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TIGER LEAPING REVIEW

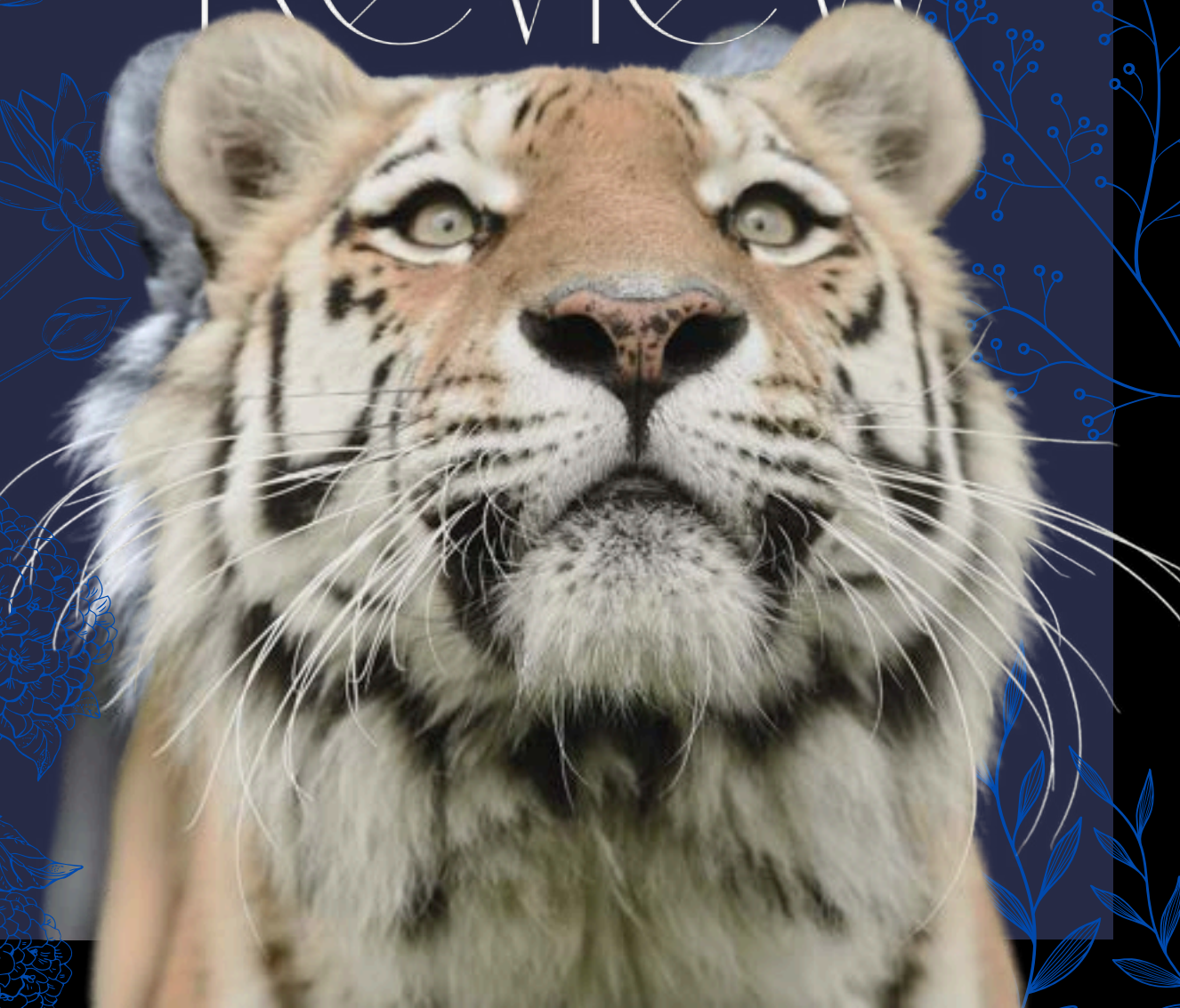


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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

We would like to thank you so much for taking the time to read this issue. Our journey into Issue 5 was filled with ups and downs (between juggling AP exams and the onboarding of three new editors), but seeing this issue come to light has made this process entirely worth it.

We'd like to take a moment to reflect on just what a wonderful journey this has been. When we introduced our new fiction category in Issue 4, we were hesitant about how far we would be able to lead Tiger Leaping Review in this new direction. With Issue 5, however, all our doubts were blown away, and we were wonderfully surprised to have received a record number of submissions in both our poetry and prose categories. Without a doubt, this milestone was made possible by you all as our readers and submitters. So, as you read through Issue 5, please take a moment to congratulate yourself as well: it is you who have made this journey at Tiger Leaping Review possible.

We received many incredibly beautiful submissions this issue, and reading through each and every line of prose and poetry was truly a wonderful experience. The twelve pieces accepted for this issue reflect feelings deeply personal or rooted in the authors' psyche. "Forgive me...goodbye, / my dearest 外婆. / I remember the last time you left with your suitcase, / the train's headlights were just as bright," writes Hanna Han in "Farewell," encapsulating the fresh yet nostalgic pain of a loved one's departure. In "The second time," Grant Shimmin writes: "...Soon applause draws him out / from that place in the music he's been / smile stretched from lips to eyes 'corners / ...He's still playing when I must leave / One day, perhaps, I'll find / the courage to read him this poem". Shimmin weaves the feeling of sweet and aching longing to understand someone from afar into each line, reflecting another aspect of the deeply nuanced and complex emotions of the human experience.

We hope you can find something inspirational, beautiful, and enjoyable in each of our pieces in Issue 5. The crafting of this issue and the exploration of poetry and prose in such varied topics has truly been a wonderful experience that we are so excited to share with you all. So without further ado, we'd like to welcome BJ Thoray, Brandice Askin, Calla Smith, DS Maolalai, Grant Shimmin, Hanna Han, Jacqueline McCool, John Brantingham, MF Charles, Navneet Bhullar, Spencer Keene, William Doeski, and you, as our reader, to Tiger Leaping Review.

Yours truly,

Mira Sridharan, Claire Wang, and Kenna Zhang

Editors-in-Chief at *Tiger Leaping Review*

I'm Poison

by BJ Thoray

Since it's my third visit, the security guard opens the gate and waves me through without checking the car, and I park my rental at the top of the steep driveway and take off my gloves. Mr. Andrew meets me at the door in an outfit that's not quite a suit but straddles the line between butler and personal assistant. Andrew guides me through the McMansion. It's not baroque, but it's gaudy in an understated way, sort of like a fancy mancave that insists it's humble. George Beauregarde is there in his office chair.

"Oh, hi," he says as if he isn't expecting me. "Take a seat."

I walk to the chair across from the desk in his home office, lean over, and stick my hand out.

"Uh, yeah. Forgive my manners," he says. He stands and shakes my hand. I keep it until he makes eye contact. Then I smile at him, release, and take my seat.

"I trust you're happy with how things are going," I say.

"Yep. Sales're up. We're getting attention. Gotta say it's looking good for this quarter and next."

"Attention is the key. There's no substitute for patience and focus."

"How is it that you're so keyed in to what people want to hear?" He furrows his brow and is genuinely curious. "My team's been racking their brains trying to find ways to cut through the noise and get these leads, and here you are. Like it's no thing."

"There's a reason some of us are consultants. You're doing pretty well with a team of interns and non-grads."

"I keep 'em busy, and they know they're lucky for the opportunity." He's on the defensive.

"Of course. It's sticky work. You're bound to get the most motivated," I reply. I'm not here to judge like that. I'm a consultant.

"Debt is a beautiful thing," he says as he looks me in the eyes. "One man's weakness becomes another man's strength." His eyes linger as if we're in a movie and he's delivering some showstopping monologue.

"Trash and treasure," I shrug.

"Yeah, I, I like that. Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Mr. Andrew!"

Andrew comes in. Beads of sweat are at his temples, and a worn smile is on his face. His sweater vest is crinkled.

"Coffee. You know how I like it. And of course, for our guest, the same as last time."

Andrew looks at me nervously and nods.

"Coming rig—"

"Lots of cream, lots of sugar," I remind him. He looks grateful for the bollocking I saved him and hurries out of the room. Beauregarde can scarcely wait before he drops in.

"I know we agreed to five sessions, but I think the 2.5 will do it for me," he says, eying me sharply.

"I'm glad that we're so efficient and that my strategies are working out, but I have to say, I'm disappointed," I say in a sincere, sympathetic voice.

"You've been well paid up to now. This is the cost of doing business in my sector. We take what we need and leave the rest."

"That does not surprise me," I say. I can tell from his tone and his stance that he does this sort of thing a lot. I obviously knew that he was a red flag for contractors when I took the gig, and I imagine that he expects me to get angry and flustered.

"Oh really," he chuckles.

"It's just, as you say, being a man of your word, this is a bit...unfortunate of you," I say again in genuine sympathy.

"You're saying I'm not a man of my word?" he asks in that gruff, play-aggressive way of his.

"Um...no, you're saying that."

"What does a bottom feeder like you know about building an empire anyway?"

"Eh...this and that. It's not my milieu but I'm around that sort of thing a lot."

"Oh yeah," he smirks, "see a lot of empires being built?"

"Ummm," I try to think, "definitely more crumbling, and most of those aren't really empires. Just inflated foibles, lotta boondoggles, every so often a genuine winner that just can't get it together, but," and I don't need to say this or be the least bit saucy but still, "most of them, even the shit ones, aren't run out of mcmansion home offices."

He humphs, narrows his eyes, and begins to speak, but I remember something.

"Most of them have usually made it out the garage at that point," I chime in.

"I thought you were about turning businesses around," he pitches.

"I mean, sure, or making them grow, like yours." The compliment turns him around.

He grins. "I like you. You don't need to be told how the world is. That's why I know you'll be alright with or without the full five sessions."

I wonder if it'll happen before or after the coffee arrives. I always hope, for the staff, that it's before. I'm not aware of any unfortunate implications, and the staff does have a choice. If they got here, it was rarely their only option though I know

that's cold comfort. But we all take acceptable risks or, in my case, make judgments of acceptability. The clinking of metal spoons in ceramic mugs comes from behind.

"Here you are," Andrew says carefully as he sets down a tray. He makes eye contact as he sets my mug down in front of me. Beauregarde grabs his off the tray and sips it impatiently. Beauregarde takes another sip, sniffs the aroma, and makes a pleased face that freezes then twists. He drops the mug, stands up while tottering and panting heavily, and then falls over.

"Oh my god!" Andrew says and jumps down. "He's having a heart attack! Call 911!"

I am very good at feigning surprise. Based on how things were going, I'd assumed after the coffee, but I thought he'd finish the cup. Andrew is shaken, but it's not his first.

"Watched my father die right at the breakfast table," he tells me after the paramedics have wheeled the body away. "Mother still made us go to school that day."

It's not a normal thing to see a man die in this business, and I'm usually not there when it happens. He's of the age and industry, so I doubt there'll be an autopsy, but even if there is, it won't show anything too unusual. It's never taken the full five.

"Well, the bastard's their problem now," Beth, the maid says once the paramedics have gone. "Don't tell me you volunteered to tell the family," she says to Andrew.

"I informed the wife. She's agreed to do the family, and I'll do the business contacts," Andrew says. "Seems fair."

"Some poor family lucked out keeping their shit this week," Beth says, dabbing her eyes.

We three share a laugh. I offer my condolences and excuse myself. "The rental's due back early in the morning," I explain. They offer to let me stay the night, say the family won't mind, but I know it's best that I get a move on. "I'm going to see if I can get on a flight tonight." I step back and head for the door. As I dread what's coming, there's a sound from the kitchen and then Andrew's phone rings. I take a

tissue from my pocket, turn the door knob and wave goodbye before I step out the door.

I put on my gloves before I get back in the car and do the drive back to the city in one shot. Were I in a bigger city, I would consider spending the rest of the day in one of the swish hotels. But my next appointment is earlyish tomorrow, and I don't see the point of stinking up a middle-class hotel. Besides, I'm already returning the car at the airport.

"Can you tell me when the next flight to New York is?" I ask the ticket clerk. The line for the desk is empty.

"There's one leaving in the next hour, but the only seat is first class," the clerk gives me a once over and cocks her head.

I put my card on the counter. "I don't like to rush through security. Do you have anything in the next 2 hours?"

She picks up my card and types the information. "Oh, I'm sorry. With your air miles, I'm sure we can find something to accommodate you."

"Excellent," I say and smile warmly. I take off one glove.

"We have a flight leaving in an hour and a half. There are still seats in business and first class. Would you like me to book you on this flight? You'd arrive by 8pm local time."

"Yes, please," I say. Politeness goes a long way.

"Business or first class?"

Business has the middle seat, but first class is really where the most good is done. "First class, please."

"Window or aisle?"

"Window."

I take my ticket and put my glove back on until I'm through security and seated in the lounge. Once I'm settled, I take off my coat and sweater, putting the latter in the bag. I make ample use of the facilities and take my time to go to the gate, arriving only at the tail end of priority boarding. Clumsy me bumps into my fellow first-class denizens and, knowing how my appearance is perceived, I have no problem brushing up against one or two of the ruder types. Dare say, I might've even rubbed up against one particularly annoying passenger who thought nothing of watching a video with no headphones. The seat next to me is thankfully taken. I let the steward set down a glass of champagne, and I sip it with the napkin between my hand and the glass. When I finish, I pocket the napkin. There's only so much I can do for the collaborators.

As per my first-class customs, I take off my glove, introduce myself to my rowmate, and shake their hand. It's gloves off for the rest of the flight. I dozily grasp each seatback on the way to the toilets, and I grasp the knob when I enter and exit.

"Do you live in the city?" the person next to me asks, gingerly stroking my wrist.

"I live a bit everywhere," I say.

"I like that. Truly living the business."

"I suppose," I say, and then, "But I guess I also don't really live anywhere. Not that I'd give up this life for another."

"Amen to that."

I hand them my card and, since they're in that age group, give them my socials. Later I'll probably get a cheeky message, and we'll meet in a hotel bar and both ignore the wedding band, and they'll most likely have a heart attack or suffer from organ failure not long after. It flows through my veins, and it'll flow through theirs as well.

The pilot tells the crew to prep for landing, and the steward comes by and asks for any remaining trash. I say no, but the tray next to me has a nearly empty vodka bottle on it. I pick it up, and the steward reaches for it. I try to put it straight in the bag, but they gently take it from me. No help from my rowmate. I wince. I'm not here to protect, but I try to minimize. Touching the same surfaces won't do anything

immediate or drastic, but it'll speed up the breakdowns. We all have a bit of poison in us, but not all of us have the gift.

"Can you imagine working that job? Glorified servant and glorified trash man?" the person next to me snickers as if we're in it together against them.

Eat the rich. Except the ones I've been around. Those'll make you sick.

BJ Thoray

is a writer/editor active in the nonprofit and content creation spaces. BJ's stories have been published in The Aesthete, Forum literary magazine, Rundelania!, Black Cat Press, and Kosmos Obscura. Originally from California, B.J. is currently based in Belgium, less for the waffles, more for the surrealism.

Reality Ticket

by Brandice Askin

in that school of fragile-boned
girls with bottle-cap eyes
i took three years to make friends

only one stayed long enough
to count my lost teeth
and share mumblings
of her waking dreams

now boxes float by
on the backs of moving men
all is new

in the belly of corrugated cardboard
rest tangled-haired dolls
the smudged screen of my etch a sketch

the house shakes
as furniture thumps wooden floor
pieces from my life scattered
across hungry living room:
spatulas and lampshades—among books and photos

my brother unpacks boxes
he likes to feed the spaces faster
he has three shelves filled:
dusty blue globe/ jump rope of pale macaroni/ unopened fortune cookie

everything breathed
when I made the world the first time
now my shelves are empty

dust wafts from floorboards and latent cracks
funk of bleach and grime
i haven't started unpacking:
I like to feel lost

It's the only time I'm honest

Blanka Pillár

is a poet whose work has been featured in *OneArt*, *Cool Beans Lit*, and *Moonstone Arts*. She is a mental health therapist, co-founder of Nerd Nite St. Pete, and leads journaling support groups for postpartum people. Brandice currently lives in St. Petersburg, Florida, but has also called Oregon and California home. She holds a M.S. in clinical psychology from San Francisco State University. A cat can often be found obstructing her keyboard. Find her at brandiceaskin.com.

The Coming Darkness by Calla Smith

The grass was beginning to grow through the cracks in the cobblestone streets. Cars rattled slowly by, every loose hinge ready to clatter to the ground as Cassandra sat there with her afternoon coffee, waiting for a black taxi cab to hit the wrong bump and disintegrate before her eyes. It hadn't happened yet, but she still hoped it would happen someday.

The light faded fast in the winter afternoon, and soon, the lampposts flickered on. She ventured out onto the street again as shadows frolicked all around her, turning into wild beasts and fantastical monsters in her blurry vision. A small candle flickered uneasily on the corner, and she could have sworn that a small bit of warmth pierced her heavy coat to breathe gently on her skin, but soon, she had left it behind and was closing the door behind her on another unremarkable day.

As she boarded the bus on her way to work the next morning, she saw a solemn man in a suit holding a white candle carefully to his chest as though it were something precious. She was soon distracted by the flash of sirens darting past them in the traffic.

Cassandra didn't leave work until the deep darkness of the night had already engulfed the city, but that day she was going to meet some friends for a birthday party. When she arrived, the music was loud in the bar. The lights were out, and each wooden table was only lit by candlesticks. Her friends had all brought their own, and the room's lighting changed as they moved around, glancing oddly at her as she stood with only her beer in her hand, alone in the corner.

By the time she was tumbling to the back seat of a taxi cab, Cassandra wasn't worried about it anymore as she focused on trying to keep the world outside from spinning off its axle. Without anyone to talk to, she thought she may have had a few beers too many.

The next morning, the streets were slick with drops of candlewax, and she had to pay attention to where she set her foot or she would slip. Burned-out wicks littered the subway floor, and the smell of them made her stomach roll as she closed her eyes to avoid the glares of her fellow passengers. A man in tattered, dirty clothing walked up and down the cars, warning everyone that the darkness was coming.

Cassandra couldn't see everyone around her nodding in a shared agreement and understanding.

Outside, clouds shrouded the sun, and the people walking past her on the sidewalk were bright pricks of flame on that grey day. Instead of umbrellas, the man on the corner was selling candles to an eager throng of worried-looking office workers. Cassandra was late, and she didn't stop to buy one. She hadn't opened a newspaper in days, but there had been no power cuts lately. There could be no reason for the sudden rush on simple candles; even if there was, she was sure she had one somewhere at home.

When she left her office for her lunch break, the sky was even darker and seemed to be falling ever closer to brush against the building tops. The street and the sidewalk were separated by a line of burning wicks, but the flames were no longer warm, instead emitting a bone-chilling cold.

The waiter wouldn't let her into her favorite restaurant, and the security guard stopped her from going back into the office. It was the darkness, he told her, hadn't she heard? Where was her candle? She couldn't go anywhere without it anymore.

Cassandra was left alone on the streets, candle-less and naked under the suspicious gaze of everyone passing by. She tried to stumble back to her home, block after painful block, but the ground was coated in a river of melted wax, and not even the grass growing through the cobblestones could break through. The wild beasts in the shadows were no longer in her imagination, and too late, she realized she had no light to fight them.

Calla Smith

lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home. She has published a collection of flash fiction "What Doesn't Kill You", and her work can also be found in several literary journals.

Something serious people do

by DS Maolalai

my wife tells her mother
that christian girls
are feminine. she names
two friends – both pregnant
with a second child at 30.
both are married, and by christian
she means pentacostal
protestant. we've talked about it:
she doesn't think a pope
is a big deal. it's more
about a lifestyle in malaysia. more about the social groups
you didn't meet in highschool. they still think
she'll come back – to be married to a white man
who doesn't make much money
isn't something serious people do.
I like her friends in spite of it. I've met
and frankly didn't like
their husbands. they keep asking
why we aren't having children. I told them
that there's something medically
wrong with me
but I don't think they believed it.

DS Maolalai

has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated thirteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022)

The second time

by Grant Shimmin

I know before I see him
It's only my second time
but no-one else plays like that
I'm here for the market's bread
but the music follows
walks me back, ravenous
I sit on weathered timber
in a foot-tapping trance
notice I'm not alone
On a wall, on a bench
standing, in the cobbled square
they move, enraptured
The splayed fingers
the focus, the finesse
the black boot precise on the pedals
the blue pork-pie hat, black-banded
I wait for the moment
to drop all my change in his case
and feel I've short-changed him, again
though his gratitude is genuine
Soon applause draws him out
from that place in the music he's been
smile stretched from lips to eyes' corners
with hints of humbled incredulity
A watching man nears to show his baby
the square's hungry seagulls
takes the chance to stand close
to the music in brief, silent tribute
He's still playing when I must leave
One day, perhaps, I'll find
the courage to read him this poem

Grant Shimmin

is a South African-born poet living in New Zealand for whom humanity and the natural world are favoured themes. An editor for Does it Have Pockets?, he has work in journals globally, most recently Cool Beans Lit, a fine line, Raw Lit and The Raven's Muse.

Farewell

by Hanna Han

On that mat, my niece brings the dawn.
Her laughter, soft and gentle,
spreads through the house like the first light of day—
warm, unbroken.
She hums 小兔子乖乖,
her small hands fidgeting with the hem of her dress.
The suitcase sits by the door, untouched,
its silence holding more weight than I can.

You stand there, slippers worn,
gray scarf loose around your shoulders,
the train ticket in your hand
folded so often it no longer creases.
I notice your coat missing a button,
the one I meant to sew back on—
or maybe I didn't.

In the kitchen once,
you taught me to knead dough,
pressing it firm yet gentle,
your hands moving as if time itself waited for them.
"Patience," you said,
"Patience is the secret."
Now your hands, veined and frail,
seem smaller than I remember—
smaller, yet still strong enough
to carry the weight of all the years you gave me.
I wonder if I ever gave enough back.

When I was nine,
we walked the garden path behind your house.
The cosmos we planted together swayed above my head,
their stems tall and unruly,
their petals pink and yellow—
like laughter left behind in the dirt.

I remember breaking the dry pods with you,
seeds spilling into my palm
like small promises for spring.
You called it a lesson in beginnings,
but I only saw how your hands
cradled the earth so gently.

The garden is overgrown now.
The flowers have withered,
their stems bending under the weight of time,
just like your steps have grown slower,
your hair faded to silver.
You never told me when the garden stopped blooming,
or maybe I stopped noticing.

The train whistle breaks the air,
a sound that fills everything and empties it too.
Your old brown suitcase, frayed at the handle,
rests against your legs,
its weight pulling you forward.
I watch your hands tremble,
though you steady them quickly,
as if to protect me from their truth.

Behind me, my niece hums her song,
the tune rising and falling like a skipping rope.
Her world too small for grief.

Forgive me... goodbye,
my dearest 外婆.

I remember the last time you left with your suitcase,
the train's headlights were just as bright.

In the Hospital, I Dream About Wars I've Never Lived Through

by Hanna Han

The Kabul airstrikes, the sandbagged checkpoints,
a boy crouching behind his mother's skirt.

On the news, they say *casualties* like the word has no hands,
like the word has never held a body or brushed dust from a cheek.
The way a city learns to burn and burn and burn.

I think about the hands. I think about the men whose hands
dug through rubble for a child's shoe, a rusted spoon,
something to prove life was there.

Outside, snow dissolves in the Hudson,
gray water swallowing yesterday's trash, yesterday's news.

On the news, they say *displacement* like the word has no house.
But I think about the houses.
Houses with bullet-pocked walls, stairwells caved in,
charred cribs still holding the shape of a child.
A woman kneeling in the wreckage of her kitchen,
sifting through broken plates, as if dinner might still be there.
A boy standing at the door of what was his school,
reading the blackened letters on the wall—
something about history, something about home.

Last week, a woman in the next room pressed the call button
until her knuckles turned white. She sobbed so loudly
the walls held their breath.

I was in the hallway when I heard her, a sound not unlike wind
funneling through broken windows. I hesitated, my hand
hovering over the doorframe, waiting—
for what? For her to call out? To say my name?

The nurse came in, checked her vitals,
offered her warm applesauce and a cup of water.

The woman opened her mouth, then closed it.
She wanted to say something.
But instead, she just looked at the cup.

And I thought, *Yes. This.*

Somewhere, a child is born in a war zone,
his first breath already lost to the wind.

Somewhere, a man wraps his wife's body in a sheet
and carries her across a border.

Somewhere, a boy steps off a bus in a country
that does not want him.

I fold my hands in my lap. I touch the back of my hand.
I touch the side of my neck, just to make sure I am still here.

Everything is still here.
The IV machine hums. The radiator rattles.

Once, my father carried me across a flooded street in Xiamen.
I was six. The typhoon had swallowed the roads,
bicycles half-submerged, storefronts gaping with broken glass.

He said, *Hold on.* So I held on.

Hanna Han

grew up among books and stories, and now spends her days thinking about mothers and daughters, language, and what it means to leave or stay. Her work appears in Empty House Press, Stone of Madness Press, and Penelope Review, among others. She reads for Ember and spends most days thinking in poems, or on the verge of a dream she hasn't quite written down yet.

The Gravitron (prev. published in Masque and Spectacle)

by Jaqueline McCool

There are two girls in front of me on the airplane. They remind me of us. One blonde, one redhead. Of course, they're different. I have brown hair, and you're dead now.

They're laughing and I'm fighting the overwhelming need to yell at them. To remind them the overhead lights are off. That it's common decency to be quiet while people are sleeping. I am not one of those people, but surely there's someone on this plane asleep. I almost tap the redhead on the shoulder, but then I think of what you'd say.

"Okay Grandma." I can feel your elbow jab into my side when you tell me to lighten up. So, instead I open my computer to stare again at the blinking line on the fresh white digital page. How can I eulogize you, Marabelle?

How do you describe the sun in under five minutes? How do you properly articulate all that it gives life to, everything that was created because of it? How can you encapsulate its power at the end of a long winter? The way it thaws you, warms your core, and heals your soul. I try to find the words for you, anything, but all I think of are toaster strudels. How you ate one every morning the year of second grade. I envied them in the carpool, when the pink syrup dripped down your fingers. My mother insisted on oatmeal. You'd tear me off a flimsy half despite my protests and we'd lick icing off our sticky hands in the minivan's backseat.

I'm hit with the sudden realization that I hate you. I hate you because you're gone and I'll never be able to tell you that I love you again. This would not be a proper eulogy.

The girls laugh at the screen they're watching. I stare a hole through their headrests. I wonder what we'd watch on the way to your funeral.

"Just pick something." You'd say. "But not any of that artsy crap."

I'd roll my eyes because The Heathers isn't artsy, but you thought Twilight was a modern classic.

The pilot announces there's only an hour left in our flight. I've never wished to be suspended in the air longer than what was necessary to meet my destination. Yet here I am, sandwiched between newlyweds, on their way back home from a honeymoon in Orlando, wishing I could grow old in this middle seat.

"Be nice to them," you'd say. "Anyone who honeymoons at Disney World deserves our pity."

I would laugh, but feel bad about it later.

Up here it's like maybe you're still living. Maybe I'm flying home to see you on winter break, like we did in college. When you stayed in Colorado, and I went out to Boston. Maybe I'm surprising you. I'll land and drive to your house. I'll knock on the door and you'll answer. I know what your shocked face will look like. We'll have a movie marathon that we don't watch. We'll stay up till 3am talking. One of us will fall asleep mid sentence. We'll wake up and remember where we left off. We always remember where we left off.

I hate you because I love you, and that is not a proper eulogy.

When you're young and dead, you're a person and a tragedy. You are the reasons you are gone and you are everything you will miss. But to me you will always be Marabelle.

The first friend I made on the first day of kindergarten. The girl that dyed her hair green accidentally during the summer we turned sixteen. The reason for every bad decision I ever made and all the fun I ever had.

Who will make me laugh at your funeral? You would whisper that it was all so stupid. That you never liked most of these people anyway. When your mother grabs my hand and tells me she's so glad I came, you'd say under your breath that she's dressed to upstage her own daughter's wake. When you see Brad Ellison hovering by the refreshments with bloodshot eyes, you'd ask if he regretted cheating on you at the Sophomore Spring Formal with Lisa Sung. And when I weep at the slide show, when I can't stop heaving over the idea that I will never get to see you again, you'd tell me to pussy up buttercup. And I'd hate you again for making me laugh when all I can do is miss you so much. But that's not a proper eulogy.

The blonde girl gets up to go to the bathroom. She's wearing a shirt you owned. Or maybe she isn't, maybe I just want to keep remembering you while I still can. That's another question. Once this is over am I supposed to stop? Where will the longing go? Is it the thing that replaces you? I don't know how to do this. You're the person I would ask.

My document is still blank. "Just write from your heart." Your mom told me.

But my heart is broken and words can't fix, only resurrection or the plot of a science fiction movie. Both are the same according to you.

The flight attendants ask us to buckle our seat belts, we're starting our dissent. In twenty minutes we'll touch down in a world where you no longer exist.

The turbulence hits and I squeeze my eyes shut. For a second I let myself believe I'm on the Gravitron. The one from the county fair. We rode it every night for three days straight in 2009. It spun in circles until our limbs grew heavy and we stuck to the padded walls. You'd inch your hand across the mat until it touched mine. We would howl with laughter at the sight of each other's flattened faces. Almost 20 years later and once again my body feels like it's made of sand. The world keeps spinning even though I'm pretty sure it was supposed to stop nine days ago when you left it. I'm reaching for you, but you're not there.

At baggage claim, the redhead cuts in front of me for a cab and I let her. I watch the monuments of our youth drift by the car window as we near my childhood home. The park bench where you had your first kiss with Luke Walsh. The Border's Books turned Container Store where you dumped him five days later. The movie theater where we snuck in to see the Hangover three times and got caught by my mother when we recited the jokes to one another. I realize that I'm mad at you again. Because if I stop being mad that you're not here, then grief is all that's left. And I know that if I'm angry, you'll have to forgive me, because you always did.

I'll love you for the rest of my life, just like you loved me all of yours. That's the eulogy.

Jaqueline McCool

is a writer and journalist living in New York. When she isn't reporting on government news, she's writing fiction of all genres. Her work has appeared in Black Fox Literary Magazine and Last Stanza Poetry Journal.

The Weight of It All

by John Brantingham

I have been reading about how space and time are being pulled back on themselves by the mass of everything in the universe. I'm thinking about this as I listen to my wife and daughter.

They're in the other room talking about how my daughter almost hit a deer last night. She has an overnight job watching a kind woman who is dying and has dementia.

My daughter didn't hit the deer, but the weight of the woman and the deer seems to pull her into herself. I'm outside the universe of their conversation; still I feel its crushing weight.

John Brantingham

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

Thoughts on Tying My Shoelaces

by MF Charles

Two free-ends.

Come together a double knot a twist – pulling together
a simple beginning combing history adventures
riding unstable stubborn bikes drawn to hedges easily
felled super gravity the culprit swinging on a rope
lashed to a gnarly bald cypress over the local stream
competitions of daring, well we ended up soaked.

Sharing, hopes a birthday present – new tires (for that
damn ornery bike) worries whether we passed a math
test that trashy magazine (so that’s what they’re
talking about) And dreams how successful we’ll be.

The second knot the bow, weaves back and forth
returns to the center holding tight gone on our separate
adventures lashed by common experiences glorious
wonders of growing up in a period and place never
repeated our golden link in lives that seemed
common.

Two friends.

MF Charles

has been published in 12 literary journals including Talon Review, Midnight Fawn Press, and The Stray Branch. His lyric mainstream poetry, flavored by nature personified and introspection of life’s highs and lows provides a chance to produce an affect in his reader. He reads/writes poetry and gardens in Waverly, Iowa.

Potluck

by Navneet Bhullar

She was the last to arrive
and I shouted out welcome, smiling wide
by the picnic table with
its red checkered tablecloth sticking under tabletop edges.
My rice pancake clung to its mango, tofu strips, cilantro doused in peanut sauce.
She had delicious noodles,
I am not sure what it means: she never tells us she is bringing anything.
I was done with cooking and happy talking.
I picked at the longkongs he brought from Berkeley,
he who made Vietnamese spring rolls (the rice pancake).
She does not even say if she will come in our joint messages post.
Now I will not go into this for what I enjoyed was the dreamy afternoon
there were paper napkins with questions to make us talk.
What is the most spectacular scene you saw today?
She answered in her booming Nebraska theatre voice
My tummy folds even when I sit erect.
I try to psychoanalyse her for my work report,
“inscrutable” is all I come up with.
It was warm again this evening.
Your dream milkshake would be?
“No sugar.”
There is nothing with no sugar I did not say.
I was doing most of the talking after she left early.
She never eats much.
My mother’s blue translucent vase stood on the table end
holding red branches
from the tree by the fence.

Navneet Bhullar

is a physician, climate activist, and caregiver who enjoys walking on new mountain ranges. Her poetry and essays have been published in Cagibi, Citron Review, Peregrine, The Bombay Literary Magazine, Wordgathering and elsewhere. She also self-publishes her climate action reveries on medium.com. She is working on a memoir in essays on caregiving. Navneet can be reached by email to greenmd@yahoo.com.

Grasslands

by Specer Keene

The murder lifts like a black cloud,
shrouding the stalked prairie in shadow.

Mother's lilting call does battle with
a cacophonous flapping, a chorus of

inked feathers and grisly onyx beaks.
She beckons from the chipped porch

that threatens to cave under her weight,
a frightful tilt seeming to suggest that

it's fed up with our farm-weary ways,
wants to reassemble itself as a stately

fir or a sturdy cord of knotless lumber.
Mother's voice looms on the horizon

in a sleepy haze of heat waves and dust,
pulling me from the pasture where my

imagination soars with the old crows
and sleeps in a moonlit nest of stars.

Spencer Keene (he/him)

is a writer and lawyer from Vancouver, BC. His work has appeared in a variety of print and digital publications, including SAD Magazine, Sea to Sky Review, Candlelit Chronicles, Across the Margin, and Commuter Lit. Find more of Spencer's work at www.spencerkeene.ca.

A Reddish Tint

by William Doreski

As if hewn from tough red sandstone,
our shadows betray us by mocking

our age, as if we've fossilized.
Not really sandstone but a reddish

tint to a winter day of shopping
and other errands, our bodies

shrived by flu we've almost survived.
You criticize my use of "as if"

as if I always want something
to be or become something else.

Our shadows plaster themselves
to a brick wall. There's the red

I meant. Brick, not sandstone.
Am I literal enough to please you?

Our shadows assume lives of their own.
They dance, flinging their arms about,

wriggling their butts, kicking the air.
We watch, amazed. If I were apt

enough I'd video this performance,
but we'll have to remember the steps

and complete this early winter dance
where we won't cast competing shadows.

William Doeski

lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Cloud Mountain* (2024). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

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