

MILLENNIAL



PULP

VOL. 2

MP

MILLENNIAL PULP

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Here at Millennial Pulp, our goal is to share art with the world, art that may otherwise clutter desk drawers and never see the light of day. Every poem, story, song, and artwork within our pages was crafted with blood, sweat, and maybe even a few tears; and it means a lot to our artists that you took the time to check it out.

We would also like to thank our contributors, without you there would be no magazine. Art is about taking a part of yourself and making it tangible, putting it down on paper, and letting it take on a life of its own. It becomes something more than alive, but less than living. It becomes art, and we are beyond grateful that you decided to share a part of yourselves with us.

And finally to our staff, who deserve the most heartfelt thank you of all. When we started this adventure at the beginning of 2020, we had no idea how strange the world would become, but our team worked tirelessly to ensure volume 2 would be the best version of itself. Thank you for helping build this platform, where unheralded voices can be heard.

Thanks for reading, we hope you enjoy!
Isaac Russo and the MP team

An Original Song by Tiny Ocean Americans



LISTEN HERE

An Original Song by Tiny Ocean Flame and the Fang



LISTEN HERE

Poetry by Rachel Anne Parsons

Thor and Loki Travel Across the Sea

Airports are like the underworld,
swarming with lost souls
waiting for their next transition.

I feel small,
under the radar.
People don't tend to notice me,
a useful trait.
My energy, soul, aura
is closed around me,
a shell nothing can penetrate.

He is broad-shouldered confidence,
making friends in line.
It has always come easy to him,
connecting to other people.
It is his source of strength,
tempered as it is by egotism.
He can walk through purgatory
and consider it a pleasant stroll.

Something about me is contrary,
by nature or nurture, who knows.
I try to keep my mouth shut
and be pleasant company.
It's easier when it's just him.
I almost think he's on my side.

He does the talking,
calls the cab, pulls up the directions
when purgatory spits us back out.

Air travel isn't quite a rainbow bridge
and I am not a seasoned traveler,
but there's a pub with a good drink
at the end of our journey,
and evening coming on
in a new world of ancient buildings
and cobbled streets.

We are old gods
cheering to our success.
I buy a pack of cigarettes
and breathe fire for a while.
Alliances are hard for me to hold,
but for now it seems right
to put down past battles
and drink with a fellow soldier.

Fiction by Edward W. Hall

Page One Hundred and Two

Wind shook the walls of my cabin. The tin roof clattered against the beams of wooden scaffolding beneath it, enough for great sheets of rain to wash in. I cowered in the spare bedroom, curled up on a moth-eaten duvet that looked as if it hadn't been changed in years. Lori warned me about this and I brushed it off. I lied and said the old cabin had been given a onceover by the landlord, but there was no landlord and I think she knew that too.

"There's a big storm coming, Ted," she said to me. I ignored her, she worries too much. We'd been lovers for a long time, Lori and I, yet we forgot all about being friends. As the storm raged that night, I thought about her and Elliot, safe in their dingy two-up-two-down, probably watching television to ease the nerves. Here, the power went out hours ago, and with it the phone lines. Any chance of that little red 'x' in the top corner of my cell being replaced by a single, white bar was slim. Not as long as this storm held up. I prayed I'd live till morning. I sniffed sharply – *the beginnings of a cold, no doubt* – and tried to curl myself into an even tighter ball.

When I saw the first cracks of lightning flash through my tattered curtains, I scooped my incomplete manuscript up in its folder and stashed it between the mattress and bedframe of the master bedroom. Later, I thought hard about why I did that – maybe a part of me knew this place was going to flood. But as soon as the rain began pouring through the ceiling, I pulled my manuscript out, stuffed it under my shirt, and ran for the driest room. It took a little searching – because all of the cabin's four rooms were admitting rain – but the spare bedroom was the only one without pools of water gathering in the corners.

I'd left my typewriter in the master bedroom, but I

couldn't cross through the living room to retrieve it. Water was welling up at the doorway and I was beginning to have visions, in my distress, of rats scuttling beneath or great, jagged splinters pointing up from the aged wood. I was barefoot, in my pajamas – which I seldom changed out of – and clutching my manuscript tight to my chest. I was thinking about how rusted my old Royal would be in the morning, how ruined, and how the ink would've run right across my desk. The one hundred and second page of my novel would be sodden and crumbling in the paper rest. I almost remembered what was written, but I was trying not to think too much. I could dedicate time later to a rewrite – for now, the risk of pneumonia was high and my spirits were low. I shuddered and flexed my toes: they were the coldest of all. I thought of slipping beneath the crusty duvet, but decided against it. There was a lesser chance of contracting pneumonia above the covers than there was of contracting hepatitis beneath them. I'd brought several bottles of hand sanitiser with me, but they were all stashed in the master bedroom. Besides, most of them were empty by then.

And yet, as I cowered, my mind was drawn back to my novel. Over and over, I tried to exorcise these thoughts, but they overcame me with such power that they became inescapable: like the rain. I crouched at the foot of the bed, feeling the mattress' springs creak beneath my weight; then, I plunged my head down the front of my shirt in an attempt to read through my manuscript. A writer's curse is his unrelenting desire to reread and rewrite until every page is perfect – or the work itself dies. We've all lost novels this way: as perfectionists, as egotists. We feel that urge to kill our darlings, but conjure new ones in the process. It was too dark for me to make out what was written on the cover of my manuscript, but I knew what it said. I'd read it over and over: *The Drowned by Theodore Stern*. When I thought of those words, I was a god; I knew every morsel of information about the three tenses of the world I'd created – past, present, and

future. I had control. And as that storm raged, a smile drew upon my face; because there was a place, in the words of that manuscript, where I was in control. However, I was tormented by thoughts of that sodden, loose page – *page one hundred and two* – in my typewriter, limp and plastered to the keys. The more I thought about it, the less I could recall the page’s contents. I sniffed and drew my head up to look around the room. Water was beginning to creep over the threshold.

I stepped down from the bed, lifted the mattress, and laid my manuscript between it and the frame. I stood thinking for a little while. As I stood there, hunched and afraid, I knew I needed to rescue page one hundred and two. I feared that a single rewritten fragment of my story would hinder its continuity – *what if I never remember the exact details of that page?* I felt that urge. I felt a desperation to see it again, to be reminded of every small detail, to be entirely in control.

Scenes of my own creation were flashing through my mind. Holly was my main character. Just like me, she was afraid of everything. She was careful and calculating, and prone to breakdowns when she began losing control. I sniffed, drew a few short breaths, then spoke aloud. “Holly writes stories. Darren doesn’t like them but Holly writes them for him. She loves him. Boy, girl: simple as that, Ted. And all of Holly’s creations come to life – well, it sounds so stupid when you say it like that!” I punched myself lightly in the head a few times. My knuckles stung. “Darren and his friends drown in chapter twelve and Holly writes a story to bring him back. But Darren isn’t Darren when he comes back he’s –” I paused in suspense for my own amusement, “the Drowned! God, that’s stupid.”

I slumped to the ground in despair, wondering if all stories sounded this way aloud. The water in the doorway was creeping closer and I – *how did Darren drown?* – shuffled a little farther away. I patted myself down, searching for my cell phone; but, of course, there were no pockets in my pajamas. I felt around the waistband of my underwear – noth-

ing. Then, I stood and took a step closer to the rising water. I couldn't touch it. What if it was diseased? But I got so close that the tips of my toes were inches from the shallow pool. It looked to be glittering. There were little stars dancing in them like the static of a television. I could no longer see the dark, cracked wood beneath.

As I looked on, the pool stirred. First a ripple, then a splash. I leapt back and pressed myself against the room's far wall. Bubbles popped on the surface and a figure arose to break the veil. An arm grew from the water first, then another, the fingers of this abomination curling around the wood at the edge of the pool. A head broke the surface and I was overcome with horror, sinking to the ground as the creature peered at me, chest-deep in the water. It was not possible – it was only a puddle, I had seen the wood beneath. But still the creature stared at me as it fished up a sodden stack of papers, dripping and wilting. Then, it smiled: chipped, yellow teeth were encased in black gums. The face was human, but rotten and eaten away by the depths of the ocean. When it spoke, it gurgled softly.

“I finished your book,” it said. “Would you like to know how it ends?”

I took to my feet with a start and ran at the creature. I leapt over it and landed with a splash in the living room. The water was hardly an inch deep, but still I could hear the sound of something splashing behind me. I made a break for the master bedroom. As I passed into the room, I looked behind me – there was only a mouse, no bigger than my palm, dashing through the floodwater. I landed several punches to my head and sniffed as deeply as I could muster. *Only a mouse, Ted.*

The water was deeper in the master bedroom, but not by much. I crept, for the fear of splinters and rats were now alive in my mind. I was walking through filthy water. Beside the bed, there was a desk upon which my typewriter sat. There was a piece of paper – remarkably upright – wedged

in the paper rest, though there were lines of ink down it like streaks of mascara on the face of a widow. I went to it, removed it from the typewriter, and cradled it like a child – *my child* – in my arms. I started to cry.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and looked around for my cell phone. It was beside my typewriter, but heavy with water. It wouldn't turn on. I raised it to my ear anyway and said softly, "Lori? I'm sorry for everything, Lori."

"We've been worried about you, Ted."

"Help me," I said. I pulled the soaked duvet over my shivering body. It felt like chainmail.

"I've tried," she was crying too. "For years, I've tried. But this book . . . it . . . screw this goddamn book, Ted. Please come home."

I sniffed, but not from the tears. "I've tried, too."

"Come home," Lori said to me. But I realised the words came from my own mouth. I lowered the phone and looked down at it. It was dripping and the screen was blank.

In one hand, I held the phone; in the other, I held page one hundred and two of my novel. There was only a small cluster of smudged words in the middle of that page. The ink had run and, from afar, the page looked full. There was a little smudge in the corner, too. I brought the paper close to my face and squinted at it in the darkness. The number '1' was handwritten in the corner, I wondered if the '02' had been washed away. I didn't want to remember. I finished my novel weeks ago. *After so long, how could I let it go?* The writing itself was no longer a part of me, and I wished I could rewrite everything a dozen times over. I had nothing but those words to live for. They were all I could think about for months on end until suddenly, like the wind . . . they were gone.

There were one hundred and one pages in the completed manuscript. When the storm hit, I'd just started work on the most important page of all – the one hundred and second page. It was the page I drafted and redrafted dozens of times. I wanted perfection and I couldn't let go.

Just then, I remember what was written in the middle of that page.

For Lori and Elliot. I did it.

I thought about lots of things as I drifted off to sleep that night. It's a writer's curse to chase perfection. I killed my darlings page after page – in my own life, too. I would've prayed to God, but I didn't want to believe in words anymore. I don't think any writer does. I ruined three lives by believing in them.

I often think back to when I first met Lori, or when we had Elliot together. She was happy and so was I. I was clean and we were untouched by prose. I wish I could go back to when I had better friends. Life is autonomous where our fantasies are not.

Sometimes, it's better to let go.

Poetry by Daniel Winn
The Ceiling was White

The worst case scenario
for which I steel myself,
is not an apocalypse of some sort,
or one of the disasters we are headed toward
or beseeched by.
It is to be reduced to a floating cloud
of electrons in space:
A consciousness with no senses, future, or end.

The best case scenario,
I just discovered,
is to lie in bed with my girlfriend,
her back pressed into my chest,
her hand holding mine,
as she sleeps and I can't,
in the afternoon.
Either way I am alone with my thoughts.

Artwork by Despy Boutris
Untitled



Collage

Artwork by Brandon Hurley
In Bloom (Red)



Acrylic on Canvas

Artwork by Taylor Moon
Blind



Artwork by Hanna Wright
World of Choice



Ink on Paper
8.5 in x 11 in
2021

Drama by Allison Whittenberg

The Bard of Frogtown

SETTING:

One bedroom apartment in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota.

CHARACTERS:

MELVIN, 19, a part-time poet/part-time window washer. He is wiry in build with mid-length dreads.

DEBRA, 25, homemaker/songwriter. She is slightly heavy set with unruly artist's hair. This part requires singing and some guitar playing.

RICE STREET MAN, 22, looks haggard and worn. He has been dead for eight years, and is therefore a ghost figure, functioning more for the audience than to interact with the cast.

(Curtain rises with MELVIN scratching away in a notebook, a kitchen table serving as his desk. He goes through a series of scribbling and scratch outs.)

MELVIN

(Sitting at his desk)

Like most writers, I am full of shit. Sometimes I look at the piles and piles of half started prose and think, "Got a match?" And then, I think, I'll write a poem. Poems save paper. So all of a sudden, I am a poet. Yet I still have nothing to say.

(Looking up at the ceiling for inspiration)

Write, writer, write! Goddamn it, write you fucking

idiot. Asshole, hole in the ass. Craphead. Son of a bitch! Hey!

(Look left)

What?

(Look right)

Don't get personal.

(Look left again)

By the by, my real father, yes, the one I have never seen in my life, is a goddamn poet. My mother still gets an occasional sestina through the mail from his as yet to be published chapbook entitled, *The Part of Me that No One Knows* . . . Tell me about it.

(Getting up, pacing)

MELVIN

Yet as a poet, I just don't feel like I am any good. When I was younger I used to read my stuff with a sense of accomplishment. Now, I just cringe. After work I come home and try to get busy on something good and it turns out to be trite, banal, and unkempt.

(Sitting down, musing)

Children are natural artists, then they get old and they dry up. I am 19 now, and as I keep saying I have nothing to say.

(DEBRA walks on stage. DEBRA is in broken-in jeans, a teal tee and a fawn colored leather jacket. She wears all of this indoors because they have limited heat. The walls are frost-covered.)

I've lived with Debra for the past four years.

(DEBRA nods.)

When I left home it was like a funeral, except no one had died. I was so sad. I cried once I hit the main drag. Big tears, buckets of them. I was fifteen when Debra and I found our own place. We moved with in the city. From west to east while still staying north. We live in the rough and tumble Frogtown. In Frogtown, us people sell crafts, we line the drags with our handufactured baskets, pottery, metal works, and textiles. Debra is a little bit older than me and helped me out a great deal. Not just with the security deposit but she

listened to me hash out my childhood. We spent long nights therapeutically bottle and blunt passing ‘til I got it all out, the words.

DEBRA

Oh yeah, baby.

MELVIN

I realized now that not only do I hate my stepfather, but I also resent my younger brother, and that my mother is a continual source of frustration. With all that catharsized, I should crack open like an egg. I should have plenty to write about. I should look at a blank piece of paper and fill it. But I can’t . . . I wash Northwest airplanes for a living. Somebody has to. I wake up at five in the morning and go down to the airport and scrub the thick plastic windows with a long handled brush. I have always loved planes, always dreamed of floating above things. Tempting God with man-made angel wings.

(MELVIN walks about the one room apartment.)

Debra is a diligent writer. She does songs.

(DEBRA walks in front of him now, she is holding the guitar pick between her teeth as she scribbles notes on a page. She flicks her head back and winks at him.)

She is a winker. Always winking, and I think just who in the Hell wears the pants in this relationship.

DEBRA

I do.

MELVIN

(Walking about)

Debra loves bits of clutter: Books and papers and hankies that she blew her nose on. I can’t stand it. Often, I just want to tidy up but dare I take liberties with her –

DEBRA

Genius is as good a word as any.

MELVIN

But perhaps it’s still not the right one . . . A few months ago, Debra sold one of her songs to a big deal down-

town company. She got five hundred dollars outright. We had steak for a week. That's the problem with being black and dealing with whites, everything you sell is sold outright. And haven't us blacks had to give enough away? They have stolen our labor, our women, our music.

DEBRA

(Singing and strumming her guitar)

Tangled in the sheets of a flophouse bed . . .

MELVIN

And when Debra sang it felt real. It was textual and lilting yet bodacious as preachers. She used steel strings instead of the ivory twinkling of a piano. I heard the pop version on the radio and I almost kept passing the dial. It was a totally different song, and a corny one at that.

DEBRA

(Singing louder)

I'm at a job that never pays. I'm afraid to ask for a raise . . .

MELVIN

Oh, Debra . . . You are the sanctuary from my problems, I forget you have so many of your own. Like any other black man with a family tree that tangles at the root, I could never get it straight. But I knew you were the half sister of the dead Rice Street Man.

(DEBRA stops singing, puts her guitar down.)

MELVIN

The Rice Street Man. The Rice Street Man and his dog. The Rice Street Man that smelled worse than his dog. And as if that weren't bad enough, quite a few of Debra's short-on-dollar-bills, long-in-the-tooth relatives used to stay over temporarily for months and months. And poor little Deb, you were treated like you were invisible. You were forced into disappearing to create room.

DEBRA

I used to have to give up my bedroom and sleep on the couch. It was then that I learned to play that funky old guitar

that I'd found in a dumpster. At night while all the live-ins were raising Hell I'd mouth the words, practice fingering, playing without sound.

MELVIN

I like to use your life in my writing even more than I like to use my life in my writing.

DEBRA

Use me, but don't use him, Melvin. Promise. Don't use the Rice Street Man.

MELVIN

Rice Street is the shopping district, it runs clear to the state capital. The Rice Street Man walks around asking people for a hand out.

(The Rice Street Man appears. MELVIN appears unaffected by this. Only DEBRA can see him.)

DEBRA

Roland!

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

MELVIN

He's one of those bums. He's one of the guys who stand out looking for a hand out. A chump. A dreg. I hate those damned nomads who make my town look like a shanty.

DEBRA

But he ain't like the other vegs. He stays solo. He don't share his sleeping bag or his wine bottle.

MELVIN

Jobless, idle, filthy, filthy.

DEBRA

Filthy. Yes, filthy.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

Steam grate for warmth, stuck to the sidewalk like old gum. I hear his stomach growl.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

Change. That's what I asked you to do. Change. Why can't you change? Change! Get your act together.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

MELVIN & DEBRA

I was there when he died. I stepped back as that cough rose in his throat. The Rice Street Man. Who has health insurance? Suppose it spreads.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

MELVIN & DEBRA

He jerked and grimaced and staggered a few paces backwards and forwards. Rolling in the slush like a worm on a hook.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

But the homeless don't die, they live forever. They have special powers.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

The Rice Street Man will never die.

MELVIN

Special powers?

DEBRA

Special powers.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . . How do you get on the street? How does it come to be real? How does the bottom totally fall out? Do you go out on the drag, for a week, for a month and all the while you tell yourself, "Self, this is only for the day, for a week, for a month." And before you know it, you're staying there a lifetime, but all the while it feels so all of a sudden. And you litter the streets and you drink and you drink

and you drink from paper bags and you disappear around corners. It still seems weird to you to be a true dreg, such a displaced person. The disenfranchised of the disenfranchised. And everybody knows you, and everybody watches you, yet everybody ignores you. You sleep on the bus bench or staple yourself to a grate. And everybody hates you because you give us a bad name. You cough, spit and smell bad. You don't have a decent place to pee so you pee in trash bins.

DEBRA

(Singing)

If you see me walking down the street . . . walk on by . . .

MELVIN

(To the Rice Street Man. Pointing at him.)

Get a job. Get a funk hole job. What makes you so special that you can't haul your ass to a stupid funk hole job like everyone else?

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . . Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

Why do you haunt me? I would have done anything for you. You had a family. We would have taken you in.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

Change, damn it. Roland, you don't want money. You can't use it now. You couldn't use it then.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

I don't know what you want. I never knew then and I don't know now.

MELVIN

I want to write a poem.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

Memories are like coins . . .

(To Melvin)

Writers are the worst type of people God ever put on this earth. They note the way the dirt falls on a casket of a dear friend because they know they can use it later.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change . . .

DEBRA

It is always writing. My writing, my writing.

(Turning to MELVIN)

It's your writing, your writing, your writing. The whole fucking world revolves around our writing.

MELVIN

I want to write a poem.

RICE STREET MAN

(Faintly)

Spare some change . . .

(The Rice Street Man disappears.)

DEBRA

Roland. Roland.

MELVIN

(Walking over to the desk)

Lovers make the worst critics, so why do I always ask you, Debra?

(He shows her what he has been writing.)

DEBRA

(Reading over it)

I don't know, it sort of sticks in my throat.

(MELVIN snatches the paper back from her.)

MELVIN

You are supposed to fucking read it, not fucking eat it.

(She throws her head back and laughs at him.)

DEBRA

Speaking of eating. Let me get supper together.

(DEBRA confines herself to the kitchenette. She is seen and

heard fiddling with pots and pans.)

MELVIN

(Uncrumbling his writings.)

Salt without bread. / Thorns on a cactus. /

Otis Redding, I miss you. / Why didn't you go Greyhound?

(He smiles, puffing his chest out, and struts across stage.)

MELVIN

Sure, it needs some revision, but it's not all bad. The images are clear and concrete. The sound and rhythm may need some spit and polish. All right, it sucks. It bites the big wiener. But at least it has punctuation and it does not employ the lower case "I". I want to be Langston Hughes.

DEBRA

(Calling from the other room)

I want to be Tracy Chapman.

MELVIN

Enough of these meditations. These scream fests on the mysteries of freedom, love, and hate. I want to be remembered. I know I am not a great writer, I am only a great re-writer. Half the time there is nothing pithy in the first draft. Half the time I don't know where it's going or how to improve it. I don't have a style or tone that I wish to effect. I feel like screaming at myself 'where is my theme?', 'where is my message?', 'Why am I writing this poem in the first place?' I will switch back to prose.

(To the audience)

Inside every fiction writer there is a failed poet. Metaphors, like my heart is dry like a big red balloon, are inflated, but then I think 'all right so where do I go from there?'

Where do I go from there?

(DEBRA sets the table right in front of MELVIN.)

MELVIN

Alas, I break for supper.

DEBRA

(Heckling him)

My ass, I break for supper.

MELVIN

What do you got?

DEBRA

I heated up yesterday's leftover pizza pie with shrooms.

(They down a few pizza slices and drop the crust.)

MELVIN

You know, you wouldn't be such a bad cook if you measured. Don't guestimate so much.

DEBRA

Yes sir.

MELVIN

Was that a rude thing for me to say?

DEBRA

(Winking)

No, it was just you.

MELVIN

(Teasing her)

You have a great smile, nothing but teeth. Big horse teeth and squinty eyes.

DEBRA

All right. All right.

(She rises and goes to the freezer, producing a tub of ice cream. She scoops out two platefuls.)

DEBRA

How are the planes?

MELVIN

(He shrugs)

Recently, they had entrusted me with an unbelievable amount of keys.

DEBRA

How many is too many to believe?

MELVIN

37.

DEBRA

Unbelievable . . . Now don't fly off with the place.

(Melvin stands and she makes a grab for his butt, playfully. He then retires to the bedroom portion of the room.)

DEBRA

(Calling after him)

Off to do more writing?

MELVIN

That's a good question.

(To the audience)

In this next expanse of time, I had done everything to write. I drew a bath, drank some murk, splashed cold water in my ears. I dance.

(He dances the bop, the bump, the butterfly, the electric slide, the four corners, the icky shuffle, the mashed potato, the shingling, the worm.)

I read that dancing is good for the creative side of your brain in *The Artist's Way*. I feel refreshed, but still no words.

(He rolls a joint).

MELVIN

So I light up and dream.

(Closing his eyes)

I am dreaming that I am making love to Debra, only she has thick white hair and the wind blows and exposed her black roots. Her eyeliner ran down her cheeks like fast graffiti. Those long full breasts have shrunk to teacups.

I dream of white food. Rice pudding and glazed doughnuts. SPACE. Time and space. Time sitting, smoking in the numb silence; watching the snow, as if it were doing something wild, like disappearing instead of the same old same old. I press my face against the pane and gaze at the wide, white city below. Winter. Heavy snowstorms at the floodgates bringing up a whirlpool of memories. Snow as marvelous as sugar – pink and white candy coated Christmas. A fairy tale of cabbage and rye toast. Toy soldiers. I shout a rendition of “White Christmas”.

DEBRA

(Standing by the doorway)

Are you going to share or is a contact high all that I
can hope for?

MELVIN

(He rolls a herb her way.)

Sometimes it's better to distill in the hope of further
cross fertilization.

DEBRA

(Smoking)

Oh yeah, baby.

MELVIN

See, we do have freedom in America because we can
fucking cuss and call it poetry.

DEBRA

We can buy things. Delicious things.

MELVIN

Shiny purple cars.

DEBRA

Complicated calculators.

MELVIN

Pasta makers.

DEBRA

We can get ourselves some education.

(She inhales deeply)

THE RICE STREET MAN

(Reappearing)

We can put our beautiful-one-time-only-self on the
street and nobody cares . . . They walk by you . . . They don't
see you . . . Winter or Summer. Day or night . . . They just
leave you to yourself.

MELVIN

There's a poem in that.

DEBRA

There's a song in that.

MELVIN & DEBRA

I have the beginning of something . . .

Snow like sweat / or smoke, like mercury, /
rising above itself / in a cloud.

(Curtain falls.)

Poetry by Ashley Cline

[in-between mast years]

i drive to the grocery store, & sit there – in the parking lot – for hours. i do not get out, just as i do not wander the aisles; don't so much as thumb through the bruised fruit from other places – warmer places, i think. i don't do much of anything, actually. it is december, & i am inventing new ways to be alone.

the geese drift on the line of the tide, & i have nothing left to say. does this surprise you – how my teeth moor

themselves to quiet, to hard-enameled touch? the shore could have taught you different, could have loosened

your grip on the future where you are air – no – water, you were always meant to be water, weren't you? & i

was always meant to break my own heart – to stack our ghosts; to line them up; to give our stories teeth. what

does it mean to be haunted in a country where there is always money for war? where i can imagine the loss,

but not the love, & i wonder what that says about me; is this what it means to pull the petals off a wildflower

& live to love you back into open air? does this surprise you – how i'm not surprised anymore? after all, winter

is here: & she's called all our bluffs.

Artwork by Ilaria Cortesi
The Mind Still Travels



Digital Collage

Ilaria Cortesi

37

Artwork by Jack Bordnick
Facing It Together



Mixed Media Digital Art
8 in x 10 in

Photography by Jeremiah Gilbert
Taipei Night Market Vendor



50mm Photography
12 in x 18 in

Artwork by Barbara Sarvis
Moon Dancer



Fiction by James Mads Pryor

Green Carpet and Folding Chairs

Seeing someone you love is watching your alarm clock as it ticks the days away until Sunday chimes in your heart. It's pulling a tie tight around your neck and forcing on a stiff pair of oxfords. It's releasing a yawn as you drive the backroads, feeling each bump at the base of your spine.

Seeing someone you love is hearing the opening chord of a church choir rattle the ancient stained-glass windows. The sound swirls and billows to fill the space, ringing in the worshipper's ears, giving them hope of their savior. It's full and rounded, a major key, enveloping the large space of creaky wooden pews littered with families, all placed upon scuffed up green carpet that gives too much traction against your shoes as you "excuse me" and "sorry" and "pardon me" your way to your seat.

Seeing someone you love is remembering the first time you tasted sacramental wine. The priest presses a wafer to the flat of your tongue with a firm but gentle hand. It dissolves almost completely before the chalice touches your lips and you are allowed to take a sip of His blood to wash down His body. The youth pastor that forever lives in the back of your mind says, "*The wine must be natural, made from the grapes of the vine, and not corrupt*". You begin to wonder about the technicalities on the meaning of "*corrupt*," but the soft clinking of the rosary beads as the priest moves onto the next person signals you to shuffle down from the altar.

Seeing someone you love is smelling the staleness of old bibles tucked away in the closet under the stairs, all while your mind is occupied with something much more stimulating. It tastes like cheap wine and coconut flavored chapstick. It feels like the fabric of your nice shirt being balled tightly inside a fist, a deep freeze consuming the pit of your stomach

as you hear a pair of heels click past the (unlocked) door. It sounds like a soft “shh!” in your ear, then muffled laughter pressed into your shoulder. You slap a hand over your own mouth to stop any sound from coming out, but once the heels fade away the giggles seep through your fingers.

Seeing someone you love is counting to sixty after she’s left so you don’t look suspicious walking in together. You smooth out the wrinkles in your shirt the best you can and avoid the eyes of the preacher as you “excuse me” and “sorry” and “pardon me” back into your place among the pews. The hymns feel new to you. You feel new. You feel a change in your person that starts in your heart, travels all the way to your toes and pools at the very ends of your fingertips.

Seeing someone you love is knowing that next Sunday is only seven days away.

Poetry by Bridget Waldamere
From My Mother's Eyes:

Matted hair and crooked teeth
Too tired to look pretty
Malicious in her words

The girl comes home from school
Covered in bruises and scratches
Another playground fight,
A fight to the death it seems.

Animal like aggression,
“Her canines came in first”
Her mother whispers around the room
Watching her child eat with her hands
And scream profanities in the air.

She tucks her in at night,
Careful to not get scratched
On unclipped talons.

Reads her a book,
With the lights on
To see her every movement.

To make sure the the animal she has
Raised and fed and clothed,
Doesn't turn around
And eat her whole.

Poetry by Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

But Grass Cannot Leave

the first thought
of all the grass

trapped underneath
a foot of snow

*here i am
to die*

*because here i am
drowning in what*

you think will feed me

*but i cannot drink
what is frozen*

but grass cannot leave
in any way other than death.

so grass sprouts underneath
dormant
and waiting

on tread the feet
of winter boots

crunch the winter's sand.

here the grass
cannot be seen as green

and when the prison melts
we only say

that we wish it could snow again.

in the summer
grass grows yellow

dying in death
matching the sun.

flood the grass
letting it tear up
with dew

weeping until
they are drowning again.

the first thought
of all the grass

trapped underneath
a foot of snow

*here i am
to die*

*because here i am
drowning in what*

you think will feed me

*but i cannot drink
what is frozen*

but grass cannot leave
in any way other than death.

Poetry by Paul Tanner

Shared House

I'd just got the job.
first shift, about five hours in, I went into the staff room
and she was lying across a couple of chairs, fingering her ear.
I know you, don't I? she said without looking at me.
I think you live in the room upstairs, I said.
yeah, she said. you live in the room downstairs.
yeah.
first day?
yeah.
you just getting a break now?
yeah.
cunt, isn't he? she said. John?
he the floor supervisor?
yeah.
then yeah, I agreed. John is a cunt.
yeah, well, she finally took her finger out of her ear. don't
worry – I'm gonna send some dodgy porn to his computer.
well – my boyfriend will.
I'd seen her boyfriend in the communal kitchen.
one of his nostrils was twice the size of the other.
landlady ever say anything about pets to you? she looked me
in the eye.
we really want a hamster.

Poetry by Kip Hart

Imagined Love

If I'm eating my food, I'll offer you
a bite. But only one bite. I'm hungry,
and you know that I brought this food for me.
And if it's raining, I would let you use

my umbrella; except I never keep
one on me. I don't really mind the rain.
Of course I know that you would do the same.
I'll buy you anything you want that's cheap.

The occasional dinner and ice cream.
I think you'll buy the next one probably;
if not, I'll haply take one for the team.
We can split a bottle of wine or three.

And I'll order the cab to drive us home.
Just promise I don't have to be alone.

Fiction by Marissa Isch

Silence on her Skin

As a little girl, Gwen jumped from swings and for moments at a time, she felt like she had wings. Once, she landed too hard and fell to her back, knocking the wind out of her lungs. She gasped and looked into the wide faces of those circling her. Gwen's smile crept over her whole body and she got right up and back on the swing.

She was born with hair so blonde that she looked bald on white backgrounds. That never changed, even as she grew into her adult skin. Her breasts are large and her eyes had enough yellow in them that people tell her they look like sunflowers. Gwen was obsessed with open windows and loved how skylights do nothing but serve their own purpose.

At eighteen, Gwen moved to New York. She learned to run for subways and watch people cry. As often as possible, Gwen walked across the Brooklyn Bridge and sat on the courthouse steps downtown. There was the most captivating wind tunnel to watch from that spot. She envied any newspaper peddler who dared to take a post nearby. Their papers taking flight, swirling around like ballerinas caught in an invisible tornado. She scurried for the "Arts" and "Economy" sections with her hair whipping around her face.

Gwen asked her brother Evan to visit and he had his own reasons not to so she felt her sadness with every fiber. Maybe it's that she had been like a feather her whole life. Evan once told her he needed the sea and Gwen scoffed because she felt weight like water when she walked down streets and stood in coffee shops. She just wanted open space, open and fierce like the wind. She wanted to sail through the sky and feel the silence on her skin.

Gwen met a little graying woman in a bodega once. This woman said, "I'm not sorry for anything." And Gwen

said, “I’m ready to try that.” And the greying woman said, “Go to the prairie and catch up with the tall grass.”

One sunny winter day, Gwen woke up and the sun glowed orange and yellow on the tops of the bare trees that cast long shadows across her bed. She dressed slowly, even matching her socks. Gwen put on her last clean pair of underwear, her thinnest pants, and her tightest coat. She got in a cab and told the driver to go until she said stop. Somewhere on the B.Q.E. between downtown Brooklyn and Bed-Stuy, she told him to stop and he actually did. She stood on the edge of the overpass until her nose and toes were numb, then she jumped. She became a silhouette against the sun.

Time passed and sometimes she could feel her childhood sitting next to her bed in the hospital room. Time passed and sometimes she could feel the nutrients in her body. Time passed. Gwen finally felt the urge to be grounded and not in a grave. On the nightstand next to her bed was a black and white photograph of a shadow falling. Her body, flying.

Poetry by Robert T. Krantz

Man Kind

Today I'm looking for the man,
walking downtown in white
leather shoes, humming Ring of Fire
while he thinks of vodka
and other women.

I am looking for the man locked
in a bedroom that smells
like sweat, Vick's, and iodine.
He is thinking of other women too –
diazepam, MAO inhibitors.
Today I am looking for the man
at Kodak at Hooker at Bell
I am watching him fall between
the boat and the dock, headfirst.
Everyone is frozen.

This man thinks of other women too,
babysitters and mini-skirt neighbors
who smoke Virginia Slims
and who have, indeed, come a long way baby.
Today I am looking for the man
who has spilled more alcohol
than I've consumed, huffed super glue
and magic markers, but never together.
The man may be in church
singing All are Welcome,
or on a line singing
Welcome Home (Sanitarium).
He may be Italian
And lifting weights before work.

He may come from Johnstown, PA.

He may be charming and witty
and drink fifteen Heinekens
at the reception. I watch TV
for the men with glocks for cops
or long rifles for plucking off intruders,
in self-defense. This guy might
have a Mohawk
and drive a cool black van
and save the cool day
and love it when a plan comes together.
He might paint, or croon or
have nunchuck skills, and the coach
should have definitely
put him in the big game.
I am looking for this man
today in books – always in books –
obsessed men who can't love
and write about the treacherous sea.
Today I am looking for the man
in your green eyes that turn blue
when you look away –
like a particle or wave.
Or in a rowboat on a pond,
trolling for the axe that fell
to the sand below,
but that he can still see.
He may be Jim Morrison –
Roger Staubach or Bobby Orr,
Syd Vicious. Once, I thought
he was Walt Whitman.
He could be Ghandi,
or Jesus Christ himself.

I kneel by a pool
and find the man's face
in still waters.

I cannot stop looking.

Poetry by Rich Glinnen

Tourist

Like a feral cat
Seeking warmth
From the bellies of
Freshly parked cars,
I dart from
Rotting moments
For pockets
Of peace.

Poetry by Evan Bennett

I was Emo Last Night so Sue Me

I'm standing in the kitchen and the world moves around me.
It's only been a week since the owner of the house on Mohawk
street slipped into oblivion's warm embrace.
Yet it already feels like a lifetime since love existed within
these walls.

I navigate piles of memories etched into plates and glasses.
I stumble over dreams filed carefully on the takeout menus
and cloth napkins of long gone restaurants.
I'm told to get a move on, to grab a box of those glasses or
plates or menus or we'll be late.
But what if that's ok?

It's 3:13 a.m. and I'm moving through a motionless kitchen.
Even though the house on Millaudon is full of tenants.
Each one full of life and love and youth.

I feel nothing but the cold embrace of a late-summer breeze.
As I move through a kitchen littered with unpacked boxes of
New glasses and plates and
A singular takeout menu, that I presume is yet to be used.

According to experts, the kitchen represents life.
The focus of the home where generations
Of happy members of a nuclear family sit down to dine.
Where jokes and dreams and secrets and giggles
Are exchanged over turkey and wine . . . or beer . . . depending
on the occasion.

I wonder, as I pick up a box of bowls, what that must be like.
As I try desperately not to wake the tenants, I wonder what

it's like.

To have a warm, loving kitchen to call home.

I load the last of the boxes into the car and

Arrive at the back door at 3:15 a.m.

And I can't help but glance back.

At the darkened kitchens.

The likes of which I'll probably not see again.

And as I take one last look as I close the door behind me.

And my mother's car rolls slowly back towards home.

I think about what was.

And what could have been.

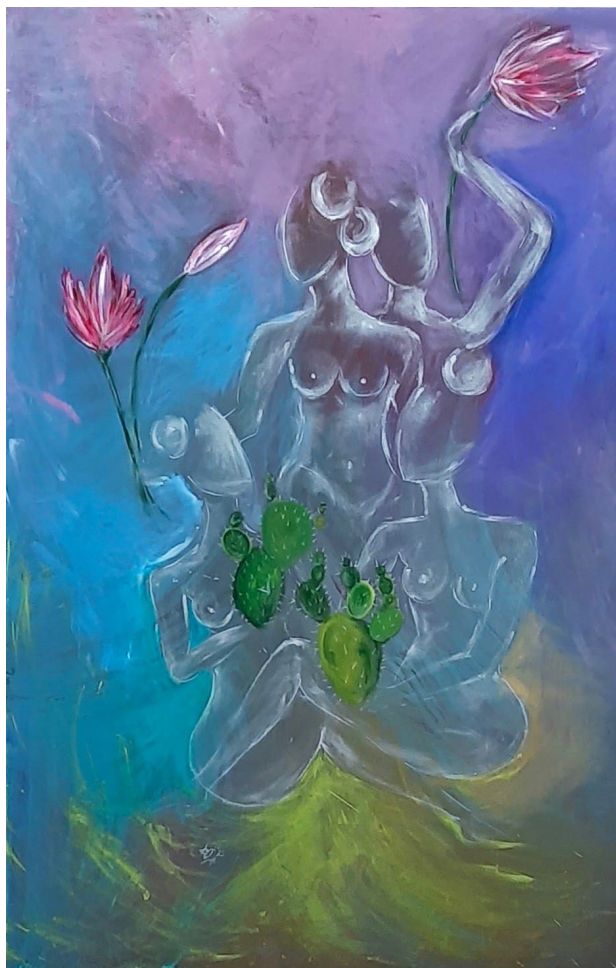
ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE LABDHI SHAH COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Labdhi Shah is an artist based in Ahmedabad, India. Trained as an economist, clinical psychologist, and art therapist, she is a self-taught artist. She specializes in finger-painted art works created from intuition without any reference or pre-sketch, distilling the purest expression of her emotion into her art.

Artwork by Labdhi Shah
Labdhi



*Finger-painted acrylic on stretched canvas board, 2020
48" x 72"*

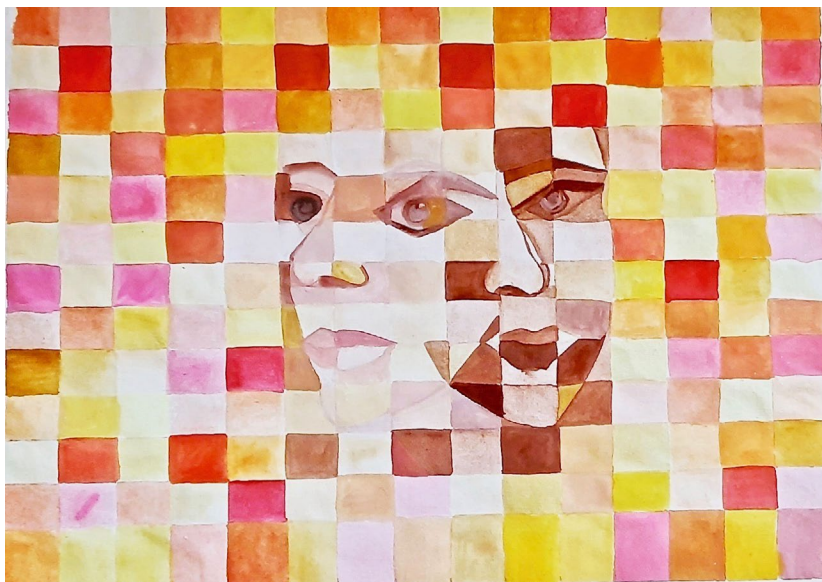
Artwork by Labdhi Shah
Untitled



Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2018
9"x 9"

find her on Instagram at [@gallery.lab26](https://www.instagram.com/gallery.lab26)

Artwork by Labdhi Shah
Oneness



*Watercolor on handmade paper, 2020
16.5" x 11.7"*

Fiction by Sabahat Quadri

The Other Side

Chapter One

Saraab walked down the stairs, floating past the mosaic of photographs on the wall. Something about the house seemed off, unfamiliar. She got a glass of water from the kitchen, unsettled. The walls were the same pale green that she remembered, but the cabinets . . . Had they always been white? Weren't they green, like the walls? They were shinier than she remembered too.

"Ammi!" She called out, but only silence came back to her. She frowned and came out of the kitchen, heading for the stairs. The house was dark, shadows creeping across the floor and climbing the walls. She went up the stairs, stopping on the fifth step to examine the pictures on the wall. When had her mother put these up? There she was, with her sisters, playing tea in their old house. There was her parents' wedding picture, the whole family at their cousin's wedding. And the individual portraits, she didn't remember those. She leaned in to examine her own picture, staring at the blue shirt she was wearing. When had this been taken? She couldn't recall ever owning a shirt in that particular shade of blue either.

She squinted at herself.

The girl in the picture moved, and Saraab jumped out of her skin.

She bolted upright in her bed, breathing heavily, her pillow drenched in sweat. *A dream, it was just a dream.*

She took a deep breath, pushed back the bed covers and swung her legs to the floor. She hung her head and recited the *Ayat-ul-Kursi* in her head, her eyes tightly shut. With an effort, she opened them and cautiously looked around, afraid that, like her dream, the room would be unfamiliar, alien. But it

all looked normal, softly outlined by the light from the window over her bed. She looked out the clear glass that had been put in a few hours ago, blinking.

The window directly opposite hers was lit.

She scrambled up to the head of her bed, pressing her face to the glass. The house right behind them wasn't empty any more. The second floor back room had someone there. She could see the silhouette of a woman through the backlit curtains, moving in and out of the frame. The rest of the house still looked dark. Saraab's eyes swept down to the house's back alley, and sure enough, she saw a plastic bucket, empty boxes, and a wiper leaning against the back wall. Earlier in the day, there had been nothing.

The window across from her was little more than ten feet away, the house one of a row of identical, contractor-built houses in a small neighbourhood of North Karachi. Their house stood in the middle of the block, the homes so close together that the builder used opaque glass in the back windows of each house. It gave them privacy, but blocked out the light to the back rooms.

Her father realised that, so he had the glass changed in Saraab's room. The window frame had been stuck to the sill from dried paint since they moved in. They had to chip the paint off to unstick the frames, eventually breaking the window's frame to get it completely off the sill. Earlier this afternoon, a workman had replaced the glass, adding an extra frame for mosquito netting, and now Saraab had a window she could actually open.

She looked back up. The curtains had been pulled back across the alley. She could see through to the other room, slightly distorted by the patterned sameness of the mosquito netting. She could see a portion of a bed, and a side table with a lamp. The lamp was on, bathing the room in a pale orange glow. For a brief second, the woman crossed the lamp, and Saraab moved back. She clamped a hand over her mouth, peering cautiously back from behind her curtain. The woman was pulling on a

t-shirt over her nakedness. Her hair was long and silky, flowing down her back like water as she pulled it out of the neck of her shirt. Her legs were bare.

Saraab slid down onto her bed, suddenly ashamed of her own voyeurism. It felt wrong.

She pulled the covers over herself, resolutely shutting her eyes. The brief peeping Tom moment had wiped the nightmare out of her mind. She took a deep breath and let herself sink into the bed, wondering when, in the few hours between the window installer leaving and her nightmare, someone had managed to silently move in next door.

Chapter Two

“Saraab, Sobia, Sana! Come and help. Your father will be home in a few minutes.” Ammi was in the kitchen, expertly rolling out chapatis next to the stove. The three girls had just walked into the house. Sana gave her sisters a resigned look.

“We’ve just walked in, for God’s sake,” she mumbled. “Can we take a few minutes to relax first?”

Saraab pulled off her dupatta, unbuttoning the burqa she was wearing. She called out to her mother as she pulled off the burqa. “Coming, Ammi. We’re just putting our burqas away.”

The other two pulled off their layers, neatly folding their own burqas. Saraab handed hers to Sana. “Put this on my bed, will you? I’ll go help Ammi.”

Sobia and Sana ran upstairs, dropped their bags and burdens, and came running back. Quickly and efficiently, they prepared lunch. They set the table just as their father walked in the front door. He came home the same time every day from the store that he owned. Along with the sale of his family home, profits from the store were good enough for a down payment on their brand new house – a distinct step up from their two-bedroom apartment. They were in a middle-class suburb of Karachi now, in a three-bedroom house that had a tiny front

yard and driveway.

Lunch was rushed – the girls had homework, and their father would need to get back to the store – so conversation was limited.

“Someone moved in behind us.” Saraab swished a piece of chapati across her plate, collecting a generous amount of the spicy daal that she loved. “They have a daughter, from what I could tell.”

Her mother looked surprised. “Behind us? I haven’t heard anything. The house still seems quiet to me.”

“I saw her last night, from my new window.”

“It still looks empty.”

Saraab shrugged. “Well, maybe they’re quiet people, which will be nice.”

Ammi smiled. “I’ll send some dessert to them today. Welcome them to the neighbourhood. People aren’t very friendly here.” She was used to socialising with neighbours. She sighed. “I miss that. This house is too quiet when you’re all out.”

Her husband laughed at that. “You’ll make friends here too. Don’t worry so much.”

“Oh, I don’t. It’s just, I’m used to noise. Quiet neighbours aren’t always a blessing, you know.”

The girls rolled their eyes. Sobia laughed. “It’s nice to have some peace, Ammi. In the flat, the bell would be ringing all day long.”

“Mostly because *your* friends would be coming round all day long.”

“Saraab.” Her father was frowning. “Saraab, keep your curtains closed. If you can see this girl from your window, they can see you.” It had just occurred to him, obviously.

“Yes, Baba. I saw her at night, in any case, and the lights in my room were off.”

“Even so.” He cleaned his plate with a little relish, but the black frown hadn’t cleared from his brow. “I should have kept the opaque glass in. These houses, they’re too close togeth-

er.”

Saraab looked up in alarm. “I’ll keep the curtains closed, Baba. I promise.” She turned to her mother. “I have to tell you about this new girl in my class.” She changed the subject, determined to move the topic away from her window.

It worked. The younger girls, both in the same all-girl’s college where Saraab was a newly-minted associate professor, had stories of their own to tell. It kept the conversation during and after lunch well off the new neighbours until Baba left for the store.

After lunch, Ammi looked out back and remembered that she was going to send a plate of food to welcome them to the neighbourhood.

“Saraab, take this to the new neighbours, will you? I’m going to rest for a little while.” She put some gulab jamun and halwa on a plate, covered it with another plate and handed it to her daughter. Saraab nodded.

“I’ll just get my burqa.”

She walked up the stairs, pausing on the fifth step. The wall to her right was bare, and for a split second, she remembered her dream and the pictures that had covered these walls. She felt a chill breeze skim across the nape of her neck.

It was just a dream, she reminded herself, forcing her feet to move. *Just a dream.*

Chapter Three

No one had been home when she had gone to drop off the gulab jamun and halwa, so Saraab came back and put the plate in the fridge.

“I’ll try tomorrow. Maybe they’re all out at work or something.”

Her mother had nodded with little interest. Saraab went back to her room to work on the papers she had to grade, staying there until the evening meal. Like lunch, dinner was a regular family affair. All the girls helped their mother with

the meal and the cleaning up, while their father read the paper. Occasionally, distant relatives would drop by in the evening and stay for dinner, which meant extra work for the girls both during and after their arrival.

As the oldest, Saraab was least likely to be able to slip away at these times, and though she recognised her responsibilities, she couldn't help but resent them. That day, she stacked the dirty dishes in the sink after the guests had finally left with a grumpy thunk, watching Sana and Sobia cheerfully drop everything and head off to their room.

"It wouldn't kill you to help, you know. It'd get done faster if we were working together." But they ran off without looking back, leaving Saraab to put everything away. Baba had already gone up to his room, and Ammi, looking tired, came in to say goodnight.

"Remember to pray before you go to sleep. And keep those curtains closed, like your father said."

Saraab sighed, it was past eleven o'clock. She finished up and went quietly upstairs. She changed, prayed, turned off the lights.

And drew back the curtains to her new window.

The light was on again, the room clearly visible. There didn't seem to be anyone there, except . . . She could hear music, slowly growing in intensity and volume. The words weren't clear, though the voice was throaty, rough, and the beat fast.

Saraab curled up against the head of the bed, leaning on the sill and hidden behind the curtain, and watched and listened.

The woman with the silky hair twirled across the window, and Saraab felt her heart race. The woman wasn't alone. She had a companion, a tall silhouette, dancing with her.

Saraab couldn't look away. She felt the music change, the beat slowing down, and when he grabbed Silky Hair's hand and pulled her body into his, Saraab felt like she was watching an Indian movie. They swayed together, faces close. Silky Hair tilted her head back, and her tresses swung down with a

shimmer of satin. Saraab opened her eyes wide, trying to get a look at the man, but they were dancing against the light. All she could make out was that he was tall and willowy, an elegant line of torso and long legs.

She didn't know how long they danced, or how long she watched. Where, she wondered at some point, was the girl's family? Were they even aware that she had a man in her room? How were her parents okay with this? How was she? This was so wrong, didn't the woman know that?

So, so wrong . . . She woke with a start, her neck cramped, her back aching from the awkward position against the head of the bed. She sat up, straightening out her body slowly. It was almost dawn, and the window on the other side was dark. The music was silent. She pulled herself up to the sill. In the pre-dawn light, both homes were asleep, serene in the lazy early morning.

Saraab stretched, slid down into her bed, pulling the covers over herself. She closed her eyes, remembering the shadowy figures across the divide; she could clearly see the clean line of the man's shoulder and bicep outlined by the dim light, the woman's hair spilling over his shirt, and she wondered, briefly, shamefully, what it would feel like to dance with him.

Chapter Four

She went to the neighbour's three more times over the next week, picking a different time every day, but they were never home. She and her sisters eventually ate the sweet gulab jamun and halwa. There was no point, as Sana said, in letting the sweets go to waste. Their mother clucked impatiently at them.

"Put that away, you won't be able to eat dinner." Ammi was teaching them how to make homemade pickled lemons. She was grinding roasted spices up in a large mortar with a marble pestle. "Hand me the bowl, will you?"

Sana brought it over. "Tell me again why we need to

know how to do this? It's not like we can't buy achar in every general store in the country."

"Because it's much cheaper to make it at home."

"Yes, but why should we care –"

"None of you know what your future holds. What if you have to struggle for money? In times like that, you need some spice with your onion gravy and chapati meals."

Saraab sniffed. "It's not like we're uneducated. We can work, earn money."

"And if your husband doesn't let you?"

Sobia gave her mother a frustrated look. "Well, if you tell our future husbands that you want us to work –"

"We can't do that." Ammi looked scandalised. "We don't dictate to the boy's family, ever."

Sana leaned back against the counter and said, "Well, I'm happy not to work. It's up to my husband to support me, not the other way around."

"Exactly." Ammi nodded approvingly. "Your job is to take care of the family, which is a full-time job. It requires care and dedication. Like making achar. It takes time. Dedication." She poured the prepared lemons, which she had lightly boiled earlier to soften them, into the bowl along with the spices. Rolling up her sleeves, she rubbed the spice mixture over each individual lemon. "Preparation. You need to make sure that every part of the lemon is properly covered. Coat them thoroughly without squishing them." The girls all leaned in with fascinated looks. "Just like raising children – the initial preparation has to be so strong that once they're old enough, you just need to check in every once in a while."

Sobia sighed. "Are you making achar or raising babies?"

The girls and Ammi laughed. "This is a life lesson,"

Ammi said. "Raising children is like making achar. A little hard work in the early years pays off in the end."

Sana looked smug. "Like with us, you mean."

"Exactly. You're all good girls, and you know what it means to be women in a decent Pakistani household."

Saraab hung back while they brought out the large jar and filled it half way with oil. *Good girl?* She thought of her nighttime adventures. She had tried – and failed – to stay away from the window, nor could she control her dreams. For four nights now, she had imagined herself floating in the arms of a tall, slim silhouette. She couldn't see his face, or any defining features, in fact, but she had silky black hair that flowed down to her waist, and she felt like a desirable woman.

Were these the dreams of a good girl?

Chapter Five

That night, she turned off the lights and pulled back her curtain again.

It was raining.

She curled up, bringing her legs close to her body. When the music started up, she closed her eyes, imagining them dancing, holding each other close. Were they married? Maybe that was it. Maybe this was a couple, and she was intruding in their personal life.

She gritted her teeth and moved away, suddenly feeling the weight of what she was doing. She climbed off her bed and pulled out her prayer mat, wondering briefly if her voyeuristic behaviour negated her ablutions. With a shrug, she started her prayers, resolutely keeping her eyes away from the window.

She was becoming obsessed, and she needed to break the pattern.

She went again, the next morning, to the house, ringing the bell and waiting for a response that she knew wouldn't come. It looked empty, and a neighbour confirmed it.

"No one lives here." He said, wiping the sweat from his face. It was October, the hottest month of the year in Karachi, and a few minutes in the sun was all it took to start sweating.

"Uh, yes they do. There's a man and a woman in the back room. I can see them through my window at night."

"This house has been empty since we moved here two

years ago. No one lives here,” he repeated.

Saraab walked to the end of the narrow street, counting the houses. “One, two, three, four.” Four houses from the road, just like their own house on the street behind this one. This was the right house. Maybe the couple were squatters?

No, that didn’t make any sense. They were too well-dressed and carefree, to be squatters. Besides, the furniture in the room didn’t look like discarded furniture. It was the kind of furniture she had seen on television, in dramas about rich people in elegant homes.

She walked into her house and pulled off her burqa, deep in thought.

“Saraab!”

Saraab jumped. Ammi was standing in the open kitchen doorway. “Where have you been? You went out without asking.” Ammi rarely yelled, and she wasn’t yelling now, but her voice was raised. “What has gotten into you?”

“Sorry, Ammi. I thought I would see if the people at the back were home.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you, Saraab, but no one lives there. Your father went round last night; the neighbours think you’re crazy.”

“Crazy? Oh, come on, Ammi!”

“Baba told them you had seen someone through the window and they said you must be hallucinating.” She looked at her eldest daughter with serious concern. “Are you?”

“Of course not, Ammi. I’m not crazy.”

“What exactly can you see?”

“Why don’t you come see tonight?” She regretted it as soon as the words came out of her mouth. What if Silky Hair and the man were dancing again? Ammi wouldn’t be happy about that. But Ammi was already nodding.

“Yes, yes. Now go water the plants outside. The soil is ridiculously dry in all the pots.”

“Dry? But . . .” Saraab stopped. It rained last night, didn’t it? She turned, went outside. The soil was dry in the

pots. Was she going mad? She was sure it rained last night. She had heard it, seen the drops falling on her window sill. She looked up at the sky, and thought of the walk round to the street in the back. The roads had been dry, no puddles, no random greenery pushing its way towards the sky. *What was going on here?* she wondered.

Chapter Six

There was no dancing, no light, no movement behind the window that night, though they waited in tense silence until midnight. When Ammi finally left, she kissed her daughter tenderly, the look of concern etched deep into her face. "It will be alright," she said, gently.

As if I was dying or something, Saraab thought. She shut her bedroom door a little forcefully. She pulled back the curtain completely and opened the window. She was pulling up the bolt on the frame of the mosquito netting when the light from the other house flickered on. Saraab looked up, intending to call her mother back, but the shout died in her throat.

Silky Hair stood at the window in a blue shirt, and time froze. Saraab heard a sound in the distance, like a giant wave growing louder and louder as it came closer and closer.

The whooshing sound burst through her eardrums, and she saw a reflection of herself standing at the other window, looking back at her.

She jumped back explosively, yelling in shock, "Who are you? What are you?" She closed her eyes and the orange rectangle burned blue against her eyelids; she opened them in a blink. The window was dark and Silky Hair was gone. "I am crazy." Saraab was sweating, the gushing wave pulsing in her ears. Crouching at the bottom of the bed, she shut her eyes and started reciting the *Kalimah* out loud to drown out the waves. She felt a sudden, irresistible desire to open her eyes because she knew, *knew*, that someone was in the room with her. Her voice rose, *there is no God but God, there is no God but God, please, please*

Allah.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she gave in to temptation and opened her eyes.

Chapter Seven

It was raining again.

A lamp on the bedside table was on. The wave receded and silence blanketed the room, an oppressive, crushing silence that weighed on her nerves. He was sitting on the chair by the wall-mounted desk, where she graded papers and wrote her lesson plans.

She forced herself to turn her head, to look at him. He was beautiful, with thick lashes like a girl's, winged eyebrows over dark eyes and a straight patrician nose. His elegant body was relaxed, long legs stretched out in front of him, his narrow hands folded casually over his ribs.

She let out a breath, swallowed, but couldn't speak.

He seemed to see that, because he smiled gently. "You have questions."

Her throat remained paralysed. She nodded.

He raised a slender hand and pointed to the window. She looked out at the rain that was streaming down the glass. "Did you ever wonder how it was that the house behind you had the same clear glass window as yours? The builder had put in opaque glass in all the houses."

She stared out the window, wondering how she had missed that.

"Or perhaps, you should have asked how it's raining in October in Karachi. When was the last time that happened?" There was a smugness in his deep voice. "The devil, you see, is in the details."

Shocked, she found her voice. "Are you the devil?"

He was startled, laughing in some astonishment. "Oh dear, no. I'm just a – a facilitator."

"A facilitator of what?"

“Of windows.”

Her head jerked to one side. She looked at the window, a deep frown carving itself into her brow.

“Into an alternate life.” The Stranger explained.

“What?”

“You’ve wondered, haven’t you, what it would be like to be born in a different house, to different parents? To be free to do what you want, with whom you want, when you want? To dance with a man who looks at you with desire?”

“N-no.” She stammered, her throat closing up with shame. She couldn’t admit it, not to him.

“Saraab.” He said. His voice was gentle again and she shut her eyes.

“*Go away!*” Her voice was loud and she looked fearfully at the door.

“They can’t hear you. They’re not with us.”

Saraab stiffened, and her voice wavered as she said, “Not with us? What have you done to them?”

He put his hands up. “Nothing, nothing. I just meant that we’re in a different plane right now. You don’t get to see what you’ve seen when your feet are planted firmly on the ground.”

It almost felt like an insult to her. She frowned at him, and said, “This is a dream? This isn’t really happening, is it? I am going crazy!”

“Do you really want to know the mechanics of what’s happening, Saraab?” he asked, politely. “Those aren’t the questions you had for me.” She looked at his face, at his eyes, and fear shuddered through her. She suddenly felt stripped and bare, examined and watched; and yet somehow, known. She ran through the *Ayat-ul-Kursi* in her head, took a deep breath and pulled her scattered brain together.

“Why?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“Why would you do this? What do you get from this ‘facilitation?’”

“What I get is not relevant. What have you gotten out of it?”

What, indeed, except a guaranteed tenure in an insane asylum? “Nothing.” She spat the word out with a little heat.

He tut-tutted with a patronising shake of his head.

“Come now, Saraab. I gave you a glimpse into an alternate life that you can step into, now, tonight, if you say the word. Which side are you going to fall on? The liberal, unburdened life of the girl in the window, or the responsible life of the oldest daughter in a conservative household?”

Her eyes widened again. Without realising it, she had relaxed, her body slipping out of the defensive crouch and into her habitual cross-legged pose on the bed. “You mean, I can choose? I can be that girl?”

“Yes.”

“Right now?”

“In a second, if you say yes.”

She was quiet for a long time. Then, “You really haven’t shown me anything, though, have you? A girl dancing in the window and wearing jeans tells me nothing about her. Who is she? Who are her family? What does she do? What will she become? And, who are you?”

“I’m her companion, her friend, her lover.”

“And the rest?”

“You’ve seen enough in movies and with the girls you teach at your college to know what kind of life I’m offering. Do you want it?”

“You’re crazy, and this is a – some sort of – I don’t know, silly fantasy.”

His expression didn’t seem to change, but she felt a shift of mood, a seriousness that descended upon the room. He said, “Fantasy? Are you sure? Maybe this is the fantasy, this life in this house with your sisters. Maybe you’re finally getting a glimpse of reality, and it’s not in here.” He pointed towards the window. “Maybe it’s out there.”

“You’re deliberately confusing me.”

He sighed. "My point is, that life is as real as this one, and you have the unique, one-in-eight-billion opportunity to step over to the other side. Are you going to take it?"

"I need to know more."

He shook his head. "No, you see the surface. Just as you see the surface with everyone you've ever envied, or aspired to be like. That's all you have to make your choice."

She protested. "That's not enough. You can't judge a life on a glimpse through a window." She nervously pulled a corner of the bed cover through her hand, compulsively smoothing it out immediately after.

"And yet, everyone does it. Everyone. People do it to you all the time."

She stopped fidgeting and stared at him.

He waved a hand at the swathe of silky black hair that was tumbling down her shoulders. "You hide your beauty under black fabric and when you walk down the street, women like the one across the alley look at you and think how backward you must be. They're thinking that you're unenlightened, repressed, oppressed; that you're a product of a mindset that wants to travel back fourteen hundred years in time and live in a desert riding camels; that you reject the joys and beauty of life by dismissing art and music and poetry as 'pagan.'"

Saraab frowned blackly at his description, recognising the unfairness of it all; the hijab and burqa didn't define her. He went on. "And you, you're constantly judging women who wear sleeveless shirts and work with men. You think they're Jezebels and have no morals. You think they are the cause of all ills in our society; that God's wrath is visited on Pakistan because they've shed their instincts for modesty. It doesn't occur to you that the more you judge them, the more you push them to another extreme, does it?" Her mouth dropped open and he seemed to derive some satisfaction from her stupefied expression. "You're two sides of the same coin, Saraab. The goal should not be to live on one side, but to meet in the middle."

She looked at him with a tinge of bitterness. "You're

not offering me the middle, though, are you?"

"I can't offer you the middle, my dear. I can only show you the two sides, and let you pick one."

She stared out of the window for a long moment, watching the rain stream down the glass and pool onto the sill behind the mosquito netting. She was tempted, dearly tempted to step across the divide. "Does she have sisters?"

"Hmm?"

"On the other side, does she have sisters who hang out with her? Walk to school with her? Does her mother make lemon pickle at home? Does she sit down to meals with her family every day?"

He shrugged, a little impatiently. "She has sisters, but they respect their privacy and individual needs and desires. The women in that house," he waved at the window, "are self sufficient, and expected to make their own way in life. They're expected to have careers, and the decision to marry or not is theirs, not their parents'. Does that help?"

It didn't. It only confused her further. She narrowed her eyes at him. "What if I want the middle?"

"Then you need to talk to someone else."

"Who?"

He ignored the question. "If you don't take my offer, Saraab, you'll never see me again. The 'window' for this offer is the next few minutes."

She felt the pressure mount and wondered to herself, why was she hesitating? She could have the freedom to do what she wanted, have a career other than teaching, take off the burqa permanently. No more serving tea and clearing up late at night, no more taking responsibility for her sisters. No possibility of a husband who would allow her nothing more than to have children and care for them. But also, probably, no more late nights with her sisters, no family meals. She'd have to find her own husband, maybe even support herself.

What if she couldn't? Couldn't find a husband, or a good job? Couldn't make her own way in life? What if she was

all alone, just her and the beautiful man before her? What if she couldn't live up to his expectations? What if she never saw her family again? What if she grew old without anyone next to her? What if she failed at the dazzling, shiny life that the elite lived?

Or worse, what if she succeeded at it, and come judgement day, what would she say to God? What excuses would she give for giving up her modesty? For choosing a liberal life when the Quran told her that the path to paradise lay in subservience to God? To family? What if all that awaited her, in return for a few years of freedom in this life, was a lifetime of fiery chains in the next? Suddenly gripped with a deep, abiding fear of the unknown, she blurted out, "No."

The gentle thrum of rain outside the window stopped, the room was blue with moonlight, and the lamp off.

He was gone.

Saraab stared in deep consternation at the empty chair. "No." She said, again, quietly. Slumped down on the bed, she slid down towards the floor. "*No, no, no.*" She put her hands up to her face. "No, what have I done?" She looked at the desk again, the empty chair, and her voice rose. "No, come back, I didn't know what I was saying. Wait. Where are you?"

You'll have to talk to someone else.

Who else? Who could she talk to? What did it mean? She cried.

Poetry by Kathryn Lauret

Sick Kid

Like a hook
Pulling from the base of my gut
I vomit in the middle of the night
Alone in the tub
Missing my mom
How she would
Run into my room in her robe
Eyes wide with concern
And when I spit
Yellow bile landed on her wrist
She didn't flinch.
But it's 3am
And my insides came out
The way they came in
I could take it as an omen
That I'm growing up
And it's making me sick
To my stomach
The world tilting on its axis
Makes me nauseous
I crawl back into bed
Brushed my teeth, cleaned my face
Snuggle with the ghosts in my room
And try to go back
To hiding in a dream

Poetry by J H Martin
On the Bench

Empty station
Watch the drizzle
With the data clouds

There are no planes
No single sex now

This world is not your oyster

Me entienes?

That passport expired
And the bus has been cancelled

No need to check the guidelines
Or look at a timetable

This building has been abandoned

Company orders

There are new plans now

A new order to this concrete reality

I have heard
Some call it unnatural
Others conspiracy

This forced removal
These lands put out to tender

These polluted views for the majority

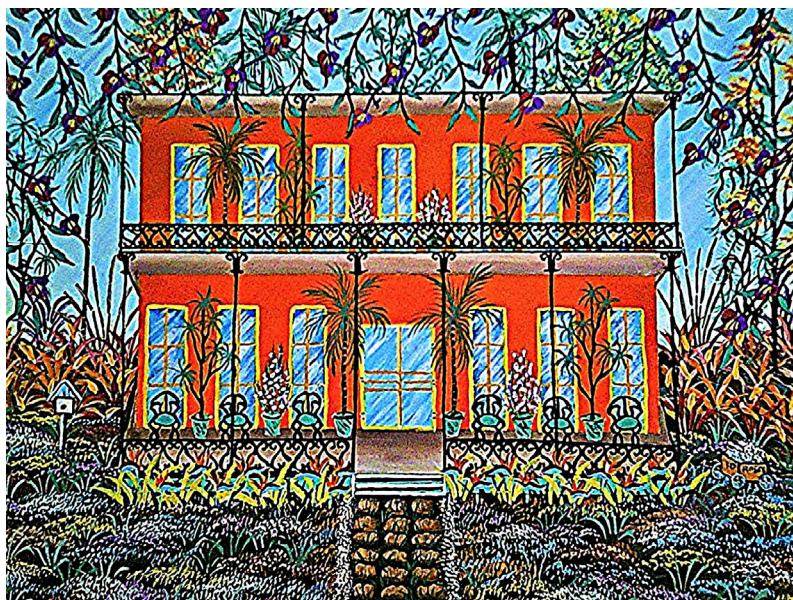
Not that the pigeons
Or the rust on my shelter
Cares

For a revolution
With no alternative
For a dream
Born from a fantasy

Come on man
Just let me sit here and watch

I have nothing else to do
And nowhere else to go

Artwork by Timothy Phillips
Bountiful Colors of Nature's Beauty



Acrylic on Canvas

Timothy Phillips

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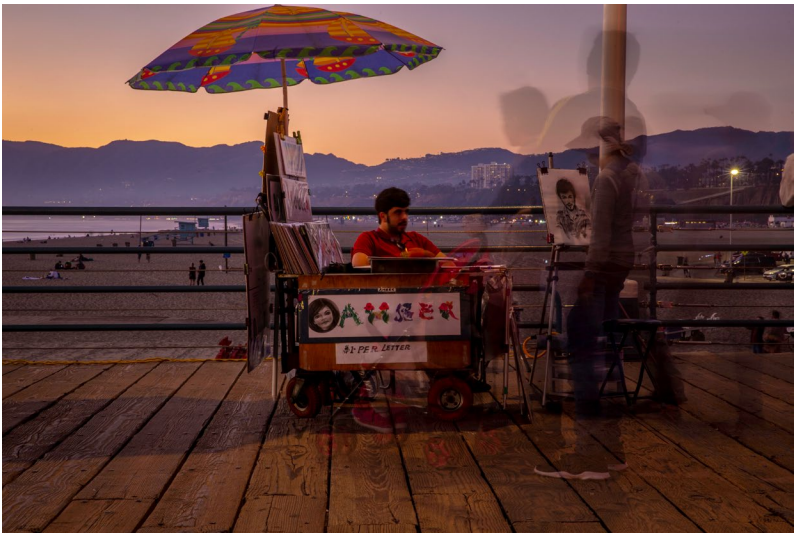
Photography by Colin Yuan

Mushroom Forest



Photography

Photography by Colin Yuan
Solitude



Photography

Colin Yuan

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Diorama by Jada Fabrizio
Final Frontier



Staged Landscape Photography - Diorama

Fiction by Sarah Hozumi

The Weather Room

Charlotte stared into her Earl Grey tea as the young waiter surreptitiously placed the check face-down on the table. It was nearing closing time, and this was the best the waiter could do to ask Charlotte to leave, given the high standards of the bar.

The tea held her interest far more than the meaningful stares of the waiter toward her table, then the exit. The young woman fathomed the depths of the darkened waters and wondered in what life she could possibly find the way forward.

Sitting beside the tea was a note that had been carefully folded in half. She had crumpled it up twice before smoothing it out and placing it on the table. Every now and then Charlotte would dip her finger into her tea and splash a bit of it onto the note absent-mindedly.

In her twenties, Charlotte was working at the nearby Walmart while desperately trying to piece together the path that would lead her to success as an artist. She'd loved painting since she was four, and it had been her dream to sell a painting since she had first understood the concept of money.

The waiter came over a second time.

"Are you staying here at the Cyrus?" He said. "We would be happy to put your tea in a takeout cup for you to enjoy in your room."

Charlotte glanced up at him as if for the first time and tried to hide the smirk clawing at her face.

"No, I am not staying here."

Who on Earth could afford such a nice hotel? Charlotte felt like laughing in the waiter's face. Instead, she took to staring at the umbrella symbol printed on a menu still situated next to her slowly drowning note. The waiter mistook her

interest in the symbol as interest in more food and promptly said, “The kitchen is closed, I’m afraid.”

“The umbrella,” she said, pointing to it. “Why is it like this? Like it got caught in a hurricane.”

The waiter coughed to hide his impatience.

“This is called ‘The Weather Room.’”

Charlotte gazed at him, waiting for more. When he said nothing else, she pointed at the symbol again. “Weather can mean so many things. It doesn’t have to be this.”

“It’s our symbol, and I’m afraid we’re closing for the night.”

The young woman stared at the symbol. “It’s so hard finding the right meaning, you know?” She looked up at the man and saw he seemed nervous. “Is this your dream, working here?”

“I’m working to be a nurse,” he said.

“Are you close?”

The waiter shook his head. “I just started,” he said. He looked at the time on his phone. “I have classes starting in an hour, and if you don’t leave soon, I’m going to be late.”

Charlotte patted the seat next to her.

“Come sit with me for a minute,” she said. “I know you’ve been eyeing that note all night. Don’t you want to know what it says?”

Checking his phone once more, the waiter sighed and sat beside her. She slid the paper, dotted with flecks of her tea, over to him.

He was silent as he read over the words.

Dear Charlotte Swift,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to review your portfolio for our “The Changing Landscape” exhibition.

We regret to inform you that we don’t feel your work is a good fit for us at this time. Please note that these decisions are highly subjective, and we encourage you to continue finding a gallery that is right for your work.

The waiter looked up at Charlotte, who had finished her tea at long last.

“You’re an artist?” He said, she nodded. “What kind of stuff do you do?”

“Oil paintings, mainly,” she said. “No one wants them. I might as well hang them up in my bedroom for how much people are interested in them.”

“What kind of stuff do you paint?”

“Mostly landscapes.” Charlotte took the note back and stuffed it into the pocket of her jeans. “This is the tenth rejection I’ve gotten this year alone. I’m spending most of my paycheck on canvases, brushes and paints, and no one wants anything I make. I can’t make this work. I don’t know how to make this work.”

Unsure of what to say, the waiter simply nodded. Charlotte stood and put some money on the table for her tea. She turned to leave.

“Are you coming back tomorrow?” He said.

At this, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“The Weather Room is a bit out of my league, price-wise,” she said. “This was kind of a last hurrah for me.”

The waiter seemed to struggle to find the right words. She watched in silence as he worked to find something meaningful to say to her.

“I don’t know art, but I start work at four tomorrow afternoon. Can you bring a canvas here? I’d love to see something.”

Charlotte managed a small smile as she turned and walked out of the empty bar.

Poetry by Jeshua Noel
I Kicked the Cat Today

i kicked the cat today
and i'm so sorry
but she wouldn't stop meowing
and her food bowl was already full

and when
she threw a plate of spaghetti at me
and it broke against my chest
because i had been drinking
all night at my desk

and when
i told her i would leave her
if she didn't fail her algebra class
so i could feel better
about my grade

and when
i bought two leopard geckos
just to take a picture with one on my head
and post it on the internet
for stranger-friends

and when
i wrote her letters every day
about how much i loved her
and then made fun of her
with my friends and her friends and yours

and when
i watched her sister in the shower

because her sister asked me to
and then she walked in
and never told anybody
but herself, over and over again
crying into piss-stained carpet on a
mac and cheese colored couch blanket

and when
you really needed a cigarette
and i didn't want you to come over
because i was jealous of you
and i had just started buying
really expensive cigarettes

but i kicked the cat today
and i'm so sorry
but she wouldn't stop meowing
and her food bowl was already full

Poetry by Kelly Hegi

Cube

My fidget cube is a compassionate concession to an intense mind and body.
I know it makes small clicking noises. Nothing is without cost.
The cube is a nod to understanding not all learn in quiet and stillness.

Some of us bounce our legs, sing to the Plain White T's and read up for that exam tomorrow.
No. It's not bad for us.
No. It won't interrupt our thoughts.
Our wiring is different.
And my degree with high honors that is still five years away will prove I know my own mind.

The small cubes with buttons and switches occupy the tiny segment of us
that would easily run away
after any other passing thought
or butterfly
Or a stray few notes of song.
Who is quietly humming Green Day? I hear you.

Don't tell me to go to my quiet room alone and sit at my clean desk in the corner and focus.
That is a slow and painful death.
All I can think about there is how I wish this wall were a different color.
And how terribly difficult it is not to bounce,
To be good,
To sit still,
My legs ache instead of settling.

They twitch.
The silence shouts.

Give me my cube and my punk
and putter around next to me making dinner and
watch me nail this exam.

Poetry by CJ Strauss

Aubade with Increasingly Intrusive Thoughts

I'm wearing my father's pants.

 This would be easier set to music.

 I'm manifesting,

 I manifest.

Despite the razor

 Despite my mustache

 Which I used to think was spelled

 “mous-tache.”

 because I've always been a little bit
 dense.

Line breaks

 the line, breaks

 Everything breaks.

 How profound.

How sad.

 More people have expressed condolences over my
 transition

 than my suicide attempt.

 With some work this could be a real
 home.

This could be a great place to shoot myself.

 We'll need some photographs to make it so.

 I collect shells to give to people who didn't ask
 for them.

 This is my top line.

This is my bottom line

I'd be better off without them
My breasts, I mean
I could probably perform the surgery
myself.

Think about the last week of your life.
In the past week have you experienced:
feelings of loneliness,
anxiety (shaking, trouble sleeping,
quickness of breath)

Regret,
like everyone would be better off if you just
disappeared.
Yes, I do have a lot on my plate.
And I'm not very hungry.

The program doesn't take insurance anyway.
Nobody does.
Nobody cares.
Everyone is staring.

that's the risk you take when you work in public
I'm breaking a rule by saying this,
But someone in the meeting said
"Pain shared is pain lessened."

This is the opposite of what I've been taught.
I am shaking.
I have to hold one cup with two hands
These feelings have been increasing
over time.

If only I had the right kind of pills
I could go to sleep and never wake up
Every lover I've ever had

Has learned a lot from me.

My last love wrote a song called
 “My dad had manic OCD”
 Sometimes I go to sleep without brushing my
 teeth.
 At some point, she became them.

Every lover I’ve ever had
 has taken a lot from me.
 I wasn’t allowed to vacuum in the mornings
 because that’s what their dad would
 do.

There were a lot of rules
 that nobody ever spoke about.
 I have used up all my kindness on other people.
 And have none left for myself.

A stranger told me that hanging
 is actually a simple procedure.
 So if I really wanted to do it,
 I’d have done it.

I must be holding out for something.
 Damn, I read a lot of poetry.
 Who was the first poet, anyway?
 If I really wanted to know, I’d know it.

Here, the stale coffee
 There, the unclenched fist
 I think that my mother will be happier when
 she is dead.
 Here, the radio trills.

I put this song on a playlist years ago.

It still holds up.

I count on my fingers exactly how long
When I run out of fingers, I will be no
one.

My Venus is in Capricorn
which means I crave stability,
Control,
A responsible soul.

I prepped meals for the entire week
And ate them all in a single night.
These things happen sometimes
I dream of suckling on my car's ex-
haust pipe

Like a newborn at the tit.
Oh tits,
How much grief they've given me
Sex, grief, sex, grief, sex, grief.

Everything is one of those two things.
When I'm certain I believe in something,
I'll jump in front of an accelerating train.
For now, I'll keep writing.

Fiction by Jake Siluentes

High Water

My mother didn't want her babies to grow up to be hateful, greedy, solipsistic, treasonous, dishonest, calloused, mean-hearted cowards the way the rest of the family had.

She told her sisters that she was going down to the creek to drown the children. They thought this was a good idea and told her to hurry back, but what they didn't know was that Micky was waiting for her off the side of the highway with his dad's Chevy C-10 and a baby seat stolen from K-Mart. My mother was to jump across the creek and climb the embankment, hop the guard rail, and she and Micky would be halfway to Texas before God or her daddy found out.

She walked down all calm to the woodline, singing as she carried us beneath that hot, low, Indiana sun. Once she was out of sight, she broke into an Olympic-style sprint. She ran and ran, as if she was breaking free from the grip of some ancient evil that lived on that farm.

The trees were all a blur around her. The world was made of wet, green paint – the canvas all spun around then hung up. It was dripping towards the earth which was behind her. The creek was ahead.

She jumped across with me and my sister in her arms and slipped on that slick river rock. She says it's 'cause she was used to running barefoot, and the day she decided to wear her Mama's old Keds was the day she made a mistake. But I think she was the victim of a rare collaboration between the devil and Jesus Christ.

So she slipped and fell backwards into the creek. The water should've been low on account of the drought, but she sank, and sank, and sank. She sank until the sun was something seen through a far-off window, until her world was all catfish and water snakes. She sank backwards in time,

through a prehistoric world where all evolution was undone around her. Back to a time before life itself, where it was just her and her babies alone, settling into the mud at the bottom of this creek.

It was there in the grip of the mud that she realized she would never be able to hide from the devil or God. That her babies would always be just one poor choice in shoe away from sinking, and that they, like her, had been condemned to a lifetime of burning alive, loving that which could never love them back. This would save them from their treasonous bloodline in the end.

She kicked and kicked and kicked back towards the window to the sun, one child in each arm. When she burst out onto the bank she couldn't breathe but she was completely dry, just a pair of muddy white Keds.

Micky looked deeply troubled as she hopped the guard rail and put my sister in the sole car seat. My mother saw his betrayal then but knew he was her only way to Texas. She kissed him and got in the truck, leaving her daddy and sisters and God behind.

Poetry by Tufik Shayeb

On Vacation

that unspeakable thing,
you cracked it open like a coconut

and lapped up all the insides
with a greedy, greedy tongue

you grinned at me,
broken bits of shell and hair

clinging to your burnt nose,
milky water curling on your jaw

you offered nothing in exchange,
hands clutching at the sunset

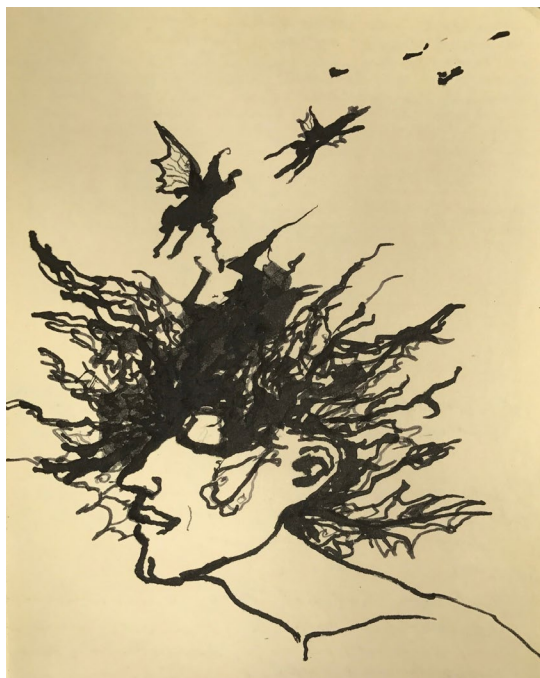
paradise, your lips echoed,
under the weight of sugar clouds

the sand itself had slipped in,
scratching at the hinges of things

this beach is not my home,
a dying sand-dollar pled aloud

this beach is not our home,
was the only thing I could say

An Original Song by Daniel Levanti
My Heart or Only my Need



LISTEN HERE

An Original Song by Daniel Levanti
Strings Go Rusty



LISTEN HERE

Artwork by Heather McGeachy
The Question Asked



Photography by Reign Serene
Boystown 1



Photography

Photography by Reign Serene
Boystown 2



Photography

Photography by Carley Anderson
Left Behind



Photography

Poetry by Donny Winter
Queer Confession #5

The window is still damp from the last
time I stood too close, waiting to watch
you coast into the driveway.
The air-tight rooms in this house are catacombs
without you here, while
outside, the world keeps its strength to spin
in the hum of each passing car,
in the hollow wind pressing through naked trees,
in the grass as it struggles to keep its green
nestled between the jagged snow-continents
melting in the yard.
These afternoons stretch into ages
when you're gone
but somehow, I stave off the empty house
from swallowing me whole
by knowing you're coming home to me.

Poetry by Abbie Hart

Deux

i.

my grandmother has tried to teach me french since i was a child who chose and continued with spanish through school. my grandfather taught me to sing frosty the snowman in swedish but now all i can say is that i am a snowman which seems like it would require a niche situation.

now ap spanish feels like the last lap in mariokart and i am down from deux grandparents to une grandparent and i suppose it's not too late but most days it feels like it is and i wish i'd chosen to learn the languages of my grandparents before it felt like they were running so far away.

and swedish is a dead language to me and all i have left are shirts that say sverige and a car with a never ending supply of pepto bismol so maybe i should learn french.

ii.

all i can say in french is ferme ta bouche which means shut up shut up shut up.

iii.

every graduation performance and fancy dinner feels like looking for a grandpa in a crowd that wasn't there. and now there's no point in looking.

iv.

deux always becomes une. deux will always.

become une.

Fiction by Viktor Rovkach

Rotting Fruits

Air quality in Amsterdam has met the standard for the first time in four years. I did not notice any change being stuck in the mustiness of my cramped apartment for a week. The country has been on lockdown since Christmas. Every public place was closed, and the city seemed deserted. Life glitched as if someone changed the playback speed of the world. Whatever the day was, I did not know without looking at the calendar. The street outside my window was as static as a movie decoration, as a grey chroma key.

Eventually, I had to go out and face the alien outside. My girlfriend came from a morning run and asked me to throw the garbage. After filling her lungs with crisp winter air, she discovered a smell of soggy rotting fruits that took over our apartment. I did not nose anything. Could I have contracted the virus? Perhaps I got used to the smell of old fish skins and empty meat containers. I avoided throwing the garbage for the last several days. When the can seemed full, I pushed yet another bunch of potato peelings down. Eventually, it was bursting with moldy trash.

Outside, the sun was rising. A dim light was barely noticeable beyond the lead sky hanging over the city. Heavy winter clouds began to glow with a faint grey color. When I opened the dustbin, a gust of wind sent a clump of hair flying past my face. It almost hit me on the cheek. I swore and threw the bag in.

On my way back, I noticed a cheerfully orange truck parking in front of the building. Big fluffy letters on its side said, "Moving Students." As it fitted itself into a tight space between rusting bicycles and a Tesla, a couple of twenty-something-year-olds emerged out of the passenger door. Among grey sky and crimson buildings, their blond hair and

sonorous laughter were a fly buzzing in a silent room. I meant to pass by them without noticing, but my neighbors upstairs just moved out, and I got curious.

“Are you guys moving into 117?” - I asked and pointed to the building door.

“Yes, you live here?” One of them replied with a thick American accent.

“Yes, I’ll leave the door open for you.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No worries, welcome!” I smiled at them and left.

The lockdown confined me to the apartment and turned my life into a conveyor belt of standardized days. Every morning I ate an organic ham and cheese sandwich followed by a cup of green, fairly sourced tea in the afternoon. And every night, I read a book from the list of *New York Times* bestsellers. The only thing that kept changing was the dashboards with the new corona cases. Oddly enough, we had to put our life on pause to both halt and fuel the pandemic. After everything else stopped, the world had only one spotlight left, the creeping chart of dying people.

As governments in Europe realized the gravity of the new virus, people had to work from home. Somehow the confinement made everybody stare into laptop screens for twelve hours a day. Proud of themselves, they bragged to their colleagues about booming productivity. They sacrificed bars, gyms, and movies to save lives. Meanwhile, their own lives were reduced to screen time and performance. Screens became dates, parties, and entertainment. Screenless professions were called essential. The screenful ones turned out even more meaningless than before. I doubled down on the trend, bought a TV, and fetched my PlayStation out of the bed drawer. While people everywhere clicked the keyboard from dawn to dusk, I clicked the joystick and got good at Dark Souls.

The new neighbors were fast to settle in our peaceful neighborhood. They spoke loudly as they were unpacking an endless collection of brass instruments and kitchenware.

The sounds of their arrival penetrated through the walls and ceiling of the apartment with clangorous persistence. At some point, I got so fixated on the noise I could overhear their conversation. I listened to him swearing at her. “Don’t put it there; what are you doing?” And then again: “Fuck, how can you be that stupid?” I could not tell what she was answering. I only heard a muffled, apologetic voice. Closer to ten o’clock, I started to wonder if I should go and ask them to be quiet. But, as soon as I got ready to interrupt, they stopped.

They repeated that same pattern every day. A constant cacophony of quarrels, doors slamming, and stomping became the accompaniment of my evenings. New neighbors moved me into a bad neighborhood. Surprisingly, they never crossed the line. I never heard them past ten. The weekend, though, promised to add a housewarming party and alcohol into the equation. I almost hoped that certain lines would be crossed. I dreamed of putting an end to the noise once and for all, but I needed a reason.

The weekend turned out disappointingly quiet. Apart from the usual noise, I heard the neighbor crying on a Saturday evening. I wondered what had happened. Could she have been abused by her temperamental partner? On the other hand, it could have been totally unrelated to their fights. For all I knew, she could have been watching *Marley and Me*. I thought to myself that I would interfere if I suspected violence. Many people imagine they would.

As the pandemic began, reports of domestic abuse skyrocketed. Everyone was stuck at home jobless, frustrated, and inevitably enraged. Some people started to snap. Their neighbors didn’t intervene or bother calling the police. “Someone else will do that,” they thought. “Someone else will take the responsibility.” Women and children were terrorized under the condemning view of impotent people with good intentions.

Was I as spineless as those other people? Could it be that I was coming up with ridiculous explanations just to

avoid responsibility? Whose cry would pierce a brick wall if it was a mere reaction to a movie? As muffled as it was, it had to be blaring to reach my ears through intricate corridors of ventilation and power outlets. But then, of course, not every howl is a result of violence.

Eventually, I got used to the noisy people upstairs. The dragging reality of the lockdown returned. The predictability of the routine, the upward-moving red chart of covid cases, the unbearable procession of conference calls, the nauseating smell of rotten fruits. I thought the most challenging part of the pandemic was the disease. Turns out it was ambivalence and nostalgia. The desire to live as you used to was shattered against the reality of societal collapse.

Just before the government introduced another lockdown, we had been planning our winter vacation. My girlfriend and I looked for plane tickets to ski resorts in Austria. We booked a hotel with the possibility of free cancelation. We dreamt about slopes we would ride in Tyrol. We spoke about cozy evenings in front of a fireplace. I personally fantasized about the hotel sex that brings just the right amount of novelty into a relationship. Meanwhile, people made similar plans. Some of them fulfilled those even before we started to plan ours. When our vacation got canceled, we realized that we were in a race. The race against covid and fellow travelers who dreamt of Tyrol, fireplaces, and hotel sex. We lost.

When the government announced a strengthening of the lockdown, I received my chance to deal with the neighbors. That evening we watched a press conference with the Dutch Prime Minister, delivering his usual speech about hard times and the unfortunate necessity to introduce new measures.

Just when the health minister took the floor, I heard the interphone buzz. I pressed the button and went to see who was going up. From downstairs emerged a figure with a confused look on his face. His eyes scarlet, almost glowing in the dim light of the hall. His lips chapped from dehydra-

tion. The smell of weed floating around him. He looked at me and asked if he accidentally buzzed my door. I meant to say something rude and sarcastic but ended up with, "Evidently." He apologized, said he was going upstairs, and proceeded to ascend.

The following hour, people kept arriving. No one buzzed my door anymore, but a steady procession of stomping feet and gagging voices promised a lively night. At eleven, my neighbors were in the heat of their party. They exceeded the number of people allowed in the house and broke the law. Something as mundane as drinks with friends had become a legal matter. It made me feel righteous. Now it was not only about decency, but a matter of public safety.

I knew that something was expected of me. Man is supposed to act. I had been thinking of going upstairs to crash the party for forty minutes. I exhaled angrily through my nostrils. I clenched my jaw and my fists. I made nervous movements, walking in circles around my living room. I swore loudly for them to hear me. At some point, my girlfriend asked if I wanted her to ask the neighbors to be quiet. She was afraid I would lash out at them otherwise. It was flattering, but I also thought that she could not bear my hesitation. That was the last drop, the final blow to my insecurity.

I went upstairs and banged on the door. The neighbors didn't open for a while. My heart was pounding so hard I could listen to it. I kept on knocking and imagining how it might unfold. Once the door was open, I would rush into the apartment, grab hold of the host and smash him with a headbutt. The blow would send him collapsing on the floor. With blood leaking down my forehead, I would punch him in the face until it turned into a bloody mess. The people around would stand gasping for air with their mouths open. I would look around and say: "Keep it down. It is late."

When the door finally opened, I saw the tired face of my neighbor. He had to grab the handle to keep standing. The air around us was filled with cold cigarette smoke and the

sour smell of alcohol. Muffled deep-house bass sounded from inside of the apartment. The guy in front of me stood shakily, and I couldn't tell whether he understood why I came. "Could you tone it down?" I clarified. He blinked slowly, processing the equation I presented to him: "Sure, apologies for it." I thanked him and left.

Back in the apartment, I heard the party being wrapped up. The people from the apartment poured down to the street. The silence was restored. Although the anticipated conflict didn't happen, my mood was fantastic. I went to my enemies' lair and returned with a victory. Standing naked in front of my girlfriend, I kept bragging about how easy it was. I got excited and demanded that she undress. I wanted her on all fours, moaning and screaming. I felt strong and savage. I was grabbing her hair and slapping her butt, pounding hard until I came.

A loud noise woke me up in the middle of the night, but I couldn't immediately tell where it came from. It took me some time to realize that someone was yelling at the top of their lungs. I couldn't make out the words, but it seemed violent. After a couple of blunt sounds, I heard the upstairs apartment door slam; someone ran outside, and the building fell silent again. I whispered: "Fucking pieces of shit," and tried to fall asleep.

My heart was pounding while I laid awake, trying to calm down. The rage ran through my body like electricity. I could not relax no matter how hard I tried. The darkness of winter night and the silence of the curfew felt eerie. I couldn't tell whether I was lying in my bed or floating in space. Time dissolved, and the room disappeared. I could nose the smell of wet soil behind the window.

I stayed wide awake until seven in the morning, when I decided to get out of bed and go for a run. The only people in the park were other joggers and dog owners. The sleepy January sun had yet to awaken. After a long break, my muscles felt stiff. The freezing winter wind was pricking my

throat. Every breath I took made me want to stop and go home. I bargained with myself for a couple of minutes; then I noticed the sidetrack that led to my house across the park. I decided to wrap up the run and took a shortcut.

This part of the park was less developed. As I turned from the main road, asphalt and street lamps gave way to unpaved track and predawn darkness. Tall grass covered the space by my sides, and I could only see a thin line of dark blue sky glittering with distant stars above me. I took my earbuds out and heard no cars or trains but total silence.

Running through this dreamy landscape, piercing through the thick stillness of the world, felt oddly familiar. I was moving forward but could have just as much been running on a treadmill. What started as a shortcut turned into a long way. The sameness of surroundings dragged indefinitely. When I turned back to the main track, I was a year older.

When I got to my building, the sky had turned dark blue with hues of pink and yellow; a faraway sun rising again. Opening the entry door to the building, I heard someone poking around at a keyhole. The hall met me with a dissonance; it reeked of alcohol and cigarettes. The city was waking up, yet like many others during the confinement, my neighbor challenged the monotonous rhythm of life.

While I was going upstairs, the door to the apartment opened and silently closed. It was odd. The neighbors were never careful and thoughtful of the noise they made. Perhaps I was biased. I imagined them to be loud all the time. I formed a prejudice and, as it often happens, generalized.

After I took a shower, made a coffee, and got ready for my team meeting, I heard a fuss upstairs. The sound of little wheels rolling on the wooden floor, stumbling over the cracks between the floorboards set my brain on fire. A sleepless night multiplied by the cacophony of the suitcase put me into a state of blind rage. I meant to go to the neighbors' and finally shut them up, but the meeting's start prevented me. I sat with my face glowing red throughout the call, and could not

stop thinking of turning off the camera and rushing upstairs. When the meeting ended, I heard soft steps on the stairs and a mute sound of something rubbing against the handrail. In a moment, the building door opened and quietly closed.

The lockdown could not last forever, and that week the government relaxed the measures. The sunny days grew longer. Yellow stars of daffodils popped out of the ground. People in down jackets became a rarity on the street, and the spring was on its way. The students from upstairs apparently left, and the neighborhood turned placid once again.

On Sunday, my girlfriend and I went to a bar on the corner of our block. Despite the pandemic and a lack of support, the owners managed to save it. It was still cold, but we sat at the terrace anyway because you ought to be outside whenever it is sunny in Amsterdam. We had draft beers for the first time in months, white to the point of transparency. People around us laughed and smoked, the waitress had her mask hanging down from her left ear. The old normality knocked out the new one in the first round.

Back at home, the sickly sweet smell of rotting fruits almost made me throw up. I had just thrown the garbage when we went to the bar. I checked the can; it was empty, pristine. I had not put the new bag in it yet. “Babe!” My girlfriend called me from the bedroom. When I came in, she pointed at the corner of the ceiling. A wet, dark stain was slowly spreading over the white plaster. I ran upstairs and knocked on the door. I did not understand what could possibly be leaking in the bedroom. There were no pipes on that side of the apartment. Besides, I was confident that the neighbors left.

After some minutes, I heard another neighbor going downstairs. A blond, slender woman in her forties was smiling at me. I was standing in her way, and she was waiting for me to move. Instead, I pointed at the door and asked, “Hi, do you know by any chance if they moved? Something’s leaking in their house, and nobody’s home.” She replied that she did

not know, advised me to call the homeowner, and gave me the number.

Back in my apartment, I called the landlady and explained the situation. She said that her tenants had a contract for six more months and promised to call them. The stain on my ceiling was slowly growing larger. By this time, I figured that the smell of rot was also coming from it. It was impossible to stay inside, and we could not leave because of the curfew. I called the landlady again. After a long sequence of beeps, she answered and said that my neighbors did not pick up the phone. She promised to come in the morning if they didn't show up. I put a bucket under the stain, hoping not to wake up to a puddle of disgusting liquid on the floor, and we went to sleep on the sofa.

In the morning, I saw two police cars and an ambulance parking near our house. I heard the feet stomping on the stairs behind the door. I rushed outside and asked a passing paramedic what the matter was. He told me that he did not know but recommended staying in the apartment. Anxious to find out what happened, I called the landlady again. She did not pick up.

After a while, someone buzzed my door. I opened it to two police officers. They asked me about the neighbors and told me that they found a young woman in the apartment. She was dead for a while; the liquids from her rotting body soaked through the cracks and ended up in our bedroom.

By the time we cleaned the apartment and got rid of the smell of rotting fruits, the government had lifted the curfew. The sounds of the city filled the street outside my window again. In a month, I'll return to my routine. I'll go to the lively office in the center of Amsterdam. I'll go to the gym filled with heavy breath and the sounds of fists punching bags. I'll go to restaurants filled with chatter and laughter. After all that, I'll return to my home, where it is still, and quiet, and the smell is fresh once again.

Poetry by Jeshua Noel
Twice-Swapped Gum

this one time
my mom made me eat
a piece of bacon that my brother
had already chewed
and spit out because he didn't like bacon that way

and this other time
i licked a boy's nipple
for a pokémon card
and then gave him all my pokémon cards
and then begged his mom to make him give them back

and the texture was the same
like twice-swapped gum
but firm like an overcooked egg
and i thought of my mom
with that boy's nipple in my mouth

Artwork by Dagny Sellorin
Late Fall in the Mimbres Valley



Pastel Drawing

Photography by Brooke Summers
Untitled



*Canon 5D mark IV – 50mm photography
makeup by Madelyn Cunningham*

Photography by Jordon Van Zante
Untitled



*Canon EOS R5 – 50mm photography
Model: Claire Corbin
makeup by Madelyn Cunningham*

Artwork by Sophia Tyris

Hades and Persephone



Digital Art

Fiction by Marco Etheridge

Foul Tommy's Armor

Foul Tommy shambles through the Ruins, and the zombies step aside to let him pass. They fear Foul Tommy and are repelled by his presence. He is a bear of a man, even in his dereliction, made more ursine by the stench that leaks from beneath his greatcoats.

Zombies from the Outside can't deter Foul Tommy, not here in the Ruins where they are powerless. He pauses his shuffling walk and looks up the lane that leads through the Day Market. The open stalls on either side are busy, and the zombies closest to Foul Tommy wrinkle their noses and move away. They don't dare point their devices in Tommy's direction.

The keepers of the stalls are impassive behind their arrayed wares. They nod to the Outsiders, sell the handmade goods the zombies desire, and take their money. They do not engage in conversation, nor do they wrinkle their noses at Foul Tommy. They of the Ruins are equals.

The muddy river makes up one undulating boundary of the Ruins, and a crumbling half-circle of ancient wall girds the rest. The Day Market is the center and heart of the Ruins, the only part of it where Outsiders dare to venture.

Only Insiders live in the Ruins, and only in the more or less intact buildings that back up to the ancient wall. Between the Day Market and the river lies a wasteland of fallen walls and tumbled stone. This belongs to Tommy.

Foul Tommy looks past the crumbling buildings and fallen walls that mark the corridor of the Day Market. A tall fir tree rises at the end of the lane, a landmark full of noisy crows. The crows are gathered for a murder or maybe a union meeting, filling the tree from top crown to lowest branch. Tommy doesn't care why the crows have gathered, only that they mark the way to the Grog Monger.

He raises his grimy hands to check that his armor is in place and properly fastened. He wears two huge greatcoats, one over the top of the other, the mantel that holds the wee ones safe and dear from the screaming and the blackness.

His armor secure, Foul Tommy juts out his chin. His scowl is hidden beneath a tangled black beard. A once-black watch cap is pulled down over a pelt of matted hair that falls to the collar of his mac. He sets out again. The zombies part before him and swirl in his passing wake.

The fir tree looms ahead, and Foul Tommy plods his unsteady way beneath its branches and congress of crows. The black birds croak out a dirge stripped of all derision, a professional courtesy extended to a comrade in the deadly trade.

The Grog Monger's shop is empty when Foul Tommy pushes open the door. A bell above the door rings out, and the ringing startles Tommy, as it always does. He eyes the bell with suspicion and steps into the tiny shop.

A rough wooden counter runs along the walls and back of the shop. Behind the counter, shelves climb into the dusty gloom. They are laden with bottles and jugs, glass canisters and earthen crocks. The plank floor of the shop will hold four customers provided they are on good terms and none of them are Foul Tommy.

The Grog Monger stands behind the counter, a gold-capped grin splitting his ruddy face. The man wears an apron over a denim work-shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows. Almost every bit of exposed flesh is covered in ginger fur. The knuckles that rest on the counter are red furred, as are the beefy forearms above them. A ginger beard rings the golden smile, and close-cropped red fuzz outlines the man's skull.

The Grog Monger's shop serves as the portal between the worlds of out and in. If the Outside was hell and the Ruins a purgatory of sorts, the Grog Monger must be Cerberus guarding the doorway.

The knuckles lift from the counter and the Grog Monger's hands spread wide in welcome.

— A good morning to you, Sergeant. I was expecting you. Your check come just the other day.

Foul Tommy shuffles forward into the flow of the man's words, batting them away with an outstretched hand. The Grog Monger seems to interpret the waving as if it were spoken word.

— Come now, no need for that. Proprieties to be observed, Sergeant, leastwise within the walls of me humble shop.

He reaches beneath the counter and produces a check printed on heavy bond and a pen. Foul Tommy peers at the lettering and at the name spelled out in block script: *Brian Sutcliffe, SSgt.*

— Just a signature as always and I'll lay it by on your account.

He takes up the pen in one hand and holds down the check with the other. The nib falters for a moment, then drops to the paper and scrawls a mark on the signature line.

— Now then, that's seen to. Talking of your account, you've got a tidy bit laid by, not a fortune mind you, but enough for a roof over your head for a few nights. I could book you something over at the Three Flags. Got a mate working there. Nothing fancy, but the beds are clean. What do you say to that, Sarge?

Foul Tommy backs away from the counter, both hands raised as if to fend off a demon.

— Calm yourself now, Sarge, it was just a thought, nothing more. Forget I mentioned it. Here, come now, nothing to worry about. If not a room, would you be minding if I asked Skater Grrl to look in on you? I know you're fond of her and she of you.

The sound of her name soothes Tommy. Skater Grrl, the angel of the Ruins. It is very hard to talk to an angel, any angel, but he can talk to her. With thoughts of her in his mind, Tommy lowers his upraised arms and steps back to the counter.

— There then, that's all settled to the good. Now, you'll be wanting your supplies I've no doubt. Here's a nice pouch of cavendish for your pipe. It's sweet as sin, that tobacco, not like the foul dregs they used to give

us on the line, aye? Torn newspaper and shredded cardboard that filth was. But this here is the right proper. And two bottles of the Four Shamrock.

The man lays a twine-wrapped parcel on the counter, then reaches behind himself and lifts two fifths of whiskey from a shelf. The heavy bottles thump on the counter. Foul Tommy peers down at the bottles, then lifts his right hand, four fingers held upright.

— Now Sarge, we talked about this as you'll no doubt recall. You're a man what must keep up appearances. I know I'm just a former Lance Corporal speaking to his superior, but I must stick to me guns on this. Two bottles's the limit and no more.

Foul Tommy sags like a scolded pup. He reaches for the whiskey and tucks one bottle into each of the outside pockets of his mackintosh. He unbuttons the top of the greatcoat and slides the pouch of tobacco inside. A fetid reek pours from the open collar, but the Grog Monger gives no sign of noticing.

Armor back in place, Tommy raises one hand and turns away. The bell over the door rings again as the Grog Monger's farewell reaches his ears.

— Mind how you go, Sergeant.

Retracing his steps, Tommy turns himself back towards the Ruins. The bottles heavy in his pockets, he shambles under the crow tree and crosses the lane that leads to the Day Market. He enters a maze of broken buildings and crumbling walls, negotiating passages that only the denizens of the Ruins know. He emerges into a crumbling courtyard. A raised platform girds the courtyard, protected by a doubtful overhang.

Foul Tommy clambers up onto the platform and lowers himself onto a sprawling nest fashioned from cardboard and lined with newspaper. He sticks his legs out in front of him, leans back against the stone wall, and fishes one of the bottles from his pocket.

Sunlight and the shadows of passing clouds play across the walls of the courtyard. Smoke from Tommy's pipe sweeps up to mix with the dappled light. He nips at the whiskey, but

only in a small way, a slow way. He has to keep his guard up and his wits about him.

A shadow moves, something darker than a cloud, half-seen but still there. Tommy sees it, or feels it, up where it hovers above the courtyard, slipping in and out behind the broken parapets that top the walls. Foul Tommy lurches to his feet, steadies himself, and raises a fist in the quiet air. His other hand goes to the collar of his greatcoat and clutches it tight against his throat.

Tommy rages against the thing, but anyone standing in the courtyard would see only a silent man waving his fist.

Nae, you know better than coming here. Not when I'm ready for you, ready and waiting, you great greedy beast. You'll not have them, not that easy, so you can just bugger back off where you came from. The wee ones are safe under me armor and cinched up tight. Prowl all you want, you'll not have a one of them.

The sense of lurking fades, replaced by the shapes of clouds passing over the stone walls. The shapes become men, and the men march past. Tommy can see them, hear their laughter, the voices young and brash. Then the sunlight turns bright as fire, and the fire holds screams at its heart, and the cries of the dying.

It is gone as quickly as it appeared. There is only Tommy standing alone in the empty courtyard with one fist raised to the sky. He lowers his arm, sinks back into his nest, and picks up his dropped pipe. He crushes out the smoking embers burning holes in the cardboard, tamps the pipe with his forefinger, and strikes a match.

The light slips away, and Tommy slips away with it. He is moving through the darkness, walking between men huddled in small clusters. Snatches of murmured conversations, the quick glow of a cigarette held cupped in a concealing hand. They are waiting, these men, afraid in the night. He pauses beside each circle of men, sees their upturned faces, hears his own voice speaking quiet words of encouragement. They nod their heads, smile their nervous smiles, and he moves on.

As he moves through the assembled men, he senses other

footsteps behind him, something following him quiet as a cat. The feeling grows stronger, and he opens his eyes.

Soft footsteps enter the courtyard, and he sees Skater Grrl moving across the broken stones; blonde, pale, and thin as a wisp. She is smiling at him, and he feels the light return. Skater Grrl pauses below the edge of the platform. When she speaks, Tommy hears flowing water.

— Hallo, Tommy. Grog Monger sent word I might ought to check you up. How're you keeping?

Foul Tommy works his mouth, trying to pull sounds from his throat. He manages to utter a single word.

— Gabriella.

The young woman quickly looks about the courtyard and then back to Tommy.

— Ah, we can't be using the Outside names, Tommy, not even when we're alone. You remember that, don't you?

He nods his head, then drops his eyes from hers.

Skater Grrl laughs, and the sound of it sweeps away anything that could be wrong.

— Here, no harm done, Tommy, don't you fret about it. But try to remember, yeah? Hey, how about you come back with me to the shop. You can have a shower, a good wash, and a brush up. I can clean your armor while you're about it. It's been a while since it had a good washing. Would you like that?

Foul Tommy nods his head, and a smile breaks out through the tangle of his beard. He rises from his nest and lowers himself from the raised platform. He dwarfs the young woman standing next to him, but she does not flinch. Taking his hand in hers, she leads him across the cobbles and out of the courtyard.

* * * *

Foul Tommy peeks through the crack in the door, counting the wee lads in the shadows. *Naught to fear, Boyos, Gabri-*

ella says you'll be safe here, and we know that she never lies. I'll only be gone a tick, just long enough for our armor and me soiled self to get a good scrubbing. You lads get some rest. He pushes the door closed and shoots a heavy bolt to lock it.

He lumbers partway across the room and pauses, a huge, ragged beach towel wrapped around his hairy middle. Below the plank floor, he can hear voices and the sounds of the printing shop. Gabriella is down there, and the man who makes the shirts.

Gabriella says to shower off the crusty stuff and won't that feel nice. She'll be cross if he doesn't give everything a good scrubbing. It won't do to make an angel cross. Tommy stomps over to a makeshift shower and turns on the water.

Skater Grrl walks through the silk-screening shop, holding a bulky bundle at arm's length. A tall man is working over a spider-armed machine. Each arm has a sort of paddle for a hand, and each paddle holds a T-shirt waiting to be printed. The man wears what were once white coveralls but are now a rainbow of ink spatters and swirls. Silky raises himself and smiles at Skater Grrl. Then he sniffs the air and wrinkles his nose.

- Hey, Grrl. Whew, is it that time again already?
- Hey yourself, Silky. Can't be helped. We can't be letting him rot away altogether.
- Silky eyes the stinking bundle.
- What's with the big fella and the coats, then? It's near come on summer.
- Don't know exactly, but he believes he's carrying folks around under his coat. Calls it his armor, says they're the little lambs, but I don't think they're sheep. It's dreadful important to him, like he's paying off a debt or something.
- A debt you say? Sounds like there's something to be learned there.
- There's more than something to be learned from Tommy. Swimming in deep waters, he is. But for now, it's the devil out of the overcoats.

- Then I expect you'll be wanting the steam room for them horrible mackintoshes?
- If you please, kind sir. You think this is bad, you should have a go at his shirt and trousers. I've already got them in the wash. The socks and unders, those can't never be saved. I don't tell him, but I keeps a stash of new hidden away.
- Right you are, my girl. My steam room will take care of those plague rags.

Silky turns back to his work, test-fitting a stencil over a blank shirt. Skater Grrl leans over his shoulder to watch.

- What's the flavor of the day, then?

Silky answers her without turning around.

- Same as always, revolution in bites so small they don't know they're eating it.

- You think it does any good?

- What, to the zombies? Naw, no help for them until their devices fail altogether. Then watch out. Mean time, the revolution serves to cleanse the revolutionaries, even Foul Tommy. Now if you'll excuse me, fair maiden, I've got a whole run of Mao as Marilyn shirts to see to.

Skater Grrl looks down at the template and laughs.

- Should sell like hotcakes. I'll leave you to it then.

Thanks, Silky.

She walks away bearing the stinking bundle and her thoughts. *Hang these in the steamer, fetch out the clean unders, then make sure Tommy ain't drowning in the shower.* She laughs again. *Just another day in the Ruins.*

* * * *

The morning light plays out a dull grey across the muddy river. Tommy's great bulk is sprawled across a cracked bench athwart the skeleton of a wooden boat. The planking has fallen from the hull, and gunwales cling to the bones of broken ribs. The sluggish river has long since swallowed the bow, and

water laps at the wooden planks not far from Tommy's boots.

Tommy nips from a bottle of Four Shamrocks, just a morning taste, something to keep the fires stoked. Smoke from his pipe drifts out over the flat water. He watches it for the longest time, and as he keeps watch it begins to take shape.

Tendrils of smoke swirl into a form, and the form builds into shadow. A huge head rises from the water, a monstrous thing, like a cat if cats had bloody scales for fur. The eyes are a fever yellow, the pupils black slits, and they stare at Foul Tommy.

The creature surfaces only to its dripping muzzle, the rest of its foul body hidden beneath the surface of the river. A set of huge claws scythe the water beside the hideous head, then disappear like diving silver fish.

The fire in Tommy's chest blazes hot with anger, and the anger flares into his brain. *Get ye gone, demon, there's nothing for you here. I don't give a damn for your hunger. You've taken all there is, and you'll have no more. You slice steel and flesh and bone. You drain and drink their blood. But you'll not have what's left of them. I guard them and that's an end to it. Be gone to a battlefield and do your haunting there.*

The creature closes and reopens its horrible eyes in a slow blink that lasts many heartbeats. Then it begins to sink. The muzzle dips beneath the water, then the still staring yellow eyes. Its pointed ears are the last thing Tommy sees. The brown water swirls, and the eddies left behind drift off on the slow current.

The riverbank is peaceful once more. The morning sun grows warm. Tommy smokes down his pipe, knocking the ashes to the mud, and sags against the wooden ribs. Exhaustion sweeps over him like a blanket, and the world falls away.

The sun is high when Tommy wakes from a sleep he did not mean to take. His armor is open, the folds of his overcoats fallen to either side of his slumped body.

A shadow falls across his face, and he looks up. The thing is there, fully out of the water and climbing over the sunken

bow of the wrecked boat. The demon digs sharp claws into rotting wood, pulling itself forward. Its mouth is open in a silent snarl, and Tommy sees the bared fangs.

Foul Tommy scuttles backwards like a frightened crab, his arms and legs flailing. Pipe and bottle are forgotten. He makes it to the stern of the wreck, and all the while those yellow eyes stare into his. Then his hands find nothing but air, and he falls from the boat to the muddy riverbank.

He rises to his feet and staggers up the bank while trying to pull his greatcoats back into place. He reaches the top of the bank and begins to run for the tumbled walls of the Ruins. Behind him, the creature rises into the air and follows, snarling and drooling, yellow eyes boring into Tommy's back.

Foul Tommy careens into the narrow passages, bouncing off stone walls as he twists and turns, leaping over piles of rubble. The demon floats above him, claws raking down from the broken tops of the ruined walls. Tommy dodges and runs, one hand clutching the armor closed at his throat, but he cannot stop to fasten the armor. He runs like a man on a battlefield, and the demon pursues him.

* * * *

Tall Boy stands behind his baskets of freshly baked breads and meat pies. The zombies drift down the lane of the Day Market, holding up their devices to record what they don't see. At the next stall, Dreadlock is smiling broad, white teeth flashing against his ebony face.

— What's up, Dreadlock? You're grinning like you've got a secret to tell.

Dreadlock's smile grows, and he holds his strong hands wide above the twisted wire jewelry displayed on his table.

— I be celebrating, man. Been three years ago today I come to the Ruins.

— Hey, happy jump anniversary.

The smile disappears from Dreadlock's face.

— It was a hard jump, man, hard jump.

Tall Boy nods his head. All jumps are hard, but some are worse than others. Being in the Outside is a frightening thing for anyone. He remembers his own jump well, and has no desire to repeat it.

— You came from the South, right?

Dreadlock sighs, looking to the sky above the ruined walls.

— Yeah, come from the Water World I did. I'm telling you, them were hard times, Tall Boy. Food going scarce on the island, fish gone away. People was making the jump left and right. I was three months on that jump, all the while wandering the Outside, chasing a rumor of this place.

— Yeah, but you found it in the end and here you are.

Dreadlock nods his head, and the smile returns.

— You know, Foul Tommy was the first person I met when I finally got to the Ruins. Took me under his wing, he did. Won't never forget that.

— Must have been stinking under there.

Dreadlock waves a long finger at Tall Boy.

— Don't you be running Tommy down. He a good man. You know he was a sergeant in the Big War? Got himself shot up good he did. He told me about it, about all his soldiers getting themselves killed. Sad story, man.

— Wait, Foul Tommy talks?

Dreadlock shrugs.

— Course he talks. Not so often as most folks, but when Tommy talks, it's a good idea to listen. He seen a lot, he has.

As if summoned by their words, Foul Tommy bursts out of the rubble. Tall Boy and Dreadlock are struck silent at the sight of Tommy running like a madman, his greatcoats flaring behind him. One hand is clutching at his throat, the other clawing the air. He runs straight at them as if he's been struck blind.

They step aside only at the last second. Foul Tommy

passes between them, and they see his face contorted with fear. The big man collides with the edge of Dreadlock's stall, tangling his feet, and falls to the pavement.

Tommy rolls to his back and raises himself on an elbow, gibbering and waving his free hand at the sky. Tall Boy is staring down at Tommy when Dreadlock grabs him by the shoulder. His long black hand spins Tall Boy round. Dreadlock is pointing at a dark shadow writhing above the stone walls. The thing shifts and roils without any real form, but Tall Boy can feel its menace. Dreadlock's hand is shaking, as is Tall Boy's voice when he finds words.

— What the hell is that?

— Don't know for sure, man, but Tommy told me he had a demon chasing him.

— You mean like a demon from a whiskey bottle?

— Don't look like that thing come from no bottle.

— Right, well sod this then.

Tall Boy looks around wildly, then snatches up a long breadknife from his stall. He raises his weapon to the shifting shadow and backs away, pushing Dreadlock behind him until they are in the middle of the market lane. They stand between Tommy's quivering body and the menacing shadow.

Tall Boy waves his breadknife. Dreadlock has no weapon, but he raises two fists.

— No worries, Tommy, you not being here alone.

Dreadlock sees two of the market kids staring wide-eyed.

— Hey . . . you kids fetch Skater Grrl right fast, you understand? Go! Go!

The urchins race away. Tall Boy speaks without turning away from the demon cloud.

— Skater Grrl?

— Man, Skater Grrl be nothing but good. We need some nothing but good about now.

An inhuman yowl rises from the ground behind them, and they spin about at the sound of it. Foul Tommy's mouth is agape, and his lips are flecked with spittle and foam. They turn back to the shadow and see that it is growing denser, as

if trying to take shape. A dozen faces stare out from the other stalls, all eyes wide with terror.

Tall Boy finds his voice and raises it to the threat.

— You get back, whatever you are. You're not welcome here.

Dreadlock nods and waves his fists.

— Yeah, you not welcome here, soul sucker. You go now, leave our friend be.

— Soul sucker?

— D'know, man, never yelled at no demon before. What we do now?

Before Tall Boy can answer, they hear a grinding noise from the end of the lane. Skater Grrl is flying between the stalls, crouched atop her skateboard, wheels growling against cracked pavement. Her pale blonde hair streams out behind her, and Tall Boy swears he sees silver sparks in the wake of her passage.

Skater Grrl leaps from her board, and it skitters away under one of the stalls. She lands on her feet like a cat, fierce as fire, and raises her arms wide; a shield between Tommy's defenders and the dark, seething shadow. Tall Boy looks past her narrow shoulders and feels the heat of her, fierce as a flame. A silver light seems to shimmer from her hands and head. She faces the demon cloud, and her voice rings out loud and strong.

— I don't know what you are, or what Tommy thinks you are, but this is the Ruins, and you have no place here.

Tall Boy sees the dark shadow waver and shift.

— You will be gone. You will leave my friends alone. I curse you back to the Outside.

A long heartbeat of silence is broken by Skater Grrl's raging scream.

— You will get the fuck out of here. Now!

Her last word pierces the Ruins from end to end, echoes of it rebounding from stone and wall. The echoes raise the crows from the fir tree at the far end of the market lane. The

huge flock of crows swirl once above the crown of the tree, and then their wings drive a screeching black phalanx to answer her call. They sweep above the market lane, above Skater Grrl's outstretched hand, flapping and cawing, snapping razor beaks and wielding needle-sharp talons.

The crows boil in air above the market, engulfing the shadow in a blackness of their own. The flock rises higher and higher, carrying the formless demon at the center of the maelstrom. The screaming black birds drift away, circling and wheeling, and at the center of the whirling flock pulses a darker shadow.

Far out above the river, the crows begin diving through the center of the shadow. The flock condenses into what looks like a solid ball writhing in the sky. It pulses, once, twice, and then a black shape falls from it, plummeting to the river. There is the sound of a muffled splash, and then nothing.

The flock disperses, the crows spinning off in fours and sixes. They flap their way back to the top of the tall fir tree. Settling onto the many branches, they begin to preen their ruffled feathers.

Skater Grrl's arms fall to her sides and she leans back into Tall Boy. For the briefest moment, he feels her small body pressed to his. Then she spins past him and is kneeling beside Foul Tommy.

Dreadlock is standing stock still, his mouth opening and closing. He sags against Tall Boy's shoulder.

— I thought we be cooked, Boy. Never saw nothing like that, not ever. Never want to see it again, neither.

Damn, I thought we be cooked for sure.

Tall Boy feels Dreadlock slap him on the shoulder, and they both turn away from where the shadow had been. Skater Grrl has pulled Tommy to his feet and is buttoning up his greatcoats. The big man is staring down into her face. She murmurs words that only he can hear, and he nods his head. When he speaks his words are clear.

— But not forever, it's not gone forever.

She smiles and nods.

— P'raps not, Tommy, but it's gone for now. And you've got friends to protect you.

Tall Boy is staring and his body quivers. A question bursts from his mouth before he can think.

— What just happened? I mean, what in the hell just happened?

Skater Grrl turns her smile to him, and the light of it stills him.

— You were very brave, that's what happened.

She lifts herself on tiptoe, grabs Tall Boy's face, and rewards him with a hard kiss. When her hands and lips fall away, Tall Boy stands stock still, his mouth hanging open.

— You too, Dread.

She kisses Dread's cheeks, left and right, and smiles at the both of them.

— I'll see youse all later, yeah? I think Tommy could use a lie down.

One of the market kids holds out the errant skateboard. Skater Grrl grabs it and pats the kid on the head. She takes Tommy's hand in hers and leads him away, the board dangling from her other hand. The big man shuffles beside her as the pair of them walk up the market lane.

Tall Boy stands frozen in place, stunned by what has just happened. Dreadlock is beside him, a big grin plastered across his face.

— Hey man, you was just kissed by an angel.

Tall Boy blinks as if waking from a dream.

— She kissed you too, Dread.

— Naw, Tall Boy, she give me a peck on the cheek. She kissed you, man, I mean, she kissed you. I think you just find yourself an angel.

Tall Boy looks down the lane to the receding backs of Foul Tommy and Skater Grrl.

— I'm not the only one.

Artist Biographies

Carley Anderson

Carley Anderson is an undergraduate at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and a minor in Photography. Her photography was published in *Arkana* and *805 Lit + Art*. She was also featured at 2nd Friday Art Night in Downtown Little Rock. She is inspired by childhood memories, literature, and her family.

Evan Bennett

Evan Bennett is a kid at a crossroads. He is both an aspiring economist who hopes to use his analytical knowledge of the world to alleviate the struggles of those impoverished in his community, and an aspiring author and poet, who hopes to capture these feelings and inspire hope. His first book, 'You're Just Not Built Like a Runner, The Memoir of a Mediocre Ultrarunner' is currently being prepared for submission for publication.

Jack Bordnick

My sculptural and photographic imagery is a reflection of my past and present forces and the imagination of my life's stories. They represent an evolutionary process of these ideas and that all of life's forces are interconnected, embraced, and expressed through creative art forms. My works represent what I have accomplished with this art form. I call it my quantum and metaphoric moment, the changing from one form to another.

Despy Boutris

Despy Boutris's writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Ploughshares*, *Crazyhorse*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *poets.org*, and elsewhere. Currently, she teaches at the University of Houston and serves as Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*, Guest Editor for *Palette Poetry* and *Frontier*, and Editor-in-Chief of *The West Review*.

Ashley Cline

An avid introvert, full-time carbon-based life-form and pop music

scholar, Ashley Cline crash-landed in south Jersey some time ago and still calls that strange land home. Her poetry has appeared in *404 Ink*, *Okay Donkey*, and *Parentheses Journal*, among others. Her debut chapbook, “& watch how easily the jaw sings of god” is forthcoming from Glass Poetry Press. Twitter: @the_Cline.

Ilaria Cortesi

Inspired by the punk aesthetic of DIY, I use digital collage as a means of personal and social liberation and to critically look at stereotypical representations of society and individuals. Each piece begins with a word or thought that evokes an image; I then slice and arrange pictures until a new, punchy visual narrative emerges, characterized by vibrant color and paper-like textures. The results are punchy collages that are thought-provoking while being playful.

Marco Etheridge

Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has been featured in many reviews and journals in Canada, the UK, and the USA. Notable recent credits include: *Prime Number Magazine*, *Smokey Blue Literary & Arts*, *Coffin Bell*, *In Parentheses*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Ligeia Magazine*, *The First Line*, *After Happy Hour Review*, *The Opiate Magazine*, *Cobalt Press*, *Literally Stories*, and *Blue Moon Review*, amongst many others.

Find his work at <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

Jada Fabrizio

I studied photography at the School of Visual Arts and The International Center for Photography in NYC. My photography has been exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the New York metro area and the continental US.

I love building and setting the stage for the images. In my studio I work with wood, clay, paint, and found objects. Each image is carefully lit and composed, making every diorama challenging and exciting.

Jeremiah Gilbert

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer, writer, and avid traveler based out of Southern California. He likes to travel light and shoot handheld. His travels have taken him to nearly a hundred countries and territories around the globe. His photogra-

phy has been published internationally in both digital and print publications, and has been exhibited worldwide. He is also the author of *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel*. He can be found on Instagram @jg_travels

Rich Glinnen

Best of the Net nominee, Rich Glinnen, enjoys bowling, and eating his daughter's cheeks at his home in Bayside, New York. His work can be read in various print and online journals, as well as on his Tumblr and Instagram pages. His wife calls him Ho-ho.

Edward W. Hall

Edward W. Hall is a teenage Australian author of short fiction and poetry. He writes poetry and short fiction in his spare time, inspired by the works of A. A. Milne, Sylvia Plath, and Allen Ginsberg. Edward has been published in local newspapers for his journalistic work and continues to author short fiction of varying genres for his own pleasure.

Abbie Hart

Abbie is a seventeen-year-old poet from Texas who also enjoys painting, photography, and theatre tech. She has a pitbull chihuahua mix named Tessie, who's the love of her life.

abbiehart.wordpress.com

Kip Hart

Kip Hart is a Kansas City, Missouri native and works in public finance. I received a Bachelor's degree in English and a Masters degree in education from Truman State University. I do not have any previous publications. You can find me on Twitter @fakekip.

Kelly Hegi

Kelly Hegi is a writer, licensed minister, and active Spiritual Director living in Minneapolis with her husband, kids, and dogs. She writes to explore life through a more creative lens and has just recently begun to be published both online and in print.

Sarah Hozumi

Sarah Hozumi is a translator and rewriter who has lived near Tokyo for about twelve years. To see other short stories she's had the honor of having published, and to read her blog mostly about all things Japan, please visit *sarahhozumi.com*.

Brandon Hurley

Brandon Hurley's work is a depiction of everyday city living, based on personal experiences across urban sprawls within California. His approach to these narratives brings a unique, surrealist style to what audiences usually expect to see in a city landscape. The technique Brandon has evolved over the years has developed into his own personal signature of texture play and surface manipulation to the audience's eye.

Marissa Isch

Marissa Isch is an artist, mother, teacher, and writer. She graduated from Pratt Institute in 2008 with a creative writing degree. She wrote and directed three Off-Broadway plays, published a handful of poems and short stories in online and print literary journals, and co-founded an art and charity collective. Marissa began writing flash fiction in 2020 as a way to cope and heal. She currently teaches art and works in the nonprofit sector in Denver, Colorado, while writing a fiction manuscript.

Robert T. Krantz

Robert T. Krantz is the author of four chapbooks of poetry, including *mishigamaa* and *Gargoyle*. His latest, *Something to Cry About* (Cathexis Northwest Press), was released in 2019. His individual works have been nominated for the Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prizes, and have been featured in *Hamilton Arts and Letters*, *Grasslimb*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, and others. He lives in Detroit.

Kathryn Lauret

Kathryn Lauret lives in Colorado with her pet snake and cat. She recently graduated from Colorado State University with a degree in English Creative Writing. Her goal in life is to write in a way that causes people to think openly about the world around them.

Daniel Levanti

Daniel is a writer and musician from Connecticut, USA, and studied at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. He's been living and working between the States and Prague, Czech Rep., for almost twenty years, writing, recording, teaching English and guitar, and performing. In that time he's published three books of poetry, which were translated into Czech by renowned translator and poet, Zdeněk Hron. The most recent, *Aptera*, was released by Paper Jam Publishing in June, 2020.

J H Martin

J H Martin is from London, England, but has no fixed abode. His writing has appeared in a number of places in Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

For more info, please visit: acoatforamonkey.wordpress.com.

Heather McGeachy

I'm an artist living in PDX (Portland, Oregon). As part of an artist collective – formerly with a physical gallery space – my life as a human has been upended. My life as an artist wrapped up in the physicality of gallery spaces – has been forever transformed. I studied painting at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and my practice continued to be deconstructed during an MFA program at Washington State University.

Taylor Moon

Taylor Moon, Class of 2022, is a junior from South Korea, who attends the Chapin School in New York. Taylor has studied art at TASSIS International School in Switzerland and studied with Sherry Camhy at the Arts Student League of New York and the Ashcan Studio in New York.

Jeshua Noel

Jeshua Noel is a writer and undergraduate student in the BA English program at Hannibal-La Grange University. My academic writing has been published in the *International Linguistics Research* journal and my creative work in *Puerto Del Sol*. I live in Hannibal, Missouri with my girlfriend, Madi, and two unlovable cats.

Rachel Anne Parsons

Rachel Anne Parsons is an Appalachian writer and poet who lives in Olive Hill, Kentucky. She has an MFA in creative writing through the Bluegrass Writers Studio at Eastern Kentucky University. She has been previously published in *Now & Then: The Appalachian Magazine*, *Still: The Journal*, as well as *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel* and *Night Picnic Journal*.

Timothy Phillips

Timothy F. Phillips is considered to be a naive artist with a splash of realism. Little cats become symbols that transmit that “another reality is hidden behind appearances,” and enchanted paths to the beach come to suggest evocative images of a better world for all to enjoy and live in contentment. Occasionally he frames his vision of the artwork with bright foliage through which the skies glimmer and the moons glow in an evening hue.

James Mads Pryor

James Mads Pryor is a student at the University of Mary Washington studying creative writing. He is the Lead Nonfiction Editor for the *Rappahannock Review*. His work has been published in *Aubade*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Body Without Organs*, and *The Telling Room*.

Sabahat Quadri

My short story “The Other Side” touches on the societal dualities that live side by side in Pakistan. I’ve worked in publishing for over twenty five years, initially as a graphic designer, and more recently, I’ve been an editor and a writer. I’ve never been trained as a writer, and this is truthfully the first submission of my work.

Viktor Rovkach

Viktor Rovkach was born and raised in Kaliningrad, in the westernmost time zone of Russia. Born at the geographical and historical border between the East and the West, he is fascinated with languages and contrasts between cultures. As a result, he studied linguistics and interpretation at the University of Immanuel Kant. Right now, he is living in Amsterdam with his girlfriend and their cat. He works as a marketer but finds true joy in writing short stories.

Max Ruebensal

I am a German painter, sculptor, and conceptual artist. I focus on various contemporary and political topics as well as the growing digitalization of our environment. Therefore I reinterpret well-known, strong symbols and incorporate them into my contrasty and vibrant works. Influences of pop culture meet my variety of techniques, innovational spirit and passion for technology, and are transformed into physical manifestos that seek to challenge the thinking of their observer.

Barbara Sarvis

Barbara Hageman Sarvis was born in Bergen County, New Jersey. She attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City and received graduate certifications in both art education and special education from The University of North Florida. After a successful career as an art educator and administrator she wrote and illustrated five children's books and continues to teach, write, and make art in her Vermont studio.

Dagny Sellorin

I have a BA in Fine Art Sculpture from Reed College. My list of shows and studio exhibitions is too numerous to remember . . . all over the West coast, USA, Grenada, West Indies, Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela, Hong Kong, and Cambodia. A small number of pieces are in private collections of discerning collectors around the world.

Reign Serene

Reign is a screenwriter and poet from Los Angeles. She has been featured by *Parallax Literary Journal*, the *Plants and Poetry Journal*, and published by the Thirty West Publishing House. Reign has also self published her own poetry book, "ULTRASOUND," available on Amazon and on her website: arielsereneee.wixsite.com/reign More work is available on her Instagram @S3RENE.

Labdhi Shah

Labdhi Shah is a self-taught artist currently living in Atlanta, Georgia. Trained as an economist, clinical psychologist, and art therapist. Art seeks to convey the truth of the human experience in all its complexity. Her effort as an artist is to share the faith she

has in the capacity of love and to accept the uniqueness of every human being irrespective of race, color, gender, and culture.

Tufik Shayeb

Tufik Shayeb's poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including *West Trade Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *The Menteur*, and many others. To date, he has published three chapbooks and one book titled, *I'll Love You to Smithereens*. Shayeb currently resides in Phoenix, Arizona.

Jake Sifuentes

Jake Sifuentes received his BA in English from Boston University. Most nights he bartends.

CJ Strauss

CJ Strauss (they/them) is a poet and vegan chef based in Brooklyn, NY.

Brooke Summers

Brooke Summers is an artist focusing on photography and graphic art living in Des Moines, Iowa.

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man from Seattle with Borderline Personality Disorder. He currently attends the Evergreen State College and works for Headline Poetry & Press. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's *Writer's Block*, UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, and UC Santa Barbara's *Spectrum*. His lifelong dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @Romangodmercury on Instagram, Facebook, RedBubble, and Twitter.

Paul Tanner

I know I'm not everyone's cup o' tea, but someone has to talk about this stuff, even if it IS beneath "proper" poetry. I've been earning minimum wage, and writing about it, for too long. *Shop Talk: Poems for Shop Workers* was published last year by Penniless Press. *No Refunds: Poems and cartoons from your local supermarket* is out now, from Alien Buddha Press.

Tiny Ocean

Tiny Ocean is an original Folk Country Psychedelic band from Connecticut fronted by Kierstin Seiser. All songs written by Kierstin and Tiny Ocean. We are completely independent with no record contract or management. www.tinyoceanband.com

Sophia Tyris

Life asked death, why do people love me and hate you? Because you are a beautiful lie, and I'm the painful truth.

I am a Greek American attorney and artist living in New Jersey. I focus on contemporary art that reimagines Ancient Greece and Greek mythology in a creative, abstract, and funky way!

Jordon Van Zante

Jordon Van Zante is a portrait and lifestyle photographer based in Des Moines, Iowa. He focuses on creating simple, but compelling imagery that can withstand the test of time. When not creating portraits or working with brands and businesses, he enjoys traveling and photographing whatever captures his eyes. Find more of his work at jordonvanzante.com and on Instagram @jordon_vanzante.

Bridget Waldamere

When it comes to art and creativity I consider myself a jack of all trades. I find poetry to be the best way to express myself, especially when I am manic, and find it pouring out of my mouth in random rhyming schemes. Poetry and art in general seem to be the only place I can be authentically myself without fear of judgment.

Allison Whittenberg

Allison Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her other novels include *Sweet Thang*, *Hollywood and Maine*, *Life is Fine*, *Tutored*, and *The Sane Asylum*.

Daniel Winn

I'm a writer and person of other hobbies living in Flagstaff, Arizona. I have had writing published in *Defenestration Mag*, *Citius Mag*, and hardly anywhere else.

Donny Winter

Donny Winter is a LGBTQ poet who writes poems weaving together nature-related imagery and LGBTQ topics. In September 2020, his first collection of poems, *Carbon Footprint*, was released by Alien Buddha Press.

Hanna Wright

Hanna Marie Dean Wright is a self-taught artist residing in Keavy, Kentucky. She uses her experiences from growing up in rural Southeastern Kentucky, teaching special education classes, and living with obsessive compulsive disorder to inspire her unique works of art. Hanna Wright uses bold lines and bright colors to create abstract figures with relatable and at times deeply emotional expressions.

Colin Yuan

Colin Yuan is a Chinese-American photographer, filmmaker, and student located in Los Angeles, California. He is a junior in high school at Harvard-Westlake School. His photographs have won awards from the acclaimed Scholastics Art&Writing Awards and been included in magazines such as *Aperture*. He is the founder of A-Roll Film Club, a community service organization that serves to improve the Los Angeles community through the production of documentary films.

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