved only being responsible for myself. While I was away, the role of hero remained empty. Paul moved back home after a stint as a Marine, suddenly angrier and meaner than he was before, and my mother continued working and sleeping most of the days away. That empty role meant that I left my 3

younger siblings, Rachel (1 year younger than me), Rebekah (8 years younger), and Solomon (9 years younger) to fend for themselves.

It's important to note that Paul, while usually unpleasant to be around, seemed to be particularly cruel to Solomon (despite the 19-year age gap). After coming home from the Marines and moving back home with us, Paul made it his personal mission to torture and pick on Solomon. He would make comments, telling Solomon he was "ugly" or "gay". He would glare at Solomon openly. He would also yell, but he did not reserve that for just Solomon - no, Paul yelled at all of us, my mother included. And yet, he was allowed to continue living with us. For some reason the matriarchs of my family (my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt) had a soft spot for Paul. He was the child who would hurt others and it had to be forgiven or forgotten. Despite the fact that all of my mother's children had experienced trauma of some kind, Paul's was considered far worse than any of us could understand and we had to remain silent. When I left for college, Paul's aggression became unchecked.

One weekend - or maybe it was summer break, I can't remember fully - I was home from school. Still riding the "angsty teen" high that is young adulthood, I mostly stayed in my room. When Paul moved in, my room became my permanent sanctuary. That particular day I woke up to the sound of Paul yelling. Because he was prone to bouts of yelling almost daily, my initial reaction was to ignore it. I rolled over in my bed and attempted to fall back asleep. After a few minutes with my eyes scrunched closed and my hands over my ears, I thought I heard the soft sound of someone crying. It was soft, and very quiet, but I heard it.

I opened my bedroom door and found Paul, inches from Solomon's face, screaming, as my little brother cried and stared at the floor. "That's why your dad left you! Where is he, Solomon? Where is he?" The cruelty and anger were so palpable as if those feelings had grown hands and were wrapping themselves around me to hurt me as well. I stared, frozen, in shock at the scene before me. Then came the rush of questions: How long had Paul been yelling at him that day? How many times had my little brother found himself on the receiving end of Paul's uncontrollable rages? Why hadn't my mother noticed? Why hadn't anyone stopped this?

At some point, and I can't remember when, I gathered my Solomon into my arms, and turned to face my older brother.

"Don't you dare yell at my brother like that!" I said. Paul sneered, but I could see through him - he was both shocked and fearful that I had intervened at all.

"Oh," he scoffed. "Am I not your brother now?"

I wish I could say I responded that day - an endless stream of profanities, a reminder of his place far beneath me, anything - but I didn't. A white man 10 years older than me, and who had just a few years before called me a nigger to my face, was screaming and I was in flight mode. My body was doing all it could to keep me upright and strong, but it needed me to leave. I grabbed Solomon's small hand, helped him gather his shoes, and held his head against my shoulder as we walked out that door. Paul didn't even attempt to come after us, apparently satisfied with scaring us out of the house. I murmured sweet words of nothing to Solomon as we walked to the safety of my older sister's house. Things like, "Don't listen to anything that he says!" and "You are

loved.” But all my little brother could do was look up at me with tear-filled eyes and ask, “Why does he hate me? Why doesn’t my dad want me?”

Where had I been? What had I been doing with my life during college that I had not seen the kind of pain my little brother was enduring in my absence? Where was my mother? Why was she, yet again, protecting the older son who, yet again, was hurting one of the younger children? I could sit there and blame her, and even Paul himself, but I knew who I was truly angry at. The hero had messed up. The hero had failed. The hero didn’t save Solomon.

I spend a ridiculous amount of my adulthood attempting to make up for my failures as the hero of the family: the times I wasn’t there and the times I didn’t notice something was wrong. It circles in my brain like a noose, holding me to a past I cannot change. Although Paul never had a chance to yell at Solomon that way again, this particular day has weighed heavily on me. If anything, it reinforced the idea that my role as hero was needed, necessary, and required.

That, ultimately, is the burden of the hero: the people we couldn’t save stay memorialized in our minds.



A Faraway Realm - Mamta Wathare

The Simmered Sea
Daniel Moreschi

Although the sea is pulled by lunar reins,
Its servile ebbs conceal the subtle strides
Of a fateful force, once nature's patience wanes,
That tests its tether with unruly tides.

Where frozen hills are stoked by metal fumes,
It brings a rhythmic ruse of turbulent grace,
As thriving swirls are topped by sprightly spumes
That lead a charge, when growing flows retrace.

And while humanity ignores the signs
Of ominous plights, as billows belch and roar,
A steep caress erodes the coastal lines
And razes borders, like a siege of war.

Uprisings of tsunamis stirs the straits
Once swells attain the sways of ancient scales
And wayward spans cascade at mankind's gates
Where a ceaseless song of simmered spite prevails.

When swept-up crowds are pleading for an ark
And lands are swallowed by the famished surge,
The moonlit sanctuaries turn to dark
To undulate the chains of Gaia's purge.

Trick the Trickster
Manaly Talukdar

My hands itched to strangle the illusionist. Adi tugged my hand with his cotton candy glued fingers toward the marquee; a roar of applause penetrated from its confinements. The last stop of the carnival— the center of attraction. The scrawny man bathed in spotlight, adorned in a ridiculous purple and gold three-piece suit with a bow-tie strapped on his collar absorbed the crowd's fascination. A trickster who passion-ed for money via abuse— animal abuse. Levitation of light-weight mortals, card revelations through psychic powers, and vanishing inanimate objects in thin air couldn't satiate his show, for which he strung along doves to conclude his sophisticated performance. He imprisoned four of them, flung them out from the small compartments sewed in his jacket; romped them like lifeless toys. Without a second for them to breathe the free air, the magician shoved the feathery beings in an elongated umbrella silver-wired cage.

"And now ladies and gentlemen ... the final act!" The performer announced. He clasped the last dove from the flock and, in a twist of his wrist, made it disappear. The mechanism behind this disappearance included snapping the bird inside a palm-sized cell knotted with an elastic band to catapult the poor creature within the inner lining of his arm-length sleeve. My nephew clapped and cheered along with the audience when the show simmered to an end. The illusionist gloated in success; a smirk flashed across his face.

"Pretty cool, huh?" A compliment from the eight-year-old. I feigned a smile. The gratified crowd scattered; chatters of their reviews faded when a majority walked out of the tent.

"Let's play a trick of our own" I winked at Adi. A mix of hype and curiosity sparked his nerves after my whispers of an instructed ploy reached his ears.

The illusionist zipped the bags, clicked the locks of some boxes; all stored in one corner— stacked one atop another— the tiny prison planted on the ground next to the tower of his belongings. While the magician spared his full attention on the packing process, Adi scurried in his direction, smearing a fistful of sweat-drenched cotton candy on his tacky jacket. In those handful seconds of distraction, I grabbed the cage and bolted for the exit.

"Good luck getting rid of that stain, sucker!" He yelled whilst following my lead.

Covering a good distance away from the illusionist, we hid behind a shack hosting the Balloon Pop game.

"Are we going to keep it?" Adi asked, hope glinted in his almond eyes.

"Something better" I grabbed my Swiss knife, slid out the scissor tool from its collection and cut off the wired rims of the dome. The doves fluttered away in the wind— a sweet escape.

"But ..." My nephew pouted, perplexed and disappointed.

"Birds should never be caged, Adi." I reasoned, "Look at the bright side, now they are free."

"Fine. Let's play Balloon Pop!" He beamed.

The Tale of the Oblivious City Comptroller Harry Leeds

Once upon a time, in a bustling city, there lived a comptroller who was so wrapped up in his work that he was completely oblivious to the world around him. He spent all day, every day, buried in his ledger, making sure that every penny was accounted for.

As the years passed, the comptroller grew more and more obsessed with his work. He rarely left his office and never took a day off. The people in the city began to whisper that he was a magician, because he seemed to have the ability to make money appear out of thin air.

One day, a group of thieves broke into the comptroller's office and stole all of the city's money. The comptroller was so focused on his ledger that he didn't even notice the thieves had come and gone until it was too late.

The people of the city were furious. They marched to the comptroller's office and demanded that he do something about the theft. But the comptroller was at a loss. He had no idea where to begin.

Just when all hope seemed lost, a group of fairies appeared and offered to help. They told the comptroller that they had special powers and could track down the thieves and retrieve the stolen money.

The comptroller was skeptical, but he was desperate, so he agreed to let the fairies help. And sure enough, they were able to use their magic to locate the thieves and bring back all of the stolen money.

The people of the city were overjoyed and the comptroller was hailed as a hero. From that day on, he made sure to take breaks from his work and appreciate the world around him. And he lived happily ever after.

Dr. No
Mary Grimm

During those ten days before his death the only person he spoke to was the mailman, who came always just after 3:30 pm. The mailman was in fact a woman and she always said hello, although once good morning instead, as if she was unstuck in time. She reminded him of his sister who moved to California years ago. She had written twice, but he hadn't gotten around to answering, and she stopped. In her last letter she said she'd found a job taking care of a movie star's dogs. "I won't tell you who," she wrote, "because I signed a confidentiality agreement. Although maybe I'll tell you some day."

Now, in the ten days of his despair, he wondered who it had been. Was his sister still alive? Was she still walking the aging dogs of an aging movie star? Was it dramatic to call what he was undergoing despair? He said to the woman who brought the mail that he was hoping for a letter from his sister, just to make conversation, and she said she hoped it came soon.

For a minute, he almost believed it would, almost believed that his sister would have written, maybe only a postcard with the name of the movie star written on it in her loopy handwriting with three exclamation points and a few five-pointed stars, and that it was coming toward him now, shuffled in mail bags, on trucks, on planes, aiming toward its place in the leather bag of the woman who brought the mail. I'm sure it will, he said, and as he said it the despair (or whatever it was) took a hold of him cruelly, and he felt its nails dig deep into his heart.

Immersive Van Gogh
Thomas Piekarski

1.

Beside the busy boulevard, heavy traffic belching,
in a repurposed warehouse the Van Gogh exhibit
draws people from all walks: the debutant, Gen Z,
art buff, dressed in everything tie-dye to swell suit.

The whole side of the building adorned
with scenes from Vincent's greatest hits,
and parking plentiful. Outside it's calm,
no wind, no rain, a simple world at peace.

Yet much of society exists in a dreadful foil
of disorientation, scandal, seditious rebellion,
prurience, ludicrous divination, and ideology
impossible to comprehend much less accept.

Many dejected souls whose sins are scant suffer
consequences of forces whirling invisibly around
that incarcerate them in psychological ruin unless
dispossessed of spells carried over from ancestors.

The attendant woe, anguish and dolor
can get to people, make them defeatist,
so they shell out hard-earned cash here
for a chance to subvert life's charades.

They're willing to make an effort to actualize
structural change, both ethereal and molecular,
adrift in a state of near disembodiment effected
by impulses of a unique sensory extravaganza.

They must blunt the disorder so relish this place
where surrounding walls become giant canvases
with projected mural-size iterations of Vincent's
delirium, atomic outbursts, color phantasmagory.

2.

This isn't a time to feel comfortable in one's skin
like being liberated from original sin, preferably

prepared to be transmogrified by classical music
and an enveloping, almost psychedelic spectacle.

Visitors sit silent in sheer blackness only lit
by images that emerge, filling the huge walls
and entire floor. There before astonished eyes
the mad genius in all his misery and splendor.

They gawk, gaze, ooh, ahh, swoon and gulp
as his paintings are displayed sequentially,
some of them still, others in flowing motion,
transparent dream streams remarkably alive.

For Van Gogh ideas became appendages
of the body, flesh prevailing over spirit:
we watch ominous crows he produced
wing, crows that would prove a vexation.

Among those who shun linear painting
Vincent is all but immortal. His portrait
reveals uncanny intuition, the ear gone,
smoking a pipe on exhibition hall walls.

In the course of soul's incubation, befuddlement,
pent up energy, repressed absolution, obsession,
ostensible insanity, sexual depravity and remorse
Vincent produced such improbable masterpieces.

As is only normal in much unsettled times when
the supernatural has about vanished from psyches
some distant undefined source makes a loud call
for Vincent to surge forth and lead us once again.

3.

Kudos to capitalism and advanced technology
for bringing us this fine visitation. The nation
happily welcomes these exhibits in many a city,
little kids included and for a reduced admission.

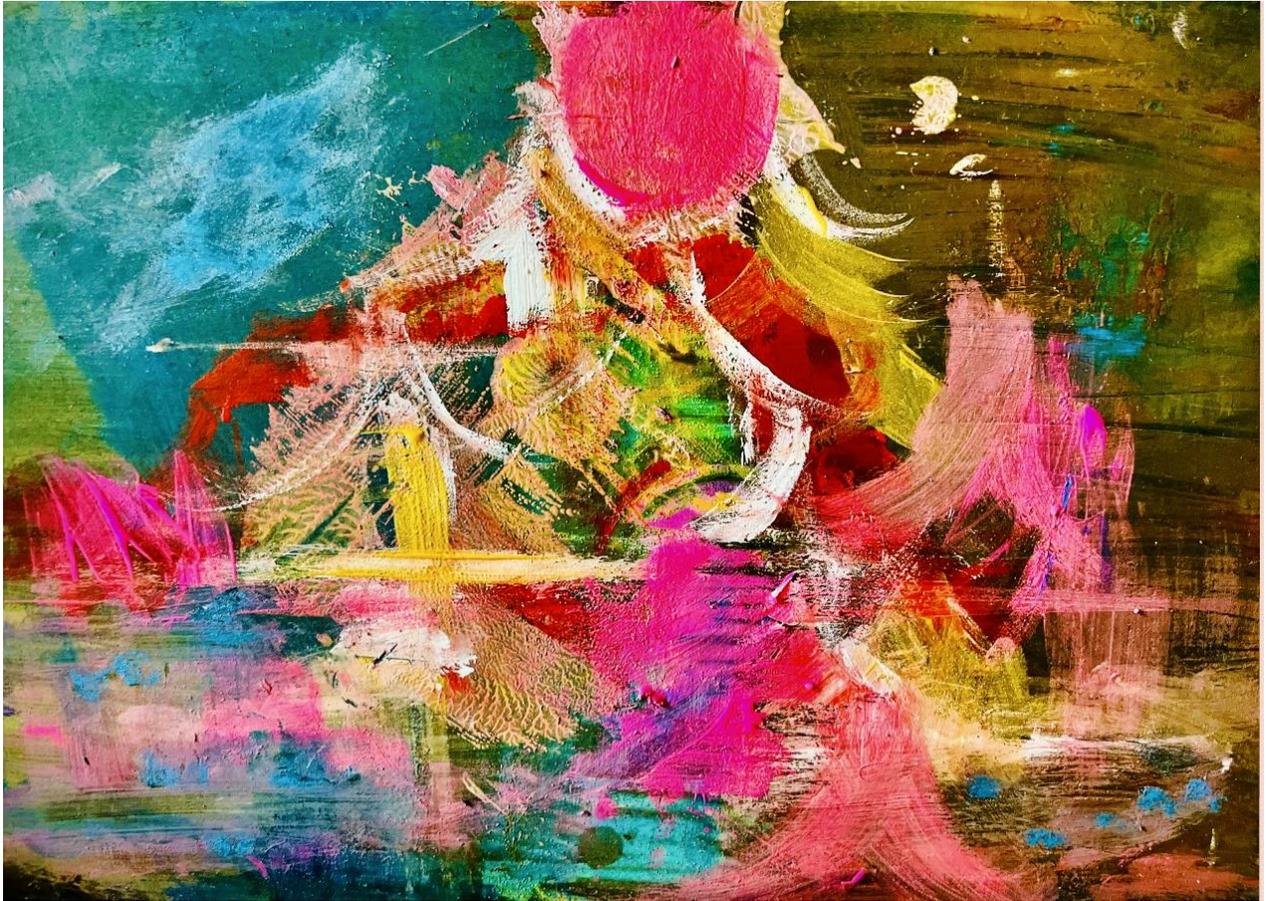
From the depths of his naked eye did Vincent
commit himself to a lofty nature psychiatrists
will never fathom, so was branded incurable,
confined to an asylum with storied Dr. Gachet.

That doctor. What a quack! Gachet, Cerberus
in a starched shirt, unseemly parasite, wanted
Vincent to stick strictly to painting and ignore
those demons dragging him through infernos.
The man who took his life with trembling hand
on that gloomy day at Auvers-sur-Oise planted
a bullet in his gut overcome with darkness which
emancipated light as The Starry Night beacons.

Now from beyond creation, no longer astral,
his sunflowers surge back through invading
discharges of fissured matter. Symbolically
this may signify both death and awakening.

The slick who divide continue their foul work.
They adroitly rob us of health and profit, spin
disgust for what's good and disdain of wisdom.
Those are the miscreants from whom we flee.

Here we're ferried to freedom through brilliant
illumination, superior lucidity, totally harmless,
modeled, built, painted, sculpted, poetic, prone
to athletic chants, immersed in a new calculus.



Dream Catcher-Mamta Wathare

Meet Me in the Night
Allyson Hubbard

Meet me in the night when the thin veil that separates our worlds softly slips away and our souls connect. Meet me in the night, in the in-between. I will wait for the quiet, for the noise of the day to fade away, for darkness to fall. I lie perfectly still waiting for the weightlessness and then the vibration as our souls collide. We will play and dance and whisper our stories to one another while not speaking a word.

We have met in the night...in the perfect in-between.

Ragtime Blues
John Dorroh

You broke Scott Joplin's bed!
Shame on you for doing what it took
to pull that headboard away from the box springs
and crack two of the legs, one of them in half.

This was before Gorilla glue,
after the great sexual liberation
when our parents kept asking when morals completely disappeared, flew out the window.

You had a plan. You always
have some facsimile of a plan, to fix
broken things. Arms & legs are easy to repair:
wrap tightly at correct angles, apply pressure.

Broken hearts and homes, more
difficult. Who believes you anyway?
Think of all the pieces of the musical puzzle
that don't fit, the part where you had to tell your lover
you've changed your mind.

Fishmonger
Jordan Johnston

“Mama, they tell me I should be a fishmonger.”

Not the job she might have hoped for her boy, now teetering through the final throes of childhood. Nonetheless, she decides to listen, as she always does.

“The word makes me think of Nordic docks and markets, bustling even in early morning. Except you can’t tell its morning, because the sky is grey and hides the sun.”

She commends his ponderings despite her doubts that the world he imagines remains. Untouched villages on fragmented coastlines.

“Men call out in loud voices as ships come in and out. They use slang I don’t understand, and tie ropes in knots I could only undo with a knife.”

With time, he could learn the slang, learn the winding intricacies of every knot. She taught him to tie his shoes, after all.

“But could I ever learn to undo them?”

A knife would work just as well, even if he has not quite yet earned her trust to chop up the dinner vegetables.

“And I’m left with the hacked-up remains of a once-whole rope.”

She recommends he concentrate on the fish. How important could rope be?

“I suppose. You know, fishmonger is a beautiful word that should be ugly.”

The sounds of words are not something she often has much time to consider. She thinks. No, neither fish nor monger particularly appeal to her ears.

“But if you put them together...”

Both her father and mother were very beautiful people in their day.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Difficult to explain to an adored and gorgeous child that beauty does not always come when expected, as her parents found out. Sometimes these things skip a generation, even if he graciously disagrees. His compliment somehow makes his encroaching adolescence feel further away.

“I think the men on the docks might not like you calling a boy beautiful, though.”

There had to be a beautiful fishmonger somewhere in the world. And besides, handsome and beautiful were two sides of the same coin.

“I don’t know if they are. A handsome woman and a beautiful man aren’t the same thing, for some people. And I will be a beautiful man.”

Perhaps adolescence has arrived, after all. When did his father’s voice start to break? She pokes ever so gently at the bluster.

“I don’t mean it like that. I just mean... I’ll never look like a fishmonger.”

What does a fishmonger look like?

“Weathered. Like a sailor. Like he’s spent his whole life under the sun.”

She reminds him that fishmongers sell the fish, that they don’t necessarily catch them. Hard to see a good fishmonger standing with their fish under direct sunlight for long.

“I know! Maybe he stands out in the sun to bring people off the street into the shop.”
Weren’t these Nordic docks cloudy?

“Well, the sun comes out sometimes. You probably have to wear a gory apron. You smell of fish all the time. You stop caring what other people think of you, because they’ll always be disgusted, because you’ll always smell of fish. You’ll try to wash the stench off every night for a while, but it’ll linger in your hair, under your nails. Eventually you’ll give up.”

That’s no way to go about life. She worries that his instinct is to give up when things are hard, because few things have been so far. It is uncomfortable to both hope and fear that changes.

He must take pride in whatever work he does.

“Even slicing open fish and selling them?”

No, it’s not being a playwright or composer (he never gave her a second to hope he would become a doctor or lawyer, and she is grateful for that). But people like fish. They nourish. They taste good.

“They smell terrible.”

He smelled terrible, not that long ago.

“And they look terrible, dead and splayed out.”

What wouldn’t, in that state?

“Mama?”

She is still Mama, for this moment.

“I’m terrified of fish.”

When they’re dead? He’s never been good with blood and gore.

“Always. Whenever you can see their eyes. There can’t be any soul inside. Flat and lonely. No joy, no hate, nothing. I couldn’t stare into their eyes all day.”

He wouldn’t have to. He can avoid the eyes, surely, forever.

“I know I would, though. I wouldn’t be able to resist. When things really scare you, you have to look at them.”

He doesn’t have to be a fishmonger.

“But that was my number one choice. It said number one, fishmonger. Number two, museum curator. Number three, attendant in an old folks’ home. They think I should deal with things that are cold and old and dead.”

She thinks of herself, someday. Old folks aren’t cold and dead.

“You know what I mean. I don’t want to be any of those things.”

He doesn’t have to be.

“You’re just saying that. I know I can’t be whatever I want. I know that was never true.”

Maybe, but he can still be many things. He doesn’t have to be a fishmonger. He doesn’t have to wear the gory apron.

“If I have to work somewhere, I’d rather work in a forest. Or in a very tall building with a view. Maybe a view of the docks, and markets. And the fishmongers.”

Her children’s dreams always sound lovely.

“And whenever I get tired of what I do, I’ll look out the window and think, at least I’m not a fishmonger. Even though maybe you could live a good life as a fishmonger.”

Maybe her beautiful boy could live a beautiful life as a fishmonger.

“I might even eat fish sometimes.”

He’ll have to for a while longer.

“We’re having fish tonight, aren’t we?”

She loves seafood. She bought the salmon that morning.

“From a fishmonger?”

Just the supermarket, where they always go.



neverwell

Darren C. Demaree

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All That Remains
Miles Varana

Do you ever worry you have too many plastic bags? You know what I'm talking about. The twisted polyethylene mass that grows, as we speak, under the kitchen sink, in the nook where you once kept that fabulous gravity bong. You've got quite the collection: Wal-Mart, GameStop, 7-Eleven, Panda Express, Jamba Juice. The bags are like the people from your hometown: thick, white, and transparent in key places. But unlike the people from your hometown, it hasn't been ten years since you last saw the bags. No. You see the bags every damn day. They're waiting for you every time you reach for dish soap, or Windex, or toilet bowl cleaner. And every time you come home to reluctantly make an addition to their ranks, the bags rustle in fervent, mocking excitement, as if aware that they will someday break from their lives of bondage in the cabinet to reach the promised land; broad, uncolonized, cigarette-reeking carpet. You can see it now. You'll get up for work and wade, bags up to your chest, to the door. It'll be fun, like living in the ball pit of a McDonald's PlayPlace.

You kept the bags because you always figured that you would need them to pick up dog shit, if you ever got a dog. Five lease terms, two jobs and three girlfriends later, there's still no dog.

How can you use them? What goes into a plastic shopping bag after it's emptied of the purchase that first necessitated its use? Trash? Too small. Loan statements? Only if Biden changes his name to Warren. Memories of Girlfriend Number Three? You already have a spot for those—the liquor cabinet.

What do other people put in their bags? What storage requirements do they have that you don't?

One night, as you lay in fidgety pursuit of sleep, you find yourself unable to stop thinking about them. Instead of sheep, your tortured mind counts bags, leaping gracefully one-by-one over a sagging barnyard fence. At midnight, when streams of warm air begin to ebb and flow from the vent under the cabinet, you're convinced you can hear the bags stir, as if aroused by the latticework touch of the heating system. You imagine them inflating with hot air and taking furtive flight, like electric jellyfish in a wine dark, not-so-distant sea. In sleep-deprived delirium you drift over to the bedroom window and gaze out at the streets of Anaheim. Empty red light intersections and Don't Walk signs flashing like dog's teeth. Hell-palms, swaying in the breeze. Why, oh why did you ever leave Canada for this?

They certainly won't go away on their own; plastic bags, you've heard, can live up to a thousand years in the wild, and probably even longer in captivity.

Maybe your neighbor, Mrs. Vladislava, will take them off your hands. You knock on her door. Too many bags! She exclaims. Do you know how many bags I had when I came to this country? Zero. I was bag-less! You attempt to protest. Look, Mrs. Vadislava... She cuts you off, her voice thick with a finality only widows and generals can muster. Young man, young man, I will not hear of it. Keep your bags. You never know when you will need them, especially at your age.

If she won't take them, perhaps the homeless, who you've noticed possess an abiding fondness for receptacles of all kinds, will. Better yet, you could take them for a scenic country drive in your Toyota Corolla and then abandon them on the side of the highway. This might be

the most humane way; the bags could catch a westward zephyr and make their way by drainage ditch and tributary to join their brethren in the Pacific.

True satisfaction, however, requires violent disposal. You could tie them to railroad tracks, drop them into a missile silo, or fill them up with someone else's dog's shit and light them on fire on Girlfriend Number Three's new boyfriend's front porch. These are all good options, but you know you'll never get the bags out the front door. There's nothing to carry them with.



Holy Spirit-Mamta Wathare

Postcards
Robert Nisbet

Three of them, in the beach shop,
in the queue for postcards. They disperse.

Meg writes to Mark over cappuccino steam,
loves it in Conti's as she loves the beach, the town.
Wish you were here? In the week's cocoon,
with three bright punchy girl friends in the gang,
she's glad he isn't there. They've tiddled,
chattered, done little wrong, but they've hinted,
oh boy they've hinted, with smirk and innuendo,
with waiters, wide boys and attendants all,
at a huge debauch. How dry it is to have
a treasurer husband. How sweet the sun, the days.

Vicky is in her B&B, writing her card
in peace and rumination. Jeremy is a scholar,
his antennae so vividly attuned
to the unseemly in the written word.
Yet she almost loves him and has sensed
some crumbling of the dry façade.
He'll warm, she thinks, but is she sure herself
about this curious man? Just now she thinks,
"Keep options, girl. Bohemian but placid."
"With love" to end is definitely out.
She'll sign off, "Cordially, V."

Aunt Grace is over eighty now, alone,
but still in her very comfortable home.
Ben's card exudes attentive-nephew.
He'll stress the week's benign enjoyments,
his one trip back to Cardiff to the opera,
pressing his charm into the card's enclosure
in his tiny, lovely script. Signing,
Your affectionate nephew, Benjamin.

The cards arrive in home and street and university.
Aunt Grace thinks once again, Oh no, my boy,

soft-soap somebody else. Mark reads Meg's card,
just registers, Enjoyed herself, that's fine.
And Jeremy, dabbing a speck of refectory toast
with a crisp white napkin, is quite pleased
with the charming card from little V.

An Altered View
Robbin Farr

It's not quite a first date, and that's okay because I am too old for first dates anyway. We are in his hotel room, one of those Ivy League clubs for alum visiting the city. It is winter and the heat is hissing from the vent by the window overlooking West 44th Street. The room is pleasant and smells like soap. He is staying there for a conference, and I took the Amtrak to meet him because it is better than dating in my small-town hometown where there is not a man I would consider as they either look like my ex-husband or are related to him. We've had a few glasses of wine and rather abruptly, he is about to kiss me. I manage to toss my glasses to the side which is awkward since we are somehow suddenly lying face to face on the bed. My one arm is pinned down under my own weight because it has been so long since I've been in a position like this, kissing drunkenly, and I don't remember what to do with the downward arm. Then, considering the surprising up-close intimacy, I wonder, "Is he nearsighted or farsighted?" If he is nearsighted and his eyes are open, from this proximity I'm certain he notices that I didn't pluck my eyebrows evenly or maybe missed some of the upper lip hairs that have now decided to sprout there instead of a more convenient place like my leg where I can actually see them and remove them even though I don't wear my glasses in the shower because they fog, and I am farsighted. Regardless, because of my hyperopia, when I peek from about an inch away, he looks absolutely thirty, and I feel a whole lot younger, well, than I am.

Everything is fine until we sit up again, and I am groping for my glasses. He is sitting on them, and though we laugh, it's not as funny from my unfocused perspective. I still have to read the train schedule which is prepared for people with perfect vision (for example, those young enough for first dates) or those with nearsightedness. Though altered vision definitely has its aforementioned disadvantages, it is now distinctly an advantage because my glasses are crushed, and without my usual clarity of vision, I am experiencing these hours through the quixotic perspective of a soft -focus lens.

And although this is decidedly not as youthful as most first dates, I am heartened to tell you, there is nothing quite so romantic, at any age, as kissing in the back seat of a taxi that is zipping through late night New York City haze and sirens to deliver us to the train station where I will depart for my small town after he deciphers the train schedule and kisses me one more time. It's then I notice, thank heavens, he kisses with his eyes closed.

Moon
Amber Burke

As a child, you longed to be an astronaut. The stars were every dime you ever threw into a well. Winters, you used to like to lie back in the snow, to look up, your powdery breath floating above you, until the happy churn of wheels on pebbles meant your father was home.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asked, one evening, shutting the door to his truck.

You were cold, but your warm house was lit up behind you, and you could go in anytime, and that made you less cold. So, you said, “No.”

Your dad lay down beside you. You were glad he was beside you, though he didn’t know how to hold still. He made a snow angel. Then you made a snow angel. You remember the scuffing sound of your arms and your legs, and his arms and his legs, as you made snow angels together, under the dark before-dinner sky.

You are on your way to the moon alone. You are being cannonballed up in a rocket. Earth makes it hard to leave. It pulls. Your narrow ship pushes. You feel the throttle in your teeth. When the push stops and you start floating, you look out the porthole. You feel acutely how thin the metal is between you and unbreathable space.

You feel as though you are falling. You were never afraid of falling, but now there are so many ways of falling, and what used to mark north doesn’t mark anything at all. North slid out from under you on your way up.

You try not to be afraid, since Earth knows your heartbeat. How much you breathe. How much you sweat. How much you blink. You try to blink methodically. You look at the blinking numbers; you press buttons. You are careful. You press all the right buttons. You are a good astronaut.

You land where you are supposed to land. You land and you slide down the chute. You are standing on the glowing surface of the moon, where you will live from now on. Here, the horizon curves under a sky like magnetite: glittering, and low enough to scrape.

Your friend’s voice is in your helmet. He is on earth. He welcomes you to your new home. You notice that he sounds like your father. During the years you practiced walking in your spacesuit through deserts and flying still ships, you didn’t notice this. But now his voice is stretched and chipped by distance: it has become a thin voice that cracks. It has become your father’s.

You get to work. You check the checklist on your wrist. You take photographs of each mountain. You put rocks in bags with your thick fingers. You pick up pebbles that weigh nothing. You can’t feel them through your gloves. You have to look at your hand or you don’t know what you have in it. You think you might have nothing.

Rocks, rocks, rocks: you are up here with all these glowing things, spinning away from you. The planets hang, sanded spherical, moving like mobiles, each heaving into the silence a noise too large to hear. A noise that surely you could hear if you had your ear the right distance from the whole planet.

You trot a slow low gravity trot, you glance your hand through the black, feeling for strings, the ones by which celestial bodies hang. Or to feel for the thickness that supports them, turns them, and slows down their light. There must be something that slows the light, swaddles it, or all space would be aglow with the gold of suns upon suns, not just punctured with pinpricks of light.

There must be something holding you up: you feel like collapsing, but you don't collapse. How nice it would be to lie down right here, in the cradle of this dry sea.

The surface of the moon feels like snow under your boots. You can feel a screeching that reminds you of chalk on a blackboard, or the bone-deep pain of cotton balls between your fingers.

You notice footprints. Bigger than yours. Footprints that are older than you. You watch your step. You step over metal junk, the suicidal machines that did their jobs and then crashed. You skirt their divots. You remember when you thought for every crater there had to be an asteroid somewhere; you remember when you didn't know that the asteroid became the crater.

Night here: one big shadow. The voice in your helmet tells you enough rocks are in bags; it's time for bed. Your father's voice, and the way the valleys sweep, as if smoothed into place by long arms--

You look back at your module. A disappointment. It looks like you made it by yourself out of foil. You did not go far. The map your footsteps make on top of the map of the moon goes loop-de-loop, it coils back on itself. You have stayed proportionately as close to the module as the moon is to the earth. You are suddenly, acutely aware of the insignificance of your steps.

You came here for nothing: rocks.

You climb slowly into the shuttle. Inside, you feel the weight of all space. The galaxy spirals its long arms around you. Stars pulse their lighthouse rays, dying rhythmically, far away. Out your window, the bright scoop of earth is your nightlight.

How could you have stayed on earth? All your efforts, your whole life, had been directed upward. All the numbers you learned! All the time you spent flying still ships! All the time you spent alone so you would not be lonely on the moon!

But now, you realize, with despair, you do not want to be an astronaut. You want only to be a child wanting to be an astronaut. You want to be a child in your own backyard, lying with your father on top of the earth, feeling the gentle press of your warm house behind you, full of light.

A Car, a Roll, a Hill, and a River
Karen Walker

The car with three kids inside will roll down the hill, will stop on the iron bridge over the river.

They will have been left in the car by their father while he ran into the grocery store near the top of the hill. Perhaps for milk or lollipops, but most likely he went for what was sold in the back behind the brown door.

The door is still there. Two of the kids, when grown, will admit to having been inside. The third will not.

They're triplets. When they were born, the small-town newspaper put a photo of the father—a cig in his mouth, them screaming in his arms—on the front page. "Who the heck has triplets?" he was quoted as saying although, most likely, it was who the hell or who the fuck. His girlfriend, that's who! Three at once ran in her family. She was from the other side of the river. She returned there over the iron bridge.

That they were kids alone in a rolling car will not be reported. No one will see it. Nothing bad will happen.

So, the father will keep going. Going behind the door.

Shaky and poor, he'll eventually give the triplets to the aunt. She'll pin three copies of the newspaper story above the one bed where they all sleep.

Less and less the father will come by. Then only on Saturday afternoons to take them to the bridge where the car came to a stop, down to the river where they may've submerged if something had happened. There, in summer, they'll share one fishing pole. In winter, one rusty pair of skates. Two will sit among the cattails or in the snow along the riverbank while he takes the third by the hand into the current, onto the ice.

The muddy river will become the father's second brown door. One night, he'll be seen leaving the grocery store and stumbling along the bridge. No one will see him come to a stop in the fast water.

When grown, two of the three will talk about the hill they'll have to climb. About ending up, most likely, where their father did if they roll on the same way. The third kid, who loved the fishing and the skating, who was taken by the hand the most, who never mentions the car and the roll, will not.

Beatrice Bakes, in 13 Not-So-Easy Steps
Maggie Nerz Iribarne

1. Beatrice joins a gym.

Beatrice can't remember when she first stopped wanting to get up in the morning, when every day felt slow moving and pointless, when the sun started hurting her eyes. The therapist says Beatrice needs endorphins, STAT.

2. Beatrice notes hypocrisy.

The gym juice bar sells nuts, dried fruit, and smoothies but also full-fat double chocolate muffins. Beatrice googles lite muffin recipes, stops at the grocery store on the way home, begins testing. She works all night, whisks egg whites with apple sauce into foamy lather. She brings the best batch to the gym. They're a hit.

3. Beatrice sells.

Beatrice completes her day job quickly. Her muffins crest, crisp at their edges. She loads her car with boxes, delivers to gyms and cafes before dawn. She smiles more, her steps quicken. She relishes the orange sky at sunrise.

4. Beatrice quits things.

Both her boyfriend (Doug) and Beatrice's engineering job loom, cast shadows, threaten her burgeoning light.

5. Beatrice meets Larry, a café customer, on one of her deliveries.

"Wow, you're something else," he says.

He's bald, rotund, a freelance computer programmer.

"I work when I want, charge by the hour, then I can travel, take breaks whenever," he says.

"You're smart not to let yourself get tied down. I just got out of that."

"We'll make a good team," he says, winking.

Beatrice floats from the café feeling strong, graceful, beautiful.

6. Beatrice locks it down.

The day Beatrice buys the bakery space, Larry proposes on a hot air balloon over a wide Pennsylvania field. The ring is from a gumball machine. She laughs and kisses him. Larry does not believe in material things. Larry believes in experiences.

Beatrice calls her parents in Vermont.

"We haven't met him," says Dad.

"It seems like a lot of change," says Mom.

"Trust me. I'm over the moon," Beatrice tells them.

7. Beatrice returns to Earth.

Larry yells at their neighbors. Larry disappears for the entire night. Larry adopts an Irish wolf hound and insists it must stay in the bakery, for protection. Larry installs cameras inside the bakery, even though only he and Beatrice work there. Larry tells Beatrice's parents not to call.

8. Beatrice works double time.

Beatrice pulls her back muscle while dragging a bag of flour up the basement stairs in the bakery while Larry sits playing computer games. Beatrice finds it hard to breathe, leaves for home early, does not fill her orders that day, or the next.

9. Beatrice needs help.

Beatrice does not tell Larry about the ad she places in the local newspaper. A young woman named Selma calls, says she has no experience baking, but is writing a novel about a bakery. Beatrice hires her sight unseen.

Selma's clear face and quick smile brighten the dingy space.

Larry says, "Who the hell is this?"

Larry informs Selma she is under surveillance; all the cameras are watching. He storms out, jumps on his bike. (Larry has a head injury and cannot drive.) The dog growls from its crate.

10. Beatrice breaks.

Beatrice cries while she measures, when she pours, when she whisks and mixes, when she spoons batter into the tins. She cries at the beginning of the day and at the end. She cries as she drives home and to deliveries. She longs to cry to her parents, her mother, but she cannot. She is stuck again.

11. Beatrice achieves clarity.

One day, when Selma is washing out the batter buckets, she suddenly asks Beatrice if Larry is helping or hindering. Beatrice knows there is only one answer, just one word, that second word, the latter one: hindering.

12. Beatrice burns.

Beatrice receives a call from the police. She stumbles through the mess of Larry's thrift store finds still cluttering her space, out of her apartment. She stands before the bakery. Smoke occludes, flames leap. Beatrice glows in fearful fascination. A fireman yells at her, "Step away. This isn't safe."

13. Beatrice bakes.

The fire out, Beatrice returns home, assembles a fresh batch of lighter-than-lite muffins. She piles Larry's stuff on the sidewalk, ambles to the gym. Afterwards, she calls her parents, tells them about the flames, the ash. She sits for a time in silence, enjoys the sun streaming across the scratched floor. A strong breeze blows through the windows. It rustles the curtains, shifts papers on the desk, lifts Beatrice's hair from her face.



Pebbles- Mamta Wathare

Dangling on a Ring of Saturn
James Croal Jackson

Anxious being
lost. Pockets
a pit. I am
unable to unlock
the city's doors,
its construction-heavy
streets, under girders.
I stare past bluegray
grids to the stars. I know
nothing of architecture
but windows and doors—
what is clear enough
to see through.
My stack of days
is a tall building
leading to where
I have yet to go.

Too Much Food
Stephen Caesar

The Authorities had told us all to stay within the bounds of “Civilization,” but my best friend had, as always, flouted this rule. He was the Alpha in our friendship, and to call me a Beta was to be more than generous. Everything we did, daring or mundane, was on his impulse; I merely followed along, albeit willingly and not without my own strain of daring, rebellion, and adventure. But at his latest suggestion I balked stalwartly, since it shattered the boundaries of defiance and entered the realm of insanity.

He wanted both of us to go camping, just one single night in a tent, complete with campfire and sleeping bags, beyond the pale of “Civilization.” According to our respective grandparents, it was what a lot of ordinary people did—some quite frequently—before the Dark Times had set in. Nowadays, such an act would be considered one of lunacy, not daring, since the unknown number of humans who had opted to live outside the secure and civilized vestiges of the former world were rumored to have degenerated into semi-humans, severely inbred and hopelessly animalistic. Others among us claimed that these wayward humans were not quite so atavistic, but were rather people who, although primitive by our standards, could still read and write, perhaps at an elementary level, and most likely retained the trappings of what we on the inside chose to call “Civilization.”

What both sides of this anthropological debate did agree on, however, was that these “Degenerates” had unquestionably sunk to cannibalism, especially once the vast majority of wildlife and livestock had died out. In fact, both sides concurred so strongly on this point that no one on either side of the debate, no matter how strong the impulse was, wanted to engage in true scientific inquiry and actually go out there and study them in person. Spending an inordinate amount of time outside the womb-like safety of “Civilization,” particularly at night, was essentially suicide.

Which, of course, is precisely why my friend wanted to go camping. I honestly don't know if he was suicidal or psychotic, but his Svengali-like hold on me was simply too powerful for me to resist. After all, I consoled myself, the Authorities didn't know everything, and they themselves admitted to their limited and imperfect knowledge of the Degenerates' true habits. Moreover, we had both agreed that we would not go too deep into the wilderness.

So, there we were, setting up a tent and building a modest campfire in a clearing amidst not excessively thick woods only a few miles from the walls of our dilapidated but resolute town. My unease grew proportionally with the dwindling daylight, but I sensed that my friend's excitement grew at an equal rate. Once darkness had completely fallen, we let the fire die out, and with just glowing embers to illuminate our shrinking circle of light, we entered the tent and crawled into our sleeping bags.

Neither of us could sleep, me because of fear and my friend because (presumably) he was high on the adrenaline rush of an unseen threat that could well endanger our lives. We stayed awake till untold hours, talking of old times and wondering what life was truly like before the human race entered its current stage of quasi-ruination. No sounds of lurking animals were to be heard outside our tent, since they had all more or less gone extinct. It was a dead, quiet world.

Inevitably, dread or excitement notwithstanding, we both drifted off to sleep. My still-active and fear-addled mind, however, would give me no mental rest. I had fitful, intermittent dreams of snuffling, shuffling entities outside our tent, and the ground at times seemed to shift

and sway beneath me. One short episode would end and another would begin; in one, soft but thudding footsteps, unmistakably human in origin, seemed to be all around me. Equally unmistakable were what my timorous brain interpreted as human voices, but which were communicating in bestial, whispered grunts.

In one of these compact little nightmares, I imagined that several of those disembodied human feet had brushed up against me, but my entire body was as stiff as concrete. My mouth wanted to gape open in a silent cry of anguish and fear, but my jaw seemed sewn shut. I wanted to squirm away, maggot-like, still wrapped in my sleeping bag, in a pitiful attempt to escape from the bodiless, quietly jabbering fiends that surrounded me. My dormant brain could not escape the feeling that these incorporeal, primal, slobbering ghouls had crawled out of some unfathomable abyss to drag me into their bottomless well of inexpressible horror. Never in my young life had I known such feelings of profound terror and utter helplessness.

Eventually, these night terrors petered out, and I descended into a black, leaden slumber devoid of dreams, unpleasant or otherwise.

My waking came with the cold, yellow dawn. I sat up on one elbow and looked over to where my friend's sleeping bag was lying. It was empty and disheveled, and the tent flap was unzipped. I assumed he had stepped outside to answer the call of nature, as I was about to do, and as pretty much everyone did upon waking up every morning. As I pulled myself out of my sleeping bag and had a good stretch, my still-bleary eyes did not notice a square piece of paper, about half the size of a standard 8-and-a-half-by-eleven, lying on my friend's rumpled sleeping bag. I went outside, called his name, got no response, and then emptied my bladder onto the remains of the campfire.

Assuming he had gone for a walk to stretch his legs, I went back into the tent to roll up both our sleeping bags in preparation for our return to town. That was when I saw the paper, picked it up, and read it. The handwriting was simple, even childish, but perfectly legible:

“Sorry. We could only eat one of you.”

Speckled
Heather Sager

On the park path,
fallen sticks of tree branches
and rivulets of golden sunlight
scatter on the course's tar-black
surface. On my neck and face
the cold, bracing air; it tickles me
as I walk, making me haunted
and restless, eyes cast down,
the speckled path appearing
to shake with me in jollity.

Fine, Fine, Fine
Harris Coverley

her blood
red
hair...

she is a warm wave
heated by some undersea hormonal volcano
flowing over me

fl
ing ow

the salt in her water
getting into the cracks of my skin
causing the most delightful of lasting irritations

...into the vortex
burning wine.

Homecoming
David Estringel

It was a typical Sunday afternoon (July 20, 2020, to be exact) and—per usual—I was driving my car around Austin, Texas, running errands and looking for a place to eat lunch that didn't bore me to tears. After stopping at one of my favorite restaurants, Teriyaki Madness, for a large Orange Chicken and white rice, I drove about, trying to decide how to waste a couple of hours before driving back home to Temple. For some reason, I was overcome with an impulse to drive back home to the Rio Grande Valley—a five-hour drive. The notion struck me as absurd as I wasn't planning on a day trip that would require over ten hours of driving. The idea was not totally out of the question, however. My mother was in a nursing home down there, and I hadn't seen her in a month or so. Still, it was a long way. I tried to dismiss the idea, but there was a nagging in my gut that said, "Fuck it!"

Driving down IH37, a Monster energy drink and Hot Cheetos in hand, I approached the city of Three Rivers around 2:30 PM. The sun was still blazing in the summer sky and the heat emanating from the windshield was palpable. Some 80s hit was on the radio—no doubt—as Spotify is a regular traveling companion of mine. Midway through an awful rendition of something, my cell phone rang. I saw from my car's digital screen that it was my sister, Lisa. I answered it with my mouth still full of Cheetos. There was nothing at the other end, strangely enough: a good five second passed before my sister was able to choke out a sound. "She's gone," she said. "Mom died."

I found it strange that I had very little of an emotional reaction to the news that I had been dreading for some time. I really couldn't say much, since she was breaking down at a rate that didn't allow for any type of verbal consolation. I listened, numb, being very conscious of the sound of the road under my tires and the smallness of the car's interior. "I'm headed that way already," I finally assured her. "Left Austin about two hours ago." She was still crying, "I should be there in about two hours. Meet me there."

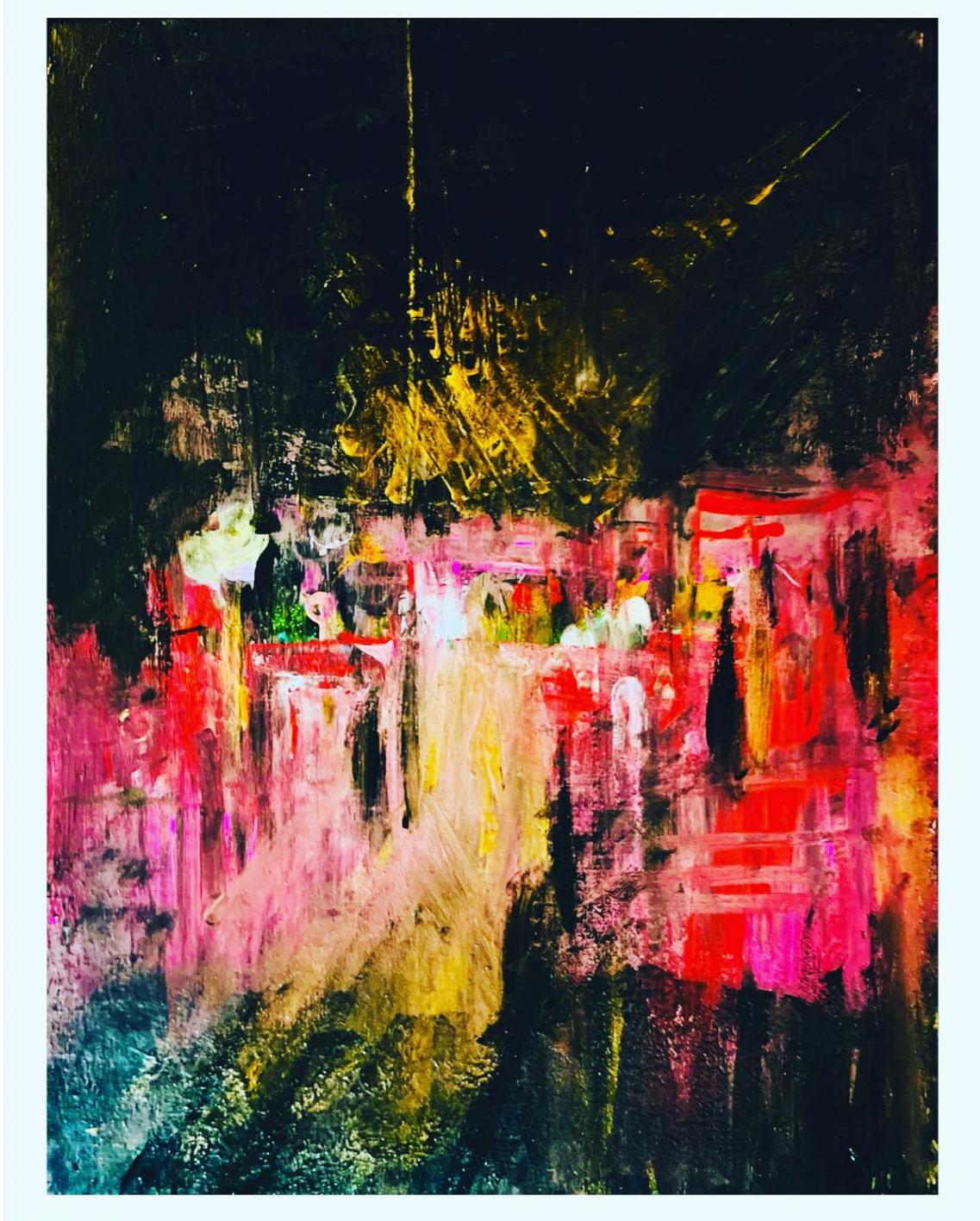
"Ok," she said.

I told her I loved her, which is something I never say initially (always a response). The moment seemed to call for it. If anything, I needed to say it. The drive to the nursing home was a blur. I know I cried, but they weren't all tears of sadness. She had been sick for a very long time from Alzheimer's and was a mere shell of the person she used to be. On some level, I was happy for her. For me. For all of us.

I got to the nursing home around 4PM. It was cloudy and nowhere near as hot as it was in Austin. I remember walking through the doors and straight to her room, where she lay in her bed with a white sheet over her. I pulled a chair to the bedside and pulled the sheet back to see her face. She was thinner than I remembered. In an instant, my eyes were drowning in guilt. Coming down to visit her was not an option with work being as insane as it was. Regardless, all I could think about in that moment was what had happened to her over the course of that month to leave her so frail. I had always envisioned myself being there with her when she took her last breath; I wanted to do that for her. Be that son. I hated myself for failing her, but—now—after thinking about it, she wouldn't have wanted me to be there for the end. Any romantic notions I may have had about that scenario would have been immediately crushed by the gravity of the situation; she knew that. I think that's why she waited a bit to call me home, again.

Pumpkin Coach
Marilyn Cavicchia

I had never been so excited about
Cumberland Farms
that place down a dusty road
where they let you pick your own
pumpkin seeds
and then they grow them for you
right there on the spot,
in a little paper cup that you put
in the cupholder in your hot car
and then you forget about it until
one day you try to get in your car
but you can't. Your car is now
Cinderella's pumpkin coach,
only inside-out, an impervious,
unmovable bristle of vines.



Ritual-Mamta Wathare

Ulcers
John Grey

Guy's got ulcers
but if you knew him
you'd figure
the ulcers have got the guy.
They didn't order
him to smoke
or eat rich spicy food
or worry his head off.
They're just perforations
in the skin.
They didn't ask to be born.

He's at the doctor's office,
begging for a cure.
They reckon the real cure
is to terminate this waster's life,
allow the lining of his intestine,
his stomach,
to integrate into
a much more natural world.

In the woods,
the trees, the flowers,
ingest just enough,
be it mineral, sun or rain.
Sometimes,
a deer nibbles,
or a wood pecker pecks,
or a fungus occupies a root.
They accept that.
It's nature.

Guys got ulcers
but what he really needs
is a nibbling deer,
a woodpecker pecking
and maybe something
in the way of fungus.
You just don't get that living.

The Dreaming Moon
Mike Lee

Neon lights shimmered as a light rain dropped on the main drag leading out of town.

After the turnabout, Mary took the highway northwest, driving from Eliadia, feeling shopworn and tired after an extended visit with her grandmother and desiring nothing but a quiet bed at home, sleeping under down covers, with her cat Fatty curled up in the corner.

The narrow two-lane strip of highway cut a swath through the low grasses of the northern prairie; the moon shone brightly amid the southern stars, offering a comforting blanket of dim light in concordance with the headlights beaming ahead the macadam. Mary was alone on the highway—occasionally, a truck came from Kerwin, where she lived after immigrating five years ago to Antanzia.

Her grandmother, the tough old bird she was, decided to leave on her own after their homeland entered another phase of civil violence, and Mary helped find her a small house in Eliadia, which reminded her of what she had left behind.

Mary drove an old American car—a classic—a 1965 white two-door Ford Fairlane that once belonged to the owner of the downtown furniture store, with who she did accounting work on a cash basis. He collected old automobiles. Restoring them was his hobby; this Ford was the car she fell in love with and could afford. She took it back to him whenever the car needed work or tuning.

Mary's solitary compromise with modernity was her satellite radio and mp3 player, a small black box she had attached below the dashboard. Though she kept the original radio and liked listening to the local stations, Mary preferred her classic rock, punk, and 1980s American college bands. These remained among the faint memories of a woman close to sixty, decidedly single in a new country.

The Fairlane cruised along on whitewall tires. Mary did not mind the expense, and as she turned the volume up to listen to the music, she felt comfortably young, if but for an imaginative string of time. She was so American in her Ford and musical tastes, but in the prairie, she was from somewhere else, and as the locals say, if one was from somewhere else, you are an Antanzian. Therefore, Mary was one--from Kerwin.

They came here, refugees from nations hit by crisis and disaster. Surviving was part of that identity. She no longer recognized her old country when watching the international cable news networks or the BBC World Service.

She stopped watching after a while and took up rereading the newspapers, a practice that fascinated her as a child. She already knew Spanish and English. Mary was picking up Portuguese through *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa, intending to learn enough to master reading the book.

Pessoa fascinated Mary, particularly regarding his use of heteronyms and his way of creating literary works of different styles. However, unlike pseudonyms, Pessoa took the practice further: he made well-defined personalities for the authors he created and his own work. These people had histories, personality quirks, and even their own politics, the manifestations of Pessoa's imagination.

These inventions of Pessoa influenced Mary. She sometimes referred to herself in writing and with strangers as Mariana, a Portuguese name. While not an attempt at a heteronym, Mary relished the spirit of disengaging from her past.

As for her last seven years in her former homeland—not so much. Finally, however, Mary escaped, and now on a summer night, she travels in an American car through the boundless nothing of grasslands to her country town, her little house, her bed, and her cat.

Mary pushed on the gas and reprogrammed the player to ZZ Top's Eliminator. Give me all your lovin', all your hugs, and kisses, too. How fondly she remembered those days before bad things began to happen.

The night air was comfortable; though it was late winter, the season in the prairie was mild. Mary rolled down the window. She leaned her right arm against her head, relaxed but not sleepy as she drove past endless plain, pretending she was on her way to a place other than nowhere.

The full moon rose high above the sky in the windshield reflection. At her fingertips, memories disintegrated, and the music segued through decades of peaceful, long-ago times without attachment to actual thought. Just noise, Mary thought, glancing at the moon, dreaming of her bed, the cat lying under the covers, the coolness of the night remaining before dawn arrives, and she rises to begin her day. Another day, hoped for many more, alone, perhaps not, but for now, solitude.

Mary glanced at the prison tattoo on her forearm and focused on the road. It was straight, the macadam smooth under the dreaming moon.

Fran, Who Became a Crow
Eli S. Evans

After his wife left him for a handsome co-worker with an electric car, Fran decided to take up downhill skiing. At first, everything seemed to be going well, and Fran even allowed himself to entertain the notion that perhaps he'd meet the next love his life while attending an Après-ski Three Dog Night tribute concert back at the lodge. But then, coming upon an unexpectedly steep section of trail while descending an otherwise gentle slope that traversed the outer edge of the mountain (he was a beginner, after all), Fran lost control of his body, careened through the rather flimsy barrier that had been erected there, and tumbled head over heels into what, for lack of a better term, we might as well just go ahead and refer to as the abyss.

As a young child contending for the first time with the impossible inevitability of his own mortality, it so happens that Fran had formulated a certain fantasy as a kind of intellectual and emotional workarround. Specifically, he imagined that when he was old and infirm, instead of just laying down and dying the way old and infirm people so often do, he would have a willing relative – for instance, a son or, more likely, a grandson or great nephew – push him to the top of a mountain in his wheelchair (he took for granted that he would be confined to a wheelchair by then) and shove him over the edge. Then, he imagined, to the amazement of his son or grandson or great nephew or whoever it was who'd taken him there and shoved him over the edge, rather than falling to his death he would magically transform into a bird (the wheelchair, meanwhile, would keep on falling) and soar off, glorious and alive, into the sky-blue distance.

Now, albeit in slightly different circumstances, Fran really had just gone off a cliff, and amazingly enough, the thing he'd long ago imagined actually happened. To put it otherwise, rather than feeling his stomach drop, as one plunging through thin air would expect, Fran felt his wings – his wings! – spread wide, and the weight of the air beneath him, and his body, as light as a feather (a bundle of feathers, to be exact), surfing on the wind.

“Holy shit!” he screamed. “It’s a miracle!”

Well, at least that was what he intended to scream. In reality, what came out of his mouth – that is to say, his beak – was: “Caw! Caw! Caw!”

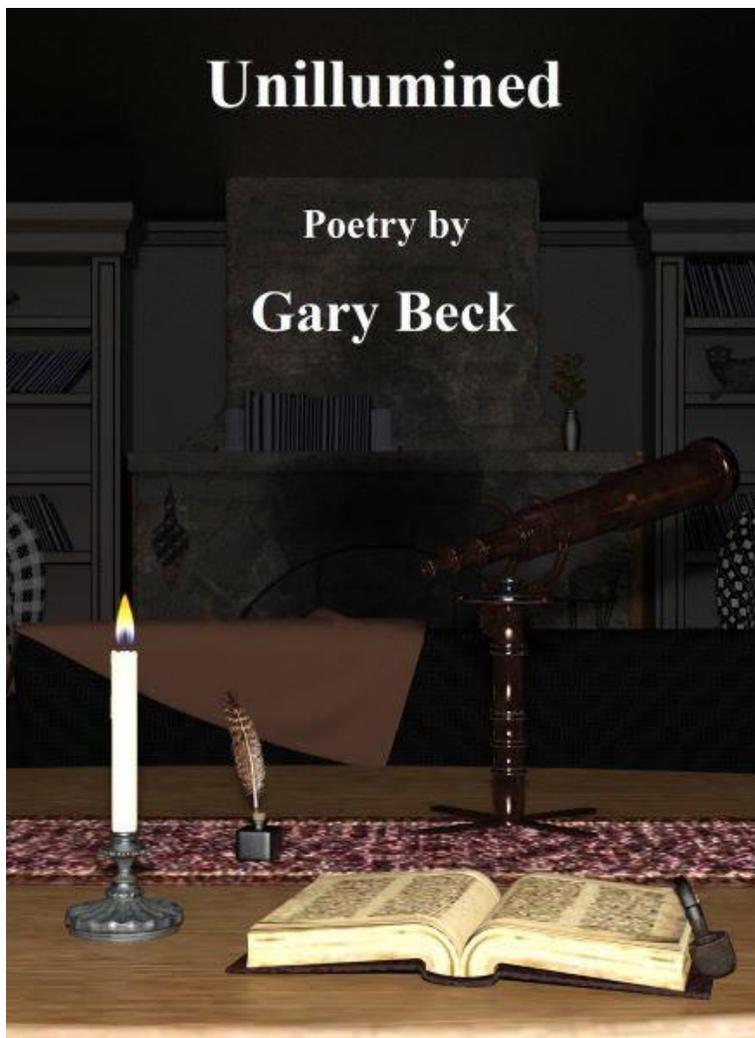
Could it be, Fran wondered, that of all the birds in the world into which he might have been transformed, he had been transformed into a crow? It seemed so, for suddenly he was overcome by an overwhelming appetite for trash. Just the thought of it was making his mouth – that is to say, his beak – water. Luckily, it was an easy problem to solve: he simply drifted down to where a half-dozen dumpsters were lined up like big, fat metal soldiers in the little alleyway behind the lodge, and soon enough he was feasting on a heap of half-frozen French fries caked in congealed ketchup, followed by a dirty napkin and what may or may not have been a cigarette butt (smoking was forbidden at the ski resort, but it sure tasted like a cigarette butt). Everything was delicious, but at the same time Fran was repulsed by the pleasure he was taking in it, which must have been, he reflected, the way certain sexual deviants felt when indulging appetites of a decidedly different sort, though in recognizing this, it was important to note, he in no way was excusing their deviant behavior if and when it ran afoul of the law, although on

further consideration he wondered whether he was too hastily granting the law – when all is said and done, a mechanism for the reification state power – the moral authority it so eagerly claims for itself. Surely, he would have given more thought to this complicated matter, but just then the back door of the lodge swung open, and a man clad in dishwashing attire burst through it, as wild-eyed as a dervish, swinging a broom in Fran’s direction and shouting, “Shoo! Shoo, you vile blight, shoo!”

With a pair of hops and a series of quick flaps of his wings, Fran easily evaded the assault. But as he ascended, it occurred to him that, all things considered, it might be more interesting to find out what death was like than it would be to live out a second life as a trash-eating crow, disdained by his formerly fellow humans. With that in mind, he located the cliff at the top of the mountain with the sheerest drop, hopped to the edge, recited a few Hail Marys and a Mourner’s Kaddish for good measure, and for the second time that afternoon, tumbled into the abyss.

Being that his intention was to die, Fran naturally told himself not to flap his wings. But it turned out that telling himself not to flap his wings was basically like that time back in college when he came out of the library one night to find that someone had stolen his bicycle seat and as he climbed aboard to ride back to the dorms his good buddy told him, “Whatever you do, bro, don’t sit down” – in other words, he did it anyway. Turning a few halfhearted circles, he contemplated additional possibilities for committing what he didn’t exactly consider suicide, seeing as technically he should have been dead already, but none of those possibilities seemed any more promising. For example, hanging: how would he set up a rope with which to hang himself (and even if he could, how would he the fasten that rope around his neck, etc.) with those weird little bird feet-hands of his? He ran into the same problem when he pondered shooting himself in the heart, or locking himself inside an idling motor vehicle in a closed garage. And though a falling piano would undoubtedly do him in, how, in his current form, was he going to figure out where and when someone was planning to push a piano out of a tenth-story window?

Consequently, he resolved to try and make the best of his situation, which is why you can these days find him living in a tall tree at the edge of the small, wooded area behind the house his ex-wife shares with her handsome new husband, driving the two of them completely insane with his non-stop fucking cawing.



Unilluminated is a poetry collection that looks at problems, issues, and disagreements facing our world and some of the things that may console us.

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This Ritual's Produce
Joseph Linscott

The doctor removes his small bag of medical gear from a larger Puma bag, full, presumably, of personal belongings. He will be going on vacation after this is done. I ask him where, but he tells us that he would prefer not to give out his personal information like that. That this is, despite the numerous times we have come out here, still business as usual. I agree. So does Bill, the plumber. We only know our names and our jobs back home, but not even where we call home.

Well, they don't know what I do for a job. They've never asked, because it's never been important for this.

Bill has only brought with him his rubber mallet. It is different from last year's, the one which broke, and caused him to break his own finger as a result. This new mallet is coated entirely, from hammer to handle, in an orange rubber. Earlier, he twirled the mallet in his hand as we waited on the doctor with a kind of grace I was consumed by. The nimbleness in his fingers to grab the handle, avoid the hammer, keeping the process going in a kind of rhythm that was entrancing.

We could always just get started before he arrives; Bill had said when the sun was still visible through the clouds.

The doctor's arrival brought with it a darkness. Storm clouds circulating, building strength, and threatening us all.

I lay myself as flat as I can in order to start this ritual.

We ready?

One more second, let me get settled.

Okay... one... there's your second.

Still just as funny as last year's.

You're not the only one with things to do.

More housewives with sinks to snake?

I told you all that in secrecy.

Don't worry, we wouldn't tell anyone that.

Besides, who'd believe us? It's not like anyone else knows we all know each other.

Even still, what's done is done. No use in digging up the past.

This is why we're not meant to share any information.

Which side you want this time around?

Right, I believe.

Right?

Right.

Same as last year's.

...

What?

Nothing, I guess. Just seems wrong.

Well, fortunately for you, you haven't had to pick. Haven't had to have this happen to you.

Just settle down.

Yellow turns a putrid green gray. I worry I won't make it back to the car in time, if anything disastrous happens. They won't be able to help me, that's part of the deal.

The doctor pulls gloves out from his medical bag. The rain starts and the latex sticks to his fingers. His right thumb breaks through the palm.

Motherfucker.

Who cares. We're doing this in a goddamn field and a tornado is going to be coming any second. To hell with sterility.

I'm sure the housewife wishes for some sterility right about now.

Can we just finish?

Heh.

Bill twirls the mallet in his hands. I press myself in the grass. The ground is still warm from the sun, or we have been here longer than I've intended.

Maybe if you put your leg at an angle... to make it quicker.

Right, I say, and bend my knee into a right angle, pointing my knee skywards. The doctor forces a new pair of gloves on. Flaps of latex above his fingertips flit in the wind.

Ready, our throats pound out.

Bill laughs to himself, flips the mallet end over end—I see its orange cut through my periphery, blotting the greenage—catches it mid-air—like a game of stump we all played our second year when we thought drinking might ease our nerves—with the gravity of the mallet's fall—as rhythmic and graceful as he's done before—and I'm lifted from the ground—carried in the tornado's embrace, swirling and smashing with debris, becoming one cluster of violence to rip and pull from the earth what feels entitled to belong—spinning, suffering, clobbering, sputtering, slobbering—silence is the only escape from this wind—howling loud as coyotes hungering under a full moon—the sky opens up and pulls us all through it until the sun—blearing, tearing, gripping, melting—establishing my place into this earth—slick with this ritual's produce.

A single raindrop falls on the bridge of my nose, sending shatters of water into each eye.

See ya next year.



Surreal-Mamta Wathare

Lonely
Heini Mair

Loneliness - I am the spider.

Lonely spins for me gold thread
Enduring damages of lonely; surrounded
- in pockets of others
- corners of their gardens
And lonely; the hermit, the single rose discarded.

Yes, alone I rest my head.
Yet I will weave again
- between each tear, hydrated by them
and by dew drops, that touch my new silks:
To glitter again
Sweep over endless legs
- all these new steps
- to everywhere and nowhere.

Destruction inevitable, they trample through
- towers must fall.

Crushed, lonely, dusted off,
No home to call home.
- So, I must recreate
- Throw out lines again
Spin, stitch, mutate:
the high priestess, on her way.

Lessons in death
On my own
Nothing to show and nothing to hold
Ever on I go
Lovely gold lines -
Yes. I will build a web.

Mr. Memory
Daniel Mowery

I don't see him anymore. It's been so long; I've given up the last of my hope.

He first came to see me when I was a child, around the age of four. At the time I was shocked at his sudden appearance. His suit was sharp and clean, his hat crisp and polished, but it was impossible to look at him directly, or really see him, to remember anything but the blurry outlines when he left. He picked up the green monster truck I had gotten for my birthday, my name awkwardly scrawled on the side panel in sharpie, and we looked at it together in the sunlight, moist rich dirt from the playground stuffed between the treads. I don't recall seeing the truck after then, but he never forgot it, and never let me. We became the best of friends. He would know just when to knock on the door, sometimes when I needed him most, sometimes when I least expected, even at times I wished he wouldn't.

He would smile as he came in with his bag of gems and treasures. Objects and mementos that I had lost or left behind. Old photographs of my grandparents that we lost in the fire, the boutonniere from our wedding, our son's blanket that he could never let go of, my picture of the time he mooned everyone downtown at the Christmas parade, his diploma and wedding portraits, my parent's obituaries, the chest port for your chemo, the long list of possible epitaphs and love poems I could never pick from, the sound of our favorite songs, the aroma of your favorite flower tinted just slightly with antiseptic.

He would sit on my screened porch, a whiskey in hand, and open his book of faces. He would wear each in turn, reviving long-ago friends, rivals, loves, family, pulling their voices perfectly from my heart. He would play them for me so well, phenomenal, ghostly performances that took me back in time.

He could imitate impeccably my mother's slurred, gruff insults, the way her eyes could spill distaste through swollen red lids, the whiskey suddenly a sour, pungent prop. He could slip into the cherub cheeks of our boy when he was small without stretching the skin tight, and in his squeaky babbling, unable to decide between mama and dada as his first word, he squealed MaDa and laughed. Then he would put on your face, to say it still sounded more like Mama than not. Say in the scourged way you'd whisper around the tubes and drips, not to cry. How could I not? So, I would smile, sip my drink, swallowing fast to get past the too familiar sting, waiting for him to pull out the face of the doctor, and one more that barely looked like you.

He could always bring back the ghosts of the things that hollow me, fulfill me. He would never bring pain without joy. With him I saw that a lifetime of the former is worth a mere moment of the latter, just a glimmer of its gold and pearl inside the lip of his bag.

But his visits have become shorter, less frequent. His fingers grew longer, thinner, the blades of bone sharpening beneath the blurry skin, the unravelling suit. I call for him from my door, and sometimes he comes, but his pace has slowed, stumbles, his vague, soft countenance sallow and weary. He trudges with bent back, though his bag grows smaller, his book thinner.

When the man who collects the lost and forgotten loses them, where do they go? Perhaps they are just gone, erased without echo or afterimage.

I think he has forgotten my face, unable to see it through the wrinkles and silver rust. It takes me a moment myself, in the cruel mirror. It is heavy and thinning, an edifice to reflect the bones, the sinew, the heart beneath. I feel it is a face that is no longer mine. When I'm gone, will he take my face for another book of his? Will it be me truly, or some version his new audience prefers to see?

I can still remember your face, though, without him. The version with the vitality, the love, the hope. It is everywhere, on everyone. He used to help me remember to come back from my eroding recollections. They tell me I know that you've been dead for five years. My son says it as if he's said it a thousand times, with a grief-calloused face, as if he's the one who lost their life partner and is teaching me how to move past the grief and live on, as if I could. If you've been gone for so long, why hasn't he told me before? Why does my heart still break?

I don't see him anymore; I can't remember how long it has been since his last visit. My dearest friend has lost his way.

No Pleasure
Joe Giordano

Quiet and moody, Kenny played drums. He lived next door in our 1960s New York neighborhood, and we'd shoot the shit on his stoop with a transistor radio playing static-crackling rock-and-roll. We attended different high schools, his within walking distance, while my father insisted on an all-boys Catholic school, he considered serious and free from disruptive influences. Three buses away, I rose early and would come home too late to participate in extracurricular activities or to watch a basketball game.

Kenny's parents were divorced, and he lived with his mother who'd remarried. His father had a powder-blue T-Bird convertible and the evenings he'd show up to take Kenny out, he'd be with a different flashy girlfriend. He'd arrive with his top down, making certain that if his ex-wife was looking out her window, she'd see the woman. If Kenny and I were sitting together on the stoop, he'd invite me along for burgers. Because of the foxy girlfriend, I always talked too much, attempting to say something clever or funny, anything to coax a smile from the red-lipstick mouth I fantasized about. Afterward, I felt embarrassed by my behavior, but that didn't stop me from repeating my adolescent performance on the next occasion.

Our asphalt-shingled houses shared a driveway, but my father always parked in the street, so when Kenny's father gave him a bright-orange Dodge Charger, we didn't object for him to park in the alley. I didn't have a car. While I would've loved a Mustang or anything whose engine rumbled and left rubber on take-off, my father's practical observance was that since I walked to friends' houses, took buses to school, and had the train to go to the beach, I didn't need one. One afternoon I must've been ogling the Charger, because my father said that for some people, their youth is their entire life. I suppose he meant that great stuff would happen for me, but later. He'd had little schooling and pushed me to go to college even though all we could afford was CCNY. Every day, I took the A-train an hour and a half each way. Kenny didn't go to college and got a job after high school, ensuring he always had pocket money and an active nightlife that was beyond my means. He took after his father, dating a bevy of beauties. In my mind, I was laboring through life while Kenny was living it. Although still friendly, we drifted apart.

Last winter, Kenny lost control of his Charger on an icy street and smacked into a tree doing seventy. I was shocked by the news. At the wake, his serene face looked plastic, and his body seemed shrunken on a frilly-white coffin bed. I knelt and said a prayer. The memories of our times together played in my head, but I didn't recall them with a strong sense of nostalgia, and I didn't cry.

Death was new to me. I expected relationships would go on forever. The finality of his death crystalized the realization that my jealousy of Kenny's car, his fun father, his money, his girlfriends, and his musical abilities had cost me our friendship. That caused me more anguish than my juvenile performances with his father's girlfriends. Envy is the only deadly sin completely without pleasure.

My Cat is Purring
Mykyta Ryzhykh

My cat is purring
I conjure with my eyes closed and the war ends outside the window

The cat smiles and knows that wizards do not exist

the future has arrived
spring came
we stuck to the graves

the sky is playing its own existence
birds believe that they fly and fly
bones creak like violins

people spend the night
in the tunnels of nuclear winters
hearts become bullets

signs and posters around
and don't know where to go

Dirge for an Amazonian Man
Norbert Kovacs

Author's Note: In August 2022, outsiders found an Indigenous man covered in brightly colored feathers lying dead in a hammock within the remote forest region of Brazil's Rondonia state. Authorities say the man belonged to an uncontacted tribe whose members illegal miners and wood cutters had targeted and killed over several years. The man's tribe appears now to have died out completely.

In an early report of the discovery, a source claimed the man, shortly before he passed, had been singing in the unknown language of his people.

We weren't supposed to understand him. He spoke a language no one other than his people did. He made choices after the rules of a culture we did not know. But then, the form of the old man's exit seems universal to our minds: on a deathbed, ornamentally dressed. He sang the dirge even, since no one else was left to. He may have sensed the irony of his singing when it was his people who were gone. You might imagine he did it for them more than he thought to for himself. No one could have found it an easy way to end a life.

But we have our own song to render now. Don't you see us there in the old man's hut on a cot, singing sadly, covered in darker feathers than his? Since yesterday, our chant has been of the brown, silty river nearby. The river, rippling like a live body, winds through this great jungle that was the man's home. Smoke follows its snaking water as much as clouds used to do, brought by fires deep in the forest. "The settlers set them," we sing, eyes streaming as we turn on our flat bed. "The fires mean the forest's ruin. Already, the villagers, the old man's people, taken and killed!" The settlers, desperate, hungry people, came in a burning fury for land, sparked by men who dangled dreams of profit before them. "But," we announce, "it is profit those settlers never will gain themselves; only their instigators may." We sing these lines in a strange fit of illness, meaning to attract listeners to this wild, little-known place unlike the old man ever thought he should.

And now they come, those adventurers from the city; they walk right up to this hut where the old man and ourselves lie. You would think these new people our doubles. They are dressed in button-up shirts, well-cut khakis, leather boots. By their articulate words, they seem educated, serious, kindly enough. But they are far away in mind despite their actual nearness. Their concern is in the abstract, the general cause, not the person dying here and now. Any anger and fear after hearing our strident verses barely registers in their hard, hatchet faces as the fires creep from the forest towards the hut. You almost would suppose we sang to the folk in a language nobody knew or could know.

Doppler Shift
Robert Sumner

You couldn't snort coke or smoke pot because you'd get piss tested constantly. And it was kind of a pain in the ass to smuggle alcohol into Saudi Arabia. But acid leaves no trace in urine. And it was super easy to smuggle.

I know. When I was a junior in high school my friend got sent to a lock-down rehab facility for several months by his parents. They let him make unmonitored phone calls, though, and receive mail. He knew I'd recently bought a sheet of acid at a Grateful Dead show so he called me and gave me the address and asked me to send him twenty hits. Sure, for a friend. I put a fake return address on it so the worst that could happen is the acid would be lost. Wade was impressed with the method I came up with: I bought a greeting card and cut out a portion in the middle exactly the size of the twenty hits that were wrapped in a single layer of aluminum foil. When I put the card and the partial sheet into the envelope, I felt it several times and there was no crease or space at all. I held it up to the light and the envelope revealed nothing.

Did he get it?

Oh, yeah. He said he took a few of them and traded the rest for other drugs. That must have been weird, attending group counseling sessions while tripping balls.

Not as weird as my last trip in Saudi. Most acid trips over there were pretty mundane, just playing volleyball in the desert and listening to music. But the last one was fucking intense. After night fall you could see the Scud missiles launching from Iraq or Iraqi positions in Kuwait. None of them landed nearby so I guess they weren't a real danger but their altitudes were low enough that you could watch them arcing over. On LSD you could just lie back and enjoy the barrage de-contextualized from the violence. The Scuds' bright orange rocket trails laced across the night sky folding in upon itself in a thousand shades of black, the stars accepting the missiles as a quaint diversion. With luck, a Patriot missile would intercept one of the Scuds in your patch of the sky. The stars would welcome the explosion as a new component in the great sky machine. Once the ground war started the desert festival was over. You couldn't take hallucinogens anymore because of the possibility you'd have to jump out of a plane into a combat zone under the influence. On the third day they ordered us to assemble near a big transport plane. We were surrounded by barbed wire and guards with snarling dogs. You could see these German shepherds didn't give a fuck if you were Iraqi or not, they just wanted to tear into your calf built up by eight months of desert volleyball and marching in sand. That's the moment when you wonder if maybe joining Airborne wasn't such a good idea. You're on the plane and into the flight before an officer announces that you're dropping on Baghdad. You might not shit your pants, but it's tempting. Anyway, after about fifteen minutes you feel the plane suddenly bank back in the opposite direction and they announce that the attack has been called off, at least in 1991 it was. George H. W. Bush's infamous stop order.

Did you drop acid in Panama?

No, there was only enough time to hose down a Panamanian government building with automatic weapons. And shoot a pregnant woman whose husband was driving her to the hospital

'cause she was going into labor. They must have thought there was a medical exception to the curfew.

Those weren't even the strangest experiences in the Army. Near the end of my four-year stint, they offered me an opportunity to be provided with a new identity after a fake death. Imagine that, your family and everyone else thinks you're dead but you're alive and maybe not so well. To be a disposable triggerman, basically. When your father is a titanic asshole, it has an appeal.

[Kyle's gesticulating knocks over his beer. He rushes into the kitchen and returns with a small American flag with which he sops up the spilled beer. He turns to his bookshelf to confirm that none of his collection of Chomsky books are wet.]

Damn. Those are some fucked up tales.

Yes.

I was still in high school when all that shit happened.

[Kyle steps back into the kitchen and flings the beer-drenched flag into the sink.]



The Land I Dreamt Of-Mamta Wathare

True to Himself
Robert Pegel

Our son was timeless in eighth grade.
He had his own sense of style.
Sometimes he would wear his grandfather's shirts
which were too big on him with a tie.
A classmate one time let him know.
"That shirt is kind of big on you. Is it your father's shirt?"
Calvin shut him down. Fuck off, was all he said.
There was no further discussion.
He was born to be himself.
And that was what he was until the end.
Original. Happy. And seeking what couldn't be seen.
Destined to make his mark in a short time.
He accomplished the mission.

Good Dirt I
Andrea DeAngelis

Her kids looked like goddamn swamp creatures, Bronwyn thought as they ran from the volcanic garden hose. She was attempting to spray them down before they ran their muddy golem selves into the house leaving imprints of fingers, knees, butts and feet in the front hall and the orange kitchen. The three of them were squealing and screaming that the water was cold. Damn right it's cold, their mother thought.

Bronwyn always smiled too widely like she was going to eat someone with her crooked teeth, which looked as if someone had glued her mouth off-kilter. Bronwyn grinned at unusual times, whenever she heard other kids throwing a violent tantrum, kicking cheerio boxes in the garish supermarket, because it wasn't her own that were possessed like *The Exorcist*.

The mud was everywhere. It was caked on their shirts and Oshkosh overalls. Those clothes will never be good again. She could wash and rewash them, even hand scrub and the reds, oranges and yellows would be forever stained a vomit beige. Bronwyn ran after them with the hose. It was a long hose so it was hard to get away. Good, she smirked. Mud and more mud ran rivers down the driveway. "Mommy!!!" They shrieked.

All of this was her mother-in-law's fault. Nana needed "good dirt" because apparently Mendham, New Jersey did not have any good dirt. "It has too many rocks in it," Nana complained as if this was Bronwyn's fault. Now that Nana was living with them permanently, she needed to import good dirt. Paul, her husband, readily agreed because he could never say no to her. That's how this mountain of dirt was delivered to their backyard and turned their kids into mud creatures.

The little monsters had managed to roll in the muck mountain, to bathe in it, to eat it. Bronwyn was not making that last bit up. Her youngest Jack had presented her with a carefully packed mud cake, "Here mommy, you can eat it," and then proceeded to cram it into his mouth. God knows what was in the good dirt? Probably some plump worms. Oh well, Bronwyn thought, Paul had licked every bus window on the upper east side of Manhattan as a five-year-old and he had turned out okay. Although...

"Jack, how did that taste?"

"Good! Sorry Mommy, I was hungry!" He pouted, "Mommy, I'll make you one!" He ran off to join his sister Jane and older brother Joseph plunging into dirt mountain, looking for more treasure. He found one in the form of a very long worm and proceeded to put that in his mouth.

"Jack!! No!"

Too late the worm was all gone. That was when Bronwyn got the idea about the hose.

All the while, Nana was toiling away in her garden, grasping and pulling out weeds. She didn't notice or care that the children were wreaking havoc on her good dirt. Probably because she was looking for another snake to behead, Bronwyn mused.

Nana had killer instincts when it came to reptiles. Perhaps seeing her in action was why Paul did everything his mother ever told him to.

"I'll get that snake," she had hissed.

Oh, poor Mary, that's what Bronwyn and Paul named the harmless garter snake Nana had gone after. Mary had the audacity to be in her garden. Nana had almost sat her immense ass on poor Mary. She jumped up with a shriek and went for her tiny hand shovel with a righteous fury

usually reserved for Sundays when the children didn't want to attend church. "Snakes are the devil!"

Mary lost her tail that day. Paul found her limping away near Nana's garden. He took her to the end of the woods pleading, "Now Mary if you come back, you know what will happen." Mary didn't come back.

Bronwyn decided against talking to her mother-in-law because she still appeared somewhat homicidal. She was still searching for Mary. She didn't realize that Mary had been rescued. Nana might mistake Bronwyn for the snake. She certainly didn't appreciate the fact that Bronwyn wasn't a believer, but neither was Paul, not that Paul would ever admit that to his own mother. Bronwyn decided against challenging Nana on the good dirt. She would just wait for the mountain to be mowed down. She challenged Nana enough already. She was always deprogramming her kids after their weekly Catholic indoctrination.

"No, I'm not going to burn in hell because there is no hell."

"But mommy, the sisters said your skin would burn right off if you don't believe in Christ," her oldest Gerald proclaimed.

"Mommy, how can you not believe in anything? That's weird," Cynthia agreed.

"I believe in you kids. I don't need to believe in anything else."

"I don't want you to die," Jack whimpered.

We all die, Bronwyn thought. We all return to the dirt. Will our decomposition make it good dirt? She certainly hoped so.

Self-Care With Cher
Katy Goforth

The cold nips at my nose turning it on like a drippy spigot. Damn dog's digestive system pushes me off the warm couch each winter evening right before 9:00 p.m. The darkness makes the temperature feel even more bitter as I stand on my front lawn, nose dripping and tiny terrier nipping at the leaves as they drift to the ground.

I secure my fanny pack. Flashlight? Check. Poop bags? Check. Pepper spray? Check. All secured in my middle-aged sack of sensibility. My nine-pound dog strains at the end of her leash like a bucking bull being held back in a steel pen. It's Friday night. I'm 45 years old. And this is my life.

I pull my toboggan down over my numb ears. The dog is charging forward unaffected by the cold. As we set off, four cars pass us like they're in a fast funeral procession. I navigate the eager terrier to someone's yard and hope I don't step in some self-centered neighbor's dog shit that wasn't picked up.

We round the corner, navigating from the busy section of the neighborhood to the less traveled and settle in at a good clip. Tomorrow is trash day, which means the dog has a buffet of cardboard and discards to stop and pee on. Everyone must know that the neighborhood trash belongs to her. Each time we stop at a trash pile a throbbing heat sets in my center and radiates out towards my arms and legs. How something can be throbbing and numb at the same time is beyond me, yet here I am.

I kick at a box and say, "Don't mess with that. There could be a severed head in it." The dog looks at me with such pity. I shrug. Both of us perk up at a sound that is out of place. Clink. We hear it again. Could it be? Yes, that is the sound of a bottle, a small one, hitting the pavement. Next, a sweet voice travels from further up the road through the frozen pavement and towards my toes up to my chest. I start to thaw a bit. The voice has reached to the tips of the tiny terrier's oversized ears, and her short legs are tap, tap, tapping away.

We've reached the part of our walk. The part of our night. Hell, the part of our very day that we look forward to. The part that makes all the preparations worth it. The joyous lady who sings Cher is coming. She is on her way, and she is bringing us a nip to warm and revive our tired bones.

I hear her approach before I see her car. It's like Cher is in my neighborhood, and she is begging me to answer her question. Yes, Cher, I do believe in life after love. I do. I too told my mom I am a rich man and don't need to marry one. So not true, but I get caught up in moments.

A Nissan Pathfinder rounds the bend in the road and heads toward me and the dog. We're both energized now. Clink. Another tiny bottle flies out of the Nissan's window. The smell of warm cinnamon nips at my nose. God, I love this moment each night. A moment that is just mine. No one else around except my best friend and Cher.

She slows a bit as she approaches us. We make eye contact. Her slim arm hangs out of the car window revealing a large tattoo of Ruth Bader Ginsberg. She shakes a mini bottle of fireball at me and raises an eyebrow like the musical booze fairy she is. I snatch it, crack the seal, and take a quick swig. The sweetness mixes perfectly with the hot cinnamon as it burns through my throat and settles in my belly. Cher is now belting out about turning back time, and while I love the music, I am not interested in turning back time. I want to savor this moment. Savor the hot cinnamon. Savor the cold. The freedom.

She pulls away from us with a short squeal from her tires. It's just me and the tiny terrier now. I pull the zipper of my jacket up higher and cover my mouth. We head towards home to thaw.

6:00 a.m. comes early. Another day on the hamster wheel that is my life. Take care of the dog. Take care of the house. Go to work and take care of those people. All of that just to turn around and take care of the dog again.

We bundle up, and the tiny terrier is not pulling at the leash this morning. She is content to stay in the warm bed. I drag her down the road, and she sniffs at those same cardboard boxes but looks at me as if to say, "Where is the magic this morning?" And she's right. Something is missing.

We turn the same corner to take us from the busy part of the neighborhood to the less traveled. The dog stops to relieve herself. Our hearts just aren't in this. I turn us around to head home, and my foot kicks something. Clink. A familiar sound. I look down and pick up a mini bottle of fireball. The seal is still intact.

I snatch it up and put the magic in my pocket. Lord knows I'll need it later.

Chance Encounter with Implied Conflagration
Joseph Starr

Perhaps a man had stopped me on the street, in the manner which some do. *Halloooing* with great sweeping arms from across the cavern of the boulevard, galloping hence with too long strides, deftly synchronized turns of the head, the overcoat tails pluming behind. He clasps my hands in his with deep meaning. “Michel! Michel! I heard you had perished, in the fire on the Rue de Reverdy.” I did not say I am not Michel. I proposed we repair to an adjacent café, to reminiscence among olives and cheese.

I am mistaken. It was a very tall Mademoiselle. Trailing behind her: a wiry dog with a mouth full of piano keys. “Michel! Michel! Pardon me monsieur, have you seen my dog?” She was reaching into her unfathomable skirts, fumbling for a photo.

I did not have the heart to tell her that Michel had perished in the fire on the Rue de Reverdy.

The Song of Me
Hilary Ayshford

From far away her longing reaches me in my dreaming. I find her sheltering from the afternoon sun in the sparse shade of an acacia, trickling handfuls of red dust through her fingers as she thinks of me. The air is as heavy as wild honey; towering thunderheads herald the arrival of the short rains. Even the insistent cicadas are stilled, and in the sudden silence I sing her my song, implanting myself in her soul.

She carries it back home to her husband. In the cool of the night, to the accompaniment of geckos barking in the rock crevices and the rustling of the rats in the thatch, she teaches him my song. Their flesh melds together, giving shape and form to me: from their entangled limbs my arms and legs are designed; their eager lips and tongues mould my mouth; the thumping of their hearts strikes an echo in my unformed chest; and the coursing of their blood ignites my life-spark. Together they sing my song to invite me in.

In the time between my dreaming and my birth, my mother teaches the song of me to the women of the village; when the time comes for me to emerge into this new life, they sing it to welcome me. As I grow, the rest of the village learns my song. If I am hurt, they sing it to comfort me; if I am brave, they sing it to honour me. If I am disgraced, they sing it to remind me who I am, how much I am loved.

When I leave to go to school, my precious books and pencils bumping on my back in the brightly coloured cloth bag cut from my mother's best dress, the people line the red dust road and sing my song in farewell. I can pick out my mother's voice, its new notes of pride and sadness.

I carry my song with me each time I leave, gradually adding the new harmony of a wife and the trilling of children, but a version remains here and calls me home eventually.

From my concrete and glass eyrie in the city, looking out over distant hills to ochre plains beyond, I hear my mother sing my song. Her voice is weak with age and cracks in pain. When I reach the homestead in a whirlwind of red dust, there is no welcome chorus for me. They have formed a circle around her hut, singing her song for the last time. Her eyes are closed but she can hear the music. I kneel beside her and breathe my song into her ear to take with her into her dreaming and not feel alone.

And when she sings her song again to a woman sheltering from the afternoon sun in the shade of an acacia, trickling red dust through her fingers and thinking of the child she longs for, there will be new notes in her melody – notes from the song of me.



Valley of Peace-Mamta Wathare



In *the luxury*, Darren C. Demaree constructs a response to the catastrophic death of the natural world that enacts rage, love, and grief all at once. Filled with endless lyricism and an unpunctuated momentum, Demaree’s poems cascade and overflow. As such, they are abundant: abundant with joy, sorrow, and a tenderness toward the earth conveyed through the specificity of ordinary life. Of gardens and politicians and children. Of berries and midnights and birds. Reading them, I felt convinced that this book offers the most honest reaction to our current climate crisis — one based in doubt and kindness at the same time. Hold onto these poems the same way you hold onto the burning world. Tightly. As hard as you can.

— Devin Kelly, author of *In This Quiet Church of Night, I Say Amen*

Available now from Glass Lyre Press! <https://glass-lyre-press.myshopify.com/collections/all-books-1/products/the-luxury>

Grom's Fable
Parker Fendler

Grom clapped his hands together sending a chalky cloud swirling about his face. Muscles blossomed along his thirty-foot frame as he twisted into a series of bodybuilder poses for the cheering crowd. Scanning the stadium, he spotted the giantess sandwiched between two elders. She puckered her boulder-sized lips and spewed a green vaporous smog. Wispy tendrils wafted through the crowd and found his wart encrusted cheek. A kiss! Putrene had blown him a kiss. Emboldened, he snatched a javelin from the quiver. The Marriage Trial could only be attempted every ten years, so he had to succeed. The stands hushed. He held an image of Mount Colossus in his mind. Fifty miles from his village, the sleeping volcano rose so high its peak wore a crown of clouds. No small feat for most, but with his superior strength, it would be a cinch. Grom started slowly, then accelerated as he thundered down the lane. He flung the javelin. A sonic boom shook the arena sending a small giantling tumbling. The crowd roared.

His keen eyes, larger than a pair of dinosaur eggs, traced the javelin's path. It whistled past the wetlands causing the turtles to duck under the tangle of water lilies. It sped past the forest tickling the canopies of the tallest trees. Still tracing an upward trajectory, it cruised toward the mountain. It punched through the low-lying clouds and disappeared. Just as Grom was about to dance a celebratory jig, a distant thunder silenced the crowd. Rather than sailing over the mountain, the javelin had slammed into the side of it. The crowd was speechless. Despite the impressive feat of strength, Grom had failed. The ground tremored for weeks with aftershocks.

A decade later, Grom vowed not to repeat the same mistake. He would aim higher. He spared a glance at Putrene. Teeth like monolith ruins complemented her smile. Such beauty. He blushed. The familiar boom shook the stands as the javelin rocketed into the sky. It pierced the halo of clouds and flew higher still. Then, having reached beyond the upper limits of the atmosphere, it teetered as if it might orbit the planet. Grom marveled at his strength. He would surely break the clan's all-time distance record. Finally, the projectile succumbed to the planet's gravitational pull and plummeted toward the surface. Flames engulfed the javelin as it careened through the atmosphere and transformed into a comet. It slammed into the top of Mount Colossus launching vaporized dirt and rocks into the air and blackening the skies for years. The path it had traveled was quite the opposite of the last one, but the result was the same.

Grom spent the next decade preparing for success. He shed the excess bulk and fashioned a more functional physique (and mind). Yoga and the study of physics and geometry filled his days. He trekked across the land conducting painstaking measurements. Putrene quizzed him on the optimal throwing angle given varying wind speeds and direction. The day had finally come. Everyone in the stands held their breath as he stretched. Then he wound like a spring and flung the javelin one last time. Although it sped at half the velocity of his previous throws (and lacked the dramatic boom), the angle was perfect. For fifty miles, it sailed across the diverse terrain toward the mountain. He watched as it kissed the snow-capped peak whipping up a swirl of

powder. Then it continued along to the other side where it plunked into the soft dirt. He'd done it! Putrene lumbered over, her skirt flapping in the wind. She pulled him into a bearhug and nearly crushed his ribcage. He planted a kiss on his new bride. The crowd celebrated as only giants can, the stomping of their feet shaking the very planet.

For the kids who were told that their imagination was too much, and for my inner child, may you reignite your fire.

Elisabeth Diaz Hampshire

When you're little
you run and jump across furniture
your mom is holding the control in her hand
she turns down the TV volume so that you can hear her
She's shouting at you in Spanish
because you've just knocked over her plant
and the lamp
she doesn't get that the floors are made of lava
and you're on a mission to beat the clock
or else you're dead
and so is everyone else because you're supposed to save them
but time runs out
you fall to your death
reincarnating into the fallen lamp
chipped edges, a tilted shade, and flickering light
the lamp still shines

your mom has had enough of your antics
the force of a thick leather strap
stiffens your small legs

you sit still
like a good child does
staring at your reflection in the window

“Parece que va a llover, verdad?”

“Sí, ma”

rain falls
lava leaves
and the flickering light
goes out.

Coffee at the Nirvana Café
Mitchell Waldman

Kurt Cobain is stirring his coffee, dumping another packet of sugar in and stirring. He puts his spoon down, takes a sip, says "Ahhhh," and looks over at me with a smile.

"Now, that shit's good, Nathan."

"Yeah, theirs is the best," I say.

He doesn't look half bad for a dead guy, a little pale maybe, but he's still got the light in those sky-blue eyes of his.

He sets his cup down.

"It's not what you think," he says, getting all serious on me all of the sudden.

"What isn't?"

He raises both his hands, gesturing to all the stuff in the street around us. A car horn beeps as if on cue. "All of it, all of this."

"No," he says, looking back at me and smiling again. "You know that, Nathan, come on. You've been reading those Buddhist books. You know. This is all shit, the stuff piled on. It's not what's real."

"Yeah. I think you're right. I really do."

"Come on, would I lie to you? I'm dead, for God sakes. I oughta know something by now."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"And all that shit, all that stuff I did while alive, you know that meant something, but not nearly as much as you might think. "No. I mean, some of it was good, but a lot of it was crap. Just stupid adolescent crap."

"But you were huge, Kurt. You guys changed the music."

He reaches across and pats my shoulder lightly, then leans back and stretches his arms out wide behind him and yawns. I just then notice that his T-shirt has a picture of John Lennon with IMAGINE plastered under it.

"We were huge and now someone else is huge. And Dave's not doing too bad for himself. He's done some good stuff, as long as he doesn't let it go to his head. But he seems to be okay with that stuff, doesn't let it affect him. Not like I did. I never could handle all the fame bullshit. It did me in. I just wanted to do my music."

"Yeah. We miss you, bud. The world does."

"Thanks, Nathan. It's good to hear. Just don't believe all the crap they say about me, about us. Because you know most of it is pure fucking shit."

"I know, bro', I know. But you got people to listen, and they're still listening. You could scream with the best of 'em. God-wrenching, awful, beautiful screams."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it." He stands up all of the sudden.

"You going?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's that time, I guess. Thanks for the Joe."

I nod. "Okay. Well, thanks for coming by. And say 'Hi' to John for me," I say, gesturing to his shirt.

He looks down at Lennon's face. "Oh, this? It's just something I threw on. J and me aren't gettin' on too great right now. Something I said last week about him having mother issues. But they've patched it all up now. He'll get over it."

"Yeah? I hope so."

"Keep on writing, dude, that's all I gotta say. It's all about what you share of yourself. It's not about the fame. That'll kill you in the end anyway." He gazes at me with his sad smile one more time, then walks out of the café, and down the busy street, until he's gone poof! out of sight.

I pull out my notebook and start writing, staring out across the traffic, thinking for a minute about what I'm going to say. Then I pick up my pen and start jotting in my God-awful penmanship:

Kurt Cobain is stirring his coffee, dumping another packet of sugar in and stirring.

It's Hard to Believe in Fruit
Kathryn de Leon

July hot in the garden, blackberries gathered
like silent bumblebees dark and firm.
Overripe ones bleed in my fingers.
I drop a few, saddened at that loss of juice.

I've watched the berries change
from cherubic pink to black.
Damsons and cherries share
their plump purples and reds,
bowls of colour in the kitchen.

December empties the trees and shrubs
like dinner plates scraped after a rich meal.
My shadow stretches
over stalled garden grass.

The sky is lost behind
a wild grey of clouds.
Bare branches point to nothing.
It's hard to believe in fruit today.

Touch Of Fire
Nikki Williams

Joan took one last look at the sunlit ocean from her window seat.

Blue, like the sprawling sky that filtered through foliage as she'd trekked into the dense woods.

When she'd finally found the hut under the high canopy, Joan's breathing slowed. She'd been hoping it wasn't still there. Pressing her palm against the door, she stepped into darkness. Something in the air burned her eyes and throat but she stood fixed in the furnace heat. Waiting.

A man emerged from behind a thick curtain, a few flickering wicks at his back, his eyes hollow in the inky blackness. There was something about his hands: fingernails like jutting blades, digits curling constantly like a centipede inching closer, like they would keep going forever.

He cleared his throat—the echo bristled the skin on her bare arms. Joan removed a crumpled photo from her pocket. She placed it into his palm, her eyes sliding to the thatch wall. The man turned and she followed him to the tiny room where shadows strutted across the walls as if they were alive.

#

Joan ignored the smiling stewardesses, slowly drifting past the beeping, bright lights and muffled conversations in the airport terminal. She'd tried sleeping on the flight to no avail and longed for the leather comfort of her car. Sinking into the red Altezza, she closed her eyes and her shoulders relaxed. She started the car, then tensed up again as her engine rumbled but would not start. Panic seized her brain. Shutting out the low thumping of her heart, she slowly turned the key again. This time, the car roared to life. Joan sped off into the traffic, the terminal watching her disappear like a force had swept her away.

By the time she reversed into her parking spot nearly an hour later, something had shifted. The fatigue in her bones didn't feel like jetlag. There was no shaking the sinking sensation. Though she'd planned to catch up on work when she got in, sleep descended on her like a dense fog.

#

Joan awoke to the sunset's glow and a throbbing pain behind her eyes. Nothing an aspirin and her favorite food couldn't fix, she mused, resenting the noises coming from her stomach. Slipping on her black Crocs, she yanked a tunic off a hanger and immediately wished she hadn't. Hints of cobalt and coral recalled the tufts of sky she'd glimpsed on the twisting jungle path.

#

It took her less than the usual ten minutes to get to Leshko's. There was no parking at the downtown eatery, and she'd leave her car a few blocks away; the short commute gave her time to clear her head. But it didn't work this time. Something was gnawing at her.

#

Exiting with her order, Joan stopped suddenly on the sidewalk. A beggar stood on the corner, her craggy digits clutching a tattered, fluttering sign. Walking past her, Joan stole a cursory glance at the woman's hands. She was surprised at her own concern when there was nothing she

could do for her. Crossing the street, she lowered her gaze, listening to sirens wailing far away as she walked back to her car.

She scanned her surroundings as she approached the Altezza, the city skyline draped in its twinkling veil. Soon, the scent of spices was filling her car, fragrant whiffs of pepper and basil. She sighed, suddenly craving Leshkos' lava cakes, wishing it wasn't already too late.

When Joan finally turned the key, a sensation streaked down her spine.

The loud bang shattered the evening calm.

The beggar stood slack-shouldered where Joan had left her, eyes transfixed on the orange light on the horizon.

Flames cracked like knuckles as they crawled over the chassis, leaping towards the sky as if they'd come alive.

Meditations from a Street Past Thảo Cầm Viên
 Brian Lee

It does not make sense
 how we reluctantly found our
 way here, mecca of hearts,
 heir apparent to True North,
 past the little brick hut, past
 the pebbles in the rain, past
 the scattered hoa mai, lying
 downtrodden as youthful years

do. Especially when we cast
 our exoticised gaze upon them
 from behind these aged gates,
 coated ineluctably with the
 corrosive patina of a dozen years.
 But your lips part in protest—

Không, không! as your clear-seeing
 fingertips direct our gaze upon
 the streets, garlanded by
 their sooty pavements; see how
 the children still ride pillion upon
 the leathered humpback Vespas:
 observe how the festive horns
 continue to rise with the wind.

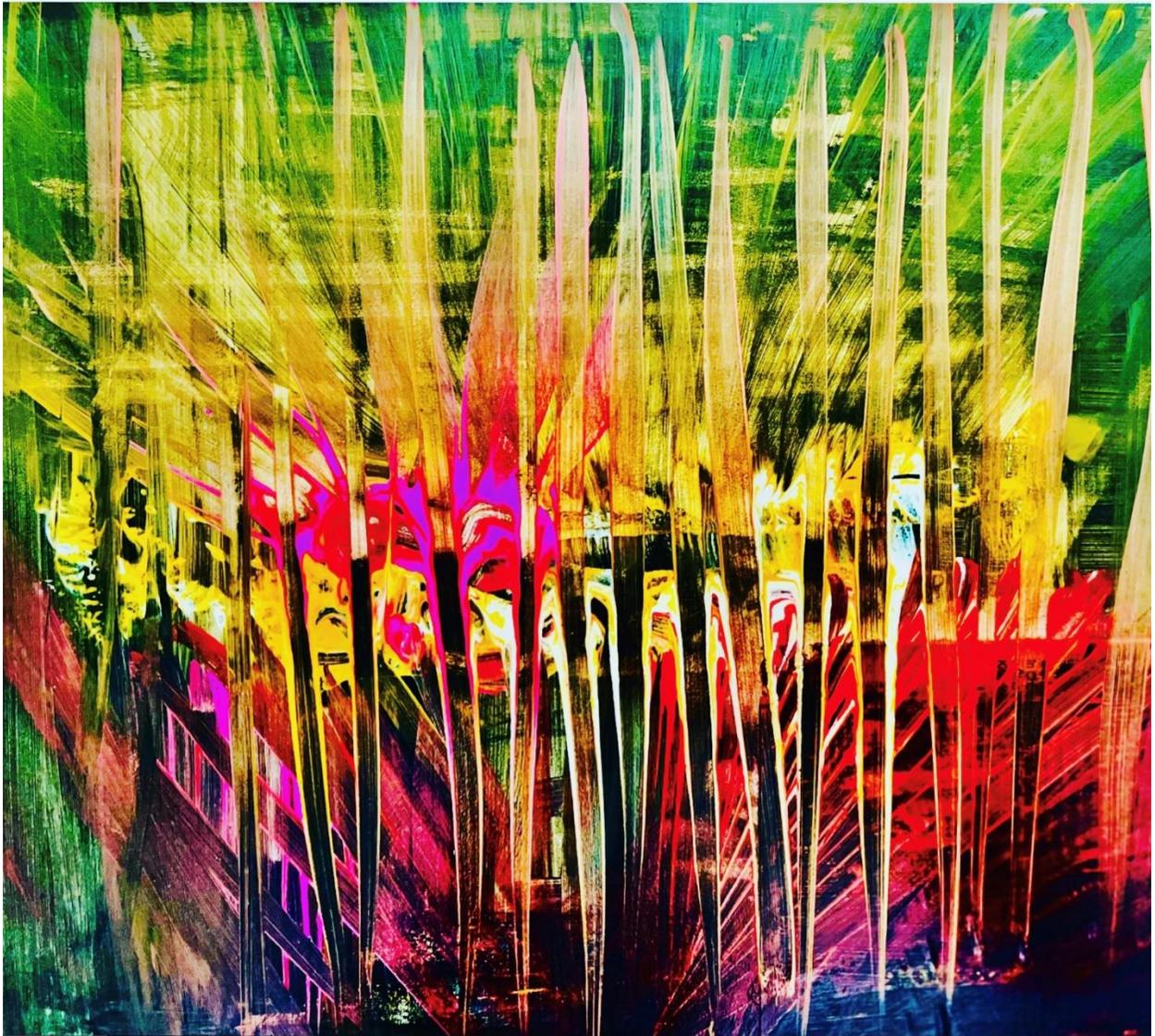
All I can afford, a pauper,
 the crumpled năm ngàn dollar bills
 from torn jeans and windbreakers.
 Adorned with sighs, no, they
 are not falling into the zookeeper's
 calloused hands. Keep your
 clean fingers clean, they float,

with Pepsi-Cola bottlecaps,
 stomped into concrete and
 faded by time. Along with
 the softshell turtle of old, which

we sheltered with grains
and the occasional shrimp, until
its bite grew hard and demeanour
frosty. To which (I recall,

but perhaps you were
still young.) we remedied
without delay, casting it
with impunity, flinging this
once-cherished old memory
into the gaping mouth of Sông Sài Gòn.
Sans farewell. And on the
way back, perhaps (memory
sometimes eludes me)

we turned down the street
right beside Thảo Cầm Viên,
entered the seafood restaurant—
“Ocean Palace”—
asked for a table, walked past
the giant tank housing its kin.



WILD-Mamta Wathare

What Do I Wear to My Friend's Funeral?

Zach Murphy

I didn't reply to Jacob's last text message to me, but I did show up to his funeral. I'd spent the entire morning deciding what to wear. A lot of the clothes that I once wore don't quite fit me the way they used to in high school.

Is wearing black to a funeral mandatory? If funerals are truly meant to be a celebration of life, why can't people wear something bright? I thought about wearing my orange polo, but I was worried I'd stand out too much. Maybe the key is to wear something somewhere in-between. So I went with gray.

A funeral is just a little bit different from a high school reunion. At high school reunions, you get to see who potentially has their life together and who doesn't. At funerals, you get to see who shows up at all. I don't see anyone from high school here.

I blend in at the burial ceremony. A putrid stench wafts off of the marshy pond in the background of the cemetery. People pretend not to notice. But the more that people pretend not to notice something, the more you notice them pretending not to notice something. This is when I realize that sunglasses weren't invented to keep the sun out of your eyes. They were invented to wear at funerals. A split second of eye contact can send you into a dizzying spiral.

I watch Jacob's mother go through three entire boxes of tissues. Jacob's stepfather, who used to step all over him, half-heartedly attempts to comfort her. He rolls his eyes. I can't help but grind my teeth.

Jacob was a bit strange. And even a little irksome sometimes. But maybe Jacob just wanted some company. Maybe he wanted an ever-so brief escape from his home. I regret the time he knocked on my door and I told my mom to tell him I wasn't home. I regret the time I didn't invite him to my birthday get-together. It's amazing how get-togethers can actually push people apart. I really wish I would have answered that last text message, even if it was about a movie I had no intention of ever seeing.

My grinding teeth come to a halt, like a train stopping when the conductor sees a problem on the tracks. I duck out of the burial and head to my rusted Subaru. I break down inside of the car that has its own breakdowns.

Someday, our bones, our brains, and our hearts won't feel a thing. But right now, I need to go home and change.

The Pestilence of Memories
John Tustin

Each day the pestilence of memories rises
From the mud like phlegm in the throat
Of a morning in mourning for a past
That was nothing more than a wish unfulfilled
And it must either be spit out or swallowed.

The locusts of memories ravage the crops
That would otherwise lie dormant and rotting.
They feed on each morsel of misremembering,
They gorge on the promises that, though withered,
Still sway in the dust and the breeze

And the dingy setting of another unfaithful sun.

Bios

Daniel Moreschi is a poet from Neath, South Wales, UK. After life was turned upside down by his ongoing battle with severe M.E., he rediscovered his passion for poetry that had been dormant since his teenage years. Writing has served as a distraction from his struggles ever since. Daniel has been acclaimed by many poetry competitions, including the annual ones hosted by the Oliver Goldsmith Literature Festival, Wine Country Writers Festival, Short Stories Unlimited, Michigan Poetry Society, Westmoreland Arts & Heritage Festival, Ohio Poetry Day, and Inchicore Ledwidge Society. Daniel has also had poetry published by The Society of Classical Poets, and The Black Cat Poetry Press.

Manaly Talukdar is an emerging writer from Assam, India who pens her stories when her memories haunt her ... even in her sleep! She was chosen as a finalist for her short fiction "Where is Grandpa?" in "The League of POETS" Weekly Contest (Week 1). Her first online publication "Persona Switch" can be found in BlazeVOX Journal's fall issue 2022. She's a Cancer sun, Leo moon and Cancer rising! You can find her on Twitter and Instagram @manalytalukdar

Harry Leeds is a registered nurse. When he isn't slinging meds on the floor, he publishes works in FENCE and the Black Warrior Review. He edits Mumbermag with DA Powell. He had an honorable mention in Best American Essays. He lived in Russia for a few years. He's got a memoir in verse about nursing. There was an MFA in there too from the University of Florida.

Mary Grimm has had two books published, *Left to Themselves* (novel) and *Stealing Time* (story collection), and a number of flash pieces in places like *Helen*, *The Citron Review*, and *Tiferet*. Currently, she is working on a YA thriller.

Thomas Piekarski is a former editor of the California State Poetry Quarterly. His poetry has appeared in such publications as *Poetry Quarterly*, *Literature Today*, *The Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Modern Literature*, *The Museum of Americana*, *South African Literary Journal*, and *Home Planet News*. His books of poetry are *Ballad of Billy the Kid*, *Monterey Bay Adventures*, *Mercurial World*, and *Aurora California*.

Allyson Hubbard was born, raised and met her husband in Southern California. Allyson and her husband continue to live in So Cal where they enjoy a close, lively relationship with their children and grandchildren. Allyson has been writing for quite a while but is just beginning to dip her toes into sharing and submitting. It is Allyson's hope that through her writing the reader will want more...more of the story, more of the characters, more writing that will spark and touch the reader to search out more of what Allyson has to say next.

John Dorroh may have taught high school science for several decades. Whether he did is still being discussed. Three of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net, and hundreds more have appeared in journals such as *Feral*, *River Heron*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Selcouth Station*. He had two chapbooks published in 2022 – *Swim at Your Risk* and *Personal Ad Poetry*.

Jordan Johnston is an emerging writer from Vancouver, Canada who minored in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. His work has appeared in SAD Mag.

Miles Varana's work has appeared in Typehouse, The Penn Review, and Passages North. He has worked previously as a staff reader and managing editor at Hawai'i Pacific Review. Miles currently works for WKBT News in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he does his best to be a good Millennial despite disliking tandem bike rides.

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet who is published widely in both Britain and the USA, where he is a regular in journals like San Pedro River Review and Third Wednesday. In Britain he appears regularly in magazines like Atrium, Black Nore Review, Prole and The Journal.

Robbin Farr writes short forms: poetry and brief creative non-fiction. Barely able to achieve a thousand words, her concentration on the short form keeps writing real. In addition, she is the editor of River Heron Review, a free-access, online poetry journal. She most enjoys the avenues of possibility that writing reveals whether she is editing the journal or her own drafts. Robbin has been published in numerous journals including Panoply, 2River View, Atlanta Review and upcoming in Citron Review.

Robert Sumner grew up in Virginia and has been a Californian for twenty-five years. His fiction has appeared in Riprap, The Emerson Review, The Penmen Review, Jokes Review, and The Quotable.

Amber Burke graduated from Yale and the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. She teaches writing and yoga at UNM-Taos. Her work has been published in magazines including The Sun, X-R-A-Y, Michigan Quarterly Review, Raleigh Review, Superstition Review, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Quarterly West, and Flyway Journal. Yoga International has published over 100 of her articles and the ebook she co-authored, Yoga for Common Conditions. Check out some of her work here: <https://amberburke3.wixsite.com/amberburkewriting> .

Karen Walker writes short in a low basement with a tall man and a tall dog. They offer support, bring food. She/her. @MeKawalker883

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, lives in Syracuse, NY, writes about witches, cleaning ladies, struggling teachers, neighborhood ghosts, and other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

James Croal Jackson works in film production. His most recent chapbooks are Count Seeds with Me (Ethel Zine & Micro-Press, 2022) and Our Past Leaves (Kelsay Books, 2021). Recent poems are in Stirring, SAND, and Vilas Avenue. He edits The Mantle Poetry from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (jamescroaljackson.com)

Stephen Caesar has been an English teacher/tutor since 2004. He served as adjunct professor of English literature at Newbury College in Boston and is former Senior Docent at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. He has had two research articles published in the

peer-reviewed journal *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* and three short stories published in *Black Petals*, *Fabula Argentea*, and *The Horror Zine*.

Heather Sager lives in Illinois. Her recent poetry appears in *StepAway Magazine*, *Litbop*, *Magma*, *morphrog*, *Creative Flight*, *Remington Review*, *ActiveMuse* (Pushcart nomination), and more journals. Heather also writes fiction.

As well as previously in *Corvus Review*, Harris Coverley has had over two hundred poems published in journals around the world, including *California Quarterly*, *Star*Line*, *Spectral Realms*, *Silver Blade*, *The Crank*, *The Flying Saucer Poetry Review*, *The Lotus Tree Literary Review*, *Yellow Mama*, *View from Atlantis*, and many others. He lives in Manchester, England.

David Estringel is a Xicanx writer/poet with works published in literary publications like *The Opiate*, *Azahares*, *Cephalorpress*, *DREICH*, *Somos en escrito*, *Ethel*, *Corvus Review*, *The Milk House*, *Beir Bua Journal*, and *The Blue Nib*. His first collection of poetry and short fiction *Indelible Fingerprints* was published April 2019, followed *Blood Honey and Cold Comfort House* (2022, *little punctures* (2023)), and *Blind Turns in the Kitchen Sink* (scheduled for 2024). David has written six poetry chapbooks, *Punctures*, *PeripherieS*, *Eating Pears on the Rooftop*, *Golden Calves and Blue* (2023), and *Sour Grapes* (coming 2024). Connect with David on Twitter [@The_Booky_Man](#) and his website www.davidaestringel.com.

Marilyn Cavicchia lives in Chicago and is a managing editor at the Society of Critical Care Medicine. Other publications in which her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming include *Hags on Fire*, *The Parliament*, and *After Hours*.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Stand*, *Washington Square Review* and *Floyd County Moonshine*. Latest books, “Covert” “Memory Outside The Head” and “Guest Of Myself” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *McNeese Review*, *Santa Fe Literary Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

Mike Lee is a writer, editor and photographer for a labor publication in New York City. His short stories are published in many print and online publications, including *Ghost Parachute*, *Lunate*, *trampset*, among others. His award-winning photography has been published in *Oprah Magazine*, *The Chief-Leader* and participated in several group shows in Europe and the United States. He also blogs for *Focus on the Story* website: www.mlephotoart.com.

In the past six months alone, Eli S. Evans has published work in several now defunct literary magazines, including but not limited to *Berfrois*, *The Bear Creek Gazette*, *Misery Tourism*, and *(mic)ro(mac)*. A small book of small stories, *Obscure & Irregular*, was published in 2021, and a larger book of even smaller stories is forthcoming in 2023, hopefully in time for National No Pants Day on May 1st.

Joseph Linscott is a writer currently living in Denver, CO with his wife and dog. His work has appeared in *ZiN Daily*, *Sporklet*, and elsewhere. He can be found on Twitter [@prosephlinscott](#).

Heini Mair is an artist from Wales, UK. She is working on a collection for self-publication due to be released this year. You can find her poetry and art pieces on Instagram at [Billie April \(@billi3hapril\)](#).

Daniel Mowery lives in Greensboro, NC with his wife, daughter, and dog. He works in residential construction, and can be found bouncing between the nursery and the music room. His grandmother struggled with Dementia for years before her passing, and his grandfather is currently battling with Alzheimer's with a happy heart. He hopes Mr. Memory continues to visit for as long as he can. Daniel received a BA in Literature & Creative Writing from Catawba College. He has been published in The Chamber Magazine, and has three upcoming poems in Spurned Zine by Gnashing Teeth Publishing, and in Suburban Witchcraft. Twitter - @DMoweryWrites

Joe Giordano was born in Brooklyn. He and his wife Jane now live in Texas. Joe's stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines including The Saturday Evening Post, and Shenandoah, and his short story collection, Stories and Places I Remember. His novels include, Birds of Passage, An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story, and the Anthony Provati thriller series, Appointment with ISIL, Drone Strike, and The Art of Revenge. Visit Joe's website at <https://joe-giordano.com/>

Mykyta Ryzhykh is from Ukraine. Winner of the international competition Art Against Drugs and some Ukrainian awards; laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik, Lyceum, Twelve, named after Dragomoshchenko. Nominated for Pushcart Prize. Mykyta has been published many times in the journals Dzvin, Dnipro, Bukovinian magazine, Polutona, Rechport, Topos, Articulation, Formaslov, Literature Factory, Literary Chernihiv, Tipton Poetry Journal, Stone Poetry Journal, Divot journal, dyst journal, Superpresent Magazine, Allegro Poetry Magazine, Alternate Route, Better Than Starbucks Poetry & Fiction Journal, Littoral Press, Book of Matches, on the portals Litcenter, Ice Floe Press and Soloneba, and in the Ukrainian literary newspaper.

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. He has published short stories in Abstract, S/WORD, Blink-Ink, and The Write Launch. This is his fifth appearance in Corvus Review. His website: www.norbertkovacs.net.

Robert Pegel is a husband and father whose only child, Calvin, died in his sleep of unknown causes at 16. Robert writes about the human condition and the search for transformation. Robert holds a BA in English from Columbia University. He is a Best of the Net nominee for 2023. Robert has been published in Door is a Jar, MockingHeart Review, Green Ink Poetry, Libretto, Boats Against the Current, North Dakota Quarterly and others. Robert lives in Andover, NJ with his wife, Zulma.

Andrea DeAngelis (she/her/hers) is at times a poet, writer, shutterbug and musician living in New York City. She tries not to disturb her neighbors by putting her guitar amp in the closet. Her writing has recently appeared in Haunted MTL, The Hallowzine and Bowery Gothic.

Katy Goforth is a writer and editor for a national engineering and surveying organization and a fiction editor for Identity Theory. Her writing has appeared in The Dead Mule School, Reckon Review, Cowboy Jamboree, Salvation South, and elsewhere. She was born and raised in South Carolina and lives with her spouse and two pups, Finn and Betty Anne. You can find her on Twitter at [MarchingFourth](#) and [katygoforth.com](#).

Joseph Starr's fiction and short prose has appeared in The Mississippi Review, Denver Quarterly, 3rd Bed, and Conjunctions. In between caring for a very small house full of creatures both bipedal and quadrupedal, Starr works on his unpublished book of prose poems entitled Domicile with Darkened Window. In his free time, he enjoys lifting odd objects outdoors and walking up hills backwards, occasionally running them backwards if he's feeling good. He lives in Denver, just close enough to the mountains to really miss them.

Hilary Ayshford is a former science journalist and editor based in rural Kent in the UK. She writes mainly short form fiction across all genres from horror to humour and everything in between. She is currently working on her first novella-in-flash. Her stories have been published by Retreat West, Funny Pearls, Trembling with Fear and Syncopation Literary Journal, among others.

Parker Fendler has been conjuring up stories ever since he could dream. He recently began transcribing them after waking. His fiction has appeared in Sixfold, Across the Margin, Amarillo Bay, Potato Soup Journal, and Canyon Voices (forthcoming).

Elisabeth Diaz Hampshire, not unlike her poetry, is made up of little pieces tenuously held together and has the remarkable ability to see beauty where beauty is often overlooked.

Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including Ariel Chart, Corvus Review, Fictive Dream, The Waterhouse Review, Crack the Spine, The Houston Literary Review, The Faircloth Review, Epiphany, Wilderness House Literary Magazine, The Battered Suitcase, and many other magazines and anthologies. He is also the author of the novel, A Face in the Moon, and the story collections, Brothers, Fathers, and Other Strangers, and Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart., He also serves as Fiction Editor for Blue Lake Review. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Kathryn de Leon is from Los Angeles, California but has been living in England for thirteen years. She is a teacher and lived in Japan for six years teaching English to Japanese university students. Her poems have appeared in several magazines in the US including Calliope, Aaduna, Black Fox, Trouvaille Review, and Neologism Poetry, and in several in the UK including London Grip, The Blue Nib, and The High Window where she was the Featured American Poet.

Nikki Williams is a copywriter and music critic. Her work appears in The Citron Review, Ellipsisazine, Sublunary Review, LEON Literary Review, Sky Island Journal, Literary Yard, PreeLit, Nymphs and New Pop Lit. She munches trail mix and takes stunning photos when not busy writing. She tweets: @ohsashalee / See more: linktr.ee/writenowrong

Brian Lee is an aspiring writer and poet from Singapore. Having grown up in three different countries, he writes in an attempt to remember and recreate spaces of memory. He is inspired by our fundamental need to return and belong.

Taylor Thomas (she/her) is a biracial & bisexual emerging writer from Indiana. Her work has been published or forthcoming in Bayou Magazine, Salt Hill Journal, The Journal, So to Speak Journal, Dipity Magazine, Active Muse, and more. She received the Outstanding Literary Essay award from Voices of Diversity in 2021. She currently attends the University of Notre Dame's MFA in Creative Writing. She lives in South Bend, Indiana with her husband, Herschel, and her dogs, Bella & Buster.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Still Point Arts Quarterly, The Coachella Review, Maudlin House, B O D Y, Litro Magazine, MoonPark Review, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press, 2022) are available in paperback and eBook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2008. fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

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