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Reno, Nevada

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# *Light Years*

Robert Wrigley

You get tired of it, time. It's exhausting, after all,  
and in a way it's everything, although  
there's no such thing as after, or all. An hour  
in eternity comes hourly for eternity,  
as though some spark ignited a fuse  
no actual firework is at the end of.

Even a grain of sand where the beach begins  
ends with a stone or a sign. Time's estate  
needs no where, it does not happen but is.  
Your friend arriving is your enemy headed out.  
Exhaust of the engine of the universe,  
time's only fatal if you breathe it.

Still, we wake up, don't we? You and I,  
you and I, wherever we are, unbidden in the night—  
it almost seems too much effort to take the next breath.  
But we take it, we do not seize it but take it gently  
and if we're lucky fall back asleep a little while.  
A little while, a little while. Such a sad and perfect phrase.

We measure the universe by how long it takes  
to not get anywhere, unless, after all,  
you're light. I knew a woman  
whose very skin was made of light,  
her spit and intimate lathers,  
her voice insisting go slow, go slow:

pure star glow, she was, and she was—  
tethered to me, by me, and like me—dying  
of time, which had all along allowed us to love.

# Smoke

Robert Wrigley

Might as well, being downwind of the wind you're sucking in secondhand from a pair of hundred square mile fires. Though it's not right a man cannot with it the palest palimpsest of a smoke ring blow.

Uncle Joe went years ago from coffin nail Camel straights to filters, lights, then ultralights through a Holly Golightly footlong holder made of phenol-formaldehyde, also known as Bakelite.

Oxygen after that, then rheumy eyes and strangulation lasting better than four years, heroic and farcical, him even at the end gone back to straights, tracing the way smoke tumbled

down the drainage tube between his ribs and grinning, half-whispering sorry-Bernice-maybe-the-next-one'll-be-my-last. That was far southern Illinois, the very air moist as a summer crotch,

AC nonexistent then. Here, it's so dry you've got to spit on your finger to loop a dime from the watch pocket of your jeans, and the whole earth is flammable, or rather it's inflammable—

somehow both words mean the same but Joe died of a cardiac infarction. Which begs the question, how is there no such thing as a farction? The fires south and west will not be fully stubbed out

until the snow flies, though lately each year brings deeper smoke than snow. An August night now, you take it in with air and itch in the alveoli for the flick of the Bic and that dramatic

golden glow of a face lit by the spotlight of slow-mo suicide. No matter what, you're breathing yourself to death anyway. But remember how satisfying it was, acting like you didn't care?

# *Chimera*

Luke Johnson

Tonight, rain drapes  
the blue acacia

& the streetlights  
shimmer, shroud

the cars in shadows.  
My sick, who calls

herself daughter, points  
at how the blossoms

curl to ice cocoons  
then commit themselves

to air. She wants  
to know where

the scavengers take them,  
& why at night

when her name emerges,  
they come so close

she could reach a hand,  
stroke

their knotted pelt.  
*Pretend* she says,

*this is all a dream,  
and when we wake*

*we are bodiless voices,  
vapors framed in mist.*

We watch *I Love Lucy*.  
Take turns singing

Frank Sinatra,  
then sit by the window

waiting for fawns,  
the little ones lost

from their mothers.  
What mothers?

As a boy I watched  
my father wipe

the dust from a rifle  
then slowly

frame a five point  
& blow

until the birds burst  
& the beast lay

still in the reeds.  
In the reeds,

a womb revealed  
a doe unborn,

& my father, lost,  
spared me the sight,

before slipping  
it into the stream.

The stream I floated  
after my father's funeral.

Where I witnessed  
clouds

consume the light  
then crack

across my face.  
I confess,

when the beast fell  
& the baby faded,

I could hear a hum  
for months. A sound

like something  
sweeping the water,

then spilling  
into the dark.

The same dark  
where my daughter sleeps,

as I wait for sores  
to puppet

her insides, then string  
her like a host.

# *Rupture*

Luke Johnson

My daughter  
spins and spins

and never stops  
spinning

stops spinning.  
The sky

she says,  
an artist's scalpel

slicing light  
to slivers and shreds.

So much that when  
she stops

she slaps the earth  
and the bees

ringlet her braid.  
*Believe me*

she says,  
*inside me*

*there's a hole  
that sucks*

*the nectar*  
*from my bones*

*and I cripple.*  
She shows

me sequins  
of slug spit

ant holes  
empty bodies

of beetles,  
the beauty of wind.

How  
the beech grass

bends  
and shimmers,

shadows  
half her face.

We suck cherries  
spit seeds

point at planes  
that pass

and pretend  
each passing

a rupture of fate  
to live

in someone else.

*Who are you*

I whisper  
and she says,

*nobody.*  
She'd rather

be a ring  
on a widow's hand,

a ruby reflecting  
the rain.

Or the rain.  
Or the vastness of it.

# *Between Light & the Day Job*

Jan Beatty

I learned how to speak in the classroom.

I learned how to say *pedagogy & agency & deconstruct*, avoid any reference to growing up in a steel town, my Dad working in the mills, my parents not finishing high school.

Until working-class students, until students of color turned in poems of awkward language, disconnected with no story. A sestina, a sonnet taught them how to write, led them away from their heart or anyone's soul. I would hear those same students talking in the hall with effortless diction & solid story, then go back to their poems drained bloodless.

Whenever I asked them to put some of their great stories in their poems—inevitably they'd say: *I didn't know we were allowed to do that.*

*Who told you that?* I said. *Give me a name.*

*Some guy*, one of them said—afraid to tell.

They said: *I just thought poetry had to be formal, why would I put that story in my poem?*

Because it's brilliant, because you're a ray of gold light sitting here in my office—not knowing your own beauty.

I walked into my classroom next day & said:

*My father was a steelworker. He taught me about poetry in his rages & his tenderness.*

I told them my Dad's GED certificate hangs above my writing desk—so I can remember the cost of being alive then, the cost of quitting high school to make money for the family, loss of a track scholarship to Carnegie Tech, my father

taught me the cost of it, the cost of losing voice/  
forgetting who you are—sleepwalking away from  
our beauty—one foot after the other—away  
from our own beating heart.

# *Fatherdreams*

J.M. Braun

we know you as him  
that man dancing on the riverbank

man we found in our field  
tied to a wolf tree with baling wire  
man long tired of calling names  
that sounded like ours

you as him   him as you

you the taker of an ax  
to a piano on a stranger's property

you the wanderer of woods  
the offhand namer   dreamer of us

that hunter on a way to a blind  
that farmer sickened by moonlight

every December surely he returns to us  
shoulder-slinging a pillowcase  
full of secondhand gifts  
santa suit smelling of Pabst

we crawled up on his lap  
mashed our heads into stubble  
beer breath in our hair

we didn't know him  
but you were our father

# *Brother Song*

J.M. Braun

mayflies hatched along watersheds  
light on the claws of our hammers

they swarm my brother all over  
they burrow in our necklines  
as if they were bloodsuckers

the help of the day gone home  
no more men singing on ladders  
the two of us left up on this roof  
of who cares on trusses of forget this

these hours eaten up are oxbows  
a back and forth of dark to darker dawn

we break to watch a barge drag our river

how out on the road a funeral procession  
throws from their windows broken glass  
this parade for the already drowned

I am reminded how my brother wears  
a suit to bed so if sleep turns to death  
they can take him straight to his burial

same man who eats a walleye's mudline  
to better know the taste of fish truer  
he who blindfolds himself in sunbeams  
so come night he can work the dark

this day he stands on the brink of it all  
hair tousled by the wind off the river  
pockets singing with nails and a sun  
on shingles that shines like minnows

when in workman's gloves a nail slips  
to open his hand I can cover it in truth  
say my brother's blood became a star

# *What Do You Usually Do on Rainy Days?*

Ace Boggess

*question asked by Breanna Nelson*

I like to watch  
as a droplet catches the window,

glints, descends,  
a hand caressing a cheek.

I listen  
to popcorn kernels

exploding in ecstasy  
on the roof.

I step outside,  
letting water take me,

to feel anything—  
a slight tremor, a heavy fist.

Dark clouds, ashy  
sky, & mist—

I stand among them,  
ghosts of crowds

in smoke-filled rooms  
where I once rested

with book in hand,  
friends around me

drinking booze, &  
a lover's note

in the ashtray on the table,  
burning away to nothing.

# *First Born Second*

Billy Thompson

My father has a second family.

How messed up is that? I just found out. And you know what's even more messed up? We're actually the other family, my mom and me. *We're* the ones nobody's supposed to know about, the dirty secret.

I had no idea. I'm fifteen years old, and I had no clue. I just thought dad worked a lot. His job was out of town and he was really important so they needed him there, but this was the best place for me, safe, good school. It was *home*. That's what dad always told me. Mom did, too. I feel so stupid. Fifteen years old still believing such obvious bullshit. What are you going to tell me next, there's no Santa Claus? God, I'm an idiot.

Mom told me. I think she's sorry she did now, but she did and you can't unring a bell, as they say. She was drunk and she was sad. We were alone, like we were often alone. We're each other's best friends, and that's what she said:

"Emily, you're my best friend and I'm keeping the biggest secret of my life from you."

"What are you talking about, mom?"

"My whole life's a lie. Yours is, too." She took another sip of vodka.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I was getting a little concerned.

"You're fifteen years old," she said.

Maybe that's why I don't understand."

"Fifteen years old and still... it's time you knew."

"Knew what?!"

"The truth."

And then she told me. In a partial slur, which seemed somehow oddly appropriate, she explained how she and my

dad carried on an affair that was going two years strong when mom got pregnant with me. Dad's job was out of town and he was really important, but out of town was here. His real home, where he had a proper wife and family, was in a suburb of Philadelphia, about an hour and a half away from our apartment in New Jersey. Mom said she didn't know he was married when they started and I believed her. She found out he had a wife a few months after they started, but she continued the affair because she loved him. She said she was sorry now, but mostly sorry that she wasn't really sorry, and I think I knew what she meant. His wife didn't have any children yet when they started, and he told my mom he was going to leave his wife for her. But then his wife got pregnant. This was when my mom said 'we have to end this' even though she wasn't ready to, didn't want to. He would have to make the move, and if he did, she would leave him for ever. But he didn't. He called, he visited, and soon enough mom was pregnant with me. My, um, 'brother' is only eight months older than I am. My dad had a wife at the end of her first pregnancy and a girlfriend at the beginning of hers. He had a choice to make. He didn't.

If you're one of those people who likes to say, well, the truth hurts: well, fuck you. If you can bounce back up, brush it off, that's child's play, that's middle school she's being mean to me bullshit. The truth? The truth doesn't hurt. The truth fucking decimates.

I don't blame my mom, not really, not for all of it. Maybe not for any of it. She met a man, and that's usually when the trouble starts. I'm only fifteen, but I already have a pretty good understanding of that. My dad was around. He'd stop by some mornings, and he'd even stay over some nights. I didn't see him many weekends, but we took a week's vacation each summer. I don't know how he did it, how he kept it hidden from his wife. How busy did she really think he was? Did she really never

check a receipt? I thought I was a fool for believing in him. At least I was just a kid.

My mom protected me because I was a kid, and I appreciate that. She also protected me because she held out hope that dad was going to finally choose her. The night she got drunk and told me was the night I think she finally accepted that he wasn't. That his first family, his *real* family was the one in Philadelphia.

He told my mom he loved her and she believed him, because you do. When you want to, you do. My mom told me she thought his wife must know, too, or at least suspect, but that she wanted to believe something else, too. Red grass will grow if you tell yourself enough times that the sun is green, my mom liked to say.

I couldn't be mad at the other woman either, because I know she got there first, and anyway I couldn't blame anyone for loving my dad. I did, too, like crazy. I knew plenty of kids whose parents were divorced, and others whose parents were together but fought all the time. My parents loved each other. I saw them hug and kiss constantly when they were together, like they were always making up for lost time. Sometimes the physicality would turn my adolescent stomach a bit, but I thought it was romantic, something to hope for myself eventually. And I knew what my mom was feeling, at least to a certain degree. I missed my dad all the time, too, and every time he came back to the apartment was like a reunion. We hugged and kissed, too, and he always brought me something new. In a weird way, I was spoiled. When I think back to those days, that's what I remember, all the presents and the long-awaited arrivals. It was awesome. And I think that's what pisses me off the most now: he cheated. That's not what family really is. Family is everyday. There's a lot of have-to to go with all the want-to in a real family. He doesn't deserve these feelings I still get when I remember falling in love with him every time I saw

him. When most kids' parents come home from work, it stops being an event when they turn, what, three? I was fourteen and still standing by the door, looking out the window, waiting to jump in his arms when I knew he'd be stopping by. He made me immature.

And what's worse is he messed up my nostalgia. Feeling good makes me feel sick.

Now, I'm obsessed with Justin. My brother I've never met. But we will. We'll meet soon, because I want to be the one who tells him the truth. He has a younger sister, too (I guess I do as well), Claire, but she's only twelve and I figure this should be between us two firstborns.

I only found out he exists a couple days ago, but with social media I can catch up pretty quick. He likes rap music and Aziz Ansari and Will Ferrell and some girl named Candy and having his shirt off in that teenage boy way I find so ridiculous and love so much. He actually kind of, from certain angles, looks like me, but he has that boy mix of confidence and obliviousness about his appearance. He has shirtless pictures of himself with girls and other boys for all to see online. Candy's in some. She's got comments on all the ones she's not in.

Justin's a terrible flirt, but Candy seems to eat it up.

Candy @justinoliver: you're so sweet

Justin @candycrush: I eat a lot of Candy 😊

Candy @justinoliver: omg, your so bad (*sic*)

Hashtag I just threw up in my mouth.

I look at all this wanting to hate him, already kind of hating him. Although I'm not sure why. I think for just not knowing yet, for not being torn to pieces yet, for still being able to live his stupid, innocent life flirting and quoting rappers in inane ways and wrestling for the high school JV. For having muscles and a dick, which gives him a certain level of obliviousness, and for being a part of my dad's actual, chosen family, which gives

him an obliviousness that's a whole other thing. He didn't choose either, but it's the latter that I just can't let him get away with. The latter is what will always separate us. The latter I can do something about. He's my brother, we're family, he should know the truth.

Why should he still get to be excited to see dad? Why should he still get to believe his dad is who he says he is? Why should he get to have a definition of family that he understands?

Why, when I don't?

I hate Justin because he personifies my pain. More than my dad even, because he is my dad's kid, his first born, what I was supposed to be, what until a couple days ago I was. I want him to see that he's not what he thinks he is, that his family isn't, that things aren't what they seem, and I want it to hurt him. And I want my dad to see him hurting. Because of him.

I watch a video of one of Justin's matches. He grapples and tussles; the boys roll over each other in their silly tank top leotards. Justin gets a two-handed grip around his opponent's shoulder and neck, and he wins. I admire his physicality, his agility. I also have no time for it. My reality no longer accommodates extracurricular activities. When the real world pins you down, there's no tapping out. You stay short of breath, you stay in pain. No one pats you on the back and says you'll get 'em next time. No stupid pop lyric posted to your Instagram account makes you feel better. No stupid lyric even makes sense.

I want so badly to tell him this. I want him to hurt, so badly, because I want him to hurt with me. He's my family now. I kind of feel like I need him.

My dad knew I knew because my mom had told him. She told me that she'd told him. The first time he visited since I found out was a Tuesday night. He wasn't planning to stay over, but he wanted to talk. I did, too, but I didn't want him to know I did.

"Emily," he said, "we need to talk."

“About what?”

“Emily.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about,” I said, knowing there was everything to talk about. My sense of self, of family, of life. Of truth and if anything, anywhere is ever true.

He sighed but said nothing. I raised my eyebrows, smirked and shrugged in what I know is a very self-satisfied, teenage girl way; I have done it a hundred times, most recently in the bathroom at school towards Ashley, who claimed she just needed a pencil but who I know was flirting with the boy she *knew* I liked, but whatever. I know the look works because it always pisses off the person I turn it on.

My mom was standing in the kitchen of our apartment with her eyes down. I turned my back on my dad and went into my bedroom. He followed me in.

“Emily, please.”

I had only a lamp on, so it was still pretty dark. It looked like he was talking to my shadow on the wall as much as he was talking me.

“Please what, dad? Please forgive you for essentially treating me like a second mistress?” It’s how I felt, and the more I thought about it the more it fucking pissed me off. We were the easy family, never demanding, just happy to get the time and money we got. His Philly family didn’t live in an apartment. He had to mow the lawn there. They probably asked him why he had to work late all the time, why he missed so many dinners, why he had to attend so many goddamn conferences. He had to lie to them. It probably got exhausting. But not us, we just took whatever we got. “That’s what you have an affair for, dad, isn’t it? The girl on the side doesn’t ask questions. She’s easy. You don’t have to be everything to her, you just have to be there, and only occasionally. She’s who you complain to about the stresses of your real relationship.”

“Emily.”

“Well, I didn’t sign up to be part of your sidepiece *family*.”

“Emily, it’s not that simple. You’re not a sidepiece anything, you’re my daughter.”

“Don’t,” I said.

How dare he crush all my built-up resolve by saying the very thing, the only thing, I wanted to hear, to believe. Until just a few days ago he was the best dad in the world because he was my dad. I didn’t want to feel this way. And my anger was unsustainable if he said things like ‘you’re my daughter’ too many more times.

“Emily, I love you. You have to know I love you.”

“I know, but...”

“I never took the easy route. I never left you, even when there were so many times I could have left.”

“Oh, fuuuuuuuuuuck you!”

“Emily Oliver, don’t you talk to me that way. I’m still your father.”

“You don’t get to...” I seethed. It wasn’t the way he tried to hold his patriarchy over me as a way to demand respect. It was how he used my surname – his surname – when he said it. I didn’t want to be Emily Oliver anymore. I didn’t know what it meant to be Emily Oliver anymore. “... not anymore,” I said.

“Emily, please, can we just take a breath and actually talk. We need to talk about this.”

I breathed.

“Okay,” I said. “How long were you going to let this go?”

“I don’t know. I can’t believe it got this far.” After a beat, he added, “I’m glad you know.”

“How do you do it?”

“It’s not easy.”

“Does she know?” I asked.

“Who?”

Your wife, asshole. “Your wife.”

“No.”

“How?”

He sighed and shrugged. He looked away and raised his eyebrows; it was almost like he was seeing her now and not me, and I saw glimpses of my own meant-to-be-mean shrug. He said, “She believes what she wants to believe. We all do, I guess.”

“What do you believe?”

He looked at me like he had never given a moment’s thought to that question. I think he even grunted a ‘hmm.’

“I believe you’re an amazing young woman, and I believe part of that is because...”

I shook my head and stopped him. “Don’t. Not on me. Not now.”

“What?”

“This won’t end well if that’s your answer,” I told him.

“Okay. I get it, you deserve better. You deserve some kind of honest answer.”

I nodded.

“I do believe you are amazing, though. You are.”

“I know.”

“But okay. What do I believe?” He sat on my bed and put his head in his hands. I watched him and saw him for the first time, finally, seem to lose his own resolve. It was as if he was actually, finally, confronting a thought beyond how do I get here without her knowing or get there without her knowing.

“I believe I fucked up,” he said. It was the first thing I wanted him to say. “Is that what you wanted to hear me say, Emily?” That wasn’t the second thing I wanted him to say.

I looked at him without saying a word. I wanted him to apologize and I wanted him to somewhat convincingly tell me it was going to work out, that it was going to be okay, that somehow he was going to make sure of it. I was going to believe him if he said that because I wanted to believe him. Because he had always had the answers. He always made things alright.

He always came back. I loved my dad to death, because he was my dad. But my dad, that dad, wasn't a real person. It was just a character played by this bastard sitting on my bed right now.

"I'm going to tell him," I said.

"Who?"

"Justin."

"You're not," he scolded. "You can't," he pleaded.

"He should know."

"You'll ruin everything."

"You ruined everything."

"It'll crush him, Emily. Don't do this. He's a good kid."

I jerked back as if he'd hit me, because it felt like he had. He noticed.

"I don't mean it that way, Emily."

I don't know why I held on to this belief that there was still something good in this monster in my room, that some part of the dad I remembered was real, that we just had to get past the hard part of the conversation to bring him out. But no. He had his family. And then he had me and mom, his secret.

"I just mean," he stuttered, "we need to really talk about this first, you and I. Then I'll tell him. I should be the one to tell him."

"And Claire?" I asked, just to be mean.

"Of course, I'll tell her, too."

"Okay, talk," I said.

He said he loved my mom, but he had a life and a wife, and so he had responsibilities. He knew he had a responsibility to me as well, and that was why he stayed, why he did what he felt was the right thing. He said it like he actually thought he was the good guy, just done wrong by bad circumstances. He shouldn't have cheated, he allowed, but there are things I couldn't understand yet, he said.

"And anyway, you're only here because I did," he added. He said it with a smile, as if it came to him like a revelation only

as he was speaking it, like it was some kind of hard-earned, unassailable truth. I just gave him a smile back. “And so I can’t regret it. I’m not sure I regret any of it.”

“Really?” I said. You will, I thought.

I couldn’t believe I came from such clueless, narcissistic stock.

I continued tracking Justin online. It didn’t take much effort to feel like I knew him to a certain extent, or at least to get the sense that I could tell his type. He was goofy and cocky, a little petty, a little insecure, and all around someone I thought I’d probably like. He was an okay wrestler, though not great, going by his record; that is, if I could take it that he lost each match he didn’t tweet about winning after tweeting about its time and location beforehand. He was silly with Candy, but he made sure he was giving her attention. He was smiling in most of his pictures. He looked like someone who thought he was part of a normal, intact nuclear family.

I peered hard at his face and into his eyes. I wanted them to tell me something, but of course they didn’t. There was nothing to tell because he knew nothing. He was a good-looking guy, beatifically oblivious to his father’s second family, to me.

He posted ‘happy birthday, sis,’ to Claire. It actually made me cry.

I wondered if he’d ever call me sis. I hoped so.

I still hated him. He was living a charmed life, the charmed side of *my* life. It was like he was the shiny side of the coin, the side facing up, facing the world, while I sat underneath, smushed into the ground, unseen, unthought of.

I read what he shared, listened to songs he liked, learned who and what he followed. He became almost as real – for someone imaginary – as dad had been.

He had this whole life, this whole cache of experiences, of thoughts and beliefs. He had everything but the one thing, knowledge of the one thing, that made us, he and I, the same.

I wanted to meet my brother.

And I wanted him to know.

I saw he had a wrestling match next Tuesday at his high school gym. I didn't have my license yet to drive there. I didn't want to ask mom to take me. She wouldn't. So, I told Ashley I was talking to this guy online, and I wanted to go to his wrestling match. She loved that shit. We all did. I had my ride.

"What's he like? How'd you start talking to him? Do you want to have his babies?"

I didn't begrudge Ashley's questions. In fact, it was kind of fun as soon as I was able to imagine this guy we were going to meet as someone other than my brother. I was coy, I was effusive, I was happy to have my mind taken off the real reason for the trip.

The gym was hot and humid with a faint whiff of body odor and dirty laundry. There weren't many people there, unsurprisingly since it was a JV wrestling match. I had never been to a junior varsity or varsity wrestling match at my own school. My dad was there, but he didn't notice me because it would never have occurred to him that I'd show up here. He was sitting with his wife and with Claire. There was a smattering of classmates in the bleachers, mostly girls, presumably girlfriends of the wrestlers. From a distance – from any distance to everyone there but my dad – we were indistinguishable from anyone else there to simply watch the match.

There were a number of matches before Justin's, who wrestled at 145 pounds.

"That's him," I said to Ashley.

I watched Justin listen to his coach, bouncing a little as he did, and then pounding a fist to his chest. I watched him so closely, trying to take every piece of him in, as if I were making up for lost time, learning the things about him that I should already know. He looked smaller in person, slighter, but it was definitely him. I couldn't believe I was this close to him,

still not close at all, I towards the top of the bleachers and he circling his opponent down on the mat.

I felt like he was circling me, or I him, taking his measure, seeing how exactly we were related and figuring out how exactly I was going to tell him we were.

He lunged at his opponent, and I actually flinched.

“He’s cute,” Ashley said.

I found myself rooting for him. Silently, internally, but unquestionably. I had glanced at my father, and my father’s other family, several times throughout the preceding matches, but now I couldn’t take my eyes off Justin. He and the other boy were both on the ground, on their backs, though it looked like Justin had the upper hand. Their singlets seemed awfully immodest. I feared, momentarily, that I might see more of Justin than I really cared to. I didn’t. He did some kind of flip-like maneuver to put himself on top of the other guy, and the referee signaled the match was over. Justin had won. I was happy and impressed. Whatever that move was that he made was something he must have practiced and worked at. Maybe he’d make varsity soon.

“I don’t get this sport,” Ashley said. I didn’t either, but there was lots I didn’t get.

We watched a couple more tussles before the whole competition was over. Then we waited for the team to exit the locker room and regroup with their families and friends.

“Are you going to talk to him?” Ashley asked me.

“Yeah. He doesn’t know I’m here.” The boyfriend parallel was the only context I could find for this, so I went with it. I was nervous in the same way. I had practiced what I was going to say, in the same way, and I knew it was going to come out all different. In the same way.

We stayed in the bleachers, and I remained undetected by my dad. Then I saw Justin come out. My dad and his wife and Claire moved hesitantly toward him, giving him time first with

the friends who greeted him and with Candy. I told Ashley to stay in the bleachers, and I moved hesitantly toward him, too, from the opposite direction on the gym floor. I got close enough to eavesdrop and heard his voice for the first time. Which rattled me. It went into my head and stayed there, bouncing back and forth, as if from ear to ear. His voice made him realer than he'd been to this point. Even though watching him wrestle animated him, that's still what it felt like, like an animated version of his social media presence, of what I thought he would be like. His voice, though, made him human, made him my real-life brother in a way I didn't expect. I realized, when I told him he was my brother, he was going to answer me. We were going to *talk*.

I heard him tell some buddies he was going for pizza with his family, and then he and Candy peeled off to join his mom and his sister and his dad. Our dad. On his approach, I stopped him.

"Justin Oliver." I think I added his surname just to remind myself.

He turned and looked at me, wordlessly.

His parents and sister kept walking towards him. When they got to us, dad's eyes met mine and he looked shocked. He must have been shocked, because he didn't say a word either.

"Who are *you*?" asked Candy. I ignored her.

"Justin," I said again.

"Yeah?" he asked, a little impatient, totally oblivious.

His voice. It shattered me.

"Justin," I said one more time.

"Look, we're gonna get going. Do I know you?"

"I'm..." A lump caught in my throat. I looked at him, at them. Claire and her mom looked at me curiously. Dad looked shaken, scared. Justin just expected me to answer him. They were a family, going to get pizza, like they do in movies and on television. Then they were going to go home. Maybe they'd talk

about Justin's match. Afterwards, the kids would do homework, and then maybe they'd all watch a show together before bed. As a family.

"I'm Emily," I said. I wanted him to know, because they were my family, too. "I..."

"Hi Emily," he said back to me, and it broke my heart. It wasn't sis, but it was my name in his mouth, in his voice. At least he knew my name, and all of a sudden that felt like enough. It was sweet how he said it, almost tender. I didn't want to crush him. I had been an only child my whole life, but now I felt like an older sister must feel. I wanted to protect him. I wanted him to be okay. I could handle this on my own for now, for awhile. Every family has its stories and its secrets, many of which were probably crafted to protect somebody. I looked at dad and I still wanted to punish him, but not at the expense of Justin, not if it was going to hurt Claire. I wanted them to go get pizza, to carry on. I was never going to have that, but it's not like they were just going to invite me if I told them who I really was. I didn't need to take it from them.

Nothing is as it seems, and family is where it all starts. We hurt the ones we're closest to. But you make your family as much as your family makes you.

"I just wanted to introduce myself."

That's the truth.



# *Luke 15:4*

Daniel Edward Moore

Unfailing though my devotion be  
to stripping reality down,  
let credit be given where credit is due,  
to those greasy, bruised trailer park boys  
with hearts the shape of crowbars  
who spread my legs like a turkey breastbone  
then stuffed my heart with fear.

I remember believing my mouth  
was a pretty garage for guns,  
a museum of molars framed in cum  
from the battle's salty bullets.

No one told me to not tell a soul,  
but I carried my shame  
like a message in a bottle  
only the drowning could read.

I was six. They were sixteen.  
Ten years of hell separated the flock  
from the Shepherd's beautiful staff,  
that loving rod that made men like me  
into sheep a story can't hold.

# Scott

## Dani Putney

I.

We tramp into Jimmy G's full  
of desert. Our histories cut length-  
wise through this state's paralithic  
horizon—we've bled the silver,  
the dirt. Plumes rise from abandoned  
ashtrays, a welcome to the nostalgic:  
the blaze whetted in our chests.  
Or maybe *quemado* is an emotion  
that erupts in the gravity between  
us, a half-breed & their outlaw.

II.

Barside, our fingers millimeters apart,  
you grandstand over the New West,  
its bones refusing to fossilize, bodies  
forever alight in protest. *I know,*  
I squeeze into your hand. I thumb  
the rough fur of your knuckles  
& look: irises glowing in crosshairs,  
past-meets-future, a foreshortened  
window in which, yes, you lean in  
& skin speaks.

III/1.

A corner away, in an alley behind  
old Ormsby, you engulf me. *Più grave,*  
I whisper, & you respond with teeth.  
I dig into your skull—if I let go,  
where will I meet your ghost?

All we have is salt to break  
*la oscuridad*, that keyhole of spacetime  
fissuring outward, consuming the you  
& me who understood anything  
but now.

III/2.

I lift your head to taste the me-  
who-became-you. A smile.

Moonfire above us. Battle-born:  
our shared lips.

# *How May I Help You Today?*

Kashawn Taylor

Sometimes this freedom  
with an asterisk  
feels like standing on the edge  
of humanity (which, if  
we are being honest,  
looks suspiciously like a Wendy's  
parking lot where grease and cigarette  
butts and foil wrappers go to die).  
Watch this new sunset  
as the breeze rips leaves  
from trees until my fingers ache  
of ice & I can no longer  
feel my ears.

The doctor tells me  
*The pressure in your eyes*  
*is elevated / keep an eye*  
*on that*, but I am watching  
this new sunset  
flaming & real and innocent as I remember,  
redolent of frying beef fat  
& dead gray plumes of cancer.

The letters inform  
the State is garnishing my new wages,  
that judges have ruled against  
my futile body & decided that my brand  
of fiscal recklessness deserves recompence  
as I paced and waited / waited  
& grew in circles for 21 months



# *Ryan Makes Me Take My Headphones Out Because My Dancing is Annoying*

Audrey Buccola

I've been getting way into the Doors lately,  
so it doesn't bother me much  
when my stomach growls and snarls its way  
up my throat and into Ryan's mom's toilet  
or when my head rattles  
with my mom's voice like a tambourine  
telling me this is a bad idea  
or when Ryan coughs at me and laughs  
about how much of a pussy I am for throwing up  
because eating wrinkly magic mushrooms bulging  
between pieces of whole grain bread slathered  
with crunchy peanut butter and grape jam  
makes me feel sort of like Jim Morrison.

I brought an old red leather notebook  
and some green and pink gel pens.  
I scratch out swirly masterpieces  
and prize-worthy poetry fragments  
while Ryan lies slumped against a pillow.  
His crooked teeth clack  
as he tells me what a little faggot  
loser our friend Owen is,  
how his blue short-sleeve button down  
makes him look like his mom dressed him.

I stumble to the bathroom every five minutes  
and every time I pee I look at the rug, a sweaty

LA nightclub in 1968 with tiny fuzzy grey people  
all dancing to “Back Door Man” in my headphones.  
The organ riffs are big stark electric lights,  
and I am shouting and gyrating up on stage,  
and flipping off cops, and proclaiming  
my world-changing lyrics  
about the desert and the wet highway  
to the crowd of ecstatic twenty-somethings.

I wake from three hours of sleep on the carpeted floor  
and Ryan tells me how he’s sort of like a hippie,  
because he likes music and drugs and sex,  
and I look at him there in the stiff morning light,  
and I say, hippies love everybody  
and you don’t love anyone.  
Ryan scratches his pimply chin and sighs  
and admits that, yeah,  
maybe he’s not so much of a hippie, but  
he’s gotta be something.

My mom picks me up and notices  
I’m lying when I tell her I didn’t get up to anything  
last night. Ryan’s mom doesn’t come home  
for a few more days,  
and Tito’s bottles pile up in his closet,  
hidden behind all the flannel.  
When I open my red notebook  
it doesn’t tell me anything  
about the desert, or what it’s like to die,  
or even about the beautiful young women  
of Los Angeles—there’s just a bright green  
drawing of Ryan, his long nose drooping low  
under his terrified eyes.

# *To All My Friends Who Made It to Eighteen*

Charlie Albrecht

I saw you all,  
desert rats boozed and hungry  
through streets of liquid acid.  
Where our mothers would weep  
for the future of a child she didn't raise.  
Falling over ourselves, wired and dumb,  
on 4th street with blotters staining our tongues  
Painting our souls in schizophrenic hallucinations  
we didn't dare keep on paper. Putting it all down  
with jack and butts of stogies we stole  
from anyone we ran faster than.

I saw you all,  
The generational coke addicts who coughed up tar  
to make room for the next fix. Montego nights  
where the filters have been removed from cigarettes.  
and you had been banned from every fast food place  
in the area, for having stars in your eyes  
while you worked. You scumbags who smoked  
your hash pipes in bathrooms, on the clock,  
before yelling mindless obscenities through a  
McDonald's parking lot. Supercenters with  
trails of broken glass and fallen ash,  
to commemorate your stoned symposiums,  
making a beat to the sound of the bong,  
Cypress Hill on stereos in suburbs.

I saw you all,  
Held down for publishing your rhymes

on the inside of your friend's skulls.  
Kicked out of school like backroom philosophers  
prosecuted and shamed for being junkies  
of the profane. Smiling as you screamed  
"Put em' in a coffin", before flinging  
yourself back first, arms crossed on the hood  
of the most expensive car you saw.

I saw you all,  
Throwing rocks at 4 bedroom houses,  
To feel what it was like to laugh hysterically  
and run through the streets with abandon  
While our fathers would yell at us to return to work.  
I saw our schools, our institutions, and our pigs  
nickel and diming education and tobacco.  
Murmuring supposed truths in the ears of the  
dispossessed, speaking of right and wrong.  
They told us to go out into the world  
with our dreams and drugs and joyride  
endlessly into the night. Because one day,  
when we ended up in jail or with 40-hour weeks  
our youth would make sense.

# Letter to Shayla

Melanie Diaz

Hey sissy, I got your letter.

I'm sorry I can't be there with you.

You have too many clothes you need to appreciate.

Please stop asking, you can't wear the flares from Wells,  
with the rhinestones that form a cross.

Those ones got me catcalled.

Remember? All you could do was laugh.

And that party doesn't sound like a good idea.

Is it thrown by those seniors? If so, then no,  
because I remember looking up,

seeing the Modelo bottle shattering  
against that guy's head, something  
about different colors, *y la novia de alguien*.

I can't remember it was all so woozy  
after the fall from the window.

Anyways, I know mom said you can go,  
but please don't.

You don't have to be the girl,

who follows

everyone else, just trying to fit in

because I promise

*mi nina* we have a chance to be different here.

Yes, I know we're the living proof of a stereotypical  
Mexican household:

where our parents crossed to give us a better life,

but then the dad got deported,

and the single mother struggled with 4 kids.

*Pero tenemos que seguir adelante.*

and don't get mad at mom's slurred words,  
and droopy eyes because she's still trying to heal.

Here, you can spend the time with your friends fantasizing  
over the dark skin men from the 90's.

You can freely talk about our savior and saints,  
our superstitions and periods. And you can tell  
the story of the elote man, who sold on grandma's street,  
and always asked us to walk with him,  
which we should probably file a restraining order against.  
And yes, we may be looked down on as Mexicans,  
in America but that's more of a reason  
to keep your head a little higher.

So, promise me you'll always buy the reduced rejected,  
tulips from Smiths because someone should give them a chance.  
And remember Shaylita when you see an ambulance,  
or pass the church, always say a prayer.

# *A Letter to My Past Self*

Tiara Quintana

You eventually stop trying to get Mother sober.  
With time, you move out of the house she haunted.  
You pack your childhood in boxes.  
Those VHS tapes starring Frankenstein,  
Dracula, and the Wolf Man.  
Every single photo of your emo phase  
That never actually left. Dad's poster  
Of The Beatles, who stand proud  
In front of the American flag. Ironic, I know.  
Don't forget about Jenny, your favorite  
Stuffed golden retriever.  
Yes, of course you still have her.  
Forrest Gump will be your comfort movie  
For a really long time.

The world will not end at eighteen,  
When you purposely swallow those pills.  
Your eyebrow razor blade will do more  
To your skin than remove hair.  
The good news, is that it gets better for a while.  
You meet a boy who swears he will never leave.  
He even goes far enough to put a ring on your finger.  
Until shit happens,  
He is no longer the boy you fell for,  
He stares at you with only resentment.  
*You're just like your mother.*

It will be unfortunate when your little Toyota Yaris  
Becomes your new home for nearly seven months.  
Two hundred and thirteen days later,

You will finally leave Los Angeles behind.  
I promise everything will be okay  
When you move to a new state.  
Do not freak out when your number  
On the scale is three digits.  
Your body will fight like hell to keep you alive.  
The thoughts in your head will always be lying.  
Despite what you go through,  
Please try to remember that the sun will rise.

# *A Letter to Understand How I Love*

## Moon Grizzle

I believe in second chances  
and loving someone after just meeting them.  
I heard that if you cut your hair every new moon, it will grow,  
so I dance in the desert behind my house whenever it rains,  
because I say it is good for the spirit.  
I smoke weed when I'm sad  
and cigarettes just when I miss someone.  
I feel everyone will leave eventually  
and that it is important that they  
are able to locate at least one constellation.

You should never go to sleep mad and it's okay  
to paint your fingernails the color you once hated as a child.  
You should sing the song that reminds you of your first heartbreak  
and light your company's cigarette before your own.  
You should give your partner all of the grape skittles in the bag,  
and feel emotional when you listen to classical music.  
You should allow yourself to feel everything  
and you should not forget where you came from.

# *The Overnighters*

Tyler Dennis

We pick our pieces every night  
in that old warehouse at the edge of town,  
keeping the machines active  
as the world rests its weary eyes.

We pack our boxes every night  
in the invisible hours that only the lonely  
vagabonds acknowledge through far-off  
dreams and fragile contentment.

We stock the shelves when there's nothing  
left to pick, into an organized hierarchy,  
So that the chain of production  
will not cease to glide along its path.

We sweep the floors when there's nothing  
left to pack, stack the palettes,  
wipe the counters, all so that the morning shift  
can pick up right where we leave off.

We watch the dust seep into the cracks of our  
fingers, and bleed ourselves over the product.  
Tiny, wet pieces shipped hundreds of miles  
at a bargain price while the world dreams.

We hear the same stories as last week  
and the one before. We place our pieces  
down on that metal belt that affords  
us our paltry allowances as it spins its rotors.

We watch them tumble and rattle,  
rise and snake around the perimeter,  
drawn up into the hungry maw of that cold  
manufactured sky, until we do it again.

We let that mechanized tempo lure us  
into an empty rhythm, until the bell rings  
and the shift ends, and we are permitted  
to remember how to breathe.

And when I am finally released  
into that beautiful evening,  
swallowing its air, crisp and clearing,  
I say to myself, Just a piece. No more, no less.

And after a few measures of quiet,  
as today slips itself into tomorrow,  
I am occasionally permitted to ponder  
how many pieces have yet to be shipped.

# *You Should Have Been Sleeping*

Jason D. Benjamin

I remember the crunch, and the grinding  
Of overcooked bacon in the middle of the cold morning.  
I was hoping you wouldn't be pissed, because our mom  
Made you wake up after working all night  
To take me to school, before I was late.  
You and her argued, muffled in your room  
While I drank your chocolate milk,  
And wiped the rim clean with my sleeve.

*Come on, bitch, I'm taking you.*

In the car your music yelled and screamed  
While I made myself small in your seat.  
Sitting on empty Rockstar cans, and dirty  
Gym clothes smelling of feet and Ed Hardy.  
You kept sighing while your foot stayed glued  
To the gas and you blew through stop signs  
With your angry yawns bulging the veins  
In your neck where black cursive ink  
Covered your scars from bouncing clubs.

*I'm sorry, I could have just walked or...*

You heard my guilt, and just laughed  
Telling me to get your wallet in the console  
So we could get coffee from Seven Eleven.

*But only if you put on a jacket to cover  
Your hairy arms, Sasquatch!*

You never blamed me, your dumb little sister  
But always Mom, and her whole days in bed.  
I never understood her back in those days,  
But you made sure I had money in singles  
For lunch, and thick enough skin to protect  
Myself from answers I didn't like hearing.

A green light popped yellow, just in front of sunrise  
And I felt your truck pull harder towards the square  
Right before Seven Eleven, and the red was obscured  
By the natural light behind, even with the window tint.

But that's when the punch came, and I thought  
Your car would be dented, and you would fight  
Whoever slammed into us hard enough to flip  
Us over onto the passenger side, but hissing  
Was all I could hear when the ringing in my  
Ears stopped. Your truck's cab caved into me,  
You were buckled into your seat, dangling over  
Me with one arm to me, pinned between the airbag  
And my chest, a stream of blood from your smashed  
Head running down the length of your muscular arm  
Directly to the spot on my shirt over my heart.

# Reading Kansas

Kendall Klym

*In Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's sculpture series known as Volutes, words, phrases, and songs are rendered as turbulent clouds containing layers of complex folds and vortices. This piece is inspired by Charles Babbage's 1838 statement that the atmosphere is a vast library that contains all words that have been spoken in the past.*

—Eastern Kansas Museum of Art, Le Musée  
d'art Contemporain de Montréal

## Part I

### Immersing

Flashlight, weather radio, and book in tow, you skitter down the steps of the storm shelter. This is your first time in the narrow tunnel below the back yard of your new home, more than a thousand miles from home. When you reach the bottom, you look up. The only natural light comes from a metal turbine vent on the roof. Tornado sirens blast. Thanks to the greenish pallor of the sky, the shelter is dark. Your mood neither good nor bad, you picture the phrase *fight or flight*. The *f* in *fight* leans forward in battle; the *f* in *flight* helps the word escape unscathed. Neither image suits the sensation of cognitive numbness: the thought of ending up dead sooner or later, the wisdom of knowing that you don't know when or how it will happen, who or what will cause it to happen. Shining your light through the dank, contracted space, you think of the skin-crawling chill you experienced at the fine arts center back East, when the sounds of shots and screams invaded your ears. Nothing can surprise you now, including an unprecedented tornado that digs into the ground and grinds you up. Thunder reverberating in your solar plexus, you set the light on the built-in bench. Sitting beneath the turbine vent, you scratch your mustache, itchier than ever, now that Sheree is gone and the graying has begun. You think

of the realtor, how he talked about the “state-of-the-art shelter,” how you failed to do more than open the door until now. The radio speaks: “Take . . . cover . . . immediately.” The simple phrase separated with pauses to accentuate each word feels hollow when it’s uttered by an automated disembodied voice. You wonder if the weather service has overreacted. You take a deep breath, and a woman interrupts the repeating message to say a tornado has touched down on the outskirts of Wichita. Her voice sounds concerned, devoid of network hyperbole.

Pings and pops pummel the turbine vent, while ice pellets land in your lap. Moving to the other side of the shelter, you visualize the shooting: two crazies with semiautomatics—one at either end of the hall, your classroom in the middle. How your students hugged each other when the ordeal was over. How you called your wife to say you were alive. How you mourned the loss of Sculpture 101 and Drawing 202—nineteen fatalities, including students, models, and teachers. How you knew that the reason for your survival was the anticipation of going home to Sheree.

The pelting gives way to a stentorian hum, not unlike the word *ah* uttered by a giant mythical warrior, his exclamation a series of gunshots, his flailing arms an army of soldiers. You remember the day the sculpture teacher introduced you to the woman who became your wife—an art student earning money by modeling—how you made the mistake of calling her Sherry instead of Sheree. How she corrected you with such kindness, you imagined her words as a loving embrace. There were spring thunderstorms then: mild, with the scent of honeysuckle.

The wind, now speaking in blasts, reminds you of one of the shooters: “Nudity is the Devil Incarnate,” he’d shouted, gesticulating in handcuffs, as police escorted you and the rest of the

art-school survivors out of the building. You shine your light on *Kansas: A Tribute*—the last book Sheree had selected for you to read, as you waited for her in chemo. You close your eyes. As you feel the funnel approaching, you think of the difference between the words *nude* and *naked*. You remember how, on a plane trip long before the shooting, you and Sheree pretended you were birds flying through clouds shaped like words. She flew through the hole of the a in *naked*, and you between the legs of the u in *nude*.

### **Amalgamating**

The light drops, rolls out of reach, and shuts off. You huddle in crash position, close your eyes, and think of Alfons Shilling's spin paintings. The first time you and Sheree set eyes on *Rotationsbild*, its fibrous morass of black and brown made the hair on your arms stand up. Neither of you liked the painting or thought much of the spin technique, yet you questioned your negative reaction. Sheree told you not to second guess good taste. You wonder if the experience was a premonition of the moment you now inhabit. You try to take a deep breath, and it comes up short. The air inside the shelter is close—too close, you think. Your thoughts bear down: surviving a shooting, losing Sheree, mixing Sheree's ashes with gesso to paint her portrait, hearing the art critic say the portrait is your ticket to fame, telling the critic with sibilant satisfaction, "I won't sell or display it for any price." Nor will you ever paint again. Not without your wife. Not after one of your best pieces—Sheree standing nude on an escalator at a busy department store surrounded by carolers in choir robes—went viral, landed on an extremist website, caused a couple of crazies from thousands of miles away to concoct a plan to kill you and Sheree and anyone else who painted nudes or posed nude. You wish you had taken your portrait of Sheree into the shelter.

A deafening crack, and you see with your tightly shut eyes the oblique image of something strong and solid splitting apart. Is it your spine or the cottonwood you'd admired that day with the realtor? Sheree would have had it cut down. "Trees and shelters don't go together," she would have said—her Kansan pragmatism complementing your East Coast whimsy. You scurry under the bench in time for a resounding crash that shakes the shelter, causes something to break open. You smell green. Pubescent and leafy, the olfactory sensation makes you think of picking spinach from the garden, ripping the soft, crinkled leaves into bite-sized bits—a rite of spring for you and Sheree. "The Salad Couple:" how many times had your friends teased the two of you? If the cottonwood's smashed into the door, you're trapped, stuck in a hole.

You're reminded of the time, not long after the art-school shooters were sentenced to life in prison, that Dr. Splotz stuck a needle in Sheree's neck and found her cancer was terminal. The reminder comes in the form of head-to-toe thrumming, except this time you don't faint. Instead, you take long ribbon-like breaths and imagine the brushstrokes of de Kooning. You picture painting yourself into an abstract, a work of art that renders the words you fail to think or say, the closure you know you need to achieve, if you have any hope of living. The more you breathe the smaller you feel. If the tree has broken down the door, filling the shelter with branches and trunk, worms and roots, you may not have to worry about closure. Despite the darkness, the room looks larger. You think of your wife tickling you behind the knees. The sensation of shrinking turns the tickling to itching. When you touch your torso and limbs, they feel no different. The manifestation of difference comes when you're small enough to step between the pages of *Kansas*, the book you'd stared at for hours without reading, without wanting to read. When you enter the book, your muscles relax.

Standing on the acknowledgments page of the text—part memoir, part tribute to a state that failed to interest you when Sheree was alive—you notice that the paper is not a single color. Beige, taupe, off-white, cumulonimbus, the page defies your expectations while the sound of the storm diminishes. Bending down to touch the paper, where ink has made its marks, you discover that the words are three-dimensional—soft, like cushions you sit on. You touch the T in the word Tanganyika and remember petting a zebra at the eponymous wildlife park west of town not long after you moved here. Reliving the sensation of touching the animal’s coat, you pronounce the words thick and rough. Taking note of how your moustache tickles your lip when you speak the text, you like the feel of your mouth and teeth when you pronounce these adjectives, their monosyllabic simplicity forcing you to reimagine learning to read, your mother pointing to words, helping you sound them out. While the faint sound of the storm reminds you of a flapping flag, you imagine turning into a galloping zebra, helping the other animals take cover. The thought gives you satisfaction; it makes sense for the animals whose name begins with the last letter of the alphabet to assume responsibility for the safety of the rest.

You think of the Kansas State motto, written on the top of the page: “*Ad Astra Per Aspera*”—“To the stars through difficulties.” A night sky with stars: the first work of art you remember painting. Your parents, gone almost a decade, taped it to the refrigerator door. You wish you had accompanied Sheree on more trips to visit her family in Kansas.

### **Exploring**

You start walking—away from the shelter, you imagine, as you step onto and over words, phrases, and marks of

punctuation. Like the landscape surrounding your new Kansas home, the surface is surprisingly not flat. Gradations are subtle like the words you found yourself using when making the decision to quit the coast, to start over somewhere else, where memories of shootings and biopsies and death might grow impressionistic. You scope out the text—imbibe its architecture: words on a page, individual marks that provoke thought and memory once you allow your brain to make their acquaintance. A quick glance at a w from the word when feels salty. You think of last Thanksgiving—your first without Sheree—when you traveled to Hutchinson to tour the underground salt museum. The guide was from Chicago, a city that pays millions for Hutchinson’s saline reserves to deice its streets. Retired from a career in marketing, the guide said she’d had an accident in the ice, had undergone plastic surgery to reconstruct part of her face. You remember looking at the geometric patterns on salt crystals, then seeing the shape of her lips when she pronounced the word halite. The guide had no visible scars. You think of your wife’s scars healing after she fell during your bike trip in Ontario. You think of her cancer, the way it spread. You think about your Connecticut cousin reminding you that Kansas is in the Bible Belt: “What are you trying to do? Move there to punish yourself?”

You wonder what Sheree would say if she were here. “Be glad you didn’t get killed by religious fanatics.” She might also tell you to use the money from her insurance policy and the sale of the house to live on and “get back to painting.” The page you’re standing on is the color of salt in its natural state. You try to shed tears, but nothing comes out.

### **Interlude**

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the

very identity of the body of writing.

*Leaving aside literature itself, linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. —dead French author.*

## **Part II**

### **Comprehending**

Deep inside the book, you kneel on the space below a line of text. Then you walk sideways on your knees. The paper is soft yet durable. Letters are black—the size of throw pillows. Unlike your perception of computer-generated type, these letters and words exude individual personalities—curves and quirks you don't sense when you're reading from the outside. As you learn about “Kansas ignored, lambasted, and misunderstood,” you picture the author: an old man hovered over a desk scattered with scraps of paper—handwritten notes stained with droplets of rain, dust, and bug splatter. You taste the chalkiness of the Flint Hills, “the remnants of Conestoga ruts sculpted in the land.” Learning about the unobstructed Kansas horizon feels like receiving like a back massage from Sheree. The *o* in the word *cloud* performs a color ballet, “yellow-orange billows revealing the blush of the sun.” As you take in the landscape, sans sketch or photograph, you follow the author's challenge and imagine a Kansas cloud at sunset as “a giant scoop of Creamsicle sherbet waiting for you to jump in the air and taste its sweetness.” When you finish reading a line, you thank the words that spoke to a part of you, you thought was dead. Though they fail to respond with verbal recognition, the letters sparkle like “leaves of grass, bluestem and brome, the scissortail catching flies in a land whose beauty rewards aficionados of subtlety.” After covering several lines, you realize that walking sideways on your knees in order to read is as intoxicating as swimming in a warm ocean: the words bend and morph with your imagination. At times, they wash over you; their meaning

seeps into your skin. Other times, they elude you just enough to chase them and run into other words that stimulate you more. By the end of the first page, you no longer hear the storm outside.

### **Confronting**

Figuring how you might go from chapter to chapter without falling out of the book, you get a jab in the back. You turn around and see a man somewhere around your age with more gray than brown glaring down at you. He wears a blue suit that's out of style. As you read his expression, he folds his arms in a knot of judgment. "Who the hell are you, and what are you doing molesting my book?" says the man. You stand up. "All I'm doing is reading." The man grabs your arm and points it toward the sentence about clouds, his icy fingers stinging your wrist. "Look what you did to the *s* in *sherbet*: you drooled all over it. You changed the meaning of my words." You take a step toward the man. "No, I didn't. I felt your meaning and added to it." With minimal force, you shake off your rival. To your astonishment, the man falls into the sentence about clouds, knocking some of the words to the edge of the page. You say, "The book is mine; I paid for it, so I can crawl inside it, molest it, slobber on it, and anything else I want to do, with the exception of violating copyright law or wielding 258 pages as a weapon, neither of which I would ever consider." You put back the sentence while the man regains his composure. "How did you know where the words go?" asks the man. You turn to him and say, "I love the sentence about the cloud. The first time I read it, it made me forget I lost my wife to cancer, I lost my best friend and colleague in a mass shooting, and I may be about to lose my own life in a tornado. It's not Shakespeare, but the sentence makes me feel alive and human. The words speak to me. They're part of me. And now that you say I dribbled my DNA on the word *sherbet*, the book is more mine than ever." The man tells you almost no one has the capability to enter a book—not when they're still alive. "Well,

then, maybe I'm dead," you say. The man says you're not. "If you were, you wouldn't have been able to shove me so hard. I'm the one who's dead." Both you and the man apologize for indulging in violence.

### **Expounding**

The two of you step over the trench that leads to the binding and onto the next page. You take a seat on a couple of *s's*—you on the first and he on the second in the word *Kansas*. For the next five minutes—on and off, you hear sirens and chainsaws in the background—the two of you talk about reading and writing. You tell the author that without books, you couldn't manage your grief; you "couldn't survive." You explain that your deceased wife was from Lawrence, home to the University of Kansas, "settled by abolitionists from New England, according to the beginning of Chapter 3." The author tilts his head and looks you in the eye. "I know what I wrote, and what does your wife have to do with my book?" You tell him Sheree was a Kansan who loved Kansas. "She came to the East Coast to go to college and study art. I'm the reason she chose to stay." The author shakes his head, and you explain how your wife had wanted you to share her feelings for fertile land and capacious skies, how you had only agreed to visit Kansas, if you then went on to Colorado, to the ski resorts and mountain parks.

"You're not going to find your wife in this book," says the author. "This isn't *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and I'm no Ovid." Turning away from him, you look at the words above and discover they've been underlined with pencil. You read out loud: "*If nowhere is where you think you are when you come to Kansas, think again. Allow the gentle landscape to pique your creativity, your artistry, the part of you that wants people to get along, the desire for Americans to pursue the idealistic, multifaceted happiness that defines our state, our Constitution, and our country.*" When you're finished, the author stands up and says,

“That’s the part some young academic criticized in a conference paper, called me ‘naïve, cloyingly sentimental, and’—get a load of this one—‘oppressively patriarchal.’ I died soon after reading that paper. Been doing great ever since, that is, until you came along and pulled me back into a world that scoffs at anything that doesn’t canonize loudmouths, glorify mass violence, and encourage sex that causes pain.” At this point, your breathing gets short and heavy. The author is getting ready to leave. You’ve heard it in his words, and now you see it in his posture—his folded arms, his torso tilted forward like the *f* in the word *flight*. You grab his hands. “Take me with you. I need to see Sheree, and you’re the one who’s going help me do it.” You feel something tickling the back of your knees and bend down. It turns out to be the edge of the second *s* in *Kansas*. When you look up, the author is gone.

### **Morphing**

Calling for Sheree, you crawl to the edge of the page and reach as far as your arms will take you. “Why don’t you answer me? I’ve got to talk to you. Don’t you understand? If you don’t answer, I’m coming after you.” Like a spelunker squirming from one crawlspace to the next, you use your upper body to wiggle into “Chapter 7: The Nature of Kansas.” You trip on a capital *T* in the word *The*, its stem so sharp it scrapes your knee. Catching your breath, you read about the whistles and gurgling warbles of the western meadowlark, the Kansas state bird. You relive the night you asked Sheree for a first date—how your voice sounded garbled and bird-like because you were so nervous. How you didn’t want her to think you were only asking because you felt sorry for her, after a student complained that her body wasn’t curvaceous enough to paint. You smile when you think of what you told her on the date: “Just wait till next week. I’ll fix that idiot. He won’t be asking for *curvaceous*—never again, not after *I* pose with my bulging

stomach and droopy butt.” You think of how, once you were married, you used to pose nude for Sheree, and she for you, how you painted each other in imagined public spaces—a ritual borne out of the desire to celebrate each other’s bodies, no matter how ordinary or unappealing to the paparazzi. Neither of you had imagined the paintings would become popular enough to show in a gallery and sell—yours of her and hers of you. Without those sales you couldn’t have afforded the trip to Costa Rica, with its isolated coastlines and colorful birds.

As you read about the western meadowlark, which “never interbreeds with the eastern meadowlark,” you think about your arguments with Sheree about having children, how you wanted them, and she didn’t, how you chose to drop the subject when things got bad between you. Wondering what life would be like with a daughter, you feel your lips begin to harden. When you try to speak the words on the page—the section of text that describes the male meadowlark puffing out his chest feathers and pointing his beak to impress a mate—all that comes out is a whistle. When you reach to touch your lips, you find you’ve grown a beak. To keep from panicking, you skip a few lines and start reading about the jayhawk, a mythical bird associated with pilfering blue jays, battling sparrow hawks, and the power and progress of Kansans. You learn about Irish immigrant and free-stater Kansan Pat Devlin, who made a living collecting and selling junk, “jayhawking,” he called it. You skip the section about the sports team associated with the bird. When you feel something tickling your neck, you turn your head to see blue and gray feathers with white markings growing out of your back. Your arms are gone—wings in their place. Feeling your heart beating faster than ever, you close your eyes and remember the night of Sheree’s mother’s burial, you and your wife lying on a blanket in the grass, looking up at the moonlit Kansas sky. A bird flew past. Neither of you could identify the species, but its silhouette

seemed unusual. By the light of the moon, the two of you read about renowned Kansas landscape artist Birger Sandzén.

### **Foraging**

Still a bird but back in the shelter, you open your eyes and learn you're not alone. The cottonwood, whose limbs and trunk have wiped out the stairway and blocked the door, greets you with its leafy scent. Flitting from branch to branch, you look for a way out. At the opposite end of the shelter is a narrow zigzag of light, reminiscent of the art deco architecture in your new city of residence. You see a tear in the ceiling vent and fly through it. Passing rescue workers with chainsaws along with a bevy of onlookers, you land on the top of your roof, not a shingle out of place. You scope the neighborhood and decide to head downtown.

Taking flight feels anything but peaceful like it does in your dreams. Passing over the Minisa Bridge, with its carved Indian busts and bas-relief buffalo, you feel the wind pushing you up and down, right and left. Only by focusing on the sky ahead are you able to stay afloat in the cooling air. Your wings feel like fingers trapped in mittens; the wind ready to snap them off if you make a wrong move. Storm clouds surround you, but the tornado is gone. Damage is spotty—one building demolished, the next one left alone. You wonder if anyone was killed. Passing over the Arkansas River—pronounced Ar-Kansas in the state of Kansas, according to Sheree—you get the hang of keeping yourself upright. All the activity has made you famished. You spot the red-and-green neon roof decorations adorning Sweet Tomatoes salad bar buffet. At just the right moment, when a woman enters the restaurant, you fly in and help yourself to a leaf of spinach. When an employee sees you, he opens the door, and you fly out. When the spinach fails your taste buds, you pounce on a grasshopper and eat it live. When

you finish dinner, you poop on the windshield of a black SUV with Massachusetts plates because it reminds you of a vehicle that cut you off on your way out of New England. A few minutes later, you land on the window ledge of the Eastern Kansas Museum of Art, its cut limestone façade a tribute to the state's rich natural resources, according to the author of *Kansas*. It doesn't take long for you to find a broken pane to fly through. In the contemporary art section, you see an ugly metal blob attached to the wall. Below it you read the following:

*Volute 1: By the Light of the Moon*

*In this sculpture, the phrase *au clair de la lune* is materialized as a three-dimensional speech bubble through a new method developed by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's studio in conjunction with fluid dynamic scientists. Breath exhaled from speaking is scanned and converted into a 3D shape using photogrammetry and printed in high-definition aluminum.*

### **Part III**

#### **Finishing**

When you're finished reading, you close your eyes and imagine painting the words—both good and bad—that you and Sheree have exchanged during your eighteen years of marriage. Like the words in *Kansas*, yours will be cushiony, sharp, and everything in between. They will swirl in and out of focus, like memory, with some words standing out, and others twisting into a vortex. They will exude your personality with curves and edges that only you could write. They will absorb the thoughts and beliefs of viewer-readers who connect with your work. Your painting will resemble, ever so slightly, Alfons Shilling's *Rotationsbild*.

When you open your eyes, you find yourself outside the museum, standing before two long poles, one featuring the Stars and Stripes and the other the Kansas flag, its Conestoga

wagons and farmer framed by the state motto: *Ad Astra Per Aspera*.  
As you translate and speak the words “To the stars through  
difficulties,” you realize you’re human again, back in your body,  
without a stitch of clothing covering it.

# *Being An Adult*

Trinity Smith

It was a late night in September 2022, and my feet ached as I trudged from my bathroom to my tiny bedroom that was actually the laundry room next to the garage. I lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my parents and two little sisters, who all owned the real bedrooms. Such was the current state of my family that barely ranked middle-class. My mattress was a gray mat on the floor, the edges of my blankets not safe from being stepped on. I had a wide gamer's desk sitting against the wall across from the washing machine—probably the most expensive Christmas gift my parents have ever gotten me. I kneeled down onto my bed-mat. Today was a long workday, having two fast food jobs, and unfortunately, I was gonna have to do it all again tomorrow...

“-nity.” My dad's voice called for me from across the apartment. *Uh oh*. It can't be good that he wants me this late at night. I stepped out into the hallway and quietly shuffled across the gray carpet floor. The hallway was dark and narrow, the only light coming from my room and my little sisters' room. I shuffled towards it. They were quiet, seeming very preoccupied with playing on their devices. Unlike me, my parents weren't strict on them about a bedtime, so chances were that they were gonna stay up til 2 a.m. again, which I didn't think was healthy. But there was nothing I could do. To my right, my parents' door opened to a black expanse. I knew my mom was in there sleeping; she worked an early morning job, which is the opposite of the hospital night shifts she always had when I was child. I turned to the left corner to approach the faint blue light from the living room TV. It illuminated my dad sitting on the couch diagonally across from me, old pink blanket over his lap and Xbox controller in his hand. I stop where the hall

and the living room meet, standing next to the corner edge of the kitchen counter. I stood about six feet from my dad. A formal type of distance between parent and child. It usually felt intrusive or unsafe to get closer.

“Yes?” I replied, looking at him. His black rectangle glasses glimmered with the TV screen, and his dark, bald head turned towards me. He had a slight frown.

“Why didn’t you take the trash out?” he asked, calm and serious.

My chest tightened, and my stomach dropped. I nervously glanced over at the kitchen trashcan next to me, beyond the corner. It wasn’t stuffed to the brim, but full enough I knew, to warrant a “taking out” by my dad’s standards. I glanced back at my dad but avoided his eyes. My weight shifted from one foot to another as my stomach got heavier. This is a repeated lecture that occurred at least once a month throughout my teenage years. *Why can’t you keep up with your chores? You’re too old for this.* So much expectation for me to be a responsible, mature, eldest child, yet I always end up slipping and repeating mistakes. I think this struggle goes back even further in my childhood, usually having to do with chores. I was tired of the same rants about “responsibility.” The replayed disappointment and scolding. The mute shame and self-loathing. I absorbed it all. But as long as I was living under their roof, I had no control, and I knew even less about why I wasn’t viewed as responsible.

I recalled a previous time when my dad scolded me for not cleaning the kitchen.

“I don’t know,” I had muttered.

“No!” he leaned forward on the couch, an understandably frustrated father. “You do know! Stop always saying you don’t know stuff. You have a brain that can think, so answer me why!”

My abdomen tightened at that time too, apprehensive of a spanking that I could get. I racked my brain for an answer.

Empty. I honestly had no thoughts in my brain about the kitchen until then.

*I forgot.* My second default phrase. But I had gotten beaten for that once, so I mentally braced myself and took a step back.

Instead, my dad commanded that I get a second job and start looking up apartments for rent. He also switched to a gentle voice and requested that I just let him know if I didn't want to do a chore, and he would be okay with that. He just wanted open communication with me, and that I needed to talk more.

Unfortunately, I failed to do even that, being a loser, and I knew I couldn't use my default answers anymore.

"I didn't want to," I mumbled. Anxiety from expecting him to be offended intimidated my voice. My body stiffened.

"What?"

"I didn't want to." I barely raised my voice any louder.

A sharp silence followed for maybe five seconds. I can see my dad sigh and frown in the dim light. Stoic shame came over me as I, a 19-yr old, prepared to get lectured. I stood stiff and still, my fists gripping the bottom of my T-shirt. I was like a trainee before her drill sergeant.

"I want you to start looking for apartments," he said quietly, scratching his shaved chin. "By October first, you need to be completely moved out. If not, I will take all your stuff out and drop you with it at the Siegal Suites across the street, you hear me? You got until October first." His voice was low and stern. October was a month away, and I got nervous wondering how I was gonna find an apartment that fast.

"I told you back in what, June, May—to start looking for apartments, and you didn't take me seriously enough, huh? You haven't made any progress—no looking to get back into college, no getting a driver's license. You just be sitting there in your room! I'm tired of waiting, I think your mother and I have to stop and start giving you pushes. The military didn't work out, so now we have to force you to go be an adult. We had to force

you to get a job. So, find a place and move out by October first, or else it will be Siegal Suites. Got it?"

I nodded as I accepted my fate. Since I was 14 or 15, my dad has been threatening to "kick me out at 18" for not doing my chores. I thankfully made it past 18, but now the ultimatum had been thrown down. My dad had had enough of me. I didn't know if mom would vouch for me to stay.

It was an unusually busy night at Burger King, and I took the drive-thru order of a man who wanted extra crispy fries. I announced the note to my manager, who said he didn't care because it was too busy, we needed to push the cars out as soon as possible. The other girl and I, a skinny white chick with glasses and teal-black hair, rushed around making drinks and packing food. Thankfully our lobby was closed tonight, so customers couldn't come in and overwhelm us up front as well. A paper sign hung on the door saying we're short-staffed, as we are every night, but people still come and yank on the knob. Since Covid, the restaurant had apparently been getting away with keeping the lobby closed until corporate schemes to save the business started pressuring our general manager to open it more often. The higher ups will make more money while we stay paid \$11 an hour. Because of that, nobody here cared much about professionalism.

I grabbed a bag of food and handed it out the window to a white, bald man in a truck.

"Are my fries extra crispy?" he asked. I hesitated, knowing they aren't but make the sinful choice to lie.

"Yes," I closed the window and walked away.

A minute later, the window banged open. *Oops.*

"MY FRIES ARENT CRISPY!! THESE ARE WHITE!"

I stayed back across the room, avoiding confrontation with the man, while my coworker tried to appease him. She shut the window, but you could still hear him screaming loud and

clear. My boss, in his Marijuana undershirt, went over to gently explain that his fries are fresh, and that we didn't have time to be crisping everyone's fries.

"There are other cars behind you sir,"

"I DONT CARE I ASKED FOR MY FRIES EXTRA CRISPY, THESE ARE WHITE!"

I forget what else was said, but the man left angry, and all was calm again.

"It's always a bald, white man," I said, noticing that was the third time a bald, white man made a chaotic scene here. They were the male version of the cranky blonde grandmas.

"If another man yells at me about fries, I will tell him that I'm killing myself because of him!" my coworker shouted. This happened to her twice now, and she and the other white girl who worked here for two months had an issue of storming out mid-shift because they got too stressed from our bosses or the customers. Short circuits. I quietly went back to work, hoping she would stay through the night to help me close.

It was 11 p.m., and I walked home alone in the dark, freezing air. I hacked up a thick cough. My feet ached badly, but I had to keep going. My phone said the bus wasn't coming tonight due to the route ending early on the weekends.

My footsteps trudged slower than when I walked this morning. I thought about how I spent my two days off from Raising Canes bussing around town to look at supposedly cheap places for rent. Since I had no car or scooter, transportation from a new home to work was important to me. *Could I make it to a bus in time for work?* Due to inflation, most places were being raised to over \$1000 a month. *Damn, why couldn't I be born in the 70s?* Even my dad insisted I find rent \$800 or cheaper because I barely made over a \$1000 on a monthly paycheck, and I would still need "grocery money." But that meant utilities had to be included, too. Money would be tight. I arrived at the house an hour later, and they let me in. I paused at the front door; my

feet throbbing as I took off my shoes.

“Hey, dad?” I called softly to my left.

“Hmm?” He pounded the buttons on his game controller, decorating a Sims house.

“I was thinking of getting a scooter, so I wouldn’t have to take the bus as often, but I wouldn’t need to walk as much, either.” I could also maybe get to work and home faster. I rode a scooter for fun as a kid back in California, so I was confident I could make better use of that than a bike. I hadn’t ridden one in such a long time, that I had forgotten the balance skills.

“I understand, but I think you should focus on getting an apartment first because scooters are expensive, and you need to save up money on getting into your own place! Ok?” he didn’t even turn his head from the TV.

“Okay,” I muttered.

“Think of it as a good favor because you are getting out of that laundry room. What adult would want to stay their parents’ laundry room for so long?”

I shuffled down the dark hall as I thought of how my parents said I could live with them in their new house when they had enough savings to buy one. I guess that wasn’t gonna happen now. But I didn’t think I’d want to stay living with them anyway because of the stress of getting scolded for little things and having to ask permission to do stuff I was old enough to “just do.” In my own home, I could struggle to function and suffer the consequences or lack thereof on my own without external judgement.

One by one, apartments were crossed off my list for being bad neighborhoods, or out of my financial reach. Finally, an old-fashioned building with a big “Leasing” sign above their door caught my attention on a bus ride home. I called, and they confirmed that they had one small room available for \$780 a month, utilities included. Yes! Finally!

The next day I stood outside a nondescript building on

Victorian Avenue, not too far a walking distance from my parents' place. It was hot, so I hid from the golden light under the extended roof. I watched as a middle-aged white lady left her parked car and approached me. She introduced herself as one of the leasers. She was showing me the available apartment as I requested. She pushed a passcode on the door, and I followed her inside the building.

The floor was hardwood, stretching under a long white hallway lined with numbered doors. But she guided me to the right where we climbed some creaky and steep stairs. They were carpeted in red with an elegant gold pattern curling across it, as was the rest of the upstairs floor. The light bulbs were dim, adding to the place's ancient and mysterious atmosphere.

"This place is 100 years old," the lady said as we walked. She unlocked a white door and let me in. The wooden floor creaked under my dirty shoes. A dusty, old-fashioned heater was on the wall next to the front door, and the room was about the size of the laundry room back at my parents. It was motel sized, you could say. The black mini fridge with a microwave on top of it resembled Siegal Suites even more. No kitchen. The window faced the bathroom, which had no tub, only a shower floor with sliding glass doors. It was just like a motel in structure but even cheaper than Siegal Suites because Apartments.com said it was over a \$1000 a month to stay there. I would be just as poor in the motel, as in other apartments.

I know about motels because my family spent almost six months living in them when we first moved to Nevada years ago. My parents moved us here because they finally got tired of California expenses, but for some reason they had a hard time getting us approved for an apartment here. Stinky Motel 6s and Siegal Suites were apparently the cheapest places to house us in. We would always have two beds; my parents sharing one and my sisters and I sharing the other. I remember eating nothing but microwave and fast food during those months. A

year later, we got evicted out of our first apartment and spent another frustrating six or eight months in and out of hotels and inns.

It was better than nothing, so I accepted the place. The leasing lady texted me a link so that I could apply after we parted. However, when their credit check on me was finished, they informed me that they could only accept my application if I had a guarantor or co-signer. I had no credit. Being young and inexperienced, I didn't know what that meant or why credit was necessary. Why did everything in society have to be more complicated and hard-to-get than it needed to be?

This turned into a huge dilemma when I told my dad that night when he came home from work. Like with my goals of going to college after I graduated, he was adamant about not financially supporting me.

“No! I told you before that I will NOT be co-signing on any apartment with you! Do you know what that means?! It means they can't tell if you're reliable on payments or not, so if you miss a month of rent, then I will have to pay, and it will also go on my credit. I said I'm not being responsible for you anymore, be an adult!!” he waved his long pointer finger in the air.

I knew I couldn't change his mind, especially with uncertain promises of keeping up my rent, so I stayed silent, standing at the kitchen corner. My mom, sitting on the couch next to him, said that she also couldn't convince dad to let me stay with them. She frowned at me with her round face, and then looked away.

“Look,” my dad began. “I told you to move out, and you didn't offer to help pay the rent or say ‘hey, can I pay the electricity bill?’ Nothing. So now it's too late. You got til October first to find a place to stay, or I'm dropping you off outside of Siegal Suites.”

I stood still, not daring to talk back, but I was confused about his claim that I chose not to contribute in paying bills. He had

just told me to start looking for apartments and to be out of the house before October! I hadn't seen that as an option or chance to find another solution, and even so, I thought he might not consent, knowing that getting chores to be routinely done were still a problem. He had told me that my rent was doing chores, and if I didn't do chores, I was out. No prior conversation existed to awaken the thought of me helping my parents on the bills, as I've heard some of my coworkers do.

"I suggest you find another apartment, or ask them if they'll accept two security deposits instead. Your mother and I are saving up to buy a house, and we don't have the money to keep housing you here, buying extra groceries and stuff to support you. It's time you be independent!" He stared into my eyes, then went back to his videogame. I didn't understand how they could be saving money, when he took so many days off work compared to when we lived in California. Mom occasionally argued with him about that!

I was worried. It was a week before the October deadline. If the apartment people didn't take me, I would be homeless within a week!

I was walking home from Raising Cane's on Sept. 30. It was a sunny afternoon, and I didn't have a Burger King shift today. But I couldn't enjoy the nature around me, and I *did not* look forward to going home. While the leasers agreed to a second security deposit, I didn't have all the money at the moment. My soonest paycheck was October 6, pushing my move-in date past October 1st, but my dad said I had to be out by then. I was gonna be homeless! I didn't think I could even afford a one-night stay at Siegal Suites, especially if I wanted to move into the apartment. I needed all my savings. Despite what my dad said, I wouldn't go into Siegal's, and I would sleep in the streets somewhere instead. I breathed in deeply, and my steps fell hard despite my feet aching. I didn't even bother to buy

a bus pass. But it was okay. It was just for a few days, I was sure; I thought I could survive. Thankfully, the frigid winter air hadn't arrived just yet. So I might not be too cold. I could wear five jacket layers. I worked at restaurants, so I had access to meals from them. But where could I hide and sleep? I prayed to God for protection and strength, as I mentally prepared myself to get thrown out into the streets, followed by harsh words of disappointment from my dad.

My mom let me in the house, and then she stood by while my dad asked about the status of my apartment finding. I informed him that I was approved for an extra-security deposit and my move-in date.

“Good job! I'm proud of you! You hear that babe! She got an apartment all on her own!” he said, turning his eyes from his Sims game on the TV to look my mom.

“Yea!” my mom said, resuming her walking exercise up and down the hallway. “Much better than our lazy forty-year-old cousins.”

“I'm impressed!” he said to me. “You were able to secure a place before October first! It's very responsible and mature of you.”

My eyes bugged out at his statement. *What?! I spent my whole childhood bracing for the worst reactions from my parents, and things were going way better than I had expected was just a daydream! I wasn't gonna be a homeless teen after all. I thanked God and went to hide in my room.*

A week after I got all my stuff into the apartment with the help of my dad, I was washing my hair in my warm shower. Large clumps of hair curls came off onto my hands. I picked them all off my hands until my shower was covered with hair. It was all over the walls, and it covered the drain. I ran my hand against my scalp one more time. It felt like there was a lot more space on my head, and I could feel my scalp more

directly. More hair tangled on my hand. Terrified, I considered buying a wig if this kept up. After the shower, I looked in the mirror to my now dried curls which shrunk up to just below my ears. I tried to tug it back into a scrunchy, but it was too short. I felt ugly. Thankfully, my shedding stopped after a few days and I didn't buy a wig.

A couple of months later, at Thanksgiving dinner, I sat at the table with my family. I would be 20 years old in a week, and it has been a little over a month since I moved out of their house. Now, I had to visit them for the holiday. My mom was sitting across from me, next to my youngest sister. She looked the same, with her round face and light brown skin and a satin cap on her head.

“Did you cut your hair?” she wrinkled her eyebrows at me.

“No, a lot started falling out when I first moved in my place,” I replied.

“Why? Were you that stressed out about moving?” She and dad tried to tell me that I had no reason to be stressed, to remember that God would take care of me, and everything worked out, yada yada. I nodded and chewed some spicy kale.

# *Graveyard Fruit*

Payge Cendagorta

The dead sleep tight today. It's warm, the kind of warm where your skin itches under sharp rays of sun, even under the cool shade, and below me, a stranger, grave overgrown and surrounded by a pleasant rot. Our picnic cloth creases under our restless bodies, squirming, and the cider spills on my dress hem. I let the plastic sweetness dribble on the grave, souring the already sickening grass. I lock my jaw on strawberries, lick the juice from my fingers, and watch my best friend do the same. I like the way she sinks her teeth into everything so violently. It's fun to imagine the mandarin feels pain, bleeds under her teeth. We are very hungry women. We devour each other's stories, suck the meaning out of each word until they run dry, until pretty words like 'summer' mean nothing, until the strawberry juice on our fingers stain, until the venom we spit can't hurt anyone, until we're full. I think we woke the dead today, with aching canines that shred into ripening rumors, hungry for attention, for entertainment, and laugh so madly, so strangely, we make coyotes sound like kittens. I wonder if we woke someone up with our giggling, when strawberry blood trickles down our palms into the dirt, when we carve mandarins open with our dirty fingers, and imagine ourselves beautiful for just this one afternoon.

# *Ten Reasons Why My Husband & I are in Couple Therapy*

Rachael A. Trotter

1.

The first time I stood in his tiny worn kitchen,  
I watched him tear apart a green bell pepper  
with his hands instead of using a knife.

2.

I've had to start a collection jar  
called "weird things I find in the dryer."  
So far I've found a yellow golf tee, a faceless  
nickel, two flathead screws,  
and the wrapper from a fortune cookie.

3.

He flew across the country  
to pick up my engagement ring  
even though the jeweler said she'd mail it.

4.

When he laughs hard at a funny video,  
chin thrown up to the ceiling,  
his voice squeaks  
like a turntable needle jumping grooves.

5.

On our fifth date, I got drunk on gin  
and tonics and I told him I thought  
we were made from the same star.

6.

The other night, spooned together,

a cat on either side of us,  
we discussed at length  
if we were one big sandwich,  
what type of bread I would be,  
which one of us is the lunch meat,  
and I state my case that the blankets  
are mustard but he thinks  
it's our white waxy deli paper  
and when he falls asleep first,  
his breath broken into quiet drags, I decide:  
I'll always be made with a piece of him,  
even maybe in the next life,  
and I'll savor it until its rotten.

7.

When we sit together in our therapists'  
blue and brick office,  
him perched in the corner in an armchair  
us, two ends of a gray couch,  
my hands restless in my lap  
like two captive birds.  
I say: I want to be yelled at,  
I say: it's what I'm used to  
and sometimes  
the way he turns on the faucet  
for me so the water is warm  
before I wash my face,  
or the quiet war we have  
about how he folds towels,  
or the way he reaches his foot  
over to my side of the bed  
so I won't get lonely,  
doesn't feel like love to me  
because I thought love  
could only be loud.

8.

Our therapist asks what we want;

I say I just want good enough.

9.

I don't know what good enough means

or looks like or feels like,

I've never seen it.

But I think it's something about

his golden hair splayed

on the pillow next to me

that I hope to watch turn gray someday.

But most days, I don't know how

to get there

so all I can do

is reach.

10.

My arms are tired.

# *Closed Eyes*

Thomas Arthur Darnell

Lying in a red kayak in the center  
of Wolf Run Lake, the heated blanket  
of the summer sun covers us.

The smell of the lake water  
smells like evaporating rain outside  
the window of a cabin in the Poconos.

I look at the sun with my eyes closed  
to feel its warmth closer to my face,  
and observe the dull red color  
it emanates below my eyelids,  
but if I just opened my eyes

I would see the face of a girl,  
with green eyes, dark and deep  
as the rows of pine trees rimming  
the lake, and blonde hair so bright  
and so coarse it seems knit  
from the sand just for me to run  
my hand through. I would notice  
their red sunburned thighs warming  
the slightly damp hair clinging  
to the nape of my neck, and feel  
the gentle scratching on my chin  
from the eczema rash on their arms  
rubbing me as they caress my head.

If I would look past her for a moment,  
below the sky that reflects the lake,  
I might see the reeds to the south  
where kids pull slippery rocks up  
from the sand or the couple rowing  
in an old cedar canoe off to the west,

the oars they jab into the lake sending  
ripples that rock the kayak softly,  
and if I looked really hard, I might  
even see the beach where people  
are tiny stick figures against the sand,  
where my friend and his mom  
wade down into the shallow waters  
and, I hope, cannot see us out here.  
I'd rather linger in this moment,  
a while longer under the sun's heat  
and a blonde-haired girl's gaze,  
in the middle of a deep blue lake  
ringed by pines, and so I don't open  
my eyes.

# *Diamonds or Gold*

Brytlee Hansen

Her body laid in the black sheets that she made the night before. She rolled, seeking warmth, yet his body was absent. Her eyes peeled apart squinting, trying to be comfortable from the light that peaked through the navy curtains. She could hear the faucet leak from the bathroom. The picture frame that held memories of jokes that weren't funny and a bridesmaid dress collected dust as it lay face down on the dresser. He never got around to hanging it, and the nails remained in their original package on his pristine wooden work bench. The 1999 Volkswagen she drove glowed orange as the forbidden light kicked on every time the key hit the ignition. The promise she wore everyday lacked worth and value. She dreamed of a day full of love and baby breath boutonnières. The diamond stayed under his glass of whiskey. She spent that hot August night duct taping the faucet the water leaked from. The picture frame was discarded in the dumpster of the apartment complex. A black sharpie scribbled over the glow of engine failure, and she set fire to his work bench.

# *Let's Stop Pretending Like She Wouldn't Love This, Okay?*

Jazlynn Mooneyhan

I mention your name in passing. A topic  
    dangling a memory  
of you in front of me,            begging  
to be put on display.

My thoughts  
    on how much you would have loved *this*  
or hated *that*

fall from my lips. I'm reciting diary entries  
    for your ashy ears

    and silence  
fills mine at the discomfort  
    of others who don't know whether to laugh  
with their own memory of you,  
    comfort me,

or change the subject  
    with a cough that would have startled you—  
enough to make you scream  
    and everyone would have smiled

    but now they're talking about the weather, skies  
as blue as that pillow you had. It was soft, matted with tears  
    and spit  
in splotches from hard times, breakdowns  
    seen only by each other  
and moonlight.

We endured those nights together  
but how could anyone understand what it was like  
    for us? All they can talk about is the sun  
while I'm sitting in that red, plastic chair you bought      for cheap  
in the garden section  
    of the Walmart on 2nd Street. The one you loved  
to bathe in on summer afternoons  
    like right now. There are goosebumps  
on my skin from the gaps  
between the hard, chilled surface. Uncomfortable for everyone  
  
but who cares? I'm surrounded  
    by friends and family, string lights  
that cast a golden glow from where they hang  
on the fence,  
  
some song is playing in the kitchen—  
I can't hear any lyrics,      but I bet you'd know it,  
  
    if you were here—  
  
and the smell of chicken brings me back  
to your birthday. When we sat on your carpet,  
    a plate between us      and your sister—  
  
who could hardly wait to dig in  
    before you got your own filling. Stomachs full  
of good company but there's a heaviness      pulling,  
  
    reminding others of the life lived thus far  
and the loss, which is      supposedly ever-present  
    but is being pushed aside

in favor of looking up at the vastness of the horizon, unwilling  
to think            or look past themselves

because on a day as nice as this,

why stay cooped up in my bedroom?

Why mutter updates of recent days to a wooden box  
that won't answer

when I could spend time with the ones who are still around?

The ones that leave me in seconds of quiet  
that have me spiraling            with more thoughts,  
more recollections

untold

on this perfect day that you would have loved.

# *Heart Strings*

Hunter Brown

When emotions are filling  
Up your body  
So that you might pop,  
Get yourself a guitar.

First you sling  
Your arm around it.  
Find that sweet spot  
Along the body's edge.  
Hug the curved wood  
Until it disappears.

You press your fingers  
Against the fretboard  
Until you have calluses  
That can hold the shape  
Of coiled steel.  
Once your knuckles curl  
Around the neck enough times  
Those shapes will hum  
Through your mind,  
Through your dreams.

Next comes the strumming.  
Nails dragged across strings,  
Again and again.  
Until the rhythm  
Finds its way inside your wrist.  
That buried frantic, madness  
Can sing along those strings.

Every chord can be played  
From your buried emotions.

The sounds of your heart  
Will pour easily from your hands.  
You can't stop it now.  
Until the vibrato in the air  
Is the cadence of her voice.  
That quirky brunette  
You want to forget  
Is humming her melody  
Into your ears and your strings.

The only way out  
Is to play your way through.  
Her cemetery solo,  
Sung for finches and tombstones,  
Might finally end  
If you make it a duet.

# *I Paint His Portrait from the Ashes*

Erandi Perera

The sky is dark and hollow.  
The stars blink one by one  
bearing witness to my silent mourning.  
Our last fight lingers in my mind.  
I smell another woman on him.  
Her scent floating like a ghost.  
He comes home late at night,  
barely speaking a word to me.  
I curl up beside him,  
lost in his dream  
his breath heavy and rough.  
I loved the blue streams of veins under his skin,  
not knowing they led to a cold heart.  
I held his breath in my gentle hands  
tracing each heartbeat.  
My fingers pressed softly against his throat  
searching for the place  
where soft notes once flowed.  
I dig deeper,  
past bones and veins,  
seeking the rustic cage of his stone heart.  
It's heavily anchored.  
The surface is cold and rough.  
I feel its weight, burdened with secrets.  
I pull it free.  
The smooth, glossy baking dish  
proudly sits on the countertop.  
Its surface gleaming under the kitchen lights,  
a glaze casting soft reflections  
that dance across the room.  
I place his fresh heart  
in the center of the dish,  
and turn the oven to 500 degrees Fahrenheit.

# Jarritos

Isai Diaz

A 24-hour Mexican bodega shop

Was my brother's favorite since that's where he got

His strawberry flavored Jarritos after a skate sesh.

He always boasted, *These bitches are still a dollar here.*

*Everywhere else is taxing these to 3 dollars.*

He'd also do his snack runs there.

Either he'd be in the tajin-powder lollipops aisle,

Or he could be getting his favorite nacho and fires combo,

While singing along to "1000 Blunts" by \$uicideboy\$.

*Chips, cheese, fries, and then more cheese, but you can never*

*Overdo yourself with a shit ton of jalapenos.*

For months I would get the "ultimate skate snack" he always

Spent 20 dollars on, and it wasn't that bad.

Then gentrification happened, so I had to move

Somewhere else to get the combo.

It had been 6 months since I left,

And I got tired of the 7/11 gas station.

It was shit, so I decided to go back

To the bodega only to catch

The owner permanently locking up.

He told me only drunk white men came

Buying beers, cigarettes, and sex pills, and no one

Would buy anything else in the store, and then

He reached into his pockets and handed

Me a picture of my brother smiling with a nacho chip

In his mouth as he tried to open a Jarrito

With his skateboard.

# *The Sun*

Raeanne Walker

Healing wounds, rough hands  
pressed strong at the small of my back.  
He tells me he knows I am in love.  
Conversation between tequila shots,  
sea foam meets light blue.  
His legs up, toes pressed against my thigh.  
Love for him is in his sleep.

How do I walk away from the sun?  
There is a pit in my stomach,  
awaiting table scraps.  
For him, I am a spare bedroom light switch—  
turned on only for visitors,  
or when looking for something more.

## & Chill

Christopher Linforth

She tells you to wash away the past,  
though you have no idea how to use  
a cliché to scrub away your backstory.  
You could reply to her comment without  
snark or lip or walking away, as you do,  
to your can of warm White Claw & to shake  
your pack of Marlboro's, hopeful there  
is one left, but you know you already  
smoked it before she came over to your place,  
ostensibly for sex, but you never started  
the movie or the dirty talk. Never said *wanna  
fuck?* or *69?* or *can I go down on you?*  
Instead, you brought up the issues  
you're having with your ex, her late-night  
calls & midnight parking outside  
of your place. She sleeps out there,  
in her car, you explain to your new girlfriend,  
or girlfriend-in-waiting, some iteration  
of a fucked relationship that you already know  
will be washed away by the girl after her.

# *The Violinist*

S. Frederic Liss

For a woman who was Concert Master for two world class symphony orchestras, the Chicago Symphony and the Berliner Philharmoniker, a half season with each, Roberta LaReine Johnson's bowing arm was scrawny like the arm of a corpse not fully decomposed. Because of her accident, her muscles hung limp and flaccid, bags of heavy water suspended from her humerus, ulna, and radius, not sinewy and hard like those in the first and second violin sections who had muscles ballet dancers or gymnasts would envy.

Violinists addressed her by her middle name, LaReine, a feminization of Leroy, both in recognition of her status, Queen of the Violin, and as a jealous jibe. Playing classical violin in a symphony orchestra was a blood sport. Camouflaged by the beautiful music, violinists were as competitive as boxers who hated each other, fighting for the heavyweight championship of the world. LaReine wore that crown before her accident and had regained it after.

Jealousy was as natural to violinists as breathing. They merged Othello and Iago. If given the opportunity, most would destroy the favorite violins of their rivals the way Amy destroyed Jo's manuscript in *Little Women*. Rooting for misfortune to waylay others so they could advance past them was their default mode. Some did it openly, most not; but all knew each other's feelings. For LaReine, these behaviors were not instinctive, but had been learned. The Golden Rule had been hammered into her by parents who were everyone's friends, no one's enemies, and of middling success. Nice guys did finish last. Not becoming her parents motivated LaReine to triumph over all in her way. She defended her crown the way an ancient warrior queen defended her queendom. Her queendom had no

kings.

Demand for LaReine's virtuosity enabled her to dictate terms to whomever she played for. Being Concert Master for two symphonies, unheard of in the world of classical music, was a demand she had imposed on the Chicago and Berliner, both of which needed her more than she needed them. Neither liked it, but both capitulated.

LaReine flaunted the visual remains of her accident to intimidate the other violinists. A puncture wound in her upper arm and a bright pink scar in her lower arm that flashed on and off like a neon light with a loose wire as she bowed. Conductors, orchestra managers, one or two critics, even major donors, begged her to wear long sleeves. As Queen of the Violin, she defied union work rules and orchestra dress codes and wore sleeveless evening wear, challenging the audience to concentrate on the music, not her malformed arm.

It happened during a benefit concert for the Chicago on All Saints' Eve. The E string of LaReine's violin, tuned down to E flat to create a dissonant tritone, snapped as she played one of the solo violin interludes of Camille Saint-Saëns's Opus 40, *Danse Macabre*. Violin strings rarely broke, a handful a season worldwide. Of that handful, a miniscule percentage injured the violinist. This broken string was a first for LaReine as she changed strings after 100 hours of playing, well below the life span of the high quality strings she used, authentic gut rather than the steel or synthetics favored by lesser violinists. The E string that snapped was less than 76 hours old. It raked her lower arm; its knot punctured her upper arm. Faint from loss of blood, the shrieks of the audience faded. The face of the conductor hovering over her dimmed. Sabotage was her last thought before passing out. She awakened in a hospital room, snakes of IVs connecting her to plastic bags suspended above the bed, too many to count.

"I'm Dr. Lucious Diafol."

A voice, muddy and indistinct. Male or female? Shadows, she saw. Soft and blurry. Lacking distinct boundaries. Silhouettes projected against a wall. Which was real, which not? She reached out; the shadows swallowed her hand.

“Diablo?”

“Diafol. Welsh. Family lore says our roots predate the Red Lady of Paviland.”

“Disneyland?”

“Confusion coming out of a coma is common. Your head should clear.”

“How long?”

Dr. Diafol held up four fingers.

“Hours?”

“Days.”

LaReine tried to sit up, but Dr. Diafol gently restrained her. She shivered at the chill of his touch. “You head me clear?”

“No. I’m a reconstructive surgeon.”

“Sturgeon?”

“I reconstruct broken bodies. Restore them to what they were. For you, your right arm.”

LaReine glanced at her right arm. Swathed in a cast of white bubble wrap, it looked like it was ready to be shipped somewhere...

“The string’s whiplash severed the nerves and muscles in your forearm. The knot punctured your upper arm and splintered the humerus.”

“Funny bone?”

“The long bone in the upper arm connecting the shoulder and the elbow.”

LaReine felt imprisoned in a can of alphabet soup swimming through words that didn’t make sentences.

“You were bleeding out. Fortunately, I was in the audience and rigged a tourniquet.”

“Tournament?”

Dr. Diafol positioned his chair opposite LaReine's head. Her brain struggled to decipher the visual cues her eyes saw, or that she thought they saw. His ears, squat and knoblike, emerged high on his head. His chin, sharp and pointed, the chin of a Disney villain, but she couldn't place the movie, place the villain. His eyes glowed as if a candle was inside his head. The air stunk of rotten eggs. It reminded her of an amusement park ride she had taken as a young child, Mr. Horrible's House of Horrors. Devils popped up like a jacks-in-the-box. She had nightmares for months. The possibility she was reliving a memory rather than experiencing reality comforted her.

"Where?" she asked.

"Northwestern Memorial?"

"University?"

"Hospital."

"My arm?"

"Surgery and therapy... No guarantees."

Slowly, LaReine realized she may no longer hear music, read music, play music, guide her fingers and bow over the strings of her violin. Without music, life would be a medically induced coma. The beeps of her heart rate monitor accelerated. Spasms replaced the rhythmic repetitive pattern of her heartbeat. An alarm sounded.

Dr. Diafol cupped his hands over her mouth and nose.

"Breathe deeply. Deeper. Again. Hold your breath for five seconds. Deeply. Ten seconds. Breathe. Hold"

Gradually, LaReine's breathing calmed and the beeps slowed, resuming their boring intervals. Dr. Diafol uncupped his hands and lifted them from her face.

"You panicked and hyperventilated."

"My arm?"

"Reconstructive surgery. No guarantees unless."

She stared at him, her eyes hovering on the edge of dilation.

"You have a unique talent. The world needs it. I need it."

Dr. Diafol leaned and whispered in her ear. “Music soothes the soul, it is said.”

“Music has charms to soothe a savage breast. Congreve.” A moment of clarity. The first of many, she hoped.

“If you agree to perform an annual concert for me, I will enable you to resume your career at a higher level than before.”

“Higher?”

“All who came before you, all who come after, will be like beginners mired in Book 1 of the Suzuki Method.”

LaReine doubted what she heard the same way she doubted what she saw. Perhaps she had not fully awakened from the coma; perhaps her senses had not fully recovered.

“Surgery?”

Dr. Diafol nodded.

“Risks?”

“Amputation.”

“If I do nothing?”

“Amputation.”

“When?”

“Two weeks Thursday. You need to regain your strength. Your head needs to clear.”

“Head clear?”

“It will.”

“Decide then.”

For the next two weeks, LaReine tried to make sense of the sensory data she had received. Music was her only reality. For it, she would risk everything. Like every musician, she aspired to weave spells that ensnared the audience in beauty. Her greatest satisfaction came not from mastering the repertoire, but enrapturing the audience in a religious experience. Transcendence. No guarantees, Dr. Diafol had said; but he exuded the self-confidence, the bravado, of a virtuoso. A Heifetz, Paganini, Menuhin, Perlman, in scrubs. Continue what she loved or suffer a comatose life devoid of music. Her

only obligation, an annual concert. Her end of the risk/reward seesaw zoomed skyward. When the conversation resumed, she assented.

“Splendid. For my annual concert, I’d very much like to attend the Chicago’s All Saints’ Eve concerts. I’d be especially pleased if the program included Camille Saint-Saëns’s Opus 40.”

*“Danse Macabre.”*

“Your solo violin will be brilliant beyond words.”

Now as another winter imprisoned Chicago, LaReine recuperated from multiple surgeries and endured a grueling regimen of rehabilitation, both physical, occupational, and mental. Day by day, her relationship to music changed. A void opened. Unable to play or practice, she listened. Initially to her collection of CDs, more than a thousand; then to online performances of the world’s great symphony orchestras, some free, some by subscription. Physically unable to play, her jealousy of those who could depressed her. For that reason, when she was well enough to attend performances of the Chicago, she did not. Depression was a dark path she did not want to walk down.

Listening was not the same as playing. When she played Mozart’s “Turkish,” his Violin Concerto No. 5 in A, for example, she time-traveled to Salzburg, Christmas season, 1775, the premier performance, playing first violin in the orchestra under Mozart’s baton. Playing, she experienced an intimacy with the music she never had in her secular life, not with her parents and siblings as a child, nor her lovers as an adult. When she played, the musical score entered her and the notes arrayed themselves on her nerves like songbirds perched on a wire, always in tune, always in the right key. Listening, the music remained outside her, the notes percussive sound waves decoded by her brain. Sound waves were the purview of physicists and decibel meters, not violinists and Stradivariuses. Listening placed her at a precipice hovering over a bottomless crevasse,

the opposite cliff face as distant as the years between today's Chicago and yesterday's Salzburg.

Time passed. The weather warmed, then turned hot. The leaves fell. Winter returned followed by another spring and summer. LaReine regained use of her bow arm enough to practice, ten or fifteen minutes a day. As the leaves colored, the practice sessions lengthened. The void slowly narrowed. By first snow, able to practice a complete piece, the void closed and she returned to the Chicago.

Her first rehearsal was more reunion than rehearsal. Champagne imbibed; chocolate cake inscribed "Welcome Back" eaten... The other violinists were polite in a frosty way. The one who had temporarily replaced her as Concert Master and was now relegated to the section of first violinists upon her return ignored her. One of them had sabotaged her violin. LaReine dedicated herself to finding out who. Vengeance shall be mine sayeth the Queen of the Violin.

LaReine went under the baton at the next rehearsal. From her chair on stage, Chicago's Orchestra Hall never looked better. The waves of red upholstery spread over three tiers of seats had the emotional impact of her favorite Mozart violin concerto well played. At the end of the rehearsal, the Conductor pulled her aside. "You're playing is so much better than before. A Paganini pact?" The Conductor had an offbeat sense of humor limited to classical music references, musical bad dad jokes.

"Some say it was his mother."

She winked. He laughed.

Now, having resumed her position as Concert Master, on stage on All Saints' Eve, her violin properly tuned down for scordatura and resting on her lap, LaReine awaited the Conductor's entrance. Her spirits danced with the lights shining down from the vaulted ceiling. Her bow arm, ugly and scarred, her badge of courage, no longer depressed her.

She had cajoled the Conductor to include Saint-Saëns's

Opus 40, *Danse Macabre*, in the program. “A promise made is a promise kept,” she wrote in her email to Dr. Diafol inviting him to attend and informing him his ticket would be at Will Call. From one of the house seats reserved for special guests of the Chicago, he waved.

LaReine raised her violin and took a cleansing breath as the harp accompanied by soft strings played the same note 12 times. After the twelfth note more strings and her entrance playing a tritone. Flutes and xylophones introduced the first theme; she the second, a descending scale accompanied by the string section. As the music ebbed and flowed, the notes transported her to the only universe that mattered. When the xylophones returned, she silently sighed, thrilled at Saint-Saëns’s use of a folk instrument not part of a traditional symphony orchestra.

LaReine closed her eyes to await the oboe’s coda that marked the finale, the rising of the sun and return of the skeletons to their graves. As the oboe faded, silence rather than applause. She opened her eyes and gasped, rubbed them, caught her breath. Orchestra Hall, still brightly lit, was empty, not a seat occupied, nor a straggler in the aisles, no custodians picking up abandoned programs. She, alone, remained. How long had she closed her eyes? Two seconds, three, five at most. A macabre ending to *Danse Macabre*. In her violin case, a note. “*Thank you for the souls your music soothed. Dr. Lucious Diafol.*”

LaReine exited Orchestra Hall. A bright sun blazed on the building’s facade. Chicago Symphony Orchestra banners buffeted by the wind of Lake Michigan fluttered on light poles. She was as disoriented as when she awoke from a vivid dream and didn’t know where she was. It shouldn’t be day light. If anything illuminated Orchestra Hall, it should be the moon. The concert had ended around 10 PM. Within a few seconds, she had opened her eyes to a silent emptiness. Minutes after that, she had exited the building.

A pedestrian approached. She considered stopping him, asking him the day, the time, the year; but dressed in her sleeveless black sheath without a coat to fend off the winds she didn't want him to think she was a hungover party girl. Like a penitent on a pilgrimage, she trekked down S. Michigan until she came to a newsstand where she bought the day's *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*. As she fumbled in her purse for money to pay, a worker on a slow-moving truck tossed a bundle of the bullet edition of the *Daily News*, the afternoon paper, on the sidewalk at her feet. She bought that as well. November 1, the day after. Nothing on the front pages about the disappearance of the audience. Nothing on the pages devoted to Chicago news. In the culture sections, reviews of the concert. Generally positive. One mentioned her by name, welcomed her back, praised her playing, criticized her choice of outfit. Passing a trash receptacle, she contributed the papers. As she walked away, a homeless man retrieved them, his blanket for the night. Everything seemed both right and wrong.

At home, LaReine prepared soft-boiled eggs, slices of buttered raisin bread, and a pot of English Breakfast tea. She lightly peppered the eggs. Comfort food that failed to comfort. Music had always been her refuge and she needed its charms to root her in a world she knew and understood. She abandoned her meal and retrieved her violin, tuning it for Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Sonata in G minor, *Il Trillo del Diavolo*. It had been the audition piece that gained her admission to The Julliard School. Returning to it was like returning home after a long and difficult hospitalization. As she played, the music led her out of the darkness. Entombed in the difficult fourth movement, she didn't hear the phone ring.

A voice mail. Dr. Diafol. "You were magnificent last night. Everything I hoped for and more. I have offered a substantial donation to the Berliner if it repeats the program and they've agreed. You'll solo. The Artistic Director will contact you."

LaReine ate her eggs and toast cold, then poured a fresh mug of tea. Repeat the program, he had said. If she did, what of the Berliner's audience. Confused, she returned Dr. Diafol's call. "What happened when the concert ended?"

"A standing ovation. Well deserved."

Her reality, so disjointed from the reality of the newspapers, was it a hallucination? A nightmare?

"I'll never perform *Danse Macabre* again."

Dr. Diafol cleared his throat. "A promise made is a promise kept.' You said that yourself."

"I kept my promise."

"An annual concert was our agreement."

"On one condition," LaReine said. "I choose the program."

"As long as Opus 40 comes last, you have my blessing."

His use of that word, 'blessing,' unsettled her.

LaReine knew persuading the Artistic Director of the Berliner to agree to her determining the program would be difficult. She was prepared to threaten to resign if he refused. The Berliner would survive without her, but he would not as its Artistic Director if he forced her out. Especially over something as trivial as her choosing the pieces in one program. The Stravinsky would anger him. He was old school and disparaged Russian composers, regardless of the century, as nothing more than serfs in service first to the Tsars, then to the state. Still, he was astute enough to program to the tastes of the musicians and audience. A broad repertoire that included the Russians attracted talent and the subscriptions, ticket sales, recordings, and public funding, that paid his salary.

LaReine couldn't tell him about what happened in Chicago on All Saints' Eve. There was no record it had. She herself wasn't sure what had or hadn't.

"Did you attend the Wilhelm Wenders retrospective at the Berlinale?" she asked.

"Every film," the Artistic Director said. "Even the embarrass-

ment of *The Million Dollar Hotel*. Awarding that movie, a Silver Bear was a low point for the Berlinale.”

“Home field advantage.”

“I know Wim well because of the importance of music in his films. An auteur. The author of his films. Not the actors. Not the screenwriters. Him. The director. The film’s creative force.”

“And you?” she said. “When you design a concert program, are you not an auteur? When you select the pieces, sequence them, are you not creating a program of music the way an auteur creates a movie?”

“The program must make sense as a unity with a proper opener and closer. The pieces must speak to each other in their keys, lengths, styles, years composed, texture, and so on.”

“I wish to be the auteur of my program for Dr. Diafol. Two pieces. The third movement of Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*, Psalm 150, and Saint-Saëns’s Opus 40. *Danse Macabre*.”

“A very short program.”

“For an audience of one. We wouldn’t want our generous benefactor to share the experience with others.”

“Why those two?”

“The third movement of the Stravinsky praises the Lord. The Saint-Saëns exalts the devil. Heaven v. Hell. Angels v. Demons. Good v. Evil. Paradise v. Paradise Lost. The greatest of conflicts. I, not the musicians, would be the creative force behind the concert. They would be fulfilling my vision. The Auteur Theory of Concert Programming.”

“Just this once, Frau LaReine.”

“Danke.”

Weeks later, Dr. Diafol chose his own seat in the empty Grand Hall where the Berliner played. He dressed in formalwear, tuxedo, black tie, an outfit fitting for a command performance, a performance he had commanded. Being an audience of one appealed to his vanity. He needed people to pay him his due. Not enough did and those who did were given as

much respect as Salem's witches or Ireland's druids.

On stage, LaReine rested her violin on her lap. The third movement of the Stravinsky had no violins. She had arranged with the Artistic Director for the violins, on his cue, to raise their instruments as if they were about to play. A subterfuge to confuse Dr. Diafol and minimize the likelihood he would recognize the Stravinsky. Early recognition, she worried, might enable him to foil her plot. The choir assembled on risers behind the orchestra, the men in black suits, white shirts, and black bow ties, the women in white blouses and black slacks. Their footsteps resembled muffled percussion... As for LaReine, she wore the same dress she had worn in Chicago. A message. Music, her exposed bow arm proclaimed, originated in the soul and heart, not the arm or fingers. If her theory proved correct, soul and heart would vanquish Dr. Diafol; if not, she was condemned to a lifetime of playing *Danse Macabre* on All Saints' Eve. She dared not ponder the consequences that might entail.

The Artistic Director mounted the podium and shook her hand. He tapped his baton on the music stand, then raised his hands, holding them still as the orchestra, including the violins, readied their instruments. The choristers inhaled and straightened their posture. After a quick uplift, he swept the baton and his free hand downwards. The opening notes sounded, the wind instruments dominant, then the choir entered backed by flutes and clarinets.

*Alleluia laudate Dominum.*

Dr. Diafol squirmed like a child desperate to urinate. The rhythm changed, very slow, then building to fast, then back to slow for the understated Coda. Dr. Diafol mirrored the changes in the rhythm, becoming more agitated as the rhythm accelerated, then so calm he seemed comatose as it slowed.

*Alleluia laudate Dominum.*

As the final *Dominum* faded there was a flash of light and a puff of smoke where Dr. Diafol sat similar to what magicians

used to distract their audience. For an instant, LaReine thought Diafol had transformed into a serpent. When the smoke cleared, he was nowhere to be seen. With the audience of one no longer present, the Berliner did not perform *Danse Macabre*. She rose and bowed to the Artistic Director, then bowed to the musicians and choristers.

Over time, the muscles of LaReine's bow arm strengthened and the scars faded enough for plastic surgery to debride them. What happened in Chicago, or didn't happen, remained a mystery. On the next All Saints' Eve, she left a ticket for Dr. Diafol at Will Call, but it was not claimed. The Chicago substituted *Night on Bald Mountain* for *Danse Macabre* and screened that excerpt from Disney's *Fantasia*. The audience loved it. No one disappeared.

# *I Hated the Mornings*

Aminah Colin-Lopez

When I saw the clock at 9:59 A.M., I knew the lady with the blue eyes, and blonde hair, wearing a white blouse, and black skirt was waiting outside the classroom. My name would be plastered on the paper of her brown clipboard. I knew Lauren with the pale skin would turn around and stare the moment she walked in at 10:00 A.M. She would call my name in a pitying tone as if I couldn't understand it. I would get out of my seat following her through the hallway, entering a secluded classroom with bright white lighting like I was getting interrogated. She spoke to me in Spanish, in a very white-accent, *hoy aprendemos a pronunciar su G's*. I wanted to correct her that hoy is not pronounced like a pirate: *ahoy*. But I would repeat the words over and over again: sing, thing, and king, until I got the velar consonant pronunciation right. Then when I walked back into class, Lauren would ask me, *Where did you go? Are you special?* At 11:18 A.M. we would line up for recess. Lauren would grab my hand, trace the lines on my palm, and say, *The M on your hand means you're Mexican.*

# *Diagnosis*

Kimberly Ann Priest

Suddenly  
there is a need for research,  
long hours discovering  
I'm not so different  
from you. Verily,  
verily  
history  
is examined: *what is  
this greenery called?* The flowers  
in the vase  
are chamomile, I remember.  
Thank you,  
Love,  
for choosing them so wisely; I don't possess  
your perfectly contoured nose.  
When I ask  
a friend: *Is this autism  
or PTSD?* He responds,  
"I've never met a neurodivergent  
who doesn't have both."  
We reach  
the checkout line at the grocery store  
with another bouquet  
of flowers,  
my happy handful  
of soothing yellows,  
whites,  
and greens. I forget to check  
the labels again  
in the interest

of taxonomy. You pay  
the clerk  
with your usual sort of humor.  
We're not  
so different, I hope,  
burying my face in petals and stems  
through the grocery store  
parking lot  
before  
I offer to let you  
smell them.

# *The Lifespan of a Wildflower*

Kimberly Ann Priest

Bad things must be bad things, good things good,  
before pain becomes emotion one can trust.  
How many times have I said *something is wrong*,  
then learned to remember ‘everything’s ok’  
as long as I repudiate singing?  
The throat is a delicate creature: little flute  
fingered sometimes. I wrote my heart  
into every cry for mercy, and he wrote me back  
by wrapping his prayers around my shoulders,  
his thumb so close to my neck. My new  
husband brings me bouquets of store-bought  
flowers nearly weekly and I feed them twice  
with the included plant food mix, peel off  
dead leaves, fill the vase with fresh tepid water,  
rearrange. It’s like telling myself  
my existence has changed for the better  
by whirling their colors into different patterns,  
the decades strewn behind me littered with carnage,  
the rich man who did this flourishing well enough.  
His beauty, says St. James, is fleeting as  
the wildflower and this should bring me comfort,  
my first husband’s longevity like all other longevity,  
destined to be cut off. I recut the stems  
of the bouquet my new husband gives me,  
pinch it back through a vase’s narrow opening,  
so careful to keep the flowers arranged  
as I have rearranged them. Good things  
must be good things, leaving no mind for the bad things,  
the rich man of my history compared  
to wildflowers—as a metaphor, carelessly arrayed.

# *To Everyone Who Won't Let Me Dream Small*

Cameron Fuller

You've always overlooked them.  
Screws and gears, nuts and bolts,  
Rusted lengths of necklace chain  
And keys that go to nowhere.  
From the street, I pick up each one to go into  
My shoebox full of pretty, worthless things.  
I hid them before, so you wouldn't throw them out.  
But now I'm not afraid of what you'll think  
Of me for loving what is useless and broken.

I'm wearing the jacket you told me to throw away.  
I've patched the holes at the pocket corners,  
And reinforced the ripping seams.  
I added fabric to the sides when I outgrew it,  
Turning a too tight fit into colorful comfort.  
It will never be fixed for good.  
I'll always have to keep maintaining it.  
But each repair makes it more mine.

Remember the "weeds" you killed with salt last spring?  
Those tiny purple clusters of flowers  
Bloom in sidewalk cracks  
And on the edges of lawns left unmown.  
I've never really said it until recently,  
But they were always the most beautiful to me.  
I finally found their name. They're called filaree.

You think that grey and brown are ugly colors.

But grey is the color of storms and steel,  
The color of fledgling down and river stones.  
Brown is the color of wood and soil,  
Of small animals in the grass.  
They're simple colors that fade into the background,  
But they're everywhere once you begin to look.

You think that I'm wasting my life  
When my long-term plan is a one-bedroom apartment  
And a bluebelly lizard in a dutifully kept terrarium.  
A few small moments of warmth and comfort  
Is all I want. No grand romance, no daring adventures,  
But just a few good friends and quiet domesticity.

What I think is that you  
Are the ones thinking small.

# *We Don't Get Girlhood Back*

Gabrielle Patterson

Seventeen years old, in the back of a 1998 Honda Accord,  
squished between dumb and dumber, as they rattle  
on about Rachel's tits this morning in math class.  
I look to the rearview, and lock eyes with the boy driving.  
They've grown darker since we were ten, a storm cloud  
far from the baby blue sparkle I fell in love with.  
\$uicide Boy\$ booms through my brain as I rest my head  
on my scrunched-up legs, reminiscing on forgotten friends.

I began to dream of who I'd be if my only vice  
were sweet treats and binge-watching shows.  
I think of twinkle lights, Sour Patch Kids, and root beer.  
How those girls acknowledged my mother in her home.  
When they whispered about Rachel, it was to say,  
she is top of their class, she's going to Harvard. It was easy  
because they wrapped girlhood up in a big pink bow.

There were never whip-it canisters being fought  
over or coke being dealt. No one asked to light my bong  
rips as a symbol of friendship. The world had yet to numb us.  
"Yo, Gabs, did you get an addy for Rachel's party?"  
Causes me to lift my head up jolting me back to reality.  
A backwood begins to get passed around. Each calloused  
hand caressed it as if it were an infant. Just one more reminder  
that the sky isn't pink anymore and these boys can't braid my hair.

# *A Four-Year Old and a Four Dollar Garden Shovel*

John Grosjean

I watch from the window as he sits  
in the back yard, dirt flung in a semicircle,  
kneeling over a befuddled hole in the ground.  
His tiny shovel scrapes and stabs, unplanned  
and uncaring. Small dirt-stained hands pull  
rocks and loose dirt from the growing void.  
A scratch of the shovel at the wall  
reveals a dull silver something. A treasure.  
Curious eyes widen, a smile travels  
across his face, an excited wiggle. It's a pirate's  
treasure. One more swipe of the shovel  
and the blade scrapes the real from reality.  
The fence boards of the island yard melt  
to crystal blue water. If he only knew

how close his mind's new world  
was to Nevada's past. High sea to high desert.

The sun, overhead spreads shimmering  
diamonds across the seascape. Brown mountain  
earth turns to yellow sand. A pirate's hideout.

His mind unable to fathom the creatures  
that hid in this landscape long ago.

Fingers begin excavating the precious treasure.  
The toolshed now a pirate ship patiently  
waiting on the shore, the crew fresh

from the latest high-sea hijack hurriedly dig  
a hiding spot for the riches of their plunder.

More silver and gold have come out of this land  
than most pirates can fathom.

Fingers pry the treasure from the sand, a crushed  
soda can. Water recedes, fence boards stand.  
The soda can examined as beach sand assembles  
brown and dry. Looking up at the toolshed a stick  
leans on the side. That's where he left his sword.  
The can is tossed to the ground. Reality remains,  
history, and facts to be learned.

His real resets with new worlds to be made.

# *A Park Behind School with a Green Playground*

Thomas Arthur Darnell

To steer the viridescent ship that never moves into the future, what glory! For as long as you can keep your hands on the cracked plastic wheel, you will be the monarch of children, ignorant of all them trying to have their turn at the helm. Her Majesties Navy is receiving their Lunchables before they can return to the unforgiving fray. Nate from the two-story house on Fire Poppy that had a pool put in last spring will never again be able to challenge your superiority after today, but why would you care for days that come after this one? This moment is all you need. All of the comfy hornet's nest under the slide, the cracked and rough rubber grates that cover the walls and floor, the smell of the grass being cut over the nearby fence, the taste of dirt going into your mouth despite your best efforts and a harrowing sound of the red stuff in your eyesight shaking when you trip on the way up. Really, you need to stand on your own and push all the other boys back down the slick fireman's pole if you are to ever live as humbly as you ought to. The rain splits away from you as it runs down the portside plastic, a reminder of the rain breaking on the window when you're finally brought home. "C'mere kid, we don't have all day,"

would come from your dad's truck, the one  
you see every other week and New Years.  
You don't yet know that the fuzzy hand  
of time is pulling away. No, I don't think  
that you need to drive the ship. It deserves  
to make its own way, stand on its own six  
legs, study microbiology until midnight.  
Shouldn't you instead go beyond? Grow  
above everyone else, lean on your knee  
and snipe a girl's cap off with your pinky.  
*Molodost' ne greh*—the ship leaves port  
soon, so do not think about all that now,  
and stay on it as long as needed for today.

# Click to Death

Marie Anderson

Finally, it was Lulia's turn to critique the newest member's story. Her thumb was sore from clicking her ballpoint pen while the writers ahead of her had droned on and on.

"If I ran this writers group," she often complained to her mother, "I'd ditch this kindergarten routine of moving around the table, giving each person time to yammer."

The writers reminded her in some ways of the kids in the lunchroom where she worked as a lunch lady: babbling, squabbling, interrupting, not listening. At least the grammar school's lunchroom had lots of windows. The writers met in a musty old public library's windowless basement under flickering fluorescent lights. Sometimes smelly homeless people wandered in and snored or mumbled through the meeting (once a bum peed his pants!), and because it was a public library, the bossy *libtard* leader of the writers group wouldn't make the *unhoused* leave.

But at least tonight no homeless had stumbled in. And the lights weren't flickering.

Lulia smiled at Leland, the newest member, sitting across from her. She cleared her throat. He stared at her, defiantly she thought, as though daring her to be the first in the group to say something negative about his story. His *masterpiece*, he no doubt believed.

"Oh if the group praises this new guy's story," Lulia had said to her mother earlier over dinner, "then I may have to just up and quit the group." Her mother used to attend the meetings until an ineffective fall down the stairs had resulted only in paralyzed legs. She still read all the stories though.

"His story's good like a slaughtered turkey, sweetheart." her mother soothed. "Roasted crisp and brown, ready for hungry teeth."

"I've got the only sharp teeth in that group," Lulia grumped.

"Indeed you do, sweetheart," her mother murmured, stroking

the faint red marks on her left arm.

Now it was time to bite, delicately of course, the new guy's ego with her metaphorically sharp teeth. "Well, Leland, is it?" Lulia shook her head. "This is an ambitious little tale, especially from someone so young and unseasoned. I can appreciate that ambition, despite the overwriting and cliches."

Leland blinked. His acne-scarred, weak-chinned face flushed. "Your protagonist, Jerricka Boone? I appreciate the effort you took to craft such an apt name for her. Now if you can just put effort into better paragraphing, better verbs, and less careless punctuation. Remember: commas and periods and white space are a writer's best friends!"

Leland swallowed. His meatball-round Adam's apple trembled up and down his long pale neck. He opened his mouth as though to speak. Lulia raised her hand to stop him. "Your job right now is just to listen so you can benefit from the critiquer's comments. Anyway. Jerricka Boone is a great name. And your morgue scene! Not plausible, but so wacky! So vivid! So plucky! I can appreciate that."

He frowned. "It's her real name. And that's what really happened in that morgue. I'm a coroner's assistant, you know."

"If I want facts, Leland, I'll read an encyclopedia. Or Wikipedia." Lulia paused, waiting for chuckles to season the silence. None came. "But if I want the truth," she continued, "I'll read fiction. *Well-done* fiction."

Leland's thick black eyebrows quivered, reminding her of the caterpillars pinned with needles to the posterboard hanging on her basement wall. Of course, the bugs eventually stopped quivering just like Leland's eyebrows did. He was now clenching his fists so fierce his knuckles burst into cauliflower-white bumps. Then he smiled and began tapping the red folder on the table in front of him.

"Well," he said, but Lulia shook her head. "I'm still talking, Leland. Jerricka Boone is a really great name. I just might steal it."

No one laughed. That theft comment usually earned her

chuckles. *Maybe, she thought, my writers group fans are still bummed that my latest story's been rejected.*

Lulia had shared that bad news with her writers group at the start of the meeting. A few months earlier, when the story had been workshopped, they'd all loved it. Nothing but *smiley faces* and *nice* or *great* or *terrific* scrawled on the hard copies they'd each read and edited before the meeting. So with great expectations, Lulia had submitted the story to *Sharp Curves Ahead*.

The rejection letter had infected her mailbox today. *Sharp Curves* was one of the few paying markets that still preferred postal over email. Her mother handed her the torn envelope as soon as Lulia had returned from community service.

"It came torn!" her mother claimed, as she thrust the envelope under Lulia's nose before Lulia even had a chance to pour herself a soothing glass of chardonnay.

Later, her mother patted liver-spotted fingers into freshly bruised skin, blubbering, "It's your writers group failure, not yours, sweetheart!"

"True enough," Lulia agreed. She rubbed her hand which ached from its contact with her mother's saggy jowls.

Leland was inexplicably smiling. Lulia pursed her lips. She wanted to punch that smile into his big shiny teeth.

Leland opened his red folder and removed a sheet of paper. "Acceptance letter!" He stretched his arm and waved the paper under her nose. "For my Jerricka Boone story. I got it today. *Sharp Curves Ahead* is buying my story! Drinks for the group on me as soon as I get my check!"

Everyone cheered and clapped, Lulia too, though her hands felt like they were battling a sea of molasses. Lulia's 33 rejection letters over the years from *Sharp Curves*—33 wrinkled rectangles of paper—were spiked with darts into the wall over her mother's bed.

Almost every night after putting her mother to bed, Lulia would throw darts at the rejection letters. She'd missed only once.

Her mother still had a faint scar under her left eye.

The bossy group leader moved the group on to a cold read of the next writer's piece.

Lulia barely listened as that writer read aloud her incomprehensible poem. (It didn't even rhyme!) Lulia clicked her ballpoint pen, each click stabbing envy over Leland's Jerricka-Boone-in-the-morgue deeper into Lulia's gut.

*Why don't I have what that Leland has? What luck that his reality is good enough for fiction.* She looked around the room. Twelve writers in attendance tonight. Her gaze settled on Leland. Last in, first out, she told herself. Lulia liked the fairness of that approach.

*Maybe, Lulia thought, it's time for me to heat up my reality. If my reality is too bland to energize my fiction, maybe I should energize my reality. But authenticity is important. I'll have to do more than just research or imagine. I'll have to do it. Actually do it. Not just pretend do it. Slice and dice and chop and chew.*

Three main ingredients were the recipe for her current life: lunch lady at the local grammar school; caretaker of her crippled mother; and writers group member. Always best to write what you know, she knew. Well, she knew those three ingredients inside out. But second best, though time-consuming, was to know what you write. And that would take fieldwork: careful planning (not like that ineffectual fall down the stairs business!)

While the other writers yammered out their critiques of the bad poem, Lulia clicked her pen.

Click, a lunchroom kid. Click, a crippled old lady. Click, Leland. Click, the libtard group leader.

*I'll let fate decide, she thought. Whatever click I'm on when it's finally my turn to critique the poem, that's who'll end up chillin' in the morgue.*

*And that's who'll spice up my next story.*

# *An Origin Story*

Joanne Mallari

*Origin's not a single point, untraceable.* —Andrew Collard

I could say my origin  
was this morning when,  
tilting my head to the sky,  
I saw the continuation  
of my breath flowing  
from a moment in 1999:  
the first time I released  
a butterfly, I fell in love.  
Or I could say my origin  
was the birth of this body  
in 1990, when I looked  
more like an old man.  
It makes sense if I think  
of this shell as a later  
version of my lolo  
who loved music. I listen,  
now, to the sounds of 1960  
preserved on vinyl.  
What was it like for Lolo  
to hold his son for the first  
time? What beginnings  
and endings did he foretell  
in the moment of his  
continuation? I, childfree,  
reimagine the ways  
I continue. I, unmarried,  
reimagine the ways I love,  
though its definition  
has always been slippery.

My grandparents tell me  
love is a song in 4/4 time.  
My parents tell me love  
withstands like sandbags  
bracing for a flood.  
In this version, let love  
transform like vapor  
into rain. Let love undo  
the chrysalis I've been  
weaving since 1999.  
Let love listen, then add  
syncopated rhythms  
to a song in common time.

# Dear Mary

Joanne Mallari

Today I drew your name from a deck  
of divine feminine oracle cards.

If I could have lunch with anyone  
from the past, it would be you.

I want to know: How do you say yes  
to what feels light? When does  
your body move according to gut  
instinct or muscle memory?

When the angel Gabriel came to you,  
did he give you enough time to sink  
into your knowing? If we are made  
in the image of God, then is God  
also on a journey to unbecoming—  
to unlearning old patterns of non-consent?  
Did you really give the angel  
a full-body *yes*, and if you didn't,  
how did you manage the crisis?

Today I finished Glennon Doyle's  
memoir, and I learned that the Greek  
root of *crisis* is *to sift*. At twenty-eight,  
I left home to sift through my priorities:  
Who is a daughter without duty,  
and is it okay for a daughter to follow  
her desire? In Glasgow, I wrote poems  
about searching for God, and now  
I realize I was actually looking for you.

Outside a church near my Airbnb,  
I pushed the buzzer to get to God's

representative, but no one answered.  
I imagine the conversation we would've  
had if you had come to the door: *I am lost  
and unworthy of my own desire,*  
I would've said. *Women are warriors,*  
you would've answered. *And warriors  
fight for everything worth having.*

Maybe I did run into you—just not  
inside the office of God's administrator.  
You were the moon at the foot of my bed  
that night. The way you showed up  
reminded me we are never without light.  
Sometimes the moon is the best light  
to sift by. In my mind's eye,  
I pick up a handful of sand on the beach.  
I feel the granules slip through my fingers  
until all that's left is what matters—  
a piece of shell that used to be someone's  
home. The piece of shell is an invitation  
to come home to myself.

# *My Freedom is Burning with Tom Kha and Rubber*

Teya Lagatta

*That feeling was all we ever desired, that freedom  
to hurtle madly against the sweet, forgiving flesh of the world*

—Campbell McGrath

We burnt the brakes of a borrowed rusting Nissan  
after it started to stall up the narrow roads of Mae Rim  
toward the strawberries farms in mountains we planned  
to sleep on for the weekend. Smoke cascaded  
from the wheel wells as our throats belted with laughter  
that poured from the rolled-down windows, now elevated  
above the banyan trees, riding the back of a tow truck  
—Charmaine sitting shotgun with her legs on the dash,  
their skin dark enough that the strangers on the street  
would speak to her in Thai. Me in the driver's seat  
with an international license I paid 90 dollars  
for at AAA back home and never once used,  
and Guillem in the back, his wide eyes sparkling  
like the feather-shaped silver earring that hung below  
a cigarette tucked behind his ear after he said he'd stop smoking.  
That night, we stayed in the house of a white-haired expat  
name Rick, where the pillows were dirty  
with the feet and faces of those who came before us  
whom we sweated over in the thick air of burning  
season in the Chiang Mai that couldn't be remedied  
by a pink electric fan. He fed us sweet tom kha  
that we shoveled into our mouths until we had to lean  
back on our plastic chairs. Living in a village that month,  
we learned to eat so fast at lunch time that a shared  
plate of rice and eggs—and morning glory, on a good day—

would be enough to make us lie out in the hot sun  
and fall asleep with the mosquitos until two in the afternoon.  
Something we never knew in our home countries,  
where the food was always as plentiful as the money.  
But we began to fall in love with it, in all its simplicity.  
So we gave a mechanic three thousand baht  
to make the still shitty car—with its torn fabric seats and broken  
speedometer—take us back there to the rock-hard mattresses  
and caterpillars that left red rashes on our shoulders.  
And for whatever reason, we felt at home  
in those concrete-walled rooms with bucket-flushing  
toilets. I think it was because we were free.  
When our time there ended,  
we stood in the side of the highway with a sign  
that read *Chiang Mai to Pai*, and were delivered  
to a town where we sipped tea on dusty floorboards  
as a Thai man with calloused feet and dreadlocks  
braided a tail of yarn and beads into my messily chopped  
brown hair. We downed vodka and Coke, floating  
on warm black tires down the murky Pai river and stumbled  
back off a tuktuk to a hostel where Guillem jumped  
into the swimming pool with dirt-covered skin  
and grabbed my dizzy head, dunking my sunburned  
face once before I kissed his chapped lips for the first time.  
I think we may all have been running from something  
cause in each new bed I slept, I found a new identity  
-under every layer I chose to shed from the girl  
that existed before, who knew nothing of what it meant  
to be free from the walls of fear that she called home—  
And as we drove back through the fields of smoke  
that seeped into the city in April, the air filled with the sweet  
ash of what used to be alive, I remembered not to look back.  
Not like I do now when that same scent crawls out  
of the fireplace burning in my dad's house behind me

as I walk the dog down an alley.  
Last year, Guillem went to Australia to work  
in the mines, the restaurants, the hotels  
anywhere that made good money and didn't mind  
his English that can't be washed of the Catalan lisp.  
He'd send me photos of him in all black slacks  
or a blue button-up polo dancing with a mop in his hand.  
Charmaine went to school in England and met  
a boy who she hikes Europe with. She tried going home  
to Singapore once but the past burned too close  
on her newfound skin and she couldn't stay  
in that hot 900 square-foot apartment with her parents.  
I went back to Reno where the grocery stores  
have slot machines and I sit in my bedroom  
on sunny afternoons staring at a computer screen  
because my ignorance—or is it lack thereof—has convinced  
me that I need a degree. This year, I began to learn  
that our freedom was something only bought  
by the money I made working  
for a cooperation since I was fourteen.  
But I like to think that, in a sense of energy,  
my soul is still as free as we were  
with our square sandal tans and dirty backpacks  
that we never cared to turn back for.

# *Lane Splitters, Berkeley, California*

Teresa Breeden

*after Campbell McGrath*

We showed up in all weather, not  
for the pizza, but for the name, for the bikers  
in leather and cordura, the camaraderie  
of a cold pitcher and a hot pie after the harrowing  
rush hour split over the bay bridge, slipping  
between Volvos and Saabs, dodging the absurdity  
of commuting hummers, on the alert,  
always, for doors flung open in stopped  
traffic, for that one asshole  
dumping out his soda mid-bridge  
and after, in the sweltering  
scent of melting cheese, in the company  
of our people, all genders and colors  
and ages but mostly young  
and male; no Harleys out front, the parking  
packed with backed-in Hondas and Kawasaki's,  
Interceptors and Ninjas, CBRs stacked up  
like pins in a cushion, a few Beamers—  
Anton who'd been tooling since high school  
always said about Beamers that you could  
fix anything on a BMW in less than an hour  
using the single wrench that came with the bike.  
By you he meant himself or Adam or even  
Colin who raced more than fixed bikes  
anyone but me, so mechanically inept  
I tried to adjust my valves with the wide  
end of the gauge and seized James's  
engine into a skidding stop when it ran  
out of oil on a particularly sweet curve—

and the elite, dry-clutch  
red Ducati, up on the curb like a torch  
calling us home, and we entered  
this sanctuary of tall tales and pale ales  
like we woke early each week for the Sunday  
Morning Ride, sliding through curves  
before tourists filled the roads north, holding out  
our gloved fingers for the biker's  
wave as we passed one of our own, motioning  
warnings of any cops on the road behind, existence  
about the people and the curves, the throttle  
and the lean, knee to the ground, pretending  
we lived like we rode, on that edge  
all the time, and maybe then we did  
and maybe the road was life itself, always  
heading somewhere we never quite got to  
mist across the pavement dissipating  
from the heat of our tires, the sun always rising  
even as we chased the moon and maybe  
those scraping pegs, sparks on the asphalt  
are notes in the song I can't quite recall  
but that jangles around my mouth  
like the pole dancers at the She's on Fire  
event are a metaphor for how it feels  
to bend my body around the shape  
of desire, to move with intention  
the way a tongue scrapes over chapped  
lips to moisten them only it ends  
more like regret how that sensitive  
skin gets even drier than before just like  
during study abroad in college  
when I asked that guy from Northern Ireland  
"Are you the bombing type?" So comfortable

in my small knowledge from my big country  
it didn't occur to me it might be offensive.  
How he taught me the best lesson I've ever  
learned about assumptions, then and there  
in the dark of that other pub, a pint glass  
loose in my virtuous fist, my feet sticking  
slightly to the floor when I shifted  
as he calmly, almost kindly, asked  
"You said you're from LA, right?  
So, do you shoot Blacks?"

# *Drive Through Fall*

Daniel Lopez Garzon

Red and yellowed leaves fall to the bed  
of a '95 truck driving through the countryside. I sit not resting but  
watching the road fall behind, unable to catch up only leaving leaves  
smushed by tires. To my sides only the same patterns of tree after  
tree.

One red.

One yellow.

Then back to red.

The warm orange iris that is peaking through the row of trees  
shines back into mine about to rest. It illuminates the leaves that  
sleep  
on my lap as they fly away in the wind that sings whispers.  
Through my hair and ears it says...

*Don't look back on then,*

*but forward,*

*take in the air.*

I bounce up and back down  
from the bumpy road, the cold steel rust is chilling  
with the only warmth coming from the smothering  
exhaust smoke and my one coat only thick enough  
to keep me warm.

The driver, whose name I can't recall, sits in the front keeping one  
eye to the road and the other on the rear view pointing at me.  
His hand is on the wheel and other out the window following the flow  
of the wind. He hums along to the local radio station  
playing fine aged country songs that I didn't recognize.

We'll reach somewhere eventually; it doesn't matter where. The sun  
will rest but the leaves will still fall and the wind will still whispers.  
The trees left behind will stay still and the leaves will remain.

Close my eyes.

Forget the leaves.

Just move forward.

# *La Noche en el Mar*

Jomarix Ailide Olivera Torres

The night is still, broken up by the sound  
Of bags *tirado en la arena*.

The tide cold as it splashes against our  
Bare skin, and I watch as figures trample  
Towards the water, the laughter rings, splashes  
And shouts and whoops and hollers breaking out.  
We enjoy the last of our summer.

*Cuidado*, knowing only a few hear.  
I hold the camera still in my hands  
To take a photo. Water is splashed  
*Y todos se paren juntos*, smiling  
And the flash is blinding when it goes over them.

*Y aquí, en el final de todo.*  
The salt of the air lingers as I breathe  
Soft in my lungs, and the laughter dwindles.  
The photo loads on screen, all bright colors  
And seafoam and moonlight and reminders  
Of what it means to be awake, alive.

# *The Bavarian Prisoner*

Landa wo

*“We revolt simply because, for many reasons,  
we can no longer breathe.”*

—Frantz Fanon.

I hesitated a long time in choosing the title of this text. “The Man Condemned to Death in the Free State of Bavaria” or “The Bavarian Prisoner.” The first title would have seemed more spectacular in this era where the mind has to absorb the substance quickly. Our era no longer has time, the time to understand and analyze, the time to question, the time for the intellectual path towards the truth or at least as close as you can get. The death penalty having been abolished in Germany, in France and generally in Europe in its most violent form as still practiced in Saudi Arabia, in China and in the U.S. So all I was left was the reference to a prisoner. Even if, in point of fact, it would be more accurate to speak of a condemnation to social death.

I am part of what the Europeans coyly call a “visible minority,” which is really being a second-class citizen in the heart of Europe. While the great America, and I mention it without irony, was still sending dogs after the Blacks of Baltimore and Atlanta, in Europe, at least in France, the political class already counted in its numbers full French citizens. Gaston Monnerville or Félix Éboué.

Things have certainly changed since. If South Africa and the United States have followed the corridor of history in the direction of progress, France has taken the opposite direction and stagnated which, in human rights terms, is equivalent to going backwards. One doesn’t advance in history by going backwards as the ancestor Ngondo Moyula<sup>1</sup> liked to say. When the American white elite no longer had the choice and had to make concessions to the Civil

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<sup>1</sup> Escaped convict from history (Angloa/Cabinda).

Rights Movement, it did but created in the process the interesting expression “the Angry Black,” who is someone who is never happy and for whom the racial question in the U.S. will always be seen from the point of view of the glass half empty. When using this term in the U.S. the intention was to discredit the claims of the Black and make him look eternally dissatisfied and spiteful.

Europe much more tactfully created another term for its visible minorities: that of “victimization.” Victimization discredits the legitimate demand of all European citizens, be they from visible minorities or not to demand equal treatment. In Europe the situation of a woman who has been raped is how the phenomenon of exclusion and social violence that affects the European Black can best be understood. Women are not raped because their skirts are too short or because they took the last bus or the last metro, women are raped because they run into someone incapable of controlling his sexual impulses. European Blacks are not excluded from the employment market, from political and economic life, because they don’t have the right degree or don’t speak the right foreign language with a suitable accent. European Blacks are excluded from the system because the stereotypes attached to their supposed performance are stronger than the values of fraternity and social justice that should apply to everyone in Europe.

When we bring together these elements of injustice, we have all the elements that lead to certain Europeans’ being excluded in a subjective manner from social progress. So when someone from a visible minority is unemployed, it’s because that person is either lazy or incompetent. In any case there’s someone of mixed race in the White House and the former CEO of Crédit Suisse Tidjane Thiam is Black so the system works. But for the few emblematic examples, how many are excluded not because of their talents but because of the prejudices attached to the status of second-class citizen in a modern and free Europe.

I’m going through a period of unemployment which is certainly one of the most exciting periods of my life because I’ve had the

chance to watch the world unfold around me. Without job or career prospects in Europe, you are in fact handed down a social death penalty, no drums, no trumpets.

My situation of being unemployed would give other people grey hairs, but not me, because I can't help comparing myself to Theodore's friend Basil, admirably described by Lawrence Durrell in "Prospero's Cell." Durrell tells us that Basil is what is commonly called a madman. I'm going to try to re-write the dialogue between Basil and Theodore from memory:

*They say I'm mad? he said.*

*Yes, said Theodore gravely.*

*So, I'm here.*

*Yes, said Theodore.*

*I'm fed and dressed and I don't work.*

*Yes.*

*So...who's mad? Me, or those outside?*

Nonetheless, everything is still relative. Receiving a social death penalty in the heart of Europe is a trifle compared to the death sentence of the poet Ashraf Fayad or the blogger Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia. Hard to imagine that the voices of Carol Ann Duffy, Paul Muldoon, Amir Or, Ghassan Zaqtan, George Szirtes and Adonis will succeed in saving these voices in danger.

Some poets really risk their lives, as when, as a young boy, I asked my brothers when we were watching cowboy films if the Indian was really dead. So compared to these latter, my social death penalty is a trip to the toy museum in Munich.

I reside in a prison open to the sky. I live in the suburbs of Munich in Grosshadernerst Number 60 in what is kindly called a "*clearing hause*," a kind of decompression chamber for those who have been evicted from their apartment, and who have to live in this place before finding somewhere else to live. The social workers are very professional and very warm in trying to reconstruct a kind of normality. Those who run into each other

in the corridors of this residence say hello without telling each other their personal story. But the European project is a project of evolution and civilization because everything is done so that our fellow citizens don't get left by the side of the road. There are slight constraints: travel is forbidden without first informing the social worker because how could you explain taking a holiday while living off the Bavarian taxpayer? It's impossible to have guests, but still, this is relative, because in their Saudi Arabian prisons Ashraf Fayad or Raif Badawi can't have guests in to spend a few days with them in prison either.

The Free State of Bavaria offers medical cover, treatment, an ISAR Card travel pass that only lets you travel after nine o'clock, but this is a minimal constraint, because public transport has to be left to those who get up bravely to go to work in the morning, to pay the taxes that allow those like me who've been given a social death sentence to live decently. The Bavarian taxpayer and the German and European taxpayer in general deserve the most sympathy because they go to work to give me a roof and a comfortable life. The man who knows how to live on very little quickly learns to be happy, to go to Deutsche Museums during the week, not to have to queue because even the poor have the right to culture.

So I am a poet, but I am also Basil. I am the Bavarian prisoner, but I am also a fugitive always looking for the chance to flee. I've done my best to escape from this Bavarian prison.

From this European society that prefers to give citizens who have qualifications under qualified jobs rather than give them the chance of a serious career to contribute to the development of the world. I have always received the employment offers from the Job Centre with great pleasure. Reference 10000-1136632878-S is one of the funniest.

Very well written with the job description in the town of Ottobrunn. So I sent off my CV and my references, without a photo of course, not to throw oil on the fire, on 23rd December

2015. I immediately got an answer from the company asking me to send a photo. Since: radio silence. Critics would probably say that the color of my tie wasn't to the recruiter's taste. Angels' smiles and murmurs from the disabled. I talked to the recruiter on the phone. It is impossible not to think that every time I'm dealing with a recruiter, the person who will decide my fate will never be from a visible minority. As my Caribbean mate in Dublin always said to me giving out about everything: "Even in the jungle king Tarzan is white." With his level of anger luckily he's not Muslim. He'd already be making a trip to Syria, let's add one stereotype to another that will make sense one day.

I'm a prisoner who's been around, and who has the potential to become a job seeking coach. Badly shod shoemaker you'll say. The telephone interviews for human resources screening are always excellent, and I'm not extrapolating like a Marsellais with Gaudin's gift of the gab. I've preened myself in Monheim am Rhein. Charming little hotel Zum Vater Rhein. Sixty-one euro a night. Breakfast 10 euro. With the hotel's private key, I was able to slip into Marienkapelle. Pretty strange to have to get into this ancient building with a state-of-the-art electronic key. The God of that chapel must have been asleep because the next morning when the recruiter asked me if I had a work permit, I told myself it was game over. If I was blond with blue eyes, come on, with stereotypes as they are, would I have been asked the same question? As a precaution as soon as I arrived at the McDonald's at the station, I sent human resources a copy of my French passport. What I'll remember about that trip to Monheim am Rhein is the evening meal in the hotel restaurant with a little glass of red wine. Who could dream of a better prison?

Augsburg and its tram and its roadworks. Lovely trip. Another job interview in Dublin. Great life for someone who's unemployed at Bavaria's expense. Munich – Dublin flight. I'm

adding miles to my frequent flyer card. Reference 434341 for the taxi waiting for me at the airport. Taxi reference 434330 for the return trip to Terminal 1 of Dublin Airport. Staying at the Hilton Dublin Kilmainham. Big room. Nice bed. Not to have to make your own bed. Do gymnastics in the sports room. Do the interview the next morning. Joyce Way, Park West Business Park Dublin 12. That reminds me that every two years I buy James Joyce's *Ulysses* in different languages, and I always stop after the first few pages promising myself I'll get into that novel. When I retire, definitely.

Waiting to get to Holly Hill in Cork for another job interview. You couldn't make it up, Holly Hill. Arriving in the taxi, I see a kind of Madonna. Dinner in a little Italian restaurant in the center of Cork. Going back, I see a guy in a suit sitting in the corridor. I tell myself he's making a phone call in peace. The next day when I wake up, I take a short walk in the city. When I get back another guy in a suit in the corridor. I start to ask myself questions. Going to breakfast, Irish breakfast, not to break with tradition. The noise of chairs and everyone stands up in deference to a man who appears but is not very tall. I'm upset that no one makes the introductions. Kingsley Hotel on the night of the 6 May 2015, I go up to my room to change. Two men in dark suits are guarding the lift. Finally, I can get in because the illustrious guest seems the talkative type and is still chatting to his admirers. I shave while looking out the window. Motorcyclists and the full range of security for the great man's car. When I was checking out I learned that I spent the night in good company because the poet president Michael D. Higgins slept on the same floor. The life of the Bavarian prisoner is full of surprises. Two poets under the same roof. A white man, the President of Ireland and an unemployed Black benefiting from the financial generosity of Bavaria and the hospitality of Germany. I didn't know yet that I'd have to make room for my Syrian brothers who would come to offer flowers to

the beautiful German women in Cologne station.

Europe is checking its pulse. Angela Merkel is in favor of stricter penalties, up to deporting refugees who commit crimes. More than eight million French people vote Front National

Must all those French voters be interned?

Debate in France on taking away nationality from bi-nationals. The executive is embarking on a miserable adventure. Every society creates its heroes, its martyrs, or its monsters. The white elite of France, of Germany, and of Europe in general has difficulty understanding this threat from inside. Those terrorists we house and educate in our schools, treat in our hospitals, who live among us. Our children—the fruit of our education, our terrorists. Manuel Valls is defiant with the social and cultural analysis of terrorist violence. In my view trying to understand doesn't mean excusing violence.

The administrative court in Bavaria has handed down a decision to deport me to France. I have to leave German territory in default of work. The long list of all my job interviews doesn't impress the judge. European society doesn't offer job opportunities to minorities and chooses to deport them. Dirty times. I could at least take a menial job. I refuse to go down that path that leads nowhere. I'm ready for a fight. Let's go for deportation. Nadine Morano estimates that France is racially white. The Portuguese are rushing to Angola. There's money to be made in Angola. Nicki Minaj gave a concert in Luanda despite the condemnation of the human rights organizations. Peter Dreier, an unhappy elected representative in Bavaria, sent a busload of Syrian refugees to Merkel in Berlin. I'm going to write to him to ask him for help with my deportation to sub-Saharan Africa. The reintegration service of the city of Munich has a budget for voluntary departures but I can't make a claim because I'm a French citizen, I am an European citizen, at least on paper.

From time to time a White man wake up and lost his intellec-

tual virginity with an empty call for action.

*“In the 21st century, there is no excuse for racial discrimination. Yet black people in the European Union today are still victims of widespread and unacceptable levels of discrimination and harassment simply because of their skin colour,” says European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Director Michael O’Flaherty. “We need to stamp this out once and for all. For this, Member States need effective and targeted policies and laws to ensure black people are fully included in our society.” Racial discrimination also remains problematic. Around a quarter of black people experienced racial discrimination at work or when looking for work. Young black people are especially vulnerable; in some countries, up to 76% are not in work, education or training compared to 8% of the general population...Member States should therefore develop targeted measures to counter such discrimination. This could include diversity audits in workplaces and public sector recruitment drives among black people.*

*Housing is another issue: 14% of respondents say private landlords will not rent accommodation to them. This is especially problematic, as only 15% own property, as opposed to 70% of the EU’s general population. In addition, 45% live in overcrowded housing compared to 17% of the general population, pointing to the need for Member States to improve the quality of housing and to eradicate housing exclusion.*

*Discriminatory profiling in police stops is also an issue: 24% of respondents were stopped by the police in the last five years. Among those stopped, 41% felt the stop constituted racial profiling, which undermines trust in policing and community relations. To counter this, Member States should develop specific, practical guidance for police officers so they can avoid unlawful profiling—FRA’s will publish a guide on how to avoid unlawful profiling on 5 December 2019. Guidance on community policing would also help.”<sup>2</sup>*

The first reaction I got reading this report was to have a look at the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

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<sup>2</sup> Being Black in the EU Often Means Racism, Poor Housing and Poor Jobs.” European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 28 Nov. 2018, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2018/being-black-eu-often-means-racism-poor-housing-and-poor-jobs>.

internet site to see if this European funded organization was diverse in the composition. 100% White Caucasian population Management board, Executive board, Scientific Committee members, Director, Management team, experts... I do understand now why this organization needed a study or a report to find out what is obvious. Because European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights organization have only an intellectual view of the experience black people are facing in Europe. Blacks are ghosts, and this organization needed a report to be able to see them.

South African PEN can't help me with my claim for asylum in South Africa because Europe is democratic. Good luck Ashraf Fayad. Good luck my brother. Hopes and aspirations are crushed. I am hiding in darkness. The system cannot reform itself. Guilty until proven innocent.

I dream of escaping to sub-Saharan Africa. I remain, therefore, a Bavarian prisoner given a social death sentence in a democratic, tolerant, and generous European society. A modern Europe multifaith, multiracial democracy where all citizens can live their lives as they choose, as long as they have the right skin color. Playing on the radio, "Banlieusards" from Kery James. With *Les Misérables*, Ladj Ly ask a troubling question: Who is really French? Who is really human?

# *The Village*

Gracie Gurr

My sore heavy feet,  
cradled by broken clamshells.  
Jagged and thick,  
like the air, I breathe in and out.  
My grandmother taps my shoulder,  
here: A cup.  
Of what? Of mussels?

No, of clams,  
Warm to the touch, with steam bellowing  
outward into the frozen atmosphere. Her smile  
enshrouds the loss—covering her real emotions.  
Like a coat of old paint,  
Wear and tear cracks show the ache  
that bubbles underneath.

The island reservation feels lost  
at sea today.  
Floating further West.  
The water nearby lapping the sand,  
I step closer to the lodge.  
my heart sore.

The lodge's view skewed,  
by fog that lingers.  
Its presence immortal  
juxtaposed next to its inhabitants.  
They know their mortality,  
As do I now.

I stand before the Klallam totem pole  
Each face different; a bird, a whale, a man.

Carrying the weight of the world.  
He's not been gone long.  
Yet I see him everywhere,  
now in the shape of colorful carved wood.  
Red, green, blue, faded yellow

I touch the clam juice boiling in my cup,  
reality comes back,  
but only for a moment.  
My grandmother reaches out her hand,  
into the lodge, we go.

We throw our clamshells on the ground,  
this is how each potlatch began.  
Creating a path of broken shells,  
As if we were walking on others'  
broken feelings of grief.  
I stare down the white-veiled path,  
hoping my grandfather would appear.

Trees line the path,  
tall and ancient,  
intertwined with the fog.  
They are probably longtime friends,  
constantly in each other's lives.  
Their companionship mocks me.

A figure emerges ahead,  
my vision blurred by clouding tears.  
Is it him?  
The crunch sound of the shells deepens  
As I drift forward.  
The figure resembles an apparition, it is him:  
No, my mother.

# *What the June Strawberries Suggested to the Old Woman*

Melanie Perish

Edible gems, our flesh shines garnet or ruby red  
in rain, under faucets. We wear heirloom seeds

on the outside of our skin and you appreciate  
the vulnerable in this, the care needed.

Sensual and still juicy, we invite  
even casual lovers. You do the same.

Your life and ours remain  
labor-intensive, place value

in what's tender in anything hand-picked.  
With you, we share the love of nimble lips,

a generous mouth, a knowledge  
of the primal, of deep and moist places.

Both of us—in our singular ways—revere  
the joy that bursts on a startled tongue.

# *moss garden*

Christine A. MacKenzie

unfinished primrose, spotting with rain *opening of its body, made for  
your body of moss—*  
unfinished fawn, white spots mimicking spots

of sun, floating among grasses and long-legged crane flies  
scattering as the fawn wobbles towards a hidden patch, grass ribbon-  
ing  
over its curled  
body,

cold leaves and sun flickering through the crane flies. *body of moss,  
opening of its thin cells*

like a cloud peeling off the moon, growing opals  
out of rot,

minute threads weaving through earth, unfinished gilled mushrooms  
*growing nowhere, so much  
nowhere, the loudness of it*

crackling, the skull  
*the white metal gleam*, I see myself nowhere, body nowhere under the  
marvelous silver rain  
streaming

over primrose; leaves curling, closing, with moths  
nowhere in the world, mossaing, where death is for me, only—

# Poverty Brome

Joannie Stangeland

Pencil factory we drove by going home seemed  
quaint in that other era, other husband  
racing down Route 1 & 9 past Jersey  
school yards, jail house, the Pulaski Skyway.  
Today, thirty years since he died,  
unexpected, here, out West. His soul in the  
Van Allen belt, his body dug in  
where this morning I set a Christmas flower.  
X my heart, hope not to perish  
yet, lugging some survivor guilt as ten  
zillion questions glint the graphite sky.  
An app called the grass last spring poverty  
brome—name sounding like a vow of Saint  
Clare, or a prayer, but meaning good for nothing,  
damn useless, like it feels to write a poem  
every day. With a pen. In this word-worn  
fever-grief, the weeds are always greener,  
growing through winter, while I catch  
how, in a glance, my eye still sees the cat  
I had to give up sitting at the window, watching  
juncos—but no, it's a hand-thrown pot now  
kept in in his place. How that cat would  
look at me, and look away. By the graves, a  
man had a tape measure. You know what that means.  
New neighbor moving in.  
Over and over, I say *poverty brome*.

# *Rain is a Dirty Martini to the Corn in Harvest Time: A Duplex*

Jake Sheff

Muskrats smell the cattails' earning potential.  
Aromas fill a wetland's gossip.

Rodents gnaw on hyssop when Arizona  
Yellow bells no longer cure their hiccups.

Opulence has a belly with mud-caked fur.  
Liquid counsel comes from the cup-bearing

Indigo at dusk. A constellation's  
Vanity makes every gray fox laugh tonight.

Every raccoon's white phlox boutonnière is made  
Red by the bliss-blush of cherry juice. Altars

Pine for the elderberry's black blood in each  
Osprey's sacerdotal base camp. Mount Tallac's

Electric prayers wear a metallic basque...  
Muskrats smell the cattails' earning potential.

# *Apocalypse of the Interior*

Tom Holmes

—from the penultimate page of an anonymous prophet's journal  
Prolepsis: 1242-1243

—for Stacia

Like regret and love, Death,  
at last, appears, within  
panic. I shut my eyes.  
He speaks to me. I hear  
him clear,  
like John, who overhears  
the Lord, "The end arrives  
with judgment," and readies  
his future, his now, he writes  
to the end.  
I hear in the wind Death  
remind me, "Ten years."  
He casts for me a future  
dream within the vision. I see  
Chaucher  
in panic and regret write,  
"The lyf so short, the craft  
so long to lerne." I ready  
to write before my end,  
the end,  
where every end ends.  
Chaucher, there and then,  
as judge, reading my future  
now. I write, like John, to be  
within.

# *Montage of the Anti-Muses*

## *[It's just hard because I know]*

Forrest Rapier

It's just hard because I know  
That when you leave the driveway  
I lose you

She looks back as if she knows you  
And she wants to know more about you

Like where do you want to go after you go here  
And how does it feel to be you right now

We go for a walk to find the lake; We never find the lake

We walk beneath the moss-mangled oaks  
Past hundreds of houses  
We cannot go inside of

I've been hearing it almost every morning:  
Multiple owl voices  
They're all fired up tonight

I poke my head out in the mornings  
Like I want to see some owls  
Where are you

Did you say Old Chief or Young Chief  
I didn't want to get the wrong Chief

I'm sorry I cried on your face  
You would tell me if you didn't want to be  
Touched like this

Would you

# *Humboldt County*

Elisa Carlsen

between the porch light and the moon,  
she appears in perfect adolescence  
a riot of curled bangs  
framing feathered wings  
holding a daydream of pretty boys  
muscle teed & Camel wide  
who took her away  
in jacked-up trucks,  
shining the high beams  
to cast a prism of light  
on the two-track  
and she is fixed  
to a point in time  
a composite of her path  
and all points colliding

# *Present Past*

Laura Lambie

Memory...memory...memory...the word echoed in Tim's mind as he sat in the waiting room, looking at the generic furniture and fake plants, and the painting of swirling colors that didn't seem to swirl into any sort of meaning. The doctor had told him he suffered because of his memories. "Well Tim, you can look at it this way," Doctor Ingram had said, "your mind has processed these memories in a certain way, to be able to deal with them, and now they can be triggered by anything that reminds you of them. That explains your workplace incident."

The workplace incident. That's what everyone called it. The night before Tim had gone to his parents' house for dinner. His mother, her face emanating a mixture of disapproval and concern (eyes squinting, blinking quickly, but still with a hint of that softness Tim used to see in them when he was a boy) had said, "you're looking so much better since...since the incident." His father had glowered at him over a half-finished plate of chicken and peas, not saying anything for his mother's sake; but still, judgment and disapproval came in waves across the dining room table. His father saw weakness in him. Too much emotion. A few weeks after Tim came home from Iraq, he had burst into tears out of nowhere at the dinner table. He excused himself, and as he climbed the stairs to his room he overheard his father say to his mother, "how did I raise such a weak son?"

The workplace incident was the nail in the coffin of his father's opinion of him. His father, a Vietnam veteran, who was proud of his service, who flung it in the face of anyone who said it had been an unjust war, who went to the shooting range once a week with members of the VFW, who had a collection of guns stashed in his basement. Who, when he had walked into Tim's place for the first time, and saw the flowerpots overflowing with

geraniums on the windowsill, the record collection that covered an entire living room wall, and the paints and easel set up near the window, had shaken his head and said, “next you’ll be introducing me to your boyfriend.”

But when Tim brought Rachel around to meet his parents, his father immediately made a crack about her weight. “I’m sure *she’ll* enjoy the dinner your mother made tonight,” he said, laughing.

That night Tim’s father called him. “You know you can do better than her, right?”

“Dad, you don’t get it.”

“Oh yeah? What could I possibly not be getting?”

“She’s a very kind girl. She’s had some tough times, but she’s doing the best she can.”

“My son goes for an overweight fixer-upper. You went from Sandra, who had it all, to this one. What happened?”

“Things didn’t work with Sandra anymore since I came back.”

“You didn’t get your balls blown off in Iraq did you? Any red-blooded man would give his right arm to be with her.”

Tim had been silent. He would never tell his father what happened. That in the early morning there had been a loud, sharp, burst of thunder; he had jumped out of bed, grabbing for his gun. When Sandra came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder, he turned around and pushed her. When he finally regained his bearings, he had looked at her, and he had known it was over.

The door opened, and there was Doctor Ingram, smiling and beckoning him into the office. Tim stood up and followed him into the small room filled with the same sort of furniture that was in the waiting room, that looked like it came from some nameless office store. He sat on the couch and Doctor Ingram sat across from him on the dark leather chair.

“Tim, it’s good to see you. How were things this week?”

Tim shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. He needed a drink. Why hadn't he ever thought to get a hip flask? He could have gone into the bathroom and taken a long sip from his flask. That was something he needed to do, look into getting a flask.

"It was okay."

Doctor Ingram nodded. "Any more incidents?"

"No, nothing."

"What was it like going back?"

He remembered the humiliation of reentering the factory that morning, and the tense, uncomfortable atmosphere. He had kept his head down and left right after his shift.

He shrugged. "It was fine."

"I see."

Doctor Ingram's eyes were fixed on him. Tim looked down at the floor. After a moment of silence passed away, he looked up again and said, "it felt...it was uncomfortable. But I got through the day."

"You're a man of few words, I know that about you. But could you try and describe it more?"

"I knew everyone was staring at me. They had all talked about it. My buddy never came up to me, he just stood at his station, looking away. So, yeah, it was pretty awful. But this is what it is. This is what I have to deal with." He pointed to his head. "Something short circuited in there. So, here I am. Like you said, my memory. The memories."

"I don't think that's a helpful lens to see it through, do you?"

"Hey, why not? The vet comes home, he has a screw loose, he has incidents, his own father hates him. That pretty much sums it up." He paused. "Look, I'm a realist. I don't need to sugar coat it in all the jargon you use here. You know, how my brain did this to protect me. That it's a natural thing. Anyone could have it. I know that's not true. My father saw his best friend's brains get blown out in Vietnam. And he never had an

incident.”

“That’s true. But it seems to me he dealt with it in a different way than you do.”

“Yeah I know.”

“Look at the way he treated you. You were always weak, you always had too many emotions. You were never manly enough, never good enough.”

“Yeah, so?”

Doctor Ingram scribbled onto his pad. “Is he why you went into the army?”

“It was all he ever talked about. I wanted to study painting. But when I told him I was applying to art school he told me I was a homosexual for sure.”

“And are you?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve always been attracted to women.”

“So you went into the military, and now you’re dealing with this PTSD.”

Tim closed his eyes and sighed. “Please, don’t call it that okay?”

“Why not?”

“It’s weak. It’s weak to have that.”

“Would it be weak to have a broken leg? Or a broken arm?”

“You don’t get it Doctor Ingram. Those things are real. A leg gets hit hard enough it breaks. This is something else. I can’t handle what happened, so my mind does this contortion, and here I am, having incidents and being court ordered to come to therapy.”

“You know Tim, I don’t think the root of your issues is your military service. I think your military service exacerbated a problem that was already there, that started with your father.”

Tim’s breathing quickened, he couldn’t take in a full breath, his hands balled up into fists. He felt that he had to get out of there, get as far as possible from the session. “That’s how

guys like you do it. It's normal to cry. It's normal for a man to be weak. It's all normal. I bet the only thing you've ever done is sit at a desk, and the heaviest thing you've ever carried is a pencil."

Doctor Ingram scribbled on his pad. "Tim, do you think your father disapproves of you?"

"Well that's obvious isn't it?"

"Please, answer the question."

"Yes of course he does."

"Have you ever contemplated his behavior towards you? Who *he* is as a person?"

Tim thought with resentment of the judge, who had given him that condescending look and said, "no jail time. But you young man, need to get your head right. You are to attend mental health treatment approved by the court for six months."

Tim sat back on the couch and looked down at his hands. A vision flashed into his mind; he had been holding a grenade in his shaking hand, waiting for the order to pull the pin out and throw. The same jolt of fear he had felt that day tore through him. He closed his eyes. He had to get focused on what Doctor Ingram was saying. "What is it that you want me to think about?"

"Your father. What kind of man is he?"

"He's a man's man."

"I don't mean that. I mean, how does he view the world?"

He thought about his father and how to answer that question. Unbidden and unwanted, a memory of one of the times his father had lost it when he was a kid invaded his consciousness. Tim had been kneeling on the floor, looking up at his father's face, at his eyes: wide and blazing with anger, blind to anything beyond his seething rage. Tim remembered—he had spilled a jar of paint on the rug. "I don't think I can do this. I would rather have been sent to jail."

"Take some deep breaths Tim."

He breathed in and out. Doctor Ingram wrote on his pad. Tim could imagine what he was writing: this guy is demented, no hope for him, let's call it a day. Doctor Ingram looked up. He smiled. "You did some very good work today. I'll see you next week."

Tim lay in his darkened bedroom, an empty bottle of whiskey on the nightstand.

All he remembered about the end of the session was stumbling out of the office building, jumping into his truck, and then he was home.

He had opened the front door, taken the stairs two at a time up to the bedroom, and opened the closet door. On the top shelf, tucked underneath an old patchwork quilt, was his pistol. He stood, eyeing the faded patches of green and blue for a long time. Finally, he went down to the kitchen and opened the bottle of whiskey.

And now he had drunk enough to make the feelings bearable—no longer ripping through him like shrapnel from a grenade, tearing away at his insides. He thought of Rachel, that way she had of smiling at him as he spoke; floating on the pleasant stream of whiskey he tried to lose himself in recollections of Rachel.

They walked slowly, holding hands, past the library and onto Main Street. As they walked on, in companionable silence, Tim was able to let the memories be there, and to mingle with other good memories, like the times he had spent at his grandmother's house in the summer. The peace he would feel, eating an afternoon snack at the dining room table, looking out onto the living room: bright sunshine streaming in through the large bay window, the clock ticking on the mantle, the faded painting of pink and white flowers in a crystal vase hanging on the wall. His grandmother would come in from the garden, take

off her worn gardening gloves, and sit across from him at the table, smiling. He would tell her about how he had spent the afternoon, and she would listen; he remembered that about her, she would really listen to him.

They passed the bakery, then the thrift shop. As they continued on they walked past parking meters, one after another, one after another. As they passed each one, Tim tried to pinpoint the moment he was looking at the parking meter in the present, and at what point, when he walked past it, it became a memory. But where was the division in his consciousness from present to past? It could be boiled down even into seconds. When one second passed it was now a memory, then the next; but that wasn't how people remembered things. They remembered in blocks of time, and when the scene changed or the emotions changed, it was catalogued in the mind as a memory. But was there anything objective about it?

If he went to a party, he considered the entire time he was at the party to be in his present moment. But actually, as each moment of the party passed away, it became a memory. Two minutes ago he had been talking to Jake, ten minutes ago to Rob; but when he thought back to it, his mind recorded the entire party as one memory, a memory that was now in the past.

“Oh, by the way,” said Rachel, stopping in front of the general store window, “I saw your father the other day.”

Tim's feeling of peace was pierced through. “Oh really? Where?”

“He came into the library.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he looked through the magazines for a while, then he stood outside the front door and started talking to a woman, tall, pretty, long blonde hair. They talked for a long time. Then she left and he came back in and checked out a book on fishing. When I handed it to him, he gave me this super sweet smile,

and said, ‘you take care now sweetheart’.”

So that was why Sandra had called him. Tim had let it go to voicemail and he hadn’t listened to her message. Rachel’s eyes were fixed on him; he could tell she was curious. “Let’s get some coffee. I’m in the mood for a pick me up.” He pulled her across the street.

They stood in front of the counter, breathing in the rich, warm coffee smell. “What do you want?” asked Tim.

She looked over the menu, blushed a little bit and said, “that caramel macchiato looks really good.”

Tim smiled. “You got it.”

He got a plain drip coffee and they sat down at a table near the window. He watched Rachel sip her drink. She really was pretty. Her big brown eyes, that had that soft look to them, her beautiful smile—he couldn’t deny that she was a pretty girl. And he really didn’t mind the weight. Sure, it would have been ideal if she were hot, but she was the only thing in his life that gave him any peace. Her kindness was his only balm. “I have something to tell you.”

Rachel turned her gaze from the window. “What is it?”

“That was Sandra who dad was talking to. He...” Tim looked away and ran his hand through his hair, “he, well, he thinks I should get back together with her.”

Rachel put her cup down and pushed it away from her.

“She called me, but I didn’t pick up. She left a message, but I didn’t listen to it.”

“And when were you going to tell me this?”

“I was going to tell you. But actually, the truth is, it wasn’t important to me so it kind of slipped my mind.”

“Oh yeah right, you expect me to believe that? The super-model you were with called you, she wants to get back together with you, and you don’t care?”

Tim stared at her. “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing? What are you doing? Let’s stop this whole

charade you have going on here, okay? She broke up with you, you began slumming it with me, now she wants you back.”

A flash flood of anxiety rushed into Tim’s chest and stomach. A memory rose up, sudden and sharp—his commanding officer getting in his face and screaming, “get it together soldier!” Tim closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. The bar was a few blocks away, only a few blocks away. He opened his eyes again. “Rachel, don’t do this. You’re wrong. I don’t want to be with her anymore.”

“I know. Everyone wants the fat girl, right?”

“I need you to stop this. You don’t know what you’re doing to me.”

“I’ll make it very easy for you, okay? I’m leaving. And don’t call me.”

She got up, grabbed her purse and left. Tim followed her out onto the sidewalk. “Rachel,

wait up. You’re being irrational. You need to listen.”

She stopped and turned around. “I’m irrational. Really? I knew it was too good to be true. The tall handsome guy asked me out. And I was dumb enough to think we could have something.”

“You know what, you’re being an ass.”

“Excuse me?”

His voice rose. “You heard me. An ass. A complete and total ass.”

“You’re the one who has his supermodel ex-girlfriend calling and doesn’t tell me. Your father obviously thinks she’s much more your caliber than I am.”

“Don’t bring him up!” Tim’s voice rolled out like a thunder clap. “Do not bring up my father!”

“And don’t you yell at me. Look at yourself, screaming in the street. People are staring.”

“And look at yourself. Obsessed with looks and hating yourself because of your weight.”

Rachel turned around and stormed away. He watched her go, his fists clenched, waves of anger and sadness rolling through him. The bar. The bar was open. That was the only thing he needed to know, the only thing he needed to think about.

It took three drinks to calm down; by the fourth Tim could breathe again and begin to think about what happened. Rachel was that insecure, that all he had to do was mention his ex and she broke up with him. It was true, Rachel could stand to lose about thirty pounds, but after the first few dates he hadn't noticed anymore. She was all he had, and she had run away from him.

A few more drinks and he left the bar and began walking home. It was a cool night; though the air was still crisp it had a warm undercurrent, and he could smell the sweet, far away scent of spring. He took in a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. Maybe he could get through to Rachel somehow. He had never seen her act that way before. All he had known was a calm, level-headed girl, and so kind. That was what impressed him on their first date. He had told her he was a veteran, he had even hinted at the workplace incident, and she had said, "I admire you so much for your service, and I can't imagine what it cost you. I can't imagine what it would be like to go through what you went through."

He turned the corner and saw the shadowy outline of someone sitting on his porch. For a second he thought it could be his father, but he didn't go out in the evening anymore. Feeling apprehensive, he ascended the steps; it was a woman, she turned—Sandra.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hi Tim."

In spite of the alcohol, their last moment together came back. The way she had looked at

him, as though he were the most contemptible thing she had

ever seen. He had a few bottles of whiskey under the sink. He would open one of those. He took out his key and opened the door. “Come in.”

She followed him in, and he staggered into the kitchen. “You want a drink?”

“No, I’m good. Do you really need another? You reek of alcohol.”

He pulled the bottle out from under the sink, took down a glass from the cabinet, filled it, then went back out to the living room. “So, what are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Why don’t you turn on a light?”

He flipped the switch; soft light settled onto Sandra. Long, pin straight blonde hair fell down past her shoulders, and there were her beautiful, wide-set hazel eyes. Her dress, covered in red flowers, draped over her body in such a way that it outlined her slender figure, showing her narrow waist leading down to curvy hips. Tim was silent for a moment, taking her in. She turned, went into the living room and sat down. Tim followed and sat opposite her.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“Okay. You?”

“Okay. I missed you.”

Tim raised his eyebrows and nodded his head, then took a long sip. The last thing she had said to him was, “I can’t make a life with an alcoholic with mental issues. I’m sorry.”

“Why? Do you want me to push you down again? Because I can do that.”

“Tim, stop it.”

“Hey, I still drink too much, I still have mental issues. Or as I prefer to say, I’m still as demented as ever. Probably more.”

“Stop being so hostile.” She paused. “Look, I talked to your father.”

“About what?”

“You. He explained to me about the PTSD, about how some vets develop it, but if they get help they can live a normal life again.”

“Regardless of what dad had to say, when you see certain things, you can never unsee them. So am I ever going to be the Tim you used to know? I’m not that person anymore and I never will be.”

“Okay, but what I want to know is when are you going to stop feeling sorry for yourself? You think you’re the only person who ever went to war? It’s your excuse for drinking and staying the way you are. That’s what it is.”

Tim gulped down more whiskey. “An excuse. Right. Just a lame excuse. Look, there’s something you don’t know, okay? You don’t understand that I was never supposed to come home.”

“What does that mean?”

Tim couldn’t control the tears starting to well up. “It’s just an excuse to you. You don’t know anything.”

“Tim. Tell me.”

He looked at her, at those eyes flecked with green and gold that he had looked into so many times; he tried to tell her, but he was frozen. Then the anger began its familiar, insidious rise. “Why? You won’t understand anyway. Five years together, I come back, one thing goes wrong and you leave me. You’ll never understand.” His voice rose. “How can I go back to what I was? How can I ever see the world the way I used to? I can never unsee it! Do you understand that?” He put his head back and downed the rest of the drink.

Sandra stood up and took the glass from his hands. “This isn’t going to help you.”

“You’re right. The only thing that will help is the revolver in my closet.”

She stared at him. “I’m going to have to call someone if you start talking like that.”

“Perfect. It would be so perfect if you do. You know, they can come and take me away, the crazy vet, but hey, that’s war, and then my father, who already hates me, can disown me. So yeah, go ahead and call.”

Sandra sighed and took the glass into the kitchen. When she returned it contained water. “Here, drink this.”

He took the glass and set it down on the coffee table. “Sandra, you and I were together in a different life. I was a different man.”

“Then it’s true. It’s that girl from the library.”

“Her name is Rachel.”

“Tim, come on. You can’t possibly go for her. She’s not your type at all.”

“People change.”

“You used to make fun of that fat girl in high school. Remember? Sarah the barrel you called her.”

“I was a jerk. What can I say?”

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said, okay? I was scared. It was scary to see you like that, to see how much you’d been drinking. But I’ve missed you. What we used to have before was so great. Don’t you miss it?”

Tim took in a deep breath and let her beauty wash over him again. “Yes, I miss it. You’re so beautiful. You’ve always been so beautiful.”

There was a knock on the front door. Tim looked up and saw brown hair through the window at the top of the door. Rachel.

“Aren’t you going to get it?” asked Sandra.

Tim didn’t answer. Another knock.

“Tim there’s someone at the door.” Sandra stared at him; she cocked her head. “Ahh, I think I know. Your girlfriend right?” She strode to the door and opened it. Rachel stood there, holding a white box of what Tim assumed was cookies or cake, looking at Sandra, eyes wide. “I...uh...I...was going to bring this to Tim. But I see now that he’s busy.”

“That’s right, he’s busy. Look, Tim and I have a long history, okay? We started dating in high school. You didn’t really think you guys had something for the long term, did you?”

“To be honest with you, no I didn’t.”

“Smart girl.”

Rachel looked at Tim and held out the box. “Here. You might as well have these. I certainly don’t need them.” When Tim’s eyes met hers, the longing to rush into the kitchen to get another drink left him. He stood up, took a few strides towards her and took the box. “Thanks Rachel. Let’s step out here for a minute.” He closed the door behind him and led her onto the porch.

He set the box on the porch swing, turned and put his hands on her shoulders. “Rachel all I want you to do right now is listen. Okay? Don’t say anything. Look. I don’t get what went on with you this afternoon. I really don’t. Up until then I thought you were level-headed. But whatever that was, all I know is seeing you just now took away my desire to drink. Sandra showed up here and waited for me on the porch. She said I’m feeling sorry for myself and that’s why I drink. But she doesn’t get it. She doesn’t get that I shouldn’t be here. I...I wasn’t meant to come back.”

“What do you mean? Of course you were meant to come back.”

He looked at her, something in her eyes, he didn’t know what, opened him: he wasn’t frozen, the words began to pour out, he imagined his thoughts traveling through the air, arriving in the safe haven of Rachel’s being.

As he spoke, he was transported back to that afternoon, the scorching sun beating down on him as he and seven other soldiers were on foot patrol. They passed a bombed-out building; a child who Tim had seen before, who he had given candy to a few times, stepped out from the doorway, smiling.

“Hey buddy.” Tim held out his fist for a fist pump. The

child touched his fist to Tim's, then looked up at him with expectant eyes. Tim reached into his pocket and found a piece of peppermint hard candy. "Here you go. Now you get on home, okay?" As the child scurried away, back into the building, Tim reshouldered his gun, he took a few steps—a tremendous noise, licks of fire reaching up to the sky, the bodies of his comrades obliterated at the end of the street.

Tim lost control of his muscles, movement was impossible, he stared at the grey cloud of smoke, that now enveloped a friend he had been talking to minutes before: "yeah, so that's how things were for me growing up next door to grandpa, or as everyone called him, crazy Zeke," Jimmy had said, laughing. Tim had been laughing too, then they turned the corner, and then the child, and then the IED.

In that moment, standing on the ravaged street, Tim had been plunged into hell—cast into eternal damnation. Horror had sprung up before him, and a terrible fear, such as he had never known, cast its tentacles down into the deepest part of his being, as the knowledge of arbitrary cruelty opened up in his soul. In that moment who he had been died, and a new man emerged to take his place.

There was yelling; Tim couldn't make out what anyone was saying. He stood, staring at the dissipating cloud of smoke. The yelling intensified until someone grabbed his shoulder. His commanding officer screamed into his face: "Get it together soldier!"

Tim told Rachel all this, his eyes locked onto the huge old oak tree in front of the porch. When he finished, a silence descended. They stood, looking at each other. A car passed on the cross street, the whirr of the engine got fainter and disappeared. A breeze came up, rustling the leaves of the oak tree. Tears filled Rachel's eyes; one of them rolled down her cheek. "Oh Tim..."

He pulled her towards him. He buried his face in her hair as

sobs rose up in him, sobs that wracked his body, that came from somewhere inside himself that he didn't want to feel, didn't want to acknowledge, that he wished didn't exist. But there was nothing he could do, he sobbed and shook.

He clung to her as the memory flooded his mind. He ran his hand over her soft hair. Her soft hair, that's what he needed to think about. That was here now. Rachel was still with him, she hadn't abandoned him. Over and over he felt her hair, until his sobbing began to subside.

He took in a long breath and looked over her head at the old oak tree. The shadowy leaves rustled; he thought about how he could paint them, which colors to use to create the leaves that were enshrouded in shadow, show them to be rustling in the cool breeze, the cool breeze laced with warmth, that contained the undercurrent of spring.

He took Rachel's hand and led her back into the house.

# *On the Road with Poetry in the High Desert*

Shaun Griffin

Waking slow in Winnemucca—twenty-eight degrees  
and the train whistling through—after a full house  
at The Martin. Katie and the Donovan family, reeling

from the loss of their patriarch, insisted on a slow Basque meal.  
Twenty years ago we drove the Mighty Zulu Nation to the high  
school auditorium. People walked out in tears after the acapella

encore of the Lord's Prayer. The fissures of art in a small town:  
six days, five gigs, four cities and closed with the poem  
to my sons on the Rogue. We were all floating downriver

when it was over. In the coffee house I read the headline—  
Poet Laureate at The Martin Hotel—but I did not know him  
and today we drive away—my dog, my beloved in the old Jeep,

the west trailing close behind. This is what we came for:  
the deep well of eyes in the stage lights—red beans  
on the salad and garlic mashed when we sang happy birthday

to Katie. I have nothing to hide—the thin ribs of art  
almost worn to dust from the road. Somewhere in The Martin  
a young voice recalls: this is how we follow without a map,

without a destination into the warm embrace of art.

# *Borrowing an Elder Brother's Poem for Looking Back from a High Plateau*

Nansŏrhŏn

Translated by Ian Haight and T'ae-yong Hŏ

I

Below a mountain-peaked pavilion, a pillar presses  
into earth.

In the northeast, drifts of clouds  
lightly caress  
the distant borders.

In Chulwon Valley, dragons long ago left  
a newly-founded dynasty—  
near nobles' tombs, burnt hues  
of autumn. Geese pass  
overhead.

A mountain range, lithsome,  
limits the broad plateau, spreads across three counties—  
a river cut  
into nine canals  
divides  
the plain.

After my day's climb, I see  
the sun's twilight—  
overwhelmed, leaning on my sword's hilt,  
I sing a forlorn song  
friendless.

II

Atop a teetering ladder, I cut through clouds—

snow-tipped summits invade  
the sky, mark Chinese lands. The range  
ends near Three Rivers County—  
the eastern landscape rolls  
the rivers far away. A smudging  
air of dust  
wisps  
into evening—  
the lone castle of my friend  
on the horizon.

Pastures of grass  
please 10,000 horses,  
fattened early for winter.  
Looking east, a small keep beats its drums,  
wishing to be led  
by a cunning  
general.

### III

Ahead, the rock-ridden path rises into mountain mist—  
my horse's hooves tread onward.  
The trail ends.  
I rest at the pinnacle, as if in the sky.  
This late season of harvest  
a dragon bellows from the depths  
of water hollows.  
Drizzling rain subsides.  
An arc of colors glistens above falls.  
A general's drums and flutes  
beat  
a hastened march  
to the borders—  
a prize princess, a token  
of peace  
for the Huns, intones  
her sorrow

through lute strings.  
Soldiers devoted to the King  
sing “Leaving the Castle” at dusk—  
their lotus-engraved swords  
hungry  
in petal-carved scabbards.

#### IV

Over 10,000 li, proudly,  
the general’s swords advance—  
a white granite tower  
crowns a mountain, stands  
in slanting sunlight  
in the sky.  
A river streams west  
along three counties—  
a southern range bends, obscures  
a plain’s grasslands.  
Clouds thicken, then rise below me—  
in my eyes, the great ocean,  
vague, distant—  
climbing ever higher,  
I turn back:  
a horse from the borders  
whinnies in wind  
hungry for war.

# *Common Birds*

Tina Egnoski

Grackle and blue jay

the woman in the oncology office  
nearing seventy  
our age  
head bowed  
downy on her cheek  
iridescent  
in the overhead lights

the skateboarder who scrabbles  
past us on the sidewalk  
as we step from the waiting  
room—just a boy with tufted mohawk, crispy at the ends, dyed  
magenta

in the parking lot we attempt to caption  
the moment

*salve, balm, tonic*

colonic

we chuckle

Song sparrow song sparrow song sparrow

# *Sun Over the Desert*

Leslie Blackman Poulin

I'm just about at the cliff  
the place where the Joshua Tree  
stands next to the rocks,  
large like shoulders  
with a whirl of air between  
the blades, rustling spines  
rustling the hair on your  
newborn calf face, wet from  
your mother's lick  
blackberry tongue  
marking you, saying  
stay close  
don't wander with the white  
cacti, the voice of the moon  
the blood on the sand.

# *Shades of Yellow Sky*

Mario Duarte

and more coats heap on until  
there is not any day, anymore,

but I keep walking under the wobbly  
branches of trees with blue trunks

After the rain, the sky curls up  
into a gray poncho with a red stripe

Under yellow grass, the icy ground  
is a mouth full of broken teeth

smashed by an indifferent fist,  
but not ignored by my eyes, this time

In my guts, something is scorching,  
like a stag running out of a forest fire

No one in sight, a fingertip  
of wind touches my high cheekbones

and my jaws lock, and the night is  
small, takes my hand, and leads me home,

my shadow stretching across the ground  
slowly dragging its feet, head bobbing.



# *Flammigena*

Triin Paja

1

at birth, we are uttered in a burning tongue.  
    some of us belong to the voice.  
                    some to the fire.

2

born when a flame turned into blood  
    I walked, fire-wreathed.  
                    I loved a poppy—he burned into raven feathers.  
oak I loved—my fire dressed him in a priest's robe  
    and God was snow  
                    melting in my hands.

3

I picked ripe cherries  
    from a burning branch.  
    ruby flame, cardinal flame.  
a face in the flame. a blue eye opened  
                    and closed in the flame.

4.

the intelligence of orchids haunts me  
    as greatly as your mouth  
but I have never touched orchids.  
                    I have never touched you.

if I am eating the bees of desire  
and my mouth is a nettle, which is to say  
flame. child. fool.

if I am alone here. if my hand too is burnt.  
still I flame for you until I become  
a sunset.

# *My House Enters Me*

Triin Paja

—after Vlad Stochita's houses

bats heavy as coins dwell in my chimney.  
the chimney is a house for the bat

though a sparrow will tell you  
a rosebush is a house.

the walls of my house drink my whispers.

hide me now, mother.  
hide me, house.

weary of being a swan-faced lover  
I grow my head into a crow.

ash has blue lips.  
mine are honeycomb and death.

the bats awake to drink blood from the cows.  
I never enter such bright meadows.

dawn, and the white storks clatter their beaks  
like so many skeletons dancing.

my house inhabits me as I inhabit it.  
I go to the balcony, I go to the staircase,

I go everywhere to fall like snow.

I haunt my house  
and my house trembles

and goosebumps rise on the walls.

# Contributors

**Charlie Albrecht** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Marie Anderson** is a Chicago area married mother of three millennials. Her stories have appeared in dozens of publications, including *Calliope Interactive*, *Sunlight Press*, and *The Mersey Review*. Since 2009 she has led and learned from a writing critique group at a public library in La Grange, Illinois.

**Jan Beatty's** eighth book, *Dragstripping*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, fall, 2024. Her memoir, *American Bastard*, won the Red Hen Nonfiction Award (2021). Poems have been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *POETRY*, *Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day*, *Best American Poetry*, *BuzzFeed*, *AGNI*, *New England Review*, *Pleiades*, and *North American Review*. She is Faculty Emerita at Carlow University, where she directed creative writing, the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops, and the M.F.A. program.

**Jason Benjamin** currently lives in Reno, Nevada, and is studying creative writing at the University of Nevada, Reno.

**Ace Boggess** is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

**J.M. Braun's** work has appeared and is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *Fiction International*, *Puerto del Sol*, *DIAGRAM*, *Bayou Magazine*, and elsewhere. Braun is a 2024 graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he won the John Logan Poetry Prize.

**Teresa Breeden** (she/her) lives in the high desert at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains where she finds inspiration in both the serenity and the chaos of the spaces around her. Teresa has one novel, *Falling* by Tori Briar, has published over 60 poems in various journals and anthologies, and is a recipient of the Nevada Arts Council Fellowship for literature. Her writing revolves around relationships: with people, the environment, and even inanimate objects.

**Hunter Brown** is an avid reader and occasional writer from Reno, Nevada. Their work is regularly focused on life and how they endure it.

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**Elisa Carlsen** is a queer poet. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Scapegoat Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Trumpeter*, *Cirque*, *Argentum*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Brushfire*, and elsewhere. Nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net, Elisa is the author of *Cormorant*, a poetry collection addressing the human dimensions of salmon recovery in Oregon.

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**Aminah Colin-Lopez** is a transfer student from Truckee Meadows Community College to the University of Nevada, Reno. She is a first-generation US citizen of Mexican and Ecuadorian descent. She hopes to pursue a career in technical writing or screenwriting with the support of her husband and her family. *¡Si se puede!*

**Thomas Darnell** is a student at the University of Nevada, Reno, and a lifelong Renoite. They are pursuing an interdisciplinary degree with minors in creative writing and digital interactive games. They enjoy writing and programming when their cat, Basil, is not trying to press the keys and make live edits to their work. They can be found online at [thomasadarnell.com](http://thomasadarnell.com).

**Tyler Dennis** is an English student at Truckee Meadows Community College. A lifelong fan of all forms of literature, Tyler hopes to one day write professionally. *The Meadow* is the first literary journal in which his work has been published, and he looks forward to adding to that list in the future.

**Isai Diaz's** writings are based on his experiences of being raised by a Latino community of Mexican descendants and modern Chicanos. His writings provide readers with a clean, honest take on self-identity. Some of the material he includes here dives into issues such as the death of a loved one, growing up in two opposing cultures, and reminiscing about small moments with close passions, and being direct and sincere with relatable topics to many.

**Melanie Diaz** is a second-year student at Truckee Meadows Community College who will transfer to University of Nevada, Reno to pursue a bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

**Mario Duarte** is a Mexican American writer and an Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate. His work has appeared in *Bowery Gothic*, *Eucalyptus Lit*, *From Roars to Whispers*, *Mersey Review*, and *Wasteland Review* among others. He is the author of poetry, *To the Death of the Author*, and short stories, *My Father Called Us Monkeys*.

**Tina Egnoski** is the author of five books, most recently the short fiction collection *You Can Tell Me Anything* (Main Street Rag, 2020) and the novel *Burn Down This World* (Adelaide Books, 2020). Her work, both fiction and poetry, has been published in a number of literary journals, including *Cimarron Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Master Review*, and *Solstice*.

**Cameron Fuller** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Daniel Lopez Garzon** is a current student at Truckee Meadows Community College who enjoys creating art in any form he can for others.

**Shaun Griffin** is the Poet Laureate of Nevada. Griffin is the author of several books of poetry, including *This is What the Desert Surrenders* and *Bathing in the River of Ashes*. He's also written a memoir called *Anthem for a Burnished Land* and a book of essays about the American West called *Because the Light Will Not Forgive Me*.

**Moon Grizzle** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**John Grosjean** is a Nevada native and Marine Corps veteran who has recently decided to return to school. He enjoys spending time with his children, coaching wrestling, and being outdoors. Since returning to school, he has discovered great joy in writing and is honored to be published for the first time.

**Gracie Gurr** is a Reno native and English graduate candidate at the University of Idaho. She holds an Associate of Science from Truckee Meadows Community College and a Bachelor of Arts in English/ Writing from Eastern Oregon University. Her work has been recognized in Public Anthropology's Community Action Project. She focuses much of her writing on environmental awareness and capturing the uniqueness of her rural childhood.

**Ian Haight's** collection of poetry, *Celadon*, won Unicorn Press' First Book Prize. With T'ae-yong Hŏ, he is the co-translator of *Spring Mountain: Complete Poems of Nansŏrhŏn and Homage to Green Tea* by the Korean monk, Ch'oŭi, both from White Pine Press. Other awards include *Ninth Letter's* Literary Award in Translation, and grants from the Daesan Foundation, the Korea Literary Translation Institute, and the Baroboin Buddhist Foundation. Poems, essays, interviews, reviews, microfiction and translations appear in *Barrow Street, Writer's*

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**Brytlee Hansen** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**T'ae-yong Hō** has been awarded translation grants from the Daesan Foundation and Korea Literature Translation Institute. With Ian Haight, he is the co-translator of *Borderland Roads: Selected Poems of Kyun Hō* and *Magnolia and Lotus: Selected Poems of Hyesim*—finalist for ALTA's Stryk Prize. Working from the original classical hansi, T'ae-yong's translations of Korean poetry have appeared in *Agni, New Orleans Review,* and *Atlanta Review.*

For twenty-two years, **Tom Holmes** was the founding editor and curator of *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*. The final issue was released in July 2024. He is an Ace writer, who teaches at Nashville State Community College (Clarksville). Blog, The Line Break: [thelinebreak.wordpress.com/](http://thelinebreak.wordpress.com/).  
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**Luke Johnson** is the author of *Quiver* (Texas Review Press), a finalist for the Jake Adam York Award, The Vassar Miller Prize, and The Levis Award; *A Slow Indwelling* (Harbor Editions 2024); and *Distributary* (Texas Review Press 2025). *Quiver* was recently named one of four finalists for the 2024 California Book Award. Johnson was selected by Patricia Smith as a finalist for the esteemed 2024 Robert Frost Residency through Dartmouth College. You can find more of his work at *Kenyon Review, Prairie Schooner, Narrative Magazine,* and *Poetry Northwest.*

**Dr. Kendall Klym** is the winner of the Tartt First Fiction Award for *Step Lightly: Stories*. Klym is a three-time honorable mention winner of the Great American Fiction Contest and holds a PhD in English, Creative Writing from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

**Teya Lagatta** is a Reno local, Truckee Meadows Community College

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**Laura Lambie** has published in *The New English Review*, *The Writing Disorder Literary Journal* and *The Galway Review*. She will be featured in issue 32 of the *Ginosko Literary Journal*, and in the *Why Vandalism Literary & Arts Journal*. Her work was shortlisted in the 2023 J.F. Powers Prize for short fiction.

**Christopher Linforth** is the author of *The Distortions* (Orison Books, 2022).

**S. Frederic Liss** is a multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, finalist for Flannery O'Connor Short Fiction Prize, St. Lawrence Book Award, and Bakeless Prize. Both collections together with a novel will be published by Pierian Springs Press in 2025. He has published 62 short stories in *The South Dakota Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Two Bridges Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Florida Review*. Visit [www.sfredericliss.com](http://www.sfredericliss.com) for more information.

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**Daniel Edward Moore** lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His work is forthcoming in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Xavier Review*, *Ballast Journal*, *The Chiron Review*, *Book of Matches*, *Main Street Rag Magazine* and *Hurricane Review*. His book, *Waxing the Dents*, is from Brick Road Poetry Press.

**Nansŏrhŏn** (1563-1589, penname “White Orchid”) was a sequestered noblewoman who lived during the sixteenth century in Korea. Considered by many Korean scholars to be Korea’s greatest female poet, she died at the age of twenty-seven.

**Triin Paja** is a poet from Estonia. Paja has published three collections of poetry in Estonian; their English poetry has received two Pushcart Prizes and their chapbook, *Sleeping in a Field* (forthcoming in 2024), won the Wolfson Poetry Chapbook Prize.

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**Melanie Perish’s** poems have appeared in *Calyx*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Sequestrum*, *Abandoned Mine*, *Third Street Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, and other publications. *Passions & Gratitudes* (Black Rock, 2012) and *The Fishing Poems* (Meridian Press, 2016) are recent. *Foreign Voices, Native Tongues* (Blurb/Single Wing Press) was released January 2022. She’s grateful for an indelible education from professors, mentors, and other poets.

**Leslie Blackman Poulin** is a graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts where she earned an M.F.A. in poetry. Poulin’s work has appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Northern New England Review*, and is forthcoming in *Kitchen Table Quarterly*. She lives in southern Maine with her husband and young daughter.

**Kimberly Ann Priest** is the winner of the 2024 Backwaters Prize in Poetry from the University of Nebraska Press for her book *Wolves in Shells*, as well as the author of *Slaughter the One Bird* (Sundress Publications) with books forthcoming from *Texas Review Press* and *Unsolicited Press*. A professor of first-year writing at Michigan State University, she lives, with her husband, in Maine.

**Dani Putney** is a queer, non-binary, mixed-race Filipinx, and

neurodivergent writer originally from Sacramento, California. Their debut full-length collection, *Salamat sa Intersectionality* (Okay Donkey Press, 2021), was a finalist for the 2022 Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Poetry. *Mix-Mix*, their second full-length poetry collection, is forthcoming from Baobab Press.

**Tiara Quintana** is a criminal justice student at Truckee Meadows Community College who was given the chance to write again and someone finally believed in her.

**Forrest Rapier** has published poems in *The Asheville Poetry Review*, *Best New Poets*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Greensboro Review*. He has received scholarships and writing residencies from Brevard College, Key West Literary Seminar, Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the University of Virginia. His debut poetry collection, *As the Den Burns*, was published by Texas Review Press in 2022.

**Jake Sheff** is a pediatrician and U.S. Air Force veteran. He's published a full-length collection of formal poetry, *A Kiss to Betray the Universe* (White Violet Press), along with three chapbooks: *Looting Versailles* (Alabaster Leaves Publishing), *The Rites of Tires* (SurVision) and *The Seagull's First One Hundred Seguidillas* (Alien Buddha Press).

**Trinity Smith** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Joannie Stangeland** is the author of several collections, most recently *The Scene You See* (Ravenna Press). Her poems have also appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Pangyrus*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and other journals. Joannie holds an M.F.A. from the Rainier Writing Workshop.

**Kashawn Taylor** is a formerly incarcerated writer based in Connecticut. He holds a B.A. in English and Psychology and an M.A. in English and Creative Writing. His "prison writing" has been featured in several publications, including *Prison Journalism Project*, *The Blotter Magazine*,

*Minutes Before Six, Evening Street Review's DIY Prison Project, Indiana Review, Fugitives and Futurists*, and by *Querencia Press* in its Summer 2024 anthology. His first traditionally published collection of poetry, *subhuman*, will be published in March 2025 by Wayfarer Books.

**Billy Thompson** is a graduate of Villanova University and the University of Pennsylvania. His stories have appeared in *The Louisville Review, Philadelphia Stories, Word Riot, Oak Bend Review, Olivetree Review, Roanoke Review*, and *Syncopation Literary Journal*. He lives in Media, Pennsylvania with his wife and their two sons.

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**Landa wo** is a writer from Angola, Cabinda, and France. His prose can be found in *Columbia Journal, Cyphers, Fiction International, Grain Magazine* and other journals and anthologies. Landa wo is politically engaged and his work deal with prominent issues of social justice, discrimination, and cultural strife.

**Robert Wrigley** has won numerous awards for his work, including the Kingsley Tufts Award, the San Francisco Poetry Center Book Award, and a Pacific Northwest Book Award. He lives in the woods of Idaho, with his wife the writer Kim Barnes. *The True Account of Myself As a Bird* is his twelfth collection of poems. He is also the author of a collection of personal essays, mostly about poetry, called *Nemerov's Door*.

# *Submission Guidelines*

Our submission period begins each year on August 15th and ends on January 15th.

Please note: We no longer accept email submissions. All submissions must be uploaded through our Submittable submission management system at [themeadow.submittable.com/submit](http://themeadow.submittable.com/submit)

For general queries, please contact us at [meadow@tmcc.edu](mailto:meadow@tmcc.edu)

We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and cover artwork uploaded through our submission management system.

All submissions must be accompanied by contact information (name, address, telephone, email, and a brief (fewer than 50 words) biography; include the title(s) for each piece submitted.

We do not accept previously published work, but we will consider simultaneous submissions and expect to be notified immediately of acceptance elsewhere.

We will accept up to five poems, photos or artwork pieces or one work of prose (fiction or nonfiction) from each author or artist. Prose may not exceed 5,000 words.