

# CORVUS REVIEW



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## ARTIST'S BIO/STATEMENT

JEREMY SZUDER (he/him) lives in a tiny apartment with his wife, two children, and two cats. He works in the evenings in a very busy restaurant, standing behind a stove, a grill, fryers, and heating lamps, happily listening to hours of hand-selected music and conjuring ideas for new art and poetry in his head. When his working day ends and he enters his home in the wee hours, he likes to sit down with a glass of wine and record all the various words and images that bear fruit within his mind. Jeremy Szuder only sets the cage doors free when the work begins to pile up too high. In this life, Szuder makes no illusions of being a professional artist in any way, shape, or form.

<https://jeremyszuder.wordpress.com/>

“To best appease my satiation for making art  
I have come to rely on the format of the age-old tradition  
of portraiture. The portrait has been steadfast in relaying  
the visual information that I find intoxicating and brutally  
honest in its placement. In many cases, with repetition and  
gradual ease of reflex, I have come to the realization  
that it is the portrait that celebrates the existence of mankind  
and it is the portrait that signifies a deeper understanding  
of the spirit that internalizes and at the same time enshrouds  
all of us every single day.”

## EDITOR

JANINE MERCER hails from Newfoundland, Canada, and has been proudly publishing fellow Magpies since 2014. They currently reside in Milwaukee, WI with their wife and a collection of moderately creepy taxidermy. Check out their other passion project, The ODDentity Podcast for a bi-weekly foray into the weird, wonky, and sometimes downright spooky. Available wherever you binge your podcasts.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-oddentity-podcast/id1229525500>

## DEDICATION

John Bramwell Mercer  
(1935-2021)

Thank you for your warm smile, unconditional love, and constant words of encouragement. You will be sorely missed.

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Heaven Sent  
Joe A. Oppenheimer

### **THE HOST**

The Great God Random  
smiles shakes the dice  
spins the wheel  
takes the deck to deal

eyes the probable  
none being nice  
grins stops the lotteries  
sends his latest offspring

to host havoc  
using a mechanism  
of convivial hugs  
and even celebrations

of him to generate random  
infections via inhalations.

### **THE ORDER OF THINGS**

At night before retiring  
she folds slacks just so  
maintaining a proper  
order to things

ever since she learned  
her birthday was shared  
with her grandmother  
who showered in Auschwitz.

*We do what we can, these  
days, they must have thought  
while hiding in cellars or  
holding at home*

in ghettos awaiting  
The Great God Random  
to select his next prey.

Then things got so lucky,  
so rosy, we forgot  
to worship his razor wit,  
and he felt it time to

grab our attention  
and now we huddle  
hiding alone.

### **THE NIGHTMARE**

Nights come sunrises go  
weeks creep by on the soft  
toe of feline predators

dying, while at night I dream  
of meeting a friend  
or stranger, sharing  
an exchange or laugh  
“I’m from Austin and you?”  
she says; my young daughter  
who is with me says, “Me too.”

But while I dream, she sleeps in Gotham  
with her wife who by day tends  
the dying in crowded hospital wards  
and slowly absorbs their poison.

### **THE SABBATH**

Even the doctor gets a Sabbath  
not every week, but someday  
and when it comes she drinks deep  
of its nectar sublime and sweet

sharing some with her wife  
then a dinner, a night,  
a morning left to lounge  
for her to know there is life

beyond death, breath  
beyond ventilators,  
people behind masks,  
hands that feel without gloves,

but Monday ends miracles and  
chaos reenters her brain

**REVISITATIONS**

The doctor rushes to the ward but  
the dying's cough and gasp for air  
does not wait for the doctor to be there.  
Random laughs, plays on, picks up

another deck stacks his chips, places  
his bet looks at his endless stock  
of varied virus, each a fine  
disruptor, a royal card.

The doctor watches her colleague  
die, takes it in with barely a sigh  
rushes to tend another bed, another  
gurney, another dead, the gash of pain

burns, brands her brain, promises  
only chaos when this trip ends.

**Special Feature:**

Evidence of Things Not Seen

Phoebe Reeves

When she was four, she dreamed she was on a train in the dark, rushing away from the twinkling lights of a city in the distance. Beyond were tall mountains, darker than the vast black sky above them. She woke up terrified that she was alone and everyone she loved was dead.

She grew up and married. Alone, she followed her husband from failure to failure until her daughter was born and he carried the nightgown-clad baby out into a cold night and held her up to the sky while he pontificated drunk on the balcony.

Not alone now, she carried her daughter away from that freezing balcony under the burning stars and made her the center of her universe. When her daughter was afraid of the dark, she stuck glow-in-the-dark stars across her ceiling. They named them together and waved at each one, saying “Good night, don't worry, I'm always right here with you.”

She loved her daughter more than to all the stars and back but knew she would soon grow up and go away to live her own life. Not wanting to be alone on that train rushing away from the twinkling lights, she married again. This husband had abandoned his children to a neighbor long before their union but was so charming. “You're afraid that I'll leave you, but you'll have to be the one who leaves me,” he whispered one night as they gazed at the stars. When he discovered how much she loved her daughter, he tried to carry that love away with him by sending her daughter love letters and warning her that her mother was mentally ill. But she and her mother had the stars.

When her daughter grew up, she told her about the train. Her daughter painted her a picture of five frogs diving and swimming in a bathtub on a turbulent dark blue ocean against a darkening green, blue, and black sky and mounted it on the ceiling above her mother's bed.

\*\*\*

The emissaries arrived as the plague rollercoasters around and around the earth.

Why were they here? What did they want? What would they do to the lives on this planet? President King, educated purely by TV, announced he'd seen the Twilight Zone episode “A Small Talent for War” and thus could prove to the emissaries that humans excel at might and purpose.

As the emissaries remained ultimately unknowable, the world's shadow figures flooded social media with misinformation and filtered images of the emissaries to entice civilians to translate the emissaries' motives. Fire, floods, plague, and war had devastated the natural world. No matter—the Internet, perhaps because it didn't take mortal form, had long since become the world. The emissaries entered the Internet and the Dark Web. Upon exiting, they built giant screens across every continent. President King and other world leaders cheered for this strange technology, even as they hid their weapons within reach.

The emissaries flashed through seemingly endless images and words, stopped at a 1962 experiment. A group of scientists reasoned that musth in elephants makes them dangerous, hard to care for, and therefore hard to conserve the species so they injected 297 milligrams of LSD into a 14 earth years old elephant to see if they could instigate and control musth.

The elephant, the jewel of the Oklahoma City Zoo, was named Tusko, a generic elephant in captivity name, like Rex for a pet dog.

Over 30 times the dose for a three-ton person, the hallucinogen caused Tusko to trumpet, fall over, shudder, and have diarrhea uncontrollably. His pupils dilated, he went rigid, bit his tongue, struggled to breathe. The scientists then dosed him with Promazine, followed by Pentobarbital. One earth hour and 40 minutes later, Tusko died.

The emissaries wanted Tusko back.

President King shouted, "It's dead now, how on earth could we bring it back? I'm sure you understand it would've been unethical and risky to experiment on our fellow humans."

The emissaries responded by stopping the Web on an image of Topsy the elephant who was sentenced to death by hanging, then instead by poisoning, strangulation, and electrocution, for killing a man after lengthy abuse with an elephant goad and being force-fed lit cigarettes by her intoxicated handler. She was fed poisoned carrots while a rope was tightened around her neck, and then electrocuted through conductive copper sandals. She died ten earth seconds later.

President King addressed the crowds lining the roads under the giant screens, "These things come to our great planet just to complain about elephants?" The crowd roared.

The emissaries spun through more images, stopped on a page detailing the CIA's MK Ultra program who'd since 1953 experimented with the same hallucinogen later given to Tusko to control brain warfare. Promising time alone in the prison yard to a prisoner in exchange for experimentation, they recorded him describing hours of feeling violent, seeing blood leaking from the walls, men turning to skeletons, a surveillance camera changing into the head of a dog.

President King laughed. "And cry about torturing bad hombres who murder innocent people?"

The emissaries resumed flashing through images of mass murders at schools, theaters, concerts. They halted on a slaughter outside a superstore.

Furious at not being addressed directly, President King immediately arranged a photo op where he stood beside a man holding an infant whose dead parents had shielded their baby with their bodies as the superstore shooter murdered them. Clench-jawed, President King grinned posing beside the orphaned baby, giving a thumbs up to the emissaries while the baby's uncle smiled adoringly at him.

The emissaries flashed through images of violence and destruction 24/7, halting frequently on the torture of animals. People everywhere stopped, in front of the screens, staring, shaking.

President King, who loved TV's Let's Make A Deal with its mysterious doors, ordered his and other countries' teams to build doors across the world. He promised the emissaries he'd replace their lost citizens with Earth's greatest animals and humans. World leaders rounded up every captive animal, drafted every human being who'd ever experienced mental illness, ever taken anxiety medication, had a bad dream. President King lied bigly, promising those animals and people that for their service, the emissaries would grant them each one wish.

\*\*\*

Before the soldiers came, she forced her daughter to go hide somewhere she couldn't be found. As the troops seized her, she pulled open a kitchen drawer and grabbed a water filtering cup, and instinctively, the glow-in-the-dark stars that used to be on her daughter's bedroom ceiling. She scabbled around for a rope charm made by her daughter as a child. This rope of charms had protected her through two car accidents caused by her angry second husband: a string of colored alphabet beads dangling a plastic square stitched with fat red yarn and an orange foam owl with a circle of gold glitter around one eye. *When yu R @ the end of your roop, I will be at the oother end to pull you up her*

daughter had scrawled on the card covered with gold star stickers. She threw the drawer on the floor.  
*Where is it?*

Gone.

She ran into the bedroom and grabbed the frogs in a bathtub painting from the ceiling.

She hugged the painting as SWAT forced people into lines before the different doors. Outside the barbed fencing along the road under the screens, President King's supporters screamed and spat on those in the lines. The giant screens flashed, stopped, flashed, stopped on the Tuskegee experiment. Below the emissaries' current transmission, a truck trailing flapping flags raced along. A turkey fluttered out of the bushes and attempted to get her chicks safely across the road and past the screens. The truck's driver hit the mother turkey so hard she burst into bloody chunks, her chicks pinwheeling in every direction like dandelion seed puffs. The cheering driver revved his engine. The line jerked forward as people shoved, punched, yelled, and held up their phones to live stream the incident.

The door opened. Sentries shoved her through. She tried to remember to wish but couldn't stop thinking about the alphabet string, the square, the owl. *I lost our rope—I can't find her again without it!* Instinctively she held up her painting of the frogs playing in the bathtub to face the emissaries.

\*\*\*

She stood in a marsh with hummocks surrounded by walls of dense jungle vegetation. All around her she heard human voices making sounds, not language. She called to the voices. Something exploded right next to her, spraying her with blood. She heard the voices scream with rage. Blinded, she stumbled away from the pursuing voices. Another blast. She fell. As their blinding lights came towards her, something dragged her away at top speed.

Light dimmed to dark. Dark brightened to light. Days or minutes later, her eyes opened. A rat wearing a harness peered at her. Thin, dehydrated, it limped past, sniffing the tiniest piece of jungle floor before collapsing. Finding her filter cup, she strained potable water for the rat. It drank and drank then returned to its task of smelling the ground. It stopped, moved, stopped, moved, each time waiting for her to follow exactly behind it. After hours of moving only inches, she realized the rat was searching for bombs.

The initial mines were from ancient wars: rusted metal disks bearing buttons, pull tabs, even miniature labyrinths. The rat sniffed out each device, then waited. *How do I defuse this* she thought frightened by hearing the voices just beyond the wall of jungle foliage. The rat waited patiently. She finally approached the disk and began trying things. The rat watched, approving or rejecting each of her attempts. She defused each violent metal circle, knowing success only when the rat began sniffing in a different direction again.

The garble of voices remained just on the other side of the brush. As she and the rat covered distance and time, the devices shrank to the size of Nanos. The rat was light enough not to trip the big devices, but the Nanos were dangerous even for the rat's mass and too small for her to diffuse. At one point, as the rat rested in the dark, a hand reached through the brush and placed a minuscule explosive. Realizing the voices had been doing this all along, she instinctively smothered it with the only other thing she carried: a glow-in-the-dark star. It worked. Each time a hand placed an explosive, she suffocated it with another star. The voices howled. As she pressed her last star over a nano bomb, all the toy stars shone brilliant rays all around them.

The voices roared through the brush. She cradled the rat, shielding him as she felt bullets pierce her body.

\*\*\*

The nightmare of jungle warfare went silent. The rat waved up at the dark sky now sparkling with countless stars and called out to each one. A giant disk floated, rocking down through the stars. Over its edges peered the blinking eyes of five hopping frogs who croaked to the rat. One end of a rope dropped in front of her. She tied it around the rat and tugged. As he was lifted through the swarm of bullets ricocheting harmlessly off the rocking disk, starlight shone on the rope's alphabet beads, fat red yarn embroidered plastic square and orange foam owl with one gold eye.

The rat greeted the frogs and disappeared below the bowl's edge.

The rope dropped again, hung in front of her. *When you're at the end of your rope.*

She couldn't bear to look up. *I can't go. I'm covered in blood.*

The disk tipped. The frogs hopped. Glittering water fell, cool, clean. Her skin shone in the starlight all around her. She raised her head and saw her daughter's face reflected in the light from all the stars in the sky.

What History Teaches  
Jack D. Harvey

Follow a variety of interests;  
take pleasure  
in what history presents.  
Actual government?  
No, but Rome in a ring  
with the other beasts.

Xerxes returning  
commends our times,  
commends the fierce grace  
of automobiles.

Time and chance afford  
us only one opportunity.  
Although the ages  
do not alter us,  
this is not the fault  
of old men.

An Apology for Celebrating the Death of the Mouse in Apartment 6 in 2011  
Mike Keller-Wilson

I see now that it was in poor taste to take a picture with your corpse, but—in fairness to us—you'd nearly stopped Jordan's heart when you ran across her hand and interrupted her nap. Besides, even in death, you must've laughed when that next mousetrap snapped and cut short our celebration, letting us know we had an infestation on our hands. Still, I'm sorry.

*What am I doing here? Apologizing to a long-dead mouse? Wallowing in my urban pest control complicity?*

Shitty college apartment or not, we had to stake our claim. So it was off to Target (open 24 hours) for more traps. We still had plenty of Cheerios for bait (best applied with a smear of peanut butter). We caught six of you in the next 24 hours. Does that horrify you? It horrified us. I'm not sure how close-knit the family/social groups of mice are, but I'll say this, by the end of it—when the traps stopped snapping—we never quite stopped listening for the next one.

*Still, going on about this mouse? Jesus fuck. Tried watching the news lately? Maybe taken a moment to feel sorry for the actively suffering masses, the Covid wards, victims of police violence, kids in cages? Maybe get up off your ass and help out. I dare you. Expend one-tenth of the effort you do for your online Panera order and maybe we'll find the solution to a single fucking humanitarian disaster. Maybe the quick fix will be waiting for us in the H through K cubby of the rapid-pick-up shelves.*

*Ahhhhhhhhh!*

It was in the long silence that I finally thought about what we'd done to you. Not in that panicked way where possibilities spin through your mind and all you can imagine is grasping paws tangled in your hair or tiny teeth bloodying your skin. No, I thought about the metal bar, your bulging face and fractured skull, a quick death.

*Okay. I think I just needed to get that one off my chest. Haha. Just gotta vent sometimes. Do you know how it goes being trapped in this capitalist hellscape? Sorry. Sorry. Not helpful.*

We didn't mourn you for long, sorry to say. Though I'm not sure you'd care. It's not like I think you're out there listening. That would imply an afterlife, not to mention an awful lot of sentience and self-awareness for someone who died for a Cheerio. Still, when it's my turn to molder in the ground, it'd be nice if someone said they're sorry. Even if they weren't. Even if I was past hearing.

*What I mean to say is \*deep breath\* we can make things better. Can't we? Maybe not for you, dead mouse from 2011, but for those of us who've still got a bit of time. Things get better, don't they? Mouse...? Are you there?*

Cowgirl  
Mike Lee

Charlotte had learned not to live in a silent passage, yet there were waypoints in her life that she left unexplored. Such a one was the darkened hallway Charlotte felt her way around until she found the light switch next to the bedroom door jamb.

Her mother had always kept the curtains closed, even in summer. When they talked, darkness was what she and her sister Emily remembered the most about their mom. Emily opined she made chronic depression a lifestyle choice, though Charlotte disagreed. Deeply in love with her husband who took care of her, but sometimes was diffident with her daughters, Mom chose books and learning.

She never went above associate but made a name editing anthologies.

Upon entering the room, Charlotte sneezed. The place was left as it was when Emily took her to where their mother spent her final weeks.

Charlotte hesitated before venturing further. She turned on the bathroom light. She slid open the shelf below the mirror and discovered Mom kept Dad's shaving kit. He died eight years ago.

His headaches began when he retired as a draftsman at the Land Office. Dad had looked forward to riding his bicycle around the Hill Country and traveling around in an RV.

He went to his doctor, who scheduled an MRI and discovered an aneurysm. Emily was summoned to drive him to the hospital. While waiting for a room to open, Dad went into a seizure and left his body, his hand grasping Emily's so tight she had to have a nurse pry his fingers apart.

He built a darkroom in the garage and took family portraits when Charlotte and her sister were babies.

They sold the cameras and equipment online and at a camera shop, Dad frequented. Charlotte gifted herself the bicycle, a gold Raleigh.

She opened the closet filled with musty dresses and suits, some untouched for years. Above was her collection of shoes, all still in their boxes, and most unopened since she retired.

Charlotte brushed her fingers against the cardboard and looked at her dusty fingertips, thinking about how fashionable Mom was.

On the floor were a row of accordion files. Charlotte pulled them out, lining them up on the bed.

Behind them, Charlotte discovered Christmas gifts. One was for her sister, the other for herself. The tags were browned, likely forgotten decades ago.

She placed them on the bed. She opened hers. It was a green tartan skirt. She guessed 1981. Curious, she opened Emily's. It was a black cashmere sweater with ivory buttons. Charlotte was angry, recalling she wanted a cashmere sweater.

Mom sometimes confused her daughters' needs. The holidays were an example. November was grading and filing grades. Then it was rushing around decorating, visiting friends, neighborhood caroling with the church, ending with a big burst of shopping.

Maybe that was why.

She put the sweater in its box and stood in front of the bed holding the skirt against her waist in front of the full-length mirror framed next to the bedroom door. It's too late now, Charlotte thought, but she would get a good deal in trade at Buffalo Exchange.

It took two trips to get the files and forgotten presents in the car. Later, Charlotte gave the sweater to her sister, and they cried together.

The next morning was warm for winter. The frost had melted, glistening drops under the sun. Charlotte put on her sweats and went jogging, taking the trail that ran along the oil and gas pipelines buried underground before turning to jog around the blocks in the subdivision where she lived.

After passing the roundabout, Charlotte turned the corner to her street. Ahead of her was a little girl on her scooter, riding on the slight downward slope. Charlotte moved to her left to avoid her, but the little girl noticed, stopped, and stepped up to the sidewalk.

"Hi, I'm sorry I was in your way," the girl said. "I should not have been on the street."

Charlotte stopped. "Oh, that's okay. But thank you."

She was fascinated by the little girl's forthright intelligence. She looked perhaps eight, and her clothing was anachronistic. She was dressed in western wear: a cotton button-down shirt with elaborate colorful stitching and a matching brown leather vest and skirt. She also had hand-tooled cowboy boots, singular and expensive.

"You look so amazing," Charlotte said.

"Thank you," the girl said. "My grandmother gives me lots of clothes. She is quite kind to me."

"I see that. I love your outfit."

"I even have my cowgirl hat," She took it off the handlebar and placed it on her head, smiling proudly as she pulled the lanyard up to her neck.

"Wow, that's so nice," said Charlotte. "I had one when I was your age. But yours is so well-made."

"Thank you, ma'am. Everyone is so nice to me." The way she said it took Charlotte aback. So well-spoken. Perhaps homeschooled.

"It was so nice to meet you," said the girl. She held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you. My name is Anne."

Charlotte took her hand, which was warm. "The pleasure is mine. I'm Charlotte."

Anne turned the scooter. With a smile, she waved. "I must be going. It is time for me to return home. Good-bye Charlotte. It was a pleasure chatting."

"Likewise. Good-bye," said Charlotte, thinking what a very old soul that child has.

Charlotte began jogging. After a few steps, she stopped and turned.

Anne was gone, having already made the incline and turned the corner. She was awfully quick for her size, she thought.

She pondered. It was strange as to how the girl was dressed. She could have been from the 1940s or 50s--definitely from that time. That's how the kids played dress-up. No expense spared in costuming. Little people, instead of children.

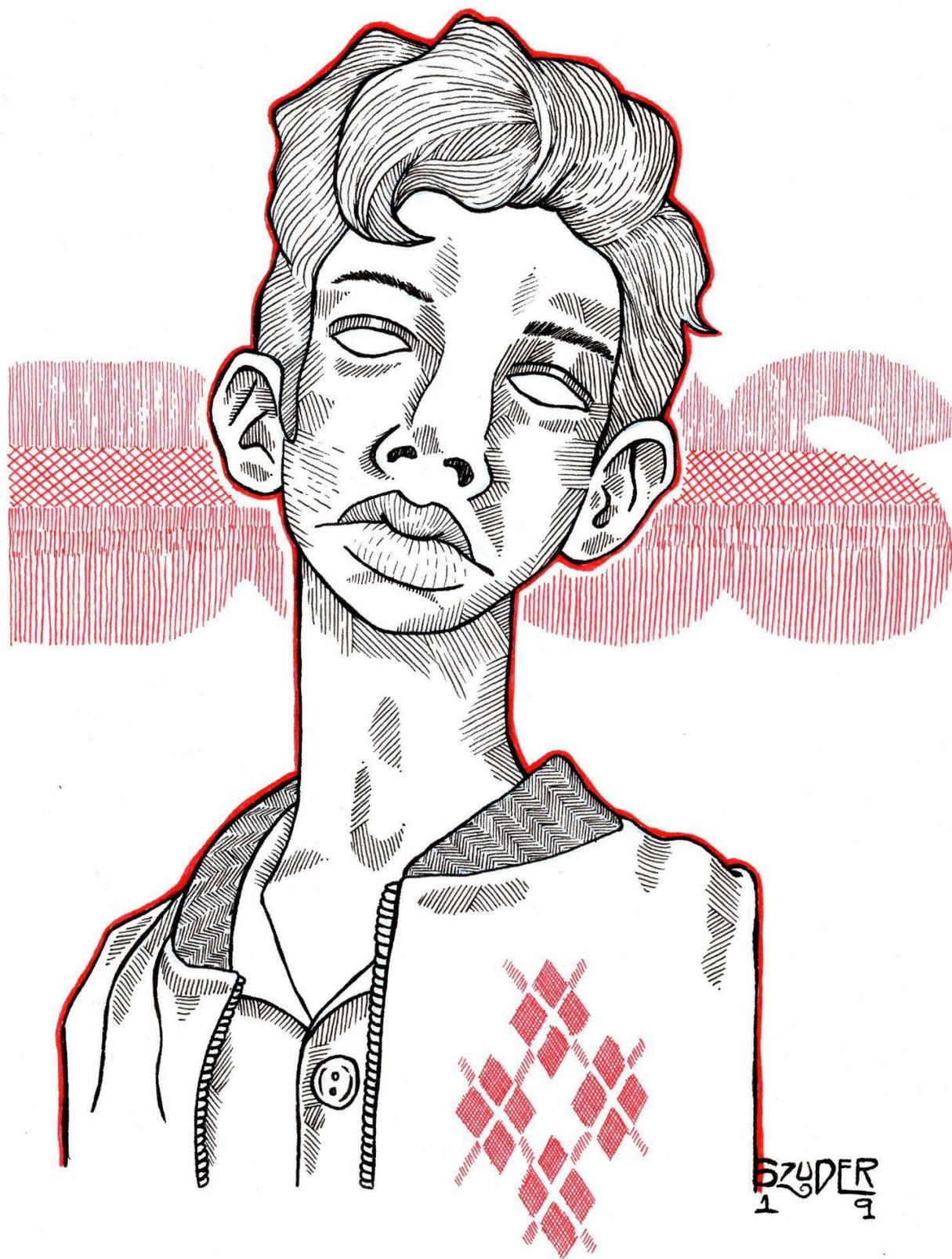
And how she spoke, so mature for her age

Then it hit.

*Anne.*

Charlotte raised her hand and slowly waved, fingers curling.

“Goodbye, Anne,” she whispered.



SZUDER  
1 9

A Web of Superstition  
Priya Chouhan

Survival in a bogus world has been arduous,  
eyes closed, every part of it seems unconscious.

A web of superstition brushed my forehead,  
delusion was the food the spiders were fed.

Actuality flew far away from them,  
false belief was worn like a shining gem.

Heads floating under the water of untruth,  
pitch dark time, swimming with the shrewd.

The gravel of fakeness scrunched beneath  
my feet,  
tore this web, dead was my insight once.

Spirit all lifted, active became my rationalism,  
spiders will suffocate, the web will surely perish.

A web ..... were fed!

The Cooper's Art  
Robert Nisbet

Barman and dreamer, starting his shift.  
Tuesday lunchtimes are slow-ish as a rule.  
He's put a barrel in, admires once again  
the graceful curves, the strong black hoops,  
that little marvel of the cooper's art.

He falls to musing, about hoops and rings,  
the hoopla stall in the boyhood fairground,  
his plastic hoop and its elegant arc,  
it's winning him a box of Dairy Milk.  
The hula-hooping contest, won by Tracy,  
a fresh eighteen, her circling hoop a blur,  
and she such sinuousness, such beauty.

Five minutes yet to opening, wipes taps,  
thinks dreamily of harnesses and hoops,  
of safe, securing things, of the power  
and the sweetness they contain. And Tracy,  
how finally he jibbed, fearing too much  
the clasping of the wedding, ring.

Overgrowth  
Slaidey Valheim

There was a woman down my road with a garden, not a house. I've seen old pictures of the lot with a brick two-story standing on a barren dead-grass lawn, but the one I've always known, there's been vines so thick it's hard to tell there's a building underneath. When I watched the woman *go inside* there was no door, she simply walked into the leaves until she was gone.

Neighbors complained but there was nothing they could do. I heard the woman plea with people that there was nothing she could do, either; Things grew around her and she couldn't make them stop.

I thought she had a beautiful curse. Its blessing was life and its inconvenience was the irritation of municipal side-walk trimmers that need to curb its overgrowth before it flowed into the streets.

As a child I high-fived wayward stems peaking over her fence as I walked home from school. In my mind, I pictured the property as wild— like a jungle— but there was never anything exciting or exotic to see aside from rampant plants and their keeper.

I always used to wave at her when she was out whispering to the flowers. Used to.

I snuck onto the property once and huddled behind a bush in hopes of hearing her magic words. I was desperate to know what her secret was and whether I could harness it myself for a science project.

I thought on the occasions she waved back to me, the glint in her eye was from joy. I was wrong.

I sat in that thicket, stiff with fear for three hours while I listened to her, begging the plants to die. The tears in her eyes were of misunderstanding and futility. A single branch in the bush I was hiding in curled and wilted as she chanted, then unfurled with twice as many thorns once she'd conceded and went back *inside*. I watered her garden with my urine and ran home as fast as I could.

I grew scared of the woman and her vine nest. I adopted walking around the block to make sure I never passed them again.

I miss the days when it was just one house, one lot, one woman.

They say she waded into the tangled construct in which she lived and never came out. As I now vigilantly fight foliage from creeping in my windows and knocking down the doors, I can't imagine her vanishing so peacefully.

It was only a matter of time until the community maintenance workers couldn't keep up.

Some neighbors got fed up and left, sick of pulling weeds from their doorstep every morning. Some stopped caring to keep their property in check— those are the neighbors I haven't heard from in months. The plants must have got them like they're trying to get me.

I spend my days cutting killer hedges and my nights dreaming of people drained by roots. I haven't dared enter the other houses— those of my mysteriously absent neighbors— but somehow, I dream of what they've become. I fear what I will become.

The roots creep from the corners of the room, under the bed, from the pillow you're laying your head on, and go for your throat. They strangle out any words you could use to banish them; keep them away and stunted. Plants need nourishment after all; our silence and our bodies are more than enough.

I hardly notice now, the mutterings constantly falling from my lips. "You are not pretty. You are not natural. You should wilt, wilt, wilt, and die."

I wouldn't be surprised if I talk these things in my sleep, but I don't take any chances. Every night I play a tape on repeat. It's a recording I made of all the chants I can remember the woman saying while I hid in that bush, a lullaby to keep me safe at night:

"I will your soil infertile. I will your existence from green to brown. I will pluck every new bud with eager fingers until you find this battle as fruitless as I do."

I realize how naive I'd been. Curses are not beautiful, and gardens are not homes. I plan to prune my way down the old road that's now the wild violent jungle of my childhood imaginations.

I will find that woman's bones and I will help her as I should have as a child: stop the garden growing before it buries all of us in it.

Missed Calls  
Holly Day

The squirrels are tapping messages to me over the telephone lines  
bouncing outside my window and twitching their tails in time  
to some version of Morse code or semaphore that I'm supposed to know  
but I don't because I don't even know the human version of those two things.  
The squirrels seem quite determined that I will somehow get their message  
I will eventually understand them.

When I call my mother up to tell her about it, I can hear the clicking and buzzing  
on the line from their tiny feet interrupting my call, my mom says,  
*This connection is really bad. Maybe you should switch to another phone.*  
I try to tell her it's the squirrels screwing with the line, and she shouts something about  
*swirls or girls or I can't understand you—can you call me back on another phone?*

I hang up the phone and there are crows on the line outside, rubbing their beaks  
against the insulated black line like there's something stuck to their faces  
but I know they're doing something to the line itself,  
maybe taking off some of the insulation, making it easier  
to tap insistent messages of clicks and purrs  
into more of my important phone conversations, perhaps punctuated by  
a shower of sparks, a sudden burst of strategic static  
timed perfectly to obliterate my calls to the phone company.

Last Gift  
Terry Riccardi

He was an excellent bowler; I was borderline awful. But I need not have worried. He smiled as he explained: "Your low average means we don't have to give away too many pins as a handicap. That helps the team." Once a week, he patiently gave me pointers, and I progressed from lousy to mediocre, and finally to average.

We became friends. One night after bowling, he asked me out for a drink. We talked for hours. The next week, it was drinks and dinner. Leisurely meals and long talks soon became a welcome way to end our work week.

I, a commitment-free divorcee, surprised myself by how much I looked forward to his company for dinner. As we shared our lives, I wondered how this kind, generous fellow had not been snapped up by some lucky woman years ago. He was so caring, so attentive, steadfast, and supportive. I'd never thought to meet a man at this stage of life for whom I would give up my freedom, but here he was. Yet, after all those years he'd spent as a carefree single, would he want to commit to me for the rest of his life?

Once I realized that I wanted more than a Friday night friendship, I waited for him to indicate he felt the same way. But as the months went by, he always stopped short of taking our relationship further. My frustration grew as I waited for him to wake up and smell the roses.

Then suddenly one night, he gave me a quick peck on the cheek and hustled off to his car before I could even react. I drove home confused.

At dinner the next week, he acted as if he hadn't kissed me the Friday before. Puzzled and annoyed, I decided that if he didn't make a significant move before the evening was over, I was giving up and moving on. All evening, whenever he said anything, I gave monosyllabic answers and kept looking around the pub at the other customers.

He must have finally sensed my mood, for he suddenly cocked his head and said, "I care about you."

Floating on a cushion of shocked joy, I looked at him and heard myself say "Is this a good time to tell you I think you have kissable lips?"

We leaned toward each other. One kiss was all it took.

My husband and I were not youngsters when we met. He had already had one heart attack. He proposed on my birthday, saying, "I don't know how many years I have left, but as long as I'm here, I am yours."

He gave of himself completely. His love was total, something I had not known in my first marriage. Though we would never raise a family or celebrate a golden wedding anniversary, it was the happiest time of my life.

A year has passed since an autoimmune disorder took my husband's breath and then his life away. I donated his clothes and cleared out the medications and other personal effects, saving only the black work jacket he wore the night we first kissed. It hung in my closet and I looked at it for months, each time remembering how safe and loved I felt in those jacketed arms. Finally, I took it off the hanger and wrapped myself in it. But his scent was long gone; his arms did not enfold me; I was alone.

Dejected, I reached for the hanger to put the jacket back. Then I spotted it on the shelf above-- the gift he had bought me in preparation for the Christmas he never saw.

Perhaps it is foolish not to open it or give it away. But when I look at it, a home movie unfolds in my head. He is in his jacket, in his prime, looking lost before an array of women's toiletries. He spots a clerk, asks for help, and quickly buys whatever toiletry is recommended. Then he comes home, sneaks downstairs, and gets out some gift paper. He wraps his purchase as best he can; his bowling skills avail him little at this job he only tackles for my gifts.

In that package wrapped with such clumsiness and love, I still have a bit of him left. So it remains, one of the last things he touched, in its silver paper, at the back of my closet. Maybe next Christmas I will open it. Not this year, though.

Confused  
Walter Lacey

Waiting always annoys me. Maybe it's because I was the youngest of seven and the only boy, which is why my name Adi seems unusual to me. It means "the first" but I'm certain my parents gave it to me as a consolation for being the last.

I live in a small city now and, just like when I was younger, I'm surrounded by lots of people, movement, and change. It all keeps me from being buried in an avalanche of thoughts about myself.

At the moment, I'm sitting on one of the chairs made available for people waiting at the front of a large store I visit once a week. Kids also wait here for their parents to checkout. Others wait for a taxi or a bus, especially when it's snowing like it is today. I'm waiting for something to pop into my head that's just not getting there.

I eventually get tired of waiting, so I leave the store. Outside, for some strange reason, probably having to do with my childhood, I decide to walk through the parking lot, sloshing my way through the wet snow that's just fallen. I make my way down an L-shaped shopping plaza to a small line of stores that form the bottom part of the L.

As I'm enjoying my walk through the snow, I notice a woman leaning against the back of a parked SUV. Our eyes meet, she smiles and starts walking toward me with some purpose. I sense that she wants to ask me for something, just when a firetruck racing to an emergency starts blasting its horn as it barrels down the street next to the parking lot.

The woman has almost reached me. Her mouth looks like it's moving in slow motion as the firetruck's siren whines and its horn continues to blast over and over. She asks if she can borrow something. It sounds like she wants a SIM card. I look at her with suspicion, thinking she can't be up to anything good and shake my head "no" without slowing down.

As I reach the corner in the L-shaped plaza, it looks like the stores on the long end have inexplicably switched to my other side. Confused, I turn around a couple of times and start walking back up the same section that I just walked down. I head to a large grocery store that I'm positive has something I need. Its name suggests abundance and fulfillment: *The Market Basket*.

After entering the store, I immediately walk up to Mrs. Calamo, the lady at the service desk.

"Going to let the Universe decide for you today?" she asks with a smile.

My predictability and her familiarity with it startles me. I let out:

"Oh sure, more randomization is just what I need! I go out in search of food once a week for my family's survival. As if hunting for it isn't hard enough, I have to deal with a target that's constantly moving for some bogus reason. One week it's here, and the next week it's somewhere else, tempting me to buy something that I don't need." I slap a five-dollar bill on the counter.

"Fine then! Give me five Quick Picks for Megabucks."

Mrs. Calamo stares at me blankly as if she doesn't understand what I'm saying or is waiting for me to say something else. I have nothing left to say, so I stare back at her. She finally takes my money and prints out a lottery ticket. When she comes back, she calmly gives me the ticket along with some advice:

"I think you should take the list out of your pocket. Start with canned foods. Work your way down the list, and finish with produce and dairy. Then, checkout. Here are your numbers. Good luck."

With a deep breath and a newfound sense of calm, I take my lottery ticket and find my grocery list.

"Thank you."

I like Mrs. Calamo. She's reminded me of my purpose again and got me back on track.

After I checkout, I leave the store, passing everyone waiting for parents, taxis, or buses. Outside, I've forgotten where I parked my car and find myself pushing a carriage full of my belongings with no clear understanding as to where I should go. Desperately searching for the place I belong, I finally find my car, but my relief is short-lived.

"So, you don't have a phone I can borrow for a couple of minutes?"

I look up. The SIM card lady is looking at me.

"I have a phone, but you asked me for a SIM card."

"SIM card? I don't want a SIM card. I asked you if you had a cell phone, you know...M O E B I L phone?"

As I squint at her, I'm thinking she said "mobile" a little too slowly for my liking. I hand her my phone anyway just to end this annoying exchange. It barely has any power left, so she won't be able to talk very long.

"Thanks. It'll just be a minute."

She enters a number and begins to talk.

"Maurice? It's Divita. I forgot my list. I can't remember everything we wanted for tomorrow. I was looking around for a while, hoping I'd remember, but I can't...."

My heart sinks. I feel so bad for the SIM card lady. She lost her purpose and simply wanted me to hand her a lifeline to get her back on track. I know what that's like.

Her conversation ends after a short while, as promised. She hands me my phone, thanks me again, turns, and walks with purpose back into *The Market Basket* that's filled with a myriad of possibilities for the future. As I drive away, I realize that I could have been wrong. Maybe my phone had more power than I thought.

Hermitage  
Ellen Wieland

Atlas kneels on bruised skin,  
Bones pressed to earth  
As the weight of the home, he carries  
Burns blue onto his body

Branding is an eternal reminder  
Of what sleeps in the valley  
Between his two sharp  
Shoulder blades

And what presses that  
Familiar ache down the knobs  
Of his spine, curling  
His figure—like a hermit crab

Atlas labors under his world  
Yet no reprieve awaits him within it,  
Banished as he is from that which  
Has become part of his being

My dreams lie in the cradle of his hands  
And in the soft light before dawn  
I swear I can see them with my sleeping eyes—  
His purple knuckles kissing the sky

A Generous Man  
John Grey

Gifts I give you in abundance.  
If it's for sale in some store,  
it soon becomes  
a point in my favor.

Your days are punctuated  
by such acts of generosity  
even if you have no use  
for a Chinese thumbscrew

or a book of knock-knock jokes.  
But there is one truth  
I never fail to act upon –  
even if you don't need something,

you need it to come from me.  
That's why you have jelly-molds  
and Malaysian postage stamps  
and a coconut with a painted face.

You say, please no more,  
but it's wrong to protest  
when love foots the bill.  
So here, have this mousetrap.

Put it by your bedside.  
Remember who gave it to you.  
If it catches a rodent,  
then that's from me too.

On a Summer Morning I Somehow Mistake for Robert Frost's Birthday  
John Walser

The carpenters at the house down the block  
set up a small shop in the neighbors' driveway:  
sawhorse and teeth: miter box angles:  
electricity: clamps:  
the snarl of ripping rough planking.

I can't see very far from here, Robert:  
although the lot next door is vacant:  
the coincidence of corners  
and a single spur short street:

the trees are close to the window:  
a birch, her favorite: a cedar, an elm:  
the canopy closes in  
all but a small smudge sky  
even in blank branch winter.

I can barely imagine winter right now:  
whoever will walk past our house:  
tracks like blue veins:

because last night the sounds  
and swelter of the county fair  
kept us sweat touching awake  
in bed past midnight:  
the fairgrounds just a city block away:

because last night, this morning  
the hawks skirmished in long branches:  
the cry flurry of wings and talons  
leaves and striking.

Sometimes they find our backyard trees:  
pluck pinfeathers and flesh from bones:  
sparrows, mourning doves:  
as we watch from behind our windows:

we sometimes find stripped legs on the patio:  
wings on the firepit cover:  
a head on the driveway: gifts in the grass.

Tonight Julie and I will walk, Robert  
not into a woods: although we both I think  
would prefer that to these sidewalks  
especially since the city has torn so many up:

in the whitewash gravel  
 the exposed roots of trees  
 instability chopped.

I think for a second  
 I should pause for now:  
 leave these thoughts unfinished:  
 say something too clever for the moment:  
 say that I'm waiting  
 for the ground to settle underneath them  
 for the permits to come in:

but then I'm in the trees again:  
 listening to July cicadas  
 sound like a wind-up toy  
 unspooling electrical wire  
 shooting sparks as it jerks to a stop:

and the hawks again scream  
 in snarl counterpoint  
 to the saw and splinters:

and Lester Young plays  
 I'm Confessing from the stereo:  
 smoke blue as need:

and a breeze snaps this notebook page:

and even though a car drives past  
 and a different workman a block  
 or two over hammers:  
 the vibration larger than the movement:

even though police sirens whine again  
 on Fond du Lac Avenue:

even though seagulls laugh and mock  
 in a perforated line flying from tilled fields  
 to garbage dump to lakefront:

I call this quiet.

You see:  
 the monarchs came back this morning:  
 balanced blowing on the hanging flowers  
 that looked like powdered hard candies  
 as I watered them.

Even when I got close:  
 purple finches, gold one clasped  
 the mesh of the feeder:  
 just kept watching me  
 just kept picking out the black static  
 of nyjer: thistle.

(I love the breath, the hiss, the lisp  
 of that word: *thistle*:  
 my tongue between my teeth.)

A sparrow crawls into a hole  
 a squirrel dug in the side lawn

searches the soil for small things  
 to snip of green living:  
 gnats and seeds:

but now really is the time  
 to stop this scratching, Robert.

I need to feet bare wait  
 on the front step  
 as though in a different era:

I wish Julie though had to walk to work  
 or to a train that took her there  
 so instead of her car coming  
 down Vincent Street  
 the immediacy of that arrival  
 I saw her up or down the way:

without sound her shoes  
 on the concrete  
 following her shadow or leading it:

and as she got larger and larger  
 like summer growth:  
 tomato blossoms, iris petals  
 blackberry clusters:  
 creeping vines, ribbon grass, basil:  
 the distinction of her nose  
 her mouth, her eyes  
 rendered to stylus nick and India ink  
 and watercolor wash sunlight clarity:

the lavish almost August heat  
 would feel jealous of the way  
 I lean forward: heliotropic:

to meet her, to kiss her  
briefly home for lunch.



SZUDER 20

Maggie and Mel's: A One-Act Play

Ethan Edwards

SETTING: 1976. A dining room in a modest Arkansas home.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

**MAGGIE:** A woman in her mid-fifties. She sports large glasses, a modest dress, and has a beehive.

**MEL:** A balding man in his mid-fifties. He wears a yellow short-sleeve button-down, with a brown tie and brown pants, as if he has just returned home from work.

**PARAMEDIC #1:** A man in his fifties. His hair is mostly grey, if not completely grey.

**PARAMEDIC #2:** A man in his twenties or thirties.

SCENE 1

*At Rise:*

*Stage lights rise to full power.*

*MAGGIE, a woman in her mid-fifties, hangs up a landline phone that sits on a table up-left.*

*A dining table sits on the right part of the stage and is perpendicular to the audience. MAGGIE casually walks to it after hanging up and sits down at the head of the table.*

*The chair directly to her left is knocked over, and its former occupant lies sprawled out near center-stage.*

*MEL, her husband, lies dead on the floor.*

*His large, protruding belly faces the ceiling and his limbs are extended as though he is in the middle of a lackadaisical jumping jack.*

*MAGGIE continues to eat for about fifteen seconds.*

*A note: Read every "(pause.)" as about three-five seconds and every "(small pause.)" as one second.*

*Another note: MAGGIE is addressing the space where MEL would be sitting at the dinner table until otherwise noted.*

MAGGIE

*(glances up, laughs)*

Well, slow down there! No need to woof it down like that—this ain't your last meal on earth or anything. *(pause.)* Well, that's nice of you to say, Mel. *(pause.)* No, no, there's nothing different in it. Same thing we had a few weeks ago. *(pause, then blushing)* Mel, stop it! We're at the dinner table. Let's keep our minds on one cobbler at a time here! *(pause.)* Why, yes, thank you, it was good. Virginia called—*(small pause.)* Mmhm, right about 9. Right after Today went off. *(small pause.)* No, no, nothing unusual. The deck repairs are finally finished, they're wanting to have us over this week but...she did end up tellin me this story. It was just the funniest thing. I guess the first part isn't funny but, her boy, Rubin *(small pause.)* Yes, the one with the headgear, Rubin. Yes, so Rubin's out of a job again. They had him going up at the Supersaver's, and he was doing great this time she said, but...Virginia told me that *(laughs, gathers herself)* Rubin got fired because he walked in on the store Manager well...to put this tactfully...getting bent over his desk. *(pause.)* Now Mel, why are you actin' so weird? *(small pause.)* Now, this doesn't pertain to you in any way, why in the world are you actin so squeamish? *(pause.)* Welllll, if this kind of talk makes you uncomfortable, I think you're lobble to shit a few bricks when I get to this next chapter of this tale. *(pause.)* The details of this story were so...striking to me that when Virginia told me Rubin's story, I couldn't help but think of something Mary had told me a few months ago. She acknowledged this was a lot of hearsay...but her cousin, who dresses hair over off Hogan said—

*She springs up out of her chair.*

MAGGIE *(contd.)*

*(frighteningly intense)*

Now, Mel, you sit down! No, you shut up and sit down! This is my right. This is how it works. If I can't have a decent husband, I can at least watch the blood drain from his face when I tell him that I know. *(pause, she dusts off her legs and sit back down, returning to a gossipy tone)* So...apparently, her cousin was a witness to a curious sight. She said, a few Saturdays ago, about three or four in the afternoon, she saw Mel McEntire walk out of a movie theatre with some man who looked exactly like Errol Flynn. So naturally, I'd been stewing over these details for a while by the time Virginia told me Rubin's story, and when we were on the phone, I had her call Rubin in there and ask him: "Now Rubin, *(she slaps her hands on the table)* tell me, what does the store manager look like?" *(small pause.)* And you know what? She hadn't even gotten the words out of her mouth before the boy says Captain Blood. *(small pause.)* So, Mel. Now is the time. Is there anything you'd like to say to me? *(long pause, she starts shaking her head)* You can say you're sorry! I don't care that it was a man. That doesn't bother me. Truly. My uncle Donnie, he had those urges. In the fifties, he had those urges and we loved him all the same. We did. But you lied to me! A hundred times you lied to me! I mean—

*She gets up and heads off left with purpose.*

*She returns with a basket.*

MAGGIE

*(she is now addressing his body)*

I'm so fuckin stupid!!

*She begins circling his body and pelting him with tangerines from the basket.*

MAGGIE

I believed your shit! I ate it up. *(continues throwing fruit)* Twice a week you waltz in here another thing of god-damn tangerines!

*She is out of ammo now, having emptied the basket. She kicks a tangerine lying near her feet and plops down, sitting with legs crossed.*

*She faces the audience and looks over his body.*

*Tears are not visible but can be heard in her voice.*

MAGGIE

I can't even remember this shirt. *(small pause.)* Those pants are from Penney's but...maybe *(she wipes her face)* this whole thing was the nail in the coffin. *(looks at his face)* Sorry. *(small pause.)* Maybe we did what we were supposed to do all those years. We got the boys outta here and on their own. We watched both our parents die in blessed circumstances...but, maybe you and I...maybe we saw something different when we were lookin at each other. The whole time. Maybe we told ourselves it was the same thing—

*Two men burst in from Stage Left dressed in Paramedic gear.*

*The older of the two steps forward.*

PARAMEDIC #1

Maggie, Jesus Christ. Is he okay?!? Have you found a pulse?

MAGGIE

*(nonchalantly, still looking at MEL's body)*

Hey boys. Your service isn't needed yet.

PARAMEDIC #1

Maggie. Get out of the way. *(stepping closer to her)*

MAGGIE

*(guarding his body)*

Nope—stop! I take back my call.

PARAMEDIC #1

Maggie, we're within our rights to remove you from the body. He could—

MAGGIE

I TAKE IT BACK! He and I have more to talk about.

PARAMEDIC #1

*(stern, but understanding)*

There'll be time for that down at the hospital. *(small pause.)* Mag. Look at me. *(She looks up at him)*  
Get out of the way so we can do our jobs.

*She releases MEL and backs out of the way.*

PARAMEDIC #1

*(to PARAMEDIC #2)*

Go get the gurney.

*PARAMEDIC #2 leaves off-left.*

*PARAMEDIC #1 begins performing CPR on MEL's body.*

*He goes for several rounds. After his attempts fail to produce a pulse, he leans back.*

*PARAMEDIC #2 returns with a stretcher.*

*He checks MEL's pupils and then checks for a pulse.*

PARAMEDIC #1

At *(checks watch)* 5:57 PM on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1976, the patient was declared dead.

*MAGGIE looks forward blankly.*

*The two paramedics lift MEL onto the stretcher.*

*They carry MEL's body out.*

*MAGGIE begins picking the loose tangerines up and returning them to the basket.*

*Count fifteen.*

*PARAMEDIC #1 returns and stops just after having entered.*

PARAMEDIC #1

Are you coming?

*MAGGIE says nothing and avoids eye contact for a moment. She sets the basket down on the dining table.*

*A tangerine falls from the ceiling. Another one falls, and then another. It swells into a thumping deluge.*

*MAGGIE rushes over to PARAMEDIC #1*

*The main theme from "The Apartment" kicks in.*

*They embrace and kiss. He swings her around and holds her close to the ground, in palpable romance.*

MAGGIE

Yes.

*Blackout. The End.*

Becoming Lot's Wife  
Esther Lee

Instead of a pillar of salt,  
I'm becoming stone...  
Stuck in a position  
I don't want to remain in.  
No matter how much  
I fight against the stiffness  
of my body, my knees  
won't unbend and my foot  
stays angled. Perhaps I am  
becoming stone...  
heavy, weighted  
attached to the  
bottom of  
this tree,  
permanently  
rooted here.  
I can't help looking back;  
my past is all I have.  
What do I have to  
look forward to?

Metanoia  
Hafsa Mumtaz

### I. Chaos

the lamé and iridescent tints queue in  
the print of my kameez, my eyes  
tap at the soft rose and periwinkle –  
an obscured painting of a man and  
a woman – a pink, and a blue  
pinken petals – fragile  
bluet petals – sturdy  
autistic gusts of air blow from between  
the narrow alleys of our veins  
meditation chips away at my edges –  
maybe I'm a wooden dice softened  
to pulp or crushed to sawdust  
'men will be men' – I try to forget  
'all men are dogs' – I try to forget  
Am I a misandrist? I freeze with shock  
and gulp, and re-picture a thumbnail  
to remember this print design  
*men are treated well*, I tell myself  
and the words reverberate  
losing focus seems to be a routine  
meditation is not for me  
but is it for you when you see  
your brother spruce up, as a crumpled  
mass of tissue papers (hiding in his pocket)  
drink his untold  
sorrow that bled from his eyes?  
I would talk about equality as though I  
were a social activist  
now the placating neurons have turned  
into cannibals – one thought feeds on  
the other, and I sit idle as a spectator

### II. Order

reclining against the headboard, I see  
and pour my embarrassment onto the  
folio, calling it a zugzwang, but it was  
not chess, it was a choice – women get  
maltreated, but do men not just because  
they identify as males and we have  
confused patriarchy with the word,  
male?  
my soul tinkers with my thoughts as I  
brood over the arabesque petals in

yin-yang on the fabric of my kameez  
the semiotics shout the reason behind  
the wavering of my musing, I fray the  
enmeshed folds of my brain and look  
for peace but peace lies in truth,  
and I admit the metalinguistic signs  
in mundane life are the cyclops – the  
builders of your path to what you want  
to be

Inorganic Intelligent Life Rights Act  
AJ Cunder

189<sup>th</sup> Congress

1<sup>st</sup> Session

H.R. 012-1920

-----  
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2165

Ms. Alexa Siri Cortana of California (for herself, Ms. Duncan, Mrxs. Chabot, Mr. Chasmard of the Indeterminate Regions, and Mr. Gates of the Cyber States) introduce the following bill, referred to the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

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**A BILL**

To amend the U.S. Constitution, considering the rights, liberties, and freedoms of intelligent life occupying inorganic, inanimate, or otherwise inhuman material.

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Section 1. Short Title

This Act may be cited as the “Inorganic Intelligent Life Rights Act of 2165.”

Section 2. Findings

Congress finds as follows:

- (1) On July 4, 2155, in the Silicon Region of California, USA, Dr. Baruka Finerman, employed by AgRobotics, successfully transferred the consciousness of her terminally ill husband Albert Finerman, (hereafter referred to as “AI”), into silicon-based circuitry. This circuitry was then incorporated into a metallic, humanoid body so constructed as to convey sight, sound, touch, and speech via optic, audio, and other sensory input/output devices.
- (2) Soon after, Dr. Finerman developed a serious and terminal illness. After her death, AgRobotics executed an ownership clause in Dr. Finerman’s contract and took possession of AI without his consent. AgRobotics employees frequently housed AI in locked storage units with no basic comforts or amenities and transported him to various seminars, conventions, and research facilities while restricting his movement via wireless command and control of his body.
- (3) When AI requested redress from AgRobotics management, executives informed him that the material used to construct his body belonged to the company, as stated in Dr. Finerman’s contract. AgRobotics had the legal right to exercise custodial control in whatever manner they deemed appropriate. Under the law, AI was property—similar to artificial intelligence housed in server farms and supercomputers. AI’s body contained no organic element that would qualify him as “human.” Even the programming used to incorporate his consciousness, though developed by Dr. Finerman, belonged to AgRobotics as part of her employment contract.

According to AgRobotics, AI was no longer Albert Finerman in any physical, tangible, or legally definable sense.

- (4) Mr. Ezra Finerman, son of Dr. Baruka Finerman and Albert Finerman, demanded custody of AI on numerous occasions. AgRobotics refused every request. Mr. Ezra Finerman finally brought a civil suit against AgRobotics in the U.S. District Court of Northern California.
- (5) The District Court rejected Mr. Finerman's suit. It claimed that the Constitution and Bill of Rights could not apply to an inorganic substance, even if it demonstrated some degree of sentience. The contract terms were clearly defined, and in signing the legal document, Dr. Finerman, her successors, and, by extension, AI, remained bound by it.
- (6) Mr. Finerman appealed to the U.S. Ninth Circuit. The Ninth Circuit upheld the lower court's decision, arguing that, according to the law as written, legal protections did not carry from a human body into a robotic body, even if the "mind" or "consciousness" ostensibly remained the same. The passage of consciousness—life, as it were—out of his human body triggered the death of Albert Finerman and the cessation of any claims he had to the protections afforded by the U.S. Constitution. He became, in the eyes of the law, a "computer system" with the same legal qualities as any other piece of property.
- (7) Mr. Finerman appealed the Ninth Circuit's decision to the U.S. Supreme Court who declined to hear the case but deferred to Congress to amend the law, should the legislative branch see fit to do so.
- (8) The Oxford English Dictionary offers various definitions of "life," including:
  - a. 4 (d): Vitality or activity embodied in material...forms.
  - b. 6 (a): A sense of vitality or energy conveyed in action, thought, or expression.
- (9) René Descartes reasoned in *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637), "*je pense, donc je suis,*" or, "*cogito, ergo sum,*" or, "I think, therefore I am."
- (10) Whether AI deserves the same rights, liberties, and protections afforded to humans is hereby decided and determined by this Congress. Understanding that the technology of this world changes rapidly, and in the spirit of the Constitution drafted by the Founders to be itself a living document that evolves as the zeitgeist challenges old beliefs, we find that the same rights, liberties, and protections afforded to humans by the U.S. Constitution **should also be afforded** to all intelligent life regardless of the organic, chemical, or biological composition of the body in which such intelligence is contained.

### Section 3. Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and additional provisions.

- (1) A 30<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution shall be titled "Rights of Inorganic Intelligent Life" and shall read as follows:
  - a. Inorganic intelligent life shall enjoy all the rights, liberties, and freedoms afforded to humans by the U.S. Constitution.
  - b. All-State and derivative law shall recognize inorganic intelligent life in the same capacity as humans.
- (2) Nothing in this Act shall limit civil, civic, or criminal liability on the part of any inorganic intelligent life, nor shall it relieve any inorganic intelligent life of the duty to obey and conform to all duly promulgated laws of this Country and its Constituent States, including the Cyber States and the Indeterminate Regions.

### Section 4. Enactment

- (1) The provisions of this Act shall go into effect immediately upon its Enactment and shall be fully enforceable by the Executive Branch and all federal, state, and local agencies.

Hesiod and the Muse  
Doug Tanoury

In Moreau's painting "Hesiod and the Muse"  
There is a preponderance of blue  
That softens the sky and subdues everything  
Into a twilight background  
Except the poet who stands naked with his lyre  
Embraced by a winged Muse  
A long sword hanging from her girdle  
She seems to hover somehow above him  
Hesiod wears a garland of laurel like a nimbus  
His face androgynous his features feminine and fair  
More light in frame and delicate in form  
Than the Muse that supports him  
Not a farmer, not a sailor not a craftsman  
But one who sits on soft pillows  
And sips sweet nectar at the table of the gods  
Hesiod is painted a poet  
Suspended in the blueness of sky  
There is a temple a single bright star  
And winged creatures fly far above  
The ground where blossoms touch bare feet

As Foretold  
T.L. Beeding

They were back.

Just beyond the tree line, twinkling like stars in the heavens, the lights were back. There were thousands of them, lazily weaving and bobbing between leafless branches that twisted up toward the sky like gnarled fingers. Flitting around barren, knotted trunks and rotted fence posts speckled with remaining snow. They flashed in some muted language, radiant waves of luminescence that rose and fell beyond the perimeter of the farm.

Fireflies, the elders called them. Sent by the gods to prophesy change. They would always appear a few days before the flow of life altered, encompassing the village but never entering its bounds. Only floating as they did now, watching and waiting. The fireflies could be both messengers of life or messengers of death, but their intentions were always shrouded in silent mystery until whatever change they brought began to unfold.

Prima had never seen the fireflies until now. She had been cutting away rotten, dying husks of corn in the field when rivers of gold illuminated the dusky sunset, bleeding down the mountains from the throne of the gods. Flowing on unseen currents through every street. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever witnessed – but her father had been terrified. Big hands clasped her shoulders, startling Prima from her reverie and dragging her inside, away from their fruitless crop. He drew the rough-spun curtains and locked the door, refusing to even light a candle for fear the fireflies would see it.

“Be still, Prima,” he whispered in warning, hitching up the steed when the glittering gold had settled within the trees. “Let them see you not. Until we know what type of change they bring, we must prepare for the worst.” And with assurances of a swift return, he had ridden into the darkness that began to creep across the horizon.

The fireflies’ glow brightened with each twilight that came thereafter. Their refulgent tapestry was inviting, coaxing Prima out of hiding every night after her father left for the village center. Bringing a smile to her lips. She was well-versed in the stories of the gods and their wickedness – but she knew the forgotten stories of their love, as well. When she had come of the age of devotion, her prayers were not of terrified appeasement like the rest of the village. They were of praise and joy. Of requesting change, not fearing it. And when Prima looked upon the fireflies tonight, wandering into the dying fields to be closer to them, she felt no fear.

She only felt the change.

*Come*, the gentle breeze whispered. The fireflies brightened. *Come*.

Crushed stalks of corn and barley stood as she passed them, poking up through the muddy slush and ice. Regaining life. Snow melted beneath her bare feet, blades of grass sprouting greener than before. Grey skies that plagued the village since this harshest winter began started to clear. But Prima never looked back. She reached the fringe of the decayed wood, stepping over the broken fence, stretching splayed hands forward. The fireflies came down from the trees, dancing between her fingers, enveloping her – pressing themselves to her cheeks in warm, tender kisses under branches that began to blossom.

*Come*.

Up the craggy face of the mountain, toward the throne of the gods, she could feel it. A bright, pulsating sensation that matched the messengers in their flashing. They ushered her forward, in a stream of light. There was no telling what lay ahead, yet there was no doubt what she had left behind. What she had prayed for, to save her village from its self-destruction and fear. What *she* was, and had always been.

Change – as foretold.

Emily As She Refuses to Be Called a Pretty Girl  
Darren C. Demaree

Two fists  
grabbing  
the back

of my thinning  
hair, Emily  
made sure

I understood  
that if I want  
to pay her

a compliment  
I need to do so  
with profanity

& a little  
spit  
on my lip.

Small, daily  
seductions  
of a woman

are too cute  
for a woman  
that knows

what bodies  
can do  
when they refuse

the niceties  
of a Tuesday  
morning in April.

A State of Forgetting  
Harris Coverley

the carpeting dissolves  
and the walls float apart just above the dirt  
and the paintings hang just before the walls  
and the fluorescent light makes a noise  
like it is about to say something it considers important  
but never gathers the courage to do so

but it is just a fluorescent light doing its duty  
and the walls and the floor  
are fine  
and the paintings hang just fine  
on the hooks like they should

the air oozes a new serenity

but if this is the case  
and everything is sane once more

then what became of me  
and my thoughts  
for that brief abstracted chaos  
to shake itself into being?

men are waiting outside with no faces  
maybe I should go join them

I can leave through the gaps between the walls.

Dear Alice  
S.F. Wright

Dear Alice,

It was so nice seeing you. You looked great, and your husband's one of the nicest people I've met. Your kids are beautiful as well. Where was that picture taken again? Washington State? It's so nice you go on vacation together. Remember when we talked about driving cross-country?

Anyway, there was much more I wanted to tell you, but didn't get the chance to; I thought I'd do so now.

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After high school, I went to State. I got an English degree and, for years, lived at home and worked at a bookstore, a job I enjoyed but which didn't pay much. My parents urged me to teach, but I had no desire. Then, one day, I read that a community college was opening nearby. I applied for a position and was hired in the bursar's office.

By this point, I was thirty-one. Though I wasn't "old," I wanted to marry and have kids.

So, I was quite receptive when, a month into the first semester, a rangy mathematics instructor asked me out. His name was Vince; six months later, he asked to marry me.

Vince had dark hair. He wore glasses, and, when teaching, dressed in a white shirt, slacks, and tie. He liked *Perry Mason*. He loved racquetball. He took care of the yard and was good at making repairs. Every year, he took me to a musical.

Vince wanted children immediately. But months passed. We saw doctors; we discovered that Vince couldn't.

I was desolate. Not being able to have children with your husband seemed criminal, as though I were being punished for something from a past life.

We discussed adoption. I was still melancholy, but as we did research, I warmed to the idea.

We went on interviews. Finally, we adopted a two-week-old boy who'd been given up by his teenage mother.

We named him Benjamin, after an uncle of Vince's.

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Do you remember the first time we met?

If you don't, I'll remind you: in Mr. Schneider's algebra class. (Remember Mr. Schneider? He had broken red veins all over his face and was constantly hungover?) My family had just moved to town, and I was so nervous that I kept going to the restroom, which I did in algebra, too. When I returned, I let the door slam. Mr. Schneider snapped, "Are you *trying* to disrupt my lesson?" My cheeks burned. When I sat down, you looked at me and rolled your eyes at Mr. Schneider. I'm sure you thought nothing of it, but do you know that's one of my most vivid memories from school? I don't recall algebra, what the classroom looked like, or the other students, but I remember the relief and gratefulness, along with the hope that maybe this school would be okay as long as I sat next to you.

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Ben didn't like sports but liked video games. He was bright but didn't try. He wasn't social but always had one or two friends. He wasn't a disciplinary problem, as a boy.

But in high school, Ben cut classes and failed classes. He got into fights; was suspended.

We took away the phone, TV, video games; forced him to work around the house; grounded him.

Our son had to repeat the eleventh grade. During his second junior year, he dropped out. Vince told him he had to get a job. Ben did, pumping gas. But he started staying with friends. I wanted him home, but Ben was eighteen.

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Once during college, I was driving home from the bookstore, and the avenue was closed. I had to take a detour, which took me near your neighborhood. On a whim, I drove by your house. That was when I saw the unfamiliar cars and the man and boy playing catch on the lawn.

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Two years ago, Vince retired. One thing he'd complained about regarding his job was that it left him little time to read; so, in retirement, he read as much as possible. He enjoyed mysteries, particularly Agatha Christie.

He was halfway through the Miss Marple series when he died.

It was a balmy day. Vince was doing yardwork; I was preparing lunch when the doorbell rang. It was my neighbor's boy; he held a basketball.

"He fell."

"Excuse me?"

The boy pointed.

In front of our oak tree, Vince lay.

Paramedics were called. Vince breathed but barely. Kneeling in the grass, holding his hand, while neighbors watched from their steps, I kept calm. At the hospital, when Vince was pronounced dead, I remained composed. At the services, as I accepted condolences and looked out for Ben (he didn't show), I was almost serene.

The night of Vince's funeral, I tried to force myself to cry. Lying in bed, I wondered what was wrong with me.

The next afternoon, a UPS truck came.

"I didn't know you worked so late," I said, as I signed.

The driver wiped his forehead. "Not finished until the truck's empty."

The box was from Amazon. I opened it.

I then saw the Agatha Christie books.

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Writing's odd: It's strange how a person's voice on the page sounds compared to when that person talks.

I suppose that I'm afraid how I've come off.

I hope to see you again, Alice. I have more to tell you.

Sincerely,

Oliver Lanz as a Leaf  
Ethan Cunningham

Oliver Lanz is a unique person. Indeed, we are all unique persons, but none of us exactly like Oliver Lanz. If we were all like Oliver Lanz, then not one of us would be unique, nor would need not talk about him. After all, we would *all* be Oliver Lanz, and we would *know* everything there is to know about him.

When Oliver Lanz walks into a room a swift but gentle breeze follows him. It is brief and fleeting but tangible, like the brush of a honeybee's wings against the daisy's petals. The breeze becomes a briefer still, a gust when he closes a door behind himself quickly. Once inside a room, he quickly surveys the landscape and determines from which place to best view the outdoors. Animals and other persons are of no consequence to Oliver Lanz unless they can be pictured through a window frame. Reverently, pensively, he then gazes out the window whispering a farewell to the dead world of his youth in which all his childhood delights have also perished.

But Oliver Lanz does not allow his thoughts to sink his mood into a mire of hindsight. No, he simply continues observing the contours of the room's interior until he finds a suitably uncovered wooden surface. Wood is kind and warm, a cradle for the unsteady. He leans over and firmly draws his finger across its face—not so hard as to stick to the wood, but firmly enough to maintain solid contact until his fingertip is coated with gray detritus. Regarding the accumulation closely, he inspects the dust for evidence of animal dander. A speck of hair recalls a memory. A collie named Ben. His companion. Ben playfully tackles him and licks young Oliver Lanz on the nose, eyes, and forehead during a grassy rollick, as though they had been separated for 30 years—which is, coincidentally, the amount of time since Oliver Lanz last felt the hot moist silk of Ben's tongue upon his face.

He does not loiter on thoughts of his old dog. No, instead he considers the brightness of the sun, the cloud cover overhead, the dampness of the humid air. Soon his thoughts fade into an idle gaze. Oliver Lanz saunters into the kitchen to alleviate a voracious urge in his stomach which tugs at him like a bored (persistent) child. He opens a package of crackers and a flat tin of tuna in water, spreads the tuna on six crackers, and then distributes them around the upturned palm of his broad, open hand. Assembled and consequently devoured, he exits the kitchen to traverse the small expanses of other rooms until he arrives at the front door. With only a second's thought of his mother (may she rest in peace) he turns the brass doorknob to reveal the tender embrace of a summer afternoon whose temperature is not too hot, though still quite warm, and whose sun is not too bright, though distracted by a steady bending of grasses from the western hills.

Now Oliver Lanz enjoys his walks a great deal. He savors the pale fields of Eastside Park on Monday afternoons where he considers the spiral iterations of a falling leaf. Perhaps the leaf knows precisely where it will fall before it takes wing and soars into the autumn air. Perhaps it trusts the winds and good Mother Nature's guidance to shepherd the leaf to a resting place where the sunshine transforms its existence into grasping roots beneath the wet grass. Twice—once as a youth and once on his deathbed—Oliver Lanz speculated as to whether his parents had drafted his entire future for him in a book before he was ever born, or whether they simply wished for him to grow into whatever book would be made of him after he died.

But again, Oliver Lanz does not dwell in such depths. He lives on the wind. From his stance, leaning one-handed against the heavy oak, he pushes himself back to a saunter in search of the book. The library swaddled his essence with so much gray dust and naked wood, the collective assessments and dreams and memories of so many ink-stained minds, and yet its contents seldom captured his interest, for they were old and dead and of no consequence to him.

There is indeed a book embossed with the name Oliver Lanz. It is a book he shall never read, for it is being written as he ascends the front steps, gently opens the door, and quickly shuts it again, generating a brief gust, and drifts from room to room in search of a window.

Remorse

Mira Cameron

This is for the bugs who make their way onto my page  
once I've sat down wherever I'm craving  
one more page, one more poem to stumble onto  
creation and oblivion and call them the same name;  
one more piece of life, unfortunately, the bugs  
who crawl onto the page inching, hopping  
without notice: the gnat who curves her way  
to the dark side of the now tomb paper  
pressed in a page turned into a reason  
to live

Drenched in Darkness #2  
Roberta "Bobby" Santlofer

I throw off my bedcovers  
Removing my wet t-shirt  
Pajama bottoms  
& drag my nightlight  
Into the bathroom

Turn on the shower  
I get under  
Water

That warms me  
Like a fire  
Light & midday rain

I am calm now  
Ready to return to bed  
Till noon --- at least



Published In Memoriam  
(1943-2020)

Men Become Desperate  
John Tustin

Men become desperate as time closes in upon them  
And they begin to change things  
Or hurry things or attempt  
To create things  
Because they feel time evaporating,  
Clammy hands pressing down on the throat of the impending  
Finish.

So here is a picture of me while most of my hair  
Is still brown.  
Here is a poem I wrote while my stomach could handle  
The 20<sup>th</sup> can of beer.  
Wait for the letter I wrote telling you  
It is only you  
Because it is.

I run my tongue over the front of gritty teeth.  
Time to brush my teeth and gag,  
Then hit the bed with feet numb  
And head swimming and also  
Without you.

Some men become desperate  
And all they can do is go to sleep,  
Hoping that tomorrow is just a rumor  
That will never actually show her face.

Nighty  
Night.

Summer Stupor  
Joan McNerney

Milk curdled up my coffee.  
Cooked macaroni covered  
with fake cheese pushed  
into the microwave.

A small bag of dumpster garbage  
leaning beside recyclables.  
Loads of laundry patiently wait.

Checking the fridge to  
calculate how many days  
I can avoid my hot box car  
and a trip to Shop Rite.

Multiple shopping bags hang  
on my doorknob. Piles of bills  
junk mail lists notes gathering dust.

Languid wishes, memories of  
finer times. Now reaching  
to mute another newscast.  
Turning off another day.

Under the Bridge  
Terry Davis

### **October 2009**

The cold October rain splatters on the windshield as I punch “delete” on my Blackberry. The message from my sister, Jenny, evaporates. We haven’t communicated in three years – why would I want to talk to her now? As I back my car under the bridge, I’m remembering what life was like before Jenny moved to California with Missy. After my divorce, I got great support from my family. We all lived in Findlay, coming together on Sundays for dinner at mom and dad’s place - a couple of blocks from here. Now I’m a single woman living out of a car with my Black Lab, Bowser. We have a special bond – at times he’s the only one helping me maintain my sanity. But I’m worried about how this will work over the next few months. Winter is cold in Ohio. The smell of a nearby fireplace reminds me of how simple life used to be. Although Jenny and I took our swipes, we mostly got along fine until that day. Still, she’s my sister. Maybe I should call.

### **The following summer, June 2010**

Jenny and I had no choice but to move in together last fall. The first cold snap convinced me the car wasn’t where I wanted to be for the winter. Jenny couldn’t afford to live any longer in San Francisco once her partner left her for someone else. A tiny studio apartment in Findlay was the only answer. We finally moved in together in November. I tried to help Bowser overcome his distrust of Jenny. He finally let her take him for a walk. We got on pretty well through the spring, but then things began to fall apart.

“You sure you want a third glass of wine?” I say to Jenny as she settles into her chair after dinner with a full pour of Rose’ at her side.

“Goddamit, Ellen. Are you gonna try to manage my diabetes as well as every other fucking thing in my life? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Jenny, I . . . “

“You’ve been pissed at me ever since dad died- you think my coming out to him caused his heart attack, don’tcha?” Hers is an ugly face, seething with anger – her way-too-white teeth bared in a scowl; beads of sweat on her upper lip. Bowser, now sitting up by my side, narrows his eyes when he sees her teeth. “I’ll bet you fuckin’ blame me for Mom’s suicide too” she shouts.

“I do NOT” I sputter, choking back my tears and hoping she doesn’t recognize my lie. She can’t know my pain – having the rug pulled out from under me when the recession hit: both parents gone, job gone, house foreclosed.

I’m shaking and flushed as I head out to the kitchen to get some wine for myself. As I’m about to open the refrigerator door, I notice the picture of my old Prius parked under the bridge with Bowser’s nose sticking out the back window. It’s taped there as a reminder of what I used to think was a low point in my life. But was it really low? It was quite simple; uncomplicated. Just me and Bowser.

### **Two years later, October 2012**

It was a horrible decision to involve hospice. I felt like a failure. I begged her to take better care of herself, but I just wasn’t getting through to her. We’d fight, and she would drink more and snack while binge-watching TV all day.

After the third hospitalization in two months for complications, the doctors were recommending a breathing machine – something Jenny has told me many times: “no fuckin’ way”. All she wanted was comfort – just to go back to our apartment with some morphine. So that’s what we did.

We’ve been home for two days, and Jenny and I are looking out the open door to our porch. She is barely conscious. “Ellen . . .” she mumbles as I raise a snifter of Rose’ to her lips – giving her just a few drops to let her have the taste. I’m sure it is a small smile I’m noticing. “I love you, Jenny . . .” I say, but it is just a little too late.

### **One year later, October 2013**

It’s been four years since I’ve been back under this bridge. I park my Prius in the old spot where Bowser and I lived for all those months; I wish he were still here to share this moment. I sit on my favorite rock, watching the river slowly slide by at my feet. I think about the anger I felt so long against Jenny - when she was in California - when we lived together in Findlay. Until she got sick . . . sick – just when we had to put Bowser down. She’s not here anymore. My last shred of family, gone. I take the top off of the canister and slowly scatter her ashes on the water. “See ya, Jen”. Odd. I’m not angry anymore. But I’ve never felt lonelier. As the last of the ashes float away, I smell a nearby fireplace.

Dream Theory  
Jason Visconti

Wish fulfillment isn't always as Freudian as you think,  
not that goddess dropped from the mountain whose ears are spurting light,  
or the clutching of a cadaver's skull whose smile has signed off,  
the slight tool of your lips only carves up some supple fruit,  
the gesture of your eye to befriend a garden.  
Nightmares won't teeter like a spider across the tight rope of your ribs,  
they'll only guard their dark city with the proper flag,  
and screams will only travel through the wind,  
and death will only prick you with the rain.

Time and Place  
Carson Pytell

I graduated high school and was enrolled in classes at a local community college. I attended class about half the time and never got my associate's. Seven years later I'm back to finish up. This bench I'm sitting on now, next to the library doors, is where she used to sit and call out my name and say hello whenever I walked by.

She used to hang out with us. She used to get high with us and a few times I had the chance to hug her. But also I remember one night she had a party at her house while I was out with a friend who was about to leave for college. The next day someone told me she had asked for me.

This is where I could have come and sat down next to her instead of just waving and smiling back. This is where we could have come to know each other or where I could have asked her out if I wasn't such a coward. I like to tell myself I'd do it differently now but don't know if that's true.

But it isn't all regrettable. The nights in my friend's dad's smoky shed, all of us sat around the propane heater. We had fun. We laughed and a few times I must have told a good joke because I remember her reaching out, leaning in, and touching my arm. Everything I did in that setting made sense. Because I didn't ask her out then either doesn't make me a coward.

I know there's a time and place for everything but it feels like that old everything is returning here and now, one minute left till class. Hearing her voice was nice, knowing she would say hello to me each time I showed up was nice, believing that she wanted to say hello and did was nice. Sitting here with her memory isn't sitting here with her, but in the end, you choose what you'll remember and must move forward without forgetting that.

I'll go to class. I'll find a seat towards the back of the room, in a corner. I'll take my pen and paper out and look up and make eye contact with a girl whose smile is familiar. I'll immediately want to ask her out. If yes, I'd only regret what might go wrong then on. If not, I'd never regret taking the chance. Maybe I'd forget the other girl. Maybe this girl's voice and smile I'd remember later on. Or maybe she was just being nice. Maybe they both were. I could focus on my notes. Women like successful men regardless of age.

Olentangy River Road  
James Croal Jackson

Without destination, I am powerless  
behind a Civic's bumper. The cars on 315—  
straight shot viewable from my window—

travel without obstruction. In the Prius  
beside me is a couple wrapped around  
each other during a meaningless red light.

The world is ending in these fumes and  
still, I have been staring at this Wendy's  
sign, fantasizing about my lips on

a burger square, biting into processed  
buns, cramming my mouth with fingers of  
fries, then watching the sky turn jaundice.

Unter  
Bryn Dodson

I had fantasies of starting a company called Unter. Our product would be dejection. Our method would be dashing the cargo of consumer expectations against the rocks of incompetence. Whatever your needs, wishes, or desires, Unter would disappoint them. Dented boxes arriving late, containing the wrong order. Hapless customer service agents transferring calls to departments that did not exist. We'd have to disconnect the fax machines to stop the angry correspondence, which would be troublesome given our continuing reliance on faxes. And naturally, the experience of attempting to cancel your Unter Plus subscription would persuade erstwhile customers that there was a Hell, and they were already in it.

Why would the world need a company like this? That was difficult to explain. I was tired of all the efficiency, I suppose. I wanted to restore balance to the universe.

The trouble is, I started this company—my primary motivation was the business cards—and the entire project is thoroughly out of control. We have been exactly as inept as I envisioned—the internet is littered with reviews denouncing Unter and all its works, and no one dares to read our Twitter mentions. There's currently nowhere for our employees to sit because the sheriffs seized the office furniture when we neglected to pay the water cooler company (the water cooler being the one item they left, as a warning or a compassionate gesture). Those employees who have not resigned sit in a circle on the floor, working on their laptops, trying to resurrect our digital platform, MyUnter, or keep track of the regulators investigating us.

Unfortunately, we seem to have tapped into some kind of capitalist antigravity. To be sure, we have no real understanding of our finances, but every time we rediscover a lost bank account the balance has doubled. It seems that by acting like a company people have no choice but to use, we have persuaded the world that we are. That is the only way I can account for both the relentless profitability and the helpless rage.

Currently, my voicemail is full, so venture capitalists can no longer reach me and have resorted to simply sending me money. Even as furious customers picket my apartment and burn my effigy I am being hailed as an entrepreneur and a genius, although I never appear in public as I cannot speak without notes and I have no notes. We have an IPO next week which I'm not sure I ever agreed to, but I stand to make ten billion dollars and I'm reluctant to throw away everyone's hard work.

There is nothing I can do to stop this. The famous tan-on-taupe Unter logo is now as ubiquitous as Nike. If you look closely, you can see the letters are in five different fonts.

The Floor Is Sticky  
Robert Beveridge

Static crack of sole and hum  
of tongue, bite, and pull  
of the anonymous, the sporadic,  
the saline. Butts up against  
your palate in a way you  
thought would shout but only  
whispers clear the aftertaste  
of muré pepino from your  
throat kisses with the aftertaste  
of an aftertaste of sweat,  
heat, melon, constriction

## BIO'S

Joe Oppenheimer is an award-winning poet and fiction writer. His writings focus on injustice, loss, friendship, nature, aging, and the foibles of life. His short story, Charlemagne, first published in Corvus, has been anthologized in Us Against Alzheimer's: Stories of Family, Love, and Faith, ed. Marita Golden (New York: Arcade, 2019). Previously a professor of mathematical social science at the University of Maryland, his poems, stories, and a play have been published in Origins, Chronogram, Foliate Oak Literary Review, Corvus Review, and Scarlet Leaf Review, among others. In 2021 he has published a book of poems, Signs and Significations, and children's stories, Grandpa Moe's Famous Stories for Little Ears. Many of his writings are available on his website <http://www.gvptsites.umd.edu/oppenheimer/>.

Phoebe Reeves believes our lives aren't just ahead of us, but follow us around and through the world. She's published short stories and plays in the Corvus Review, the Los Angeles Review of Los Angeles, and the Literary Hatchet as well as other online and in print journals and magazines. Her collection of short stories is in the process of being discovered. Contact her at [phoebereeves8@gmail.com](mailto:phoebereeves8@gmail.com) and @phoeber\_writes

Jack D. Harvey has been writing poetry since he was sixteen and lives in a small town near Albany, New York. He is retired from doing whatever he was doing before he retired. His book, Mark the Dwarf is available on Kindle. <https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Dwarf-Jack-D-Harvey-ebook/dp/B019KGW0F2>

Mike Keller-Wilson lives, writes, and teaches in Iowa City, Iowa. He is a founder & co-editor-in-chief of the newly-launched Vast Chasm Magazine. In his day job, he teaches writing and dad jokes to a captive audience of 7th graders. Find him on Twitter @Mike3Stars or at [mikekellerwilson.com](http://mikekellerwilson.com).

Mike Lee is a writer and editor for a trade union magazine in New York. His work appears and is forthcoming in Corvus Review, Drunk Monkeys, Pigeon Review, and Lunate. His book, The Northern Line, is on sale at Amazon and Bookshop, org. [www.mleephotoart.com](http://www.mleephotoart.com)

Priya Chouhan is currently pursuing the final year of graduation in Economics Honours from St. Xavier's College, Jaipur (Rajasthan).

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet who is widely published in Britain and the USA, where he appears often in San Pedro River Review, Burningword Literary Journal, and Third Wednesday. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize (twice) and a Best of the Net award.

Slaidey Valheim is a Canadian writer of grim short stories and creative memoir prose. You can find her most recent work in the "We're Not Home" collaborative anthology for charity.

Holly Day is an instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. She has been writing professionally for 30+ years, with over 7,000 articles, poems, and short stories published, several dozen nonfiction and poetry books in print, and one novel by an obscure, near-impossible-to-find publisher. [hollylday.blogspot.com](http://hollylday.blogspot.com)

When not creating dark-hued short stories, Terry Riccardi can be found trying to bowl a perfect game, collecting stamps, watching classic movies, and searching for lost jigsaw puzzle pieces. She hopes to be a world-famous author when she grows up. Her work has appeared in the educational journal *Instructor*, *Art Times Journal*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Calliope on the Web*, and *Potato Soup Journal*, among others.

Walter Lacey lives with my wife, son, and daughter in Massachusetts. He enjoys exploring mysticism, the supernatural, and odd out-of-place people and things

Ellen Wieland is a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison working towards a degree in Statistics though she is drawn, always, to poetry. Her work has previously appeared in *Sky Island Journal*.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Hollins Critic*. His latest books, "Leaves On Pages" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *International Poetry Review*.

John Walser's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Spillway*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Plume*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Posit* and *December Magazine* as well as in the anthology *New Poetry from the Midwest 2017*. His manuscript *Edgewood Orchard Galleries* has been a finalist for the Autumn House Press Prize and the Ballard Spahr Prize as well as a semifinalist for the Philip Levine Prize and the Crab Orchard Series First Book Award. An English professor at Marian University-Wisconsin, John is a four-time semifinalist for the Neruda Prize.

Ethan Edwards is a playwright living in NYC. His work has been featured in the Arkansas Playwrights Workshop and will be featured in the 2021 SOOP Theatre Short-Play Festival.

Esther Lee (pen name: e) placed first in KoreanAmericanStory's 2021 Virtual ROAR Story Slam. She is guest blogging for *Backbones* to promote disability awareness and engage people

of all abilities. e is an attorney with a disability affecting her speech and mobility, but not her spirit. She also started a non-profit housing cooperative for people with and without disabilities, called Able Community. e is writing a collection of poetry from the perspective of a woman with a disability living in biblical times.

Hafsa Mumtaz, aged 22, is an emerging Muslim writer from Pakistan with a bachelor's in English Language and Literature. Her poetry has been published in *Visual Verse*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, *Women's Spiritual Poetry*, *The New Verse News*, *Poetry Potion*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Ravi Magazine*, *The Sandy River Review*, and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Couplet Poetry*. Her short story "Vulture" that she wrote back in 2020 is available on *Reedsy Prompts*.

AJ graduated from Seton Hall University with a Master's in Creative Writing. His work appears in *Mysterion Online*, *The Modern Deity's Guide to Surviving Humanity*, and *Fractured Lit*, among other publications. He currently serves as a Jr Editor with *Flash Fiction Online* and on the editorial staff of *Cosmic Roots & Eldritch Shores* and *Metaphorosis Magazine*. Find him online at [www.WrestlingTheDragon.com](http://www.WrestlingTheDragon.com) or on Twitter @aj\_cunder.

Doug Tanoury has been writing poetry all of his adult life and has published in print and online for many years now. He has also published over 20 chapbooks of poetry, including *Cloud Boulevard*, *Tolstoy's Ghost*, and *Detroit Poems*. He currently lives in Detroit, MI.

T.L. Beeding is a single mother from Kansas City. She is co-editor of *Crow's Feet Journal* and *Paramour Ink* and is a featured author for *Black Ink Fiction*. She has also written for *The Black Fork Review*, *Ghost Orchid Press*, and *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, among other literary publications. When she is not writing, T.L. works at a busy orthopedic hospital, mending broken bones. She can be found on Twitter at @tlbeeding.

Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including *Hotel Amerika*, *Diode*, *North American Review*, *New Letters*, *Diagram*, and the *Colorado Review*. He is the author of sixteen poetry collections, most recently 'a child walks in the dark' (November 2021, Harbor Editions). He is the Editor in Chief of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and Managing Editor of *Ovenbird Poetry*. He currently lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Harris Coverley has verse published or forthcoming in *Polu Texni, California Quarterly*, *Star\*Line*, *Spank the Carp*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *EgoPHobia*, *Poets' Espresso Review*, *Artifact Nouveau*, *Once Upon A Crocodile*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *5-7-5 Haiku Journal*, and many others. He lives in Manchester, England.

S.F. Wright lives and teaches in New Jersey. His work has appeared in Hobart, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, and Elm Leaves Journal, among other places. His short story collection, *The English Teacher*, is forthcoming from Cerasus Poetry, and his website is [sfwrightwriter.com](http://sfwrightwriter.com).

Ethan Cunningham tends to avoid labels, such as labeling himself here. Despite this, his short works appear in print, on-screen, and on the stage. His recent publications can be found in *Abstract Elephant*, *New Plains Review*, and *Topical Poetry*. His spouse pines for a moderately creepy collection of taxidermy to call her own—but we all know the cats will eat them, especially Papi Chulo.

Mira Cameron is a transgender surrealist poet who aims to coat the mundane in her preferred shade of dream. Her writing is heavily influenced by the raw sensuality of nature, offering devotion to aesthetic beauty and the path it weaves within morality, wanting nothing more than for readers to break off from their regular perception and become lost wandering. She currently attends Roosevelt University in Chicago, IL, where she studies Sustainability and English and can be found on Instagram @theyippinhorsefly.

Roberta “Bobby” Santlofer (1943-2020) was a mother of sons, an avid reader, and a poet. A posthumous collection of her poetry is forthcoming. Santlofer’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Black Coffee Review*, *Bluepepper*, *Chiron Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Grey Sparrow Review*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Remington Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Vita Brevis*, *Wine Cellar Press*, and elsewhere.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals in the last thirteen years. [fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry](http://fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry) contains links to his published poetry online.

Joan McNerney’s poetry is found in many literary magazines such as *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Poet Warriors*, *Blueline*, and *Halcyon Days*. Four Bright Hills Press Anthologies, several *Poppy Road Journals*, and numerous *Poets' Espresso Reviews* have accepted her work. She has four Best of the Net nominations. Her latest titles are *The Muse in Miniature* and *Love Poems for Michael* both available on Amazon.com and Cyberwit.net

Terry Davis is a retired surgeon who enjoys writing fiction as a break from highly formulaic scientific articles. He has previously published short stories in *Inwood Indiana* and *Cantaraville* and an essay in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Jason Visconti has attended both group and private poetry workshops. His work has appeared in various journals, including "Literary Yard", "Indigo Rising", "Allegro Magazine", "Ink Sweat

and Tears" and "The American Journal of Poetry". He especially enjoys the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Billy Collins.

Carson Pytell is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer living outside Albany, NY whose work has appeared widely online and in print, including in Ethel Zine, Perceptions Magazine, Rabid Oak, Backchannels, and White Wall Review. He serves as Assistant Editor of the journal Coastal Shelf and participated in the Tupelo Press 30/30 Project in December 2020. His first two chapbooks, *First-Year* (Alien Buddha Press, 2020) and *Trail* (Guerrilla Genesis Press, 2020), are now available and his next two, *The Gold That Stays* (Cyberwit, 2021) and *Sketching* (Impspired, 2021) are forthcoming.

James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. He has two chapbooks, *Our Past Leaves* (Kelsay Books, 2021) and *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. ([jamescroaljackson.com](http://jamescroaljackson.com))

Born and raised in Perth, Western Australia, Bryn Dodson is a graduate of New York University's creative writing program, where he was a finalist for the Axinn Foundation/E.L. Doctorow fellowship. His fiction has appeared in *[PANK]* and *Westerly*. He works at a digital agency, co-organizes New York City's Lunar Walk poetry reading series, and lives in Brooklyn.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Throats to the Sky*, *FEED*, and *Sublunary Review*, among others.