

Corvus Review



Issue 22

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COVER ART

Keith Nunes (Aotearoa-New Zealand) has had poetry, fiction, haiku and visuals published around the globe. He creates ethereal manifestations as a way of communicating with the outside world. Nunes writes when the light pings and the only voices to be heard are in his head. He sleeps with Kurt Vonnegut's hopes, Cole Swenson's descriptions, Lydia Davis's prose, Denis Johnson's heroines, Larry Eigner's wheelchair, and so on. He plans to evolve into a particle. He is currently related to Pessoa.

EDITOR

Janine Mercer is a writer, editor, and podcaster living in Milwaukee, WI. Their work has appeared in many literary journals and various publications in the United States and Canada.

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Letter from the Editor

Does anyone actually read these?

Hello Magpies,

It's been a while since I've written one of these so I thought I'd take a moment to update you.

First, I'd like to thank you for perusing our collection of shiny bits. I've published many talented writers and artists over the years. The winter issue of Corvus will mark 10 years for the publication, longer than many little lit rags run out of a back bedroom. I am tremendously proud of all Corvus has produced, the flock it's built, and I'm continuously impressed by new work that appears in the slush pile. Corvus is a passion project and will continue to deliver as long as the Magpies (usually just myself) are able.

As far as abilities go, the end of last year was a challenging one for me. I wound up in the ER at the beginning of September 2023 with some strange symptoms. I won't bore you with those details, but when all was said and done, I found out I had a saddle embolism and was taken into surgery for a thrombectomy. It was an emergency situation as I could have suffocated from the buildup of blood clots in my lungs. I was told if I hadn't gone to the hospital when I did, I would have died. The procedure (I was awake for it all) was successful and I was put on several rounds of blood thinning medication to help break down the remaining blockages. In short, I'm recovering and that process could take months, years, or, in some ways, may never really improve. I also strained the right side of my heart so there is much healing to be done.

There's something about a situation like this that really helps to put things in perspective. I love being able to do the little things I always took for granted like stopping to smell the flowers or spending time at my pond and watching the fish splash about. Linda Ellis's poem, "The Dash," refers to the dash on your headstone between your date of birth and your expiry date. I've been thinking a lot more about my dash as of late. At this point in my life, I feel like I've done a lot that many didn't think I would accomplish, one of those things being the creation of a successful literary journal. I'll forever be proud of that.

Anyway, I just wanted to fill you all in as I've spoken to a few Magpies since getting out of the hospital but haven't really explained the situation. The bottom line is, I am here and continuing to further this little lit rag's mission. I will be here as long as I can.

So, in closing, I want to wish you all a bright and vibrant summer brimming with prospects and all the shiny bits life has to offer. Keep creating. Keep elevating your work and raising up your fellow Magpies.

And keep feeding your dash.

Janine Mercer

Krumpta

Aleks Omylak

It is objectively impossible to dislike Grace Jesus-Lilypad. It is, however, very easy to dislike Krumpta. Krumpta is a walking biohazard. She smells of russet potatoes in the springtime and of wet coal in December. She tries an average amount and fails. She blames the women of her family for everything (she hates women), especially for the generational curses they have imparted on her and her unborn children (she hates children) with their eyes closed and backs straight while swaying in lush Irish meadows. Krumpta wails about these psychological woes and picks herself up from under their weight only as many times as she has to in order to be classified as ‘brave’ by the men she eats pretzels with on the green bench outside of Smitty’s Gas and Goods (~3-4 times). In her own home, she eats in the dark, biting into her microwaveable dumplings in such a way that the pork juices shoot out and land squarely on her dusty kitchen floor in the arrangement of major constellations so that, come morning time, she may outline the hardened fatty droplets in chalk, photograph her progress and send it (funnily enough) to Grace Jesus-Lilypad, who was the first to teach Krumpta about stars and Jupiter. Krumpta has yet to successfully capture 87 of the 88 officially recognized constellations.

She is a character of ambiguous chutzpah; a skeletally-unsound, deeply disturbing scarecrow of a sin machine with nothing but a single, lonely conviction suction-cupped to the inside of her skull: all Earthly life is but a trot in an iron hamster wheel. Randomness is king, and coincidence the ultimate governing force that this monarch uses to piss on criminals and zookeepers alike. Krumpta is fundamentally determined to withdraw herself from any campaign of personal improvement because “no philanthropic feat, no invention of life-saving medical procedures, no amount of dirty money or sexual favors can render an individual immune to the cold, uncompromising hands of life’s pure indifference and genuine disinterest in whether the microscopic sand grains scattered across its spherical body are deserving of peace or fire-sharpened wrath.” This belief has taken time to harden and manifest in Krumpta to render her the philosophical tank we see her as today. Witnessing her transformation was like waiting for rock candy to crystalize. Before crystallization begins, one is staring at a string or dowel suspended in cold, sugar water. This distrust of life purpose grew into the microscopic crevice between her brain and her head bone like a fungus, at first occupying the space like a paper-thin tumor, gradually inflating like a balloon as her brain lost weight due to climate change (metaphorically-speaking, of course, about the tumor, not the climate change).

Husbandry
Robert Nisbet

Now that I come to husband these things,
I am amazed how close I come to wonderment.
On Llansteffan beach, in a full June,
we swung full-circle turns, swung
from the green of the woods and the grey
terrace, along a lighter green inland and round
to Ferryside, the doll's houses along the railway
line and the estuary stretching to the sea.
The pub in Lamma Street was thought of
as a poet's pub. (We sometimes met Garlick
there). It was benign Carmarthenshire,
kind. And then the Boathouse,
predictable maybe, but your pleasure was such,
in the scraps of manuscript, the dusty room
preserved, even the herons we saw, that
we were glad we'd come to find a poet, finding
too Carmarthenshire and the season's story.
Now that the memories are gathered,
only good will come of them.

VARIANT LITERATURE

*Bean Spiller***Carroll Ann Susco**

Susco takes us to hell and back and sings her own mysteries in this fierce, spare, courageous, poetic rendering of a life and lives lived on the mental edge. —Catherine Gammon, author of *China Blue*, *Sorrow*, and *Isabel Out of the Rain*

Susco writes to both the mentally ill and those who have no experience with the ill to illuminate, heal, and come to terms. From various perspectives, Susco weaves a portrait that is evocative and meaningful in a collection that deals with how mental illness is experienced and how it is passed down generation to generation. It's about how it is made peace with, dealt with, and ultimately how it is endured. *Bean Spiller* is an important statement, fighting the good fight against suffering and stigma and fighting for a new, better way to see mental illness.



Carroll Ann Susco has an M.F.A. from the University of Pittsburgh in fiction and numerous publications, including three in *The Sun Magazine* and two in *The Blood Pudding*. Her short story "Sinking" was made into a film, renamed "Burned," and won best narrative at the Ohio Film Festival.

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M.I.A.

Rebecca Kilroy

Maybe it's the Rapture. But surely, if fascist dictators and oil barons and people who don't use turn their signals made it into Heaven, you would too. Well maybe there was a plague. Maybe it wiped everyone out overnight and you're magically, infuriatingly immune. And the bodies? Maybe the plague eats flesh. And bone. And organs. And also infects domesticated animals because you haven't seen any either in weeks. But maybe the problem isn't everyone else. Maybe it's you. Maybe you're hallucinating or in a coma or dead. Maybe you're the victim of a long-running practical joke/psychological study. Maybe this is *The Truman Show*. Maybe you're meant to go insane. Maybe if you scream at the walls for a few hours, someone will show themselves. No? Then maybe you're cursed. Maybe some supernatural being wants you to learn a lesson like *Groundhog Day* meets *A Christmas Carol*. Maybe this is punishment for ghosting your last four boyfriends. Maybe you're dead. Maybe this is Hell. Maybe one of those boyfriends you ghosted *was* a supernatural being, maybe the one with the birthmark on his dick (yeah, it was definitely probably Jason but did you ghost him or was it the other way around?) Or maybe aliens. Maybe the undead. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it's not that bad. Maybe it's a worldwide metaphor for modern man's lack of connection. Maybe you're just been shit out of luck lately. Maybe if you wait long enough, things will eventually go back to normal and because there's no one around to tell you that's a bad idea, probably you'll do it.

This Old Moon
MaxieJane Frazier

Moonlight slashed through branches, striping Miriam's face. Brake lights flashed beyond the window with her soon-to-be-ex-husband's jabbing stomp and left turn. Recently, as a fingernail sliver, this very moon watched his skin, silvery, against a stranger's. As if Miriam were still riding through the fifteen years of his shitty driving, her body jerked and swayed. An ache expanded in her chest: the thinning skin of an overfull balloon. How had this very moon shot a molten beam rippling across the pooling river onto her own body entwined with his? Witnessed their abandoned wolf howls? Illuminated their snow angels on the frozen lake?

One breath. Another. Now the lycan light puddled in submission at her feet. Yes, it would light her way again.

MATTERLOOM™ ASSEMBLY AND INSTALLATION

WARNING: The MatterLoom™ is not a toy, it is a product. Misuse or improper assembly of equipment can result in grievous bodily harm, utter obliteration or systematic removal of one's self from reality entirely.

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Product Inc. thanks you for your purchase. Enjoy your new product with care.

Signed,

Richard Weed Jr., CEO of Product Inc.

Components:

A1 2in Screws (32)

GG Lead Anti-Radiation Panels (8)

HH Stabilizer Cage w/ Input Port (1)

Q3 Weaver™ Mechanical Finger Lathe (1)

A2 Cursed Object (1)

Step 1: Using a Phillips head screwdriver, use Screws (A1) to secure Lead Anti-Radiation Panels (GG) to the Stabilizer Cage (HH). Missing a Screw (A1) could result in catastrophe for you and/or the surrounding area. But your apartment is pretty empty anyway, and it's not like you live on the nice side of town.

Step 2: Within the Stabilizer Cage (HH) isolate the Input Port. Install the Weaver™ Mechanical Finger Lathe (Q3) at the Input Port. You should hear a click sound when it is correctly installed. Leave your coffee in the kitchen, because you are liable to spill on your living room carpet and the carpet already seems to have enough stains on it. Keep your cellphone handy; you might receive a call soon.

Step 3: Carefully handle your Cursed Object (A2) with nitrile gloves. If the Cursed Object (A2) comes in contact with bare skin, rinse contaminated area with cold water. If the contaminated area itches, stings or burns contact your local poison control center immediately.

Position the Cursed Object (A2) gently between the needle points of the ten fingers of the Weaver™ Lathe (Q3). It should suspend in mid-air between them if installed correctly.

If the Cursed Object (A2) is glowing purple, this is normal. If it is glowing with a hue never before seen by human eyes that penetrates your psyche and feeds you false memories that reshape your very identity, beginning the slow and severe process of deformation or death by encephalopathy, you have received a defective Cursed Object. Please contact customer support for instructions on how to return your defective Cursed Object. *

*Product Inc will replace your Cursed Object within 5 to 35 business days. Product Inc is not liable for damages incurred from defective Cursed Objects. Shipping and handling rates apply.

Note: If you have made it past Step 3 without being obliterated, you may proceed with complete disregard towards caution and/or personal safety.

Step 4: You missed a Screw (A1) in Step 2, most likely because you had to stop and take your coffee back to the kitchen. It's okay. Go ahead and install it now, but be wary of the cursed energy radiating out of the orifice. Once you have installed that Screw (A1), set the MatterLoom™ in the upright position. Be sure to install our phone app available for free download in the Google Play Store and the Apple Store. Scan the QR code below or visit our website for more information.

Step 5: Your mother is calling. You should answer. She misses hearing from you because you're her last connection to her family after your younger sister joined that off-grid hippy commune. Your phone is connected to wifi, so it shouldn't affect the speed at which the app downloads.

Your mother loves you; you know. It would really brighten her day to hear from you.

Step 6: Now that the app is installed, you may browse our free collection of MatterLoom™ blueprints. We also offer a Premium Blueprint Subscription service starting at the low price of \$29.99/month. Feel free to design your own MatterLoom™ blueprints in CAD or our own MatterLoomDev™ software, available for download in the Google Play Store and the Apple Store for the recently discounted price of \$999.99. Scan the QR code below or visit our website for more information. Use code PRODUCTDISCOUNT at checkout for .1% off your purchase.

Note: If, after Step 3 you noticed a note that informed you to proceed with complete disregard towards caution and/or personal safety, it was an attempt to keep you from panicking. In reality you made a dire and irreversible error during the assembly in Step 2 by forgetting that Screw. There is nothing to be done. You will be unmade and removed from reality altogether between the hours of 4:35pm Mountain Standard Time and 5:05pm Australian Central Standard Time.

Step 7: Call your mother back. You will cease to exist soon and any effects or memory of your existence will be systematically removed from all reality. Tell her you love her. Tell her you

never expected her to be a superhero, you only just ever wanted her to be there for you and she always was. Tell her you know that she tried and you hold nothing against her. Tell her that she has nothing to apologize for and that you never held her responsible for the actions of your lousy drunkard father or stinky hippy sister. No relationship is perfect, but she tried so hard. Reconnect with her because she is all you will have left and it would be a shame to be unmade from existence without forgiving and having been forgiven for the innate sorrows that come with having existed at all. Hurry, you are running out of time.

Step 8: Enter your credit card information in the app to finish registering your MatterLoom™. Upload a profile photo and personal bio to your account and connect with thousands of Matterloomers near you. Enjoy your MatterLooming (while you can)!



“Cutleries”

Gavin Kim is a dedicated artist, currently attending a high school in Easthampton, Massachusetts. She is actively working on building her art portfolio and developing her skills in various mediums. In her free time, she indulges in her passion for ceramics, baking, and playing golf.

When I Was a Pirate
Sarah Daly

When my father was dying, my mother took me to the movies. I would watch, enthralled by the superheroes, cowboys, and astronauts, while my mother just stared blankly at the screen. I would peer over the tall seats, absorbing every color, every sound, every flash of light. Even the previews were riveting and source material for my imagination.

My mother's unseeing eyes only vaguely disturbed me as we walked home. In my head, I was figuring out how to re-enact my favorite scenes in our small backyard. The bushes along the fence would be my jungle, the sticks, my swords, the sandbox, my moonscape. In the evenings, when it was too dark to play outside, but too early to go to bed, I would draw pictures of pirates, and shipwrecks, and buried treasure and give them to my father to admire.

When he was first diagnosed, my mother and I would eat our meals in the kitchen, while he sat in the living room with the television blaring. Never asking him to turn it down, we would finish eating and then my mother would leaf through a magazine. Eventually, he sat in front of the television all day and all night. So, my mother bought us ear plugs so we could sleep. When he began to vomit, he vomited directly on the floor, purposely missing the bucket my mother had placed at his feet. When my mother would try to clean it up, he'd throw the bucket across the room. When she placed a blanket on his lap, he would toss it away. When she tried to comb his hair, he would ruffle it. After a few months, he had no appetite and would toss his plate, mashed potato side down, onto the rug. My mother would scrub out the stains on her hands and knees. Soon, his body was so weak that she was able to drag him onto a rented hospital bed and wheel him to the guest room. After that, I rarely saw him, unless I had a drawing for him. Then he'd grunt and stick it in his pocket so it was all crumpled.

Whenever he was sleeping soundly, we left and went to the movies. The usher soon knew us and saved us the seats we liked, right in the middle of the theater. We didn't have any money for popcorn or candy, but sometimes the usher would slip me some Tootsie Rolls. I ate them carefully, slowly peeling back the wrapper then sliding them into my mouth so my mother wouldn't notice. The flavor stayed in my mouth for hours and only made the movie more exciting. Even if the movie was a romance, there was always something that I could find that appealed to me: a cliff, a cool car, a Ferris wheel. These trips made me a happy child, a young boy who loved imagining games, drawing, and making up stories. I'd scare the bull, build a rocket ship, fly to the moon. If I could only make myself and others smile, then there was no reason to worry.

So, it was not until my father's final hours that my untiring geniality cracked. My mother had motioned me to enter his bedroom and stand beside his bed. The room was repugnant; though my mother kept the area spotless, the equipment, the medications, and other paraphernalia exuded coldness, sterility, and a smell which I would forever after associate with death. Everything in the room, from the pill bottles to the hospital bed, were bitter, unfeeling, and ungenerous. I turned towards him only to block them from my sight. He was breathing quickly and could barely focus his eyes. He was not *a man*, not my father; he was some corpse, some zombie, some supernatural being who only partially inhabited this world. I could hardly bear to look at him, a man who my mother and I had once feared, tiptoed around uneasily, trying to placate his shifting moods. "Tell him that you love him," my mother whispered to me. I wanted to please my mother, really, I did, but my mouth was full of stones; this was a ghost, a vampire, an alien disguised as my father. A coughing, choking sound came out of my mouth, but that was

all. My mother sighed and led me away. I fled to the backyard, where I hid behind the bushes, my body shaking and my mind confusing reality with the scenes that I had envisioned and had spent hours re-enacting.

After his death, my mother beckoned me into his room, which had been off-limits for some time. She opened the side drawer, and there, smooth and stacked neatly, were my drawings.

What Crows Think of Us
Tim Murphy

Do you ever think
about the things animals
must say behind our back?
Or maybe to our face.
For they know we don't listen
to anyone but ourselves,
and hardly even that.

Let's take Crows. They nose through
our trash, take our shiny things,
live amongst us, know us well.
They must think it odd we need
studies to know they know us.
They must find us aloof. No.
Arrogant. These glorified primates
who need clothes to be seen,
pave the world to stone,
leave the stove of this planet on,
sleepwalk through streets
only noticing our own —
all the while, still thinking
we are the ones aware.

Perched on a lamppost,
the crow sees us coming.
Reads us like books they don't need.
Walnut in their beak, at the ready.
Drop it just as we draw near,
as we drive on by,
as they feast using these tools
they make of us.

Cocklebur
Mark Dunbar

Cocklebur, I see now that I've got it wrong
hauling my primped-up heart to the tent sale
every day—afraid that before long
spoilage wins, lifts its insidious veil
to show how the dance really ends. How quaint.
How desperate it makes the come hither,
how inadequate etiquette, how faint.
Your dance card's empty, cocklebur—quiver,
shout, bluff your unceremonious heart
out pining for all the stale niceties
that scorn your craft, your most delicate art
needling strangers before they can flee
the wonder of forsakenness again,
a kingdom for a handsome dose of pain.

Infestation
J. Tavares

"It's not supernatural. I never said that. I never said it because I don't believe it. I'm not sure what's going on here, I just have a suspicion. But it's nothing crazy like what you said. I don't believe that kind of thing."

Her look dipped from his eyes to the front of his good t-shirt through the 8-inch gap between door and jamb.

"I don't think it's good you being here by yourself. At least your clothes are clean, and you seem lucid, but I don't like any of this weirdo bullshit. When was the last time you talked to Dr Besic?"

"Look, I checked for carbon monoxide, which is what causes people to see and do weird shit. That's not an issue here. The furnace doesn't work. Hasn't worked in a long time. What I'm talking about isn't anything to do with me. Animals, maybe. Nobody's been here in years, Elena. Maybe a decade."

"Like raccoons and shit?" She asked, maybe taking him seriously for the first time since she showed up on the porch. "They can be dangerous, Jacob. I remember how you used to be sleeping in the dark, let alone now by yourself in this house with no power and wild animals."

"I was a child." Jacob said. "An anxious child."

He tried to remember that weak, coward child as her taillights shrank and took whatever faint sisterly fog of comfort, she emanated with her into the evening and off to her world of new possessions and high ceilings. He couldn't and was fine with that. He estimated the time to full dark by the evening sky's color and shut the door.

In turning from the doorway to face the interior of the house, the first droplets of sweat seeped out of his back to be sopped up by the t-shirt. His heartbeat sped up but not from fear. He was excited. Anticipating. That was wrong. It wasn't natural to be unafraid. It wasn't a reasonable human reaction.

With the energetic euphoria of a new millionaire, he marched swiftly and confidently to the smallest of the three bedrooms and the closet at its back. He opened the closet door and then pushed in the part of the wall that swung inward to reveal the black rectangle beyond. So black it would have been foreboding even if one were certain of what it hid. He stepped into it and was shocked when he — his own hands — shut the door behind him. He had no light and could not see if there was a handle on the inside or a trick to getting it open again.

What if he had told Elena that he saw shapes moving in the dark? Or that he knew what they were. Or that he knew why the bank let her and Oscar get it so easily. Easily enough that old Oscar didn't worry about her pathetic, homeless brother staying there unsupervised until they could fix it up.

He walked in the dark and felt no dread even when there were heavy shuffling noises behind him. Coarse fabric brushing gently against the walls like something fat and soft bulging in a burlap sack. His eyes wide open, he smiled. Surrounded, he waited for them to take him, take from him and give to him, and then to be among them forever.



“Human Garden”

Brian Park is a ninth-grade student attending high school in Massachusetts with a passion for visual arts. Brian's art portfolio encompasses a range of mediums and styles, reflecting his diverse interests and inspirations. Outside of his artistic pursuits, Brian enjoys exploring nature, reading, and spending time with friends and family. He is excited about the possibility of sharing his artwork with a wider audience and looks forward to continuing to grow as an artist.

Deep Freeze
Jan Cronos

The frost at the north pole wasn't funny although Rosita couldn't stop making jokes about Santicles. These lifted her below zero depression. Winter had become the singular season, global warming turned on its head as Sol faded. Droll humor referred to frigid balls, though most men over 40 weren't amused. Kids were "chips off the old ice block." The myth of the frigid blond was a truism.

Patting Mila on the head, Rosita sighed. Her husband was deceased, frozen solid in a windstorm. The planet had become a snow globe. Rosita wondered if the gargantuan Lords of the Universe shook it occasionally to watch the snowflakes swirl. She stood near the ocean-it was a huge bowl of icy lattes prepared by a drunken waitress.

Rosita blinked as she stared at the two frozen statues that were her offspring. Her brown eyes were blued from cold. In their aqueous humor were clumps of frost. Rosarita's own warm sense of humor was now as tepid as her deceased spouse's sex drive.

She sighed. Her sunny disposition was wintry. Even her wise cracks were stupid. Rosarita grinned a glacial smile at her own chill wit.

Taking a weathered bible from her cloak, Rosarita hefted the lumpy text. Inhaling cautiously, she wondered aloud what the freezing point of oxygen was.

Minus 361.8 degrees Fahrenheit, chirped the computer chip inside her brain.

"Oh, Heavenly Mother," she whispered, "save us please."

It appeared- the Bramble Bush, or *Rubus Sanctus*, flickering with flame. It radiated heat.

Rosarita gasped. Her nose was melting. "Give me a break," she hissed. In that instant, her pinky fractured. "Damn you," she said aloud.

"You can't damn me, I'm heavenly," the Bush sizzled.

Rosarita wondered if she was hallucinating. The pain of her finger was real. "What the heck is this?"

It is a construct of a bush with artificial flame enhanced by thermal energy, the chip chirped.

"Is there anything you don't know," Rosarita snapped, covering her ears with both hands.

Two voices spoke in unison: "NO."

The Bush crackled. Little blueberries on brown fronds popped, emitting tiny pastel poofs. The walls of the igloo were melting from the radiated heat. Rosarita rushed out just before it collapsed. "My house is now a white hole. I must be out of my mind," she wailed. Mila's furry body rubbed against her, and reality reasserted itself. She was alone except for the whoosh of wind. Yet, her igloo was gone.

Then the Burning Bush reappeared. Its holy fire blazed. "What do you want," it roared, its brambles now a raging furnace.

Nearby, Rosarita's son and daughter were vertical ice cubes.

"If you're real, save my children, please," she pleaded.

A flash of infrared, and a scrawny naked boy and plump little girl shivered in the snow. Their clothing had rotted away.

Rosarita cursed. “Please, for Heaven’s sake, Bush, clothe them before they freeze all over again.”

The Bush flickered with a nasty edge. “I’m just a mirage or only a construct with artificial flame.”

“Please, just do it,” Rosarita cried.

And it was done.

“Please, please oh mighty Bush, the Earth. It needs a sun.”

“As you wish,” the Bush thundered.

Rosarita’s son combusted, then soared up, a golden shooting star. Presto, the sky was glowing and sunny.

“No,” Rosarita screamed. “Not like that.”

“Heaven demands sacrifice. My work is done,” the Bush proclaimed, and vanished.

The air was brisk but bright. Sobbing, Rosarita embraced her daughter as the ground melted to mush. Soon, the planet was warm again.

“Well, you can’t have everything, murmured Rosita, staring wistfully at the sky. And the warmth felt nice.

Thenceforth, late afternoons Rosarita sat outside on the porch with her only daughter and her setting son.

Karma
Jeffrey Zable

“Do you smell something burning?” the monkey asked the crocodile, who responded, “You set my tail on fire and then ask me if I smell something burning!? I’m going to eat you right now, but first I’m going to cook you over my tail!”

And that’s exactly what he did, but before the monkey was cooked the alligator had burned so much of his tail that he was on the verge of extinction.

Hurling the monkey into the water, it was immediately eaten by another crocodile who thanked him for sacrificing himself so nobly.

To which he responded, “If that’s what you think then I can now die happy, knowing that I leave with the best of karma. . . so much so, that maybe they’ll make me a king when I come back again. . .”

Woman Climbs into Lion Enclosure
Brooksie C. Fontaine

The lion wouldn't eat me. At first, that was a disappointment. I'd gotten pretty attached to the idea of ending my life in such a memorable fashion, and lions were, after all, my favorite animal.

It wasn't that I hated my job, I actually liked accounting. Working with numbers was fun for me. I hated the people I worked with. I hated pretending to like them, singing happy birthday for Jim or Joe or Dierdre or Rachel. I hated smiling and nodding when they talked about themselves.

If I wanted forced civility with loathsome people, I would have stayed with my mom or dad, both of whom were married to people who hated me and pretended not to.

My job paid decently, but there was a downside to my comfortable life. When all your physical needs are met, all that's left to think about is emotional hunger.

My parents, I'm sure, felt they met the quota for loving me. Their quota, not mine. When my mom got remarried, I heard her quibbling with my dad on the phone all night, trying to get him to agree to adjust their custody arrangement so he'd have me more.

I came to the top of the stairs, and heard his tinny voice say on the other end, "You know Marina's going to be busy with the baby. If you don't want the kid around, send her to your mother's."

It was childish, to be so hung up on that. But love is the only thing that makes life worth living. You realize that when you don't have it.

I dated men. I dated women. They never stopped feeling like strangers. I kind of wanted a baby, but I didn't want to bring a child into the world without two parents to love it, without someone to serve as backup if something happened to me. I got worse, drank a lot, and started sleeping with people I didn't know.

I went to the zoo to distract myself, because the alternative was going to my coworker Gina's bridal shower, and even drunk I couldn't tolerate her grating, nasally Boston drawl.

I leaned over the edge of the enclosure, and the African lion looked back up at me.

That was when I decided I wanted to be eaten.

I thought about jumping into the enclosure then and there, but there were kids around me – pressing their faces to the glass, saying "wowwwwww." One little girl had a lion doll. I couldn't do it in front of them. It would have to be after the zoo closed.

So, I hid in the shrubs as the sun went down and the crowd thinned out, as the speakers announced that they were closing in thirty minutes. Twenty. Ten. Security walked right past me a few times as they made their rounds, and I was pretty sure they could have seen the top of my head if they'd just looked down.

By that point, I'd sobered up a bit and it scared me that I hadn't changed my mind. I still wanted to do this.

I poked my head comically out of the shrubs, like Barney Fife on a stakeout. I looked left, then right. The coast was clear.

I hurt my ankle so bad jumping into the enclosure, I thought for a few minutes I had broken it. As I sat on the ground, wincing, the lion emerged from the shrubbery.

I was pretty sure there were females in the enclosure too, but the place was pretty big and they were nowhere to be seen. Even though they were supposed to do most of the hunting.

There were lights in the enclosure, so I could still see him clearly as he approached. He had startled, gold eyes, rimmed with black that made him look like an Egyptian pharaoh. His mane was gold around his face, burnt chestnut around his shoulders.

He was so much bigger up close. His head seemed almost the size of my torso.

My heart shot spikes of adrenaline through me, hints of regret. This was real.

Then, the lion made a disinterested sound, like a tired dog. He lay down in front of me and sighed, ears flicking back, and lay his chin on his dinner plate-sized paws.

I stared at him, in disbelief and annoyance. I felt jilted, like I'd been stood up for a date. This sense of, how dare you turn me down?

"Hey," I said, trying to prompt him into action. "Hey!"

I almost swatted him, but that seemed so mean.

Instead, I stroked his mane. It had a density that reminded me, somehow, of a popped balloon, and a wooly, flexible texture. I buried my face in it – I don't know why. Because I could, and because it had been a long time since I'd been this close to anything.

He smelled musky, like a farm. He chuffed as I curled up next to him, my back pressed to his warm flank.

I'd find out later that they had security cameras, but whoever was monitoring them just didn't notice me – they didn't think anyone could be that close to a lion.

I breathed in, and the lion breathed out, and I realized I didn't want to die anymore. Because the universe was kind enough not to kill me in my moment of self-pitying, impulsive stupidity. Because there was still magic in this world if I could lie down next to a lion and go to sleep. It felt Biblical, like a message.

I'd wake up to the awe-struck faces of early morning zoo goers, staring down at me.

The lion and I would look up at them, and smile.

The Wind
Seungmin Kim

Because he still waits for you, there
Right over there, right beside you
He still waits for you, if you ever need him

Like the whispers you were
ever meant to hear, he tried
to bring it close to you

You surely haven't forgotten when he
braided your hair for that first date and
comforted you when they never showed up

Or how about those paper airplanes that
he'd always carry for you, just to make sure
that you'd never feel like it wasn't enough

All those times the sun was out in fury
and he came rushing in tides of breeze
just to make sure you wouldn't fall ill

The one who slips around your shoulders

and sings

and sings



“The Pilot”

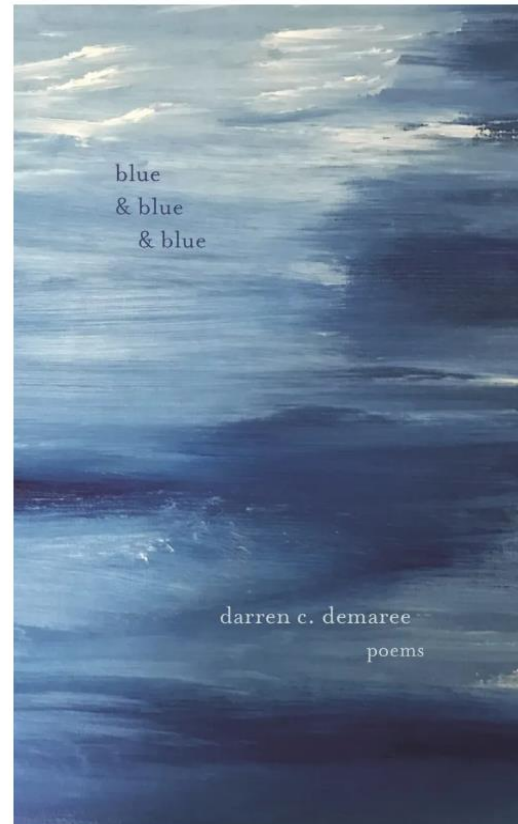
Erin Kim is a student attending a school in Seoul, South Korea. When she has not trapped herself in her room alone working on her art, she enjoys playing tennis.

Chemical X Invades the Sun
Ihita Anne

Our Late Sun, in which formaldehyde is now obliged to dwell
Will not yet explode, a kind of pacified dynamite
Code-ed to stay ablaze in quiet devotion
But even with his cosmic ode, slowly a careful routine erodes
Both the star and mankind, grow weary and trite
Our dying desperation we try to sell
Watching us in somber, his careful routine erodes
Though demise is a faraway ember, the sun fights
For us, his beloved creations

Books say that AM's glow and proudly smile on our skin, light
Mistook 'em for weak morns I know that just cower in, light
Crooks stole all love from the Sun and left me like an orphan.
Look at 80s ladies, tanned. Not the shade I'm covered in, light.
Pushed my energy in arctic water and made me swim.
Ambush the entire earth with flames to solve my burden, light

blue and blue and blue conveys the overwhelming importance of having (every so often) a complete washing off of your desire for success. Heading to the sea or the ocean on a trip is a classic setting for such narratives because of the immense power and repetition of the water, something that can bring a life into starker focus. If you can find a way to be simple and loving and a part of community that takes care with each other in a pronounced humanistic way, then everything else is superfluous. This book was written to bring you back into that.



<https://www.fernwoodpress.com/2024/06/14/blue-and-blue-and-blue/>

Love Exposure / Corinthians 13
Erin Kroi

When I smile at men in my heart's gut, I spit at them
All day I shake them off my damned legs, rootless
I won't be dead deep sea fish rotting at the bottom of their acetic acid swamp
Men just want a paper doll that only develops as far as the eye can make itself see through a stop
bath
Try to catch a fly with vinegar all you want but love is not what you probe from a body in a petri
dish
Men think love is science and think they earn prizes for whipping up insufferable theories like
"Limerence"
They know as well as varmints that I could lecture them all on the composition of limerence
swishing beakers brimming with the river Styx
I make them drink it up and corrode their bodies drowning from the inside flooding out
I'll show you a pervert that'll put yours to shame
Pummeling through the liquid massacre with condemning vorticity
Shrieking Corinthians 13

Valerian
E.P. Lande

José is having trouble sleeping. While he goes to bed early—9:00, which, in the past, was our dinner time—he wakes up between midnight and 3:00 AM. Also, he’s been having nightmares, usually centered around his growing up in Castro’s Cuba. Had I grown up in Castro’s Cuba, I, too, would be having nightmares, so I empathize.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whined. Since José whines just about all the time—about just about everything and everybody—I didn’t take any notice.

“Have you tried melatonin?” I asked.

“Yeah, and it didn’t work; I still wake up between midnight and 3:00, and my nightmares rage on.”

“Why not go to the natural food store in Morrisville; I’m sure they could suggest something,” I offered.

“Will you go for me?” he pleaded. I expected José to ask me to go. He’s such a snob that going to Morrisville, and seeing the humanity that roams the streets and shops there, sets him off such that I’m surprised his nightmares have never included the few times he’s actually been to Morrisville. Then again, perhaps Morrisville morphs into Castro’s Cuba when he sleeps.

In the natural food store—operated by a local hippie with braided greasy hair reaching his knees—I asked what he would take were he José—which, thankfully, he wasn’t.

“Have you tried melatonin?” he asked, smacking his protruding red lips as he munched on one of the protein bars the store sells.

“Yes,” I answered, as though I was the one having sleepless nights, “and it doesn’t seem to work.”

“Well, why not try valerian,” and he walked over to a shelf, lifted a bottle, and handed it to me. “It’s not addictive,” he added, as a selling point, although with some customers his selling point just might have been a turn-off.

On the drive home, my thoughts traveled back to when my late wife Jeanne and I were with our older, cultivated, European friends, Irmgard and Alfred, in Switzerland. We were having an apéritif in the living room of the Hôtel Waldhaus, in Sils Maria, when Irmgard said, “Children, I recommend you take valerian tonight.”

It was the first night of our vacation together in the Swiss Alps. Irmgard had told us of the wonderful vacations she and Alfred had spent, walking through the woods to Silvaplana, and, occasionally, to St Moritz, and of their walks in the Fex, with views of the glacier.

“It’s your first night at this altitude; you’ll experience a restless night.”

Jeanne called her the oracle, as if everything Irmgard said was holy and turned out to happen. Irmgard should have been on Wall Street, but then, she and Alfred would have had to live in New York, and that would not have suited her tastes, her disposition, nor her personality—and she would have had to take a triple dose of valerian every night, regardless of the altitude.

“I take valerian even when we’re back home in Vence.”

I recalled Irmgard telling us that she always took a small red pill in the morning, as it allowed her to pass stools more easily, and that she never missed a day without taking the small red pill, so necessary was it to her comfort.

“I buy a sufficient supply of valerian at the pharmacy in St Maritz—I’ll take you there—in order to never, ever, be without.”

But she told us the same thing about another tablet, I think she called it the green pill, that she took just before lunch, in order to aid her digestion, and that she wouldn't think of being without it, even when she and Alfred were on vacation or in Paris shopping.

"Tomorrow I'll instruct the concierge to telephone the pharmacy in St Moritz so that they'll be sure to have sufficient supply on hand when we come by."

And then there was the yellow capsule she took every time she felt a headache coming on—always popping one in her mouth after lunch, just in case.

"And, if you take my advice, children, you'll set in a sufficient supply for when you go back to America, because I'm certain that you won't find it there."

I remembered she said the same thing about the triangular purple pill, the one she said she took at 4:00 tea, to settle her nerves, and attempted to convince us to follow her example, as she truly believed that everyone ought to take the triangular purple pill to settle their nerves.

"I'll part with four valerian," and she took out a bottle that must have contained several hundred pills, and handed us four. "Be sure each of you take two."

Shortly after we first met her, Irmgard had strongly advised us to take a square robin-blue pill she swallowed every evening with her dinner as, she told us, it cleared the brainwaves and allowed her to enjoy her evening listening to Alfred read to her.

And then there was the star-shaped black pill she took whenever her mood changed—which was several times every day. Irmgard never told us her reason for taking it.

By the time I arrived back at the house, my memories of Irmgard's habits had outweighed her priestess' holy wisdom. I looked at the bottle of valerian, and, before entering the house, I dumped its contents in the trash.

Dear you
Michelle Tram

Tell me why I can still feel
the curl of your fingers
tucked under the ruffles of my
dress that you said reminded
you of the fifth of June.

You picked me up in your mom's
old Toyota, your right hand rested
over a ready wheel while
your left stumbled to still as
you anxiously waited for
little me in my little
white dress to slip in.

Since that day, you wrote me
a teenage girl's summer, and four
years later, I can still breathe its ink
in the letter you left me to remember:

your scent on my favorite sundress,
a teenage boy's salt and sweat
kissed by his older brother's Old Spice,

your chest pressed against my naked spine,
twenty-four bones you left to ache
for just one more tender touch—
a soft caress to smooth a hundred
edges of a tide-crashed cave.

So please,

tell me when I can

wash out all these thoughts
of you that sleep like sand
inside the envelopes of my brain,

when I can forget

your red sweatshirt-turned-blanket
that warmed two pairs of naked,
tired toes dangling in a
moon-dimmed night

(your tiny crooked fourth
toe that perfectly nestled
into your third)

the quiet, happy creases at the
corners of your playful lips as
you tried to show me all the
Leos and Dippers that I never
found but you promised you saw.

That night you laughed at me
because I was too impatient to
sit and count every single star,

but now I wait here alone,
and I count the number of days
until your face, your touch, and your
love become but one more wrinkle
tucked quietly away into the
little ruffles of my little white dress.

Mapping Mars
(Opportunity's Response)
George C. Harvilla

From January 25, 2003 through June 10, 2018, NASA's Mars Exploration Rover Opportunity transmitted critical scientific data from the Martian surface back to Earth.

Back here, in the outfield, in the sandlots, radio dishes
craned back, stretched their mitts into the buzzing sky.

I've got it...

I've got it...

I've got it...

The message read:

There's no life here...

and so, we took off our gloves and went home,
kicking up great, red dust-veils behind us,
great, red clouds of disappointment.

But, as is often the case,
the message *sent* was more complex
than the one we received.

Details... nuance, it seems,
gets scattered as much by space
as by anything else.

The message read:

There is no life here.

Forget Mars.

Forget Kabul. Forget the Gulf.

Forget Indochina. Forget Tarawa.

Remember the first time
you saw the stars in black December water
and thought *There must be light inside the Earth.*

Forget the Somme.

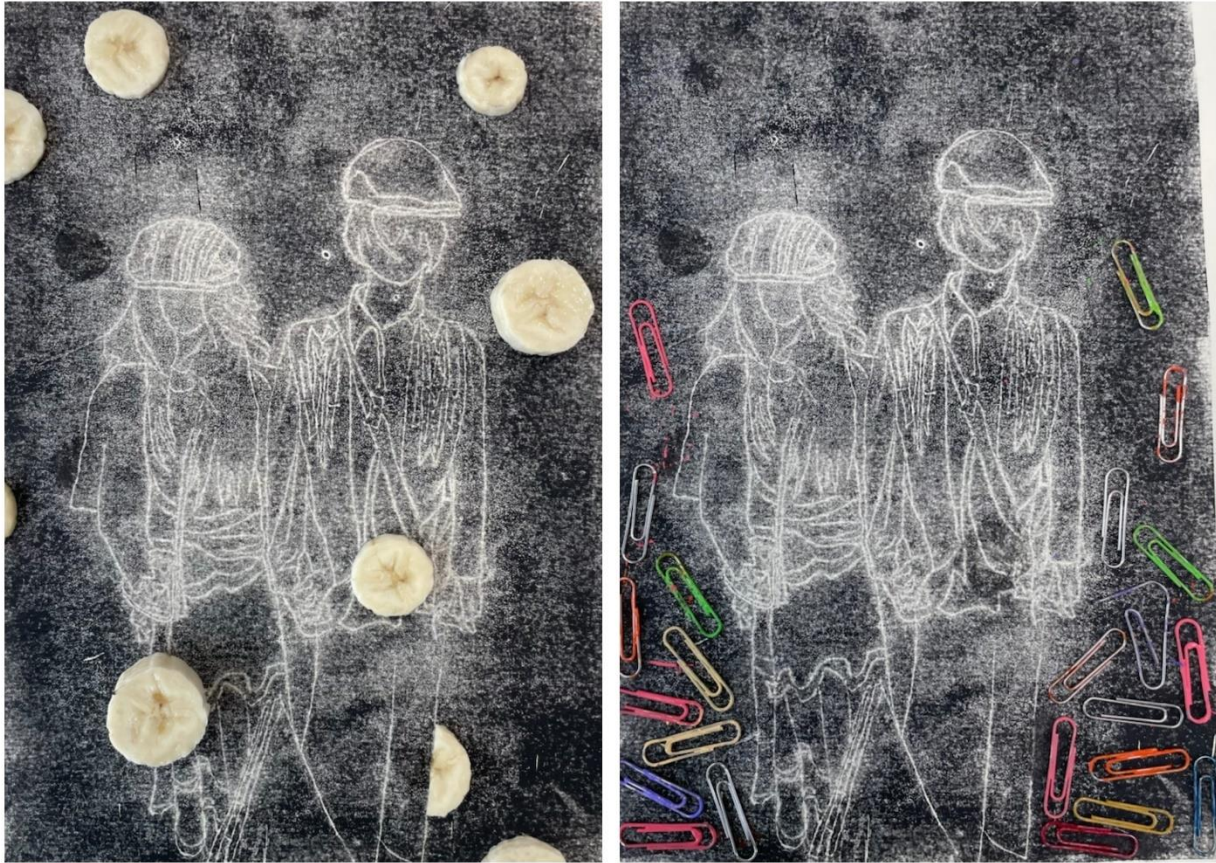
Forget Verdun.

Forget the Wilderness...

Antietam... Stone Mountain.

Remember the first nightfall
you saw the planets shivering in your brother's eyes
and thought *There must be light inside us all.*

Forget Cannae. Forget Jericho.
Forget Mars...
There is no life here.
Forget...



“We Ate Bananas and Wore Paperclips”

Erin Kim is a student attending a school in Seoul, South Korea. When she has not trapped herself in her room alone working on her art, she enjoys playing tennis.

Fate?
Philip Pak

I always thought that 'someday everyone meets their fate' was just an expression, but that all changed with an out-of-the-blue phone call. I was watching the morning news when the phone rang. The voice on the other end said,

"I'm calling to make an appointment for you to meet your fate. I have an opening Thursday; what time would you like?"

It sounded preposterous, of course, and I almost hung up, but I found it intriguing. I've been pretty bored since my retirement, so I stayed on the line.

"I know you're selling something, so why don't you just cut to the chase and tell me what it is?"

The voice on the other end sounded both annoyed and weary of saying what she was about to say.

"Whoever started this rumor that someday everyone meets their fate' is just a saying? I'm here to tell you that it's literally correct. Now what time would you like?"

I was actually starting to enjoy this. Since my retirement, my life has been pretty mundane, so I said to myself, What the hell?

"Okay, how about Thursday at 12 noon?"

"That works. Fate will be in the diner across the street from your apartment at noon on Thursday. Don't be late; he's pretty busy."

The phone line clicked, and that was it. I was disappointed because I was expecting more: a pitch for a product, an invitation to an insurance sales seminar, or even a bad guy with a ruse to steal my money, but no, that was it.

That was two days ago, and I had almost forgotten about it. It was Thursday and lunchtime, so I was about to cross the street to the diner and have lunch when I suddenly remembered the call. To my surprise, I walked into an empty diner. No one at the cash register, no one behind the counter—even the maître d, who usually stands by the door, was missing. Seated in Booth 12 was a short, fat, impatient-looking man who motioned me over. I walked over and took a seat. I couldn't even believe I was saying this, but I asked:

"Are you Fate?"

"What were you expecting? 'A black-hooded skeleton? Yeah, I'm Fate, and you're ten minutes late. You're not my only designated person. I have to kill a guy in an auto accident on the other side of town in twenty minutes."

"What happens if I make you late?"

His elf-like features and dark eyes suddenly became pretty scary-looking.

"Don't tempt me!"

This was starting to get less funny.

"What do you want with me?"

He still appeared annoyed by my being ten minutes late.

"Look, I'm going to make this quick, you know, the auto accident thing. I'm just here to tell you to buy a lotto ticket. I have to go."

He then just disappeared. I found myself suddenly in a busy diner with a waitress by my table tapping her foot on the floor.

"Sir, today is a busy day. Have you made up your mind?"

I answered in a half-daze: "A BLT, light on the mayo."

So here I am eating a BLT, wondering, What the hell just happened? Am I going crazy from boredom? Do I need to get a job or a hobby? Or, did this really happen? I finished my BLT and

washed it down with coffee. I walked out of the diner, and there on the corner was a newsstand that I never remembered seeing before. I walked over and bought a lottery ticket.

As you would expect, the ticket won, and to make a long story short, I'm now a multi-millionaire with a penthouse suite overlooking the Hudson River and a Ferrari in the garage. My life has really changed for the better since I met my fate. I wondered what other random sayings were actually true. There was a knock on the door; it was my breakfast, brought up by the concierge service.

"Jeeves, please set up my breakfast table by the window. I love looking at the river."

"Of course, sir."

Halfway through my breakfast, there was another knock on the door.

"Who could that possibly be?"

When I opened the door, I saw the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. It was love at first sight.

"What lucky star brings you into my life?"

"Actually, a cup of sugar. I live across the hall. I'm in the middle of baking a cake, and I'm short on sugar."

"Why don't you stick your finger in the mix? That should sweeten it."

"Thanks, but I'm here for sugar, not sweet talk."

"Come in; I'll see what I have. I occasionally have a chef come in to prepare my meals, so I must have some food in these kitchen cabinets. Here we go, sugar."

I handed her the box, and when she grabbed it, I held on to the other end and would not let go.

"What are you doing, silly?"

"I'm not letting go until you agree to have dinner with me tonight."

She thought for a moment.

"Well, okay. How about the restaurant directly across the street?"

"Is that the Brazilian steak house that serves steaks from a long sword?"

"Yes, in fact, that's what it's called, The Sword."

"Why that place?"

"I want to be close to where we live. This way, if you get fresh, I don't have to wait for a cab."

"It's a date. See you at 7:00?"

"Fine, see you then. By the way, please let go of the sugar."

Seven o'clock couldn't come quickly enough. I was looking forward to this all day. I knocked on her door. She looked even better than I remembered. We took the elevator down, walked through the lobby, and exited the front entrance. There, across the street, was a big neon sign that flashed 'The Sword.'

I walked ahead of her, sticking my body out between a row of parked cars. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain as I fell to the ground. I had just been hit by a passing motorcycle, and I could tell I was hurt badly. Blood was pouring out of my body like a fountain, and I felt myself fading rapidly. Through blurry vision, I looked up and saw my elf-like Fate pointing upward at the flashing neon sign. His words were the last I ever heard:

"Those who live by The Sword, die by The Sword."



Yoon Park is a dynamic high school student enrolled at an international school in Seoul, South Korea. She channels her creative energy into writing and visual art and finds joy in expressing herself through these mediums. Additionally, she has a passion for music and spends her spare time playing the piano or the guitar. Her dedication to her craft has earned her recognition and admission into the prestigious Sewanee Young Writers Conference.

Moving Wall
Marie Cloutier

I take two cheeseburgers and hope no one needs anything for a minute. We're all so hungry, us volunteers, we've been in the sun all day. We help the grieving look for the names of loved ones on this half-size Vietnam War memorial wall traveling the country in the summer of 1990. They leave mementos as we lick French fry salt off our fingers, hoping the mourners don't judge us for our smiles. We attack food as it lands. Cheeseburgers, plain burgers, two bags of fries. We can't help it, the fries are so good, their grease spreading like sunburn.

The Condiment Whisperer
Ellen Notbohm

Ava, being a toddler, has no sense of the five food groups, the food pyramid, the effect of diet on growth or disease prevention. She gives no thought to the angst her outlandish eating preferences cause those who love her. Nineteen months old and her mother had no trouble choosing her first Halloween costume: a skunk. A little stinker.

“Ava only eats condiments,” her mother told me. Ava would guzzle ketchup out of one of those red squirt bottles if allowed to. But she has to settle for smaller vessels. I watched her from the kitchen table, sitting in front of Paw Patrol, dipping mayonnaise out of a Toy Story Dixie bathroom cup and sucking her finger clean, over and over.

Sometimes, her weary mother continues, Ava can be coaxed to take a bite of meat, if saturated in A-1 or Heinz 57. Listen and you’ll hear little suction pump noises as she extracts the sauce, returning the meat to her plate, wrung dry. Occasionally she’ll eat a dab of lemon yogurt, but only if her mother pointedly spoons it onto her own cereal or salad—like a condiment.

“What does her doctor say?” I ask. Ava’s mother blows a weak lip trill. Even the pediatrician finally admitted concern, despite forty years of assuring parents that toddlers always outgrow wacky eating jags. Like me, he may be envisioning the menu if she carries on with this perplexing propensity. Breakfast as a bowl of pineapple marmalade. Lunches of onion relish and bacon bits.

As much as I care about Ava, I’m in no position to offer advice. I have no experience with children since leaving childhood myself, nor do I have any familial claim to her welfare. She came with my marriage; her mother is my husband’s favorite cousin.

Ava’s mother and I sit with our veggie wraps, pickle chips, and sweet potato fries. “Condiments,” I muse, eerily mesmerized by Ava and her cups. An extraordinary mental timeline unspools before me.

She’ll go through school never once hitting the cafeteria line, but calmly unpacking her lunchbox containers of tapenade, pesto, and tahini, having silenced her mother’s objections with the explanation that olives, basil, and sesame are part of the touted Mediterranean diet. A few years later, she’ll join friends at a Mexican restaurant where her meal will be chips with bowls of guacamole, salsa verde, mole sauce. “Dark chocolate, raisins, peanuts,” she’ll explain blissfully. “It’s like dessert, only healthy.”

“More.”

A small warm hand on my thigh nudges my dream back to the kitchen table. Ava looks up at me with her mostly-empty mayo cup.

“You want more?” I ask, wondering if it’s possible this toddler has gauged her odds and considered that she’s more likely to get a yes out of me than her mother.

“No. You more.” She grabs the edge of the table and my shirt, indicating she wants up.

Seated on my lap, she runs her finger around the inside of the cup to round up the mayo clinging to the sides, then flicks it into the pool of ketchup on my plate.

“Ava!” her mother cries, but somehow, I know to hold up my hand and say, “No, wait.”

Ava gives her concoction a sticky-fingered stir. She stares at it for a moment, then tips my plate so tiny puddle of brine from the pickles rushes into the ketchup mayo. This too gets a tiny-finger stir. Then she looks at me.

“She just made fry sauce,” I breathe to her mother. Ava dips one of my sweet potato fries in the sauce, and brings up to my mouth. I don’t hesitate—we’re family. She pops it in, and I beam at her. It’s as good as any restaurant.

Did she just nod at me? I dismantle my wrap, scrape the hummus into one of Ava’s cups and put it in front of her. She dives in. I pry the top from my unused mini-cup of yogurt-avo dip. Her hummus-coated finger stops halfway to her mouth. She stirs the hummus into the dip and uses two fingers to make it vanish down the hatch in lavish swoops.

And suddenly I’m laughing, as her mother’s face contorts with anxiety and befuddlement.

“Everything’s going to be okay!” I tell her, because now I can see it all. After the condiments-only childhood, Ava will find her tribe, her bestie, and/or her soulmate who appreciate her eccentricity, tell her she makes the best croutons and blue cheese dip on the planet while happily churning out the potato soup to show them off.

“People are so narrow-minded about their condiments,” I explain. “Just this week, a perfect stranger on social media threatened me with a ‘butt-whoopin’ because I put butter, not mayo, on a tomato sandwich.” Ava clambers down from my lap and back to Paw Patrol. “Our girl here is a natural-born artisan.” I reach into the bag at my feet for my notebook.

“Oh no,” moans Ava’s mother. “You’re not going to—”

“My editor wants one more story for the collection.” I scribble madly. “And this one has such a happy ending. See, I’ve already written it.” I turn the notebook to face her.

And she’ll be a wonderful daughter, meeting her mother for lunch every week at the gourmet market cafe. They have the best olive bar in town, and their smoked eggplant chutney is to live for!



“Bearded Man”

Lindsay Baik is a student at an international school in Seoul who is passionate about writing, art, and collecting CDs. She spends much of her free time playing the guitar and listening to music. Currently, Lindsay is working on building her portfolio.

Looking for Tony
 Michael Jordan

"Tony?" Nettie pulled open the door to Universe 1.a, and stuck her head inside. "You there?" She stepped most of the way inside, just dragging one foot behind to keep the door ajar. She couldn't let the door fall shut or she'd be trapped inside. But 1.a was the obvious place to look first. It was practically identical to Universe Prime, so they were easy to mix up. "Tony?" she called again.

Nobody there. Nettie stepped back, and let the door fall closed. Universe 1.b looked much the same, but when she opened her mouth to call, no sound came out. Silent World? She'd never heard of that one before, so she tried again. Twice. But nothing. So, she shrugged, and looked around. There was no sign of Tony, and she moved on.

1.c turned out to be Garden World. Uh oh. Garden World had been 1.g last week. But the riot of flowers was unmistakable: roses, daffodils, hollyhocks. And did she see orchids just up ahead? She loved orchids! It was so beautiful, she almost talked herself into lingering. Surely, she could prop the door and stroll around for just a little while. But propping the door never worked. Never. She sighed.

1-d revealed a raging blizzard and 1.e was a desert world. She didn't bother to call. She didn't even like to look. When she opened 1.f, water gushed out, almost knocking her over, and she had to put her shoulder to the door to close it again.

She peeked into 1.g carefully, but it looked okay. She saw an interior, with high ceilings and tall windows. A grand piano stood on a polished parquet floor. "Nice," she murmured, and leaned in as far as she dared. "Tony? You in there?"

"That's Mr. Clarence to you," sneered somebody with a British accent. "Move along."

"Great," muttered Nettie. "I've discovered Snob World." She slammed the door.

1-h also opened into an elegant room with tall windows. Sheer curtains fluttered in the moonlight. Most doors opened into daylight. Was this a night world? Whatever it was, it was beautiful. "Tony?" she peered into the dimness, but couldn't see much and stepped in more deeply, keeping just a few fingers on the doorframe.

"Tony?" echoed back a musical voice. A man stepped into her line of sight from one side. He was young and slim, wrapped in a robe, with long hair, tied back. He came closer. "You are too beautiful to be a 'Tony'," he said. "Perhaps an Antoinette." He took her free hand in his right hand, and stroked it with his left.

His touch startled her and she jerked back. His grasp on her wrist grew firm. "O, no, dear lady, you mustn't go."

A woman—almost identical to the man—appeared from the other side. She laid a soft hand on Nettie's shoulder. "No, indeed," she whispered. "You must stay! We are so lonely here—you cannot be so cruel as to leave us." She stroked down Nettie's arm until her hand arrived at Nettie's hand, just above the fingers hooked on to the doorframe. She tugged gently on Nettie's hand, not quite hard enough to force her to let go.

"Please, stay," purred the brother. He kissed Nettie's hand, and shock ran through her. Then he kissed her wrist and next her arm, and at last her shoulder. Each touch thrilled her more. The sister did the same, with the same effect. When they stepped forward to share her mouth, she could hardly breathe.

"You're vampires," she gasped. "Let me go."

"You don't mean that." They spoke as one. "Stay. We could give you such pleasure."

They could, and she knew it. Oh, God, how she knew it! But . . . Vampires. "Let me go," she croaked. "I have not come in of my own free will." She'd seen movies. Vampires always made you say you were there voluntarily. They needed consent. According to the movies.

It worked. They pulled back. Only a couple of inches, but enough. She flung herself back into the hallway, and pressed the door shut, then falling on it to hold it, while gasping for breath and fighting the impulse to fling it back open.

She approached 1.j with great care. She would not to go all the way in. She would not to speak to anyone in there except Tony. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Even without her stepping forward, the lintel crumbled underfoot. She started to fall before she had finished saying, "Tony?" so that the word came out, "T-yack!"

She caught herself with her forearms on what was left of the lintel. Horrific heat ballooned up around her. The crackle of flames filled her ears, punctuated by agonized screams. "Hell world?" she screamed. "No! I'm not dead yet! I don't have to go to hell!"

She scrambled, sobbing, at the doorframe, trying to pull herself up without losing the purchase she already had. She was not athletic, but desperation and adrenaline made her strong. She crawled back up, and lay there a long time, flames licking her toes, the door still propped open by her lower body.

Eventually she hauled herself to her feet. There was another door ahead, 1.k. She stared at it, wondering just how badly she wanted to find Tony. Couldn't she just give up, and start back? Did she really have to risk another door?

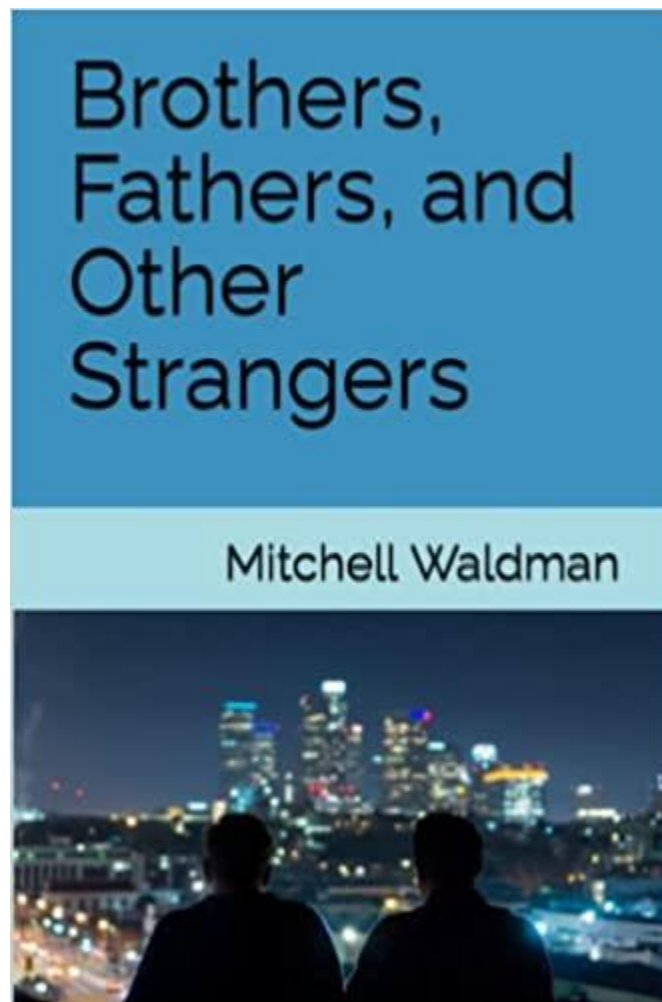
She sighed. Yes, she did. So, she opened the door.

She blinked. There was no opening on the other side of the door. Instead, she found herself looking into a mirror. "Toni!" cried her reflection. "There you are! I've been looking for you everywhere!"

10 Things I Wish Someone Told Me When I First Started Acting

Zoé Mahfouz

- 1 . No one is going to “discover you” because you ate a slice of pizza as it happened for Natalie Portman. So, stop hanging out at the *Pizza Hut* on Hollywood Boulevard.
- 2 . Do not get your hopes up when you take part to an “Actors Showcase” at your local acting school. No agent will show up. No casting director will show up. Just some has-beens your teacher bribed for a pint of beer.
- 3 . The decision of casting you or not for a role has barely to do with your performance. It mostly has to do with how the director sees the character. You might be doing an Oscar-worthy performance and end up being rejected because the director would rather have a blonde instead, or someone older, younger, taller, or just his niece who’s been begging him for a part in the movie since Uncle Jack’s latest brunch.
- 4 . Do not compare yourself to others. Yes, there is a 10-year-old in your agency whose extensive career includes modelling for Gucci, winning America’s Got Talent or being nominated for a Screen Actors Guild Award alongside Dakota Fanning, but she’s an exception and all paths are different. Your dream doesn’t have an expiration date.
5. No, you cannot play EVERYTHING. I know you have 0,001 % West African Ancestry according to your latest DNA test, but that doesn’t mean you can play a drug dealer from the Bronx when you’re from the Hamptons and your main hobby consists of trying out all the Michelin-star restaurants with your mom.
6. Do not fall for “class clowns”. Class clowns only remain famous in acting classes. It’s just a matter of time until they serve you a calzone at your nearby Papa John’s.
7. Do not oversell your special skills on your acting resume. Just because you fell from your rollerblades when you were 2 doesn’t mean you’re a professional stuntman.
8. You will become a brand ambassador like you always wanted. For a heated towel rail.
9. There is no seagull in *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov.
10. You expect too much of this list.



Mitchell Waldman is the author of the novel *A FACE IN THE MOON* and two short story collections. His latest is *BROTHERS, FATHERS, AND OTHER STRANGERS* which includes stories about family dysfunction in a not-so-blended family, work, Adolf Hitler's imagined alternative lives and possible reincarnation, the spirit of Kurt Cobain, a green angel giving an aging alcoholic man a second chance at redemption, men struggling to find some meaning in their lives, and more. Many of these stories deal with feelings of alienation and abandonment, and feelings of the characters that they do not fit in in their families, their lives, their jobs, or, sometimes, in their very bodies. For more information about Mitchell's books and writings, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>

A Dragon Was Born in A Stream (개천에서 용 났다)

Karen Lee

Once upon a time,
the sun turned its cheek to a bright red.
It blushed,
and with it the glimmer of sunlight disappeared.
The stream kept flowing,
even though there is no one to shine against its hard work.

After tireless more twirls of the sun,
the stream was rewarded with the most majestic creature;
a dragon.
Despite its humble origins of a lonely stream,
it flipped its wings and flew into the sky,
becoming a star in the dark shade.

The dragon keeps the world from being unnavigable,
guiding the troubled souls,
rewarding all those who try
no matter where they come from.

Passing Notes
James Nelli

Even after forty-seven years, the moment she walked through the door, Adam knew it was Susan. Her translucent blue eyes, soft rounded chin and cascading red hair set her apart from everyone else in the restaurant. The lingering smells of aromatic woods, dashi, soy sauce, and cucumber permeated every corner of their favorite Japanese restaurant in Manhattan Beach southwest of downtown Los Angeles. The ownership of the restaurant had changed many times in the last five decades, but the memories remained the same. It was comfortable.

Susan looked apprehensive as her eyes darted around the room looking for Adam; but when he stood up and their eyes met, her apprehension was instantly replaced by a sigh of relief and a burst of excitement. They approached each other cautiously, both trying not to look too eager. But as their arms met and they drew each other close, past feelings flooded their space and immediately became the present situation. The familiar touch of their bodies initiated a rush of memories that only Adam and Susan could fully appreciate.

The last few years had been difficult for both of them. Happiness had been hard, if not impossible, for them to find. Susan had lost her husband after a long battle with cancer, while Adam's wife passed away when dementia slowly stole her mind and then finally, mercilessly, claimed her body. They found each other on social media, and today was their first in-person meeting.

Adam held Susan's hand tight, not wanting to break the new bond they had just created. He led her back to the booth overlooking the beach where they had spent so much of their high school time enjoying all that the California lifestyle offered. The view wasn't new. Just more meaningful today.

Susan's once vibrant red hair had streaks of silver, and the lines etched on her face spoke of a life filled with disproportionate amounts of joy and sadness. Adam, with his salt-and-pepper beard and thinning gray hair reflected the weight of the passage of time. They sat there, not uttering a word, staring at each other admiring the uniqueness of the moment. The silence was uncomfortable but satisfying.

Finally, Susan broke the silence, her voice trembling with emotion. "Adam, I can't believe it's really you?" Her eyes glistened with tears she was desperately trying to hold back. She was having only limited success.

Adam nodded, a bittersweet smile playing on his lips. "Yes, Susan, it's me. It's been so long."

Susan reached out and touched Adam's tanned weathered face. "Oh, how I've missed you," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Their fingers intertwined as they began to catch up on the years that had passed. Most of their comments started with the phrase "Remember when". One thing they both remembered were the times they passed notes to each other in the hallway in between classes at school. The notes were always tightly folded on yellow paper, and just small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. The notes contained anything from a simple hello to a loving message or even an "I'm sorry".

"That was our way of keeping in contact before all the electronic gadgets of today," said Susan. "And it worked!" proclaimed Adam with a satisfied smile.

As they shared tales of triumphs and failures, of laughter and tears, they began to realize that they had both changed in profound ways.

Susan, once free-spirited, had become thoughtful and introspective over the last several years. She gave up the big city corporate marketing life and found solace in the Hudson Valley of New York. “I spend most days tending to my garden, riding horses, and raising money for a variety of nonprofits. My heart has grown bigger, because it’s constantly being filled with compassion and empathy for all living things. It keeps my own life in perspective,” she said squeezing Adam’s hand a little tighter.

Adam, once an ambitious go-getter in the communication industry, had learned the value of simplicity. He traded the hustle and bustle of city life for a quiet existence in the Colorado countryside. “In Colorado, my heart softened. It was my last years with my wife, and I realized the importance of connection and love. When she began drifting away due to her dementia, I had to spend more time caring for her at home. That was when I surrounded myself with books and began writing. I discovered that writing about the joy of introspection and self-discovery helped me deal with the loss,” he said as his eyes welled up with a mixture of compassion and reflection.

As they listened to each other's stories, they marveled at the transformations they had undergone. They realized that their paths had led them to these changes, shaping them into the individuals they had become. While their love had withstood the test of time, they understood that they could never recapture the carefree days of their youth. Their feelings for each other had not lessened, just matured, like a fine wine aging gracefully and deepening with each passing year.

The sun was setting over the ocean when they ended their visit. As they both stood facing each other and admiring the sunset they had shared so many times before, Adam reached out and lifted Susan’s hand. He then placed a tightly folded yellow piece of paper in the palm of her hand. Susan’s eyes shifted to the note. She shook her head in a gesture of disbelief, reached into her purse and took out a similar tightly folded piece of yellow paper and placed it into Adam’s hand.

Closing his hand around the note, Adam asked, “See you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” said Susan. “I’m already looking forward to it.”



“Smoking Chief”

Lindsay Baik is a student at an international school in Seoul who is passionate about writing, art, and collecting CDs. She spends much of her free time playing the guitar and listening to music. Currently, Lindsay is working on building her portfolio.

Djinn Math
Farriz Mashudi

The djinn had seen a thing or two in his time: greedy fools, cheats, sweet talkers trying to pull a fast one. Craziest were women who viewed coins left in pockets at the laundromat as free money. (Ladies, it's from the same pile.) And consummate shoppers who consider anything ON SALE as pure profit. Or that wearing something pricey five times turns it into a good return. He'd agree, three is never enough for wishful thinking. Except this once: "Very well," he tells the boy. "Three for you; another three for the one you love; plus, three more for the world."

Brush
James Moran

In the summer of 1936, I attempted to write what you now call graffiti on the side of a toilet stall at the Highbridge Public Pool in Manhattan using my own period blood as paint. I don't remember what I had intended to write and how it came out. I recall I was somewhat desiring of attention. I had used a one cent brush. The brush lived on as my hair pin that summer. I wore my hair longer than girls dared to in those days. I had saved enough by the end of the summer to purchase a small oval of costume topaz which I glued onto the hairs of the brush. I felt like I owned something really special.

Penmanship
Livio Farallo

and what i remember about pencils
is how gray they wrote.
not strident as the blacks and whites
of extremes, but not compromising
either: just gray.
and stricken with cerebral lesions,
testicular torsion, a spinal cord
buried like an exit ramp, i didn't care
about the shades: battleship, timber wolf,
slate, stovepipe.
i just thought about making my point
in the sterility of winter.
what i remember is that they were
lodged between ear and temple; under
a pushed back hat. or crunched
on in mouth with depressions
like small notches on a gun.
what i remember is that the eraser
was much more amazing than
the lead. and i wanted to write
in red pen so no one
could ever correct me.

red sky at night.
red sky at morning.

red sky maybe
obscured by gray clouds
but palpable as the bricks of eternity;
and even if you hated them, you
couldn't say they were wrong.
you couldn't pound on the stars with
a little hammer to fasten night
in place. you couldn't correct them
with red ink.

red sky at night.
red sky at morning, with maybe
a little gray wind rupturing
the december color: pulling down
christmas tinsel to drip red as a pitchfork
in all the ornamentation. i remember

pencils being primitive things
evolving just after ferns and much
before flowering plants and republicans:
swampy, reedy, almost dinosaurial.
for a long time i wrote on
onionskin with in crayon, spinning
nebulas flat as time. and, with
a finger that wouldn't dry out,
signed my name in blood.
so something grows taut inside me,
like a bowl of milk left out in the sun:
shriveled, shrunk, coagulated,
desiccated, evaporated, concentrated,
reduced, defogged, caked.
something that colored the horizon
with dawn and dusk, with
warning and delight: the letters
that spell me floating high off the pages,
dodging gulls and power lines. and then,
brave butterflies out of oxygen
communing like fools at a séance,
their wings interlocking
as all the continents once more.
pangaea. gondwanaland.
perfect masses in the sky fraught
with the tearing away of birth.
small fissures from small erasers.
chinks where red sun and red moon
peak through. my lenses cloud over
in gray cataracts from looking
too long at what i remembered:
the first time i spelled my name
in pencil, perfect, without
a stray mark, after so many
cracks with a yardstick
across my knuckles: red lines
that couldn't correct,
streaming over the page.

38 Haiku
 Joshua St. Claire

my rheumatologist invites me to join him in the endoplasmic reticulum petioles
 night sweats the Buck Moon through the nectar of an evening-blooming stock
 black-capped night heron why do you never answer my rhetorical questions?
 the scent of evening primrose intensifying before it collapses twilight
 lion's mane mushroom dissecting the remains of an inside joke
 earthworms moving through clay the way this blood is brown
 white chrysanthemums insisting they're fair-weather clouds
nothing tastes as good as skinny feels Isthmus of Panama
 what could have been could have been summer concert
 evening news transcribing the lyrics to *Yellow Ledbetter*
 Steller's jay, don't you know how to count the alphabet?
 great egret buy one get one yellow-headed blackbird
 paints chips but it looks like I turned out just fine
 Sheela na gig entering the strangler's synconium
 we're all naked under our clothes flower names
 Spring Triangle rising from the sheets six feet
 at last, I understand the pelicans auguraculum
 noticing the new wallpaper a sphinx moth
 autumn crocus opening the soldier's eyes
 planned obsolescence Maui silversword

wind eggs the eyes of everyone I meet
that day the chair became faraway rain
calling my name Nycticorax nycticorax
chromatic scales the peaks the valleys
after one cigarette a second cigarette
salt spray licking you from my beard
Veil of Isis. No. For real. Believe me
black raspberries the color of death
empyrean this stand of glass irises
deer ribs the centipede's 100 legs
waves crashing tires on gravel
dead stars ashing their cigars
imitation wood grain beard
Janus whispers a tautology
Dyson Sphere blastula
all eyes on you tuatara
mitral valve stoplight
|{m[a]r|row|}



“Walking Over Puddles”

Chloe Park is a student at a high school in Boston, Massachusetts. With an unwavering passion for art, she is diligently curating her art portfolio. Beyond her artistic endeavors, Chloe finds joy in creating handcrafted objects and expressing herself through K-pop dancing.

Some Teenage Fare
John Grey

I remember facing down acne in the mirror.
“You will not win,” I told it
in a deep Darth Vader voice.

And, at the age of twelve,
I proclaimed that Saturday
would, from this moment on,
always end with Pizza Night
and most of the time it did.

Once, I listened to my sister
sob in and out of sleep
after a visit to the dentist
forecast braces in her future.

I had a dog for a while.
It barked for no reason,
growled at strangers
howled at the moon,
whether new or full.

As the dog and I grew older,
he quietened down
and I got noisier -
with the stereo mostly.
Nothing like rock and roll
to make a teenager
bark and howl and growl.

Waterfalls
Lawrence Winkler

‘It’s always ourselves we find in the sea.’
E. E. Cummings, *maggie and milly and molly and may*

It had been a wonderful vacation. Darryl and Madelaine Hope had driven their two daughters out from Alberta to visit Maddy’s mother in Harbour City. Shirley MacMillan always looked forward to seeing her grandchildren Dawn and Carrie and played havoc with her son-in-law’s head when it was time for them to leave.

“Why don’t you move the family out to the Island, Darryl?” She’d save the question for the last pancake breakfast of the summer holiday. “You could go fishing and I could have my family living closer. I won’t be here forever, you know.” But Darryl never bit back. He knew how difficult it was for Maddy and her mother to be so far apart, but he still had a well-paying job back in the Alberta oil patch and moving to B.C. wouldn’t likely happen until the girls grew up. Dawn was fourteen but Carrie was only still eleven years old, and Darryl and Maddy were still in their early forties.

“Someday, Shirley.” He would say. “You never know.” There were hugs and tears when they left this year, more than before. For Shirley, it was like drowning on dry land. Dawn and Carrie piled into the back of the brown minivan. Darryl fired up the engine and waited for Maddy to finish saying goodbye to her mother. Everyone waved backwards as they drove away.

There was a two-sailing wait at the B.C. Ferry terminal in Departure Bay. Darryl knew it was a stiff price to pay for coming to Harbour City during the summer holidays, but it must have been worth it because everyone came. This year he was smart and paid for a reservation on the 9:00 a.m. Queen of Alberni. The pleasure in his own cleverness forced a grin as he pulled past all the vehicles without as much foresight or money.

“Lane 3.” Said the ticket vendor in the booth. “You’re the last.” Darryl steered across the back of several painted white lines to take his place behind a red Thunderbird convertible with California license plates. The cavernous metal doors of the Queen of Alberni were already gaping, and the first lane of vehicles began to pour into the top decks of the ship. Every sort of conveyance, every colour of the rainbow, drove past Darryl—camper vans and sedans, sports cars and SUVs, trucks and trailers and the boats they carried. Dogs drooled out open windows. The smells of coffee and cinnamon and sea air and diesel intermingled over crossword puzzles and cell phones. The California convertible lurched ahead of him, and Darryl followed. One of the ferry workers directing traffic up ahead stopped waving and held out an outstretched arm.

Darryl knew it was OK. He had a reservation and the ticket vendor in the booth told him he was the last. No one told him how true that would be in so many ways.

They speak of slow motion, of life flashing before your eyes, whoever they are. But not that way at all today. The minivan rolling forward off what had been the loading ramp for the receding ferry produced an initial feeling of sinking nausea, but the thirty-foot plunge off the upper car deck was all too quick and unspectacular.

Darryl fumbled to close the electric windows, but the freezing salt water had already shorted their circuitry and was now silencing every Hope. He looked around his cockpit, to his wife and two daughters, gasping and holding their breaths, unbuckling their seat belts, moving their arms like they were climbing rocks, but it was only the Strait of Georgia. The panic hammered their hearts against their ribs, like birds trapped in cages too small. They tried rolling

over on their backs to float. Desperate hot waves washed over them. As the minivan sank, the increasing hydrostatic pressure set their lungs on fire.

They were all strong swimmers, but their breathing reflexes were stronger, and they weren't swimming. Ice water rushed up their nostrils, streaming in cascades into the back of their throats. When the carbon dioxide concentrations in their bloodstream overwhelmed their breath-hold breakpoints and throat spasms, they began to swallow and then aspirate large volumes of swirling dark indigo, in exchange for strings of bubbles. The cold salt water rushed in like it owned them, enveloped them, and triggered their diving reflexes, slowing their heart rates, constricting the blood flow to their extremities, shifting their blood volume to the inside of their chests, and leaving different concentrations of sodium and chloride ions in the left and right chambers of their hearts. But it also diffused into their blood, making it thicker, requiring more work from their hearts to circulate. They could taste the salt and seaweed and the diesel. Microscopic diatoms unique to this place passed through their lung membranes into capillaries, seeding their internal organs with tiny shells.

The feeble light from above had dimmed. Red and black splotches danced in their vision.

Their hair rose upwards like the kelp beds below them. The cabin was full of freezing seawater and vomit and partially digested pancakes.

They floated like the seaweed, heads back, mouths agape, empty eyes of glass open wide. The red blotches had long since disappeared, faded to black. Their minds had unraveled like a turning spiral of wool, slipping skyward through gaps in the universe, floating away. The chaotic sounds of the sea had drowned in a low hum, muted into silence, one with the darkness. No one heard the last sounds of stopping hearts.

One witness said the ferry appeared to move away slowly.

"Either the driver shouldn't have tried to drive on at the time, or the ferry moved early."

He said. "It was a lack of communication, I guess."

On Finding a Dead Deer in My Backyard

Nolo Segundo

I saw them a few weeks ago. My wife called me, something urgent-- so, I left the computer and went to see what so excited her.

Three deer, 3 young deer meandering around our ¼ acre backyard. They look thin, she said-- I agreed (not saying it was not a good sign with winter coming near).

We enjoyed watching them through our plate glass door, their casual grace, that elegance of walk deer have when unafraid. They were special, even more than the occasional cardinal alighting in our yard like a breathing ruby with wings-- so we stayed as still as possible. I told her that deer can only see what moves, so we held ourselves tight like insensate statues.

Two of these white-tailed beauties grazed daintily on the ground but the third was drawn to our giant holly tree, resplendent with its myriad red berries, like necklaces thrown capricious. I was concerned-- something alarming about even deer drawn like the proverbial moth-- safe, I wondered, for deer or tree?

The triplets soon left our yard, as casually as they had come, and a week went by-- then one day a single deer came back. I say back because she went straight for the holly tree, and I banged on the plate glass door and yelled as fierce as an old man can yell to scare off the now unwanted intruder, for something told me the holly tree would be death to the deer.

She fled, but the next day came back again, again alone, and again, with eyes only for that tree, an Eve that could not say no to the forbidden fruit-- or berries or leaves it appears. Again, I chased her away, and for a few days saw no return.

Then one brisk morning our neighbor called-- he saw what we could not see in the deep green thickness of that holly tree. The doe lay sleeping under its canopy (so death always seems with animals, unlike a human corpse where something is gone), killed it seemed by berries or the leaves of the innocent tree.

I called my township-- they said, put the carcass by the street, we'll send someone to pick it up-- but I couldn't, or wouldn't. Not just because I walk with a cane, and am old and unsure how such a moving would be done-- no, no, it was more--

when I saw the deer lying sheltered beneath the tree it loved,
the tree it died for, it seemed a sacred place, consecrated--
and I could not bring myself to violate nature's holy ground.

Fortunately, I have a neighbor who is not sentimental, and he
dragged the dead doe roughly to the curb, and I knew, by
its pungent unearthly smell of death, it was the only answer.

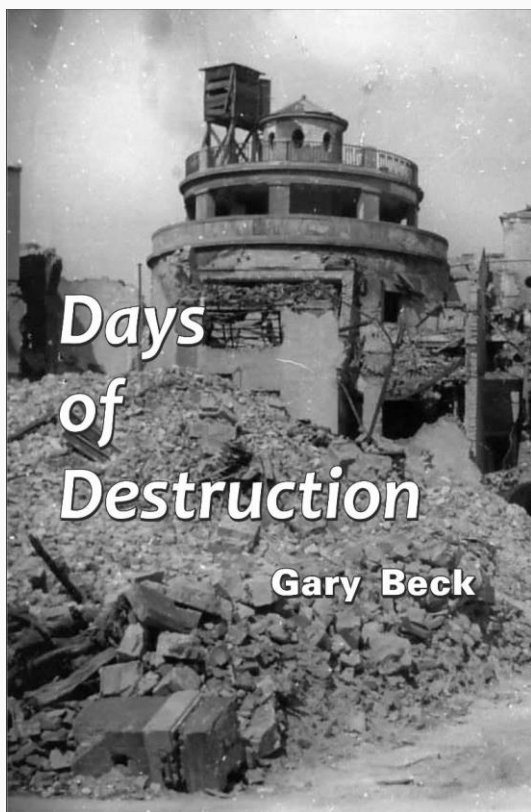
Days of Destruction

poetry by

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Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 39 poetry collections, 14 novels, 4 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 7 books of plays. Gary lives in New York City.

Walk into Imbolc's Quickening
D. Walsh Gilbert

A poet can hear it—the quiet rumble
of soil granules when the snowdrops

push toward light, through last year's
sweet rot of leaf mould—can you smell it?

Grains of clay give way to upward
growth. They circle what emerges green

and insistent—make a collar of red dirt,
a cervical channel deep as ancestry.

Listen, because it's all around us.
This ancient, enduring sound speaks

to the continental shift—that shuffle
made by our planet's land to relocate

up or down or over there—to change
what has been into some place new.

You can feel it, too—
the goosebumps rising on your skin

when you hear a newborn cry,
when you smell her head that first time.



“Rosa Rosa”

Yoonji Huh is a dedicated student enrolled at a school in Seoul, South Korea. With a strong passion for the arts, Yoonji is diligently curating her art portfolio in preparation for university.

Marooned
John Stanizzi

Among my finest skills is the one that
allows me to forget.
For example, I can simply erase
from my mind that fight in the kitchen,
the one where you held the knife.
You.
Not me.

I can ignore the malicious remarks
embedded under my skin-
their pain became part of who I am.

The air we breathed so mechanically
became a crazed windstorm
grinding around us so closely
it slashed at our skin,
yet you persisted that
I was imagining it,
like so many other things.

Oh, my children,
the time has long past for you to take
my quivering hand and guide me
across the lure of this landscape,
that bleak place I spent decades
trying to find what I knew was not there.
Every day that dashes by us becomes more washed out,
replaced by an affliction we cannot see.

I shall engage the gears of amnesia
which will remove the children,
and replace them with a golden ship
laboring boldly across the turbulent sea.
Then I'll call out It's too late to fix it!
I'm sailing back to the very beginning,
and I'll take it from there.

From the beach a very long way off
from where I was sure I left you,
you could not hear my voice above the sea,
which gradually became a part of the sea, roiling,
as I screamed out to you irreconcilably
This is the darkness at the very end of our walk,
the tide bubbling up around my knees.

Full Corduroy in the Nickel Package of Your Love
Zach Arnett

for poor creatures
 yanked out of the clay
such as me still

wet behind the ears
 from cute boy church
never much

for protective coloration:
 earning and spending
buck breaking

bailing the weight
 and
making a lot of noise

I bag my limit November 1
 yes, you know my grunts
- a four-bar lug wrench

turning turning
 to please
and excuse I tell you

I came here for the education
 but really
I came here to get sick

like everybody else
 when you get cartwheel silver dollars
for eyes you shack with anybody

I oblige because
 I think I deserve it:
to own things

but it's just a spell
 and a bottle-job
all anybody owns

is a return to the original mud
 ordinary sightings

run the front door

wager with low blood pressure,
 buffer hours,
sleep hygiene

but at night you have no moon
 all you have is a circle of Franks
bleeding me in so

I splinter the mirror
 I come down the sink
I dream with a fan on

Book Bandits

Rani Jayakumar

It was on a Saturday that I noticed that the little library had fewer books than usual. I tried to keep it stocked, but I hadn't had a chance to get to the library sale to pick up more books and magazines. It seems that the neighbors who usually help me in this task were on vacation. Little by little there was got more and more space in it until the top shelf (with the smaller books) became entirely empty. I put in a few more books, classics and Sherlock Holmes, in the next day or two. I thought it might be a particularly avid reader. I could think of a few I knew who lived nearby. Or perhaps it was someone gearing up for a summer yard sale, gathering books that they thought were likely to sell. Or maybe they were people who wanted to sell books online only to find that it was much more work than they thought. I wouldn't have even realized what was happening if not for my daughter, who told me pages had been fluttering down in our backyard from the elm tree. Since it was spring, after all, strangely enough, I thought birds were gathering up books to use to line their nest. Not exactly soft, fluffy material, but still quite insulating. And then there was the squirrel who, while I sat on the bench devouring a copy of pride and prejudice for the hundredth time, gave me a curious and interested look like I've never seen on an animal that size. I left the book on the bench when my neighbor Pat called me to chat about the garbage bins. I returned, and the book was gone. The only books left in the little library were religious propaganda and romances. Mysteries, westerns, self-help, sci-fi, fantasy all flew off the shelf. I didn't see that many takers - 'could they all be flying into the bushes and trees?

Then that night, as Pat had suggested, I brought the bins in a little later than usual rather than leaving them for the morning so that they wouldn't be left out overnight forgotten. I didn't get out to the curb until after 9 PM. In the corner of the yard underneath the pomegranate tree, which is really more of a bush, a group of crows - a murder as they say- flew, leaving on the ground the Collected Works of Edgar Allen Poe.

The rest of the week, I found books abandoned all over the front and backyards and on my doorstep, flipped open to random pages, weighted down with rocks. The books went and came and I was now sure that up in the branches literature had become a new hobby. I stopped by the used book store to stock up on Watership Down, Moby Dick, Wind in the Willows, and other books about animals. My children suggested others - Winnie the Pooh, Charlotte's Web, the Velveteen Rabbit - but I worried whether to introduce my feathered and furry neighbors to Animal Farm or even Bambi. What if they turned against us?

But I didn't have to worry. They took the books, read them, shared them, and returned them. Except for the occasional smear of berry juice or dusting of dirt, the books came back clean and unmarked. They were voracious for them, if they were really reading.

That I became sure of later, when a limping old raccoon tottered by wearing a discarded pair of my father's glasses, the ones he was always looking for. And that is also where those single socks disappeared to. The little bandit was reading - of all things - All Creatures Great and Small, holding the book prettily in both hands while stomping across my geraniums. That dispelled any doubts I had.

These days, my fellow non-humans and I share books. They are known to leave books in the library found around town. Occasionally they'll leave a newly released book directly at my doorstep as a suggestion. I try to find books they'll find interesting - not just animal books, but more about humans as well, in the hope it helps them understand us, and that we remain connected.

I was thinking of naming some of them, but they beat me to it with suggestions of their own. Now the raccoon is Mister Darcy, the squirrels are Tom and Becky, one hummingbird insists on Katniss, and three crows are Harry, Hermione, and Draco. I have no say in the matter.

On the bright side, I find myself reading more to keep up with them, and the kids have become interested in the classics they see the animals reading. Neighbors flock to the little shelves in my front yard with books they hope the fauna will read, and our sidewalk has become a gathering spot for humans and non-humans alike.

For now, reading is all the rage. But I fear something may be afoot. We seem to be running out of not only books, but more recently, pencils.

This Is How the Silence Works - After Ada Limón
Lydia Venus Valentine

She was right - the silence of the
world is abounding. I have
begun to try & absorb it more, its
stillness, its reserve; identifying
it is an easier game. There's the
silence in a crowd, where the ocean
of others refuses room for
more fish. There's the silence
that aches. The silence that feels
like swimming through thick fog, quiet
pea soup so sweltering no sound
could escape even if it tried. There's
New York silence. Loud city silence. After-
the-bar silence & before-the-first-drink
silence. & there is silence where I am catching my heartbeats
in my hands & hoping
that one patter sticks.



“Wildflower”

Yoonji Huh is a dedicated student enrolled at a school in Seoul, South Korea. With a strong passion for the arts, Yoonji is diligently curating her art portfolio in preparation for university.

Wood Pulp Fiction
Susmita Ramani

During a noisy, middle-of-forest picnic, a little boy named Aloysius thrust his jam-sticky fingers into his mother's activities bin, selected a white sheet of paper and cornflower blue crayon, wrote "HELLO" on the sheet of paper, folded it into an airplane (he was renowned in the third grade for his paper airplane making skills), climbed to the highest reachable branch, jettisoned the paper airplane, and laughed and whooped as it soared clear over the canopy.

After a while, the picnic wound down, and the family packed up their food scraps and litter, except the paper airplane, which only Al (as he preferred to be called) knew about. By then, Al's mind was onto other things, such as telling his best friends and neighbors that he'd gotten to see redwoods, which were older than...well, anything.

Now we turn to the paper airplane.

It had flown into the oldest, most venerable, and hands-down most photographed redwood tree in the forest.

After the clanging people were gone, the paper airplane strained to hear the forest's noises - so different from the noises of the paper mill where it was created, the big-box shop in which it had resided, and the family with which it had subsequently lived, always hoping for its special moment to be useful and shine - and, happy day! The time had come at last. The piece of paper had become an airplane with a message, and was out in the world, which itself felt like a noble purpose (though at times before it had wondered if perhaps it could be one of the few that were put on a wall and looked at for years). But it could feel that this place where it was now was the world as it once had been, and as it still might be when humans weren't around. Though the paper airplane couldn't exactly hear, and certainly couldn't see, it tried to stretch out the crisp points and planes of its nose and wings to absorb the cool air, woodland stirrings, hummings, chirping, croaking, and swishing of leaves.

Early in the morning, as it was adrift in a reverie about verdant patches of land rich with crushed leaves and full of small things that breathed and sighed diminutive breaths and sighs, the paper airplane heard a distinct moaning sound, and knew - as it had never known anything before - that the sound came from the redwood tree against whose trunk it rested.

"Ah, me," cried the redwood. "That I should be littered upon in this manner. I, who have witnessed the dawning and death throes of civilizations and empires."

"Hello, Grandmother," said the paper airplane, who felt instinctively that this was such a creature. "How can we speak to each other?"

"I did not know that you could speak to me," said the redwood. "But according to my nearly endless knowledge, if I were to guess, it is because - alas! - once, you were a part of a tree, or many trees, like me, so we may still make ourselves mutually understood. But right now, I simply wish you were not sitting so close to me."

"I cannot move," said the paper airplane, straining to do so. "I am sorry."

"Please do not mind our mother," whispered another, smaller, redwood tree. "Mother, this paper creature is lost, as we all are."

"As we all are," repeated the redwood. "But you, paper item, are unnatural. You represent everything that is wrong with the world. Humans, the great destroyers, cut down my brethren, then subjected them to a torturous process of being mashed up. Now, here you are, a bit of litter, garbage, a blot on our pristine environment. I am sorry to say that, and do not intend to be unduly cruel."

The paper airplane found that while it still could not move, it could not stop quivering. "I am sorry," it whispered again.

"Have mercy, Mother," said a smaller tree.

Other smaller trees took up the refrain: "Have mercy, Mother."

The redwood remained silent for several minutes, then said, "I am very old, and you will never find anybody more set in her ways than I. But I do see that my diatribe would more properly have been addressed to those who tortured you into your current form than to you yourself, who had no choice in the matter." She paused. "If you wish, you may speak."

The paper airplane said, "Grandmother, I agree that I am an unnatural creation of humans. However, besides representing what's wrong with the world, I also represent what's good and right about humans. I myself carry only a small message. But - and I feel this to my very corners, having inherited the paper sense of my ancestors, as all paper does - my brethren have been used for books to describe life itself, and commemorate the deepest and most authentic expressions of human feeling. Paper is also used for legal contracts, to memorialize people's agreements so that there might be peace. Some paper is drawn on, painted on, and folded to create pieces of artwork. I feel that I am a piece of artwork, although anyone may disagree. But, while I shall not outlive any of you, some other cultural items may." After this, the paper airplane could not help but squeak, as it feared that perhaps that it had gone too far.

After a few seconds' silence, the redwood asked, "And what small message do you carry?"

"My message is 'Hello,'" said the paper airplane. "It is the most basic sort of greeting among people."

"Ah, yes," said the redwood. "I am familiar with this 'hello.' You make some good points, particularly considering that you are a snip of a thing. I shall consider what you've said. And...you may remain where you are. I no longer mind your proximity."

The paper airplane still could not have moved even if it wanted to - but if it could have smiled then, it would have.

An Anti-Renaissance
Hannah Keeton Hughson

It's happening in our house;
A darkening of things, a heavying of air.
I never use that chair and I miss the sound of your keys
turning the lock, you would hold me
on the stairs for a full minute.
I miss both of us knowing the house sounds,
and I can't even look at it,
the book you asked for with the uncracked spine.
I call insurance, try to be tame.
It will be years before
I shed my old me, fall the dust
from my shoulders and the tops of my hands,
the dust on your things
in the rooms that my memories cower and sulk
inside. You changed me
like lamplight changes a room.

In my dreams, the stormtorn ship returns to me.
Sails barely bloated and threadbare,
it eases forward now.
I address the bow, I fling my wrath,
How dare you come back without him!
and I send it out again.
I let the brine, foam, overwhelm,
lap at me. Standing fingertip deep
I will wait in this water forever.
You said you would come, so come.

In my body you are still
ferociously here.
I feel you standing behind me at the sink,
I feel your hand on the back of my neck I feel you
I hear you I hear you
and I have the voicemails but nothing of your laugh.
You were the thickmossed forest where I grew up, sixteen on,
Where the boughs were strong enough to hold me, every one.

Hester, Oklahoma

for the former town, at present a "populated area," and its namesake, Hester Rude Young
 Ryan Clark

the town of Hester
 a root young and thirsty

a woman named Hester
 the wife so soon a widow

night on a track yelling freight
 toward the interrupted grasses
 that the MK&T has called townsite

the man the railroad company sent
 to charm her name off a face
 it would hardly outlive

the first town south of Mangum
 and the train softened the earth
 enough for the care of farmers

the wear of a young word
 and her years slid
 as sales for Lovett Furniture

and in the middle
 where their names
 call home out of
 any reach of
 contextual certainty
 the one mirrors after
 remains active and here
 and never lost
 in the ways of our forgetting

Home
Dudley Stone

Jack read every book in the Seminole library
in competition with a tenth-grade Suzy

and I imagine a time maybe in the 14th century
(certainly, before Gutenberg got busy)

when a single person, cloistered and mad,
could know all that was known about the world.

Books are disappearing from my local library
like murder victims in a town with a TV detective

and I wander down the aisles, open covers,
distract myself with colors. We all occupy too much space.

I see books, like cats and aircraft carriers, as women.
I long to run a finger along their spines.

Who wants to come home with me?



Yoon Park

God's Laughing When You Step into the Church
Leopold Crow

and the door closes like an oath.

what have you got for me, blasphemer? show me what you've got.

something sparks behind your eyelids, but he won't mistake it for faith. faith isn't scintillation when you're angry.

shoved up against the altar, wings tear themselves through your flesh, your back, your hands, flickering like crushed sparrows stabbed straight through the bone. any other paladin would surely have been beheaded, hanging as a grotesque bauble, eyes bright like angler fish and teeth just as sharp, but not you. something howls and your stomach's been long replaced by infinitely condensing supernovae, aching, aching, aching. your guts warp in on themselves, desperate guilty prayers spilling from your mouth like you can't get enough of the light show or the pain. god watches.

you take a breath. your fists curl.

and you dribble, bleed out beyond corporeal boundaries and *defy*,

come on, blasphemer, hit harder. show me what hallelujahs you've got left.

everything in this serious house leaves claw marks and you've learned to grow thorns instead of teeth, blackened with bitter covenant, use them to *fight*, just like god wanted. there are a thousand eyes with glowing golden rims wheeling around your head, firefly trails blazing behind them, faster, faster, faster, brilliant torches in the gloom. it's electrifying. you choke up dust and feathers with each hit. the technicolour thump of your heart pulses, oozes with the weight of each *lacrimosa* you spit out, bloody.

why so bold, blasphemer? I can see your sins painted in gold up and down your arms.

love's a sacrament best taken kneeling and oh, you're kneeling now. god's laughing as he draws your sword from your sheath. something dark trickles from your ears and oh, you're really out of control now.

the choir starts up. (*qua resurget ex favilla / judicandus homo reus*). god may not mistake fury for faith but he forgets: he made this and you're still vandalising the concert gates.

the organ starts up and you sing: *strike me down. I dare you. I dare step on this ground. I won't be any kind of holy today.*

I won't be surprised when god is laughing.

Coda

Andrei Atanasov

CW: Bullying, Physical Violence

Patrick Fonda died today. His mom used to do Alana's hair back in Jefferson, and they kept in touch, so the news appears as soon as we pull up Facebook. The day her son turned forty-eight, a Mack truck flipped his Harley over on the interstate, pinning him under it. Squashing him like a bug. Exactly what he almost did to me that day.

I step away from the computer, rubbing at my eyes. Too late. The memory invades like a doctor's torch approaching the eyes of the sedated; impossible to stop. My knees buckle and Alana must help me to the couch.

I'm on the ground. My nose is bloody, and my lip, from when my teeth broke the skin of his hand. His boot is on my neck, its rubber-tipped sole threatening to crush my windpipe. "You're just a bug to me, Anderson," he says smirking, and it's true: at fifteen, Patrick Fonda is 190 pounds of ballooning muscles, while I'm 135 soaking wet. His foot slips a bit and I think I might die.

A splitting headache pulls me back to the room. First time it ever comes at a good time. Alana hands me a glass of water, but my hands are clammy and it slips, shattering on the floor. I'm shaking all over.

I never spoke about what Fonda did to me. Everybody thought I was a pussy anyway, including—and likely most of all—my dad, so why add fuel to a flame that doesn't need it?

About a decade ago, I saw him step out of a gas station, his auburn hair blowing in the dry Texan wind. That's not true; I don't even know if it was him. I didn't wait to make sure. Hotshot programmer in Pegasus City, and all I could do was climb back into my pickup and drive to the next gas station, my heart pumping all the way there. Like I had Mistress Death instead of just the sun on my heels.

A trio of rock pigeons has made a nest on our windowsill. We love pets, but Alana's allergic, so these three are the only friends we have in Dallas. I used to own a cat, Marty, but had to leave him with my mom when we moved. I've got this thing about naming animals after people; helps me connect with them. As a kid, I went out to the bayou a lot; I named every animal I could see and followed them with my eyes as they went about their day, eating, playing, fighting, shitting; forever *here*, never just lost in their heads. Watching animals calms me. The pigeons I call Melvin, Bob, and Lucy, short for Lucinda.

"Should we call Mrs. Fonda, let her know we're thinking of her?" Alana asks while I feed the birds. I should be the one to make the call, but I can't bring myself to talk to Patrick's mom yet. Alana calls.

"Funeral's tomorrow at 11, at the FBC. Would mean the world to her if we could come."

I surprise myself when I say yes. "Yes, of course we will," Alana tells the receiver. "We'll pray for Patrick's soul together. May he rest in peace."

She pours me another glass of water and I gulp it down. Then I throw it at the far wall, where it shatters into a thousand little pieces. I only notice the tears when my eyes start to sting.

I tell my wife everything. How I had to wear a turtleneck for days to hide the imprint of his boot. How during our nightly prayers my father forced me to wish for success but secretly I prayed to see that bastard in the ground. How his death hasn't fixed anything. How it hasn't fixed me.

That night, I toss and turn, plagued with questions. All of them about Patrick. What was he like, at the end? What kind of man had three decades moulded him into? Was he married? Did he have any kids? Pets? Will anybody miss him?

Did he even resemble the boy I remember?

I leave the bed carefully so I don't wake Alana. I boot the computer, pull up Facebook, search for "Patrick Marion Fonda". I don't expect there to be more than one, but three results pop up, and I wonder, did this androgynous name make them as angry as it did my Patrick? Did it make them want to torture, humiliate, taint? In the third picture down, I recognize my devil. A little fatter, a lot balder, his arm around somebody cropped out, and on his face, the same smirk he wore as he stepped on my neck. I click.

Sound Advice from Your Favorite Pants
Tracie Adams

My opinion may not matter much because after all, I'm just a pair of pants. But hear me out. I mean, I am undeniably your favorite pair of pants. And I am pretty spectacular if I may say so myself. And I will say so because all your other pants collecting dust on their wooden hangers don't stand a chance except on that one day a week when you wash me gently, massaging my fine linen fabric tenderly with adoring hands. Don't think for one minute that I feel threatened, lying there drip drying on the side of your jacuzzi tub, watching you squeeze yourself into that pair of high rise flared jeans. I see you eyeballing me, wishing you could slip your legs into my smooth, loose fit before you settle into your favorite spot on that rattan sofa to write another story. I know you want me.

We have been through more together than those jeans can fathom. They weren't invited on every single vacation like I was. No, it was me you chose to travel the world with—from the sandy beaches of Hawaii to the cobblestone streets of Vienna to boat rides across the Aegean Sea. Together we explored the ancient ruins of Athens, ski lodges in Banff, street festivals in New York, a houseboat adventure on Lake Mead, and that unforgettable mission trip to Haiti. I'm always there for you. You trust me because I have never failed to comfort you in every time and season.

I've been a witness to many joyous occasions like graduations, baby showers, and birthday dinners with your family. We've passed the time many evenings on your covered porch, watching the stars in silence, my dark fabric like Velcro against your dog's hair. But I've felt especially loved when you have been sad, like when you grieved for a whole summer after your best friend died. And just this week when you spent the day helping your nephew write goodbye letters after he was told the cancer treatments were no longer working.

Our relationship has survived your long battle with Anorexia and several descents into the pit of despair. At one point, I struggled to hold tight to your narrow waist, sharp hip bones rubbing against me like the blades of a surgeon's knives. These days you struggle to pull me up past well-nourished thighs. We're both stretched to our limit it seems.

We've shared such treasured memories together. My frayed, ragged hem is evidence of years rubbing against your Birkenstocks and those white tennis shoes you're so attached to, and I never minded you treading on me barefoot in the sand or across your kitchen's cold hardwood floor. I never complained once when you dragged me out into those humid Virginia summers to cut the grass with you or pull weeds in your vegetable garden.

I think I've earned enough of your respect to voice my concerns. This is as hard on me as it is you, but I wouldn't be a true friend if I didn't tell you, it's time to move on. Embrace your changing, aging body and love it like I have. Buy some new pants that will fit you for another decade or two. It's time.

The Codger's Chronicle
James Kangas

There was a big pine five miles north of our hometown when I was a kid, the last tree of an old growth forest. It must have been five feet in diameter and heaven knows how many feet tall. Sky high, folks thought, touching the clouds. People used to stare at it in wonder trying to guess how many rings it might have if it were to be cut through by an extralong crosscut saw. After I left those parts for my first job in the city, and beyond that following my nose through decades of chance wanderings down roads to nowhere (Shangri-La, I always hoped), I remember going home and hearing the news that lightning had struck the tree and set it ablaze and *poof* it was gone, leaving behind a stump and nothing more. I went to see the old thing with only the ground surrounding it covered with wintergreen and mosses and arbutus and oak fern, and lichen on the stump. It reminded me of myself, having been burnt by life's lightning, rotting away now with things growing on me (warts, keratoses and basal cell growths, like whatnot on *its* remains), and birds and skunks and bears and other wildlife using it to peck at or scratch, looking for ants or bark beetles, and when full up from feasting and needing to crap, do. On top of the decaying mound. Well, I figure, just what else is a damn moldering corpse of a stump or an old man good for?

Witching Hour
Sydney Koeplin

7:40 p.m. in Charlotte, North Carolina, is thick with hazy light. It washes through the windows, climbing up my half wall and deepening as it goes, the sun a ball tightening as it sets. The apartment I'm renting is the only one where I've stayed longer than a year in the last seven. Around me, people are leaving the city for new lives. I want to follow, but I'm tired.

Carolina heat doesn't break, it settles. In the summer, you resist going outside between early morning and dusk if you can help it — leave the refuge of an air-conditioned building, and you may as well be an ant under a magnifying glass, frying. The air above the asphalt perpetually shimmers. Occasionally, the sky opens with a swift violence, rain pooling on the uneven sidewalks and flooding the streets faster than the drains can suck it down. As suddenly as they come, the storms move northeast towards the ocean, leaving a particularly saturated stickiness behind. But at this time of day, the heat is tolerable, almost pleasant. The sidewalk crawls with people laughing, yelling, sweating.

Fat June beetles careen into my balcony doors with a *thunk*, hitting one, two, three times before giving up. They're drunk, I think — clumsy. I can hear their whirring through the glass. The neighborhood buzzes with an insectile hum in the evenings, like a heartbeat. Crickets chirp and cicadas sing, though I've noticed they aren't as loud here as in northern Illinois, where I grew up. But just like home, the mosquitos will suck you dry.

Motorcyclists begin to congregate in front of the dive bar down the street. They're seemingly immune to the heat, leather-clad any time of year, and greet each other like old comrades in arms. My building has arisen around the bar like a cheaply built amoeba, engulfing it in a horseshoe but not yet devouring it. Occasionally, I ask the flat-toned bartender for a three-dollar cider and tip thirty-three percent to apologize for being an interloper. As the bikes peel to and from, their engines roar in an abrupt crescendo that used to startle me but now blends into the tapestry of city sound.

Behind the crooked teeth of downtown, the light begins to turn, a taste of the sherbet skies yet to come — a kaleidoscope of oranges and pinks and purples and the tulle of clouds. Sunset feels like a threat and a promise here: it will darken and then lighten; the heat will rise. We will do this dance again tomorrow, and I will be here — waiting.



Yoon Park

Looking for Light
Jen Ippensen

When the first vine started growing, just peeking from under my left pointer finger nail, I wasn't even sure if it felt right, if it felt like *me*. I wasn't ready to reveal it, to let it spool out of me, in the middle of chemistry lab next to the Bunsen burner embedded in the table I shared with Calloway Hansen on one side and Melinda Cooper on the other. But pulling, clipping, *pruning* it didn't feel right either. So, I curled it neatly into my cupped palm.

When the vine grew and coiled my wrist, I wore long sleeves, pulled the band down over my fist—holding it close, this secret thing I'd only begun to understand.

The habit of rubbing a soft, green leaf between thumb and forefinger began idly one night while I lie alone in the dark, wondering about my classmates and teachers and what they might say, what they might do, if they saw what I had up my sleeve. What would Calloway Hansen say if a single ropey stalk crawled along the back of his chair, like ivy tracing ragged cracks in brick and mortar? What would Melinda Cooper do if a leaf, gentle as an evening breeze, brushed the back of her hand during a pop quiz on ionic bonding? And Mr. Carlson? If, instead of raising my hand in class, I lifted an earthy tendril to indicate my understanding? The possibilities were both alluring and terrifying.

Still, it wasn't long before it started spilling over into school, this meditation—thumb and forefinger, circling in wonder. First, I began letting my leaves out in the shadows under my desk and occasionally in the halls during passing periods when the crowd was thick and no one would notice. Then, one day I woke to discover they'd brambled up my neck and curled into my hair. I stood a long time in front of my bedroom mirror, wondering at this part of me that insisted on being seen.

I decided if that kid Robert Stanley could wear the same sweatshirt—stained with last Wednesday's spaghetti sauce—every day of the week despite its obvious stench, I could simply show up as I am. At least I shower.

During Mr. Carlson's lecture on conductivity, I felt Calloway's eyes on me. I refused to look at him until it was time to hook electrodes to our lemon and see if our citrus battery would conduct a current. I rolled the lemon on the table to break down the cell walls, to loosen up the juices. Cal kept staring at me until finally I said, *what?* and he reached out, without asking, and touched a vine that had worked its way out my collar and down my shoulder blade. Somehow instinctively anticipating his advance, I forced myself not to flinch. But Cal flinched, even let out a little yelp. He sucked his finger, then swore at me under his breath like it was somehow my fault he was bleeding.

Until then, I'd thought this new part of me was all soft and tender, all vulnerable. I didn't realize I was capable of producing thorns.

Melinda looked up from drawing wildflowers in the margin of her notes. Cal stalked off to the handwashing station, and when he had gone, I rushed out the classroom door and down the hall.

The restroom door hadn't fully closed when Melinda slipped inside and said, *Sorry*, as if any of this was her fault. I didn't know what to say, so I only shook my head and looked at my hands gripping the sink.

She stood next to me.

Slowly, a long, slender tendril, that first one that sprouted from my nail, loosed itself and uncurled. It inched along the porcelain, reaching out toward Melinda. Her intake of breath sounded to me like a gasp, and I pulled away.

Sorry, she said again and took a few breaths before lifting one shaky finger. I saw then that she too wanted to touch me, wanted to know.

Voice barely audible, Melinda asked, *Can I?*

When I hesitated, she withdrew and said, *it's okay, never mind.*

No, it's just—I don't want to hurt you. I felt my voice wavering, saw my vines trembling in the mirror.

Stepping closer, Melinda looked to our reflected images and held my eyes. Shoulder to shoulder we stood, seeing ourselves and each other. It occurred to me that Melinda looking in that mirror with me must have been the first time anyone had ever seen me as I see myself.

When she lifted her right hand, palm out as if in greeting, I lifted my left, freshly wrapped in foliage. Our hands hovered in the air and I noticed her fingernails, orange and flecked with dark spots like tiger lily petals. A single leaf, glossy with light, gently unfurled from my hand and reached toward hers. It curled tenderly around her speckled nail and caressed the soft flesh of her finger where her heart beat in double time with mine.

My Not Quite Manifesto
Amanda Weir-Gertzog

this is my not
quite manifesto
not quite an idea
claim or creation
not a hell no
or rallying cry
despite my years
of therapization
my yeses and nos
fade to grayscale
scantly clad mild
mid-observations
while poetic pond-
erings creep-seep
through my mind's eye
burrowing cerebral
wire-deep to indigo-
tinged memories
i willow my days
by metered hours
and cannot dictate
what may satiate
your inner needs
or tomorrow-desires

in this screaming-wide-
world of joy and sorrow
this ache in me feels
the ache in you
(like words akimbo in
my multi-track-mind)
i hold it close —
washi-taped and true

this is my not
quite manifesto
not quite a
declaration
a tell-all
or a how-to
but a why-i
because-we...

Chartreuse
Robert Reece

His life flowed in steel rail tributaries. Pallid planes across ink-blotchy dawns. A heat-tempered confluence. Seamless metal veins from Trenton to Sandusky to Athens to LA. Resting for a few days when the sun whispered through to gather strength for the pilgrimage to the expanse of mirror shimmer flattened. Reflecting the sky. Reflecting upon his life that flowed in hot rolled manganese rivers.

To the place he is now anonymous and moves no more. Stillwater blackened deep in ice forest greens. Gossamer knives of light stabbed at him from the sun. Down until the radiation warmth was frozen out. Waiting at the bottom. Sedentary. Mired. In the silt of everyone else's success. Sitting in that velvet chair, a songbird chartreuse furniture cast-off dumped near the switching yard in Sylmar.

A bottom feeder, he drank the bilge. Dined on the scraps that trickled down the food chain. He ate and observed the days like they were still frames in an old Super 8 reel. Memories blurred into overexposed camera flashes frozen in glass neurons. His brain was a shattered stained-glass window with shards and faces like a broken kaleidoscope. Like the day he met Adelina at Uncle Rem's welcome home BBQ when he returned from Afghanistan. Rem said he couldn't wash the sand and dust and blood out of his teeth. But Adelina's eyes were impossibly yellow-green, like a cold fire of fern leaves, like the songbird chair. It was kismet to find it now just like it was kismet to meet Adelina. After Rem died from the downed power line in a storm, he drank with Adelina for light-years across the galaxy. Then the miscarriage. Sand and dust and blood. The fights gave birth to continents of cooling lava between thoughts of a child they never had. Those landforms became row after row of houses and cemetery plots and vanilla Sprite smiles stared out from front doors and side windows. Looking past him. Passed him.

Rem first showed him courage and then painkillers. Adelina showed him he was a design flaw overlooked. A small crease on the surface of the concrete plan. A blueprint that was never submitted for his approval. No say in its implementation. Constructed dot to dot. A life painted by numbers in an old hobby shop activity room. Cement sewage and gum grey spotted sidewalks that looked like his legs. Mosquito bites, flea bites. Fleas in his songbird chair. The plan connected by dead highways and those steel arteries to skate on and carry oxygen.

But they would see him there today. Rem, Adelina, the ghost of a son unnamed. Their eyes would not overlook anymore because he willed it.

He would have them on their feet. A standing ovation in LA River channel backyards where he was a shadowless specter. A silent, garden gnome chimera hiding in the polluted reeds. He could hear his legend bleeding out on social media, his face on local news channels in every living room and office building. Who and why would resonate as a funeral dirge. Who and why and impact destiny.

He picked up his songbird chair and sat it on the jugular. Right in the middle of the southbound tracks. His feet planted on the creosote railroad ties. Waiting for the scream holler horn of an Amtrak. Blaring wide-eyed into the face of the conductor. Catatonic brakes blistered in a shower of sparks like fireworks over Dodger Stadium. He'd seen them at night, shooting across the universe, trying to illuminate the house where Adelina lived with her husband and children and a lifetime of missed glances.

The headlights blasted him first. There would be no blinking. His eyes blinded and dried up, aqueous humor evaporating to halogen dust. The train narrowed down upon him, like the

magnificent lance of an undefeated knight in a jousting tournament. So, the who and why could become a legend.

But the conductor looked away, distracted at that defining moment by a moth that fluttered through the cab. He swiped at it, turning his eyes away from the tracks. He didn't see anyone. He didn't apply the brakes. He didn't hear anything at all except for the crack of ballast, he thought, bouncing under the passenger cars.

The train barreled through the songbird chair, exploding it in a nebula of chartreuse panacea. The train rumbling diesel pulse. Never slowing down for the anonymous cloud of splintered wood, bone, blood, and velvet. A legend died that second and no one even knew.

The conductor looked back out his window. His fingers greasy from moth wing powder. He looked up just in time to see a meteor burn out across the darkening skies in an insignificant arc. Like the scratch on his back from a prostitute. He made a wish.

BIOS

Aleks Omylak is a lifelong New Yorker with back problems. She has zero woes in life. She will graduate college within the next year and plans to become either a smashing, worldwide literary success (really!) or a plumbing associate at her neighbor's janitorial firm. More of her writing can be found at <https://aomylak.wixsite.com/bigrecyclingbin>.

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet whose work has been published widely in Britain and the USA, where he has had four nominations for the Pushcart Prize.

Rebecca Kilroy (she/her) is a novelist and short story writer from the swampy suburbs of New Jersey. Her work has been featured in "The Forge," "trampset," "Fatal Flaw," "oranges journal," and others. She's currently at work on an apocalyptic historical novella.

MaxieJane Frazier is a writer, teacher, editor, and retired military veteran from Riverside, WA. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in Cleaver Magazine, Booth, SoFloPoJo, Scribes*MICRO*Fiction, Bending Genres, The Ekphrastic Review, The Bath Flash Fiction anthology, and other places. MaxieJane holds an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars and co-founded Birch Bark Editing where she is a co-editor for MicroLit Almanac.

Slater Ross Garcia has had his work published in Samfiftyfour, Santa Fe Literary Journal, and has a horror novel set to be published this year with Mischievous Muse Press. He needs a shower, a good night's sleep, and a cigarette, probably. There is little more to say about him.

Sarah Daly is an American writer whose fiction, poetry, and drama have appeared in twenty-one literary journals including Quail Bell Magazine, Two Hawks Quarterly, Euphemism, and Triggerfish Critical Review.

Tim Murphy (he/him) is a disabled, bisexual poet who lives in Portland, Oregon. His writing primarily explores disability and our complex, tenuous relationship with the more-than-human world. Tim's poetry appears in over a dozen literary journals, including Wordgathering, Remington Review, Eunoia Review, CERASUS Magazine, Writers Resist, and in the book, The Long COVID Reader. You can find him on Instagram and Twitter (@brokenwingpoet).

Mark Dunbar is a former teacher and writer originally from Columbus, Ohio, and now living outside Chicago. He attended Kenyon College where he was the recipient of the American Academy of Poets Award.

J. Tavares enjoys writing most prose except for bios. He has no published work that he wants remembered and the more interesting aspects of his daily life might distract readers of his present work so the bio is bland. He is presently appreciating some Amy Hempel and Padgett Powell while trying to anticipate what AI will do to other people's fiction.

Author writes in New York City, U.S.A. under the pen name Jan Cronos.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. His writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in

Chewers & Masticadores, The Gorko Gazette, Ranger, Cacti Fur, The Hooghly Review, Alba, and many others.

Brooksie C. Fontaine is a coffee addict who got into college at fifteen and annoyed everyone there. She is a teaching assistant, tutor, illustrator, and grad student. Her work has been published by Eunoia Review, Quail Bell, Boston Accent Lit, Anti-Heroine Chic, and the Cryptids Emerging and Things Improbable anthologies. Her illustrations may be viewed via BrooksiesSketchbooks.com.

Seungmin Kim is a diligent scholar enrolled at the Hong Kong International School. Presently, he is meticulously curating his compilation of written works with the aim of fortifying his candidacy for admission to esteemed academic institutions.

Ihita Anne specializes in poetry to illuminate and uncover the mysteries of life. She despises referring to herself in third person, however she may dabble in the dark arts for certain awe-inspiring publications.

Erin Kroi is an Albanian Canadian creative writer based in Vancouver, British Columbia. She studied English and Film at the University of Victoria. Her work favours experimental and poststructuralist approaches to literature and media. She has an affinity for all things grotesque and macabre. Her work can be found in The Albatross and in Dyke News. Beyond writing, she enjoys sitting in dark theatres, working with children, and envisioning the apocalypse.

E.P. Lande was born in Montreal, but has lived most of his life in the south of France and Vermont, where he now lives with his partner, writing and caring for more than 100 animals, many of which are rescues. Previously, he taught at l'Université d'Ottawa where he served as Vice-Dean of his faculty, and he has owned and managed country inns and free-standing restaurants. Since submitting less than two years ago, more than 50 of his stories have been accepted by publications in countries on five continents.

Michelle Tram is an avid reader and writer of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. In the past, she worked as a genre editor for Polyphony LIT, an international literary magazine for high school students. Her writing can be found in The Daphne Review, Blue Marble Review, and other publications. Alongside her passion in writing, she also studies as a first-year medical student at Albany Medical College.

George C. Harvilla is an organizational anthropologist and executive leader in the global health sciences. His poems, which operate at the convergence of the quantifiable and the intangible, have been featured on New York Public Radio's Poetry in the Morning broadcasts and have appeared in Atlanta Review, California Quarterly, Modern Poetry, Medicinal Purposes, The Comstock Review, Earth's Daughters, The Journal of Poetry Therapy, Willow Springs, and The Rift among others.

My name is Ed Filipak, and I write under the pen name Philip Pak. I have had short stories published in Mystery Tribune, Bewildering Stories, Murderous Ink Press and a British publication, Personal Bests Journal. I also have had a collection of short stories published by, Prodigy Gold Books.

Marie Cloutier (she/her) is a writer and poet. Her work has been published in Scribes *micro* fiction, Bare Back Literary, and elsewhere. She is at work on a memoir. Connect with her on her website, www.mariecloutier.com.

Ellen Notbohm's internationally renowned work has touched millions in more than twenty-five languages. She is author of the award-winning novel *The River by Starlight* and the nonfiction classic *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*. Her short prose has appeared in many literary journals, including *Brevity*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Quail Bell*, *Does It Have Pockets?*, *Eunoia Review*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, *Eclectica*, and in anthologies in the US and abroad.

Michaele Jordan has worked at a kennel, a church and AT&T. Now she writes. She has written two novels -- *Blade Light* and *Mirror Maze* -- and has numerous stories scattered around the web. She also makes pie.

Zoé Mahfouz is an Award-Winning bilingual French Actress, a Screenwriter and a Content Creator based in Paris (France). She is the proud holder of a screenwriting certificate from the University of Cambridge, her screenplays have been recognized by a handful of IMDb qualifying film festivals.

Karen Lee is a student at Chadwick International in Seoul, South Korea, who has an unquenchable passion for both writing and drawing. In preparation for her future academic endeavors, she is diligently compiling her writing portfolio and has recently received an acceptance to Iowa Young Writer's Studio, a distinguished program that identifies and nurtures emerging writing talent.

James Nelli is a retired business executive and the author of the flash fiction story, *Passing Notes*. He has learned that you never know how strong and creative you are until it's the only option. He attended the University of Illinois, where he received a degree in economics, and then to graduate school at Northwestern University, where he received his MBA in Finance and International Business. His travels have taken him to many areas of the world. These travels have served as a basis for many of his stories. Writing fiction has been a passion for him, and in recent years his writing has specialized in murder mystery novels and poignant short stories that elicit emotional and thoughtful responses. His short stories have been published in a variety of online and print publications. He and his wife live in Southern California, along with a lifetime collection of books.

Farriz Mashudi used to write contracts, news, and blogged as the Grumpy Naturalist before turning to fiction and CNF. She writes novels and short stories, and presently loves the micro and flash forms best. Malaysian-born, she currently divides her time between the UK and ME.

James Moran is a professional astrologer who regularly publishes articles, fiction, and poetry. His published works can be found at <https://jamesmoran.org/the-creation-playpen>

Livio Farallo is co-editor of *Slipstream* and Professor of Biology at Niagara County Community College in Sanborn, New York. His work has appeared or, is forthcoming, in *The Cardiff Review*, *The Cordite Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Triggerfish*, *Ranger*, *Misfit*, and elsewhere.

Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania who works as a financial director for a large non-profit. His poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Lana Turner*, *Sugar House Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *Allium*, and *The Inflectionist Review*, among others. His work has appeared in the *Dwarf Stars Anthology* and he is the winner of the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award and the Trailblazer Award.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside the Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

Lawrence Winkler is a retired physician, traveler, and natural philosopher. His métier has morphed from medicine to manuscript. He lives with Robyn on Vancouver Island and in New Zealand, tending their gardens and vineyards, and dreams. His writings have previously been published in *The Montreal Review*. Some of his other work can be found online at lawrencewinkler.com.

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.j. Carber, 77, became a published poet in his 8th decade in over 200 literary journals in 15 countries. A retired teacher [America, Japan, Taiwan, the war zone of Cambodia 1973-74], he has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and thrice for Best of the Net. Cyberwit has published 3 collections: *The Enormity of Existence* [2020]; *Of Ether and Earth* [2021]; and *Soul Songs* [2022]. The titles reflect an awareness he gained over 50 years ago when he had an NDE whilst nearly drowning in a Vermont river: That he has, is a consciousness predating birth and surviving death, what poets since Plato have called the soul.

A dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, D. Walsh Gilbert lives in Farmington, Connecticut on a former sheep farm at the foot of the Talcott Mountain, previous homelands of the Tunxis and Suckiaug peoples, near the oldest site of human occupation in Connecticut. She's the author of six books of poetry, the most recent, *Finches in Kilmainham* (Grayson Books). She serves with Riverwood Poetry Series and is co-editor of *Connecticut River Review*.

John Stanizzi is the author of *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!* *High Tide – Ebb Tide*, *Four Bits*, *Chants*, *Sundowning*, *POND*, *The Tree That Lights the Way Home*, *Feathers and Bones*, *Viper Brain*, and *SEE*. John's work has been widely published -- *Rattle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cortland Review*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Tar River Review*, *PoetLore*, and many others. His nonfiction has been published in *Literature and Belief*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Ovunque Siamo*, and many others.

Pop culture's rising star Zoé Mahfouz navigates life with the heaviest burden there is, an illness no doctor was able to cure: the Gift of Greatness. Wherever she goes, she just lights up the room with her humor, her wit, her intelligence. It is fair to say that she is the life of the party, but she actually is The Life itself. Did you know that the name "Zoé" actually meant "Life" in grec? Of course you didn't, you peasant. Also, while you were busy reading this, Zoé Mahfouz already wrote her new soon-to-be Award-Winning screenplay, which is probably going to cause the next bidding war in Hollywood. Some people might even say she is the 3rd (female) Coen Brother. Well, mostly her mom but that still counts.

Zach Arnett was educated at Ball State University. His poems can be found in Red Ogre Review, Hominum Journal, Bending Genres, The Meadowlark Review and elsewhere. He works at the library.

Rani Jayakumar lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family, teaching music and mindfulness and trying to save the planet. More work can be found at okachiko.wordpress.com. Her little library is often emptied and refilled by unknown neighbors.

Lydia Venus Valentine is a black trans + lesbian poet currently located in New York. His poetry varies from topic to topic, but the inspiration of their friends and experiences always remains the same. Their work can be found in beloved zine, the little patuxent review, ballast journal and others.

Susmita Ramani's fiction has appeared in The Wondrous Real Magazine, 3 Moon Magazine, 365 Tomorrows, and The Daily Drunk, among other publications. She lives in the Bay Area with her husband, two daughters, and a dozen pets. WordPress: <https://susmitaramani.wordpress.com/>. X: <https://twitter.com/susmitabythebay>

An intentionally happy person, and avid reader and writer, who is working on loving each season equally. Hannah Keeton Hughson is approaching a move from Raleigh, NC back to Richmond, VA, so that she and her husband can spend more Saturdays at the museums they love most, more Sundays with their family, and more Mondays at day jobs that somewhat fulfill them, with a backyard to write in all days of the week.

Ryan Clark is an Old Greer County native who writes his poems using a unique method of homophonic translation. He is the author of Arizona SB 1070: An Act (Downstate Legacies) and How I Pitched the First Curve (Lit Fest Press), as well as the forthcoming chapbook Suppose / a Presence (Action, Spectacle). His poetry has appeared in such journals as DIAGRAM, Interim, SRPR, and The Offing.

Dudley Stone's poetry has recently appeared in NiftyLit, Shadowplay, and Wilderness House Poetry Review. His writing for the theatre has been seen on stages from California to Connecticut. He has a B.A. in Theatre from the University of Kentucky and studied playwriting at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Mr. Stone lives in Lexington, KY.

Leopold Crow (he/they) is a trans writer who can generally be found painting or talking someone's ear off about Star Wars. More of his work can be found at <https://leopold-crow.carrd.co>

Andrei Atanasov is a Romanian writer whose prose has appeared in Flash Fiction Magazine, Drunk Monkeys, The B'K, and elsewhere. If you liked this piece, consider checking out Andrei's Substack publication, Practice Space, at www.practicespace.blog.

Tracie Adams is a writer and teacher in rural Virginia. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Oddball Magazine, The Write Launch, WOTL Magazine, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Sheepshead Review and others. Follow her on Twitter @lfunnyfarmAdams and on Substack @tracieadams.

James Kangas is a retired librarian living in Flint, Michigan. His poems have appeared in Atlanta Review, Faultline, New York Quarterly, Penn Review, Unbroken, West Branch, et al. His chapbook, Breath of Eden (Sibling Rivalry Press), was published in 2019.

Sydney Koeplin is a writer and editor from the Midwest. Her work has appeared in the Lovers Literary Journal, Qu Literary Magazine, and Hypertext Magazine, among others. She won the Elmira Nelson Jones Prize for Creative Writing from Colby College in 2021.

Jen Ippensen (she/her) lives and writes in Nebraska. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska. You can find her at www.jenippensen.com or on Twitter @jippensen.

Amanda Weir-Gertzog is a neuroqueer poet from New York who lives, writes, and edits in the American South. A nap goddess and bookworm, she basks in the wonder of sweet tea, silliness, and cozy gray cardigans.

Robert Reece is a writer and painter from California. Recently, his stories have been picked up by Flash Fiction Magazine and 3:AM Magazine.

Did You Know?

Corvids are able to identify themselves in a mirror and can even use a reflective surface to find and remove dirt from their face, in much the same way a human might remove spinach from their teeth.

