



CORVUS REVIEW

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Issue Art:

Brian Ji is a seventeen-year-old writer and visual artist currently attending Seoul International School in Korea. He finds meaning and delight in creative expression, channeling his energy into both literature and visual storytelling. His artwork investigates themes of urban compression, spatial memory, and the quiet poetics of daily life. His work has been featured in *The Collidescope*, *The Expressionist*, *The Amazine*, *Alcott Magazine*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *SCOPE Magazine*, *Lullwater Magazine*, and *VOICES Journal*. Brian is an alum of the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop.

Edward Baranosky has painted seascapes since he was seven years old. His focus on marine- scapes, draws him back to visit his native home in the American east coast, for inspiration from the North Atlantic. His work emphasizes the present - in the ever-changing moments of water. As a poet-artist he crosses the channels and pathways between the visual and the textual.

Cover:

Stephen Holder grew up in South Africa, where wildlife and open landscapes were part of everyday life. That environment shaped an early and lasting interest in animals and the natural world. His work focuses on animals and birds, using watercolour, ink, and layered mark making. Some pieces are based on close observation, while others are more symbolic, using pattern and repetition to explore structure, balance, and restraint. Rather than aiming for strict realism, the work focuses on presence and character. Animals are used as subjects, but also as ways to explore calm, focus, strength, and stillness.

Freedom is an original watercolour painting depicting a raven standing in a calm, grounded posture. The bird is shown still, with emphasis placed on presence rather than motion. Painted using professional watercolours on archival paper, the work relies on contrast, controlled detail, and restraint. The raven's stance suggests awareness and composure without exaggeration. Here, freedom is treated as clarity and self-direction rather than escape. The raven functions as a symbol of steadiness and focus within its environment.

Editor: J. Mercer

IMPORTANT: Our submission guidelines and publication schedule have changed. *Corvus* is moving in a bit of a different direction. Please see the website for additional information!

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Plaything
Krista Sawyer

ACT I

unresolved
unfinished
cocktails
established mixtures and mistakes

anxiety
digest raw energy

marks we talk about risking
minds and sparks catch fire

roll the dice
kiss the chaos

ACT II

true colors phase together
the disposable divine
radiate fresh authenticity

tension cuts footfall
love pools in the thrill of the chase

mentally strong
poison and wine
circling notions and tongues
(twisted)
fear the taste of trouble

ACT III

see beyond vision
chase the past in decline
touch every direction
in the dark
confused and swayful heart

*fall
through
the
door
that
never
closed*

The Juju Man – Kenya 1978
George Larson

We had been living in Nairobi for four months and decided to leave town for a weekend trip to the Ark Lodge. It had been a hectic pack-out and transfer to the U.S. embassy where I served as an attaché. My wife and I needed a break.

The Ark was a well-known game lodge built high in the trees in the Aberdeen forest. Another, better-known lodge in the area is named Treetops. At both lodges, animals would be lured to the camps by baiting. Spotlights at night would shine over the bait, and the various animals would come to feed. It was a photo shoot event only as hunting big game had been outlawed many years before.

The Treetops Hotel was more famous because it was the place where a princess went up one night and came down as a queen the next morning. In 1952, Queen Elizabeth II of England, then a princess, stayed at Treetops. During the night, her father King George VI died. So, the saying.

As part of the Ark package, we lunched at a two-story colonial house on a foothill outside the forest. This was the rendezvous point for the tourists taken to the lodge. After lunch, the tourists visited a corral that had been set up adjacent to the house.

The corral was a third of an acre in size and had a dozen tribe members selling trinkets to the tourists. The tribe members were Kikuyu as the Aberdeen was part of their ancestral homeland. The Aberdeen was also the stronghold of the Mau Mau, mostly Kikuyu fighters, who waged guerilla war against the British colonialists in the 1950s.

I recall seeing domestic animal skins, beadwork, and other tourist tchotchkes for sale. It was the same stuff we could buy any day at the Nairobi market. This was strictly a tourist trap, and we did not buy anything. Well, sort of.

There was a tribe member in his late sixties or early seventies who caught our attention, but his age was difficult to determine. He spoke no English and helped by another man, much younger, with interpretation. The older man was a witchdoctor or shaman or Juju Man, all the same nonsense.

The Juju Man was wearing a traditional piece of cloth wrapped around his body and was otherwise unremarkable in appearance. There were no frightening masks or makeup or other theatrical effects one saw in the movies. The interpreter was wearing Western style clothes, slacks, and a button-down shirt. For about a shilling or two, we could have our fortune read. While we knew it was all a swindle to earn a bit of money from the gullible tourists, we agreed. After all, the cost was equivalent to only about twenty-five cents.

The Juju Man removed a small leather pouch from his person and shook the bag. He then opened it and dumped the contents on the ground in front of us. The items I remember were bone and stone bits and there were about a dozen items in total. He spoke to the interpreter who in turn said that we had a child with a deformity. Yes, deformity was the word he used. He then cupped his elbow with his hand. Stunned, we told him he was wrong. My only son Michael, an infant, was with us and did not have a deformity. The interpreter asked if any of the family had a deformity, next pointing to his leg. We replied with an emphatic no. The Juju man had struck out. The interpreter simply shrugged his shoulders as if to say “Well, maybe the old man doesn’t get it right all the time.”

We thought nothing more of the Juju Man’s reading of his pouch contents. That was until my second son was born five years later. The delivery room nurse immediately brought

to our attention the large hemangioma on his elbow, a bulging collection of blood vessels. The pediatrician assured us that as he grew, the blood vessels would naturally absorb back into his elbow. He was correct.

I never told anyone the story about the Juju Man we met one day in Kenya in 1978.

Lines Written at a Sidewalk Table in San Francisco
Mark Crimmins

You are sitting at a patio table of Kuleto's Italian Restaurant on Powell Street, just south of San Francisco's Union Square. It is early on a Saturday evening, and the downtown streets are buzzing with restless traffic and passing multitudes.

You first gazed in awe at the beauty and vibrancy of this city from the windows of the 1978 Mercury Marquis Brougham Sedan in which you drove your mother here from Salt Lake City, twenty-one years ago, back in 1985. She had decided to move here on a whim. She came to San Francisco for a brief holiday and fell in love with the city so much that she called you at your student apartment in Utah from a phone booth on a street like this. She was so excited that, at sixty-two—in spite of the fact that she had gathered her entire family around her in Salt Lake—she had decided she was going to quit her job at the University of Utah, leave her daughters and grandkids and friends and workmates, along with the support network she had built around herself since her 1978 emigration to Utah from Manchester, England. She was going to leave her comfort zone behind and move to San Francisco all on her own to start a new adventure in living.

A new life.

Incredulous on the other end of the phone, you asked her why she had decided to do such a crazy thing, and she said it was because she had never visited a city like San Francisco. New York, she thought, was grim. Washington was boring. Chicago was dirty. But San Francisco—well, there was a city! She was sixty-two years old, twice divorced, and didn't have a high school or college education or any money or any property.

All she had was herself.

But from a sidewalk payphone in San Francisco, she called you to tell you she had fallen in love with San Francisco and was resolved to move there. Again, you asked her why, and this time she said it was because San Francisco made her feel twenty years younger. And you knew her well enough that when she said this, you knew she would—despite any objections—take off and rejuvenate her life by moving to San Francisco.

And so, one fine day in the summer of 1985—just after graduating—you helped your mother pack all her possessions into her Mercury Marquis and drove her all the way along I-80 from Salt Lake to Wendover and from Wendover to Winnemucca and from Winnemucca to Battle Mountain and from Battle Mountain to Sparks and Reno and from Reno to Truckee and from Truckee over the Donner Pass and down to Sacramento and from Sacramento to Oakland and from Oakland across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco, where she had no friends, no money, no job, and no apartment.

You checked into a Pacifica Motel 6 with her, took her to the DMV to get her California driver's license, drove her to Job Services, and chauffeured her to her first job interviews. A kind old couple at church agreed to put her up—along with her giant automobile—for a few weeks while she looked for a place. Then you helped her sign a lease for a nice apartment at Sunset Towers, near Parnassus, because she had already decided where she would work—just around the corner at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center. Bowled over by your mother's self-belief, the manager broke the building rules (no deposit, no job or job offer) and let her move in on faith.

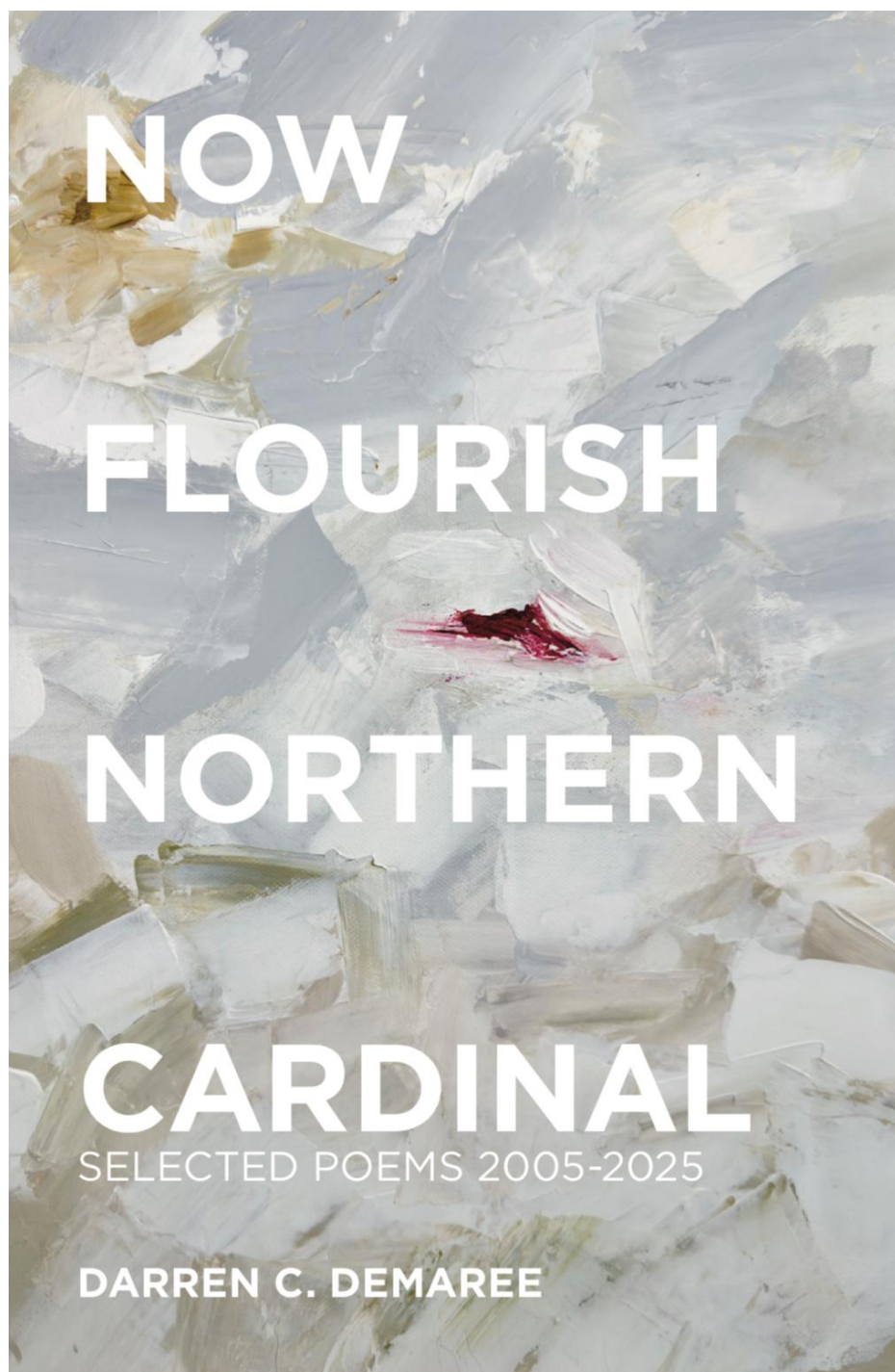
And so, you helped her move into her new place, and somehow—with her gift of the gab and her irrepressible personality—within a month she got the exact job she wanted at

the UCSF Medical Center, the only job, in fact, that she would accept: Manager of Medical Records. In this way, by sheer force of creative will, she brought off the whole daring enterprise of starting over again in San Francisco in her sixties.

And this is why, in many ways, you are sitting here writing these words in San Francisco and why you have so many memories of this city and such a great attachment to it. Because your mother—twenty years older now and back in Salt Lake City living in an old folks' home—moved here and lived here and loved it here, and whenever you got a chance you drove to town and stayed with her, and she took you to her favorite places and the best restaurants she had found, and for years San Francisco—though you never lived here yourself—was a kind of home to you.

And this is why you will always remember San Francisco with affection: you will always associate it with your mother, the good times she had here, and the good times you had together here, decades ago, when she felt twenty years younger than she was and you were twenty years younger than the man who writes these words.

And as you sit at this round brass table, jittery from three double espressos, engraving these little words on these tiny pages as the daylight declines and the cityscape subsides into twilight, you feel like Fernando Pessoa, sitting on his chair as a bronze sculpture of himself in front of *Café A Brasileira* in Lisbon, a simulacrum of yourself impermeable to time, striving to capture what cannot be captured in words, a deranged figure scribbling—with trembling fingers—these jagged lines written at a sidewalk table in San Francisco.



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DARREN C. DEMARREE
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A Day at the Office
John Grey

I am a small man
at a large desk
in a cavernous office.
My head is down
but my fingers are moving.
The keyboard must be fed.
The computer monitor
defecates information.

This was never the dream.
At best, it's the necessity.
At worst, it's mind-numbing
corporate Hades.

I don't feel so good.
But when do I ever.
And time passes so slowly
that only an occasional glance
at the clock
stops it from running backwards.
The boss is somewhere to my rear,
overlooking everything I do.
His eyes burn the back of the neck,
could cause cancer of the soul
in laboratory rats.

What does this business do exactly?
I can't really be sure.
They do populate the walls
with signs that read, "Teamwork."
But I don't think that's how
they make their money.

I've been here ten years.
That's the kind of sentence you get
for robbing a gas station.
Another ten years
and I may as well have murdered somebody.

But I must make a living.
And the more time I spend
making it
the less time I have for living it.
Otherwise, how do I live.

He was eighteen, fresh out of school, and he was pregnant. How? He'd like to know that too, but unfortunately, he hasn't got the foggiest. It occurs to him that perhaps he should have paid more attention in his sexual health module, instead of honing his skills in drawing boobies (which he was, admittedly, already an expert in). But what's done is done. All he knows now for certain is that *somehow* there's *something* growing inside him and eventually it'll have to come out.

On the number 15 bus, his splayed knees jostling against the two elderly women either side of him, he closes his eyes and tries to imagine the fetus growing inside his abdomen, wriggling its little limbs between large intestines and kidneys alike. Did it have sufficient room in there to grow nice and strong — like its daddy? It should have enough common sense to at least not get itself tangled or wedged into any treacherous crevices. Harry's firstborn wasn't going to be some helpless, snivelling, needy idiot. It was going to be *great*. He could feel it in his bones, his conjoined pinky toe, and his patchy moustache.

At 16 weeks, Harry is stacking shelves, labouring over whether *Brazen Pussies: Three Nuns and Their Bad Habits* ought to go in the 'religious' or 'group sex' section, when a woman enters the store. She peruses the extensive selection of sounding rods, lingering on a 12mm Rosebud. He notices her glancing at him occasionally and assumes she must be extremely attracted to him. It's just as he suspected. Despite his aching back and his swollen feet, he's just as handsome as he was in his prime. A thrill rushes through him. No-one knows what he's hiding inside.

Harry tries not to dwell on how exactly his body will expel this creature when the time comes — he's confident that nature will take its course in that department. Instead, he focuses on documenting and monitoring the changes in his body. Every day, while he takes his morning dump, he writes down his symptoms in the back of an old geography copybook. He's never been a medical marvel before, and he's taking it very seriously.

21 weeks and 2 days:

Chest — tight, swollen, tender to the touch

Nipples — bulbous and leaky (on occasion)

Abdomen — taut and even, looking a little blotchy?

Misc. observations: Peed on myself twice yesterday. Didn't notice until I got home. Little bugger must be playing keepy-uppy with my bladder. NB: still unsure of fetus's drink of choice. Seems to slightly favour a screwdriver, but IPA also seems like a strong contender?

39 weeks and 0 days:

Chest — 1 new hair erupted on left breast

Nipples — persistently erect

Abdomen — looks a bit caved-in sometimes, then bulges again immediately after

Misc. observations: Noticed last night that my hairline appears to have receded slightly. Confirmed this morning. Some distressing thinning occurring throughout. Temporary?

As a cowardly, woman-fearing man, Harry has mixed feelings about his pregnancy. Pregnancy is generally a woman's affliction — and women are weak. Carrying a baby makes them even weaker and more entitled to seats on public transport. A woman 'with child' smells musty and sweet, like a bundle of your favourite flowers, and she uses that advantage to make everyone else treat her with reverence. They can't help it, of course, but that doesn't make it any less diabolical. But men — who knows what they could achieve as child-bearers? Well, any minute now — he notes, as he feels his first contraction coming on — he's going to find out.

A fleshy lump rips through Harry's sphincter, tearing through the tight dark cavern. It hurts, but he's convinced he's had more traumatic hangover dumps. He turns up the volume on the TV to distract him from the pain. Sister Roxie has just confessed to the bishop her true feelings for Sister Candy. He gave her eight Hail Marys and an hour of cunnilingus as penance. Harry worries how Sister Roxie will manage to say any Hail Marys with her mouth full like that, but he has every confidence that she'll pull it off. Another contraction ripples through his hairless body. He grips the remote for support. As he lets rip one final haemorrhoid-inducing push, he knows all his pain will be worth it when he sees the miraculous creation he's been brewing for all these months.

The mound finally expelled, Harry slumps on his La-Z-Boy, sweating and beaming with pride. He's accomplished the unachievable. He's made history. But will his heir be a girl or a boy? He reaches down to touch the slimy entity he's birthed and clasps it gently against his bare chest. It's not a girl or a boy. It's an Umbro Neo 2012. His favourite football. He lets out a deep, guttural cry of relief and plants a kiss on its diamond-shaped forehead. He couldn't have asked for a more beautiful child.



Stephen Holder – Watchful Flame

The Dishwasher, the Man, and His Friend
Jennifer Haertling

Demand

"If we don't get a dishwasher, I'm leaving." She stomped out of the room.

Crass

"So, she says to me, can you believe this, if I don't get a dishwasher, I'm leaving. She stomps out of the room. That's her idea of leaving." He and his friend had a good laugh.

Regret

"I am going to lose her over my stubbornness. All she wants is a dishwasher, and I have been refusing to buy it for her. I think this time she is really leaving me." The friend patted him on the back in an empathetic gesture.

Sarcasm

"She said she was going to leave me if I didn't get her a dishwasher. Of all the reasons that are worth leaving me for, she picks a dishwasher." He cast his line and watched the bobber settle; his friend reached into the cooler and handed him a beer - his seventh of the day.

Callous

"Then my friend's wife said she is going to leave him if he doesn't buy her a dishwasher. You know what that SOB did? He went right upstairs, pulled out a suitcase, and started packing for her." His friend slapped the tabletop and laughed heartily.

Threat

"You have to buy her that dishwasher or else she is going to start talking to my wife." His friend looked him squarely in the eye. "And then my wife is going to want me to get her a new dishwasher."

Irony

The next day the dishwasher was delivered and installed. If truth be told, he also thought a dishwasher would be nice.

Hippies VS. The Bank
Vern Fein

There was a time, indeed there was a time,
when hippies, despite ragged jeans,
torn tie-dyes, no bras, long hair
or hair under gals' pits and on their legs,
beads the vivid colors of parrots,
sandals and dirty feet, weed Heaven,
psychedelic dreams--had power.

We had created co-op businesses,
ways of sustaining our culture.
A record store, SOUNDZ, an art co-op, ART START,
METAMORPHOSIS, our veggie restaurant,
a clothing store, THIMBLE AND THREADS,
our food co-op, EARTHWORKS.
Trucked fresh food down from the big city,
brought (YOU'D BETTER BE READY)
granola to life, by our Jesus freaks,
(everything was alternative), even an alternative
tropical fish store, OCTOPUSES' GARDEN,
our own print shop, HOTT OFF,
run by Crazy Frank to get our news out,
GOOD VIBES, a competitive electronics store, etc.

We spent—our parents had money
and we could scrounge with the best.
But we did not have an alternative bank.
That big grey monstrosity still smirked
over our tiny business hovels,
as we stored our cash in their coffers.

But the fat cats got too fat,
dollars from the poor weren't wanted.
The poor shopped at our stores.
The bank stopped taking their stamps.
We could not serve our neighbors.

I was there for the showdown,
the fight at not OK Corral,
the suits vs the rags.

Our burgeoning little community
had more than a million in the vaults.
"Either accept food stamps again
or we walk." How faces change,
how smirks disappear.

Our rights, restored.
America was alright again
in one tiny way.

Daybreak Soon (A Fano Poem)
Alison Jennings

Let there be crosscurrents of joy underneath a frigid winter's sky.
Look behind the brittle firmament and see a panorama of twinkling stars.
Winter shall be dazzled by ten thousand flames, midnight over—daybreak soon.

Let there be crosscurrents of joy underneath a frigid winter's sky.
Be wary, like a fox over thinning ice.
If you could drink the silver elixirs of moonlight, you'd glow like an ember.

Be wary, like a fox over thinning ice.
Spirit shall shine anew, reflecting doubled beauty.
Look behind the brittle firmament and see a panorama of twinkling stars.

Be wary, like a fox over thinning ice.
You may feel too old for fairy tales, but you'll someday reawaken.
Winter shall be dazzled by ten thousand flames, midnight over—daybreak soon.

Let there be crosscurrents of joy underneath a frigid winter's sky.
Spirit shall shine anew, reflecting doubled beauty.
You may feel too old for fairy tales, but you'll someday reawaken.

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If you could drink the silver elixirs of moonlight, you'd glow like an ember.
Spirit shall shine anew, reflecting doubled beauty.
Winter shall be dazzled by ten thousand flames, midnight over—daybreak soon.

(Note: In 2024, an English professor and a mathematician, Katherine Collins and Siaw-Lynn Ng, created a poetic form, inspired by a geometric figure called the Fano plane.)

Jake La Motta: Though I'd much... Though I'd rather hear you cheer / When you delve...
Though I'd rather hear you cheer / When I delve into Shakespeare
- Raging Bull

Jake is practicing this speech backstage. He is practicing his comedy routine. Jake used to be boxing champion of the world but now he is a failed comedian.

And he is failing. His routine is terrible. But everyone laughs because they are scared of him. But we do not have to be scared of him. He is on the TV. He can't come out of the screen and get us. He can't come out of the screen and hurt us. He can only hurt you if you are in the room with him.

This film is about violence. Jake is violent so everyone is terrified of him. Everyone knows he used to be the boxing champion of the world. People knew he could use that violence against them. They know he could hurt them in any number of ways. People were terrified of him.

So, they laugh at his jokes. Maybe if they laugh, he won't hurt them.

But towards the end of the film somebody does heckle him. When he started doing his routine everyone laughed but now years later people are brave enough to heckle him. Jake is not strong like he used to be. Jake is not scary like he used to be.

Time has taken all of his talents away. He used to be big and muscly but now he is scrawny and weak. He used to beat up some of the strongest people on the planet but now he can't even beat up a heckling drunk. Jake used to be big and strong but now he is a failed comedian. He used to be top billing at his own club but now he does his routine to a dozen people in a quiet bar.

But he thinks he is so clever. He makes his stand-up routine rhyme for goodness' sake. Jake thinks he is really clever. He thinks he is clever enough to be a comedian. He thinks he is clever enough to write funny jokes. But he is not. The guy is a complete idiot. At one stage he dismantles his belt to sell the gems for money when the belt is obviously worth more whole. Jake is not a clever man.

He is probably stupid because he got beat up so much. He got punched a lot. That kind of abuse would surely result in some type of brain damage. Jake was a boxer when he was younger and that boxing turned him into an idiot.

But the crowd used to cheer his name. People would raise his arm into the air and the crowd would cheer and chant. He was so good at boxing he became famous. Do you think it was worth it? Do you think he thought it was worth it? Is fame so great that you will take decades of brain damage, decades of being a complete idiot, for it.

I think a lot of people would take that. There are other professions where brain damage is prominent. I know that American football players get a lot of brain damage. They run around bashing into each other head first. So, they all get serious brain damage and that brain damage turns them into complete idiots when they are older.

I think people still want to be American football players in spite of the brain damage. I think the brain damage has done nothing to reduce the number of people wanting to be professional sportsmen. Millions of people would do anything to be a professional sportsman.

Most people would take the brain damage. That is a price they would pay for fame. They would pay it willingly. They would queue up around the block to pay that price. People just want to be famous. People will do anything to be famous. People would die young if they got to be famous for a bit. And the sportsmen probably do die young. If they are getting so much brain damage, they are turning into idiots they are probably hurting themselves in other ways. If they are fucking up their brain, they are probably fucking up their lungs and their liver as well. So professional sportsmen likely live less than normal people do.

But people would still take that. People would still pay that price. People would do anything to be famous. The point of this film is 'the price of fame is high'. And the price of fame is really high. Jake got famous but he had to beat people up to get famous. He got famous but he had to hurt people to get that fame. He hurt people so badly he could have killed them. Why would you do that? Why would you want to do that? But Jake wanted fame so badly that he was happy to do that. He wanted fame so badly that he was happy to hurt people.

He was happy to be put in pain himself.

And his opponents did hurt him. They made him bleed. They bruised him. But Jake was willing to pay that price. He wanted fame so badly that he was prepared to spend extended periods in great pain to get that fame. The world is full of people who would pay that price just like Jake did.



Stephen Holder – Eyes of the Sky

Poison at My Roots
Michael Roque

Chew—
Lips smack
Smack!
SMACK!!!
Until the SWALLOW.

Most of the time
I mask the taste—
cover the sour with sweet sauce
and create something consumable.
700 days—
above my roots,
piss has soaked into my soil
resulting in fruit produced
by my tree of life
rotten as they bloom from the branch.

Staring down my toxic spread,
I thank God for the ability to plant,
slap myself for poisoning my garden,
raising something processed
my system can't pass.

Pile the mash up,
shovel it all down.
Chew—
Lips smack,
Smack!
SMACK!!!
until the salty, tangy swallow.

War wages on my gag reflex.
Hundreds of hands
push back a cough,
hold up the corners of my lips—
declare a hollow victory
over another day,
force a laugh

Great Night for a Swim
Elizabeth B. Morse

Even though it was getting dark, Ben jumped in first and started swimming lengths. Diana followed, hopping into the shallow end and doing the breaststroke. Finally, they both clasped the ledge at the deep end. They were still in shorts and shirts; shoes and bags tossed on the grass.

He winked and gently touched her ear. "Great night for a swim," he said.

She smiled. "It is."

The pool sparkled a deep aqua ahead of them. Squinting upward, she saw the sky's purple. This was the most fun she'd had in a long time.

After Ben and Diana climbed out, they sat down, side by side, in aluminum folding chairs. She clasped his hand, and he patted her thigh.

Jumping into the pool at this hour had been exciting, as had scaling the waist-high fence to reach it. They'd never done anything like this before. Did she miss a dose of lithium? She checked her bag. No, the pill box was empty.

It ran in families. Her grandfather had been in and out of the state hospital that used to be called the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. She herself had been hospitalized once, so she had to be careful.

He leaned his head back, curls still dripping, legs stretched out in front of him. She examined his chiseled features. While she loved his looks, she wasn't sure if she could read him. It was as if his thoughts and intentions were in a language she barely knew. Still, he made her feel comfortable.

Ben and Diana had knocked at Grant's door before jumping in. No answer, even though he said he'd definitely be home. The windows of his house were dark. Diana called his number several times, but it went to voicemail. The pool belonged to the landlord, who lived in the larger house across the lawn. Grant had taken them once during the day, but this was different.

"We've just invaded someone's property without permission," Diana announced.

Ben turned. "So?"

Once when the three of them had gone to the Eveready Diner, Grant had looked directly at Ben and shaken his head. "You don't have any limits, do you?" he said.

"That'd be boring!"

"I don't know," Grant went on. "Do people really need that kind of excitement?"

"You're retired." Ben began pointing his finger at Grant. "I'll never, ever do that!" Diana didn't think she would, either.

What kind of people stole into someone else's pool at this hour? Teenagers, sure. But middle-aged adults?

Ben once told her how pleasurable it was to drive drunk. Twelve years ago, he'd been arrested. That was unnerving. He wouldn't do that now, since he'd gotten sober. Or would he?

She pulled her phone out of her bag and touched his elbow. When he turned around, she pointed to the hour.

"Time doesn't matter." He shrugged.

“Come on, let’s go,” she urged, getting up.

“Everybody’s on vacation so we can do our mischief,” he explained, reaching for her thigh again. “You want to lie down?”

What did he have in mind? Surely not making love in the grass by the water.

Diana took a step back. “Why are we here?”

“Grant said he’d be home if we dropped by. Since he wasn’t, we might as well take advantage. You suggested it. And I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” Ben encouraged.

He wasn’t wrong. She was the one who brought up swimming in the pool first. She just hadn’t realized what a bad idea it was. At least not then.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned anything,” Diana folded her arms, then started gathering her things.

“You’re no fun.”

“No?” She began to shiver.

“Sounded like a great idea to me.”

“We could go to jail for trespassing,” she said. “Unlike you, I’ve never been, and I want to keep it that way.”

“Even though I didn’t hit a bus full of school children, jail is where I wound up,” he admitted.

“Why did you think this was a great idea?” she asked.

“You mentioned it as soon as Grant didn’t answer the door. You just couldn’t wait to jump in.” He turned and faced her. “I thought you were having fun.”

“I realized after we got out of the water.”

“Look,” he said. “If you’re not comfortable, we’ll go.”

He got up and began walking toward the fence around the pool, the one they’d been nervy enough to climb. She followed. At least they were leaving.

“Here, I’ll help you,” he offered, wrapping his arms around her hips to give her a boost. Then he scaled the fence himself. They walked toward the welcome red glint of the car parked in the driveway.

She thought of the call she would make to her doctor. When she’d first told Ben about the lithium, he told her he didn’t believe in psychiatry. He had been to rehab after a DUI. It was court-ordered, and he hadn’t gotten much out of it. All he did was give the woman therapist roses.

“Spur-of-the-moment things are always the best,” He offered, kicking the gravel under his feet.

She stopped. “Why do you think that?”

“I just do.”

“Look, I want to understand —”

“Get in,” he interrupted, opening the car door. “We’ll go back. I give you my word.”

She fastened the seatbelt while he slid in next to her. She’d find out soon enough if her dose had to be changed.

Amsterdam or Seven Months and Four Days
Aldo Giovannitti

Only later, after the psychiatric internment, the teddy bear, and the fat woman, would I learn that MW was thirty, and that she had been thirty for the entire duration of this story: seven months and four days. During that time, however, MW looked nothing like thirty, and yet nothing like any other age one could tell.

What one could tell, instead, was that her flat faced mine, ten meters away, on the third floor across a narrow brick street in Amsterdam. If you had lived where I lived, you would have gazed into her life through the panes of glass that exposed her entire existence save for the bathroom. She could have gazed into yours too, of course; she simply wasn't interested in it.

#

The two men who fed her habit would stay the night as well. After the foil, the lighter, the inhalation, came penetration. She lay there, a corpse with legs spread, eyes voyaging beyond the man, through the ceiling and into the galaxies, until the act was over and the accounts reconciled. Neither man knew of the other. They came at night, by bike, on alternating days.

The story began on a Wednesday night, when the three of them converged. It was her mistake of scheduling. The triangulation of gazes – MW leaning from her window, the two men fastening their bikes to adjacent poles – closed in a narrowing circuit that, in due time, would seal her end.

They fought first with fists, then with bike locks, and then with bricks (which the street supplied generously), until the block flared awake at two in the morning. MW raced down screaming, tried to wrench them apart, and was hit. She backed off, her bleeding head between her palms, and watched in horror as the tangle of flesh writhed like an octopus the size of two men.

Even in retrospect, you couldn't tell if she favoured either man. She, whose skin, blue or violet, was drawn tight across her bones. She, with dreadlocked hair falling to her hips. She, in flip-flops from which her feet spilled past the soles and brushed the ground. She, who every soul on that street called nothing but the Mad Woman.

People poured into the street, looking at the scene, then at each other. They were entertained or preoccupied; a few forced themselves worried. "Moroccans," some said. About twenty gathered, but twice that with those from the windows. The police came, washed the street in their flashing lights, and left. And that was the first turn in the spiral that followed.

#

The day they forced MW into a psychiatric facility the rain had finally lifted above Amsterdam. That morning MW wasn't home; in her place, a fat woman was. I didn't yet know she was the mother. Her masses of fat followed her with a lag, and you couldn't help but fixate on that lag as she waded through the rooms, pulling out drawers and inspecting closets.

I got distracted, and she was gone. A minute later the doorbell rang and I leaned out the window (the intercom had been broken five months). From the street the fat lady spoke of the forced hospitalization she had arranged for that day – the third attempt in half a year. She never said psychiatric, or hospital; only residence, facility.

She needed me to make the call: she had forgotten her mobile on the very day. “It is for my daughter’s well-being,” she kept repeating. Then she spoke of the teddy bear. There was a teddy bear on the central windowsill. God only knew what its plastic eyes had witnessed. When MW would come home, the mother would turn it toward my flat, to tell me: she’s back, make the call now. I watched her strain to be loud enough to reach me, and yet low enough to keep the affair private. When I said yes, she hurried to dictate the number. I wrote it down. After each digit she looked around. Nobody. “It’s in her best interest,” she said at last. Then it was done, and I drew back in.

I thought. I watched the perpetual overcast above the gabled roofs, and I thought. A quarter of an hour passed, then half an hour. Maybe it had been the MW’s childhood bear. Some of mine had lasted even longer. But maybe it hadn’t. I thought. Then I stood, threw the number away, and resolved not to look at that teddy bear again until nightfall. Instead, I wore earplugs, plunged underwater, and went back to the short story she had interrupted and that would never get published (fifty-seven submissions). I typed, and typed, on my Olympia SM9.

By the end of the day MW had checked into the facility. Somewhere near her hometown, by the German border. Femke, who lived below my flat, told me. The next day the bear was gone; within a week the flat was emptied, and by the next month it was sold. Word on the street said the apartment belonged to MW’s mother. For two years she had tried to sell it, to buy a place for herself and her third husband, but couldn’t, because MW refused to move out, Femke said, shaking her head.

#

And that was when MW’s story ended, seven months and four days after that first fight. Once the furniture was sorted, the French couple who had overpaid for the flat moved in. One day their baby materialized, and I studied each stage of his growth through the panes of glass that exposed their entire existence save for the bathroom. I watched his static infancy, then his crawls, then his assisted steps. By the time he walked on his own, I had already taped shut my four cardboard boxes the supermarket boys had set aside for me and left that street, and the city.

Princess Buttercup Saves Cerealville
Connie Allen and Shoshana Groom

Once upon a time, there stood a little village named Cerealville. Every day, the people of Cerealville woke up, got dressed, and went to work at the cereal factory, mixing grains and baking sheets of dough.

Now, under the streets of Cerealville lived a mischief of rats, led by their wonderful ruler, Princess Buttercup. Every morning, Princess Buttercup would brush her coat and trim her claws, and scurry up to the door of the cereal factory.

"We want to help!" she would call, her voice ringing loud and true. "All we ask is some cereal to fill our bellies in return."

The managers would peer out the window and scoff. "Us? Trust a rat? All rats do is scurry on the dirt and steal our food! Begone!" they would cry.

And so Princess Buttercup would return empty-handed. And since her mischief had pups to feed, she would don her rat-armor and call forth an army of rats, and they would scurry through the pipes and sewers into the walls of the cereal factory. And there they would stuff their mouths with rye puffs and rice rings, and drag bags of toasted oats back into their lair to feed their young. They did not like to steal, but what else could they do?

Until one day, when something went terribly wrong.

A worker fell asleep at his desk, and he didn't release the pressure valve for the rye puffs...or the rice rings...or the toasted oats! With a BOOM the great ovens exploded, and down rained cereal, all over town!

It flowed through the streets and through windows, stopped cars in their tracks and drowned the produce in the supermarket. It covered people in their beds like a blanket, and ground trains to a halt.

Everyone at once tried to run...but they couldn't move! The cereal slowed their legs like jelly, and pinned their arms in place. "Help, help!" they cried.

And their pleas fell on the little ears of Princess Buttercup.

"To arms, vermin!" she called, assembling her rodent friends behind her. Down they scurried into the sewers. "Nub and Witchy, you take the roads! Cardboard, Paquita, you take the schools! Dirbette, Cheddar, you take the general store!" she cried, and rats peeled away, down tunnels and tubes, to do her bidding.

Up they popped in streets, in showers, in basements and in stores. With their mighty jaws they dragged away cereal by the mouthful, back to their lair to store in their underground caverns.

Princess Buttercup herself took the town hall. She fell from the ceiling onto the mayor's hat with a sack in her mouth, and wasted no time filling it while the mayor stared in shock. Finally, he asked, "Why would you thieves help us?"

"Because," Princess Buttercup answered, pushing the last rye puff in the sack, "Your people ignored us when we begged to work for food, so we had to steal for food. And now food rains from the sky! We are gathering it so we will not have to beg or steal anymore."

"How foolish we have been!" the mayor cried. And he humbly begged Princess Buttercup's forgiveness.

By noon, the people could move their arms again. By 5, they could walk. And by the time the sun set, not a grain of cereal could be found. The people wept with relief and embraced one another, and the mayor wasted no time calling the townsfolk together.

“Today, our enemies have become our saviors!” he called. “Never again will we look down our noses at those who scurry underfoot. Never again will we shame our neighbors for feeding their young. Today, we celebrate the rats! Let us cheer!”

“Hip hip, hooray!” the people cried. The owner of the factory offered Princess Buttercup and her mischief a lifetime supply of cereal as payment for their good deed, but Princess only laughed. “I already have a lifetime supply, thanks for your sleepy worker!” she said.

And so, the people embraced the rats as their neighbors, and the rats never had to beg or steal again. And they all lived happily ever after.



Stephen Holder - Wayfarer

Sirens

Aanum Khan

The riptides slip between my fingers like marbles,
smoothing out the edges of my pauses & pleas &
worries. *Come on, take a swim with us?* Glass glints
off scales & sails over to me—an offering. *Cut closer
& maybe you'll catch us*, say the sirens, frolicking the
way they know how—beautiful, brief, a small sun
setting before you blink. Paints me scarlet & silver,
dagger-bright & dove-like in the passive lethargic bliss.
Siren songs echo longer than the maker & someday you
& I will be but our creations, just our makeshift palaces
& cathedrals—glassy & hollow, a ray of sunlight exposing the cracks.

The Future is Men Fighting Over Shit They Don't Want
Graeme Richmond Mack

Eric ambled over to the pit where his uncle, Harold, worked to build up the fire. He crouched down next to him.

Harold's eyes remained fixed on his hands as he stacked up kindling and watched as the wood caught sparks.

"Your teacher broke the rules," Harold said. "He knew the new rules, but he chose to ignore them."

His uncle prodded apart two logs then jerked the poker away. The logs collapsed into one another like two weary fighters desperate for rest. The fire surged.

"Everybody knows there's a relentless war on manhood these days," Harold said between chews of gum. He sat down in a worn lawn chair and sipped from a can of Miller Lite.

"The second you're anybody with ambition...yes, somebody who dares to bind your life to a greater purpose, a larger destiny, the world turns around and shits all over you," Harold announced, adjusting his shirt down to cover his belly.

Eric rose to his feet, crossed his arms, and looked at the fire.

Mr. Sully, Lincoln High's new social studies teacher, was popular. Eric loved Mr. Sully's classes. Always animated, Mr. Sully would bob to and fro, asking students questions, considering their answers.

Then he would walk up to the blackboard and scratch out phrases in big white letters.

"AFFIRMING THE DIGNITY OF OTHERS," Eric remembered Mr. Sully scrawling in giant letters when discussing political revolution. Looking over the blackboard afterwards, Mr. Sully seemed entranced.

"Your teacher's mistake was thinking that men like us would sit back and let the world change without us, without our say so," Harold groaned, then drew down his beer, smacking his lips once he'd finished.

About a month before, Mr. Sully had moderated the annual Lincoln High debate in the gymnasium. The discussion got heated—nearly violent—ending with one female student condemning the misogyny of the "manosphere" as a male student made lewd gestures.

A student-recorded video of the event got people like his uncle grumbling. A local news segment discussed the fallout, interviewing a series of grey-haired men with furrowed brows.

Then new people started showing up at the school's community meetings. These "pillars of the community," as they called themselves, were only there to protect students' well-being.

At the last meeting, his uncle had sat at the front, pointing his finger at the teacher, then at a group of women opposite him during the Q&A.

"Kids these days," Harold had said. "They get so confused, they start thinking up is down, down's up, and what's worse is you—none of you teachers—are steering them straight."

Eric remembered slouching low in his seat and dreaming of ways to disappear.

"I understand your concerns, sir," Mr. Sully responded patiently. "But as a teacher I am committed to encouraging free speech in the classroom and fostering critical thinking in our students."

Mr. Sully's pale face wore an earnest expression.

"But why did Mr. Sully need to lose his job?" Eric asked, turning away from the fire. "All he ever did was teach us stuff about history, politics, how people used to think."

"Ah yes, the history of man's misogyny as recalled by a bunch of sorry hacks," Harold said in a mock serious voice. He leaned back, spat on the grass beside him, and scratched his elbow.

"Eric, we are men. Unlike women—who're always in their feelings—we feel the facts like fire coursing through our veins," Harold said. Tiny flames blinkered in the air.

"And so when we act, the world better listen!" Harold's pupils engorged. The whites of his eyes receded.

"Mark my word, Eric. If the world doesn't want to listen, then the real men will step in. Yes, they'll burn the whole fucking thing down," Harold warned, pointing out at something beyond the fence.

Eric glanced over at the metal fire poker propped up against the pit, shadowed and blinkered in the fire's light.

"REJECTING HATE. LIVING LIFE FOR OTHERS," Mr. Sully had scrawled in capital letters on the blackboard during his final class. He let the chalk powder fall, making no effort to dust his hands.

School officials and reporters shuffled outside the door, waiting for him to finish.

“Eric, listen, as men,” Harold said slowly, methodologically, rehearsed. “We must prepare ourselves for the future.”

Eric leaned in, grasped the poker, and began prodding logs apart.

“The future?” Eric asked, his throat dipping.

Harold ran his tongue along his bottom teeth.

“Yes, the future,” Harold nodded. “The future is for men who doggedly pursue what they want in life without apology.”

Eric stabbed a large coal-red log, splitting it into two. Flames swayed in a dance, stretching around both logs like tentacles.

“The future is for men who walk heels first to the earth, who demand what they want of the world,” he said.

“The future is for men who take what they want, who cannot be cowed, who won’t step aside,” Harold proclaimed. He gestured at the fire, indicating where Eric should focus next.

Ignoring Harold’s gestures, Eric jabbed the poker deep into the earth and sighed deeply.

“The future?” Eric asked and turned to his uncle.

“The future is men fighting over shit they don’t want!” he shouted, surprising himself by his outburst.

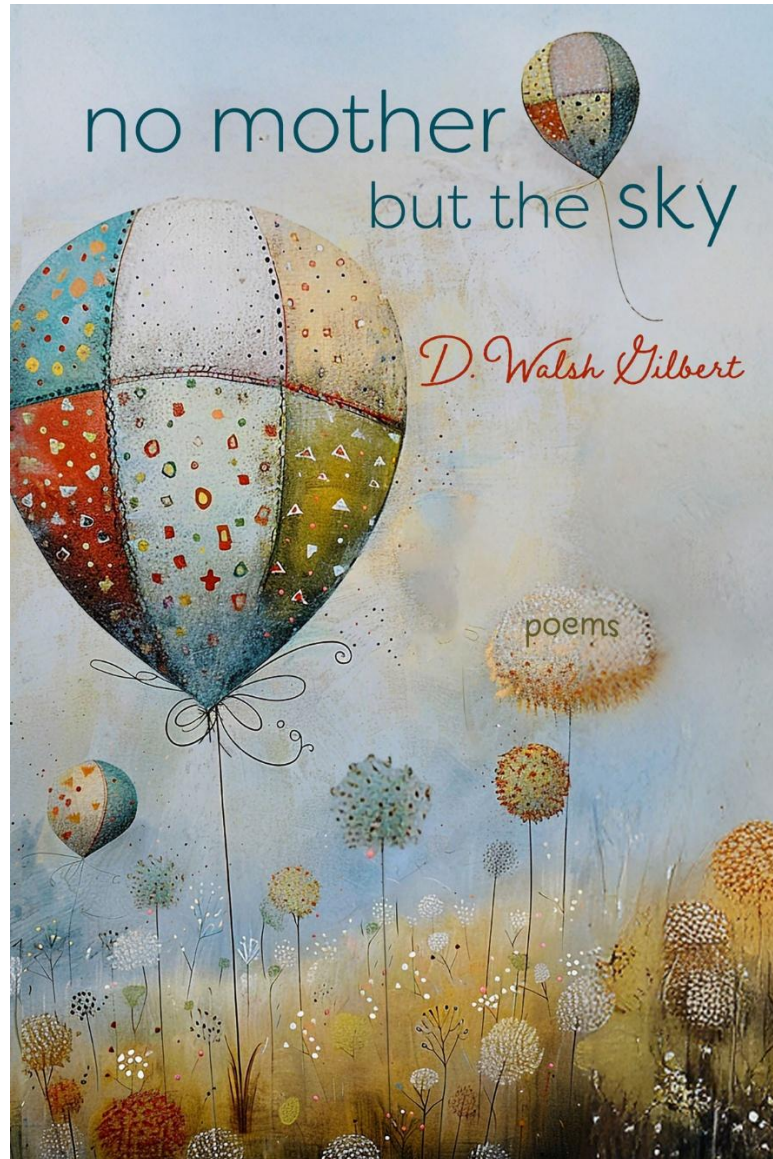
Harry shifted in his seat, looking like a wounded bird. Then his eyes darkened and he snorted to himself.

“Perhaps,” his uncle said finally, darkly grinning. “But, in the future, you can bet, my boy,” he said, looking into the fire, “that when the men start talking—everyone around will stop and listen.”

A stack of logs collapsed and red coals shot up into the air, hanging there a moment, before falling as blackened ash upon the earth.

“But that depends on today,” Eric said, turning from his uncle. “On what we do, today.”

Frozen in his seat, Harold watched as his nephew walked off, leaving him with what remained of the fire.



In *no mother but the sky*, a poet talks about how poetry comes to her. The forces of her natural world surround each lyrical moment, encouraging them to invoke inspiration and creativity. By paying special attention to her backyard landscape and listening for the voices of the ordinary creatures of the forest, a poet finds the “snuffles” which produce the magic. Here, one poet asks her fellow writers to join her—to “pick up a quill.” She recalls her own journeys, her starts and re-starts, accomplishments and failures, and builds together with her community of fellow writers and readers. This collection is about belonging and continuing and praising what is discovered “among the waking ladybugs.”

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<https://thepoetrybox.com/bookstore/no-mother-sky>

How to Put Out a House Fire

Brenna Walch

Every homeowner encounters a temperamental house at least once in their lives. Houses have personalities, and while each house is wonderful and unique for that reason, researchers have found some notable similarities in how they express themselves emotionally.

Raise your hand if you've ever had a house repeatedly allow beetles into the guest bathroom as a coping mechanism for loneliness after someone moved out.

Now raise your hand if you've ever had a house refuse to stop a dripping kitchen sink faucet because it didn't like how often you stayed upstairs.

Exactly.

And these are only the mild examples.

Maybe one or two of you have experienced the dreaded temper tantrum of troubled homes; today's topic: the house fire. Let's go over the methods developed for dealing with this.

1. *Be Polite, In and Out.* Always say hello and see-you-later when entering or exiting your house. Never say goodbye. Houses prone to outbursts will hear your goodbye and think you're never coming back, so they create a fire to replace the warmth they believe you're taking with you. When you return, it doesn't hurt to thank the house for its patience. Houses remember compliments. Trust me.
2. *Provide Outlets.* Sometimes, these houses alight simply because they feel they have nowhere else to store their energy. After an unfortunate roof fire incident in my newest home last winter, I began keeping multiple resources throughout the interior for the house to use or play with, and I haven't had an attempt at arson since. Candles in every room are a tried-and-true technique. Do not rely on wall sockets.
3. *Develop a Routine.* This one is a follow-up to method #2. It might seem cumbersome at first, but once you settle into habits like these, your house will thank you. Plenty of routines can involve interacting with your house's fiery side. Make tea using the stovetop burner at the same time every day. Light the fireplace every movie night, even if it's a bit warm outside. Even weekly check-ins on the water heater will keep a house fire at bay.

If you return home to find your house already ablaze, here is a step-by-step process on how to deal with the aftermath while waiting for your local fire department to arrive.

1. *Observe the Origin.* If the fire is centralized, note which room it appears to have come from. Your bedroom? The kitchen? In rare cases, the hall closet? Every origin tells us the purpose behind the outburst, and what your house was missing from you in the first place. If the fire has overtaken the majority of the house itself, write down everything you can think to apologize for on a scrap of paper and toss it into the blaze so your house can read it. Remember: a house fire is nothing more than begging for attention.
2. *Talk It Out.* This may involve some yelling, if the house chose a roaring fire. You need to be heard over the crackle of the walls burning down and your own

thoughts of home insurance. Your house may not want to listen; it may just want you to listen. If your offer to talk through what's bothering it and that doesn't appear to help the blaze subside before the firemen unwind their water hoses, consider repeating the now-ashen apology list, this time aloud.

3. *Understand the Ashes.* Once the house fire has been dealt with by the fire department, search the remains of your belongings in the origin room for any clue as to what your house was truly upset about. Is there only one page left of your favorite novel series? Are your windowsill plants mere specks of dust atop scorched soil and cracked clay pots? Is your bedframe a charred square of planks held together by grief's refusal? Pay attention to what your house wanted you to lose. Know that when your house hurts you, it's really hurting itself. Maybe you could've been a better homeowner. Maybe you did the best you could.

Roasted Mushroom and Pepperoni Pizza
Marcelo Medone

I opened the refrigerator and took out the leftover pizza from the day before, which didn't look so bad. I have forcibly become an urban recycler of food scraps.

My father had always wanted me to work with him at the chemical factory, as he and his father had before him. It was a family mandate from which I was not allowed to escape, as the only son and the last link in the line of succession.

I was very hungry and didn't feel like cooking: one of the drawbacks of being a lazy teenager living alone.

"Rick, if you don't study, you're coming to work with me. You must do something with your life," he had said, giving me no choice. "Besides, I don't trust anyone else to take over the company when I retire, which is still a long way off."

I put three servings on a plate and put it in the microwave. I pressed 1 minute on fast heat at full power.

I told him I was going to think about it. Then, I left the house.

I heard the sizzle of the cheese hugging the pepperoni slices, with the little bits of mushroom popping joyfully. My taste buds responded obediently as if they belonged to Pavlov's dog.

I'm still thinking about it. It's not easy to earn money to live on. At least working at the tattoo store I meet interesting people and make enough to buy pizza. I guess my father will never understand.

Almost in unison, the front doorbell and the microwave doorbell rang. I took out the plate and set it on the kitchen counter.

He is still waiting for my answer. He thinks he can still win. He's a wily old fox, but he doesn't know I inherited his genes. It's simple biology.

I went to the door. It was my father.

He briefly glanced around my small apartment, like someone doing a real estate inspection for an auction. He noticed the plate of hot pizza but said nothing.

"I have more pizza in the fridge," I said. "Will you stay for lunch?"

"I have to go back to the plant," he said. "I came to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine. Deciding what to do with my life, like you told me."

He looked at the pizza plate again. "Roasted mushroom and Pepperoni pizza? I can stay a while."

Living in a Pizza Box Town
Bob Iozzia

Sometimes I wish I could live in Pizza Box Town, where all sidewalks and roads lead to *Your Favorite Pizza Parlor* and the townspeople are all smiley and cheesy. No cross words are ever spoken in Pizza Box Town, only pleasantries related to pizza ordering, such as “Extra cheese, please, José,” who always answers, “Usted lo consiguió, mi amigo.”

Pizza Box Town is green in two ways. One is good and one I could do without. The Town Fathers and Mothers have discovered an alternative heat source for Pizza Box Town: pizza. This is good ... in fact, it's delicious. A trade-off is that Pizza Box Town cover's colors are overpowered by Italian-flag-green. Even though my ancestors were Italian, I am not a fan of this shade, especially when it deviously intrudes into the two other colors' spaces. I don't know if I can commit to living in this hued world, no matter how scrumptious the heat source is. Who am I trying to kid? Of course I would— they don't call me The Pizza Whisperer for nothing.

“Excuse me, José, is it too late to add anchovies to my pizza? And you better make it ‘bon voyage,’ as you like to call ‘to go.’ I don't like people gawking at me when I'm eating while I've got a pizza jones working. It's a scene that would upset the tranquil karma of Pizza Box Town.”

“Si, si, jefe, ningul una problema.”

No, of course not. We don't allow problemas in Pizza Box Town.



Stephen Holder – Abstract Owl

Under Construction
Dudley Stone

They came in the morning fog,
putting down fence posts between my dying
mother and my neighbor. On our side,
a white metal cage, knee high,
once home to an unruly peach tree,
reminds me of a grave marker.

Joan Baez sings “Diamonds and Rust”
behind me and asks where I’m calling from.
Someplace in the Midwest.

The old fence fell with the last big wind
despite my best effort at Boy Scouting
it with knots I couldn’t untie. I don’t miss
the fence or the peach thorns, but the thought
of losing the tombstone when my fog lifts
makes me weep.

Baby Bear
Anabela Machado

When Sara was six years old, her father brought home a dead bear. She saw him from the kitchen window, her knees pressing against the wooden stool, father moving slowly from between the thick trees, strong arms pulling the cart, wheels crushing the lush green grass. The bear was a dark mountain curled in itself, covered in blood. For days afterwards they ate the meat, red flesh sizzling on the stove, as the skin dried outside.

Once it was ready, father threw it on the floor, in front of the fireplace, the great creature hugging the ground, coarse fur under Sara's cheek every night before bed. She liked to hide under it sometimes, pretend she was a bear too, the unbearable warmth of it seeping into her skin. She grew used to the feel of it under the sole of her feet, as she walked around the house, cooking in the kitchen, cleaning the floorboards, the fruity smell of soap filling her nostrils.

It was the only bear her father ever killed. His pride, making the procession of animals that followed seem meaningless. When he could no longer hunt, Sara took up the mantle, leaving under the morning sun, quick feet over the grass, scenting her prey. She never killed a bear, never even saw one, making do with small animals who weren't fast enough, growing everything she could in her garden.

Her father rarely ever went to the nearest town, his back curved under scrutiny. It didn't make any difference to Sara, she was happy in their world, surrounded by the deep green woods. She didn't mind even when she had to bury him by herself, dragging his cold body outside in the morning, wrapped up in a white sheet, his head hitting the steps. The soil took its sweet time to yield, her furious digging opening a hole, her father's last place of rest.

It was quiet after he was gone, the silence of the woods uninterrupted by his customary noises. To cover up the emptiness, Sara slept on the bear skin, breathing in its animal smell, letting the sun come in through the uncovered windows. In the night, with the low sound of the fire, she liked to pretend her father still sat in his favorite armchair. She closed her eyes and brought forth the memory of his voice reading an old book of fairy tales. Her hands clutched the bear fur as she thought about a princess locked in a tower.

(Sara had never felt trapped, never tasted the bitterness of desperation. Every aspect of her life was undoubtedly hers. If she had been born in a different place, she would still have found her way to the house in the woods, to the man reading by the fire, his weary hands and hair smelling of gunpowder.)

The year alone passed without trouble. Sara kept her mind in the dough rising, the blood dripping from a skinned rabbit and the dirt that found its way under her nails.

Nothing changed in the house itself, but the glaring signs that showed another's presence disappeared bit by bit. Only one cup of coffee on the kitchen table, the smaller boots by the door, his clothes finding new life under her skilled hands, thread between her teeth.

The gun was the same, mounted on the wall, smooth wood shiny under the light. Sara considered every animal before she killed it, wondering if she could bring it to heel, use it to fill a bit of the loneliness that had crept in. Her father had always forbidden pets, attachment disgusted him. But he was no longer alive, and the only heartbeat in the house was hers. She killed them in the end, unskilled as she was in the art of keeping another creature.

By the time she noticed something was off in her own body, it was too late. Her belly, swollen, seemed to house a stranger. She didn't know from where it came from, but she enjoyed the companionship. The long stretch of quiet had made her so sick that to no longer be alone felt like a gift.

Sara kept up with her chores, with her traditions. She was unwilling to deviate from her path, happy to simply distort a space in her life where a baby could fit, could shape around it. At night, her nose buried in the bear fur, she imagined stretching her father's legacy. A parent and their child in the woods, one following the other, neat and sure, all holding the same gun, pointing it with the confidence of a skilled hunter. The babies would all come like hers did, unexpected like nature.

She slept deeply at night, after spending her days moving restlessly, ravenous for work and food. Fragrant bread baked perfectly in the oven, one loaf after another. She stained her nails red with rabbit meat, seared steak, fat running down her chin. The bitterness of her morning coffee mixed with the sweetness of the honey. Sara kept working, eating, pushing forward, reinforcing the world she had known her whole life. A house in the woods, the bear covering the floor, the coldness of the gun barrel.

The time for the baby came, the warm fire heating her toes, her head resting against the top of the bear's head. Biting down on a hand towel, she labored, sharp teeth cutting through cotton, her sweat drying, just for more to come from her pores, layers upon layers on her skin. The hours passed, her trembling hand reaching out to keep the fire alive as winter moved ominously outside. She drank lukewarm water from a basin by her side, lapping like an animal when she could no longer find the energy to raise it with her arms.

Sara pushed the baby out of her body, small, covered from head to toe in dark hair.

Fur, matted with blood. An animal sound coming from its mouth.

It was a baby bear.

Why Would You Choose to Follow a Witch?

Nina Gajdosikova

I blamed it on the hole in the heart.
But why wouldn't you leave?
Because I was a child
A witch doesn't look like a witch until she starts witching
and by that point it's too late.
The centrepiece, singed at the edges
from the time the table accidentally caught fire;
I wished it would do so again
Imagined plunging my hand into the flames,
Perhaps that would draw her out;
She would let me burn before that happened, she said,
Listening in on my thoughts.
I could feel her settling into my bones,
Her words prying my lips open so
I took a bite to stop them
the food rotted in my mouth
but not wanting to offend grandma, I swallowed it anyway.
I think my sister knew, the way kids just know things
Others just stared at me
as if there was something between my teeth
but they did nothing.
Only at the witching hour did she call me away,
it belonged to her after all
Can I really not stay?
No. The answer always *no*.
So I stepped onto the ledge and into the Silent Night,
Her voice drawing me beyond the clouds and amongst the stars
the only place large enough
to hold the loneliness she needed me to fill
It wasn't until the last thread of my reality broke
that her voice dissolved into silence
leaving me alone, wondering
if perhaps I was always alone, not following a voice at all
but a desire to be wanted, to belong.
Merry Christmas, were the last words I had heard
Or was it just the wind.

A Widow's Walk
Edward Baranosky

Above her worn, black shawl
A crane reaches out an iron hook.
Not far in offshore haze
Canvas, freshly shook, billows out.
The muffled crowd pushes in--

Yes? She wonders,
For this she had gotten up
Early in the dark cold.
No breakfast now, not far behind
The rest running down the hill.

*Our seventh beached whale,
We'd probably have more but
For the spring riptide--
We certainly had more rain-
Riven breakers last week.*

*But this time, God!
We've got the whole damn carcass.
They'll believe us now.
And what a body! Yes.
She wonders. Her body?*

She wonders that the rain
Hadn't dissolved her memory too.
*Wasn't this where it all began?
It's got to have a mother or son,
A single body won't do.*

There's got to be others...
She rubs her elbows with her cold,
Boney hands, *perhaps today?*
*No, none of that. If only
To prove it's not a hoax...*

All her ancestors
Had been famous:
*Captain, Yankee trader,
Buccaneer, she had traced
Them all back to the first.*

What wonder, then, that

Her son should have been the same?
Well, she'd met all kinds of
Drifters, herself one --stranded,
Castaway, marooned.

She tugs at her shawl
And starts downhill, below
A tangle of crowds, hot coffee.
You've got to have convictions, she says
To no one. *I've had years of them.*

It begins raining heavily again,
And she starts to get soaked.
Move that woman aside!
Here! Let the crane through!
Good, now stand away.

Left Alone at the Hotel Chelsea
Bradley Mason Hamlin

Charlie Parker
had that high alto
that set ya back on yer heels
that wailing

John Coltrane
played a tough tenor
a gut-shot

while Gerry Mulligan
made you stagger
with that rumbling frog
of a baritone

You've
got to listen to the high
middle
low

You've got to tune into
all the frequencies
until you find your own

and let the world explode.



Stephen Holder – Wolf and Blue Moon

How to Do Lit Crit

Ken Tay

I must be a lot wiser now, so everyone said, inevitably maybe, but this is a true story, it really is, I cannot emphasize enough. Do what you love, and the money will follow, they said to no end. Three aunts and two uncles among them. Oh, they said, she was going to become a great musician when I picked up a ukulele at three, using it like a drumstick. I followed three or four years of music lessons on the piano only to find enough talent to consistently switch on the hi-fi in my old age. I was never going to get good enough to play well but listened exceptionally well.

My older sister and I are cut from the same cloth except I like dentists. She took the wisdom to new heights. The tenor sax loved her and never strayed far, sometimes sleeping together. Afternoons, I could hear them talking in the basement, then giggling, and laughter would break out. Sometimes crying. The sax turned her breath into a layered voice of throaty melodies, polished with fine emery cloth, that alloyed the click-clack tunes on the keys. She graduated from Berklee College and then signed contracts with a record label in Los Angeles. She is now always in extra-large sunshades because fans even asked for an autograph while we were having lunch on a Wednesday, two towns over in Chester, Massachusetts.

Music lessons will widen your horizons, they said. Never did know what those horizons were, but I listened to Alizee. Discovered at sixteen, she was instant fame personified: top of the charts, doted on by screaming fans six to sixty. Well before 26, a husband then none, a few extra pounds, wider hips, rounder arms, and a baby later, she became immortalized. Now, back to my story.

The first step to literary criticism is to get a PhD, my teacher-parents said. Concomitant with increasing individualism and that grand narrative, I thought it wise to check public opinion on my proposed career path. Shall I do a PhD in Comparative Literature, I asked Reddit. Seventy-one responses later, they said many things.

But, before the first step really comes reading. You must read a lot, many said, before you can criticize. Reading Shakespeare began in my teen years, after the Famous Fives, and Secret Sevens. Loved by millions around the world, Enid Blyton is better known now as being racist, sexist, and xenophobic. Blyton did exactly what Zadie Smith has done—focus on whom some people are and what they do. So much for reading contemporary literature.

Poor starving artist might be a better description of graduate school but so much more enlightening. They did say it was going to be enlightening. Strong minds discuss ideas, the faculty said. I met so many people of profound perspectives that it must surely have been a freak collision of cosmic bodies. Broom closet for my office, with a desk shared with three others, in a building built in the 18th century for sensibilities in the 19th and should have been condemned by the 20th, was one of the brighter moments, that is until the fluorescent started singing and the heater didn't say anything. Tall, bare, sienna-colored stone walls deified knowledge while exposing striations of blood, sweat, and tears of aspirants. I wondered if Robert Fagles had sat in my chair. I gave up some time in the office to give Bobbi more space—she was anxiously preparing for qualifying exams, which she eventually failed that year. Advice didn't work for her. We exchanged emails occasionally until she got too busy as an exotic dancer.

Speaking at conferences and seminars brought me fame. Are the Greek classics queer, some asked. That, I said, took 400 pages of dissertation. Some of those ideas came from lots of travel to seminars, always to the oldest buildings on campuses. Except for Amtrak, it's like I never left the 19th century.

Years earlier, somewhere, somehow, I developed a romantic relationship with a nice epiphany. They will pay for my ideas. A professional student is what I want to be when I grow up. I can ask a lot of questions and link obscure theories, I had thought. First came literature classes. Narratology. Russian authors. Stylistics. Lacan. Done! But, that was before graduate school.

Fame came to an abrupt end when a man, who looked much like Severus Snape, who had a billowy cape, who constantly smiled, who wore a black mitznefet, passed me a blank script rolled up and tied with a blue ribbon, shook my hand, and another ushered me along. Nowhere in particular.

The final step is to get money to follow. Many years later, while still trying to embark on the new career, I would remember, rejections became second nature. No, no, no, universities said, definitely not. No, we don't need a waitress, restaurants said. Bartenders, others said, had to complete a certificate class longer than six days. We don't need someone who speaks four languages to give out parking tickets, town officials said. While inebriated, I felt overconfident about my body and wondered if I might join Bobbi on stage. No way, the mirror said. My hair is not long enough anyway, I told myself.

Swallowed by late-stage capitalism, it was time to confront a true realism. Passive voice was to be dropped. Reasoning, grammar, and ~~syntax~~ word errors made me less academic, and more normal. Short sentences, and smaller words. Swapped one register for another, substituted dresses with tee and jeans, dropped the jewelry, talk'd more sports. I denied knowing Derrida, and told new friends I loved Taylor Jenkins Reid and all her seven husbands.

I now teach preschool kids to draw in Dubai for 180,000 euros a year, a job I know I'm good at. What I have uncovered is a unique interpretive lens.

Morning Snow
Zhu Xiao Di

flakes of snow falling upon the
roof soundless a knock hit
on the door I went downstairs
wondering who could that be
at this hour in such a heavy
snow a young girl in red
khimar appeared coming for the
boy she was dating he's been
my tenant for over a year and
had just left yesterday upon an
urgent call from his Korean mother
living in Japan after surviving
her Japanese husband now being
diagnosed with cancer Seeing her
disappointment I wish I could give
this Middle Eastern girl a warm
hug she turned her back
to me leaving footprints from
her red boots on my stairs
soon to disappear in falling snow

Kissed by a Myth
or:
“Spare us death, axe wielder, ye!”
Roger Brezina

Far from human ears and eyes too civilized
to let dogmatic teachings vie
with reason and imagination,
Dryads softly sang their isolation songs
sweetened by a taste of forest scents
beneath a verdant canopy of leaves
of bold box elders, bolder oaks,
of maples, elms and hickories,
Of bossy birch, of pines and glossy firs,
Of sassy saplings and of fearless cedar trees
Mid mossy matted needles, fallen leaves,
Fallen twigs and branches filling nostrils
Fresh and fragrant from a recent rain,
Meshed and flagrant from a decent rain
Moistened by a lost intelligence
Through institutional belligerence
Insistent that existent myths
Do not exist except as myths.

Lest their being be deceived
By an approaching strutting woodsman
Toward the outposts of intellect
Who shouldered a weighty axe,
Every Dryad melded into her own tree
And blended bark and greenery
With the beauty of their unclad forms
To remain by mortal eyes unseen.

So many trees for him to choose—
The laws of probability
Predicted that he should let them be.
But—*Lo!* Panic took possession
Of the Dryads’ darting eyes
When by chance he took his stance,
Drew in his deepest breath,
Swung back his mighty axe,
And prepared to deliver a telling blow
To a perfect tree of his choosing to fell—
A moosewood so majestic and magnificent.

In that instant came an alarming shout

As from the trunk of the tree came out
A beautiful naked forest nymph
With her arm outstretched
Like a busy intersection traffic cop
Between the woodsman and her tree
And hollered a fearful tearful, "*Stop!*"

The woodsman froze with owlsh eyes
Then she uttered to him her plea:
"Spare us death, axe wielder ye!"

Dumbfounded and benumbed, he stood
Still and silent, stiff like seasoned wood.
His muscles drooped as limp he grew
And he dropped his hungry axe
At the roots of rationality.

The frightened Dryad thus exposed relaxed,
Exhaled an expansive sigh and smiled.
She glanced to the left and right,
Leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek,
Then slowly melded back into her tree
Till the tree again appeared as just a tree.

Mid forest scents and common sense
With reality and fantasy so justly blended,
The disbelieving man consented
And then thereby believing he relented.
He spared and pardoned guiltless trees
And forfeited his firewood needs
For that particular time
From that particular place.

Dragging his axe behind him,
Leaving his mind behind him,
He departed the forest
And from that day forward
He only chose ugly, misshapen trees
Because his homey fireplace
And wood burning stove
Didn't need to know
And neither did they care.

Henceforth inside his favorite tavern
Before taking a sip he always gave a toast
With nary word to whom or what
As he raised his tankard high overhead

Explaining nothing to his friends
Lest elicit ridicule to scorn.

Thus he shrouded himself in secrecy
Although oftentimes at random times
He returned unto that special place
To talk to that selfsame tree
Addressing the Dryad if she be
Dwelling and hiding inside of it.
He touched it, caressed it;
He even embraced it
As he symbolically embraced his past
As he did his rationality
With semblances of his sanity
That he alone could guarantee.



Brian Ji - Bench

Dialect of the Barrel
Ethan McKnight

Depression changed my tongue—
stretched it thin
into static wires and copper burns.
It taught me how to speak in feedback,
in cryptic syntax no therapist could parse,
a coded hymn
for those baptized
in sleepless 3AMs
and cigarette halos.

I no longer speak in "I'm fine"—
only in stutters
that rhyme with gunmetal.
My vowels glitch mid-sentence.
My metaphors bleed.
Every phrase is a detonator
I disarm with a smile.

The sane recoil from the accent—
too many sharp consonants,
too much silence between words.
They ask me to repeat myself,
but what I mean
can't be said twice
without shattering.

That's how my best friend knew.
He heard the distortion
in my laughter,
translated the pauses
as pleas.
He spoke the same language
long enough to write a note
instead of a goodbye.

I should've seen the grammar breaking
before the punctuation was a bullet.
But we only proofread each other
after the final draft.

Now the fluent ones vanish
into jobs, jokes, Jesus.
They hide the dialect

under business casual,
pronounce “hope” like it’s a chore.

And the ignorant—
they nod when I talk,
but they never really listen.
They think grief is a phase
and panic has a volume knob.
They speak in TED Talks
and drink from mugs
that say *Choose Joy*.

I envy them,
in the way you envy a child
for believing monsters live
under the bed
instead of inside the mirror.

Because once you’ve spoken
in the dialect of the barrel,
you never forget the taste.
The phantom recoil
haunts your mouth—
a ghost syllable
that never quite fades,
no matter how many times
you learn to say
I’m still here.

Eurydice
Dana Herrnsstadt

The pulse of a watered-down echo

It's dark underground, yellow bulbs busted
Maybe to do with the storm last week, rain like a damn stampede—

she pulling lake down her gullet by the fistful
a silky eel unfolding

he on the opposite bank looking
looking just looking—he isn't supposed to do that—
crawfish eyes/mollusk head/flaccid hands—
you whale-creature, you fish-person—

sonar's on the fritz again—gotta give 'em a call—x and y, you know—
echolocation was never your strength, was it, yeah
yeah, pinch the nose bridge, massage the temples, sigh. going through a tunnel or
something, say that again?
hold the flashlight steady, you sluttish thing—

and what did I do to deserve you
go on now, arms up
pretty, you're pretty is what you are
let's get
your head through the head-hole let's make this go inside-out, I want to see the tag
sticking up like
it's supposed to
the whole thing where someone says What's going on in that head of yours
where someone says Do you want

turns his back, he was supposed to have done that already
her mouth crammed with algae ready go to
hell
the cut of stiff denim his crocodile feet—bad reception, sorry, staticky, you get it—
can you help me out a minute here maybe

anything on the radar

unironed black lake
signal there but on the weaker side

so far away she can barely hear him call *fuck*—
hungry for not him, eating freshwater and radios.

Frankie and Johnnie's Blues
Greg Martin

Jimmy's is slow for a Saturday night, but it's early. Thick-hot and humid, even for Dunson, Alabama, the inside of Jimmy's Juke is cooler, cheap box fans drawing up smoke from the few folks tuned in to the slow slide blues of Macon Joe's steel guitar. Jimmys' tending the small bar where in the middle of a wood planked floor, a big black pot-bellied stove looks out of place. It's starting to pick up, but the heat's got teeth tonight, and somethin' cruel is comin', stirring just out of sight.

Jimmy's is a backwater, even on the Chitlin Circuit, and this part of Alabama is as backwater as you can get. Macon Joe liked Jimmy's though, played here before and asked to come back. One thing for certain, once the night got going, Jimmy's was jumpin' 'till all hours. Joe's guitar would start slow then grow to a pounding blues beat, his fingers and slide working the crowd to a frenzy, the dance floor jammed with hot bodies. Joe said Jimmy's had *"the kind of crowd that knew the blues down in their bones."*

Jimmy's wasn't legal. It was 1936 and Prohibition still meant something on paper, but Jimmy Canes had friends in low places—local pols, the sheriff, and even the preacher if the rumors were true. It had been raided only once. For such a small joint, it was costly to keep up with lots of palms held out needing grease.

Sometimes on hot sweaty summer nights like this, truth came in on rhythmic waves—music told the truth before the people in the room knew it.

"Frankie and Johnnie were sweethearts, oh Lordy how they did love, swore to be true to each other, true as the stars above—He was her man he was doing her wrong," Macon Joe sang and slid and wiggled that steel tube up and down the strings of his National Resonator.

A pretty woman named Nellie was sitting with Johnnie in the corner at Jimmy's and Frankie got wind and came to call. Frankie was no regular to Jimmy's, wasn't that kind of gal at all.

Johnnie lied and lied—he's been seen around town, all sweet-talk, and sugar lies, telling folks Nellie was his cousin, a friend, maybe nothing. But a town like Dunson's got no secrets, just truths that catch up slow.

Nellie was dressed unlike any cousin you'd ever seen—hot red dress slit up towards the hip, slit down front way past where the good God-fearing women of Dunson knew it shouldn't. Plenty there to keep men looking.

Johnnie was all smooth. Slicked back hair glowing soft in the low lights, a fine pin stripe suit with a white pocket square, two toned spit shined loafers, and a wide brim fedora. A toothpick rode the corner of his mouth—not chewed, just placed—his trademark. Women watched him, even when they told themselves not to.

When Frankie stormed into Jimmy's, folks felt it before they saw her—like a cold wind through a hot room. Her jaw was set, boots loud on the wooden floor. She saw Johnnie. She saw the bottle. And she saw Nellie beside him, laughing low, leaning too close.

Johnnie didn't flinch. Didn't blink. Just sipped his drink like he'd been waiting. Johnnie always played it cool.

Frankie reached in her bag, pulled out a forty-four—the music stopped like a needle scratch across a record.

Macon Joe's fingers froze mid-slide, mid beat. The crowd backed off, fast, some ducking behind chairs, others running for the door.

One shot.

Just one.

Johnnie fell before his hat hit the ground.

Blood flamed against Johnnie's white shirt and splattered on the wooden planks.

Nellie screamed, but Frankie just stared at Johnnie, her face cold and stony.

How'd that line go:

"...this story has no moral, this story has no end—this story just goes to show there ain't no good in man—he was her man and he's done her wrong."

A docent's voice cut through the silence.

"And here," she says to her small group stepping into the room, "we have Frankie and Johnnie, painted by Thomas Hart Benton in 1936. It captures a moment of Southern folklore—love, betrayal, and the heat of violence in a juke joint. This lithograph was commissioned by the state of Missouri for the Missouri State Capitol Mural Series. This tale and the many songs that came along with it, were based on an actual shooting that took place in 1899."

This startled the man who'd been standing in front of the lithograph. He blinked several times, adjusted his glasses and leaned in again, letting his eyes wander across the dramatic shadows, the frozen expressions, just before—or just after—the shot. Like he'd been inside it, the heat, the sweat, the music. For a moment he'd been there, with them, part of the scene—but like a late-night train whistle swallowed by distance, the dream thinned and slipped away the harder he chased it.

The docent continued.

"So, folks this concludes our tour of the Reynolda House Exhibition. We hope y'all enjoyed this visit and we hope y'all join us again real soon. Thank You and please enjoy the rest of the museum and grounds."

For a second, just faintly, he could hear the blues guitar echoing off the canvas.

Almost.

Vulture Manners
John Brantingham

Noon breaks bright onto the grove, and my wife and my dog and I are silent, listening to the vultures grock as they circle above in their sacred spin dance. They are here to cleanse the dead. They speak to each other. I wonder if they are speaking about us. I imagine their chatter calms them down.

My wife's voice calms me down. She watches them and says, "I wonder why they're so shy?" Last year a deer carcass lay in our street, and none of them came because we were there. Maybe they were afraid. Maybe they had manners.

Closing Time
Sherri Levine

“Let me tell you something,” my father says to me on the phone. “We’re all trying to manage our illnesses. We go on vacation to the pharmacy, doctor appointments, dentists.” Out the window, I hear a fledgling crow who can’t *caw* yet and sounds like a baby’s *whah*. I remember on his last visit at the diner, his twisted finger pointing to my baby, racing around the diner as if it were a playground, the tables— monkey bars, the dirty carpet—a sandbox. He turns and gives me the evil eye, one bulging gray blue eye. My chest burns: I know I’m in hell—inside the ring of trust and betrayal. Everything is quiet, no cackling, no grease popping from the kitchen. Now, my father rises to the ceiling, toward heaven, and I wonder if he will be let in, like the corner liquor store on Friday evenings, chained around the door before closing time.

from Margot
[12-14-16]
David Harrison Horton

[12]

witness Kronos a discontent
a meal set upon the table
there is the master bedroom
and every room else
the throne

and chairs

angels are aware they are lesser beings

servants
as peasants plow a field

the pretense of hope
renamed station
a rat upon shards

negotiate

a king

[14]

a whisper of truths we all know a deceit
apples churned to butter

an apron dangling on the back of a kitchen chair
there is time for arranging
held low to tides lest asunder
a cliché about baited breathes

1 little 2 little

heard word bout shake-up gon come
gon come shake-up never happen

heard word they gave in
they gave in they own fault

[16]

empty grows every bed

a coward descends the stairwell

counting each step expecting the number to differ

from the ascent

in other words the core of the matter

watchtowers now clocks now seven minutes to the slow
the value of hours nothing quite else
a conspiracy of will not fail

Residue
Natalie Gachoka

You hover over the sink, water rushing over your trembling hands as you scrub away layers of skin marring your palms. Artificial scents cling to the air like fungus, thickening with each pump of soap. The red ink has made a home, burrowing deeper into every crease and contour of your hands. You scrub harder; skin peels away. The water burns against raw scrapes, but the red will not relent. The water swirls crimson down the drain, staining the steel.

I had to do it

You whisper into the drain. It does not respond.

You know I had to do it

You clench the counter until the faded paint clings to your dirty nails. Your knees buckle onto the hardwood floor. Water pours over the sink's edge, drenching the floor and soaking into your clothes.

He would have killed me.

You say these things to reassure yourself, but the words fall flat. The audience does not believe you, no matter how hard you try to convince them.

That's not true

You yell. But what's not true? Your performance or your confession?

Neither, I am not a murderer

You yell again, but to whom? You look at your hands again. The proof is carved into your skin. Because you know, no matter how hard you scrub, how hard you pray, how well you lie, your hands will always remind you of what you are.

Shut up

You cover your ears, trying to drown out the outside world. It's just you and your hands.

Stop

Stop from what? You claw at your ears, trying to rip them from your head. Do you think that will make you feel better? But we both know you enjoyed that; you always wanted to do it.

I did not, you don't know what you are talking about

Turn and look at him, then. Look at how his corpse rots into food for the rats. Look at his lifeless eyes sear into you. Look.

I can't

Look!

You can't make me

I can and I will.

You look at him, the man who gave you everything. You know he was flawed, but that does not matter. He was trying to get better, but you weren't listening. It wasn't his fault for hitting you. It was yours. If only you had just been better. Why did you bring up leaving? Where would you even go? You have nothing. He did everything for you. And were ungrateful enough to kill him. How could you do this? You bitch. You slut. You whore.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

You repeat those words over and over again, each one growing more frantic, becoming more pathetic than you already are.

I'm sorry I will never do it again I'll always be with you

You crawl to him. You touch his chest like it might still rise. You wrap his body into yours, becoming one, cradling him like a newborn. The smell of iron feels like vanilla. You know he will always be a part of you. You know you can't wash me away. Dead or alive, we will always be together.



Brian Ji – Rush Hour

Blood & Carbohydrates
bug tourmaline

i sweat at night from trying, half-awake,
to peel off my own nauseous form.
i don't like having skin, having an appetite;
the oozing heat of sexuality. i should be
pristine and bump-free.
i shaved for years for you. now, hair
on my lip, i am an animal.
i leave dirty footprints where you've mopped.

Soliloquy of Man Dissolving
G.D. Christopher

I sit long, read, smoke, remember what I never had, disregard what's on hand—
I blink, see the faces, crooked looks and bloody teeth, heart thumping out of envy,
 Fist clenched for inner peace.
I assume the position, internal, of submission to the towering effigy that wears the shades
of all
 The cruelest ones.
I maintain superstition that those eyes can roll about in stone head tracing all the
movements I
 Make with quiet feet.
Do you remember me? September leaves and the way the boardwalk caught on fire?
Do you still sleep in the rain, face down, a broken cigarette and a smile?
Drink up, by day and night, in honor of the sun and moon, empty wombs, and the
overflowing
 Cemetery.
You know they're taking up the bones, right? They started yesteryear. Yard's too packed
and
 They're seeking alternatives.
There are those that want to offer them to the spirits in the sky. Yet others see these
sepulchers as
 Their source material for sculptures,
In the style of the ancient masters, and in celebration of the end that spins back around to
new
 Beginnings all over again.
They want with death to build new life, to paint scenes of love with blood that runs freely
from
 The knife.
They stand in the storms speaking curses at the clouds, rending garments from themselves,
and
 Eating off the forest floor.
The snakes and slugs, they scuttle forth down throat to root themselves in bowels and from
 Here they seize control of mouth and sing:
"Consume thyself and thy young, hear the thundering of the drums coming up from a
horizon
 Fast approaching from the west,

“Rejoice in transformation, far and wide across the nation from human meat to human waste

At the plunging of the bomb.”

A Divine Dinner Tune

Grace Lee

when we gathered around the kitchen table,
holding hands as my mother said grace,
the clatter of plates rang like beating drums
while the dumplings cracked like fireworks
on the frying pan. our voices were keys of a
piano. every conversation played in my
ears as a melodic tune. blinded by rising
steam and golden, glimmering sunlight
peeking through the windows, all i sensed
was laughter. chuckles were strings on a
violin as we sang the same song. i realized
i no longer feared forever, rather, the end.
i yearned for time to slow as the voices of
my siblings rang like church bells through
my ears. i muttered a “thank you” to
whoever watched over us, as this joy could
be the work of no less than divine powers.

The Show
Jeffrey Zable

The curtain opens and a flea comes out wearing a sombrero.

“Take off that damn hat so we can see your face!”
someone yells from the balcony, and after he does,
he recites a poem about how the world is falling apart,
the government is corrupt, and no one cares about anyone
but themselves.

“You call that an opening act!?” the guy next to me says,
and I respond, “Well, I thought it was a very relevant poem!
And being a poet myself...”

Mid-sentence the guy gives me a face, rises to his feet,
and slides by the rest of the people in the row, not returning
for the rest of the show...



Brian Ji - Typography

Icarus Upside Down
Greg Martin

"I remember exactly where I was when..." Here easy enough to fill in with *Kennedy Assassinated, Moon Landing, Nine-Eleven*, etc. But what about the smaller stuff closer to home? At ten-years-old, I saw my first dead bodies, in situ—that stuck.

A fourth grader, I lived in South Miami. Kind of nowhere really. I had a bike, a best friend, two parents, and a dog. My friend and I lived on our bikes, and we rode everywhere. At least it seemed like it—with no helicopter parents back then we were free to explore the world.

On a warm summer morning, my friend and I were riding a few blocks from my house heading who knows where when I noticed a small plane overhead flying low—a small Cessna. It flew past us, over our neighborhood then circled a group of houses nearby and kept turning. The circle tightened, one hundred feet off the ground. In a flash, a death spiral. I didn't see it hit, but immediately a thick cloud of angry black smoke erupted into the clear blue sky.

We sped toward it, our small legs cranking the pedals—this was live, we'd be the first one's there. The plane had nose-dived into a suburban back yard just blocks away. There in seconds we dropped our bikes in the next yard over. The heat from the burning aviation fuel seared my face. Fire roared, thick smoke billowed, and twisted metal screamed in the heat.

An adult told us to stay back, and we did. In those days adults had some authority—today, I'm sure we would have told him to take a hike.

The plane had folded up on itself. The tail section—white with blue pin stripes—was still intact. The rest was a blackened mess—nothing resembling a flying machine. In the flames were two charred and blackened hunks—bodies or what remained of them.

In the next backyard a young man with a garden hose was squirting a small stream of water at the fire and screaming and crying. The hose did nothing to quench the flames. He was crazed and hysterical—two men were holding him back. I didn't understand that part and it looked strange and wild. I'd never been near death and certainly nothing like this so close-up and ugly, so violent.

It turned out the guy in the yard with the hose was the pilot's brother. The pilot was a young guy flying with his girlfriend. Circling low, showing off—maybe for her, maybe for his brother. Who knows? Like Icarus, upside down.

Later, I thought about what I saw that day. I'd never seen these two people before and there weren't any photos of them on the news or in the paper—I saw them that day though, just thirty feet away, being eaten by the flames.

What were they thinking as the plane went down? No time to react, just split-second perception. Was she screaming at him, *"quick screwin' around, you're scaring me."* Or maybe, *"look, down there, Its Joe, he's waving."* Then the spiral.

The Miami News ran a few lines in the Metro Section—Two Dead, Pilot Error the cause. All was cleaned up soon after the standard investigations were conducted. I didn't know the family who lived there but I'm sure they moved away after this.

Small planes crash all the time but don't make headlines unless it's someone famous. I don't remember the day the music died—the day Buddy Holly spiraled down

into an Iowa Cornfield. I was only an infant, but I'll bet there are still lots of folks around who remember when they first *heard the news*.

Me, I was just some kid on a bike riding through a sunny South Florida morning, exploring the world—but I remember the small stuff.

Mirror

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb

She was looking in the mirror. At first, I thought the slight woman with the matted auburn hair pulled into a haphazard ponytail was putting on makeup. But then I noticed her fingers manipulating her eyelids, pulling on the upper lid, then the lower. Stepping back, then up until her nose touched the mirror, then back again, the woman seemed puzzled by her image, as if she didn't recognize herself. Suddenly she turned to face me, whom she evidently recognized, and smiled wickedly, then lunged toward me. "Boo!"

I had planned to run out of the park restroom the moment I entered and saw her old backpack and faded army-green sleeping bag thrown carelessly by the first stall, but a moment of fascination had overtaken me.

There was a time I would have not fled, would have felt sorry for the now familiar woman. There was a time when she offered me invisible hot toddies or papayas as I passed by her on my walk. It was hard to know her age, as the bug-eye sunglasses she typically wore shielded not only her eyes but part of her face. She would sit quietly on one of many park benches, everything she owned at her feet, and never really talk to anyone else except herself—and me. Maybe she sensed acceptance or fragility or vulnerability. But she wasn't the same person now, just the same body.

As the latter part of autumn approached with its colder, grayer days and swirling collage of crisp, crimson, brittle but sharp leaves darting through the air, she still arrived in the park at roughly the same time every day. She kept her routine of inspecting the trash cans for food, which she shoved into her bulging backpack for later, then occupied a randomly selected bench. There she sat at attention, stoic and stone-faced. But now the once innocent comments directed at me had turned into something darker.

No more offered hot toddies or papayas. Last week as I passed by, her tone had changed. "Hey, don't we get our drugs at the same pharmacy?" I shook my head no and continued walking faster. She insisted, "Yes we do, the pharmacy in Denny's restaurant." Adding accusingly, "And you know it, you crazy bitch!"

I don't know why she had targeted me, but it made me think that maybe there is a little craziness in all of us, just waiting for the right circumstances to emerge—loneliness, chronic discomfort, pain, stress . . . in her case, most likely, homelessness. And now, it wasn't just me on whom she seemed to focus, although I was still the obvious favorite point of contempt.

This week, she seemed to come out of nowhere, stalking me from behind. And her anger was apparent. "Hey, Bitch," she screamed, "You really are crazy! All eyes are on you!" Then she suddenly rushed a few feet ahead of me, startling a young man nearby. He had stopped to put a pack of sugar in his coffee. She yanked the packet out of his hand, ripped it up, and threw it on the grass. Pointing at me, she blocked him, shouting, "She's crazy! She's a psycho!" The man, irritated, stepped around her and quickly continued on the path.

Yesterday, she grabbed a pack of cigarettes from another homeless person at the park. Then she threw the whole pack of cigarettes at me as I passed, an explosion of thin, white cylinders hitting me in the face. Noticing what happened, a security guard came from across the park grounds. He seemed familiar with her, calling her by name.

She did not acknowledge his addressing her, but used the opportunity to once again disparage me, shaking her finger in my direction. “She’s a homicidal maniac! She’s diabolical! If you only knew!” I did not see what transpired after, as I left the area in a hurry, disturbed that she was becoming more physical. But I wondered what it is she thinks she sees in me that is provoking her.

About twenty minutes after the restroom incident today, when almost finished with my daily walk, I once again spotted her. This time she was seated on a bench in the path directly ahead. An old, brown blanket wrapped around her shoulders, she was sipping something from a cup clutched tightly in her hand. Noticing that she seemed to be staring intensely in the other direction, I tried to stay off her radar, to avoid her by taking a different route further away and to the side across the grass.

But before I could get completely by, there she was, standing behind me like a shadow shouting, “Hey, Crazy Lady! If they only knew . . . If *They* only knew!”

I had become her nemesis, but is she my mirror?

BIOGRAPHIES

Krista Sawyer (she/her) is a fiction writer with an interest in genres such as psychological, magical realism, and horror. She has experience with both poetry and prose writing and seeks to push the boundaries of the written form. At age 22, she is attending the University of Washington, Bothell as an MFA candidate in the field of Creative Writing and Poetics. As a queer writer, Krista wishes to tell the stories of those who are commonly excluded from the narrative.

George Larson is a retired Special Agent with the Diplomatic Security Service, US Department of State. He holds a BA degree in English and has written eight novels and fourteen short stories. The stories have appeared in a number of publications and narrated on podcasts.

Mark Crimmins's fiction and non-fiction has been widely published, appearing in numerous journals, including Reed Magazine, Rive Styx, Drunken Boat, Del Sol Review, Cloudbank, Saranac Review, Queen's Quarterly, Portland Review, Permafrost, and Chicago Quarterly Review. His first book, literary travelogue Sydneyside Reflections, was published by Everytime Press in 2020. He teaches Contemporary Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong Shenzhen.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Shift, River and South and Flights. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Rush, Spotlong Review and Trampoline.

Courtney Byrne (they/them) is an Irish game writer based in Berlin. They have had several flash fiction pieces published in Visual Verse and a poem in Wicked Gay Ways. They are currently working on their first novel.

Jennifer Haertling is a writer who enjoys exploring the quirks and absurdities of relationships with each other and with the world. Blending humor and depth, she crafts narratives that invite introspection and contemplation. Jennifer enjoys time in coffee houses listening in on conversations where she finds juicy bits to inspire her writing.

A recent octogenarian, Vern Fein, has published over 300 poems and short prose pieces in over 100 different sites. A few are: Gyroscope Review, Young Raven's Review, Bindweed, Corvus Review, River and South, Grey Sparrow Journal, and Spindrift magazine. His second poetry book—REFLECTION ON DOTS—was released late last year.

Alison Jennings is a Seattle-based poet who worked as a journalist, accountant, and teacher before returning to her first love, poetry. She's had a mini-chapbook and 125 other poems published in numerous journals—including *Amethyst Review*, *Mslexia*, *Poetic Sun*, *Red Door*, *The Society of Classical Poets*, *Sonic Boom*, *Stone Poetry*, and *The Raw Art Review*—and also

won 3rd Place/Honorable Mention or been a semi-finalist in several contests. Please visit her website: <https://sites.google.com/view/airandfirepoet/home>.

Dominik Slusarczyk is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. He was educated at The University of Nottingham where he got a degree in biochemistry. His fiction and poetry have both been published in a number of literary magazines. His fiction came 1st in *The Cranked Anvil Short Story Competition* and his poetry won *The Letter Review Prize for Poetry*. His full-length poetry collection *Reaction* is out now with *Cyberwit*.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Michael Roque discovered his passion for poetry and prose among friends on the bleachers of Pasadena City College. Now residing in the Middle East, he draws inspiration from the bustling, tumultuous life around him. His work has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies worldwide, including award-winning publications such as *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Queen's Review*, *The Roanoke Rambler*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and many others. Social Handle: <https://www.instagram.com/roquewrites2009/>

Elizabeth B. Morse's fiction and poetry have been published in literary magazines, such as *Kestrel*, *Ginosko*, and *Active Muse*, as well as anthologies. Her story was shortlisted in the *Panurge Tale of Two Cities Fiction Competition (UK)*. Her full-length poetry collection, *Unreasonable Weather*, was just published by Kelsay Books. She is the poetry editor of *BigCityLit*.

Aldo Giovannitti is an emerging writer based in London, currently at work on his debut novel. His writing explores moral ambiguity, illness, transformation, and alienation, spanning both fiction and nonfiction. His work has appeared in *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Ishka*, and other publications. He is a member of the Society of Authors and PEN America, and he has lived in the US, UK, Ireland, Poland, France, Holland, Thailand, and Kenya. He was born in Campobasso, Italy, in 1987.

Connie Allen grew up on the East Coast and studied child development at Tufts University. She moved to Oregon in the 70s and worked with children her whole life, spreading love for dance and reading among the kids she worked with. Needing help in her golden years, she met Shoshana, her caregiver, who shared her love for children's stories. After Shoshana mentioned her pet rat, Princess Buttercup, she decided to write Princess' adventures with Shoshana's help. Shoshana is thrilled to work with Connie and help bring Connie's ideas to life!

Aanum Khan is the Youth Poet Laureate of East Windsor, Connecticut and a senior at Loomis Chaffee. Her work can be found in *Journey75*, *The Simmer Zine*, and *Pulpit Magazine* (among others). When not writing, she enjoys listening to music and discussing politics.

Graeme Richmond Mack writes flash fiction and historical commentary, which has appeared in literary magazines, journals, and on platforms, such as *BigCityLit*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, the *Washington Post*, *The Conversation*, *H-Net*, *Yahoo!News*, and the *Journal of San Diego History*. He is also a reader for *Flash Fiction Magazine*. Originally from Canada, Mack studied

history and literature, earning his B.A. at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, M.A. at McGill in Montreal, and Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego. He lives in Virginia with his wife and young children and teaches college history. BlueSky: historiangaeme.bsky.social Threads: @graemeiam

Brenna Walch is the poetry editor for the online literary magazine *Lodestar Lit* and an MFA student in Creative Writing Fiction at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Her poetry has been published in *Oddball Magazine*, and her fiction has been published in *Sky Island Journal*, *Jokes Literary Review*, and *All Your Stories*. Brenna is currently working on a novel duology, a short fiction collection, and a few creative nonfiction pieces.

Marcelo Medone (1961, Buenos Aires, Argentina) is a Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominee fiction writer, poet, essayist, journalist, playwright and screenwriter. He received numerous awards and was published in multiple languages in more than 50 countries around the world, including the US. He currently lives in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Bob Iozzia is a former world's youngest human (tied). His work has appeared in *The First Bullshit Anthology* from "Bullshit Lit Mag + Press," "Hearth & Coffin Literary Journal," "The Short Humour Site," "Corvus Review Issue 8S," "After the Pause," the old "Praxis Magazine" and "Dogwood Alchemy's" Issue 2. He misses the days of first-person bios.

Dudley Stone's poetry is Pushcart Prize-nominated and has appeared in *Spare Parts Literary*, *MORIA*, and *Corvus Review* in the past. In addition, his writing for the stage has been seen in theatres from California to Connecticut. He has a B.A. in Theatre from the University of Kentucky, studied playwriting at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and the Kentucky State Poetry Society. Mr. Stone lives in Lexington, KY.

Anabela Machado is a 23-year-old Brazilian writer. Her book, *The Sacred Deer* and other stories, was independently published on Amazon in the beginning of 2025. Her short stories (including *Baby bear*) can be found on her Substack, *Child of Sea Foam*.

Nina Gajdosikova (Guy-doh-she-co-va) is a Slovak bookworm with a passion for fantasy and magical realism. Influenced by a childhood immersed in European folklore and classical fairy tales, she finds home in darker, atmospheric stories. In the real world she is a graphic designer focusing on projects in education.

Edward Baranosky has painted seascapes since he was seven years old. His focus on marine-scapes, draws him back to visit his native home in the American east coast, for inspiration from the North Atlantic. His work emphasizes the present - in the ever-changing moments of water. As a poet-artist he crosses the channels and pathways between the visual and the textual.

Website: <https://painterpoet.weebly.com>. Education: BFA 1969, Rhode Island School of Design, Major in Painting. He has several chapbooks of poetry, as well as Journal and Anthology inclusions, but no full collection. At 78 he is still emerging.

Bradley Mason Hamlin aka “California’s Poet” is a writer of comic books, poetry, and short stories. He is the creator of Mystery Island’s Secret Society franchise and the author of the Intoxicated Detective weird crime series. You can reach him at brad@mysteryisland.net.

Ken Tay, a retired professor, grew up in Malaysia and Singapore before moving to California. He now writes in between walks with his two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels.

Zhu Xiao Di, author of *Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China* (memoir), *Tales of Judge Dee* (novel), *Leisure Thoughts on Idle Books* (essays in Chinese), and lately poems in journals published in the U.S., Singapore, U.K., and Canada.

Roger Brezina grew up on a farm in south central Minnesota, graduated from Mankato State University (as it was called in 1977) after he’d complicated his mind with physics, math, and astronomy. After 5 decades of various engineering and technical positions, he now resides on 5 acres of the old homestead trying to uncomplicate his mind. Until December 1st, 2021, he had 5 grown children (tragically now 4) and he has 6 grandchildren who reside in his heart.

Ethan McKnight is a San Diego-based poet whose work draws from music, comics, and mental health struggles. His chapbook *Recovery is Longer in a Dissolving Mind* is out now from Bottlecap Press. His writing has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *Punk Monk Press*, *The Literary Times*, *Shoegaze Lit*, and more. Find him on Instagram: [@Gunnerman27](https://www.instagram.com/Gunnerman27).

Dana Herrnstadt is a Brooklyn-based writer whose work can be found in *Hunger Mountain Review* and *Points in Case*. She's a pretty good swimmer.

John Brantingham is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024, and he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks’ first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and *The Best Small Fictions* 2016 and 2022. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

Sherri Levine is a poet, mental health advocate, and teacher, who lives in Portland, Oregon. She spent her career teaching English to immigrants and refugees. She was awarded the Lois Cranston Memorial Prize and is a four-time winner of Oregon Poetry Association Contests. Her books include *Stealing Flowers from the Neighbors* (Kelsay Press, 2021), a national book club pick by Alzheimer’s Authors and *A Joy to See*, an ekphrastic anthology of her late mother’s paintings with response poems from esteemed poets. Her most recent work, *I Remember Not Sleeping* (Fernwood Press, 2024), is an illustrated poetry book dedicated to those suffering from mental illness or those who know someone who is. Her writing can be found in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore*, *Driftwood Press*, *Calyx*, *Jewish Literary Review*, *Corvus Review* among

many others. She believes in the power of writing in the community, supporting, and encouraging mental health recovery. Please visit her at sherrilevine.com.

David Harrison Horton is a Beijing-based writer, artist, editor and curator. He is author of *Necessary* (Downingfield, 2025) and *Maze Poems* (Arteidolia, 2022). His latest chap, *Model Answer*, was released by CCCP Chapbooks/subpress in 2024. His work has recently appeared in *The Belfast Review*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Verbal Art* and *Yolk*, among others. He edits the poetry zine SAGINAW. davidharrisonhorton.com

Natalie Gachoka is a Liberian and Kenyan writer whose work explores girlhood, diaspora, political violence, and transformation. A student of both creative writing and political science, she is passionate about storytelling as a means of resistance and healing. Her writing weaves poetic language with historical and cultural depth, often centering Black women navigating rupture and reclamation. When she's not writing, she's studying international law, mentoring youth, or dancing to Afrobeats in her kitchen.

bug tourmaline is a 30-something queer/trans writer & poet, focused creatively on the visceral and macabre. His various projects can be found at linktr.ee/bugtourmaline.

Hailing originally from the mid-Atlantic, G.D. Christopher has been honing his craft while crisscrossing the continent with his wife Rinni Kipp ever since, driven to live and create eclectically. His first short-story collection *Night-Night: Bedtime Stories for the Black-Hearted* was self-published in 2025.

Grace Lee, a high school student in Seoul, South Korea, is passionate about words. Whether crafting stories or poems, she blends her unique perspective with the vibrant culture of Seoul. She has explored her passion for creative writing at the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop and Juniper Young Writers Online. Excited to contribute to the literary landscape, Grace's writing reflects the universal themes of adolescence in a big city.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Uppagus*, *Ellie*, *Beach Chair*, *The Paradox*, *Trashlight*, *The Broken Teacup*, *The Raven's Perch*, *Part Two*, and many others. His selected poetry (from Androgyne Books) should be out very soon.

Greg Martin is a retired data architect, Marine Corps veteran, and emerging writer exploring childhood memory and personal history. BA-UF, MS USC. Greg has also published essays and working on short fiction and a novel. A musician and photographer, he is currently living in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. It's hot!

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb is the author of *Shapes That Stay* (Kelsay Books, 2021). Her poetry and prose have appeared in *The New York Quarterly*, *Camas: The Nature of the West*, *The*

Midwest Quarterly, Flash Fiction Magazine, Utopia Science Fiction Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, Slipstream Magazine, AJN: The American Journal of Nursing, Watershed Review, and elsewhere. She is cofounder of a 501(c)(3) natural-history nonprofit and has a special fondness for spiders, peccaries, and anything in the Corvidae family.

Did You Know?

Crows can live up to 15 years in the wild, with some individuals reaching over 20 years in captivity. They inhabit a wide range of environments, from urban areas to forests, showcasing their adaptability.



Edward Baronosky – Sea Crow