



Cover/Issue Art

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Bube Bird  
Benjamin DuBow

I know, I know, that is not my Surie Bube, that  
is a cardinal, and Bube—though she loved them  
and would spend hours and hours, a lifetime  
in admiration of their spark—is no bird,  
and also she is dead.

But this morning, at the edge of my eye—  
sitting in her sofa chair in the corner of the den  
—I see a flash of color in the far-left window  
of the room's clerestory. A crimson bird is perched  
on a curve of a mulberry tree, and there is...something.  
This odd vantage point; the sky's blue gentled  
by a cheesecloth cloud to brilliant the red of him;  
the angle of light through that upper window.

## How to Make Me Feel Loved Huina Zheng

Embrace the diverse world of sugar water in Guangdong. Beyond mere liquid, it's a lush delight, in thick pastes of sesame, almond, peanut, walnut - a taste that's just right. Don't miss the hearty soups of mung bean and red bean; they're a part of the scene. Or even solid, with treats like double-skin milk, ginger milk curd, and turtle jelly. That's why locals "eat" sugar water, not just "drink" it.

Blend in with Guangdong locals – their love for sweetness is legendary. The menu for Guangdong sugar water is rumored to be as extensive as a dictionary. Wander the streets, and you'll find sugar water shops dotting every corner. It's a daily ritual here: a bowl in the morning, a soothing treat in the scorching afternoon, or a late-night comfort after a long day. In Guangdong, sugar water is as essential as the air they breathe, woven into the fabric of life.

Stay enthralled. This sweet tradition, born from Guangdong's tropical tapestry, offers respite in summer's heat and nurtures in winter's chill. It harmonizes with the local rice-centric diet, aiding digestion, echoing traditional Chinese medicine's wisdom of bodily balance and health. The sugar water here dances with the seasons, each variety serving a purpose. Spring ushers in Apricot Stew with Snow Fungus, a balm for the liver. Summer brings the cool caress of Water Chestnut Sugar Water. Autumn's air is sweetened with Fritillaria and Loquat Snow Pear Syrup, a lung's ally. And winter warms the soul with Ginger Juice Sweet Potato and Sweet Soup Balls. In every home, these traditions take on a personal touch, reflecting the tastes of those who prepare them.

Embrace the artistry in Guangdong's sugar water, where bold creativity meets tradition. In crafting mung bean soup, my mother adds "stinky grass" and kelp. This unique herb, also known as Rue, unfurls a rich, sweet scent upon heating, mingling flawlessly with kelp's fresh taste. Each spoonful brings a harmony of slightly melted kelp's mild freshness and the bean soup's thick, cooling sweetness. Every summer, as she chilled the soup in the fridge, its sweet taste becomes a cherished memory for me, especially when the summer heat intensifies and cicadas chirp outside.

Learn to appreciate the warmth and care in Guangdong's sugar water culture. As autumn winds ushered in dryness, my mother often said, "Let's have some papaya and silver ear mushroom stew." During late-night study sessions, she'd ask, "Hungry? I'll whip up sweet potato sugar water." Her secret touch: ginger slices, a remedy for the cold, a boost for appetite and digestion. Before big exams, my mother had a special ritual: crafting a pot of red bean soup for dessert, laden with more than sweetness - it symbolized a victorious beginning. I'd relish each spoonful. It was only upon stepping away from home that I truly felt the void, understanding that what I missed were more than mere treats - they were, in fact, precious fragments of home itself.

Engage your senses and savor the moment. Preparing sugar water is a patient art, a ritual not to be rushed. Choose green papaya, firm to the touch, to avoid a mushy result too much. Soak snow fungus, one to two hours, until it softens and empowers. Rinse well, remove the yellow part, tear into pieces, a culinary art. Stew for an hour, watch as it simmers; add rock sugar, goji berries – they're shimmers. Dice papaya, add to the mix, stew half more, a flavorful fix. Once ready, let it cool, a moment to treasure. Sit down, ladle a bowl, and relish each sip. Watch as silver ear mushrooms transform into a translucent, captivating white, and the papaya softens into a semi-translucent state. Notice how the broth takes on a soft yellow shade. With each spoonful,

discover the mushrooms' tender silkiness, contrasting with the papaya's gentle fibrous texture. The broth, slightly thick, envelops you in its exquisite fruity and floral scent. This dessert is not just a treat, but a feast for the senses, an intense dance of flavors and textures.

Connect with others. In Guangdong, it's rare to refuse an invitation to "eat sugar water." It's a place where awkwardness fades away, and meaningful conversations flow. Street vendors offering sugar water present an array of metal boxes, each filled with options like green beans, coix seeds, red beans, locust flower powder, and turtle jelly. Post-school, my routine was to relish different sugar water flavors, served in plain stainless-steel bowls. Together with friends, we'd sit on tiny red plastic stools, immersed in the people's rhythmic flow, our sugar water sips offering a sweet escape from daily pressures. In the workplace too, after a colleague's project triumph, "I'll treat everyone to sugar water," became a familiar, celebratory phrase.

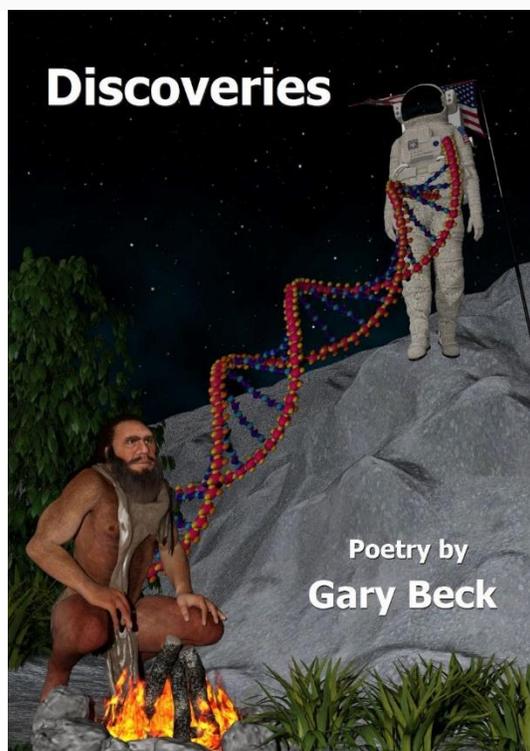
Far from home, the yearning for familiar sweetness draws me to red beans, lotus seeds, lilies, aged tangerine peel, and brown sugar. My mother's treasured recipe guides me, as I recreate that comforting essence. Each sip is a journey back, a reminder of life's simple joys.

# Discoveries

Poetry by

**Gary Beck**

Discoveries is a poetry collection that reveals many of the disturbing changes roiling America, from our assault on Nature to the crumbling structure of our democracy, as well as world events that don't exalt the human spirit



Discoveries is a 101-page poetry book in paperback priced at \$12.95. ISBN: 191569261X published by Purple Unicorn Media.

For info or to request a review copy, contact: [info@purpleunicornmedia.com](mailto:info@purpleunicornmedia.com)

<https://www.amazon.com/Discoveries-Gary-Beck/dp/191569261X/>

Gone  
Erika Seshadri

you always were  
too much for me, behind your  
panoply of drum beats,  
cigarettes,  
and inability to sit still

a dichotomy  
with anodyne presence  
and a secret grin that  
pulled me in

I now hold  
a final memory of you  
standing in half-light  
cherry glow,  
laughing on front steps

a memory, when  
clutched tightly  
only ripens heartache—  
yet the thought of it  
forever forgotten  
is unbearable

I don't want this

I want firm substance  
of muscle and flesh  
adorned  
with familiarity,  
warm to the touch,  
breathing the air between us  
as if nothing ever changed

but there is no choice—  
grief buries the living  
alongside the dead  
for a bit

until one of us gets up  
and moves on

Punchers  
 Jiang Haitian

Sometimes it rained,  
 With distant doors banging,  
 Glasses clanging;  
 With nimbi coasting the sun—  
 Big grey fondant flounces.  
 The phonograph ran silent laps:  
 Rachmaninoff is dead.  
 Liszt clops off down this lane  
 On the roan tendony horse that jigs in limps;  
 Brahms laminates his wilted flowers  
 Into his shrouded case of broken scales.  
 Berlioz's mountains slope down in slabs.  
 Others' pianos reminded you of wishes undone.  
 Others had fiddles too,  
 Jangling and jostling upon offish chords.  
 With all those metaphors  
 You had stayed for far too long.  
 You forgot to ask  
 Why circles end,  
 Deadlock lives;  
 Lies fulfilled,  
 Wish dispelled.  
 And said instead  
 With a little puckered smile,  
 A crook round the lips:  
 I am not Proust  
 Not proud of these thoughts.

You are not,  
 And out.  
 And really the world is full of hollows.  
 I couldn't anymore care  
 For some one particularly notched—  
 Like beneath the dome  
 There's nothing good.  
 Like below the sea  
 There'd be no more sound.

Fractals  
Joe Oppenheimer

“. . . political possibilities aside, of course,” she droned, (said?)  
but just then I pictured an egret  
in a cove, its surface covered  
with reflected fractals of firs,  
scattered midst water-lily blossoms.

She interrupted, “Are you still with us?”  
and I didn’t know the answer.

Things You Own  
Maggie Hart

I meet a man obsessed with bones. He runs impatient fingertips over my ribcage & grabs my hip bones & kisses my teeth instead of my lips, uninterested in my soft parts entirely, favoring instead everything pokey & sharp. I wonder if I have anything soft left, or if you took that with you, if I've been hardening since we parted, like bread growing stale & clay in the kiln. Nothing malleable left, nothing that gives & nothing left to give.

There are things you own, like "baby" & brussels sprouts & sunbeams & bells. Like the purple glow of Taco Bell & wedding bells & church bells, ringing every hour in the foreign cities I live in now, summoning worshippers, believers in something. You do not own bones.

I've been so cold since I saw you last, though I huddle by fires & redden my skin in showers. Guillermo & I share bedrooms on a trip in southern Bolivia, so our honeymooning companions can have their giggly privacy, & we share a bed too, after he notices my trembling, even in three layers of leggings & my cosiest (my only) sweater, & I think he imagines I am someone else, something about the way he sighs, like he is remembering someone far away, someone he held like he holds me now, shaking against his soft belly, & we never mention it in the daylight, how we were wrapped around each other & trusted one another in the dark, & how my teeth still chattered in sleep & do you ever sigh like him, when you are holding someone who isn't me?

Even the sun cannot reach my bones these days (I meet a man obsessed with bones), though she tries, she just rests atop my skin, & she's a sip of whiskey, a taste of what warmth is like, & I cannot stop myself, I think of you before the chill returns.

Snow  
Justine Payton

Do you meander a wayward path in fear of death?  
Or is it for the sake of the journey that you swirl and leap in mischievous bliss,  
free from constraints and imagining that the wind's caresses exist just for you?

The snowflakes fall like kisses across my face, their crystalized form melting into cold droplets that run to the edges of my cheeks and down my neck. The sky's the gray of snowstorms, luminescent and bleak. I trace the paths of the snowflakes as they fall from the clouds, gracefully descending to a soft landing.

A muffled hush descends in a display of solemnity. The sky decorates the earth, adorns her with crystals like elegantly strung diamonds placed lovingly on every inch of her naked body. The beauty steals my breath away. The intimacy makes me blush.

I walk on paths that are newly formed by the direction of my own two feet — not on earth, but on water like saints. The only sound amidst a whistling wind is the quiet cooing of a nearby mourning dove serenading its lover. I twirl and jump in mimicry of the snow. I lay down in its embrace, feeling cold seep through the seams and lick my skin.

Who do you choose to lie with at journey's end,  
when gravity forces your crystal form into the anonymity of a white canvas?

Some say I am a fool to love the snow. Remain inside, and I would forgo the seduction of its cooling caress. Remain inside, and my eyelashes would never be dusted with diamonds. Remain inside, and my cheeks would never blush from its whispers of hidden desire.

And when the snow melts, I would not know the pain of separation. Thinking it merely to have disappeared, I would not see the selfless sacrifice. How each snowflake let go of its individual magnificence to nourish and decorate the earth. How in a world of metastasizing selfishness and greed, each snowflake lived and died by the decree—

Yes, there is something more important than me.

Providence  
Vern Fein

At twelve years old, divorce  
put me on the plane,  
a summer with my Mother,  
who gave me to my Father  
because he made her afraid.  
I was afraid of flying too.  
Even my popping ears  
scared me despite  
the wad of bubble gum.  
Planes were small back then,  
loud propellers were seen  
out of the window.  
Imagined them falling off,  
bursting into flames,  
closed my eyes,  
saw WWII movie crashes.  
Lifted off into the Arctic clouds,  
the vast, impenetrable whiteness.  
Descending.  
At last! At last!  
Why are we going up again?  
Planes land or crash.  
Gravity goes down, not up!  
Descending again,  
gripping the seat tightly  
like every trip on a Ferris Wheel.  
Safe! In Rhode Island. In Mom's arms.  
Mom exclaimed about the landing gear.  
"They were not down on the first descent.  
You were saved by the radio tower."  
On and on she talked  
as if the landing  
triumphed over my arrival.  
Now, summer in Rhode Island.

Sea Drift  
Sarah Macallister

My eyes swim off-shore  
Towards the line  
Breathing the sky.

Our feet sink  
In silt, salt, sand,  
But not tar, nor mud, not here  
Where hope reconfigures  
Beached dreams,  
And cleans toes.

Within Our Ruins  
Samantha Sapp

Five thousand miles and five thousand dollars, all for her daughter to stare at her phone. Anna craned her neck to look at her wife Bea, who was also on her phone, doing Duolingo—German, confoundingly.

Anna squinted at the sun, too hot for November, even in Southern Italy. Behind them Vesuvius rose to the sky—a symbol of birth and destruction. It had consumed all of Pompeii, and yet preserved it. It had razed the earth for miles in every direction, yet the land was now more fertile for it. Death and rebirth, it—

“Mom, can we go yet?”

Anna sighed.

They stood in the ruins of an old house, little more than foundation and a few crumbled walls. Still, a few faded frescos of bloody wars endured. They’d spent the day touring the ruins of Pompeii, and her family had loved the exhibit of bodies preserved from the eruption, of people who’d ignored the earth’s rumbling warnings—except there were no bodies. Just empty shapes in the strata, mothers and daughters curled together as they burned, filled by plaster and preserved. But the more they toured, the less they seemed to care.

“That’ll be us one day,” Anna said, pointing to the fresco of a man dying a violent death.

Her daughter glanced over her phone. “What, in a painting?”

“Dead.” She could feel it in her own bones—life was already half in the rearview, and death waited at the end of the road.

“Whatever.”

Anna gestured at the frail bones remaining of the ruins around them. “Our home will be a ruin one day too, just like this one. Everything we know and love will be lost to time.”

Her daughter ignored her, so she turned to Bea, pointing to the umbrella pine growing through cracked foundation. Its trunk was twisted and gnarled, bent over the crumbled wall to meet the blinding sky above. “Isn’t it beautiful, the way nature reclaims? Doesn’t it make you think about how even if climate change destroys life as we know it, new kinds of life will flourish in its place?”

Bea offered her a sympathetic shrug. “Sure, I suppose.”

Anna wanted to tear out her hair. “Don’t y’all get it? Everything and everyone we know will be gone, and nothing of us will remain. We’ll destroy our own species, and the universe will continue like we were never here at all.”

Bea frowned. “Love, I think you’re spiraling. You’ve been so fixated on the past and future this whole trip. We’ve looked at so many ruins—what about the present?” To prove her point, she turned to their daughter. “What do you wanna do right now?”

Finally, she put her phone down. “Get some gelato, I guess.”

Bea turned back to Anna. “You were the one who taught me to live in the moment, so how about we get some gelato and stroll around town? Maybe we could even find some live music, and enjoy all this while we still can?”

It hit Anna at once. “Oh God, you’re right.” She looked at the ruins, which had made her feel so small in their enormity. “I guess the universe is so big, I lost sight.”

“That’s fair, but we’re a sliver of it ourselves. Shouldn’t we make the most of it?”

Anna managed a smile and reached for her wife's hand. She could dwell on the inevitability of death later—because now, she could practically taste the lemon gelato already, tart and perfect.

Genesis: Divorcee  
Kendra Whitfield

On the first day:  
read the note  
remove the rings,  
change the sheets.

On the second day:  
collect lawyer references from divorced friends,  
call mother-in-law to collect his things,  
tell mother-in-law he left,  
bleed through three maxi-pads in an hour,  
dump all the decaffeinated coffee beans into a box with the expired condoms,  
and a positive pregnancy test.

On the third day:  
attend trivia night at the pub solo,  
drink Scotch neat,  
accept the drinks your friends buy you,  
and the ride home they offer,  
try to sleep.

On the fourth day:  
close the bank account,  
consider changing your name,  
squeeze the toothpaste in the middle

On the fifth day:  
keep breathing,  
remember to take out the garbage,  
ponder the difference between grief and rage,  
resist the urge to dump used kitty litter into his comic books,  
look up how long humans can survive without sleep.

On the sixth day:  
decide he's not worth the grief  
dump his 1963 encyclopedia on top of his cowboy hat,  
find two brand-new chainsaws in the garage,  
trim the trees he told you he couldn't,  
fall asleep on the opposite side of the bed

On the seventh day:  
weep.

Time and Gasoline  
Glen Armstrong

These midsummer days are made for runaways and their imagined oceans. Asphalt's rhythm has more to do with melting, softening, reclaiming its primordial odor. What are tides to the landlocked?

You are probably laughing at me, but a lot of Detroiters never reach the West Coast. The distance between here and there demands time and gasoline. With so much Eldorado out in front of me, I never quite arrive.

It is for sale. I am for sale. The Cadillac. The abandoned factory. Two hats for each season: one for the party, one for the wind. Our daughters rise like Texaco signs. No dentists. No police. No need. No dermatologists. Name your price. Make me an offer.

Ode to Tibet  
Betty Smith

The Senga and the Sumpa  
Love their chortens and kiangs,  
They dwell on high in Mongo Phus  
On the beautiful bug-ri plains.

Chang Tang is a blistory blustory place.  
Where Shang Shung once survived.  
Now all that's left are big blue sheep, tall yaks, and little beehives.

Yak dung, salt banks and black neck cranes  
Await the daring few,  
Who trek far up where the nomads dwell,  
With even a wild ass or two.

So come to the kingdom of yak-haired tents,  
Of mud-bricked domes and cold winters spent.

Come graze with us.  
To seek pastures green,  
Where the Bon-Shamans know  
Nature reigns supreme.

Psittacosis  
Robert Beveridge

I couldn't tell what it was  
you were looking for—thinner  
client, a lavender corpse,  
the unmarked graves  
of every cock rock guitarist  
who wore AquaNet  
in the eighties—but your trips  
out got longer and longer.  
We went from “dinner  
will be in the oven” to “birthday  
presents are in the front closet”,  
and let me tell you, it was murder  
keeping the Yorkies out of that  
wrapped veal joint after it  
sat a few months.

Then, to all our surprise,  
a postcard—you'd hooked up  
with Juliane Koepcke  
and, over too many Pisco Sours  
mapped out a plan to bring  
water to Patagonia.  
At the time of composition,  
you said, you were engaged  
in hiring phalanxes of parrots,  
capybaras, tamarin  
who were down on their luck  
and needed the stability  
of American dollars.

Russian Regrets  
Lev Raphael

I wish I'd learned more Russian growing up. My parents used it as a secret language to keep me and my brother ignorant. And they translated what sour-looking Russian diplomats said on the news, explaining what was left out in the English version.

They could Henry Higgins a speaker's accent and tell me where he or she was from. Even better, dissect the speakers' vocabulary and separate who was well-educated from who wasn't. They even explained what a person's name meant.

I had my own CNN commentator and a solo guided tour of that exotic. The same country I learned to "duck and cover" from in grade school because Russia was going to bomb New York someday.

Of course, knowing more Russian wouldn't have helped me survive. But to that, I could at least say "*Bozhe moy.*"

Oh my God.

Keep This Leaflet. You May Need to Read It Again.  
Luca Fois

This medicine has been prescribed for you only. Do not pass it on to others. It may harm them, even if their signs of illness are the same as yours.

1. Always read the label – Dosage

Take this medicine exactly as your doctor has told you. Do not take this medicine with food.

you  
are made of the  
songs for a christian god you  
have forgotten you bring with you  
the only time your real voice  
sang out to praise  
her

Take this medicine at bedtime.

your maths  
teacher awards you a  
surprised A in a test she says  
first time for her she is impres-  
sed with order and clarity  
in your answers you  
are thirteen.

Take this medicine by mouth.

In school you give up  
on all the poetry when you learn  
that you can get a zero if you write  
all sounds a clock makes but the teacher  
hears only ticks and tocks you learn  
again to be a liar you say you  
made it all up

Swallow the capsule whole with a glass of water.

you puncture the love of your  
primary school teacher when learning  
to hide your mistakes you lie about a home-  
work you have not done she blesses you with half a  
curse because she loves you more and you  
learn about the pain of letting  
someone down.

You will usually have a few days withdrawal.

2. Frequency not known – Description of side effects

- Sudden chest pain: I don't want to remember
- Difficulty in breathing: but I remember
- Jealousy: I put salt on my sister's eyes / when she was five to stop her from becoming beautiful
- Loss of vision
- Double vision
- Eye diseases: I had to wear an eye patch when I fell
- Fractured sense of self: like Amaterasu and her / temple, I get demolished and rebuilt / every twenty years.
- Painful swelling and redness of the legs: I remember my walks when I lived in Japan
- Lightheadedness: I am living in the trees / of my grandmother's ghost stories.
- Migraine-like headaches which happen for the first time
- Erratic energy: I call forth each bean / crushed and brewed in coffees. I drink too much coffee and
- Yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes
- Islands: I am made of islands / can I say I am me?
- Headache, tiredness, dizziness

3. These measures will help protect the environment – Additional information

Your doctor might ask about your own and your family's medical history. / I am made of my father's silence, and his small gums, / I am made of my mother's big teeth and promises. Keep this medicine out of the sight and reach of children. / I am islands // I was born in one // at five I learned an archipelago // of painful truths // I was one of them. Store in the original blister pack and in the original outer carton. / Where are you? If I am an island, what makes me? I am made of the distance from your eyes. The other ingredients are sunflower oil and soybean lecithin. Think about it: / If you look from far enough, America is an island. / Do not use this medicine after the expiry date which is stated on the packaging after 'Exp'. And if you look even further the Earth is an island. / The expiry date refers to the last day of that month. / Call the space sea. / The other ingredients in the capsule shell are gelatine, glycerol, titanium dioxide and purified water. / And if you look close enough, atoms are islands. / See how they move in your fingers. / And see how they move / when you touch my body. / Capsules are soft and white. / When I hug you, our islands create continents. // They are supplied in cartons containing blister strips of 30 capsules. / If I believe in my words again, / they will be bridges.

Wo Bist Du?  
Mike Lee

This is October, and it is raining outside. The weather had turned suddenly. Where months of lingering streams of light had passed over the pavement below my apartment window, the cataclysmic downpour and wind gusts heralded the arrival of autumn with an open-mouthed kiss. I had dressed up for the occasion. The leaves had gone entirely the day before, a riot of reds and oranges clashing against the cloudless sky.

Now came the moment. During the night, the first storm invaded. The thunderclaps awakened me from a dream forgotten except for shards.

It was set in Las Vegas, in a hotel. A grey dog was walking along the hotel balcony. I felt the blast of high summer heat. Nothing more recalled.

It was not too early; the cat pawed me gently through the covers at five in the morning to remind me he was hungry.

I made my way into the kitchen. I dished out half a can of canned beef filets into his dish. He pushed me awkwardly aside to eat as I wrapped the can, placing it into the refrigerator.

After closing the living room window, I look down, watching a solitary black car make its turn under the brightly lit streets. The rain flees to the ground, briefly glistening through the light beams. The smokestack of the ConEd power substation is barely visible through the fog. The mists are so thick I cannot see the East River or the Brooklyn skyline on the opposing shore.

I go to my desk, turn on the laptop, and make coffee in the kitchen. In the morning, coffee and a cigarette are my morning rituals as I pour the first cup, sit down, check my email, and turn on the music to match this dreary morning mood. I will miss the summer and the lingering warm days of September that lasted into mid-October. It was an unusually mild season until now, and unfortunately, it has passed. Now, it will be rain and more relaxed days; the temperature drops weekly until winter appears. The days were short and fleeting, and there was endless night until April.

By April, I will be older. My personal passage of time picks up its pace, and as life reflects the seasons, the journey has long crossed its mid-point. I could no longer hold the hands of life's clock at fifty.

This morning marks several years since that epiphany.

As I go through the emails, which are junk, the thought comes to mind that while I have much to look forward to, the time to enjoy it is less. Days chopped up, overflowing with experience.

I see why we all miss our youth and regret the inactivity and languidness of those days. Now, when it really matters, you steal the time freely frittered away.

Sipping my coffee, I realize I am nearly out of cigarettes. I need to quit. I vow daily that this would be my last pack. It never is. Maybe today. It is too expensive and dangerous, particularly at my age.

There is much I did against me, but I have grown out of the regrets.

Perhaps. There are threads undone, gaps to a bridge, and ties yet to bind.

Afterward, I took the train to the hospital to fall in love again.

Regrets  
Holly Day

I feel I have failed my children  
Because they've never been on safari  
I've never taken them to the ocean  
They've barely left this state. I comfort myself

With thoughts of children crying in airplanes  
Getting seasick, carsick, memories  
Of how poorly I traveled when I was a child.  
I'm saving them from having these memories themselves.

Years from now, they'll hate me  
For not introducing them to elephants  
Or whales, or seals in their natural habitat  
Never get to see herds of giraffes or horses or antelope  
Loping across far-off arid plains.

The Brood Parasite  
Mikal Wix

I'm in the *Palais Garnier* in Paris  
at night in Puccini's *Tosca*  
and my bloodred wool on the seat  
beside me is still warm, calling her back,  
Elena from Minsk and I'd traded tickets  
with other women speaking Spanish  
on a train because we had what they wanted  
to bear the March wind on the Right Bank  
in the 8th—cashmere scarves we'd lifted  
before them from American tourists  
returning late from a Royal Mile trip  
to Edinburgh drunker even than Falstaff  
himself ever was in any dramatic play,  
where old men spout nest egg fables  
of Arbus and Alasan goats roaming  
snowy plains of Inner Mongolia folds  
of riches in communist tongues,

and because we knew the vaulted sky  
inside the opera house better than anyone  
faced with the presence of *quid pro quo*.  
Mother had adopted her at 10 in Vitebsk  
in 1999, that year we fled elections west  
into Polish fields where she hid us  
from votes, from guns and horses  
where we roamed metro stations  
like genie and djinn impersonating  
the manners of the *desaparecidos*  
into salons asleep among the plush velvet  
-covered pillows of old hotel rooms,  
to pluck small treasures from purses  
and bags bound for airports and rails  
in Atlanta or Manila or Seoul,  
for deals and dickering of further times  
and places of material digressions

—Corfu in April and Tromsø in August,  
we trek the Old World as leopard ghosts  
come down from the tangled peaks  
of Cantabrian mountains and chaparral  
to prey upon mobs massing at fountains  
or castles as the coins they toss cannot

absolve them of extinction,  
colonial pogrom foul and low  
so unlike mother in whose hands  
stained bright were Chagall's brush  
and paint, who faded in struggle  
*jede dunkle Nacht* for peace,  
in a taste bent over the gouache  
of oppression and escape,

she gave us the value of wit spit  
in duplicity, how a smile  
can be heard from the hidden hand  
of family  
fathering balance in a mad world  
returned us to the noblest gesture  
of mirth in evenhandedness,  
to hiding our nature in plain sight.

Loose Translation  
Patrick Sweeney

Kurt Rogers, an amateur linguist with a low-engagement day job, experienced a fearsome revelation that he couldn't quite digest. He felt dwarfed by its embrace. He'd had the stray manifestations of brilliance over the years; the gold medals for Latin composition, some four-figure scholarships that were just lying out there to be claimed, a near-photographic memory for piano music, and the ability to calculate complex equations in his head, nothing exceptional. This one, though, this one really validated his parking ticket. And it felt way overdue.

It would be a tough discovery to share with others, never mind viably getting it out to the world. Transformational changes would be triggered in so many fields that a backlash was inevitable. He would prove either a savant or a "savant." While well convinced that he was the former, he was increasingly preoccupied with how mega million lottery winners so often ended up buying anonymity as if in witness protection programs.

Nonetheless, during a night of relatively modest pub flogging, he rashly told a gathering of friends that he had cracked the code on dog speak. A little soupcon of doubt would have been welcome, but they were enchanted. Whatever they were before, they were now dog lovers' intent on arranging puppy play dates for him.

He explained that his breakthrough was interpreting dog 'language' by modeling it on those human languages with a limited number of characters but a far wider range of tones, emphases, accents and glottal stops. Cantonese is a good example, with the central role of its nine distinct tones often giving the generally false impression of anger or inquisitiveness when it's quite playful. Like humans, dogs developed vocabularies specific to their environments, nothing extensive but robust for critters.

His broad conclusions were that we shouldn't eat or beat dogs but they're far less likeable than they act with those who feed them. The barking at their human 'parents', even when accompanied by tail wagging, the bouncy pounce and some facsimile of a smile, is fundamentally saying, "You have a duty to obey me and I'm losing my patience."

This was related to the presence of Toffee whose owner, Olivia, had just joined the table. Toffee had caught scent of something that was due to her and stood on her hind legs with front paws doing the dog paddle for balance.

"Isn't it cute how she begs?"

"That's 'Human, give me taters! NowNow' They like french fries for the lard."

"Just adorable."

"If you don't comply fast enough – though I trust that you do – ah, here she goes, 'I know where to bite!'"

"That's highly imaginative."

"Try this little beast sometime. Don't call her bluff without a whiffle ball bat handy."

"That is not how the pet bond works. Dogs evolved from gregarious wolves. They have their rough edges, but they're love bombers."

"Their actions and sentiments are savage unless they're tired from gorging on animal protein. Some bring their kills home to share, particularly heartfelt if it's deposited on your pillow."

"I'd say if you can tone it down, you've got something marketable. There are many animal psychiatrists and animal psychics who hang out shingles and make a decent living."

“They perform at county fairs offering a break from the oxen pulling cinder block sleds.”

“But they are wildly popular.”

“I don't know. Somehow my heart's not in it.”

“You've got something way beyond whatever they provide. You can just step into the arena, show them how it's done, then vanish.”

He subsequently reviewed a consensus catalog of dog vocalizations and their purported purposes, including the unique ‘dialects’ of certain breeds such as Huskies, Rottweilers and Bloodhounds. Checking these against his interpretations, he was fundamentally encouraged though he did note some flaws in the canon and highlighted areas for conflict resolution.

The county fair arrived nearly on cue, and, after token resistance, Kurt attended with Olivia, who was somehow taken with him, and Toffee, who wasn't. He was eager to try actual conversation with the species and was drawn to a pair of Pomeranians in plaid thunder shirts matching that of their matronly owner. He pointedly ignored her and quickly got into a shouting match with the Pomeranians who offset their unthreatening visuals with the breed's menacing growl. One of them was a boisterous pup, tail going like a Geiger counter's alert while learning this social skill, ostensibly from his mom. At length, the mom said, “Get out of my head!”

Kurt replied, in English, “No, you get out of my head!”

The elder lifted a hind leg and, lacking a rejoinder, Kurt sprang out of range. More than embarrassed, he was unnerved, like the Pomeranians' human, then appalled when a genial animal psychic, comely in fortune-telling regalia, came to his rescue and Olivia took the opportunity to beg off. Axiomatically, that was when Toffee and the Pomeranians became hell-bent on some butt-sniffing. Once the leashes were disentangled, Olivia hustled off, face averted, while the trailing Toffee flashed Kurt a disdainful look. The psychic pronounced Kurt copacetic, chucked him under the chin and proffered her card.

Home stewing, he concluded that he had landed deep in a greased rabbit hole. The company of humans in a fundamentally dog-loving society was now abhorrent. His discovery, his revelation, had ruined him so rapidly, suddenly leaving an outsized jawbreaker for his chew toy collection. No options but to let the dogs be bastards and delete all traces of his research. Cowardly maybe, but he lacked the chops to deliver this message effectively and a reboot with human society was barely tbd.

He continued replaying his unraveling while walking down a moonlit street with various yardbound dogs holding forth over whatever grievances or territorial imperatives preoccupied them. They were still boorish, combative louts, but their voicings of rut, loneliness, fear, indignation - the yips, growls, howls, mewling, whines et al - were unalloyed bestial gibberish, species - specific and as irretrievably lost to him as his high school Latin.

No Passing  
Susan Shea

The middle of the road  
wrenches me back  
into place just as I am close  
to picking up a lost jewel  
that has caught my eye

a quick dazzle, a new shape  
a look in an eye, words that  
seem roomy, a little  
skintight in right places

until a mirror drives in front  
of me, making me feel the tug  
back to level-headed, ready  
to draw the double yellow lines

my self, partaker of order



Youthfully | Michael Moreth

The Best Lies  
Mary Paulson

fall like light rain into  
     my every day  
 dilute and trip over     stones like  
         water in a brook days upon  
 days smoothing out  
     a narrative sequence   some  
 core misalignment     followed by  
     a modest band  
         of constituent elements  
 innocuous as     minnows  
         they nonetheless repeat  
             repeat—  
 an almost     unassailable  
         deceit evolves a micro life egg  
             to adult to  
                 life beyond itself  
 every time I say it     out loud  
         whatever gut sense speaks to me  
             whispers no is rendered   mute the  
                 treachery nullified     so the next time  
                     I speak   I do  
 so without question  
         my ability to set these  
             new truths     sailing startles  
                                 even myself—

Lofty Heights  
Daniel Speechly

When Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier's balloon caught fire, we watched in astonishment. Was it supposed to be ablaze? Was the tattered silk flapping up and down and left and right and in and out of the hole in the side of the apparatus suspended above the basket helping? Was this what a balloon in flight looks like?

It didn't look right to us.

A farmhand broke the silence. "Is Pilâtre de Rozier's not alone?" he asked no one in particular.

Pilâtre de Rozier. We knew his name. The details of his flight had been published in *Le Courrier*. The paper had mentioned his hot air balloon, but the fire was unexpected. This was like nothing seen before. Flight. Here. Above our heads against the summer blue sky.

And just then, without word or warning, what had been a flicker of fire became a smoldering mass of smoke and flame raging toward the clouds.

"What is that?"

"*Oh non!*"

A twisted mound of fabrics twirled down from the heavens. A cocked hat followed suit.

"Pilâtre de Rozier?"

It fell beyond the tree line. Not far, but we deigned not look. We knew it was a man: Pilâtre de Rozier or his companion.

The ball of fire held our gaze, and so we watched as what remained: basket, cords, and fabric—the insect like carapace of the flying machine—arced toward a neighboring sugar beet field.

The sudden whoosh of air and roar of flame followed by shock of dirt and debris stirred a herd of cows into a chorus of moo and a stamping of hooves.

"*Oh non! Mon Dieu!*"

"*L'eau! L'eau!*" the farmhand shouted.

The Airways Are a Battlefield  
Jarek Jarvis

I.

Doritos aren't worth dying over,  
that's why I only go for rations  
when I am down to my last packet  
of ramen. See there used to be  
one rush hour, then, following  
a string of successful sequels, we had  
rush hours, and now you cannot leave  
your house without experiencing  
congestion in the geriatric arteries  
of this country's dilapidated infrastructure.  
Or, have some poor lost soul aim a beam  
cannon at you from the other lane after  
riding your ass for half an hour, and  
deciding, at last, to aggressively pass.

II.

At the hypermarket, Spidey-sense  
tingling the whole time, you peruse  
the white tile aisles, fill your basket  
with tuna and chips. Leery of other  
machine-less pilots maneuvering  
around you. Everyone trying to recall  
what it is like to be flesh under gravity.

## Haunt

Matthew McLachlan

I wish I could say that what haunts me are your usual culprits: ghouls, ghosts, or demons. Those are words I use to describe my friends. My haunts are not as sexy or exciting as all that. My haunts are deep rooted. They sit at the very core of my being, not easily shaken off or defeated. They're why I've lived most of my life as a fear-based person. "Who's going to love me?" "How can I be enough?" But I'm here to shake those roots. To do the scariest thing I can think of: get out to the world what haunts me most.

I am haunted by heritage. My Scottish name whose lineage can literally be traced back to Irish kings who fled to Scotland for a better life in 500 A.D. One of the original 21 clans of Scotland whose name you find in every souvenir shop and on endless historical plaques across the country. I'm haunted by the pressure from my family and even my country to keep that name alive, no matter what.

Not as much pressure as my father felt. The only male in his generation of McLachlans. Who hid the fact that he was gay until he had two sons to carry the burden for him. I *am* haunted by my father's expectation of me. Not just in name, but in life. That his sacrifice of uprooting our family from the Scottish town our family has lived for almost 200 years in the hopes of a better life will have been for nothing.

I'm haunted by the fact that I'm from two very different places yet belong to neither. To my American friends, I'm Scottish. To my Scottish family, I'm American. That every time I'm overseas, I carry the weight and sins of an entire country that I often feel ashamed of but owe everything to. That I'm expected to have an answer for every shitty decision this country makes for itself and for every idiot we elect to office. I'm haunted that everyone thinks it's so cool I'm from Scotland when I'm a stranger there.

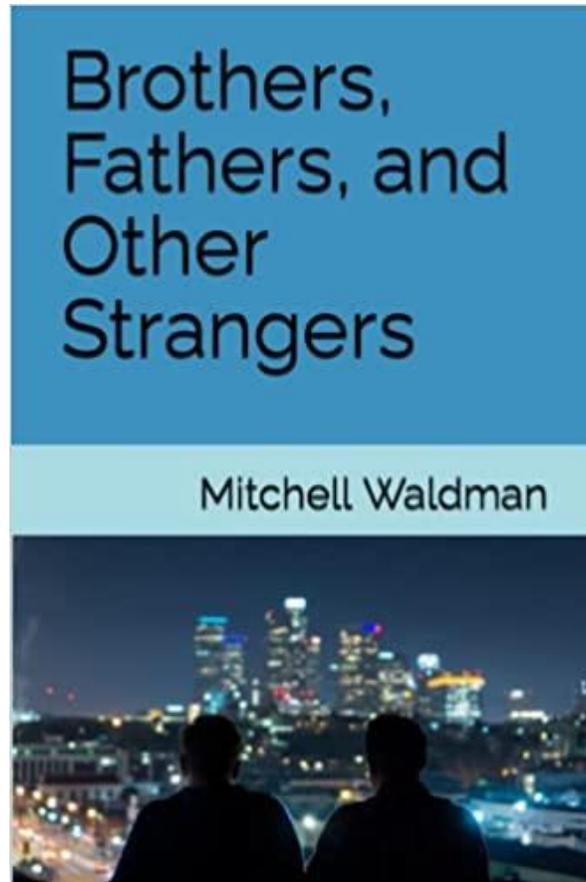
I'm haunted by how many women have told me, "I wish you had a Scottish accent. You'd be a lot more attractive if you did." And how many times a day I think about different ways to *be* more attractive while railing against my own body dysmorphia and how a fucking accent could be enough. I'm haunted by all the times my father's forced me to attempt a Scottish accent in front of my family, knowing full well I can't do one very well. The party gag that always ends with, "well, he *is* the American one" as if *I* moved us here.

I'm haunted that my family's home in Scotland now sits empty. No laughter filling the space. No grandmother or Aunt Jan to nag each other endlessly, as sisters do, to have it always end with one of them making tea for the other, a quiet truce. No TV blaring to life in the background when I call long distance, that unfamiliar ringtone in my ear. I'm haunted by not having had enough success in my career yet to buy that house from my father who casually threatens to sell it whenever he feels the need for a power trip or emotional blackmail. I'm haunted that the house will be sold and become another family's legacy. That they'll rip up the red Peonies in the front yard that my great grandfather planted that continue to bloom 60 years after his death. That I'll never step down that big front step again. The same one my grandmother helped Aunt Jan step up onto as a baby when they first moved in. The same one my father helped her down one last time on her way to a care home where she now sits. I'm haunted by how alone she is. If she remembers.

But ya know what? Despite all this...I'm haunted even more by a parallel version of myself. Some distant universes where I never left Scotland. Who has a shit job, at least two kids, and no doubt a drinking problem. Who wishes he had the guts to pursue a dream and make more

out of his life than what he was given. Who wishes he could find the courage to leave his shitty factory town, even though *no one* leaves. Who lies awake at night wondering if there's a parallel version of himself in a big city across the ocean, creating art with his friends, and staying out late performing to crowds he can barely see.

I'm haunted by the thought that people I love, people I have made my chosen family, don't know how much they really mean to me. That to me, *they* are my family. My legacy. I'm haunted that those people, many reading this, might not realize how many times they've saved me. From depression. From myself. From lots of things. I'm haunted by the thought that they don't know the real me because I'm too afraid, too ashamed, or too haunted to show them. Well...perhaps what haunts you helps make you. The real you. So. Here I am.



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The Interlocutor  
Perry Genovesi

But this could be a successful conversation and I might not realize it - I do remember launching a plan moments ago to drill my gaze other places instead of her mostly meaty eyelids.

I don't know why these ceiling lights are Tums-colored. Nor why the table lamp turnknob, that black mushroom cap, would, if I twisted, bite the combed sand of my fingerprints; their Roman numerals ticking the dock of your index and thumb. (The impression is the same when twisting off a bottlecap. The teeth along the bottlecaps' edge are like the ribs of an umbrella. If you were holding the unopened umbrella and the ribs pressed into the webbing between your thumb and index there'd also be imprints.)

If you want to project a sense of listening, you must look your interlocutor in the eye. But when I look at her pupils right now there's two swollen drops of water about to sever themselves. To...wriggle out from faucet.

I will NOT think about the way light from the ceiling injects itself into those drops, or how the butter-yellow lamp can thermometer itself up into - NO! - because I want to convince this fellow person that I am *listening*.

Luckily, I've strung on this listening mask.

So, I must compose timed intervals of glancing away so she believes - let me look back at the starfish imprinted on a sand dollar curio next to two National Geographics.

I must take stock of my diversions.

I hope that my interlocutor failed to notice that when I looked away at the sand dollar, over my face must've wiped the expression of glimpsing a hotter friend at the party.

BUT the cracks in the sand dollar make me think of how the first imprints you catch in the sand are seagull asterisks. Or, how, at the very same beach, a kite string sketches long lines that swirl, circle, and bite fingers.

My God, I've done it again.

On this next inhale I need to flood my mind and buoy away all the other thoughts gummed in there - bottle caps, sand dollars, combed sand thumb-prints - let them bob, let ripples halo around them. On my next exhale, I will watering-can these thoughts out my ears to enter the round state of listening.

She says Cuba. Cuba? Cuba! Have we been talking about Cuba this entire time? Suddenly she's levels above me.

I must peel apart my fused lips, un-sponge my tongue and *thwup* it off my mouth's floor if I want, nay, need to enter the verbal phase of the listening face. I must gather her breadcrumb trail of words and present them back.

But which ones to re-present? I should pluck that last, size it before she does, use one of hers to mosaic my response. I should dig out the tip of her word and wrestle it away before she hurls it out.

"Palm trees."

"Down the shore?"

"OCEAN!"

Is she waiting for me to respond, now?

My God - we are in a waiting room.

Don't tip your nose to the floor! This is just as insulting as waving at the friend at the party. Even if - *even if!* - you're just checking your palms for bottlecap jaw marks.

My God, I've done it again.

I wonder if my interlocutor realizes that a lifetime of typing can mash down the combed sand of her fingerprints. She'll be left with crumbling stubs!

Maybe I'll let her know - thus bringing up something *I* want to talk about - the erosion of coastlines under climate change. Let me find a good place to do that. A row of bulbs lines the soil, and I am armed with the teal-handled garden spade. I hover over these rows, looking for a hole, or a mole, to pomp down and shovel up. The fact I can visualize this during our conversation makes me think that perhaps I'm not listening as closely as I could be.

Well now's the time for change! Become a patient person. *This* listening face lists as its instructions pushing out all thoughts. This will become a listening *head*.

One.

Two!

Dislocated  
John Kucera

If you ask me why I left Michigan,  
I would tell that you that it wasn't because  
Of the weather which left me with a bloated album of waiting  
for the blackouts  
to skip between the trees. It wasn't because  
the roofs unfurled and the doors retreated to hollows  
somewhere in the sky. It wasn't because  
of the shelves of water, inching like new constellations  
across an endless night. It was the full circle  
of fear, the kind that stays in my mouth  
like neon jawbreakers, refusing to surrender, tailor-made  
to dislocate words that I try to speak. I dread  
colliding against this familiar: when the memory gathers  
like burning hands around your throat.

Notes After the News of Linda Pastan's Passing  
Sam Calhoun

Meanwhile, it's Tuesday,  
And in the thunder-rush morning  
The bird feeder swings cocked  
the seed eaten side sheltered  
From the storm.

I can no longer tell the difference  
Within the shuffle of bronze azalea leaves—  
If it's the birds, if it's the wind,  
Or if it's the azaleas wanting  
To let go of what others already lost.

Overhead a thousand grackle  
Move tree to field, and back again.  
And now I have gotten the mail:  
Bills past due, ads for loans, the ink  
on the paper just beginning to run.  
shadowless in the light.

Heart Emoji  
Jennifer Fanning

My pills were preventing me from crying.  
I remember that I was finally able  
to think clearly that day when I told you.  
Like the clouds  
had moved aside for a moment.  
But I couldn't cry. That day, I was  
contacting loved ones because I had the words:  
"I've been crippled by fear and darkness."  
I was scared that soon I might not  
have the words anymore.

You were one of the loved ones.  
We hadn't been in contact much for a year  
or so,  
but that wasn't new, mostly it was me  
sending you my mediocre poem drafts, links  
to words I hoped would move you.  
Did they move you? You didn't say. (Was  
that your heart emoji on my FB post?)

That day, when I said those words,  
my pills were preventing me from crying  
but if I could have cried maybe  
it could have been different,  
maybe you would have heard me.

What happened is that  
I asked you to check on me, and then  
having cast that line into the world, I  
felt a little more calm knowing that  
someone out there who's known me for so long  
would hear me.

But anyway, you never did. Check on me.  
Time passed as it always does, after which  
I realized that this is just one more loss  
among many. I get it now. But I can't cry.

Placeholder  
Cameron Smith

A book with a bookmark in,  
rests its neck upon the desk;  
the last page read is overleaf;  
the last clause before his head hit the street,  
concerned voluntary sphincters  
and anal gonorrhoea.

And all the paraphernalia that surrounded it –  
sat waiting like a dog at the door,  
seemed animated, yet still –  
still buzzing with the residue of a task unfulfilled,  
still swimming in an idiolect of spacing and position  
still ready to be regarded by the hand that placed them and the eyes it pleased.

At twelve, and one, and two o'clock they waited  
at three, and four, and five o'clock  
they ceased.

It was at the hour of liquid lunch  
that he dropped his brains and his body on the floor.  
A most unseemly hour to open a window in summer;  
a stranger hour still for causing a scene.

And a phone, with a cracked-glass screen,  
pings its alarm for dinner.  
It will not feel those fingers again.  
It will not know another face that eyes it so familiar.

At six and seven and eight o'clock it kept the hours.  
When no one was watching  
it ceased.

And the spaces left by his fading scent seemed to ask:  
What is this city that continues?  
That rings on with baseless voice?  
That rings the top of the ear, where the prostate is?  
Echoing with united voice:  
'Here there is a space – and into the space will gush the air;  
and into the air will gush the city – that waits for space to appear.

How could it have been written  
in the last flutter of the curtain blown back,

in the last fingerprints that still mash  
into a sweaty collage of their predecessors?

How could his life have been written  
in the thumb prints that failed to break his fall;  
in the blood that wends its way toward the curb,  
around the loosening grip of a child, whose teddy bear for the first time finds the floor?

Soar With Me Through ABC Carpet and Home  
Violet Piper

If velvet could be transparent. If iced tea pitchers could sport crown molding. If trees could spread flat against walls like vines. Every glittering glazed fantasy might be around the shelf or behind the crystal chandelier.

Delicate strings of pearls, nickels, turtle plants, spilled wine weigela, cherry blossom bulbs, and suspended clouds of crispy branches dangle between stacks of jewel-toned dinnerware with metallic accents. It is my Tree of Souls; I search for a place to plug in my ponytail.

Handcrafted pottery sets include bedside vessels meant to hold a single ring; the creamy lacquer stops just beyond the lip to reveal the porous flesh of sundried starfish. It is only eighty-five dollars, but I would pay anything to wish it good morning and goodnight. To be divorced, smooth and cold like the dark wooden staircase, nostalgic but not mawkish, sharp but not bony. Here, the portal to that future unfurls around me like an orchid—oozes out of the supple ottoman poufs. I *will* possess each ornamental and organic form, even that eggshell Corinthian column no patron acknowledges apart from me. I nod to it, pious, cunning, vindictive of something undetermined. Even that garish neochrome cutlery with rainbow PVD titanium coating—seriously, what is that? I don't care.

On the lower floor, some of the rugs are so colossal I cannot fathom the rooms they would fit into. But I must; they will be my rooms.

Outside these walls and beyond the entrance's juicy floral frame of tri-pink hydrangeas, "rose gold" means nothing. "Stonewash" means nothing. Crocheted, brass, swirled, and etched are hollow, collapsing descriptions. Here, they shoot every doodad and bric-a-brac into the bloodstream, the corporeal jetstream. Here, things sing—they transcend thingness. The candelabras, the necklaces, the duvet covers, armchairs, vases, and vanities. Everything floats, breathes, flickers, and hums.

I pause on my way in. A sixty-year-old woman in a coral yoga set steps into the left window display and begins her flow; I have never seen this before. She holds herself sideways and upside down on her palms and forearms. Behind her, slipping in and out of sight is everything I've been waiting for. How will she move in my living room? What will she obscure behind her?

The Invisible Father  
John Grey

Having never known the man,  
it's unlikely he'll appear to me.

Sure, I'm wrapped up in bed.  
My fever is high.  
My body aches all over.  
My mind is in a perfect unhinged state  
for an hallucination or two.

But how can it conjure up  
a complete stranger.  
The facts are few.  
He fished. He earned a living  
babysitting railway lines.  
His face shows up in an old  
professionally-shot family photograph.  
(One that doesn't include me.)  
And that's his scrawl  
on the back of a postcard  
that somehow has survived all these years.

Maybe he'd just love to be here with me.  
But mirages aren't up to him.  
They can only be my doing.  
And I can't direct the real man,  
or even his phantom,  
to sit down in that bedside chair  
to comfort me, encourage me,  
even rest the back of his hand  
on my sweating brow.

To be honest,  
were I not so immobile,  
so devoid of things to do,  
I'd never have thought of him at all.  
He's immaterial to the good times.  
He's irrelevant to the average, mediocre,  
spans of my life.

Even in sickness, unlike my wife,  
he's not required to find a way to love me.  
I can cough and splutter,  
announce my presence.  
But he can't hear if I don't know him.

The Kill  
Carol Raitt

Appeared previously in a different form in *A Bird in the Hand: Risk and Flight*, (The Outrider Press, 2011)

The scream stopped me cold—a sound unlike any I knew, a sharp shriek that cut through drizzle and late afternoon dusk. I stood in the kitchen, turned off the water and listened. I heard it again. Sharper. Closer. Clearer. I looked out the window. Nothing. It was not child’s play. The sound was raw, pure wildness, uncommon in this community of tidy, manicured lawns where neighbors walk Jack Russell terriers.

Stress, short for the Latin word *distress*, means “to draw or pull apart.” That’s how I felt now, pulled apart. I’d become inured to most loud, city noises but this sound was different. The scream tore through me. Hands and feet throbbed with pain. Sharp tingles, like jet-propelled glass shards, surged up and down my arms and legs. There was the same heart-thumping terror and confusion I’ve known when I’ve awakened from a nightmare.

I ran toward the sound and opened the door. I saw two birds. The larger one, a Sharp-shinned hawk, had a robin pinned against the deck. The robin’s wings slapped the cedar planks, thunk-kathunk-thunk-thunk-kathunk. Should I intervene, try to separate the two birds? As if that was my right. A predator’s job is to find prey. The hawk’s sulfur eyes glared at me. “Back off,” it seemed to say, “This one is mine.”

I’m a naturalist living in Seattle. As far as cities go, it’s not a bad place to live. A drone’s eye view of Seattle reveals sizeable patches of green space—fragments of a bygone time. More than a century ago loggers took their cross-saws to stands of old-growth cedar, fir, and hemlock. Early settlers tried to tame this city’s wildness. And for the most part they succeeded. But remnants of the wild remain.

The hawk tightened its grip on the robin, lifted off with its prey, flew around the corner of my house and plunged to the ground near the edge of my woodland garden.

I tiptoed within ten yards of the pair. Dim light and swirling fog obscured my view, and I could barely make out the Sharpie, a muzzy image, whose blue-gray feathers blended into the stone path. The accipiter would flee if I crept closer. I was torn—should I feel anger toward the hawk? It was, after all, just being a hawk. Who was I to be selective about which birds visited my yard and for what purpose? I watched the hawk and robin. The carnage was awful, but I knew this was a rare chance to observe predator-prey behavior. The hawk glared at me. I knew what it wanted.

*Go ahead. Eat. Don’t let me stop you.*

The woodland, with its native plants and visiting birds, is my sanctuary. My humble attempt at rewilding suburbia. I began planting the garden two decades ago and over the years this little patch of forest has evolved into an embarrassment of riches attracting migrating warblers, resident wrens, song sparrows, hummingbirds, and chickadees. And now: a Sharp-shinned hawk. The hawk-robin interaction awakened fear I hadn’t expected to rise up inside me. Was it the unexpectedness of the attack? My thumping heart and fight-or-flight response touched a much deeper nerve.

The hawk continued its attack, plucking the robin’s breast. Feathers swirled above them, drifted to the ground, and fringed the outline of the dying bird. The robin issued one last scream when the hawk’s bill slit open its breast.

It seems improbable, even miraculous, that hawks, bald eagles, great blue herons, and merlin have adapted to urban areas like Seattle. Despite habitat loss, development, noise

pollution, crowds and traffic, wild birds move around us mostly unnoticed and manage to go about their business in human-altered landscapes.

When I see a flowerpot littered with peanut shells or a silver trail meandering drunkenly across the back porch steps I'm reminded that squirrels, crows, slugs, and other wildlife are keeping busy. Sometimes we get a sneak peek inside that wild world we rarely see. The hawk kill was a gift—one that had dropped, quite unexpectedly, from the sky. A bit of naturalist good luck.

Fog became drizzle. When I turned to go inside, I saw movement, maybe ten feet behind the hawk. I squinted. A white cat crouching behind a low-growing salal bush began to creep toward its target. The hawk kept eating. Would *it* become the hunted? Would predator become prey?

Ears erect; the cat slunk low to the ground. Two black-as-licorice-drop eyes fixed their stare on the hawk. The hawk sensed danger. It dug its talons into its half-eaten prey and sprang upward, labored to gain altitude. The hawk's wings beat harder. Plucked feathers: gray, white, cinnamon-brown, rose like a funnel cloud, then drifted downward toward the cat. The Sharpie rose. The cat, spellbound, watched as hawk and robin crested my garage roof and disappeared.

I owed a lot to that hawk. My backyard is hardly wilderness, yet as I watched the hawk and robin, I forgot I lived in a city. For a few moments there were no police sirens. No car alarms. There was only a hawk and its prey rekindling something wild that took me out of myself and into another world.

The hawk's visit rekindled something that had languished inside me. Living in a city it can be easy to forget or ignore the wild creatures, seen or unseen, with whom we share space. Although I don't hold mystical beliefs, I couldn't help but think that the hawk had delivered not only a robin to my doorstep, but a message as well. I didn't want to forget the hawk or the lesson it had taught me—pay attention. I walked inside, opened my journal, and began:

*"March 5, 2006: Approaching dusk; drizzly late afternoon, when suddenly I heard a scream. An animal in distress? I ran to the door and ..."*

Drawn Lines  
Paul O. Jenkins

“That’s enough,” he told his wife, feebly waving away a spoonful of proffered applesauce. Though he knew now that her tenderness was inspired more by pity than any remaining affection, he took some consolation from the fact that this had not always been the case. There had once been real love there, he felt sure.

Home, he was well on his way to meeting a goal: dying in his own bed. Sunlight broke through the window; the Beatles were singing in his head. On the wall he saw framed likenesses of relations once dear, the Bruegel painting of Icarus plunging, scarcely noticed, into the sea, and the map of the world his father had given him for his ninth birthday. At the time he’d dreamed of becoming a cartographer, of learning all the borders.

He hadn’t learned so much, it turned out, but he comforted himself with the recollection that he had known where to draw certain lines. Some penetrations had been inevitable, if inglorious, but even in his youth he’d kept mostly to himself, unwilling to risk repeating all the errors he’d read about so often in novels. He’d had plenty of time to read.

The deadline was approaching, and he’d never missed one yet. He saw himself again now on London’s Fitzjames Avenue, a boy waiting for permission to cross the street. In the zebra crossing was the Lollipop Man, happily clutching the round red stop sign that had earned him his sobriquet. On the other side of the avenue, she was waiting for him, precocious in her appetite.

He looked at the Lollipop Man, waiting as he’d been told all his life to wait. He was, he thought, a good boy, the kind who never crossed those lines without assent. If you did as you were told, rewards lay ahead, glittering recognition of your obedience. Wait until it was your time, and nothing would be denied you.

The traffic on Fitzjames Avenue was heavy that morning. He studied the contented expression on the crossing guard’s face. Every now and then the man’s tongue emerged to lick the black and white mustache that decorated his upper lip. The boy and the man exchanged a quick smile. They were old friends by now. Cars darted through the zebra crossing, important for the moment, then gone forever.

He made out a smile on her face across the way and something penetrated his insides. He felt its intimate progress as it bore its way through him, forcing him to emit an audible gasp, the sound escaping him despite his best efforts.

It seemed time to go. And yet the Lollipop Man made no signal.

He was a good runner, fastest in his class. When he dribbled the ball with his feet, learning the local game, his friends called him “the juker.” He could usually evade them, just as he had practiced evading cars when nobody was looking.

He was her Yank. Out of place, still chilly in his short pants, but different, and learning. When it was time to go to the apparatus—what they insisted on calling what he knew as “gym”—the English boys and girls stripped down to their underwear. She locked his eyes while pulling her dress up over her head. Her underwear was light blue like the broken shell of the robin eggs back home.

One day her hand found his. For the first time something had risen within him, and he felt his breakfast waiting to escape. But he contained himself. Should he tell anyone what she was doing to him?

His underwear was white. He had to show it to her for apparatus. Whenever he did what he considered a good trick on the bars he checked to see if she might be watching. Whenever they walked down the halls, he lagged, unable to keep pace with her long-legged strides. “You’ve got to learn to keep up,” she told him firmly.

Birds were passing overhead, black against the gray London sky. Across the street, lights were on in Fred’s, the candy store, where they sold traffic lights, the red, yellow, and green suckers that tasted so wonderfully sour. He’d stolen a few one day when Fred wasn’t looking. They burned in his pocket but tasted just as good as the others once he’d slipped out through the door.

Now he glanced again at the Lollipop Man and scanned the traffic. He thought he could do it easily since he was so fast. She’d promised him “something good” if he would do it for her. She’d also suggested that if he didn’t there were plenty of others who would.

In bed, at home, he fixed his stare on the legs in the painting. They suggested a twisted, awkward entry, the boy’s surprise evident even though he must have fallen a good few seconds before breaking the plane of the water.

What had he been promised that hopeful flyer? He tried to remember the myth. His eyes darted around his bedroom, and he felt a new kind of terror. It wouldn’t be long now, finally. He basked in the glow of the Lollipop Man’s smile when he signaled his permission. It was all so simple, he knew, at last. Icarus had been dared. He himself had been dared, tempted. One had fallen, and one had walked when told, shoes pushing off against the grit of the London blacktop as he watched the girl hurrying away in disgust. And all the while the world spun on, unaware of any slight ripples they may have caused.

Even In Grief There Is Laughter  
Lissa Staples

I suspect you are singing to an audience  
of musical souls. How lucky they are!  
I can still hear your voice – resonant as joy,  
tender as a new wound. Remember  
the concert in Madison, how out of tune  
the violinist was? We had to leave  
the hall. Or that crazy drive from Toronto  
when we had a flat and were rescued  
by nuns? How I need to celebrate  
those moments for even in grief there is  
laughter, enough to brighten those times  
when the purple shadows come, when night  
absorbs all color and death is not so different  
from being alive, for what are shadows  
but bruises on the edge of the day.

Ghost Story  
Lilit Grigoryan

I'm lost at sea. Again. It's the dead of night and I'm in a violent thunderstorm. I try like hell to paddle back to the beach I'm supposed to be on, although I'd rather not be at sea at all. I hate the sea. I feel like a soldier in Normandy, except all I have is a pool floaty. A donut with a unicorn at mast. A digital gurgle pulls me out of my dead heavy sleep and answering the phone I can already tell I've slept in so late there's no point in waking up at all.

Hey sweet bean, how are you?

Not great. Exhausting night of sleep.

Oh, I'm sorry. Bad dreams?

Just busy.

Ah. More hard work all night. Good thing I woke you.

Yeah. Hey, my nails match my underwear! Maybe I will stay up.

Are you peeing?

Yeah, sorry. It came too fast to stop or hang up.

Ok. Well, I just wanted to make sure you still wanted to meet Cary and Sam for dinner.

Tonight?

Yes...

You know that feeling of getting scared so completely and out of the blue that instead of screaming, the husk of your body hardens while the blood in your temples pulverizes and falls to your toes? I didn't either until I saw my dead Ex staring at me from the bathtub. His knees gathered in his scooped-up hands, so expressionless I'd think he were dead if he weren't looking me right in the face. And if he weren't already dead. He looked like a statue stuck on a feeling.

Hello? Blueberry? Can you see me?

My phone lay flat by the toilet.

D-Daniel?

Yeah.

What the fuck?

*'What the fuck?' Who Are you talking to? 'Blueberry'?*

I hung up with my toe.

Whaaaat the fuck is happening?

Well. I died. Then I came back here.

On purpose? Are you a ghost?

Yes. I'm sorry to do it like this, I was hiding in here until you woke up, I didn't want to scare you, but now I guess you're. Scared.

Yeah! Can you please get out?

It took me so long to collect myself and come out I had a red halo on my ass. I tried not to be too self-conscious about it. He's the one that's dead.

I sat on the bed covering my butt like I'm holding a surprise gift. Damn my vanity, at a time like this.

You don't need to sit in corners like that, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not even sure that I can. Can I?

I've been too freaked out of freaking people out to go near them, so I'm not sure.

Ok. Why are you here now? I'm sorry if that sounds rude, I mean I'm happy that you seem..well? But it's been like two years, what took you so long? I mean, a bit long, isn't it?

What the fuck Maria, I'm back from the dead and you're worried about appropriate timing?

Well, I'm sorry, why don't you just tell me the right questions to ask?

Oh my god, I'm regretting this already.

We went on like this for a while before he cut to the chase. He always does this. Did this. I've been watching you, and I just had to come back to give you a message.

You've been watching me? Why? We were broken up way before you died, isn't there anyone else you needed to watch over? Your wife and kid, maybe? Your mother?

I watched over them too! Jesus don't flatter yourself Maria, it's the afterlife, there's nothing but time. And unlimited access. Like, no one has privacy.

Wow.

Yeah. You'd love it.

Um. Ok. No offense, but what's the message please.

God, nothing's changed. Ok I came here to tell you— you must break up with Will. He's not the right person for you and if you stick it out, you'll make the same mistake I did and spend your life with the wrong person wondering 'what if'?

What if what?

What if I'd taken a chance and gone into the unknown, looking for the person that was meant to be with me.

Ok, you were married! Are you telling me you married the wrong person and now you regret it enough to come spreading the news posthumously? That is so embarrassing Daniel, honestly.

Ok whatever, I tried. I see you googling celebrities' girlfriends all the time, as if there's a world where you'll meet them even if they were single?

So?

So, you're not happy! You got comfortable with Will and spend your time fantasizing about bigger, better opportunities. You're just too chicken shit to let him go to see if those maybes exist.

That's when I found out Daniel was a ghost in the traditional sense and punched the wall.

That could have hit my face.

I wish that it had!

Whatever. I'm out.

The creaking of my bedroom door sent a jolt through my system again, as Daniel disappeared and my 20-year-old Shitzu hobbled in through the door. Pansexual always knows when to comfort me. Usually. This time he threw up on the rug and laid down on it. You can't fault him for what age has robbed him of gracefully through the years.

Come here Pansex, I cooed his even more tasteless nickname, and embraced his little old body, upchuck and all.

The next few days found me despondent and barely present, as I floated through the physical realm in my mind capsule of rushing thoughts. The things that were just nagging, peripheral feelings a few days ago grew and wrapped tight around my mind like an unwanted hug. Did I really love Will, or did I love the respect I got from other women when they knew I was with someone who loved me, and I could talk badly about because that's what you do to show off being in love? Was I sure of our future together, or did I love the idea of a life with somebody who saved lives for a living and the way that made me feel like I was way more important than the other people in a room?

It is, of course, this huge haze of distraction and not a nihilistic surrender that caused me to walk straight out into traffic and part ways with my hot body forever.

Daniel was right, I do love being a voyeur in everyone's life all the time. Although "*sweet bean*" giving up Pansexual to a shelter after my passing was something I'd be ok having missed. We're so gonna haunt his ass.

Trying to Raise the Dead  
John Tustin

Trying to raise the dead tonight  
with the memories of life and books  
standing in for incantations.  
This room a jail cell  
standing in for a chapel.  
I am the apostate  
standing in for the faithful.  
My prayers come like smoke  
from the priest's swinging thurible,  
splattering in acridty,  
staining the four walls.

Still, the dead will not rise.  
Still, the unknown remains unknowable.  
No one emerges through the floor  
like an exhalation from God  
to come and sit beside me;  
no old unforgotten lover  
flies in through the open window  
to make love to my body,  
caress the crevices of my heart  
where the accumulated pain has congealed.

I chant the names,  
heavy with my memories of life and books,  
then emerge from the bubble of my sadness  
to sleep alone in the silence  
that never fails to return.  
The dead remain dead.

A Puppy Named Shark  
Gabrielle McGhee

Maddie squealed with delight when she saw the black ball of fur tumble out of the Volkswagen and begin running towards her. She had been begging for a puppy since she was five years old, but her mother had always said 'No'. Alice heard the scream from bed and ran to the front door in a panic, sure that Maddie was being kidnapped. When she saw the uninvited canine running up the front walkway with Maddie giving chase, she flung the door shut and stomped angrily back to the bedroom. "I told him *NO DOGS*", she huffed angrily as she pulled down her largest suitcase from the closet shelf. This puppy was the last straw.

As she began stuffing clothes into her luggage, Peter entered the room behind her, already knowing he was screwed. "Maddie *needs* a dog", he pleaded. Alice shot him a glare so caustic he could feel the heat on his face. She slammed the lid of her bag down on top of the hastily folded clothing and snatched the car keys from Peter's hand before storming out of the house. He let her go.

Maddie was still outside playing with her new best friend as Alice climbed into their VW Bug, and barely seemed to notice as her mother pattered away and out of her life. That night, accepting her father's story that her mother had simply gone on a trip to visit Grandma, Maddie went to sleep with a smile on her face and fur on her pajamas.

Peter got up early the next morning and took the puppy outside to use the bathroom. It promptly planted itself in the dewy grass and didn't seem to know the point of this excursion, so he left it in the yard and went to start the coffee. Upon returning to check on his new ward, he was surprised to see Annabelle the Siamese waiting at the door with a red smudge on her nose. As Peter's gaze drifted to the yard behind her, he saw three crumpled kittens strewn about, a fourth in the puppy's mouth as it danced and yipped. "*This is bad*", Peter thought. There was no time to waste, as Maddie would be up soon, so he cleaned up the mess, gathering all the feline appendages and entrails the pup hadn't swallowed. He buried the victims and their parts in the yard away from the house and placed the murderous puppy in a box in the shed.

He would later tell Maddie another tall tale over Poptarts, one that her new puppy had run away, before putting her on the bus to school. With Maddie gone, Peter retrieved the cardboard box from the shed and sat it on the passenger seat of his work truck. He then drove to the county shelter where he had adopted the pup just the day before and traded it in for four kittens to replace the ones that were now in the ground under the maple tree.

A few days went by, and a very nice family brought their daughter Gemma to the shelter to pick out a pet for her birthday. When she saw the bundle of black fuzz bouncing around in its cage, it reminded her of the tutu on her dance recital costume. "I want that one!", she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with excitement. As they made their way back to the shelter lobby, through the rows of cages and kennels, they passed a bank of glass front compartments, each with its own litterbox. Gemma's face lit up again when she saw what was inside. "Mommy, Daddy, can we get a kitten, too?"

All You Need to Know About Ghosts  
Hilary Ayshford

Know this: We are not gone. We are all around you, fleeting, insubstantial, but we are still here.

Know this: We are not gone. If you try, you can feel our touch in the petals of a flower or in the breeze that ruffles the grass and the leaves. If you look hard, you can see our reflection in the clouds and the lake. If you listen carefully, you can hear our whispered words in the silence between sleeping and waking.

Know this: We are not gone. While you remember us, speak our name, think of us, miss us, look for us in the faces of strangers, we are still here.

Know this: We are not gone. If one word we wrote is still read, if one thing we made is still cherished, if one song we sang lingers on the air, we are still here.

Know this: We are not gone. Even when no living soul remembers us, and our features are no longer seen in generations yet to be born, we are still here. The atoms that made up our flesh still exist, floating free among the stars from whence we came, and the energy that made our hearts beat and created our thoughts is still here.

Know this: We are not gone. It is death that is the phantasm. Nothing is lost. Nothing is gone. We are all still here.

Cuticle Oil  
Rachel Severino

I am a picker.

It's not trichotillomania. That is hair specific and usually ascribed to women of a nervous disposition. Any hack could tell you I'm...nervy, but I'm not all that interested in hair. I much prefer skin. It started with picking at my lips. As a child, when I got sick, I'd forgo lip balm and my lips would get nice and dry and *cracked*. I'd snip at the fattest swell of lip with my nails until a piece lifted. Then I'd peel back neat slices like the skin of a peach. Sometimes, I like to gouge at the soft fat of my thighs until white goes pink goes red and then there's oozing blood and a pit right above my knee. My favorite, though, is cuticle. I'll wiggle it back and forth, pinch it between my pointer finger and thumb, catch it in my teeth and tear it backwards – a lion with the throat of a gazelle.

Anyways, it's not trichotillomania, but I wasn't surprised when I woke up one morning and found all my eyelashes dusted across my cheeks and chin. The urge was already unconscious, and eyelashes were easy – they come off if you rub too hard. I'd been crying a lot the night before. My husband's secretary gave me a call. Oops, she's pregnant, and bigger oops! It's my husband's.

My eyes were dry, and I didn't bother to brush away the eyelashes, just letting them flutter away as I sat up in an empty bed. In my peripheral, they looked like moths, taking flight towards a sudden light. I had no real interest in where they went. In the bathroom mirror, my sockets looked bald and pink, and where my jaw met my ear, I had clawed a hole now scabbed over. I think I was bored when I did that. I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. When I pulled my hands away, my eyeballs went with them.

My eyeballs were pearls in the clam of my palm, unblinking as they stared up at me. My fingers twitched inwards, as though to cup and curl around. Covetous, like little spiders. I didn't need my eyes anyways. What was there to see? My husband walking off into the sunset, hand in hand with his secretary and their new baby? No, thanks.

I thought about maybe pickling them, but that felt too morbid. Instead, I pierced the delicate jelly with a hook and wore them as earrings for when I *wanted* to see. I wore sunglasses on my nose and my eyeballs from my ears and life was not so bad. The neighbor's cat got in, though, and escaped with one of them. That eye went dark soon after. I think the cat ate it. It's okay. I still have the other one, even now.

My husband's secretary came to visit me one week after the phone call. My husband, I should add, had not visited me. My husband's secretary sat on the couch across from where I perched on my loveseat. Nervy people never settle and sit, they perch. I could tell, she wanted me to make her comfortable; offer her a beverage, ask her about how she found the weather. We soaked in the silence. She looked at my single earring, and I could see her wondering why my husband would have wanted a woman so macabre. She had the good grace not to ask.

"The baby," she began. She placed a delicate, non-picking hand over her stomach. "Is actually your husband's boss', not your husband's. I was mistaken." She maintained eye contact with my eyeball earring, which I found to be thoughtful considering how much I could tell she disliked it. She smiled. "Do you think you could ask him to come home to you?"

I opened my mouth and all my teeth fell into my hand. Some of the teeth had spindles of nerve roots sprouting from their tops. I ran my tongue over the fleshy holes and tasted blood. I gave the teeth to my husband's secretary, and she nodded with an air of seriousness. As she took

them from me, her fingers lingered over my own, brushing the open wound of the peeled cuticles. “I understand,” she said, and then stood. She made it halfway across the room before pausing, turning and asking, “Have you ever considered buying cuticle oil? It might help with your...” She smiled. “They come scented; you know. Watermelon, lily... Something for everyone.” She left. There was nothing more to say.

The great thing about having no teeth was I never had to talk. If I was at the bodega, buying my burnt, morning coffee, I only had to flash my gummy smile, once, for the cashier to never expect an answer to their bland questions. They actually let me have the coffee for free. I thought they felt sorry for me until one day, they asked why I still bothered with the wedding ring. Before my teeth had fallen out, I told the cashier my husband was having a baby with his secretary. I never really got around to correcting that, especially since that morning had been the first morning the cashier gave me my cup of coffee for free.

I couldn't verbally answer, of course, so I shrugged, and pulled off my left ring finger, rings and all. I gave the cashier the finger and the rings. Through my one eyeball earring, I could see the cashier flush a bright red. They let the rings fall off my finger and roll away under the soda machine. They gave the tip of my finger one, careful kiss and then tucked it away into their shirt pocket.

It was breezy when I left the bodega. My eyeball earring swung wildly, twisting and twirling. Through the clear door, my eyeball earring saw the cashier pull my ringless, cuticle-less finger out from their shirt pocket, and swallow it whole.



Zorbing | Michael Moreth

## The Man in the Doorway

John RC Potter

The bogeyman. The creature under the bed. The shadow that is death in disguise. The kind stranger who kills.

Childhood is a wonderful world of the imagination with extremes: at one end, the fantastical and joyful landscape of lightness and hope; at the other, a frightening and jittery underworld of darkness and fear.

When I was a child, my mother told my sisters and me a story from her youth. It was when she and her siblings had experienced the mythical bogeyman becoming a reality. Of course, our mother did not tell us this real-life tale to scare her children. She was always a fiercely protective and loving mother, despite having dealt with a lifetime of bad nerves and mental breakdowns. It seemed to me that our mother told us this story because it was still on her mind after all those years; that she could not be rid of the memory of that night decades before when the bogeyman appeared as the man in the doorway.

\*

It was in the waning days of the late 1930s. The Great Depression was receding in the distance, but still being felt by many. There were still drifters, hobos, and men of all ages and descriptions riding the rails and wandering the roads as the 30s wound down. In the farm country of southwestern Ontario, it was common for these men to try to find temporary work from farmers. Men often stopped by a farmhouse and asked the housewife if they could speak with her husband about doing some odd jobs or being a hired hand for a time. Often, there was no work to be had nor even money to pay for wages, or the farmer already had a hired hand. If their husbands did not require any hired help, the housewives would usually provide any drifter with a meal or some food for the road.

At the time, parents would leave older children in charge of younger siblings when necessary. On that evening, my mother and her siblings were at home alone. Their parents had gone to a local function, possibly a school or political meeting. In my mother's family, the two oldest boys would have been responsible for their four younger sisters and brother. Their ages at that time ranged from eleven to four years old. At a certain point that evening, the children went to bed in the upstairs of the old farmhouse in Tuckersmith Township; in each respective room, three children slept in one big bed. The three boys were in one bedroom, and the three girls were in another one nearby; both bedrooms were located near the top of the stairs. No doubt to save energy, no lights were kept burning in the house. It was in darkness. I recall my mother commenting on how dark and quiet that night had seemed. Perhaps she and her siblings felt the absence of their parents, with the knowledge they were on their own.

*Creak. Creak. Creak.*

The children in their respective bedrooms heard the old wooden stairs give a whispered warning that someone was at the bottom of the stairs. That someone was coming upstairs.

*Groan. Groan. Groan.*

The worn floorboards at the top of the stairs sounded a hushed alert that someone was now just outside the bedrooms.

*“Who’s there?”* called out one of the boys from his bed. No answer came back.

In the other bedroom, my mother and her sisters lay in the big bed with the blankets up to their noses, peering into the darkness. From both bedrooms, the children could just barely make out a shape in the inky darkness. An apparition. But not a ghost. A man. They could hear his breathing as he moved from one to the other of the opened doorways of the two bedrooms.

*“Is that you, Harry?”* one of my mother’s brothers asked the voiceless shadow in the corridor. He was no doubt hoping the figure in the doorway was their neighbour from down the road who was often at their home, and sometimes helped their father on his farm.

It must have felt to the children that the bogeyman had come to life and decided to visit their home that night. My mother and her sisters lay in their bed, hearts beating faster with rising fear. Who was the man in the doorway? Why was he not saying anything?

Then the man turned from the door of the boys’ bedroom and came back to the doorway of the bedroom where the girls were trembling under the covers.

*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

The timeworn floorboards in the girls’ bedroom murmured their soft but urgent alarm. The dark shape stood beside the bed. The silence in the room was overwhelming.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the bogeyman turned and started to walk back into the hallway. He paused outside the boys’ bedroom door one last time, and then began his descent down the stairs.

*Creak. Creak. Creak.*

*Groan. Groan. Groan.*

*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

When the children knew the apparition, the bogeyman had left the house, they all bounded from their respective beds. All of them had been scared within an inch of their lives. They discussed who it could have been, why he had come, and why he had not spoken. When their parents returned home later, the children excitedly informed them about the nocturnal visitor. As parents, they would have wanted to allay any fears, not wanting to alarm, or upset the children further. One wonders if they were worried that something terrible could have happened to their children that night. They assumed it was a drifter or a hobo, who had entered the unlocked farmhouse, perhaps in search of food.

Daakbachi  
Jim Genia

Your son Whitney visits every year, standing on the deck behind the house and gently rapping on the sliding door. He is, as always, how you remember him: tousled sheaf of blond hair like a crown atop of perfect head, expression of innocence, meaty palm against the glass. A four-year old brimming with curiosity and wonder. “Daddy?” he says. “Momma?” he says, and always your wife sobs beside you, as you sit on the living room couch and watch him from the darkness. “Oh, Whit...,” she mutters, over and over.

Your son visits every year—every Halloween night—begging to come inside, and it would be easy to rise from the couch, unlock the door and slide it open. Easy to kneel, arms extended for the embrace you’ve longed for. Easy to pull him close and never let go. But you don’t.

Because Whitney died five years ago.

\*

You moved to Montana to be closer to nature, so you and your wife could raise your son where the air was crisp and clear, cellular reception was spotty, and everywhere you looked was a postcard vista of earth and sky. But you cared little of the air and wished your cellphone worked when Whitney had his first seizure, and those postcard vistas only meant hours-long drives for chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

When the end came, the nurses—indifferent to outsiders at first but soon warm with compassion—went silent with pity.

When the end came, an old janitor with a face like tanned leather leaned his broom against the wall, held his palms up to the ceiling, and sang a prayer.

You and your wife were thankful for that act of kindness, and when you learned that the janitor was a medicine man from the nearby Crow Reservation, you sought him out. Tracked him down to a ramshackle trailer parked in the dirt off a cracked and forgotten asphalt road. Standing inside a tiny living room filled with broken furniture, you asked if he could bless Whitney’s ashes before you put them in the ground. In exchange for an offering of tobacco (a pack of cigarettes), he did.

“Eh-ya, he is at peace now,” said the old Crow with authority, and you believed him.

\*

That first year, after Whitney died, the grief sometimes left you breathless. Where there had been an ocean of affection between you and your wife, there was now emptiness. The only thing you shared was what you had lost.

That first year, that first Halloween night when he appeared, you couldn’t believe your eyes.

“Daddy?” he said. “Momma?” he said, and your wife cried out at the sight of him. You unlocked the door and slid it open, and Max—the family German shepherd, who used to stand vigil next to Whitney’s crib—made it outside first.

Watching Max get torn to pieces, you knew to never open the door again.

\*

The morning after Whitney returned, after the sun came up and you were sure he was gone, you buried Max's remains in the woods. Through tears and crashing waves of hysteria, you and your wife concluded that going to the police would be futile. But the old Crow might have answers, so you drove to the ramshackle trailer.

"*Nirumbee*," he said solemnly, as if that would explain it.

"Is that... is that like a skin-walker?" said your wife.

The old Crow shook his head, his face contorting as if her question was painful. "Eh-ya. That's Navajo. This is a Crow spirit. Like the *teihiihan* or *hecesiitteihii* of the Arapaho, but more..." He seemed to search for the word, his brow wrinkling. "...More insidious."

Your words were caught in your throat, until finally you coughed and sputtered them out. "Our son is a what?"

"That's not your son," said the old Crow. "Your son—your *daakbachi*—made the journey. His spirit moved on. That's just... something that's making itself look like him."

In the living room full of broken furniture he searched, first rummaging around inside a drawer, then pulling a shoebox down from a shelf. From within, he produced a leather pouch tied with cord.

"Open this when it's around," he said. "One whiff of the medicine and it will never visit you again."

You took the pouch. Your wife began to cry.

"Why us?" she said. "Why Whitney?"

The old Crow shrugged. Said, "Probably because of your grief." He dug a lighter out of his pocket and probed a crumpled pack on a table for a cigarette. Beside the crumpled pack was a picture in a frame of a younger man in a soldier's uniform. "But you should consider yourself lucky," said the old Crow. "Seeing your *daakbachi* again is a gift."

\*

Your son Whitney visits every year, standing on the deck behind the house and gently rapping on the sliding door. "Daddy?" he says. "Momma?" he says, and always your wife sobs beside you, as you sit on the living room couch and watch him from the darkness. "Oh, Whit...", she mutters.

Your son visits every year—every Halloween night, on the anniversary of his death—begging to come inside, and it would be easy to rise from the couch, unlock the door and slide it open. Easy to kneel, arms extended, holding out the pouch with the medicine that will make him leave you once and for all.

But you don't.

Because Whitney died five years ago, and this *nirumbee* that wears his face, this creature that would tear you to pieces if you let it, is all you and your wife have left.

A gift you cannot let go.

How to be Sad  
Bradon Matthews

Look at the sun,  
Look at the way the sky selects  
From all the light,  
Blue,  
The way we say green  
When we mean envy, greed,  
Not grasslands  
Or the tops of forests  
Where the birds nest  
Before they learn  
Flight,  
And many learn  
The harsh earth's surface  
Does not give  
Pity, pity,  
And many are less honest  
Than they would be  
If they sobbed a thousand days  
Straight,  
Oh sadness, I wear you  
As I wear my favorite shirt,  
Though long ago  
I had outgrown it,  
Oh sadness, how I lick  
At all that blinding sweetness,  
How you cling to me  
Like feathers  
Even as I fall

The Ghost of Enola Echoes Loud  
Srihith Jarabana

It took a second for me to notice the mushroom cloud forming about 15 kilometers out before everything in my vision turned a blinding white. Without a second to process, I decided to run inside the bank, barely protected from the explosion by the red sturdy concrete walls that looked like they'd been there for a million years.

The ground shook violently, sending massive tremors through the floor as the shockwave tore the rest of the city apart. Even though I was heavily shell shocked, I could still feel the sharp debris penetrating the windows, continuing to shatter the fragile seal of uncontaminated space that remained.

As I went to look out the window, I noticed a distant plane flying away, already far from the hypocenter of the explosion. Its silhouette stood out among the planes tailing it, a stark reminder that the chaos was in fact real.

The sight somehow stirred a mix of awe and sadness within me, knowing that I couldn't hop on their plane and leave the devastation that they caused behind.

But that thought was quickly put on hold as I was forced to move into the basement by the teller. With each step I took, the grey air became opaquer with a suffocating heat that seemed to dig at the very core of my being.

There were only five of us huddled in the corner near the gold bars in heat so unbearable that the metal itself seemed like it was slowly melting. Giant beads of sweat trickled down our faces, disguised amongst the tears, mixing with the dirt and ash that our hair had accumulated.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly as we clung to the hope that we had been stuck in a nightmare and in some twisted way, our minds were playing a cruel trick on us.

We didn't talk much, but something about the collective fear of what was going on outside didn't make that silence awkward. When the silence finally knocked on the door, the gravity of the situation finally pressed down on our chests like anvils falling from the sky, choking our voices in the process, and leaving us with the mere sound of our laboured breathing.

After a few days, I was walking along the Ota River, near ground zero, when I first noticed the shadow of a person on the stairs of the bank outside. It wasn't a regular shadow like one you'd see on a sunny day however, but rather just a dark human-sized shape in the layer of ash surrounding it.

Curious yet cautious, I approached, my footsteps barely audible amidst the eerie stillness that enveloped the entire city.

I turned around. I couldn't. I still saw their ghost.

I kept walking, with my heart heavy in my strained hand since the weight of sorrow and the burden of survival was reluctant to leave. My individual steps felt like a progression into a world where the line between life and death was blurred into an indistinguishable fog.

It doesn't help that everybody in the bank with me that day had already died. It doesn't matter how, through a noose or in an impromptu hospital, their ghosts still haunt my mind. At least the radiation coursing through my veins was going to allow me to join them soon, one way or another.

In fact, there's no difference between me and the tens of thousands of ghosts that I feel here except for the small fact that I'm still *technically* alive. I should've joined them. They're my family, my friends, my community, everything that I've ever known, everyone that I lived for.

As I'm thinking about this, I surprisingly notice a body. Alive. Struggling to move. Her frail body trembled ever so slightly, her clothes tattered and coated with ash. With a sudden surge of recognition, her voice pierced through the desolation, calling my name, "Kei," she cried. My heart skipped a beat as I fully positioned my head towards her, eyes widening in disbelief because unlike everyone else I've seen in the last 48 hours, she's not a figment of my imagination.

As she says my name, I recognize the distinct crookedness of her still-white teeth. "Rina," I offered my hand, reaching out to her with trembling fingers and sweaty palms.

As I say her name, my heart skips another beat because I recognize her from a past life. My childhood neighbourhood which I hadn't thought about in years.

It was the first time I talked in weeks. The sound of my own voice felt foreign like an old friend greeting me after spending a lifetime apart.

A bittersweet smile graced Rina's face as she clasped my hand with a familiar gentleness, the warmth of her touch reaffirming our new reality once more.

I guess that's another difference between me and the ghosts—I'm here of my own accord. At least now I am.

## Boozer

Brian Christopher Giddens

I was eight years old when my family moved from a small in-city apartment to a growing suburb north of Seattle. We had room to roam, and a yard for a dog. I got my first bike, a red Schwinn Typhoon, and soon after we picked a puppy out of a box in front of the grocery store. He was a golden tan mutt with a thick white ruff on his chest. We named him Boozer McNaughton. My folks were drinkers, and McNaughton's Whiskey and Water was the house cocktail. I wonder what the neighbors must have thought when we shouted from the front porch, "Boozer! Boozer! Boozer come home!" at the end of each day.

But at the time, neither Boozer nor I let his name hold us back. In our new suburb, the streets were smooth, the hills were gentle, and the traffic minimal. Perfect for racing around town on my shiny red Typhoon.

With Boozer on my tail, my friends and I flew to the woods, where we looked at old Playboy magazines smuggled out of Doug's house. On the weekends, our gang rode a couple blocks away to the new cul de sac where more split levels were being built. We would explore the houses, partially framed, trying to imagine which room was which. Boozer followed behind, sniffing, and often leaving his scent, on the new wood. We'd pedal down to the new Fred Meyer store, park my bike, tell Boozer to stay and head on in, only to have Boozer use the automatic doors to follow me in every time.

"Boozer! Outside!" I'd yell, chasing him out of the store. I'm sure he enjoyed the game. He probably couldn't fathom why I would want to go anywhere without him.

#

I'm not sure when I graduated to a blue ten speed, with handlebars that curved under like ram horns. That was a transitional bike, as there was a lot less free riding as I grew older. Instead, my friends and I would aimlessly wander the streets, try in vain to look tough, and hide out in unattended basements. Boozer didn't get invited as often. He may have found other interests as well. He was a free-range dog, before leash laws, and not "fixed".

I was fourteen when my folks picked me up from the Lynn Twin movie theater one Friday night. The rain was pouring as I ran over to the car. My folks were quiet, which was kind of a relief because they always wanted to know about everything I did. But then my mom cleared her throat and told me Boozer had been killed in a dogfight, likely over another dog in heat.

It was too dark to see the faces of my parents. My mom waited a minute and then asked if I was okay. I said yes. But I wasn't sure what that meant. I just thought how once again, Boozer and I were in sync. I had spent the evening in the back row of the theater with Rhonda, a girl from my eighth-grade class, carried away by my own desires.

On the way home, I stayed quiet. I just looked out the window, staring at the rain illuminated by the streetlights, hoping that Boozer had a chance to enjoy himself that night as much as I did.

Voter Fraud  
Ash Kingery

Arnitor, the Blue Wizard of the Council of Elthys, was in a real pickle. Most of the other council members had stopped voting with him. He was now in the *minority*, and it was a horrible feeling. Why didn't they just *listen* to him? Why couldn't they see the folly in allowing women to practice elemental magic, or how unwise it was to let foreigners study at the Elthysian School of Wizardry? This could not stand.

The Council's makeup had changed drastically in the past few years, as members that Arnitor had known for decades retired or passed away, leaving young upstarts to fill the vacancies. But he'd been studying the Council rules, and now he had a loophole that could work in his favor. As it turned out, those who died while still members of the Council remained members. Or, well, there wasn't anything *saying* they'd forfeited their membership upon death. It was more of an *assumption*.

Necromancy was a tricky, dangerous beast, and for that reason its use was restricted only to Council members, and then only in urgent situations. This was urgent enough, in Arnitor's opinion. So, in the dead of night, he went to the mausoleum where all the former Council members were interred. He just needed three of them.

Arnitor decided to resurrect Daraxes, the former Red Wizard; Kethril, the former Green Wizard, and Orthan, the former Yellow Wizard. They had been good, compliant men. He took a heavy quaff of his favorite mead, stretched out his skinny arms, and went to work.

Just before dawn, Arnitor stumbled out of the mausoleum on exhausted legs. Three shambling skeletons clad in faded, worm-eaten robes clattered after him. He used the last of his strength to teleport himself and his fellow wizards to his home, ordered the skeletons to wait, then slept for the rest of the day. The skeletons watched him the whole time.

When he woke, he checked his sundial and found that there were only a few hours until the council meeting. He explained to the skeletal wizards with the simplest words possible (for the resurrected have very little in the way of brain power), that they were to vote "no" on the day's proposal (whether wizards should be permitted to marry non-wizards). There were six Wizards of the Council—Red, Green, Yellow, Blue, Black, and White—and he knew that Alforas, the Black Wizard, would be voting with him. He always did. With the resurrected Council members by his side, the others would be outvoted, and for as long as he lived, they would stay that way.

Arnitor had some difficulty simply walking to the teleportation circle. His vision was blurry, his hands were shaking, and his chest hurt. Three resurrections in a row at his age had evidently taken a lot out of him, more than could be renewed by mere sleep. He wouldn't let that stop him, though. He would vote if it killed him.

He arrived with his friends just minutes before the session was set to start. The others shot to their feet, terrified and furious. "What sick joke is this?" the current Red Wizard, Kalyna, said.

"I'd like to introduce you to your predecessor, Daraxes," Arnitor said with a smirk. His voice quivered and his head ached, but he had to press on. "And this is Kethril, the previous Green Wizard, and Orthan, the former Yellow Wizard. They've come back to vote."

"Ridiculous!" The White Wizard, Syluni, cried. "They're *dead*!"

"There's no rule saying they can't vote," Arnitor said smugly. "I checked." He turned to Alforas, who was even paler than usual and sweating buckets. "Shall we get on with it?"

Alforas quailed under Arnitor's gaze. "Y-Yes, I suppose. We *are* all here..."

"Then it's settled," Arnitor said as he sat down. As soon as he did, he felt pain race up his old joints, sharper and fiercer than the usual aches. His vision blurred severely; once it came back into focus, he saw everyone else had sat down and was now glaring at him or avoiding his gaze. Behind him, the skeletons clanked softly.

Syluni's glare could melt metal. Through gritted teeth, she said, "I call this meeting of the Council of Elthys to order. First order of business..."

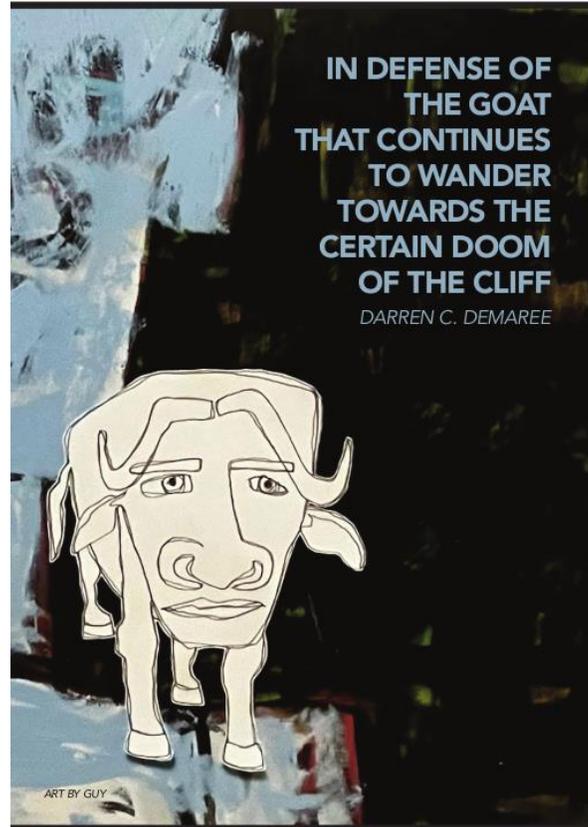
Whatever she said after that, Arnitor couldn't hear it. His ears were filled with the buzzing of a thousand angry bees. His heart was beating strangely. He tried to take deep breaths but couldn't.

"...nitor?" Syluni's voice broke through the bees. He looked up to see her staring right at him, a tiny hint of concern in her eyes. "How do you vote?"

"I vote... I vote no, of course! We wizards are better than this, we should remain separate from the rabble!" he wheezed.

Syluni grimaced as she looked at the skeletons. "H-How do you three vote? Raise your hands only if you vote no."

The last thing Arnitor heard before his heart stopped was the sound of three skeletal arms raising. He did not get to hear or see the rest of the Council members staring impassively at his fresh corpse while his three confederates crumbled into piles of lifeless bones. Nor did he hear Syluni say, "Alforas, add a proposal to close the damn loopholes to the docket." This is because he was dead, and no one was going to resurrect *him* any time soon.



*in defense of the goat as it continues to wander towards the certain doom of the cliff* is an exploration of the importance of imagination and creativity. There is always a momentum to the day, but choosing to create with or against the human elements of this world is vital to our survival. The ocean (space and time) always gets us, but those brave enough to attempt flight before it does through artistic and humanist practices can change the tides before they splash. This book-length poetic sequence tracks the path from the town/city into the fields, through the field parties, and all the way to the edge and beyond of the cliff. Working with the metaphor elaborated on in Mary Ruefle's *On Imagination*, the footprints of the goat and those tracking it are celebrated in this book. This goat has escaped the metaphor of Ruefle's goat in the attic and is on an artistic parade towards the end of the endeavor. The individual poems in this book twist and energize the common practices of the artist. The stillness is abandoned. The ferocity is given to the practice, and it entitles those practicing it to revel away from the eyes of the non-artistic community they've left behind, and to imagine more freely than they ever have before. As artists we smell the salt when there is no sea, and the sea is there because we do. This book is a grand gesture towards the idea that we need a thousand more books written in the fields before they disappear.

\$12.99

<https://aprilgloaming.com/shop/in-defense-of-the-goat-that-continues-to-wander-towards-the-certain-doom-of-the-cliff/>

Brothers  
Thomas Van Street

My brother hasn't left his bedroom in 14 years. He's 34 now.

I stay down the hall from him in my childhood room. I observe his life as if it's a reality show or an unethical social psychology experiment from the 1970s. It's just the two of us. We don't talk.

What's going on in his room I could not say. I suspect he is awake when I hear video game sound effects or movie dialogue. He's got funny DVDs from the early 2000s—Children's Hospital episodes and Pineapple Express. He's not laughing in there, though.

I know he's alive. He flushes his toilet and runs water in the sink. A human stench escapes from under his bedroom door and leaks down the hall to me. I wonder if a pathologist could capture it in a jar and examine the odor to diagnose his condition. It smells like solitude to me.

You are wondering how he eats. He has visitors—old friends from community college—that bring him supplies on an irregular schedule. One guy, Matthew, plays surf guitar and goes to trivia night, and has a normal life with a wife. He drives a Lyft around and brings my brother leftover fast food and sometimes peanut butter and bread.

Look, other than walking alone to work for four shifts a week, I don't leave the house much either. I think about pathogens in the air. My brother avoided a few things, like COVID, although he forgot what it feels like to activate the automatic door at Kroger or to scrape ice off his windshield. Matthew said my brother doesn't miss anything. He's not scared. He's comfortable. Matthew says there's nothing out there for my brother.

You must be curious how we pay the bills. I rake in about 200 a week as a food prep at Texas Roadhouse near the mall. I mostly mix salad dressings and marinade and arrange baking potatoes on large silver trays. My conversations with co-workers are brief. For me, friendship is an impossible math class. Matthew said I should try. I stayed after my shift once and had a cold draft beer at the bar with the busboys and hostesses. I scrolled through my phone, listening to them go on and smiled at the parts where I was supposed to laugh. It wasn't awful. Things are the way they are. I haven't been touched by anyone in years and that's fine.

There is movement in my brother's room today. Soft footsteps and the click of a lock on a bathroom door. I walk slowly towards the sounds and freeze near the door, trying to gather a sense of him. He doesn't want me lurking about. Years ago, after Mother moved away, I often pulled a scratchy cushion off the couch and slept with it on the floor in front of my brother's door. He told me to stop and I did.

I had a girlfriend once. She had theories about my brother. Like he's asexual or someone broke his heart—it agitated me. One night we got in an argument about him. I told her to leave. My brother never dated anyone. So what if he's asexual? Some people don't want anyone.

You probably want to know if I ever see him—If I ever make eye contact with him. It happened today. Matthew showed up on our stoop with a large brown, grease-stained grocery bag. I jogged to the door to let him in.

Matthew didn't have time to socialize. He had food and pills for my brother and wanted to drop them off and be gone. I followed him into the hall, hanging back in the dark like a shadow of him. He knocked at the door and said *Bro, Bro?* My brother slowly opened the door just enough to reach for the sack. I saw him. He opened the bag and looked inside. He was fully dressed. Shoes too. My brother looked skinny, and his hair was shorter than I remember. He must have scissors.

That was it and Matthew went back to the world.

It's not terrible here. The best nights are when it's cool outside and the windows are open. The wind coming in feels clean. I hear the distant, steady, repetitive barking of a neighbor dog down the street. My brother hears it too.

Psittacosis  
Robert Beveridge

I couldn't tell what it was  
you were looking for—thinner  
client, a lavender corpse,  
the unmarked graves  
of every cock rock guitarist  
who wore AquaNet  
in the eighties—but your trips  
out got longer and longer.  
We went from “dinner  
will be in the oven” to “birthday  
presents are in the front closet”,  
and let me tell you, it was murder  
keeping the Yorkies out of that  
wrapped veal joint after it  
sat a few months.

Then, to all our surprise,  
a postcard—you'd hooked up  
with Juliane Koepcke  
and over too many Pisco Sours  
mapped out a plan to bring  
water to Patagonia.  
At the time of composition,  
you said, you were engaged  
in hiring phalanxes of parrots,  
capybaras, tamarin  
who were down on their luck  
and needed the stability  
of American dollars.

Wallflower Prat  
Jimmy Boom Semtex

The Wallflower came into work looking like a drowned dog  
Her dyed blond hair all stringy straggly saggy soggy  
Like she'd just left the shower with her Boss bonk  
Or got caught in the thunderstorm spared by lightning  
Not worth the electricity so she bugs us by her presence  
Caterwauling like a dead cat screeching dancing prancing  
My God some of us have to do autodial outbound Hell  
Can someone shut that woman up send her to her boss  
She must miss him so gets even louder look at me  
Wallflower with blues waiting for a new boss to seduce  
Keep away from me I loathe all things about you  
Fake plastic false loud prittle prattle lunatic female  
Wallflower to the end of time terrorising the BPO

What Would Quentin Tarantino do?  
Benjamin Macnair

Somewhere in a non-descript pub,  
a non-descript man holds forth,  
shouting to someone else, out of frame.  
Another man bangs his head on the table,  
hoping for change.

What would Quentin Tarantino do?

The jukebox would play a song from the 1970s.  
A faded actor would show his moves,  
and a Mexican stand-off would end  
with poor Marvin, shot, again.

If that happened here,  
the blood would never come out of the carpet,  
but in Hollywood, all the chemicals are stronger.

Boo  
Robert Bires

Down in my grandparents' dark, musty basement, near the deep freezer where my grandmother kept the ice cream sandwiches, waited the spoils of war my great-uncle Clinton had brought home—full German infantry uniform, rifle, bayonet, and helmet.

Mark and I would go down there every summer when we were younger. We would tug back and forth over who would hold the gun. The loser, me, got the knife and maybe the helmet. No one would tell us how Uncle C found the souvenirs or why my grandfather had them. There was a tear in the bottom of the shirt, but we couldn't find any blood or bullet holes. We acted out our short, bald uncle making a prisoner strip to his underwear. We wondered if he'd taken it all from a dead soldier. The uniform and weapons were how we relived the war that pervaded our childhood.

Our father had served in the Pacific, but he only repaired airplanes.

By the time I turned eleven, moths had eaten through much of the wool uniform and the rifle and bayonet had been sold. Often things we looked forward to playing with were gone the next time we went to visit my grandparents in Buffalo. My mother would silence me when I asked why.

Grandma E asked if Mark and I wanted what was left. When they arrived in Pittsburgh that summer, Grandpa E carried in a torn box which contained the helmet, the frayed cuff, collars, and sewn-on insignias from the uniform. "You boys get the remaining loot," he said, as my mother handed him his first beer.

The helmet was too large, but my neck was strong enough to wear it around the house the rest of the night.

That fall, I decided that I wanted to be a German soldier for Halloween. My brother, at fourteen, was too old to go out anymore, so there was nothing to fight over. I had a dark green sweatshirt, and my mother secured the cuffs and collar to it with safety pins. She also pinned the Wehrmacht insignia to my chest.

"There," she said, stepping back. "You look like a real soldier."

I practiced walking around the house with the helmet on. My father said I looked 'snazzy' and wanted to snap a picture, but then the doorbell rang. Craig and Dean were early. It was Halloween. Who wouldn't be?

"Sieg Heil," Dean said as he came into the den. He was a pirate with a red bandana on his head, wearing one of his mother's clip-on earrings and a fake mustache, carrying a sword.

"Aargh!" I retorted.

Craig wore a Native American headdress over his blond hair, and the tea-dyed shirt and leggings his mother had made for the school play. He had a bow slung on his shoulder, but no arrows. We were ready to maraud the neighborhood.

My father stood up and looked us over. "Tough-looking crew," he said. "You boys be careful of cars. It's probably going to rain."

"Nine o'clock," my mother said.

I nodded, but none of us wore watches.

As always, as soon as the door closed behind us, we turned around and rang the doorbell. "Trick or treat!" We yelled when my mother opened it. She pretended to be surprised.

Dean pointed his sword at her. "Give us all your Clark bars, wench!"

My mother frowned at Dean's language. But then she laughed. "I'll give you each *one*. You don't scare me."

It was that way all up and down my street. Neighbors knew us, made us show off our costumes, saluted me, made war whoops to Craig, asked Dean if he would walk the plank, told us we were getting too old for candy, said we should be doing our homework, quizzed us about our activities on Mischief Night the night before, waved us away when we pled ignorance.

Soon the streets were filled with hundreds of other kids and parents. We were on a mission and moved quickly through the flow of those families.

"How many houses so far, Craig?" I asked.

"Ninety-seven."

"Let's hit one hundred and fifty!" Dean shouted.

"It'll get too late. How about one hundred and twenty?" I said.

"Let's get a move on then!" said Dean.

We all played basketball, and the long hills left us unfazed. Rain began pattering on my helmet as we worked the farther streets over by our school. Near the top of Sterling, we went up the steps of a brick house that needed its brown shutters painted. I got there first, sweatshirt wet, my helmet dripping, and rang the doorbell. The second the old woman saw me, before I could say, "Trick or treat," she shrieked, "No! Not you!" I ducked. She slammed the door and turned out the house lights.

She had been staring at me, but I turned around to see if she meant someone else. No one was there except a kid in a ghost costume crossing the street.

"Wow," Craig said, standing beside me.

"We should soap her windows," Dean said. "She looked like a hag with that nose."

I felt like she'd slapped me. I wanted away from there. "No, she's probably watching. She'd call the cops."

"Witch," Dean said.

In dry clothes, I sat next to my father who sorted through the candy. Anything suspicious or that he deemed 'pure sugar' was off limits.

I said, "We went to this one house way over on Sterling and this old woman took one look at us, slammed her door, and turned out her lights."

"What in the world?" my mother asked from her chair.

"You guys must have been a scary bunch," my father said, as he pulled out all the Smarties.

That was 1968. It took some years before I learned what ghosts I had stirred up for her. Whenever she appeared in memory, I recoiled, because only she had done an accounting of me.

Clean Socks  
Giancarlo Riccobon

There were two things Trevor dreaded most about Vietnam: land mines and crabs.

Land mines were the worst, because they'd kill you in a confetti of shrapnel. Even if they only blew off your leg, that still meant a long and howling goodbye.

And then there were crabs. Not the seashore kind, but the tiny ones that scuttled around on your junk. He'd heard stories of corporals scratching their privates till they bled. Trevor knew it wasn't fair to compare lice to mines, but he shuddered anyway, certain that his dignity would seep out his pores and puddle on the jungle floor. Dignity was always the first casualty.

But after the incident with Gunderson, dignity became the least of Trevor's concerns, and friendly fire jumped to the top of his list.

\*

It sounded so inconsequential, the phrase *friendly fire*. Like two buddies messing around with popguns. *Nothing to worry about, just friendly fire*.

He became so paranoid that he took a neon orange sweatband and Sharpied the words *Team USA* on it in huge block letters. He wore it everywhere, even to the latrines, until Lieutenant Sheldon confiscated his sweatband and said, with that shade of orange, he'd give away his whole platoon's position.

Trevor wanted to tell the lieutenant that he could handle a regular combat death – that was war for ya. But he couldn't handle a bullet in the back. That was exactly what had happened to Gunderson. Poor Gunderson, a born-again pacifist who wouldn't have swatted a fly if it was buzzing around his open wound. From way up in the chopper, though, he must've looked like a VC, because the aerial unit had shot him good and dead.

"That's why you should always report your position," Lieutenant Sheldon said afterwards. "Don't go anywhere without my say-so. S'like a marching band. You miss a step, and everybody trips over you."

Once Sheldon was out of earshot, the other guys agreed that he'd never been in a marching band in his life. Meanwhile, Trevor hunched over the river and tried to wash the blood out of Gunderson's socks. Gunderson would've liked that, he figured. So, when they shipped his body home, his folks could say, *At least he died with clean socks on*. A small dignity.

It was hopeless, though. In the end Trevor draped them on a branch. If you couldn't even save your socks out here, then what was left to hold onto?

That night, Trevor felt a crab take root. It was the worst crab of all, because it nested in his mind, scuttling around behind his eyes until he knew he would never see straight again.

\*

Gordie was the one who'd lent Trevor the headband.

"What's mine is yours," he'd said.

And Trevor had shaken his head, dumbfounded and a bit sheepish at Gordie's generosity. When you were carrying 80 pounds of ammo and rations, you didn't have much space for luxuries. So, whenever you brought along a scrap of home, it was priceless. Yet Gordie was giving away his belongings like Andrew Carnegie.

That was why later, when Gordie's pack was up for grabs, Trevor wouldn't reach inside to see what he could salvage. That would've been like reaching inside the mouth of a corpse, snatching that coin from under its tongue. Not that Gordie had anything under his tongue now except a crust of black blood.

“Shame to waste his stuff,” the other guys said while they smoked Gordie’s cigs, but then they weren’t the ones who smoked poor Gordie to begin with. They hadn’t killed him.

\*

It had just been a routine tunnel scouting, though it always started that way, didn’t it? Gordie had gotten the short end of the straw, so he crouched down and crawled into the Viet Cong tunnel.

He was gone a long time.

Trevor couldn’t help it – his mind filled that silence with VC soldiers playing peek-a-boo in the dark with Gordie. Or worse: tag, because in Vietnam, tag meant *You’re dead* instead of *You’re it*.

Before long, there was a shuffling, like a soldier padding on his hands and knees, except it sounded too heavy to be Gordie. Not Gordie, who weighed a hundred-ten and arm-wrestled like a noodle and wouldn’t stand a chance against a VC. Unable to stand it anymore, Trevor crouched down and squinted into the esophagus of the earth.

When he glimpsed a familiar soul patch, Trevor was so relieved that he half-laughed, half-hiccaped. But that hiccup traveled down his arm to his trigger finger. It happened automatically, like a reflex he’d picked up after years of schoolyard games: the blind urge to reach out and tag the kid in front of him.

“It was self-defense,” the guys would tell him later, “an honest mistake.” Yet they slept curled around their rifles for weeks afterwards, as if they were afraid that killing was contagious.

But Trevor wasn’t thinking that far ahead when he rolled over Gordie’s body. Instead, he just prodded Gordie with a branch, waiting for Gordie to tag him back.

\*

Back when it was still their first week in Nam, Gordie had shown Trevor his dog tags. Trevor had pressed his thumb into those little goosebump letters until they left welts on his skin.

“Who needs a medal when you got dog tags?” Gordie told him, stretching out on the ground. “They got your name engraved on ‘em and everything. I heard medals are too heavy to wear around all day, anyway.”

Trevor eased himself into the mud beside Gordie. At that moment, Gordie’s socks seemed positively pristine.

“Don’t you ever – wonder?” Trevor had meant to say *worry*, as in worry about how easy it was to die over here, but somehow the word *wonder* came out instead. Trevor liked *wonder* better.

“What’s to wonder?” asked Gordie. “I got your back, and you got mine. Isn’t that enough?”

The next morning, Gordie’s name had faded from Trevor’s thumb.

Robots' Wedding House  
Debasish Mishra

I took a fully automatic driverless cab that dropped me exactly at the venue which the digital map in my hand had pointed out. A building bedecked with lights and flowers stood before me. Electronic fireflies wafted in the air. The gate at the entry read in big bold letters: ROBOTS' WEDDING HOUSE.

It was the wedding of Frozen-Horse240 and Alexa130. Frozen-Horse240 was a partner in my start-up: an ethical hacker who helped me to allay the viruses sent by his stepbrother Trojan-Horse420. Alexa130, the great granddaughter of Amazon, was working on Artificial Intelligence. It was love at first sight. She was so beautiful that I'd have proposed her for marriage had there not been these restrictions on machine-human relationships. These social prohibitions were stern, in fact sterner than inter-racial marriages. Anyway, I was happy for the fact that FH—FH being Frozen-Horse240's shortened name which I preferred to call—was lucky enough to woo her.

I was welcomed at the gate by an unseen voice and then the gate opened on its own. The infinite potential of Artificial Intelligence! Thereafter, I had to walk through an Evil Intentions Detector, which was installed to scan human intentions. Gone were the days of metal detectors. I had no evil intentions as such. Yet I was scared for a moment. How could I otherwise access my own unconscious? Nevertheless, I came out of it successfully. Thankfully.

The hall where I was ushered in by an unseen voice was embellished with digital flowers, lights and intangible portraits of the very first robots on earth. The mythical, fictional 3D image of Frankenstein's creation was celebrated and deified in the middle. He was the new nameless God for this new generation. There was hardly anyone of my species in this gathering which was manned by machines. Bodies of metal swayed with dexterity and the electronic eyes composed of cameras and flashlights glinted all around. I felt as if I was encircled by CCTVs from all sides. The guests—all the robots—relished digital food constituted by jpgs and gifs, while I moved from one place to another with a feeling of utter alienation. Nobody gave a damn to the fact that the land where they danced and revelled was first discovered by Columbus, a man of flesh and blood like me. Now it was their turn. Yeats was right when he forecasted this imminent possibility: *Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer.*

There were free charging ports and many of them plugged the chargers on their backs, while the others exchanged binary codes, intelligible only to themselves. Siri345, for some reason, was unable to fix the charger.

She looked at my eyes and said, 'Would you help me?'

I gently held her metal body, took the charging cable, and tucked it in the slot.

'Thank you,' she said.

'I'm Ram,' I volunteered.

'Nice to meet you, Ram. Give me some RAM someday,' she giggled.

What a beautiful deathless daughter-in-law she would be for my ailing mother! I thought. FH's elder brother Frozen-Horse100 saw me standing in a corner, alone, and reached me.

'Are you not enjoying the party?' he asked.

'Very much,' I said.

'I've been advised by FH to look after you,' he laughed.

'He is kind and considerate,' I said.

'You are lucky that he hasn't usurped your company like other robots all over the world,' he argued.

I was taken aback. The company had absorbed decades of my sweat. It was my sweat. Robots didn't sweat in a literal sense, either.

'He's happy being my partner,' I said, 'and I'm offering him a promotion in a couple of months though, as his wedding gift.'

He shook my hand in excitement and, for a moment, I presumed it was an electric shock.

'What will he get in his promotion package?' he prodded further.

'Upgradation of his RAM, new technological equipments, power of attorney to procreate more robots on his own...'

'Our community detests human beings for reasons which are inevitably valid. But I swear, you are different.'

I smiled though it wasn't a reason to smile. When you hate a tree and decide to chop it, how does it matter if you love one of its branches? I was a drop of that river which was once an ocean. Now, there were not many drops left.

Finally, I walked to the stage.

'Hi FH,' I said.

'Hello Ram', he responded, and introduced me to his wife.

She shook hands with me. Once again, I got the feeling of a mild electric shock.

'May you be together for millions of years', I wished.

'Of course we will. Unless humans have some foulplay in mind.'

FH wasn't pleased with her remark. I could read the code of apology in his eyes. But she wasn't entirely wrong. Who had imagined that robots and humans would share such an embittered relationship one day? In fact, I had not ever thought that Artificial Intelligence would drub natural instincts so easily. First, the robots were incorporated to unsettle the uncompromising trade unions. Then, the foolish trade unions tried to dismantle technology. Huh! As if undoing technology was as easy as ABC! All the robots united and their collective artificial intelligence exploded the human control. Fortunately, there was infighting between some like Trojan-Horse420 and others like FH while human beings were saved from extinction.

FH urged me to stay a little longer, but I didn't want to be an odd-one-out in their merrymaking. It was their moment of celebration.

'Enjoy the party, mate. I'll see you in office tomorrow,' I smiled, and turned around and walked out of the gate, counting my footsteps and measuring the acreage of my shadow.

I looked for a human-driven cab—a rarity bordering on the impossible—to reach my place where humans were still present, despite being minorities, and life was not at risk of complete digital upheaval.

## Bios

Benjamin DuBow is a writer, traveler, and chef interested in how things relate to other things, of being-in-relation. Benjamin holds a BA in English Lit from Columbia University and an MFA in Creative Writing & Environment from Iowa State University, and has published work in Longreads, The Hopper, Gadfly, and others. They are currently working on a novel.

Erika Seshadri lives on an animal rescue ranch in Florida with her family. When not caring for tame critters or feral children, she can be found writing. Her work has appeared in Burningword Literary Journal, Funicular Magazine, Button Eye Review, Hare's Paw Literary Journal, and others.

Helena Jiang is an undergraduate majoring in English Language and Literature at Shanghai International Studies University, China.

A recent octogenarian, Vern Fein, has published just shy of 300 poems and short prose pieces in over 100 different sites. A few are: Gyroscope Review, Young Raven's Review, Bindweed, Corvus Review, River and South, Grey Sparrow Journal, and Uppagus magazine. His second poetry book—REFLECTION ON DOTS—was just released. His Muse is the entire world of poetry.

Huina Zheng, a Distinction M.A. in English Studies holder, works as a college essay coach. She's also an editor at Bewildering Stories. Her stories have been published in Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal, and others. Her work has received nominations for the Pushcart Prize twice and Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her husband and daughter.

Joe Oppenheimer taught mathematical social science and philosophy at the University of Maryland. In 2010, he retired from writing fiction, poetry, and plays. The themes of his writings reflect social justice and collective action. His works have won some local prizes, been republished, and have been published in numerous literary journals. He has also self-published a novel, 2 books of poetry, children's stories, and a volume of other prose. He has taught at the Osher Life Long Learning Institute and ran a writers' group in a homeless shelter in Silver Spring, MD and co-founded one at the VA hospital in DC. That led to a volume of the group's writings. Information about his work is available on his website <https://joeaoppenheimer.wixsite.com/my-site>.

Maggie Hart is a writer, retired bartender, traveler, and cancer survivor based in Colorado. She is a graduate of Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Previous publications include Roxane Gay's The Audacity, Cold Mountain Review, Glass Mountain, and Little Village Magazine.

Justine Payton is an MFA candidate at University of North Carolina-Wilmington, where she is the recipient of the Philip Gerard Graduate Fellowship and Bernice Kert Fellowship in Creative Writing. She has been published in the Wild Roof Journal, HerStry, and was a semi-finalist in TulipTree Publishing's Wild Women Contest. She currently reads for Ecotone and The Masters

Review, and volunteers with UNCW's "Writers in Action" program, where she teaches creative writing in local public schools.

Sarah Macallister has a Natural Sciences PhD and is currently studying for a second PhD in History of Art. Besides academic publications, she has short stories published by Impspired, Flora Fiction, Literally Stories and Shooter Literary magazine.

Samantha Sapp is a former middle school teacher and current MFA student at Miami University. Though she is originally from the Florida panhandle, she has spent the last few years in the Midwest coping poorly with winter. Her work has appeared in the literary journal Sinister Wisdom, and she was a finalist for the 2022 Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest.

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes in Athabasca, Alberta. Her work has been anthologized by Community Building Art Works and Beyond the Veil Press. When not writing, she can be found swimming laps at the local pool or basking in sunbeams on the deck.

Glen Armstrong (he/him) holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and edits a poetry journal called Cruel Garters. His poems have appeared in Conduit, Poetry Northwest, and Another Chicago Magazine.

Betty Smith began writing poetry around 12 years of age. Edgar Allen Poe's Annabel Lee remains a favorite poem of hers. Since retiring from Aerospace up in the amazing PNW, she has begun writing more poetry and a book of various vignettes regarding her interesting career. She has also created a parody of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer titled "REDEYE the Red Domed Missile.". Her hobbies are reading, poetry, opera, and local theatre; plus caring for her 2 very senior cats, Annapurrrna and Shang Shung, both rescues.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). Recent/upcoming appearances in Wishbone Words, SurVision, and Down in the Dirt, among others.

Lev Raphael's micro, flash, travel, and memoir essays have appeared most recently in over fifty lit mags including The Smart Set, Braided Way, and Memoirist.

Luca Fois is a librarian living in Edinburgh (Scotland). He loves thinking and discussing poetry and writing, the meaning of words, and their etymology while assessing the differences in meaning in words from different languages, and the things that don't make sense in a language. He also enjoys quietly looking at people's lives, writing in cafés and cooking for friends and family. You can find him on X @cuttinghail.

Mike Lee is a writer and editor at a trade union in New York City. His work appears in or is forthcoming in The Opiate, Fictionette, Brilliant Flash Fiction, BULL, Drunk Monkeys, and many others. His story collection, The Northern Line, is available on Amazon.

Holly Day's writing has recently appeared in Analog SF, The Hong Kong Review, and Appalachian Journal, and her hobbies include kicking and screaming at vending machines.

Mikal Wix is a queer writer from Miami. Their poems are found or forthcoming in Uncanny Magazine, North American Review, South Florida Poetry Journal, Berkeley Poetry Review,

Moss Puppy, Portland Review, Corvus Review, and elsewhere. They are Associate Poetry Editor of West Trade Review. All published work here: <https://linktr.ee/mikalwix>

Patrick Sweeney lives in New York City with his wife, Nora. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in numerous publications. Some stories are linked here: [linktr.ee/pdsnmo400](https://linktr.ee/pdsnmo400)

Susan Shea is a retired school psychologist who was raised in New York City and is now living in a forest in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. Since she has returned to writing poetry this year, her poems have been accepted in a few dozen publications, including Ekstasis, Across the Margin, Feminine Collective, Persimmon Tree Literary Magazine, Military Experience and the Arts, and the Avalon Literary Review.

Mary Paulson's writing has appeared in multiple journals most recently in VAINÉ Magazine, Cathexis Northwest Press, Fevers of the Mind, The Gyroscope Review, Ephemeral Elegies, Beyond Words Literary Magazine, Door Is a Jar, Ephemeral Elegies and the Disappointed Housewife. She has poems forthcoming in the Willowdown Books Anthology: Looking In, Looking Out and in the journals, Down in The Dirt and The Opiate. Her chapbook, Paint the Window Open was published in 2021 by Kelsay Press. She lives in Naples, Florida.

Daniel Speechly is the Academic Coordinator at a private language institute in Seoul, South Korea where he teaches reading and writing to young adults. In his free time, he runs NFEscapism.com, a nonfiction book review blog created to help others fall in love with some of his favorite books. His most recent publication appears in Panorama: Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature.

Jarek Jarvis is an emerging Hoosier writer, and current MFA candidate at Western Kentucky University. His poems have appeared in Washington Square Review, Ignatian Literary Magazine, and elsewhere.

Matthew McLachlan is a Scottish-American playwright born in Scotland, raised in Florida, and currently survives in New York City. He is a Dramatist Guild Member, a two-time ScreenCraft Stage Play Finalist, and Samuel French OOB Festival Finalist. His plays include: The Demand of Avarice, This God Damn House, Jack & Melissa, Orion, and The Place We Are Meant to Be, among others. His plays have been presented by Abingdon Theatre Company, Labyrinth Theater Company, The Chain Theatre, Nylon Fusion, The NOW Collective, The Farm Theater, The PIT, Thespis Theater Festival, and performed regionally in Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Wyoming, New Jersey, West Virginia, & Florida. Other credits include: Nominated for Best Writer of a Web-Series (ADULTish), The Roast of Michael Musto (Head-Writer), & his published works A Collection of One-Acts & Other Things You May or May Not Enjoy and full-length play Orion are available now at The Drama Bookshop and on Amazon.

Perry Genovesi works as a public librarian, serves his fellow workers in AFSCME District Council 47 and plays in the sandal-grunge band, Canid. You can read his published fiction in the Santa Monica Review, Gone Lawn, The Disappointed Housewife, and collected on [tiny.cc/PerryGenovesi](https://tiny.cc/PerryGenovesi). Philadelphia, that giant pothole dotted with roads, is where he calls home. Twitter: @unionlibrarian

John Kucera was educated at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in New Reader Magazine, The Sandy River Review, Connections Magazine and Friends Journal. He lives in Arizona, where he writes and teaches.

Sam Calhoun is a writer and photographer living in Elkmont, AL. The author of the chapbook “Follow This Creek” (Foothills Publishing), and a collaborative work “The Hemlock Poems” (Present Tense Media), part of the Conservation Through Art: Saving Alabama's Hemlock program and exhibit. His poems have appeared in Pregnant Moon Review, Westward Quarterly, Eratos, Boats Against the Current, and other journals. Follow him on Instagram @weatherman\_sam, or his website, [www.weathermansam.com](http://www.weathermansam.com).

Jennifer Fanning is a teacher and writer living in Seattle, Washington. She holds an M.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work is currently appearing or is forthcoming in 34 Orchard, Mania Magazine, and Flight of the Dragonfly. She is working on a chapbook about the body.

Cameron Smith is a new poet from Leicester, UK who has just begun his Creative Writing MA at Birmingham University.

Violet Piper is an essayist, poet, comedic writer, and journalism student from Brooklyn. Her work has been featured in Slate, Camping Magazine, Reductress, and others.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Stand, Santa Fe Literary Review, and Lost Pilots. Latest books, “Between Two Fires”, “Covert” and “Memory Outside The Head” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the Seventh Quarry, La Presa and California Quarterly.

Carol Raitt is a Seattle writer and retired environmental educator. She has written about the Maasai in Africa, cockroaches in Costa Rica, and geology in Alaska. Her essay about sea stars is forthcoming in The North Coast Squid, an anthology about people and wildlife on the north Oregon coast.

Paul O. Jenkins lives in New Hampshire and increasingly in the past. His work has appeared in journals such as Straylight, Avalon Literary Review, Blue Unicorn, The Field Guide, Nebo, and the Northern New England Review.

Lissa Staples is a classical singer who found writing a little later in life. Writing is a lot like singing and both bring her great joy. She has been a student at The Writers Studio since 2014 and recently won Synkroniciti's short story contest with her piece, The Month of Drowning which was published September '23. Her work can be read at The Stickman Review, Quibble, The Write Launch and East by Northeast among others.

Lilit Grigoryan is an LA based writer from Armenia, thinking about idiosyncrasies that make us human and the funny ways we exist. They write dark comedy and magic realism as flash fiction, poetry and screenplays.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. His first poetry collection from Cajun Mutt Press is now available at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C6W2YZDP> . [fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry](http://fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry) contains links to his published poetry online.

Gabrielle McGhee is a writer in Florida sharing her experiences in nature on her blog Naturally Intriguing and has more recently been exploring her creative side with short fiction pieces as well as contemplative essays. She is working on her first fiction novel, and was previously published in her local newspaper, Clay Today, writing about the plight of the endangered gopher tortoise.

Hilary Ayshford is a former science journalist and editor based in rural Kent in the UK. She writes mainly micro and flash fiction and short stories and has a penchant for the darker side of human nature.

Rachael Severino is a fiction writer from New York. She received her undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College and is completing her master's at Columbia University. She placed Proxime Accessit in Oxford University's Wadham College's Rex Warner competition.

John RC Potter is an international educator and gay man from Canada, living in Istanbul. He has experienced a revolution (Indonesia), air strikes (Israel), earthquakes (Turkey), boredom (UAE), and blinding snow blizzards (Canada), the last being the subject of his story, "Snowbound in the House of God" (Memoirist, May 2023). His poems and stories have been published in a range of magazines and journals, most recently in Blank Spaces, ("In Search of Alice Munro", June 2023), Literary Yard ("She Got What She Deserved", June 2023) & Freedom Fiction ("The Mystery of the Dead-as-a-Doornail Author", July 2023). It was recently announced that "She Got What She Deserved" has been recognised as one of the Top 100 Projects in the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Launch Pad Prose Competition. [John RC Potter – Author Website \(author-blog.org\)](http://author-blog.org)

Jim Genia—a proud Dakota Sioux—mostly writes nonfiction about cage fighting, but occasionally takes a break from the hurt and pain to write fiction about hurt and pain. He has an MFA in creative writing from the New School, and his short fiction dealing with Indigenous themes has appeared or is forthcoming in the Zodiac Review, Electric Spec, Sage Cigarettes Magazine, ANMLY, the Indiana Review and the Baltimore Review. Follow him on Twitter @jim\_genia.

Bradon Matthews is a writer based in Philadelphia with a bachelor's in philosophy. He likes listening to post-punk and feeding pigeons. His work has previously appeared in Soundings East, TERSE., and River River. You can find him on Twitter at @bradongmatt.

Srihith Jarabana is a sixteen-year-old poet and writer hailing from Oakville, Ontario. He likes boxing and board games.

Brian Christopher Giddens (he/him) is a writer of fiction and poetry. Brian's writing has been featured or is pending in Raven's Perch, Litro Magazine, Silver Rose, On the Run Fiction, Glass Gates Collective, Roi Faineant, Flash Fiction Magazine, Hyacinth Review, and Evening Street Review. Brian is a native of Seattle, Washington, where he lives with his husband, and Jasper the dog. Brian can be contacted at [BrianChristopherGiddens@outlook.com](mailto:BrianChristopherGiddens@outlook.com), and his photo haikus can be found on Instagram @giddens394.

Ash Kingery is an author from Phoenix, Arizona who loves writing whatever strikes her fancy, especially speculative fiction. She likes making comics, video games, and lying on the pavement to become a human scrambled egg. She has a [website](#), in the loosest sense of the word.

Thomas Van Street teaches university courses on crime, deviance, and social theory. He lives in southeastern Ohio with his wife and a retriever.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). Recent/upcoming appearances in Wishbone Words, SurVision, and Down in the Dirt, among others.

Jimmy Boom Semtex is into many things. Writing is one and includes poetry, prose and stories. Erotica like his Fire Extinguisher Man series, poetry on current world events, horror stories etc. Jimmy loves tattoos, listening to alternative music, drinking beer and living a simple fulfilling life. Check his blogs out. His writing career is diverse and so are the authors/poets/writers he's collaborated with. Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet and playwright from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @benmacnair

Robert Bires writes in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He has published most recently in Sky Island Journal, The Centrifictionist, Ritualwell, Pegasus, Third Wednesday, and JAKE.

Giancarlo Riccobon (he/him) is a freelance features writer for Looper and a teaching assistant for the Polyphony Lit workshop How to Be a Literary Editor. In 2019, he was selected for the annual editorial internship at Brink Literacy Project. His writing has been published by Star 82 Review and Atlas and Alice.

Debasish Mishra is a Senior Research Fellow at National Institute of Science Education and Research, India. He is the recipient of the 2017 Reuel International Best Upcoming Poet Prize and the 2019 Bharat Award for Literature. He was also nominated for the 2022 Rhysling Award. His recent work in speculative writing has appeared in Space and Time Magazine, Penumbra, Par(AB)normal, Enchanted Conversation, Utopia Science Fiction, Liquid Imagination, California Quarterly, Amsterdam Quarterly, The Big Windows Review, York Literary Review, Arkana, and elsewhere. His first book Lost in Obscurity and Other Stories was recently published by Book Street Publications, India.