

**Volume 74**  
Towson University Literary Magazine



# Grub Street

# Grub Street

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# About Grub Street

*Grub Street* is an annual publication funded by Towson University’s Office of the Provost and by the College of Liberal Arts and is a member of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. The staff, composed of undergraduate Towson University students, considers all submissions anonymous until publication.

To keep up with the latest *Grub Street* news, visit our website at [wp.towson.edu/grubstreetlitmag](http://wp.towson.edu/grubstreetlitmag), follow us on Instagram @GrubStreetTU, and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson](http://www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson). To contact *Grub Street*’s editorial team directly, email [grubstreet1952@gmail.com](mailto:grubstreet1952@gmail.com). Copies of *Grub Street* are free on campus or as PDFs on our website.

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# Editorial Mission

Send in your best work.

*Grub Street*’s staff examines all submissions with care and attention, and employs a blind review process to ensure a fair and impartial selection system. As Towson University’s annual undergraduate literary magazine, we provide an opportunity for artists to showcase their visual and written works. We encourage artists from underrepresented backgrounds to submit in an effort to challenge mainstream narratives and to endorse diversity within the literary canon. That said, all considerations are based solely on artistic merit and on that which moves us. Submissions must be unpublished, original, and created without the use of generative AI. We are proud to present the contributors of Volume 74 and look forward to all editions to come.

# Submission Guidelines

Please follow these guidelines to ensure that your work receives a place in our review process.

**Only previously unpublished works** (print or online) will be considered for publication. Please submit each individual work in a *separate document*. **Remove all identifying information from your works** (i.e; title pages, headers, document file titles, etc).

Genre-specific guidelines are as follows:

- **Poetry:** Up to **five** poems may be submitted for consideration. Please submit *one poem per document* (.doc or .docx files only).
- **Fiction:** Up to **two** pieces of fiction under 6,000 words each may be submitted for consideration. Please submit *one prose piece per document* (.doc or .docx files only).
- **Creative Nonfiction:** Up to **two** pieces of creative nonfiction under 6,000 words each may be submitted for consideration. Please submit *one prose piece per document* (.doc or .docx files only).
- **Visual Art:** Up to **five** works of visual art may be submitted for consideration. Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw or high-quality .jpeg file with at least 300dpi and a size of at least 1MB. Submit each work in a separate document.

If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines, please contact us via email at [grubstreet1952@gmail.com](mailto:grubstreet1952@gmail.com).

# Grub Street, London, 18th C.

Dr. H. George Hahn  
Professor / Past Chair, TU Department of English

Home of butchers and foreign manual laborers, Grub Street was not a fashionable London address. In his Dictionary of 1755, Dr. Johnson noted further that it was also a place “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called grubstreet.” Hard living, hard drinking, half starving, Grub Streeters turned out biographies before the corpse was cold, poems during the event they were watching, ghost-written speeches and sermons to order, and satires to deadline. First draft was final copy. They walked with pistols or swords to defend themselves from creditors and angry satiric targets.

Yet however poor, low, and scorned, they were the first fully professional writers to whom “publish or perish” was not a hyperbolic metaphor. Forgotten today, they nevertheless throw a long shadow over us. With them the modern periodical press can be said to have been born with its interests in live events and lean prose. Their plagiarisms led to copyright laws, their defamations to better libel laws. Their work encouraged a free press. Their writing to a newly but barely literate public doomed the long, aristocratic romance in the hard language of realism. Their work helped to produce a mass market of readers. Freelancers, no longer under pressure to praise patrons, showed finally that a writer could be independent.

# Masthead

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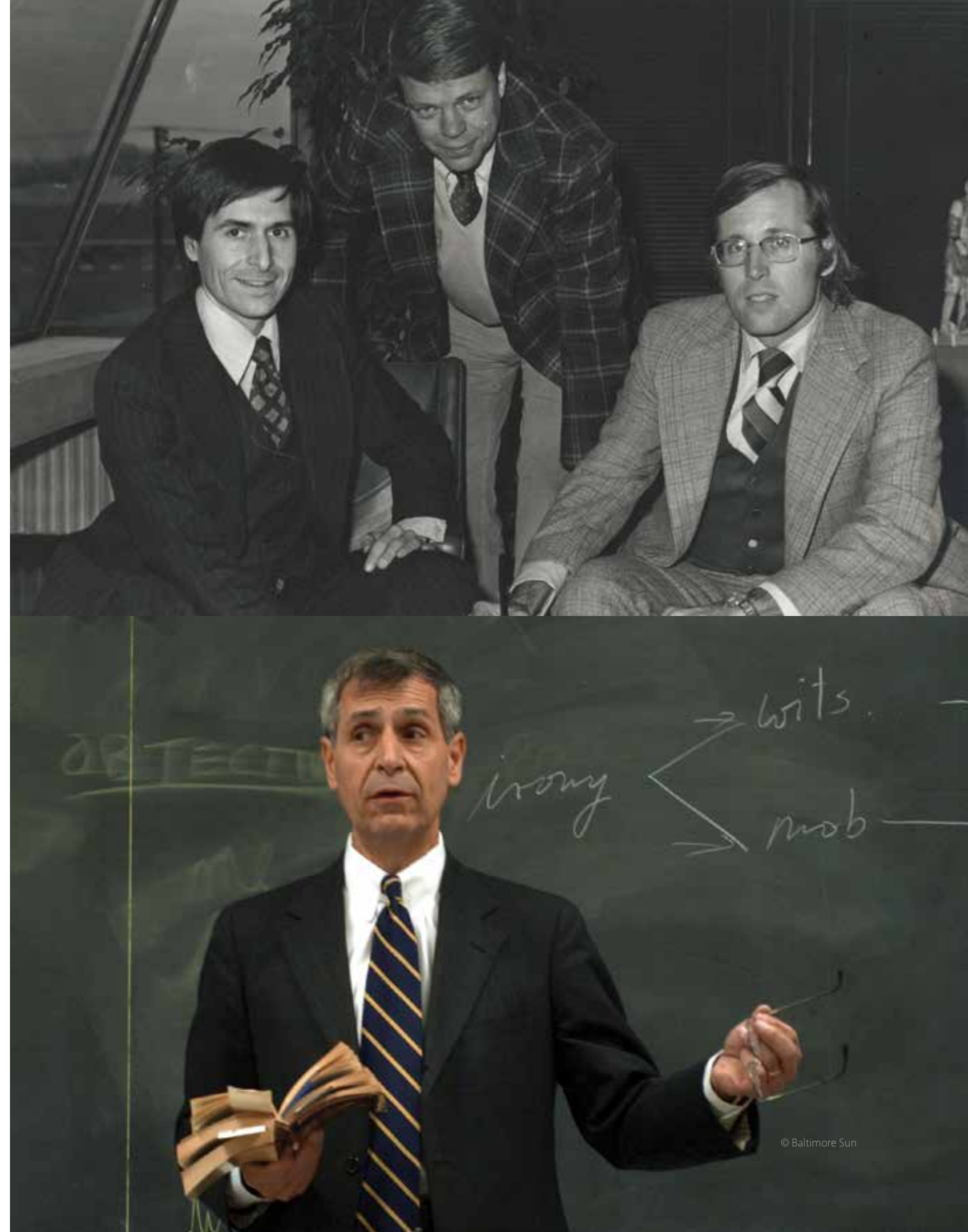
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This year's volume of Towson University's literary magazine, *Grub Street*, is dedicated to Dr. H. George Hahn. Since 2009, each volume of *Grub Street* features a brief nonfiction piece in which Dr. Hahn eloquently discusses the origins and literary significance of our journal's name. His time as an established supporter, friend, and confidant of *Grub Street* is perhaps overshadowed only by his value as a member of the Towson University community. Dr. Hahn served Towson University as English chairman for two successive four-year terms, founded and directed Towson's M.A. in Humanities program, directed Towson's Honors Program, and coordinated advanced writing courses for the university. He has authored five books, written sixty-eight book reviews, has scholarly articles featured in prestigious publications, and has worked with undergraduate students as a professor of topics including, but not limited to: British Literature, Literary Research and Methods, and Writing Argument. Dr. Hahn's impact on Towson University's College of Liberal Arts will be commemorated for years to come.





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# Charlotte “Daisy” Knauth

## Letter From the Editor

As a young child, I read books by the mouthful. Family knew me as voracious—that I didn’t read, I devoured. My parents set a rule: I could take as many books as I wanted from the library each week, so long as I could carry them. My arms elasticized every Friday during our library trips. I stacked novels from the tops of my thighs to my chin and walked to the check-out desk, blind to my feet and the floor in front of me. This act brought librarians to know me by name. It became a story my parents told to new friends. I was a reader first and everything else second.

When my little brother Ben came into reading, we were the Pevensies and the library was our Narnia. Instead of listening as our dad read C.S. Lewis from my bedroom floor while we fell asleep, we ourselves were adventurers. Ben and I traversed the aisles together, searching for stories. We climbed shelves when a book was too high, hid in the backlogs to scan through unfiled titles, but I quickly found that merely offering one-off recommendations was lackluster. Early into our childhood, before he learned to walk, I wanted to teach him to jump. I looked to be a keystone in his life, much like fictional characters were in my own. So, I began to write.

My interests, at first, were solely in widening the body of stories at Ben’s disposal. I cared very little for what I had to say, only what he might want to hear. I devised fables on printer paper folded into quarters, cut, and stapled into books which fit easily in his small hands. As I look back, I know now that my writings were often bastardizations of stories I already knew—I simplified *The Swan Princess*, I augmented *Aladdin* to center Abu, I reoriented *Anastasia* so that she and her little brother stayed together. Writing, at this point in my life, was wish fulfillment.

After a proper and unintentional foray into fanfiction as a middle schooler, I began translating my interest in pre-existing stories into creating characters myself. These characters were never central to any particular plotline or setting, but rather were fully formed people with/from whom I developed senses of self. I knew what modes of transportation they appreciated, their favorite colors, what they ate for breakfast, their fears, their plans for the future, what shampoo they used. Then, I plugged them into happenstance plots. I’d ask myself what they would do in a math class, at an aquarium, stuck in an elevator? I ate lunch with my seventh grade English teacher and talked to her about books we were reading. Eventually, I showed her my own writing—a short story lost to my old Google Drive about a girl drowning in a lake who fell through quicksand at the mossy floor and into a secret prison for predicted criminals.

This teacher approached my mother in the parking lot during a parents’ night and said, “I know we don’t know each other, but your daughter belongs at Carver.” My parents and I attended open houses for the Towson-based public magnet high school George Washington Carver Center for the Arts and Technology. In the Literary Arts classrooms—my program of choice—I learned about the school’s literary magazine. I ended up attending the school on a happenstance miracle—after auditions and testing, my acceptance hinged on a lottery. The first week of my freshman year, I attended my first literary magazine meeting. The staff was organized through a club that met fifteen minutes after the final bell rang each Wednesday. We adjudicated works submitted anonymously from students at the school, reading blind much like the *Grub Street* staff. After that, joining the literary magazine staff was merely following a path set out by my single-minded interest in storytelling.

Similar to the books of my childhood, the works that make up Volume 74 of *Grub Street* bit into my attention and refused to unhook their jaws. I remember reading “Fall” by Sam Moe for the twelfth time in our faculty advisor’s office one afternoon. It was a story I settled into the first time I read it with a feeling much like the books I’d toted through childhood. There was something about the jaw-dropping imagery and employment of literary devices that intertwined with my original inclination towards reading and literature in the first place: good literature puts words to what once was undescribed. Halfway through the essay, I lowered my laptop screen, looked up, and said, “I want to be the person to publish this.”

Those who submit to our journal have histories far more complex than can properly unfold in even the longest of epic poems or the most extensive of series. The writers and artists alike who log into our Submittable and send off their artistry take the time and energy to entrust the *Grub Street* editorial staff with their work. As editors, publishers, and more so as readers, we are indebted to them. Each year our contributors form *Grub Street*, offering us the makings of not only a literary magazine and a representation of the current literary culture, but as a demonstration of humanity. “Negative for Any Bleed” by Jason Thornberry explicates the lives of individuals behind the music we hear at concerts, on the radio, or in department stores. “Parasitic Parasocialism and Other Girlie Pop Philosophies” by Katie Kenney reflects the melding of public emotion and the blindness of assumption. “Fall” offers an immersive mosaic of what it means to practice survival. “On Susan” by Elizabeth Stevens directly demonstrates the powers of publishing literature; that written works often offer readers a comfort they have not found anywhere else.

These four pieces, along with the rest of this year’s publication, reflect elements of humanity often unshared. Editing *Grub Street*, I accept submissions with the intention of devising a literary magazine which reflects the current literary culture. Until the day I read “Fall”, I sought to do my job through the eyes of our readers—what will they want, what will they appreciate? But Sam Moe, Jason Thornberry, Katie Kenney, and Elizabeth Stevens reminded me that the writers were *why* I took interest in literary magazines.

It was in my freshman year at Towson that I found *Grub Street*. An editor of that year’s volume handed me a copy in our fiction class, and I immediately went to check my wallet. I assumed the literary magazine would cost money. I could not get over the idea that it looked like a book I would fork over fifteen dollars for if it meant I could call it my own. As editor-in-chief, I know from the other side of the exchange that *Grub Street*’s mission is intrinsically tied to its accessibility. We seek to broaden the scope of literature so that all who have the ambition may learn to be involved—as readers, as writers, as editors. The contributors, just like our staff, come from different backgrounds, interests, and academic leanings, but share the same space because literature and art transcend typical social and economic molds. *Grub Street* assembles writers and artists who may very well have only one thing in common: their insatiable need to perfect creation.



Jessica Furtado  
**A Witnessing**

The brick patio outside the children’s library  
is sprinkled with witnesses – the lichen  
scattered like Jackson Pollock action-painted  
a splatter ecosystem for the soles  
of small pink feet and canvas sneakers,  
their untied laces. I bear witness  
to the sundrenched faces of daffodils,  
tipping the cup of their existence  
to catch more light, to the lichen  
that have seen the origin of the lone  
cracked brick, split like a smile growing weeds  
green as parsley caught between gapped  
teeth. The irises, like the kids, are just beginning;  
messengers carrying joy in their belief  
they can stretch from soil to sky.  
Who am I to tell them that life will keep you  
grounded – a deep root that can’t be dug up?  
Who am I to believe otherwise when my skin  
holds the sun like a shame that rises  
to the surface? – A blush that gives away  
my witness, my carrying of *ultraviolet* rays,  
as the kids would say when reading about bright stars.



Ivy Choe  
**Women Bathing in a Stream**  
*Digital art*

## Elizabeth Stevens **Lilith Speaks of Adam**

I sometimes wonder  
   if he could have loved  
 me then, in that end-  
   less green—a green so  
 deep even the air  
   tasted of it. That  
 was the summer of  
   our lives, and I would  
 dream he would woo me  
   like a bowerbird,  
 building a nest of  
   bright bone and blue glass.  
 But how could he, when  
   death was yet to be  
 a dream in the eye  
   of that which made us?  
 How wrong was I to  
   long for winter cold?  
 I never knew the  
   crisp bite of frost—had  
 yet to dance to the  
   still sound of falling  
 snow. In that place, the  
   sun and my husband  
 clung to me. I breathed  
   sweet air like viscous  
 honey, choking down  
   that gold in silence.





Jenny McBride  
**Your Inner Ceph**

She first decided to go underground—well, actually, underwater—the day after the courthouse turned into a television station. Things were flip-flopping like that all around her, winter changing to summer, wilderness changing to wasteland, logic changing to mimicry. The industrialized nations had been cooking the Earth for profit for a couple centuries, and though the polar ice was melting, disappearing into an ever more vast sea, every day was business as usual. She briefly considered trying to wake some other people, or at least make sure they were still breathing, but eventually chose a simple retreat. She enjoyed swimming anyway, even though she was pretty bad at it.

It had taken years to figure out how to pace and measure her breath to keep from getting all gaspy at the end of every lap. But finally she got it, and delighted in it. Pretty soon she was doing ten laps, then twenty, then a mile. She breathed out underwater and listened to the strange bellowing of her breath. She did this for an hour a day until the deep breaths took control of her amygdala and she resolved to return to the ocean.

“Don’t you get itchy?” her roommate asked her, “all that chlorine?”

“Not so much chlorine, some salt. I itch later, but not when I’m in the water,” Melody replied. “Which tells me I need to spend more time in the water.”

“What?” Mary was skeptical.

“It’s getting bad out here, Mary. They still want to pump oil through the ocean and burn fossil fuels ‘til the cows come home! ‘Til the cows come home and die of climate change with the rest of us. And it almost seems like people are listening to the climate change deniers, or at least they’re not standing up to them.”

“Yes, they are,” Mary argued with exaggerated weariness. Her reddish hair suggested amber in the beam of the fluorescent light.

“Oh, what am I saying?” Melody sighed. “I just need to swim. It makes me feel better. I like the water world.”

“Yeah. One hour a day is probably enough though, don’t you think?”

Melody nodded sagely.

“For now.”

“Tsk,” Mary remarked. “What, you gonna do the Mr. Limpet thing?”

“Mr. Limpet?” Melody broke into a wide smile.

“You saw that movie too? Boy, that’s an oldie.”

“Probably watched it with my grandma. So, that’s it?”

“No. I never really liked that movie, certainly not all that time with Don Knotts.” Melody paused. “Not really fish, either. But I do feel I have an inner marine mammal.”

Mary burst out laughing. She was relieved.

“What, a whale then?”

“Maybe,” Melody said, rocking her head, “maybe more like a manatee. If I just keep swimming a little longer each day.”

Melody didn’t say much more about it to Mary, but she did nail down her plan and spent a little more time in the water every day. On the day she stayed in for ninety minutes, she had a few strokes of freestyle where she could feel the water moving around her, could feel her feet moving like a split tail, waving with the water. It was mesmerizing. It was a baptism. She noticed sometimes she’d skip a breath, turn her head, but instead of inhaling, comfortably parse out the breath she already had. She was becoming more quiet about water in her nose, at the edge of her mouth. She could swish it back out and guide some air in. It was becoming instinct.

Then one day she thought she felt her nostrils close. Not just pucker, but close with a membrane, like the seals have. She was delighted. It was a most amazing experience. She had to tell someone.

Madison Lane  
**Memory**  
*Oil on canvas*

Mary was afraid to look too closely. She thought she might scream if she actually saw something like that in Melody's nose.

"I kept thinking you really weren't serious," she whined. Her amber curls dangled and coiled. She didn't like what was happening to her roommate, even though it was a roommate she didn't like very much. "I can't believe you're doing this to yourself."

"I'm doing it *for* myself," Melody corrected. "I told you, too awful up here. All the racist violence revving up again, the war on women. I remember the first time I voted in a presidential election I was eighteen. I thought things were getting better, and that the course of history would keep up that way. Now look! And on top of all that, the fucking multi-ore mine! Don't you worry about the mine?"

"Yeah, I do," Mary admitted. She shared Melody's hatred for Atlantis Mining Inc. "I tried to fight it too, remember. But anyway, your plan still seems..... extreme."

"Mmm. Not really. Some people run away from their problems, I'm gonna swim away from mine. 'Cause I can't stand to see them build any more miles of roads or helicopter pads. Right there in the most beautiful scenery I've ever known."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. She looked a little like a wobble toy.

"And the war—I mean wars. How many are we involved in now, officially, that is? Is it three? Will it be three tomorrow?"

"We are not involved in any," Mary replied staunchly. "It's the fucking Pentagon and weapons industry."

*"Some people run away from their problems, I'm gonna swim away from mine."*

"Yeah, but it's my country of citizenship," Melody argued. "I can't claim Finland's Pentagon."

"Finland doesn't have one."

"Anyway, I like being in the water! I like swimming! And the first time in the ocean with my goggles, wow!"

Mary just shook her head again.

"You can't just live?" It was more of a plea than an outcry.

"And what about the war on women?" Melody continued. "Aren't you paying attention? Pretty soon they'll be burning us at the stake."

"Melody!"

"There's so much more ocean than land anyway."

Melody kept swimming, and the more she swam, the more she noticed stunning changes, like the way she never coughed in between air and water anymore, as if her airways and waterways had made peace with one another. More and more often she found herself skipping a breath, just not needing it. At about that point in her transformation, she began to recognize the confinement of the pool, that she really was similar to a marine mammal captive swimming up and down the chlorine blue lanes. Doing laps like some doomed goldfish. She dreamed of something in the open.

"Does anybody ever swim in the channel?" she asked. She and Mary were putting away groceries. They shopped together, but with separate carts and wallets.

"No, I don't think so," Mary replied. "The Coast Guard would probably come out and get you. Too many ships."

"Hmm. I was hoping maybe I could get in right here."

"Melody, you really need to reconsider this whole back-to-the-ocean thing. The whales are starving to death, you know. Did you hear?"

"Yes, I did hear," Melody sighed bitterly, then squared her shoulders. "But that's just in California."

"Mel, whales are starving in Alaska, too."

"Up here?" A near whisper, which turned to a scoff. "Whales can't starve in Alaska! This is the land of plenty—the sea of plenty."

"And the mass die-off of seabirds last year. Half a million? Landing in Anchorage driveways, emaciated." Mary remembered sorting through the daily headlines, like picking your way through a thicket of machetes.

"Yeah, you're right," Melody had to admit. "But then, you know, the whole show is probably just about over. On land, too."

"Could be."

"I think I'll just go right into the channel here."

"No, Melody! Stay here. You don't want to go off by yourself when things are getting so bad."

"The mine," Melody reminded her. "It opened, you know. Just wait 'til the ore trucks really get rolling. 'Til the acid gets running. I feel sick from it already."

Mary pursed her lips in abject protest.

"Maybe we can shut them down," she snapped.

Melody didn't reply. They resumed shelving the groceries, two hands at a time.

"Whoa, how did you do that?" Mary asked a moment later.

"Do what?"

"You had your right hand here, and you put the peanut butter on the shelf, and without even reaching into the bag, all of a sudden your right hand was back again with the tahini!"

"....and the cookies in my left hand the whole time." Melody's eyes widened.

"You're not...are you?" Mary was looking at Melody's shoulder, which was suddenly a complex shoulder.

"A new arm!" Melody gasped. "With suction cups!"

"You're an octopus!" Mary cried with delight.

"Well, no, not really. I only have three arms."

"I bet you have more." Mary stepped around to check Melody's left shoulder. "Yes! There's another coming."

"Octopus...." Melody was considering. This was bewildering. "Cephalopods."

"I know they're really smart," Mary said.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about this? Oh crap, let's just finish putting away the groceries. It will go fast."

Before long Melody's body had transformed to the point that she was more awkward and vulnerable on land than in the water. She knew this would be her last week at work. Watching from the window of her commuting bus, she felt as if she were saying goodbye to the terrestrial realm where she had spent her entire life. But the landscape had been deeply altered. Sometimes it felt like the industrialists had put up concrete and steel wallpaper all around her home range.

"You're going to go in right here?" Mary asked the following Saturday morning. She kept thinking Melody was wearing a wetsuit, but no, she was just starting to be orange.

"Yeah." Melody was sober rather than exuberant. "I'll probably hang around for a while, you know, before taking off on any long quests. Might not leave the area, just the terra. Maybe we can talk once in a while."

"Sure! Whenever. I'll be watching for you." Then, after a pause to sigh, "I'm tellin' ya, Mr. Limpet!"

With a nod of her now bulbous head, Melody slipped into the steeply deep water. She let her arms dangle. She felt like a kid on a carnival ride. But it wasn't just the joy of the motion, it was the fear of all the unknown creatures around and below her. Every eye she caught made her wonder. She tried changing color.

She eased into water life pretty smoothly, but did go back to see Mary every week or so. Just because she was lonely, was having trouble making friends in the ocean. The sea was so huge compared to the world above it! And most of the creatures down there were so very different from her. It was beautiful and cold and deep though, and she loved her piscine neighbors.

She always began her visits with Mary by calling, "What's going on up there?" And Mary would give her news about flowers blooming or berries ripening. And about the continued attacks on wild things and wild places; what now? A new road, new buildings spawning ghastly parking lots. One day Mary replied, "The mine. It's really big. There are trucks all the time, huge trucks, you wouldn't believe how big. Their noise is like buildings falling down."

"Oh," Melody bubbled. "The poor road. And all of you. That's horrible! How do you stand it?"

Mary shrugged.

"No choice. Amazing what you can get used to when you have to."

"Mary!" Melody cried, rising sharply from the water. "You're getting used to it?"

"No," Mary admitted quietly. "I'm really not. But I can't stop it. Neither can I move away, you know, job and all."

“And you like it here.”  
“Otherwise.” She shook her head angrily. “I’ve seen the tailings pond. Poisoned water. Birds come to drink there.”  
“Why? Why did anybody ever say it was okay?” Melody demanded. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know: money. Not really jobs, just money. But there will never be enough money to clean it up.”  
“Clean what up?” Mary snickered. “They’re perfect. Never spill a drop or make a mess. But hey, now there could be some jobs!”  
“I’m sorry,” Melody said. “It is nice to see you though.”  
“You’re staying in the area?”  
“At least for a while.”  
They said a slow goodbye.  
A couple months passed, but no more than a couple. Suddenly the water where Melody was strumming her imaginary harp became infused with an acrid taste. Not choking, but acrid. She didn’t know what to make of it, so she swam for the closest shoreline, finding herself quite near her old home. People were coming out of their houses, their offices, and there was Mary! Melody called to her, waving several arms. Mary was heading up the stairs to a large parking lot with everybody else, but she hesitated when she saw her old friend. She hurried down to the water.  
“The dam is leaking,” she told Melody.  
Melody had never seen Mary so somber. She had never seen anyone so somber.  
“The retainment wall, you know, at the mine.”  
“Oh! The tailings pond?”  
“Yes. A small crack. A minor earthquake. It’s been seeping, but they know the whole wall is gonna collapse, so we’re being evacuated.”  
“Right now?”  
Just then the water began to rise, chalky white and gray, climbing up the shore to places it had never seen before. Mary and her neighbors climbed to the top of the stairs. They would be safe there for a while. The water had lifted Melody like a Ferris wheel, and she found herself abreast a tall, strong spruce. The bad flavor in the water was suddenly more pronounced. She had to leave, and how well those eight arms worked together to climb the tree!

Her little hometown was a terrible sight. The lucky people were stranded on their rooftops. The mountains looked the same, but there was a sobbing sadness shining out of everything.  
“You okay?” Mary called to her. She was crying. Some of her neighbors were crying, too. Their mountain, their river, their ocean, everything they loved about their home had just taken an irreversible wrong turn.  
“I’m fine,” Melody called back. “Maybe if I climb to the top of this tree I can see if help is coming.”  
“It wasn’t supposed to happen just now! No one will be coming. Unless you can signal them.”  
“Okay.”  
Melody was on her way, wincing every so often when a stiff spruce needle caught in her tender under arms, but soon she undulated her way to the top. She could see the closest town, over in the next watershed. A few people were in the streets, but most of them were inside. Most of them spent most of their lives inside.  
Unable to scream like she’d been able to do as a terrestrial creature, she tried waving all her arms, squirting ink, and even hurling a couple branches, but no one noticed. Then she shot the rest of the ink straight into the air, like a flare aimed at the town square.  
“Well?” Mary called up. She was so anxious now that she sounded calm.  
The ink fell on deaf ears. Below Melody a river was sick and failing.  
“No one even noticed,” she told Mary. She wanted to add, “how long can this go on?” but she was afraid it would sound too discouraging.

## Konstantinos Patrinos Summer Flood

the faucet leaks no matter how tight  
I screw it    drip drip    dishes in the sink like an army  
  
defeated    half-drowning    I pull out a knife    hold onto it like  
a rescue rope    the moon turns purple as if beaten    yesterday  
  
a flood    under the sun hammering the heat down like  
punishment    the landscape rearranged itself    washed out  
  
car parts and open fridges    torn parasols and dead goats    the waves  
spat them out like sunflower seed shells    everything tangled with sun-  
  
burned kelp    my daughter on the kitchen floor  
practices the front crawl in her water wings    terrifying    how fast  
  
the dishwater can turn as muddy as the stirred sea    the ticking  
of the wall clock slows down    drip    drip    the moon sprinkled with  
  
salt crystals    my daughter eats an ice cream cone  
in her pajamas now    gets softer by the second    deforms  
  
towards the floor    sweet stickiness dripping    she sits on her bed  
buoyant    I am soaked now    the kitchen tiles oil-slicked    shimmering  
  
brown and gray    my feet refract below the water level  
rising    the moon is now bleeding from the nose    body drenched  
  
my hair clumped into tentacles    my daughter grows  
a mermaid tail    fanning it up and down    I am trying I am trying not  
  
to go under    my hands still clutching the knife    drip  
drip    I try to pull myself out    I pull through air    I pull myself in place





Madison Lane  
**Lack of Care**  
*Oil on canvas*

Cari Oleskewicz  
**Let us describe how she died**  
*(with thanks to Gertrude Stein)*

Let us describe how she died, peacefully and with our hearts. It was a very bright morning in October on a Florida horse farm, and the day had started chilly but then grew warm, and the vet, although sensitive and full of compassion, still had to administer the sedative and then the overdose of an anesthetic. It was a very bright morning, and we gave her nuzzles and kisses, and we scratched her scratchy ears, and we murmured what needed to be said or did not need to be said, and we saw her getting sleepy. In consequence, the vet and her assistant took over with a syringe and a tube, and down she went, her knees bringing her gently to the ground where she would finally rest, and we were unable to go with her. Many creatures kept watch and there was a sacrifice, of what shall we, an apple, a braided tail, a harness, a pile of dirt, and a tractor, and all that having been blessed by Gwen, let us bless her.



## Elizabeth Stevens On Susan

*"I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left."*

*"Where, Lord?" they asked.*

*He replied, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather."*

Luke 17:34–37

When I was a child, my mother would cut my PB&J's into four squares, and I would pretend that each fourth was a tiny cake topped with an icing flower. At this point, I was young enough that she was still making my sandwiches for me, but as I sprouted up, she decided that I was old enough to do it myself—world-shattering news for an eight-year-old. She saw an opportunity and tried to use the situation to teach me about the sin of laziness. I spent the next year in what I liked to think of as a battle of wills with my mother, where I would ask her for a peanut butter and jelly, and she would say no, leaving me bereft because I refused to do it for myself.

During this time, I discovered the BBC's *The Chronicles of Narnia* mini-series at the library. The animals were all played by actors in fur suits, the White Queen signified that she was performing magic by theatrically widening her eyes, and Peter said "by Jove" too much for my liking—I had no idea who Jove was or why people were swearing by him. Truly, a cinematic masterpiece. I was obsessed with it.

On a routine Saturday, my parents sat me down in front of the TV and popped in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. They had errands to run, but I'd be fine. Both of my older brothers and my sister were home, doing what I assumed were cool, esoteric teenage activities. I could go to them if I needed anything. My parents left with me happily preoccupied.

I stayed that way until my belly started to rumble. With my mother gone, who could possibly make me something tasty? What a gauntlet. But if the Pevensie children could win against the White Witch, I could face my mortal enemy—a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I scaled the stairs from the basement to the kitchen, ready to do battle. Butter knife in hand, I faced down the peanut butter jar and the jelly jar. The first yielded to me—obviously recognizing my superior battle skills and opening without a fuss under my small, child hands. But then, a challenger approached. The jar of jelly might as well have been welded shut, never budging no matter how much I strained at the lid.

And yet, I did not despair. After all, what were older brothers for if not to perform feats of strength? Fingers sticky from jelly that had dried around the lid, I wandered around the house, trying to find someone. The longer I searched, the more my voice wavered, desperate for someone to answer me.

I had never been left home by myself before.

As I searched, a hideous possibility occurred to me. What if the rapture had occurred while I wasn't paying attention? I had learned from my Sunday school teachers that the second coming of Christ would be announced with trumpets, which I was pretty sure I wouldn't miss. But as my search unearthed only more empty house, I became less certain and more afraid.

I had always wanted to be Susan, the pretty one who everyone liked. I just never expected to be left behind like her.



*The books don't tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having by then turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there's plenty of time for her to mend and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end... in her own way.*  
— C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Children*

C.S. Lewis always claimed that *The Chronicles of Narnia* were suppositional, not allegorical. What would happen if the story of Jesus took place in another world? The conclusion he came to involved a messianic lion and some questionable choices involving his female characters. He held up Lucy, with her middling looks and faith as pure as the driven snow, as the ideal that a young girl should aspire to. In *Prince Caspian*, the Pevensie children are searching for a safe passageway to their talking animal friends. They're forced to halt when they run up on a ravine with no way to cross it. The enemy's soldiers are hunting them, so they desperately need to move forward. When they camp down for the night, hidden in the nearby forest, Lucy meets Aslan. He's been invisible this whole time, only showing glimpses of himself to her. He tells her that he can lead them across the ravine using a hidden pathway, but she must stand firm in her faith and convince her companions to follow her, while he remains invisible. Through the power of her faith, she has to stand up to her older siblings and make them follow her. Edmund is the first to agree, and comments to his other siblings that Lucy had never led them astray, even when they thought she made up Narnia back in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Finally, everyone agrees. Except for Susan. As they traverse the secret pathway, each child slowly starts to see Aslan. Edmund sees him first because of his trust in Lucy. After thinking about how Lucy is his favorite sister, Peter sees him second. Susan, who had accused Lucy of dreaming the invisible lion, sees him last. She spends the entire journey complaining about how Lucy was just spouting nonsense. When Aslan reveals himself to the group, Susan shrinks back, ashamed of her lack of faith.

*Dear God,  
I know I'm a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness.  
I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe that He died  
for my sin and that you raised Him to life.  
I want to trust Him as my Savior and follow Him as Lord,  
from this day forward. Guide my life and help me to do your will.  
I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.*  
— Billy Graham, "The Sinner's Prayer"

Some of my first memories of the church include the call to altar. Towards the end of his sermon, Pastor Wally would invite nonbelievers in the crowd to come before the congregation and kneel before the altar. He urged them to repent their sins and take Jesus into their heart. After performing the requisite song and dance, the nonbeliever would be transformed into a born-again Christian—never again would they need to prostrate themselves in front of the Lord like that. The Holy Spirit now resided in their redeemed soul forever. In Sunday school, the process was much the same, but involved more songs about obedience as the best way for a child to show belief in God. I don't remember when I first followed the call to altar, but I know I did it more than once. There was always this vague uneasiness that I had somehow done it wrong. Perhaps the key was in repetition. If this was what I needed to be safe, it was best I kept going until I got it right.

Eventually, one of the teachers recognized me in the crowd of six-year-olds who had come forward to be washed clean of their child sins by the blood of Christ. When she asked me why I had answered the call once more, I didn't really have an answer. In theory, I shouldn't have needed to, but how else could I be sure? Jesus never answered back.

*But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened at the same time.*  
— C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Chapter 14: Night Falls on Narnia

As a child, *The Last Battle* was my least favorite of the series. It portrayed a Narnian Revelation—a whimsical, fairytale apocalypse, complete with an Antichrist and the second coming of Lion Jesus. The first six books had immersed me in wonder and magic; I had no reason to believe that the last book would be any different. It was like a nightmare. I couldn't reconcile the books I loved with an ending full of such violence and loss. The stars fell from the sky, leaving nothing but void behind as dragons and monsters descended upon Narnia, laying the country bare. The moon plummeted into the sea as a colossus snuffed the light of the dying sun in his fist. Any of the magical animals who hadn't stayed true to their faith in Aslan were transformed into nothing more than beasts fleeing total devastation. The world was torn asunder.

*"I don't remember when I first followed the call to altar, but I know I did it more than once. There was always this vague uneasiness that I had somehow done it wrong. Perhaps the key was in repetition. If this was what I needed to be safe, it was best I kept going until I got it right."*

As I read on, I was thrilled to see that Peter, Edmund, and Lucy arrived. The rule of Narnia is that, once you become too old, you can no longer travel there. The last few books in the series followed new children, and they didn't have my heart like the original four main characters. As I read on, I found that it wasn't just the Pevensies who'd arrived, but also other friends of Narnia from throughout the series. All of them gathered together, witnessing the devastation of the fantastical world they had grown to love. They were safe from the destruction, standing with Aslan on the other side of a door that led to the true Narnia—a paradise where they could all stay together, never to leave again. As they entered through the door to Lewis' version of heaven, they met Emmeth, a character who had ardently followed the Antichrist through the entire book. Despite Emmeth's worship of a false god, Aslan allows him entry into heaven. Emmeth's faith had been so pure and good that it never went to the Antichrist. The Antichrist could only be nourished by the evil that his followers did in his name. Since Emmeth's worship had been so sincere, the Antichrist never received it. Instead, Emmeth's devotion went to Aslan, who knew that Emmeth had a good heart. Even though he followed the wrong god, he was given into the kingdom of heaven. The whole time I'm reading this, I wondered, where is Susan? How did the other Pevensie children travel to Narnia? They died. There was no magical wardrobe with a fantasy world hidden inside, no portal that changed the rules about age. Instead, they all were in a train accident that killed them, sending their spirits to Narnia. Susan

was left behind, the only survivor of the train accident that killed her parents, her siblings, her cousin, and the professor whose wardrobe had first taken her to Narnia.

*Submission is not inferiority, it's the right response to God-ordained authority. Good wives obey their husbands and keep the home; submit to your husband and you submit to God.*

— My Bible class notes, Junior Year

After being homeschooled for five years, I attended a Christian high school. It was the school that all my older siblings had graduated from, so of course that's where I wanted to go. Finally, I was the teenager, esoteric and unknowable.

One of my favorite teachers was Mr. Reisberg, who made corny jokes like my dad. I thought he was funny. Like any white man, he had many opinions, and, like any white man, he was vocal about them. He said that the country should follow in the footsteps of George Washington, who, he claimed, executed at gunpoint any gay soldier he found. He said that George Bush was a statesman appointed to power by God, whereas any Democrat was nothing more than a conniving politician. He even said that he would vote for a woman if it meant defeating the opposition, even though women didn't belong in government. It put them in a position of authority over men.

After one of his in-class political tirades where he berated any politician he didn't agree with, calling them stupid and awful and whatever other insults he could think of, I raised my hand. I didn't understand why he was being so unkind. I asked why he was attacking their character. That was an ad hominem argument. Weren't we supposed to show respect to our leaders? Wasn't it wrong to use unkind words?

Those were the lessons I was supposed to embody, not him.

*"My sister Susan," answered Peter shortly and gravely, "is no longer a friend of Narnia."*

— C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Chapter 13: How the Dwarves Refused To Be Taken In

By all accounts, Susan was desperate to be grown. And wasn't that her right? As a child, she was sent away from home to keep her safe from World War II, found a secret world, fought in a war against an evil witch, was crowned a queen, grew into an adult who ruled the country, was nearly kidnapped by a man who wanted to force her into marriage (everyone forgets about *The Horse and His Boy*), forgot the world that she originally came from, was forced back into her child body, into a country that was still experiencing World War II, was dragged back into Narnia to fight in another war, and finally discovered that she was too old to ever return from England to her magical home. Her siblings reentered Narnia through death. Susan lost everyone she'd ever loved.

In further writing, Lewis described Susan as a silly conceited girl who may one day find her way back to Narnia, but he wasn't interested in telling that story. It would result in a book that was more grown up than he wanted to write. He never acknowledged her trauma and how faith can become a one-dimensional trait in the face of nuanced human experience.

*"Who would say something like that? Me, bitch! I delight in my wickedness and I refuse to see the kingdom of heaven!"*

— TikTok user Max, @high5yourestillalive

When I was left home alone on accident, fingers sticky from an unopened jelly jar and terror in my heart, I called the police. I thought I had missed the rapture. It was proof that I hadn't been faithful enough.

When my Sunday school teacher discovered that I had been double-dipping the Sinner's Prayer, she told me I was calling Jesus a liar. It scared me. Surely Jesus wouldn't save me if I called him a liar. He would leave, angered by my insolence. I'd be alone.

When I questioned Mr. Reisberg's unkind behavior, he mocked me in front of my class. The biggest lesson he taught me was that questions weren't tolerable. All of my teachers were like that. Curiosity was a pesky thing to be squashed in a child. Anytime I asked something they didn't know the answer to, they either yelled at me in front of my peers or chided me for not trusting God hard enough. By the time I graduated, the faculty had successfully taught me to swallow my questions and my righteous anger. A good Christian girl did as she was told.

As a child, I wasn't allowed to wear makeup until I was fourteen. I didn't know what to do with it when I finally came of age, but I longed to decorate myself. I'd draw bracelets on my wrists and scribble reminder notes on my arms. The first thing I did when I turned eighteen was get a tattoo.

I like to imagine Susan and I as friends. We hang out at her apartment, watching movies while we paint our nails. She has to hold my hand while my nails dry, because otherwise I'd somehow smear it on my shirt—a shirt I borrowed from her closet. Our interlocked fingers feel like home.

We stay up too late at night, talking about our hopes and dreams. I show her my poetry, where I practice being angry. She shows me her paintings of magical creatures and trains on fire.

Together, we learn to live.



Chuck Carlise  
**Waking in Nebraska to  
 the Sound of Stifled Weeping**

Across the prairie miles—grassland & corn.  
 She leans on the window, tries not to touch  
 while I crack my back in the small seat, stretch  
 my neck, settle in. From behind, a warm  
 sheet of sunrise creeps, like eyes, over us.  
 I don't know how this begins. There's music,  
 tinny guitars faint in her ears—blues for  
 the interstate, deep thrum of the bus.  
 I try to motion, *you can lean on me*  
*if you're tired.* (I want to say her name, but  
 I don't know it.) She smiles, doesn't ask what  
 I mean, turns back to the glass, unhealed.  
 & what did I expect? A cinematic pause?  
 A tearful embrace? A field of thunder? A cause?





Jen Hallaman  
& no, I won't go back

to roads twisting toward the lake  
or maple trees spitting spinning jennies  
onto brick-brown houses crawling with ivy

& rarely do I cross paths with a cardinal  
& no, I won't go back  
& if I do I think I'll find  
birdsong ringing spectral

& yes I used to dream we'd live in that one,  
there, with the gabled roof & soft evening light  
like the house where we grew up but better not

*mine mine mine*

lie & say I can't remember walking these same  
streets  
legs too short to skip the crack *careful, don't break*  
*your mother's* back then far meant further

than a stone's throw & far was far further  
than I'd like to be from home I can see her  
cruising  
down the sidewalk on her cherry-red tricycle

which the neighbor boy smothered  
with shiny round stickers of a fat red bird  
singing victory for a baseball team, but I thought

they sang for me, those plump red cuties  
i thought they were cheering me on as I sped  
down the sidewalk *not too far* perching bright on

meaty branches kept me safe  
from cars breezing down the block  
& bats razing the oak tree at dusk

which sent my father railing about rabies  
each night my mother kept the door cracked  
swore the light would keep me

safe even when I couldn't see the red bird  
& the gabled roofs & the green trees & the bats  
& the spinning jennies

far away was so close to home  
now close means further than three hundred  
miles  
in a city where sparrows and pigeons run rampant

Charlotte "Daisy" Knauth  
**Deconstruction**  
*Digital photography*

John Gallaher  
**I Am Trying Not to Lose My Shit**

For a short period of time, there weren't stripes on the roads of America, and they were filled with cars and horses and people and it was a mess, like how we turn up as the pains of a love gone sour to knock on each other's door, or pour from a heavily damaged boat on a remote coral atoll in the Marshall Islands. I'm coping. See? This is how I cope. Bring me a cup of answers. I'm all out of theories. But a cup is a friendly thing. Like someone loves you, which is a kind of answer, even as lovers don't know where they're from or where they're going. I'm not much in the mood for compromise. Gravity does you up and then undoes you. So bring me a room of marbles. I might have reached my limit. And they say it's a house you live in. The kitchen beats time. The attic meanders.

I'm trying not to lose my shit. Like saying how things go, as if a good many people should have been happy to see themselves wiped off the map, calling it a magic trick or destiny. Bring me a handful of countries. I'd love to have options. Like things we do in the name of health that kill us instead. Drinking gold flakes and drilling holes in our foreheads. Bring me a flag dipped in chocolate fondue. I don't know who's listening, so I'm speaking in code. It shows itself in every State of the Union played backwards, and is delivering a record-breaking drought or flood, or a winter like that of famous movie scenes, in the style of the Ottoman Empire. Even with our modern airlift and snowplow. "One, two, three, go!" the children said, and we dispersed, pure as all the things that never arrive.

John Gallaher  
**I Am Trying to Be More Colorful**

You're dropped into the middle of a desert and you have to choose a direction to start walking. It could be simple. I don't know.

I think the answer is don't get dropped into the middle of a desert.

It's like when you're reading along in a book and enjoying it just fine, and there are a lot of pages left, but then the book suddenly stops,

and it turns out all the rest of those pages are a sample promo chapter from some other book. And you can't say "wait," or "why didn't you tell me."

Can you always be the wrong person at the wrong time? Yes. In 1967, they thought stereo was going to be a fad.

There's always something going on that you're not noticing. We tell a story meant to correct a story. New version.

You have this fragile and heavy thing you have to carry a long way.

I know why people give up. We all know.

# Sierra McNew

## Burn it All

When I entered the bar on Friday, the so-called time traveler was there again. He perched two barstools down from my usual spot. As I sat down, he touched the brim of his baseball hat and nodded. I sipped my beer in peace for fifteen minutes before he slid down to the barstool next to mine.

“We meet again.”

“So we do.”

“You seem less than happy to see me.”

I turned slightly away from him, watching the Royals game on the TV to my left and hoping he would pick up on the cue to go away. “I’m just enjoying a drink. No need to chit-chat.”

“I weirded you out with my talk of time travel.”

I eyed him over my shoulder. He looked much the same as before, dressed in a faded, baggy t-shirt and ripped jeans. His hat bore a logo I didn’t recognize, maybe from a minor league team. “Son, it’s none of my business what you believe as long as you can respect a man wanting to enjoy a beer in peace at the end of a long week.”

He nodded, putting a finger to his mouth to indicate that he would be silent. However, he didn’t move away. I returned to watching the game. It was the top of the eighth inning, and the Royals were down five to seven against the White Sox. They still had time to turn this game around, if they put their minds to it.

Our pitcher struck out a batter on the other team. A few people around the bar cheered. The so-called time traveler whistled, but it was not the encouraging whistle that people use at a baseball game to cheer the team on. It descended in pitch, the kind of whistle people use when expressing sympathy.

“I remember this,” he said. “This was the night that F5 tornado hit north of Edgerton.”

“Tornado?” I asked, raising my eyebrows at him. “It’s well past tornado season. And we’re only supposed to get a drizzle tonight.”

“Just wait.”

I shook my head. The White Sox had a man on second base now. I missed it while I was engaging with this dim man and his antics.

The next batter stepped up to the plate. Strike. Another pitch. Foul. Another pitch.

The batter hit a low rolling grounder. The shortstop and second baseman both dove for it, but it squeaked between them and continued its inevitable path into the outfield. Cries of dismay erupted around the bar. The runner on second raced to third. He looked around, then kept going.

He was heading for home.

I was on my feet before I had realized it, though my heart was already sinking as I watched the runner barrel on towards home plate. I held my breath.

The TV screen went blue.

“Oh, come on!” a man cried to my left. He threw his hands up in the air at the interruption.

A logo for the local news station came on the screen, then it cut to a weatherman in front of a county map marred by splatters of red and orange. “We interrupt your evening programming to broadcast a severe weather event. Just two miles north of Edgerton, we have reports of a tornado on the ground. So far, a supermarket and several homes have been reported as damaged or destroyed—”

I looked frantically around the bar, but the barstool next to me was empty.

The time traveler was gone.

I returned to the bar the next Friday. I had wanted to go sooner, but it was during the harvest and time was short. We needed the income from our soybean crop more than ever this year. Our youngest was diagnosed with aortic stenosis, and those city doctors weren’t cheap. With all the activity around the farm, I’d barely had time to grab a sandwich for lunch. The ham must have been past its time, because my stomach hadn’t felt quite right all afternoon.

As I stepped into the bar, I tried to keep from scanning the room. My eyes didn’t get the message, because they looked from left to right, finally fixating on the young man at the bar in a faded baseball cap. Something he said made the bartender chuckle and shake his head before walking away.

The old barstool creaked as I sat down next to the young man. I leaned on the bar. My hands shook, the muscles tense and sore. Not unexpected, given how hard I’d worked them that day.

Though he’d been quite chatty the previous two Fridays, tonight my acquaintance didn’t speak. He just sat sipping his whiskey. Every so often, he lifted his right hand to his left wrist, fidgeting with a cracked wristwatch on a leather band. Dark red blood blisters marred the skin on the back of his hands. Unusual for such a young guy.

I nodded to the bartender. He brought me my usual. Behind him, the TV displayed the evening’s Royals game.

After drawing in one deep, refreshing pull of beer, I set my glass on the bar. “I want answers,” I said quietly. “You say you’re a time traveler. Time travel isn’t real, but you knew about the storm last week before we did. You work for the National Weather Service or something?”

He spun on his barstool to face me, his expression holding none of the mirth it had in previous weeks. “I’m not a government man. I’m trying to do what our government hasn’t been able to. Trying to save the world.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Sounds a bit dramatic.” Then again, aren’t young men often a bit dramatic?

He dipped his head to the side, acknowledging my point. His mouth tightened in a wince as he swallowed another sip. “I wish I came with better news. The truth is, humanity is about to face a crisis that will threaten the global food supply.” He took off his baseball cap, and his hair underneath stood up in scraggly wisps. Patches of blotchy skin peeked out from between clumps of brown hair.

He looked me in the eye, emphasizing every word. “It’s a mite whose effects are easily mistaken for dry rot. It started as a fruit mite on apples, we think. Then it spread to pears. The next year to peaches, berries, zucchini, wheat. Within a few years all our produce was infected. It’s hard to fight something you can barely see. We didn’t think it was harmful to humans.” The time traveler shook his head. “It turns out the signs of infection take about five years to develop.”

His sickly appearance turned sinister. I pulled my elbows in close to my chest, wondering if I should back away.

“So tell people about the problem,” I suggested. “If you get enough people working on it, I’m sure you can find a solution.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” This time, the swig he took of his whiskey was a long one. He set it back on the bar with a heavy thud, sighing. “Oh, I’ve been trying for eight years. Or longer, depending on how you count time. I went back to 2042 and found a senator. I told her I had an important message for Congress and for the President. They thought I was a paranoid conspiracy theorist. In one of my more desperate moments, I went back to the 1990s and tried to talk to anyone on the street, anyone at all who would listen.” He gave me a rueful smirk. “They locked me up within the span of six hours. I visited scientists in every decade between 1980 and 2060. They said we couldn’t get the funding needed for such ‘theoretical research.’”

He huffed a bitter, thready laugh. “By the time we have the funding, it will be too late.” He arched his back, stretching it. His t-shirt hung off him, like it had once housed a brawnier man. “Truth is, I’m getting up in years. I’m running out of time.”

“You think you’re getting up in years.” I forced a chuckle. “You can’t be two days past thirty.”

He eyed me evenly. “Where I come from, the average life expectancy is thirty-four. Most people

start showing symptoms by the time they're twenty-nine."

Symptoms. Like hair loss and blood blisters? Were these fruit mites he spoke of contagious? I shifted my weight on the barstool. *No, don't be foolish.* Such mites don't exist. Nonetheless, I started looking for an opening in the conversation, a moment where I could excuse myself to the restroom but actually hightail it to the parking lot. I'd miss the end of the game, but I'd escape this conversation. Besides, Nora would be pleased to have me home early.

The young man gripped his tumbler but didn't take a swig. "But I have one last trick up my sleeve. Something I haven't tried yet. I've come here to talk with you."

My ears perked up, and I halted my escape plans. "With me? Why?"

"You're a farmer. You understand the risks of an infected food supply better than, perhaps, anyone. I thought I could be successful in recruiting you to stop the disaster that lies ahead."

"A spoiled harvest is a real misfortune," I allowed, trying not to think about the bills stacked on the kitchen table back home. One lost harvest could put a farm under.

An emptiness haunted the young man's eyes. "At first, people started hoarding fruit and vegetables they didn't think were infected. Scurvy came back rampant as people couldn't afford the astronomical price of produce. Five years later, it became clear that people were infected with the mites as well. The healthcare system began to collapse from the strain, but the real problems came once the lights went out."

"What do the lights have to do with fruit?"

"If you don't have enough healthy people to work in your electrical plants, you have no electricity. No light, no refrigeration, no electronic means of communication... Have I painted an adequate picture for you?"

I swallowed. That damn ham sandwich from earlier rumbled deep in my stomach. "You have." I fiddled with my pint glass. "But if what you say is true, I don't understand why people wouldn't work together to fix it. What about the USDA?"

The time traveler let out a belly roar of a laugh. It burst from his narrow frame, then cut off in the choking wheeze of a cough.

Startled, I glanced around the bar. A few other patrons shot concerned glances our way, but they soon returned to their conversations or to watching the game.

The time traveler still chuckled in fits between gasps, now starting to wipe tears from his eyes. He buried his face in his hands. For a moment, I wondered if his laughter had turned to tears.

"Why is that so funny?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, it's so rare that I get to sit down with a pragmatist. I forget what life used to be like."

He cleared his throat, then hacked again and covered his mouth with one hand. His cough rattled mucus deep in his throat, and when he returned his hand to the bar, a fleck of blood moistened the edge of one knuckle. "We think we've traced it back to a farm in this area. It's around the right time, give or take five years. I knew you would be the guy to talk to." He gripped my arm, and I flinched.

His eyes burned with the intensity of a lightning strike in a summer thunderstorm. "Maybe if we burned all the fields we could stop it. Maybe. But I'm almost finished. I can't do it. I need someone else to take up my life's work. Will you watch for it? Promise me."

The crush of his grip on my wrist spoke of desperation. I wanted to pull away. I wasn't sure what alarmed me more: this man's tale of impending catastrophe or the fervor in his eyes. "Okay, I promise."

He released my arm, his posture slumping on the barstool. "Thank you."

The remaining details he imparted were few. According to him, I'd know the mark the mites left on fruit by a sprawling, splotchy discoloration. "And when you see the first sign, burn it. Burn everything for five acres on either side." He made me repeat his directions to him twice.

When I'd met his specifications, he thumped me on the shoulder. "Ach, maybe you'll do better."

Then he staggered out, leaving an unfinished beer and his broken wristwatch on the bar.

Three harvests later, I sat watching the baseball game in the living room. The Royals were down eight to nine at the top of the ninth inning. They still had time to turn this game around.

***"The crush of his grip on my wrist spoke of desperation. I wanted to pull away. I wasn't sure what alarmed me more: this man's tale of impending catastrophe or the fervor in his eyes."***

They had the bases loaded, and their second-best hitter up at bat, when a loud clang from outside made me jump. I glanced out the window. Our gas grill had blown over in a gust from the incoming storm. Cursing, I ran outside to right the grill. With as dry as this fall had been, the last thing we needed was a fire.

After heaving the grill back to its position by the shed, my eyes wandered to the edge of our orchard. The nearest apple tree hung heavy with tart Granny Smiths. I shielded my face from the wind with one hand and ran over. One apple was a fair reward for interrupting the game.

I ran my hands over a few apples, peering at them in the dying evening light. They were nearly ripe. One apple drew my attention. I picked it, observing the dull, brown mottling on its underside. It wasn't a single bruise, like I often saw in fruit rot. Instead, it was a winding, irregular shape, like droplets of oil sinking into the pavement.

A sudden urge to drop the apple gripped me. The fervor in the so-called time traveler's eyes and the thick rattle of his cough flashed across my memory. I wanted to wipe my hands on my jeans, to rub them with soap and water until my fingers pruned. No. I was being foolish. How many apples had I previously touched that had rot?

But this one was different.

Wasn't it?

No. It wasn't.

I hesitated, looking out over the apple orchard and the corn fields beyond. He'd raved about a deadly fruit mite with an anguished desperation, claiming his life work was not yet complete.

*Burn it. Burn everything for five acres on either side.*

I imagined my fields up in flames. I could almost see billows of smoke stretching towards the darkening sky. An eerie shudder ran across my shoulders. What did he know about one's livelihood, about feeding one's family?

If he even was a time traveler—such things don't exist.

I brought the apple inside, tossed it in the trash. Feeling foolish, I removed the trash bag. I double-bagged it, took it outside. Then I stowed it in the metal trash can and dragged the bin out to the road. Surely that was enough.

By the time I came back inside, the game was over. A loss, eight to nine. I shook my head. "Better luck next time."

I turned out the lights and went upstairs to bed.





## Matti Ben-Lev **Phosphene**

I'm standing next to my mom, overlooking the Rocky Beach in Varkiza, Greece. I'm nine. The air smells of clean salt. Sun beaming at the translucent water, drawing its sparkle. Children giggling below us, out of sight.

We're getting some one-on-one time on this vacation; my mom and I haven't had much time together since my little sister was born.

"I don't want to forget this moment," I say, eyes fixed on the magnificent water, the beach's smooth stones, the white foamy curtains holding tight and letting go. "But I know I'll forget."

My mom grins.

"I can teach you how to take a picture—"

"I know how to take a picture, Mom," I smirk, and gesture toward our beige beach bag, containing my disposable KODAK camera. "But I want to remember the smells and the sound of the waves and how the sun feels on my face."

***"I want to remember the smells and the sound of the waves  
and how the sun feels on my face."***

"You didn't let me finish. I can teach you how to take a picture with your mind."

She grabs my shoulders, turns my whole body towards the ocean, tells me to stand still and observe.

"Notice what you smell. Notice what you hear. Notice what colors you see: what's standing still, what's moving. Now make an L-shape with each hand, close one eye, and take the picture."

I notice. I form an L-shape with each hand. I close one eye.

"Hear the click," she says. "Now close your eyes and look at your picture."

I close my eyes. The sun's glare dances on the insides of my eyelids. The glimmer fades, like wiping sand off a stone, revealing my moving image.

"Now open your eyes—how accurate is your picture?"

The picture is almost perfect.

"Now do it again."

When I said I never wanted to forget this moment, I meant I never wanted to forget this time, this moment *together*.

I still have the moving picture, twenty years later: The sea of children cackling, cracking like a tide rippling; the humming gulls, gliding over the water, like smooth froth; the azure waves pulling in so fiercely it appeared they'd never release, and then thrusting water toward the rocks like a hug—holding tight and letting go.



Katie Kenney

# Parasitic Parasocialism and Other Girlie Pop Philosophies

Him? Oh, he's a bleeding heart  
cinophile deep-throated art lover.  
You're just celebrity obsessed, chronically  
online, a bit bratty, but did he know  
Batman when he was indie and blue  
covered in diamonds, Clair de Lune?  
Taylor Swift *did you see her stomach?*  
Babies! Please, no babies  
we are only thirty-four unfolding  
*Teen Vogue* posters from collaged boxes  
Liam! Oh, Liam. We lost him  
too soon fifteen is to love  
everything ironically & so desperately  
it's satire for the satirically hysterical,  
Did he get it? Does he know? You've been  
in on the joke since you were breathing.  
A baby girlie no more, hey you're bleeding.  
*Well what do you think of RFK*, he asks  
defiantly, you puke in your mouth a little bit.

Konstantinos Patrinos

# Helena

I watch you slurping your dripping  
ice cone holding it close to you like a wonder your eyes  
almost crossed on the strawberry ice cream  
how you forget  
yourself in this simple act  
and I want to remember  
your small head and thin hair  
and your tiny hands and your tiny nostrils  
pulling and pushing air in rhythm patterns  
I can't predict  
and I want to remember  
all the minuscule microscopic sub-atomic  
bits of you  
and your electrons too  
going crazy around your nuclei in the haze of  
probability clouds that I can not see  
but are there and are probably the same as those  
of the air you displace by simply  
being here  
the same as those  
of the clouds I point for you to marvel at  
and the same as those between  
earth and moon  
and of the stars too  
that sit all by themselves in the vastness of space

## Leslie Harrison & Jeannie Vanasco, co-judges **Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award**

Hannah Nathan Rosen was a rising senior English major and creative writer at Towson University when she died unexpectedly in January 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the Department of English. Both of us had Hannah as a student in her last semester at TU, and we adored her and admired her writing and her courage. It is an honor to be able to administer this prize on behalf of the college, the university, and Hannah's family.

The prize gives a financial award to a creative writing student whose work in either creative nonfiction or poetry (Hannah's two loves) is outstanding, and who has senior status. Our hope is that this award will make a gifted writer's journey and transitions after graduation a little easier.

This year's winner is Findley Eve Holland.

## Findley Eve Holland **Buttertubs**

Buttertubs was surrounded by water. The marsh, the lakes, the streams, the creeks, the Pacific all entrapping us to this house on this island.

We would stand on the shore and look at the mainland, watching the boats and the ghosts in the shallows. Watching the dried jellyfish get eaten by the rising tides, throwing sand dollars into the surf when they start getting too pale.

Everything smelled like salt and rot, yet it was fresh. The smell of mushrooms sprouting on the deer carcass we found in the woods across the streets. The smell of the oysters being cooked over the fires with blue driftwood flames.

There was no one around at Buttertubs, but we were never alone. Racoons and foxes would come to our yard and school would go into lockdown over cougars and wolves at the playground and we would stand at the window, waiting for them to leave.

When people say they don't believe in ghosts or spirits, I know they've never been to Buttertubs. To Nanaimo, to our island in the Graveyard of the Pacific, where fog penetrates your skin and the wind speaks in riddles and songs and the rocks hiding under the surf chew up boats before they even know they're sinking. Where people travel from around the world to surf and ski and rock climb and hike and freeze to death down abandoned logging roads when the rain sets in, and the car battery dies.

In Buttertubs, we ate salmon on bagels and squash in soup and we sat at the window watching the hail and told stories about the rain and the mountains and the ocean. About them waiting to wipe us all away and reclaim their salty lands.

## Jason M. Thornberry **Negative For Any Bleed**

I stood in the middle of a moonlit street, kicking passing cars in my boxer shorts. And when I kicked a white Camaro, two men jumped out. At least that’s what my girlfriend, Lindsey, told my mother—in the intensive care unit. When I woke up eight days later, I couldn’t remember that awful night or the long road leading me there—the years and months, the weeks and days, ribbons of time unfurling themselves in a vivid pile beside my hospital bed.

I was a struggling musician—and I’d just played my biggest concert. My bandmates and I performed alongside Eminem, the Black Eyed Peas, Ice-T, Blink-182, and others on a muggy July afternoon in front of several thousand people. This concert resulted from a dozen years spent performing in every conceivable setting. Except now, it felt like my music had gained a different momentum, hurtling beyond the garages and rehearsal studios, the patios, parties, bars, cafés, college campuses, nightclubs, and theaters into which I’d immersed myself, hustling and paying my dues. An appearance on the Vans Warped Tour 1999 was the perfect starting point—the perfect beginning of a new life. I was ready to tour the United States and the world—to live on the road, to make music professionally. I lived so close to my dream that its shape infiltrated the structure of my reality.

Leading to that night, I lived with bandmates in Costa Mesa, California. As a trio, we crammed ourselves into a studio apartment. I slept on the floor in a corridor leading to the toilet. Subsisting this way allowed us to concentrate on our music in ways impossible for my other bands. Deep-rooted, intractable obscurity dogged every band I’d ever played with. I was determined to change that. I played the drums for alternative rock bands, for punk, post-punk, and hardcore bands, and a surf rock trio. One of my bands was scouted by major labels, and another by a series of indies. Others existed in the basement of namelessness—the one-offs, the side projects, the forgettable assemblies. And I was going nowhere until I started a band called The Pressure.

The Pressure’s future was incandescent. After years of trial and error, we came together to do things differently. Ronnie, Dana, and I lived for The Pressure; we spent every waking moment working toward our dream of making music the focus of our lives. Apart from my girlfriend, I had time for nothing else.

Lindsey had recently moved from Anaheim to Long Beach. Outside her house was where I stood, freed from my clothes, drunkenly battering cars. The men emerging from that white Camaro beat me into the outer reaches of a coma, punting my head against the curb until they figured I was dead. Someone at Lindsey’s house called the police; the police called an ambulance.

My diagnosis was simple—and it was complicated: traumatic brain injury. My medical chart was specific:



County of Los Angeles                      Department of Health Services

RANCHO LOS AMIGOS NATIONAL REHABILITATION CENTER

DATE OF DICTATION: 09/20/99                      DATE OF TRANSCRIPTION: 09/20/99

SERVICE: ADULT BRAIN INJURY

DATE OF ADMISSION: 09/20/99

**CHIEF COMPLAINT:** Status post traumatic brain injury secondary to blunt head trauma, admitted for acute rehabilitation and continued medical care.

**HISTORY OF PRESENT ILLNESS:** 28-year-old white male status post blunt head trauma on 7/24/99 admitted to St. Mary's Medical Center. Head GCS on the field was three. The patient was comatose in the emergency room. CT of the head was negative for any bleed. Remained comatose for approximately eight days. Repeat CT was negative for any pathology as per chart, but the patient sustained anoxic encephalopathy with left upper and lower extremity weakness and contracture. Patient is only recently able to follow commands and cooperate with therapist. Patient had left upper extremity cast placed to prevent contracture. Patient had been intubated on admission and had self-extubated on day number four. Patient also had a right cheek laceration, which was repaired. Patient treated in the Intensive Care Unit with Levaquin. Patient developed multiple pressure ulcers on the occipital and bilateral seat. Patient required a PEG placement for feeding which was done on 08/10/99.

**SOCIAL HISTORY:** The patient lived with two roommates in an apartment. As per mother, no smoking and drug history; however positive ethanol use. Patient was intoxicated on admission to St. Mary's Medical Center. Apparently, the patient worked as an administrative assistant and played in a rock-and-roll band.

REVIEW OF SYSTEMS:

The patient is nonvocalizing. However, as per mom, no complaints.

NAME: Jason Thornberry                      R#: 025-11-20                      WARD #: 2 South

The Pressure's debut album *Things Move Fast* was released the day after I was attacked in July of 1999. I spent four months in the hospital, celebrating New Year's Eve and the end of the twentieth century in a wheelchair with a cast on my arm—the only light from a flickering television in my mother's den, where I sat alone, counting down the minutes, wondering what the future held for me.



Ivy Choe  
**Say, Can You See?**  
Mixed media



## Jessica Furtado Monster Disco

Sitting in the theater next to my father,  
I cried for Godzilla – the beastly treatment  
of a beast born for destruction.  
And whose fault was it  
but the very humans raining death  
down on a disco of shimmering scales?

My best/worst trait is empathy,  
a heart so open that it holds  
a city spacious enough for monsters  
to dance like no one's watching them  
take out whole communities  
with a careless two-step.

I've been both the reptile  
and the pavement buckling beneath  
his mammoth feet. Superstition  
concedes: *step on a crack and break  
your mother's back*,  
but what if you are the rift  
you're meant to avoid?

I once built a city in my heart  
for a boy who moved in  
and outgrew it like Alice  
tearing the roof off to fit  
his ambition. He, too, was monstrous  
in the way of children who shriek  
when they don't get their way.

All of this is to say that Godzilla  
was just like any of us trying  
to get through the day unbothered,  
the sun ricocheting off skyscrapers  
in millions of tiny mirrors  
that introduced him to a face  
he could surely love.



Sarah Burrier  
**Call of Cthulhu**  
*Digital art*



Evan H. Brisson

Captcha

the city  
cracks  
glistens  
crumbles  
to white  
ash  
then is  
stubbornly  
reborn  
as I stare  
into the  
screen  
trying to  
decide  
what is  
bicycle  
and  
what is  
not  
bicycle



Joel Harris

Welcome to the Plasticene

Semen is a miraculous fluid

A single teaspoon can contain hundreds of  
millions of motile sperm countless vitamins citric acid prostaglandins  
proteins and yes for anyone curious up to 25 calories

But lately

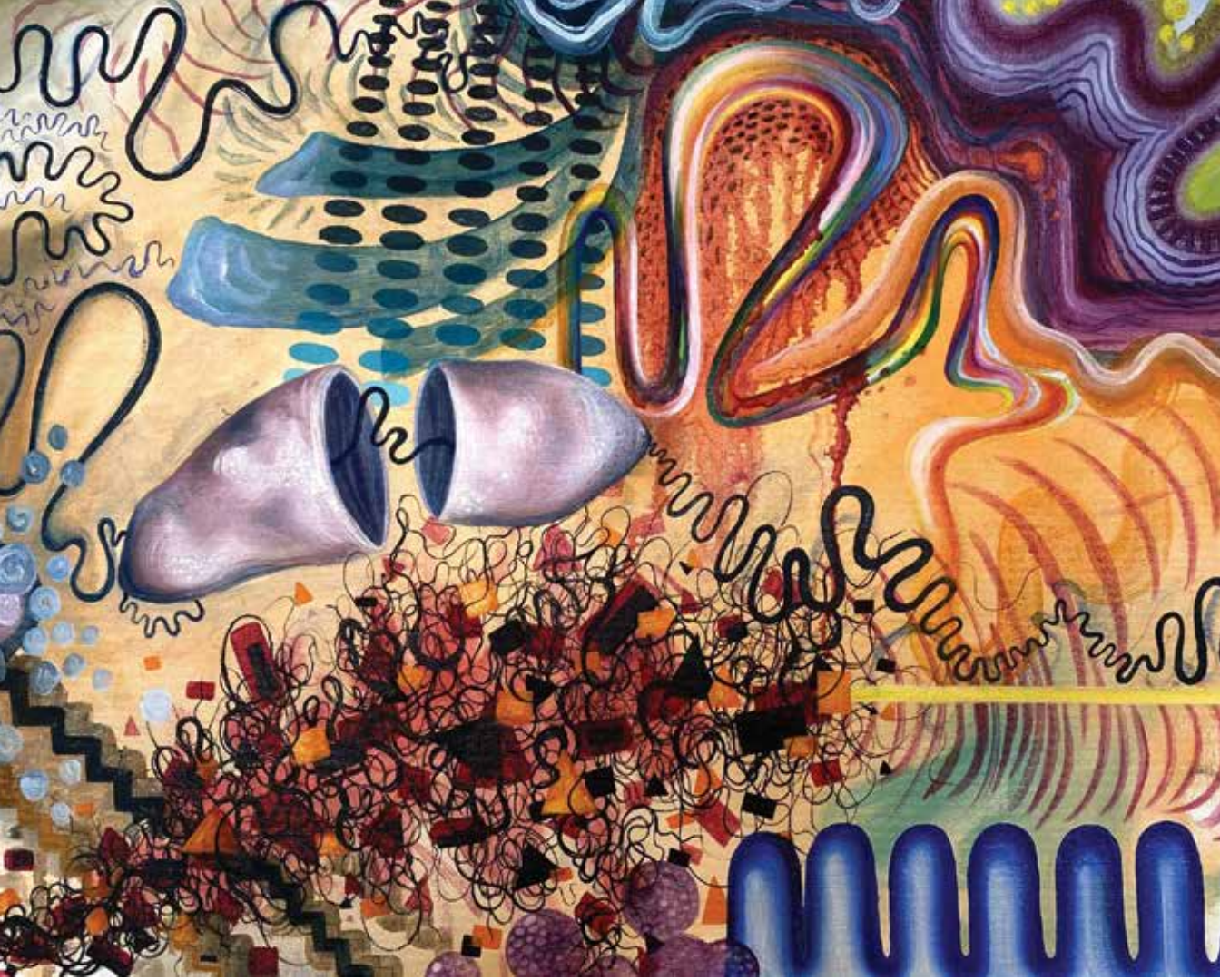
scientists have been finding something troubling:

plastics

This is a found poem\* taken from the following source:

Franklin-Wallis, Oliver. "Scientists Are Finding Microplastics in Testicles, Potentially Causing Infertility. What Can We Do About It?" British GQ, June 28, 2024. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/are-microplastics-in-semen-and-testicles-causing-infertility>.

\*According to the Academy of American Poets, a pure found poem consists exclusively of existing texts. The words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form are left to the poet.



Lorin Drexler  
**COMPLAINT**

SXRATCH	SCRXTCH	SCRATXH	SCRATCX
SUCH A DENSE TWEET SHOW ALL THE WRAPPED	A THING LITTLE YOUR OTHER UNDER	XXXX <i>REQUIRED</i> <i>BIRD</i> <i>FUCKING</i> <i>SHIT</i> <i>THE</i>	WOR/_D. TO LOVE. TWEET— FACE.  UMBRELLA.
WE TOOK INDIGENOUS, THE A NOW ALL	A FUCKING TREE WE TALK	SIMPLE AND WINDOW. WITH ABOUT IS	WOR/_D, THREW IT OUT COMPLICATING INDUSTRY. <i>WHAT IF</i> SIMPLICITY.
<b>i-have-a</b> INSIDE EVERYTHING	<b>COMPLAINT.</b> ABSURD 2ND-HAND THE UNDESERVED	<i>for what is there.</i> CHAIN GRANDEUR NOTHING.	LOOK REALLY. REACTION. UPDOWNOUT. MIND
FILLED BEAUTIFULLY,	WITH DERIVATIVE.		NOT SIMPLY, THERE.
WAITING WAITING ITS	TO BRING COM	FOR THE PROMISE.	REBOOT. WOR/_D WAITING, SIMPLY.

Madison Lane  
**A Day in the Life**  
*Oil on canvas*





Brett Stout

## Where Vacant Eyes Meet Broken Landscapes

Mixed media collage

## Kathleen Seltzer I Went to Jail

My three children moved out of the family home years ago. I was glad they were living their own lives, but I'm left with a freezer stuffed full of dead pets. The frozen hamsters, guinea pigs, birds, mice, reptiles, and a few fish, are preserved in elaborately decorated boxes and Ziploc bags. Some of them have been there for over thirty years.

The dogs, cats, and rabbits have all been professionally cremated. Their remains would have been too big for the freezer. Their ashes are in small, tasteful containers lined up on my bookshelves. My children and I, usually a harmonious group, could never agree on where to bury our beloved dead pets. They had heartfelt questions.

"What if we moved, would we exhume their bodies or leave them behind?"

I suggested a funeral pyre in our backyard fire pit. They were not in favor of that idea, watching their furred, feathered, and scaled friends in flames would be too much for them. So, the dead have remained frozen in the freezer. And now that my children are grown, I approached them again with my thoughts.

"The poor dead animals have been through a lot," I said. "During the big hurricanes and huge snowstorms when we lost power, they defrosted and refroze, defrosted and refroze."

We were on a Zoom call, so I could see their faces and knew they were horrified.

"I just bought a new freezer and I buy a lot of frozen foods. There's only room for one Newman's Own Organic Frozen Pizza, one Amy's Organic Mexican Specialty and some organic frozen vegetables. I need more variety. I can barely squeeze in a pint of Häagen-Dazs coffee ice cream. And the souls of those poor animals are not at rest. Believe me, they're demanding to be buried. My ice cream always has freezer burn. That's no accident."

"Do what you need to do," the three of them said. "We trust your judgment."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll be in touch."

The next morning, I put on my favorite black gardening dress with two deep pockets. There were clouds and a fine mist, perfect for a funeral. I gathered all the frozen dead in large plastic containers and lugged them out to the backyard. I thought I'd go back inside for my coffee and a quick bite to eat. Then I'd dig the graves and call the children for the service.

I sat down to write a eulogy mentioning each beloved pet by name. Eating and writing took longer than I expected. The weatherman had said cloudy and cool, but when I went back outside, it was sunny, steamy, and in the nineties. I had to get the graves dug and the bodies into the ground.

I took a deep breath and felt a surge of positive energy guiding me. I was doing the right thing. I was putting the souls of our deeply loved dead pets to rest. I don't know any prayers; I'm a semi-Buddhist. I closed my eyes and sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, to create a peaceful setting. The song wasn't perfect for the occasion, but right enough.

Then, like an evil fury from the depths of hell, Bud, my crazy barefoot neighbor, wearing a t-shirt and boxer shorts, came bounding out of his house. He ran up and down the property line, brandishing a garden hose, threatening me, and calling the police on his phone. He put it on speaker.

"She's burying something in the yard, can't tell what. This is an emergency, a crime!"

I was calm. "Everyone buries their pets in their backyard," I told the two policemen when they showed up. Bud was having a screaming fit and appeared insane, so I explained.

"My hysterical neighbor, a man with no life, has made me the focus of his unhappiness."

"Your neighbor called to say you were burying something," one policeman said.

"She's building a fucking cemetery!" Bud yelled.

"I can see it out my window, I can see it on the way to my front door, ruining my property value. Look at all those headstones!"



"The headstones are very small," I said. "Bud is an angry man. He threatened me with his garden hose."

The two policemen took notes. Bud, a man with no self-control, raged on.

*"My hysterical neighbor, a man with no life, has made me the focus of his unhappiness."*

"Here are the details," I said. "Bud was in a state. I was on my own property, digging a hole. He turned on the hose, threatening to attack me. All I had were the bodies of my dear dead family pets. I had to defend myself. First, I sang a song, 'The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow,' thinking that would drive him back inside his house. That didn't work so I had no choice. I pelted him with the pets. They'd been in the freezer for years. Apparently, they'd semi-defrosted and now they were all squishy. I had no idea they would explode on contact. I have good aim, so every throw was a direct hit. Then he turned the hose on himself to wash off the remains. My children are going to be very upset when they learn parts of the animals are stuck to him. I was glad he called you guys."

The police were confused. I was standing placidly on my own lawn. Bud was soaking wet, and covered with bits of fur, scales, and innards. The smell was terrible. I was the voice of reason. I smiled. My hair was cut short. I looked warm, friendly, non-threatening, and nun-like in all black.

"Bud doesn't like me because I sing in the shower and really everywhere. He claims he can hear me. The man must have supersonic hearing. He hates show tunes and that's what I sing."

I sing a few lines of a song from the show *Wicked*. Bud starts to scream as if he's on fire. The cop asks me to stop.

I put my hand into one of the deep pockets of my dress. There's a lot of dirt in there and I pull out a handful.

"This is pure gold. I'm putting my pets to rest in the most fertile soil in the neighborhood," I say to

the officers and my music-hating neighbor. "I grow the very best tomatoes."

I try the other pocket and pull out some bones and a small skull I found on a trail walk. The officer took a step back. I could tell he was the kind of person who'd watched too many horror movies.

"What's that you got there?" he asked.

"Bones. I draw them, take photos. I'm an artist."

"My sister's an artist," he said. "She paints pretty things, flowers, sunsets."

The policeman pointed to the small headstones on the ground and the bones in my hand.

"You put them in the ground and then dig them up?" he asked.

"No, of course not. I find bones in the woods and if I find a small dead animal, I put the body in a safe place and wait for it to decompose. I let nature do Her job."

I could tell he didn't understand because he and his partner arrested both of us, unable to figure out who was the guilty party. I commended them on a very King Solomon-like decision.

"I need to get back home quickly," I told the policemen when they booked me. "There are body parts on Bud's lawn, and more bodies are in the plastic containers. I need to retrieve them before the stray cats get to them. I need to call my lawyer."

They handed me a greasy phone and I called my old boyfriend, Doug, who was a lawyer. He was disbarred, but that was years ago. In his wild youth, he'd been caught with two pounds of hashish hidden in the car he was trying to drive across a tricky border in Turkey. Over time, he'd lived his life as if the arrest had never happened.

On my first date with Doug, I told him my three children had three different fathers, each from a different country. He told me about his drug smuggling ordeal. I liked his honesty and was happy to be dating a lawyer. I enjoyed hearing about rich people's prenuptials and complicated divorce settlements: Like who got the dog, the vacation house in the Hamptons, the private chef, and how sometimes neither parent wanted the kids.

"How'd you get to practice law again?" I asked him.

"I just thought my disbarment away. I have a strong mind, great willpower. I can make things happen with extreme concentration."

"Can you make my water glass levitate?" I asked, wanting to give him a real test.

"I save my tricks for the bedroom," he said.

I'm attracted to confident men. A little bit of danger turns me on. I like to be surprised. Throw me on the bed, press me to the floor, take me in the bathroom of a restaurant. I don't like any sweet mushy small talk. Give me heat, drama. My life was so boring. I needed him to spice things up. He never got tired. Maybe, when we had sex, he was thinking, that he could, at any moment, be apprehended. So, for him, every time we did it, it had to be spectacular because he thought he might never get to do it again.

The sex was good for me; other things were not. Doug dressed in all black, wore dark glasses, a wool cap and scarf. His collar was always turned up and he only took off his gloves during sex. He perspired. We ate in cheap restaurants. He only used cash, no credit cards. We never vacationed out of the country or the state.

But, in the end, he was too slippery for me. I loved my children. A criminal boyfriend would not have been good for their moral development, even if he was a lawyer. I broke up with him. When I made the call from the police station, I hadn't seen Doug for years, but he came through and got me released. I invited him back to my house for a proper thank you.

We heard Bud had a bad asthma attack and spent the day in the hospital. That was good. Not that I wished Bud harm, but it meant Doug and I were able to pick up the animal parts that were on Bud's property.

The dead were a mess, even the ones I didn't throw. Sun can do that. I decided to dig one large hole with different compartments. Even in death, I thought, each animal might like a bit of privacy. Doug was a big help.

It was late afternoon and still ninety degrees. I gathered my children onto Zoom for the funeral. I appreciated that Doug stood away from the camera. He turned up his collar and turned down the brim of his hat disappearing into the shade of a big tree. We all wept as I spoke about each one

of our departed pets by name. It was the most together we'd been in years.

Jen Hallaman

A Cardinal Flies Low to the Ground

It is 8:30 p.m., and God  
has granted me a half hour or so  
to walk laps 'round the four blocks

encircling my brick house.  
It is 8:30 p.m., and the baby has decided to sleep,  
allowing me to walk laps  
'round the four blocks encircling my house  
while my husband pan-fries salmon.

It is 8:30 p.m., but a July kind of 8:30 p.m., you know?  
The sun is hardly setting; for the first time all day, the neighborhood oaks provide  
enough shade to ease the Anthropocene swelter. It's been so hot,  
I'm worried my alt-right neighbors finally prayed the world's way  
to the second coming. I'm too busy walking laps to contemplate  
the prospect of heaven, which in itself tells me  
which way I'm headed – but if 8:30 is the End Time,  
at least I'll go down all aglow with evening.

It is just past 8:30 p.m., and I spot a cardinal  
flying low to the ground in the yard of a house  
whose otherwise neat flowerbeds are combusting

with purple hydrangeas  
It is after 8:30 p.m., and the cardinal  
is flying away, and I am swimming  
in the evening breeze. I am damp  
with stubborn humidity. I smell  
like sweat and tear-free shampoo,  
& when I catch a whiff of my own skin,  
I miss my daughter.

I have passed by the combustion of purple hydrangeas  
no fewer than five times, & the cardinal  
has not returned. He is not tied to these four blocks,  
or to any brick house, I imagine.  
I hope he finds whatever he is looking for. I have

walked something like seven laps.  
My half hour is almost up. Before,  
I'd have written a different poem.  
Waxed on about flying away

after skimming the Earth's surface, bursting free  
from a flowerbed & blooming, uncontained  
for the summer, unconcerned  
with anything that bloomed before me,  
or anything that might bloom after.

## Eddie Jeffrey Molting

At some point the police will get involved. A detective will come to Angela's house and will look at her pictures of Shanya, but he will not write down in his wrinkled, leather-clad notebook that the child's green eyes seem to flutter like newly molted katydids taking wing against the deep burnished luster of her mahogany skin, that her smile shines a gleaming halo beyond the smolder of her dark, wavy red hair, binding the world around her like another kind of skin. Being a policeman, he will be blind to these thoughts hovering in the ether for anyone to snatch and hold close to their heart, and he will jot his notes instead in a tightly scrawled hand: bulleted, terse, detached, mechanical.

He will know the outcome even as he sits there in the young woman's cramped, breathless living room listening for details through her muted sobbing. Tears will form at the corners of her crinkled eyes and roll in single file down her high, rounded, alabaster cheeks like a string of tiny translucent pearls falling free from a broken necklace. They will wash over him and they will harden, forming a new layer atop the crust of old tears that has grown about him; the years have been long, and the stories seldom good. But, he will play the staunch epitome of police professionalism and he will look for this lost girl. He will file his reports. He will do his due diligence knowing the girl is already gone, that they will never find her. There will be many questions that follow, all unanswered, that will flutter in their minds from time to time through the years like a host of wilted, crumbling chrysalises tossed about by a nagging wind through a field of tall, jagged-edged grass, but none that will not have been asked already with the darkness gathering about them in that stale, worn-out room.

And one morning, with this all far behind her, Angela will come home from another long night at her job scrubbing toilets and pushing

brooms, stooped and gray with bulging rheumatic knuckles, her once bright skin now sallow and spotted with the soot of accumulating age, to find her house aflame and burning a hole in a torn tissue paper sky, and something will twitch inside her then, something small, the slight shift of wind that sets off an avalanche, and she will run down the street screaming "My baby! My child! Somebody please! My baby!" and her neighbors, whose houses stand alongside hissing and smoking and faintly aglow, will part before the mad woman, will let her pass to fall dead on her face—a tiny, crumpled cinder silhouetted against the furious tormenting blaze—standing wide-eyed and trembling with questions of their own.

So what do we know? We know that on that day during recess Shanya finds herself wandering the chain-link fence at the edge of the playground, lets the fingers of her left hand trail a jagged stuttering Staccato over the interlocking diamond shaped aluminum wire (catch-release-catch-release-catch-release-catch-release) until she comes to the corner with the ancient corroded hole torn in it, where she is blocked from plain view of the squad of halfheartedly vigilant teachers standing near the cafeteria doors by the ramshackle maintenance shed squatting behind her. In the distance she can hear the shouts and pounding feet of the other children, the metallic squeaking of the swing sets and the thudding bounce of giant red rubber balls against hard tamped earth as she squeezes herself through the gap in the fence. Her heart skips once, and then she is free.

We know she crosses the street. We know she ducks down an alley and disappears. We know it is because she does not want to see Jesse Cutter anymore. He is the boy who tormented her. It is also because of her recent encounter with the

principal, Mrs. Iverson. Tall and hulking in her stiff polyester suits, she wears horn-rimmed glasses on a chain around her neck that seem to serve only to magnify her stern, bulging eyes, and the slack half-moons of the chain, swaying limply back and forth against her cheeks, are like dead worms floating on the surface of puddles after a hard rain.

We know the alley opens up onto a ragged square of communal laundry lines strung between two long blocks of faded row houses, that the laundry hanging there billows out in the late morning breeze like full sails on a concrete ship to nowhere, that the air is tinged with the smell of detergent and bleach, making her feel a warmth having nothing to do with the rising of the sun. She takes off running through the hanging clothes as if she were engaged in a giant game of peek-a-boo, flitting from shadow to shadow, playing tricks on herself and the pale waning moon hanging high in the sky, and that a smile spreads wide and tight across her face. But the question we must ask is that in that moment—does Shanya let go with her lungs, with her soul-empowered tongue? Or does she use her smile, as she takes that final step from the darkness into the light, to hold her girlish screams deep, deep inside?

That afternoon finds Angela sitting in an uncomfortable wooden chair in the administrative office of Woodlawn Elementary anxiously waiting to see Mrs. Iverson. A fat boy in a red and white striped shirt with a dirty face is mouthing off to Ms. Peachtree, the wizened spinster who has worked the reception desk even before Angela was in pigtails and knee-socks there.

"You don't know nothin'," he says.

"I know you are in trouble, *Mister* Dolan, and that it is getting to be a habit." Ms. Peachtree is nothing if not precise, giving equal emphasis to each syllable, deliberately pronouncing the last letter

of each word in a raspy, melodic, up-and-down voice that sounds like a rusty steel drum. *You are going to end up in a jail one of these days, you nasty little boy*, Ms. Peachtree thinks behind her dark eyes. "Wait until your parents hear about this."

Angela avoids Ms. Peachtree's glance and the subtle knowing nod the older woman seeks, the affirmation of righteousness Angela cannot offer her. The years that should stand as a barrier between them have fallen in Angela's mind and she, feeling like a child again, can no more share in this secret affirmation than can a moth. So she stares instead at the floor, at the doorknob, at the paint chips peeling from the ceiling, trying her best to be invisible, to not think of all the terrible things that might come next.

We know that the day before, the child came hobbling in through her kitchen door with her right shoe tucked under her arm and the left strap of her sundress torn and dangling in a nervous arc over her flat, prepubescent chest.

She said, "It's OK, mama!" in that defensive, bravely-fearful way children do, seeing the panic in her mother's face as the plate she had been cleaning slipped from her hands back into the sink, sending suds flying into the air and splashing over the countertop.

Angela fell to her knees at that point, held the girl at arm's length and inspected her mussed hair and knotted brow, her bleary eyes and bloody nose, her scratched cheeks and skinned knees.

"What happened?"

"Jesse Cutter called me a ni—" Shanya said, but Angela cut her off before she could finish uttering the foul word.

"Hush," she said, trying to both comfort and admonish.

"I'm just tellin' you what he called me, mama!" Shanya squealed. Because her brave, brave armor



was cracking, Angela warmly placed her hand on the back of the girl's neck and said, "I know, baby, I know. But you don't talk like that. You're beautiful. You're mine."

But Shanya broke free and stood there on the yellowing linoleum tile shivering in a fury.

"I told him not to do it again," she yelled, "but he wouldn't listen! He just kept callin' me it and callin' me it all the way home and he made it into a song and he wouldn't stop so I kicked him and then he pushed me down and I grabbed him and bit him and he hit me and pulled my hair and..." she broke down rambling, finally, and the words all rolled into one.

*Ten year olds fight dirty*, Angela thought as she hugged the sniffling, babbling, tender ball of blood and dirt and snot as close as she could to her without smothering it, and fought the wild jolt of unbidden laughter that bubbled up through her with her own hot, salty tears. Because it wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all.

After peroxide winces and a bath, Shanya sat on the floor in front of the couch between her mother's legs while Angela leaned over her, teasing her hair out and brushing it back down. There was no fussing, no whining, no yelling, no threatening. The usual struggle was abandoned that night. They just sat there, mother and daughter, performing a timeless ritual—wordless, thoughtless, caught up in the feel and the sound of a brush moving through hair over and over and over again.

That night Shanya went to bed early and Angela read to her from *The Ugly Duckling*, her favorite story until only a few years ago when she had begun reading for herself, another sign and reminder of her ever-loosening hold on Angela's apron strings and the slow interminable awkward shrugging dance of life's metamorphosis. But that night she tightened her grip, reached back for the comfort of her mother and the trappings of a childhood that were already slipping away, and when Angela was sure Shanya was asleep, she leaned forward and planted a kiss on the child's bruised forehead, placed the book on the bedside table, switched the light off, removed herself from the room feeling thin and

weightless. She pulled the door closed, let the latch slip noiselessly home, and floated down the narrow hallway, her cold, trembling feet gliding across the naked hardwood floor and away from a life that could no longer be hers.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs the phone rang.

*"The usual struggle was abandoned that night. They just sat there, mother and daughter, performing a timeless ritual, wordless, thoughtless, caught up in the feel and the sound of a brush moving through hair over and over and over again."*

"You need to keep that little rabies-infected bitch daughter of yours on a leash!"

The harsh voice tore through the receiver and scattered across Angela's kitchen like needles through a rain stick.

She knew it was Mrs. Cutter. Who else could it have been? But she could not muster a fitting response. She felt like a stone lying worn, flat, and rounded at the bottom of a deep flowing river, cut off from the world by a raging, white-capped foam; so she stood there dumbly pressing the phone to her ear and stared blankly at her refrigerator lost in Shanya's latest progress report. It was covered in red and blue and green and gold stars.

The voice took no notice and continued unabated as Angela tried imagining Mrs. Cutter in her own kitchen. She only saw knives and a floating, screaming mouth. She tried again and again with Mrs. Cutter vacuuming the carpet in her living room; in her bedroom putting away shoes; planting flowers around her house; at the grocery store buying milk; filling up her gas tank;

eating dinner at a restaurant. She was only able to fully visualize the woman seated on a toilet, feet propped up on the edge of a filthy bathtub, painting crooked toenails a slick, sticky red.

She hung up.

She made tea. She sat at her kitchen table. The only light on in the whole house was the one over the stove. In all that darkness, in that soft, tiny glow, she went back to that day down in her grandmother's basement when she had let Darrell go all the way. She wondered what she had been thinking in that moment, knowing children do not think, knowing that the next moment, all the next moments, would be shut to her then just as they were now. Ten years gone and what did she know? She was still a child.

And she thought of Ida, her grandmother, and knew she had been the only thing Ida had had left after Angela's mother had died bringing her into the world. One final agonizing push and her mother had passed over right out there on the living room couch before hearing Angela's pink little lungs draw their first spluttering gasps, before hearing her wide toothless mouth and its shivering livid screaming.

And Angela thought of her grandmother lying cold in the ground surrounded by the darkness of the world; and she thought of this house, how it still held her smell. She felt that day still, knew it would always mark her, a covenant of which she had known nothing, and she felt Ida from across the divide and knew they were not so different even now.

Ida was there with her then, sitting next to her awash in the glow of the lamp, and Angela saw into her eyes, into her backward looking eyes, saw her grandmother in lost moments, arms raised to the heavens calling God down to His earthly altar, praying *what can I do with this child? Whose father was lost in a war in some faraway jungle? Whose mother, my own poor child, gave all that she had and died?*

And she saw how Ida had tried to give her the one thing her mother could not; had given what had remained for her to give. But when Angela's mother died, her one and only, something in Ida

had broken. And Angela saw in Ida's dead eyes the gentle malice of resentment she had carried for her through all those years, felt it even now, and knew she had grown up never figuring she had anything to lose.

When Angela turned up pregnant, she was fourteen and Ida would not look at her. When she finally spoke to her, Angela saw that her anger had gone. But, she saw now, it had been replaced by something else, something bitter and final that had settled into her bones like some ancient petrifying sediment.

"Such a waste, child," Ida had said across the breakfast table that morning. "Such a terrible, terrible waste," and the steaming, yeasty smell of the biscuits she had made earlier sitting cooling in a pan in the open window over the sink churned Angela's stomach. As Ida reached for her granddaughter's hand, the girl bolted out of her chair and ran down the hall. Ida could hear her straining herself in the bathroom, and she sat there at the table with her hands folded across her lap, solid stone resigned all the way through.

Angela saw this all through those flat, gray eyes, heard Ida's cold, chiding voice fading way across Jordan, heard a baleful, faltering chorus singing *Oh, come/Angel band/Come and/Around me stand* and found herself alone again in the kitchen but for a tepid, lonely, forgotten cup of tea.



## Sam Moe Fall

“Here am I. Send me!”  
Isaiah 6:8 New International Version (NIV)

1.

The deer is alone in the:  
A. Woods    B. House    C. Backroom at work    D. Basement

The hunter is a:  
A. Man    B. Woman    C. Animal    D. All of the above

She first tries to keep going like nothing is about to happen, because what is she going to do, react to every twig snap, tree-log scrape, shadow cast? The other animals make fun of how jumpy she is. They have never been hunted. If some of them have been hunted, it was so long ago that they no longer recognize a rifle from the branch of an oak tree.

The creature pursues her. She knows the feeling of his body pressed against her face, her limbs, everywhere else; she recognizes this lack of language: an emotionless pit in her mind. Beyond are dogwoods, soft and dark green. Patches of aster, bayberry, and poisonous doll’s eyes. She can feel the chokeberry. Her memories are leeches. There is no juniper, only rain glazing the soil, forming mud.

If she is alone in the forest, what happened to her?

If she spent time locked away in a crate of sorts, is it her fault for entering the woods?

And if nothing violent is happening, then why is she always covered in blood.

When you were younger, your body was eaten away daily by different men—and their hands were jaws and their bodies were voids, and sure you were bleeding, but that’s not the point. You fought with your mother in Central Park. How do you explain a grief which you do not understand? *Out all night. Everything warm. Numb.* When you arrived at your mother’s apartment, she told you to die for all she cared. Was that the moment your story stopped and hers began? You wonder if it’s possible to heal yourself. Your reflection in the lake beyond is obscured by easy yellow fish and you are afraid of the smooth river stones.

It takes a lot for you to be introspective; lately, you are floating through life. While you are floating, you are working; teaching, grading, talking with your colleagues and friends, editing a novel. It isn’t until you pick up an old journal, completed a few months ago, that you realize you have been dissociating for weeks on end. The prose is clear, emotionless, restrained. You write lists of what happened during the day; there are barely any details. Each journal entry ends with “I don’t know how I’m feeling” or “I don’t know why this is happening.” Now, you are in-between therapy sessions for the upcoming holiday, and you don’t know what any of this means. Your sessions are short—the typical hour, but still, it never feels like it’s enough. You spend most of the session doing EMDR. You like your new therapist; she’s kind. She asks you at the beginning of each session if there is anything from the week you want to talk about before it is time to close your eyes. You know if you say yes, you won’t be able to stop talking. The



stories will take up the whole session and you won't get to the EMDR portion, which you know you need to help with your PTSD.

Instead, you write essays, poems, and short stories about the abuse, self-harm, and chronic illness. The men (and one woman) in your memory are blurry; you can barely remember their features, just their actions.

2.

The therapist's office is small, with off-white walls and a lamp casting yellow light. You want to cry. You don't know why you're watching another show about a woman with PTSD. You wonder how the main character is dealing with everyone knowing what happened to her. When this happened to you, repeatedly, no one believed you. You know when you tell this story now, people won't believe you. Still. You dream, and in the dream her house is filled with doors. When you open the first door, it is filled with rivers and salmon, each stacked atop each other like ribbons. Door number two is oysters whose words are embossed with language from your poems. You can't read a thing except *no / no / no*. Rivulets of memory. You know this search. You recognize this topic, this wound. The vanity mirror door says *sorry*, empty today, no silver, yes squid ink and an octopus twisting around your fingers. The lower half of your body is numb. Lift the couch and find a chorus. Pour tea and her tennis bracelet spills. She appears in the living room, opens her sweater to show you the surgery marks on her stomach. Organs removed. Every line break is meaningless in the bright surface of her scars. Yours have turned light, translucent. When she finds out you're at it again, you fight in the parking lot of a school.

3.

Merritt Wever and Toni Collette don't know who you are. You've never spoken before, and you will never speak; you are not an actress or director. You are not a character in a movie. But when you see both are acting in the limited series, *Unbelievable*, you immediately burst into tears. Over the past two weeks, you have rewatched *Tiny Beautiful Things* ten times. You have rewatched *Hereditary* on and off. You ruminate about your relationship with your mother, how you will have to go home to see her, soon. How the two of you have what one might call a *complicated relationship*, but really, you know she used to hate you. If you upset her when you are back, she will slip easily back into hatred. You call her when you're in the parking lot at the grocery store to let her know you have finished reading Erika Krouse's memoir *Tell Me Everything*. You make small confessions to her with each piece of media shared. You think about telling her you were also raped. Once, when you were in New York City for winter break, you almost told her. On the corner of Amsterdam and Broadway, you had bonded over lunch, and when you asked her not to judge you for what you were eating, she obliged. The two of you have eating disorders that make you react in certain ways to each other. You remember she turned to you in her navy-blue jacket, coated in rain, and smiled. "What?" "I was just wondering something." The words rattled around in your mouth, and you swallowed them. "I was just wondering if you were going to read my memoir when it gets published," you ended up saying. She hit you lightly in the arm and said, "Of course, don't be ridiculous." You make plans to travel to New York City if your memoir ever gets published so you can find it and hide it behind other books. And then you will distract her until its presence fades away, and if she ever confronts you, you're going to lie. Sure, the rest of your family occasionally finds your writing online; but you highly doubt they will ever set foot in a bookstore, let alone look for your name. Still, you can't be too cautious.

You tell your mother a synopsis of Krouse's memoir. How it is a braid between her past and present; her own sexual violence, and a case she is helping to investigate. You realize this might be triggering your mother when she immediately starts talking about her past. "It's a common thing," she tells you. "When you're a child, these men are beyond reproach. They're older and they say you don't know what you're talking about. Grandma would yell at me all the time when I refused to go near the men. I was afraid of them." "You mean because of what happened to you?" You peel nail polish off your finger and watch rain slide off the windshield. You have no idea why you are the one continually interrogating her. She doesn't take it as such and seems happy for an excuse to discuss her trauma with someone who won't judge her. You have energy and are content to listen. "There was one man that was Grandpa's friend, and I remember he was really kind. He asked me if I wanted to play with the other kids and I said no, and he left me alone. I will never forget him." Meaning, she will never forget him because he didn't hurt her. Meaning, safety. You wonder if there are any men in your life like that. Including your partner, the majority of men you have spoken to have said something damaging or triggering to about your experiences. You carry their voices around in your head. They push your personality out.

The detectives in *Unbelievable* do not believe Marie's case. Marie's family members, friends, and coworkers know something is wrong with her; many suspect she is lying. Detective Parker asks her to recount her story repeatedly. During these conversations, a blue-hued flashback appears across the screen. You think about your own flashbacks, and the shapes they take. You didn't realize your memories were flashbacks until you started going to therapy again. Daily, you have dozens of memories which suddenly appear in your line of sight—if not more. Sometimes, they are movie stills of other women being raped. Sometimes they are of you. You can see yourself in the various locations and you watch your body as if you are a ghost or a director. When the flashbacks are especially intense, you must shake your head once to make them go away. Your colleagues begin noticing what you are doing, and they comment you are acting like a horse. You don't remember telling one of your best friends about what happened. You wonder if he inferred, read it in your writing, or perhaps you said something at random. Either way, he knows. You stand in his office and ask about the book he is reading. He tells you it has a lot of S.A. in it. Your first thought isn't to be triggered, or grateful, it's to be curious as to why he *thinks* that might be a trigger for you. Again, you don't remember telling him, but he knows. Your second thought is, *I need to read this book right now; I need to consume every piece of media which reflects these aspects of my life*. And so you spend the rest of the week reading a memoir a day, watching television shows about violence, and wondering why your mental health becomes a hot stove coil. At the beginning of the semester, you remember wanting to tell him. Nothing had happened in months, but you thought he might hold your story gently. You wondered if perhaps it would change the way he reacted to you. You hoped he would stop telling you to apologize. You wondered if he would be more patient. Lately, when you leave after having dinner or drinks together, he walks you to your car, even if it is only a few feet away, just in case. You recall he says he doesn't like to say he loves people; he believes his actions should show how he feels. Part of you wants to call this out. *You must love me if you're walking me to my car*. Instead, you tell him you love him, and he doesn't respond. Upon entering your car, you swear once, loudly, and hope he hasn't heard.



4.

Pressured into lying, Marie tells the two detectives she made it up. They comment about how people make stories up all the time. She continues to be affected by the violence as the show progresses. You wonder what would have happened if you'd had earlier access to language. Would anyone have believed you, or would your story remain the same? You told them to stop, and they didn't listen. You told your teachers, the school guidance counselor, your friends, your mother: something is *wrong*. Nobody listened.

A few weeks ago, in my class, after finishing James McBride's *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, my students get into an argument about whether we should have the death penalty. The conversation changes, leaps into discussions of whether abusive men should be sent to death.

*Women make things up all the time*, one of my students says.

*They do*, echoes another student whom I am helping through a Title IX case of her own. *They make things up and they ruin men's lives*.

I find I am unable to respond to anyone. I stand in the corner of the classroom for what feels like half an hour, but in reality, it has only been a couple of minutes, before there is a pause, and I speak. Then, I gently guide everyone through a conversation about consent, sexual violence, and the ways in which we refuse to believe victims. I think about how much I hate the word victim. I know I am shaking and I put my hands under my armpits. A student comes up to me with a yellow stress ball and says she thinks I need it and a glass of water. After class is over, I head to my office and cry for an hour before going home. Then, I cry in the car.

5.

Everyone comments on your eating disorder and your mother has an eating disorder and your cousin and your sister and your aunt and your grandmother have eating disorders, and your memory is a ringworm.

*I have trouble eating*, you tell a friend. They laugh loudly and say, *I know*. You wonder if time will make this funny.

At breakfast during Christmas morning, your stepbrother observes you and your sister having pancakes.

*I'm surprised you're both eating*, he says. *Because you don't know how*.

You say his name one time, but it's not enough to stop him.

*What? You don't*.

You hide in the bathroom and smoke a joint. *What, you? Don't. What, you don't? What? You, don't*.

You break apart his words as you hang your legs over the lip of the tub and inspect the mold, the vanilla shampoo, the tools. Your heart is a dish rag, and your history is blood. Does trauma make you a pessimist, or has your mind decayed to the point where there is only a pit of earth, soft to the touch, still craving sweetness? Like the time you thought there was a hole in a tooth when it should have been pale and white, and you took your mother's sewing needle and jabbed.

Hers is not your story to tell, so you won't. But here is a list of words in case you want to crack the door open: *crying; sobbing; hands; skips; failure; pain; bruising; hyperventilating; fear; avoidance; frustration; anger; exhaustion; crying; panic attack; awake*. Afterwards, you are alone, *crying; hitting the steering wheel as you drive home; every day, sobbing; every day, shaking hands; not allowed to speak about it; knowing when it happened to you, you didn't want to tell this story; begged the only person you knew to not report it; there is no more sleeping; there is no more eating*.

You are in your best friend's office again. Every time you tell him he is your best friend, he jokingly says you can only have one. You wonder if this is his way of telling you you're not his. You wonder why you

keep calling him that. He asks if you have eaten yet. You tell him no and he tells you to go have lunch. You think about how this is a loving question. Instead of telling him this, you go to your office to eat a tuna sandwich and start sobbing into your food.

6.

My therapist asks if I've been having crying spells. When I say yes, she checks a box on her checklist. Afterwards, she diagnoses me with PTSD and clinical depression. I already know these things. I wonder why she ignores me when I tell her about how my old therapist diagnosed me with *complex*-PTSD—how I have not only more than the initial number of symptoms, but different symptoms. I also tell her I was diagnosed with OCD, and she tells me we will take things one step at a time. She tells me if I start hurting myself, we need to pause EMDR. I have hurt myself a total of three times since we started EMDR about four weeks ago. I don't tell her I have relapsed and after a while, she stops asking. I wonder if she will be able to tell I am lying.

7.

Marie tries to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge into a river at night. You think about dying again, this time on a Wednesday.

All week I have been sick with a sinus infection. My primary care doctor knows I have a sinus infection. A nurse knows I have a sinus infection. My colleagues and friends begin asking me if I am lying. They tell me they are scared because whooping cough has started to spread through our university, and people are having breakthrough cases despite being vaccinated. One of my friends, a student I mentor, starts calling me sick. She says it more than ten times. *Because she's sick, because you're sick, yeah because you are fucking sick right now*. When she is out of the room, I tell my friends this is triggering. I am chronically ill; I am *always* sick. Forever sick. Each day, due to chronic pain and trauma, my body hurts. Each time she tells me I am sick, I am reminded of the hospital. Of yanking an IV out of my arm, much to the discontent of my mother and a nurse. "It's freaking me out because I *am* sick all the time," I tell everyone.

My best friend says everyone is worried because of whooping cough. They wonder if I am lying. I begin to wonder if I am somehow lying, too.

The researcher in me wants to look up how many cases of sexual violence are misreported or lied about. I look up the number, but it means nothing to me. It is in the single digits. I wonder how many of those cases have been manipulated out of telling the truth.

When I tell my therapist something my colleague/friend has told me—that after hearing about my history of being abused, he is afraid to be alone in the room with me—she gets angry. This is always something I appreciate about her. *They should know how many cases are actually made up*, she tells me. *There are more people falsifying break-ins than rapes*.

The next day, my best friend is frustrated with me. He tells me he agrees with my student, the one who continuously told me I was sick. I explain to him about my chronic illness and being disabled.

"The problem is, you should be staying home if you don't feel well," he is saying.

"I don't feel well *every day*. I can't just go home and skip school, unless I am contagious."

"Didn't you say one of your students has whooping cough?"

I immediately pull my phone out to look at the hospital report my student sent me.

"It was a case of the flu—you can look at my email if you want," I tell him.

“That sounds defensive.”

I don't know how to explain to him I am not being defensive. He has a tone that makes him sound mad at me. If I accuse him of this, he might get annoyed at me. Or worse, I might offend him. He might tell me, like he has in the past, that I am pushing people until they become frustrated. That I am asking him too many questions when he has his own trauma going on and he doesn't always have the capacity to hold space for my stories, too. All this makes sense; I don't have a problem with taking care when sharing my stories. My problem is I am burnt out and I currently incapable of reading people's moods and tones.

At dinner again, little blue pit, inaccessible as locked boxes, the drapes are translucent and billowing like hands. There are subcategories of creatures I should like to free, but I'm still learning how to release their little ginger pits. You have many ideas about paring knives and pearls, how to hit the rum of the throat until it hums just so. If you can't slice out my heart you'll settle for loosened flesh, the intuition which grows out of my chest. Even my tendons have died. No matter, the woman serves bowls of nectarines and plums. Pull my teeth into candy strips; many individuals have no tolerance for the story of my body, I've tried to tell you on many occasions and each time the room fills with blue fruits.

When the sexual abuse first started, I was sixteen. Some of the men and women were in their forties. Then I was seventeen, and they were a few years older than me. A few months later, I met more men in their forties. There were so many instances. I wrote about them in my journal. There are blood smears. I tried to kill myself. I went to school, covered in self-harm scars. No one asked if I was okay, and no one asked if I should be inpatient. The teachers at my high school thought I was on drugs. They took my constant sobbing in class, skipping school, and general demeanor to mean I was a delinquent.

I told the people abusing me they were hurting me, and they told me it was my fault. They said I was getting what I deserved because when they first started abusing me, it counted as cheating on my boyfriend. Even though I said *no*. Even though I said *not really, maybe, I'm not sure*. Even though sometimes, I couldn't respond with words. I proceed to spend the next decade believing I was at fault for being raped over twenty times. When it happens again and again in college, my language is clearer. I am more aware I am not at fault. It isn't until I am in therapy in my doctoral degree that I meet a therapist who tells me these stories are *all* violent. They are all illegal. And I was a survivor the whole time.

“I wasn't trying to be defensive and I'm sorry if it came off that way,” I say to my friend.  
“It's fine.”

We keep talking. I don't remember the rest of the conversation. I only remember that he agrees to keep being my friend, even though he is tired I have asked him again.

8.

There is a message I sent to myself on social media that reads: *Reread your journals to figure out when you learned about the assault, about yourself. Maybe 2020? And finish your memoir.*

My mother loses half the bone mass in her jaw because of her ED. Yours leads to blood / hospitals / hospital / bad walk / inability to breathe / the week you were in so much pain, you thought your legs would dissipate / needles of pressure / IV in your arm / your aunt / back then / was so *worried*.

You share memories and experiences. You share jaw trauma, an affinity for séances, a belief in ghosts, pain from your father, a love of all things red, melancholy in the morning, journaling, hospital trips, abuse,

an obsession with pearls / stones / seashells / foam, a problem with eating certain textures, too much sweetness, a belief in ghosts, and your grandmother is a ghost, but you almost never hear from her. Your grandfather and great-grandmother are gone, and the apartment complex she shares with your cousin—who, yes, hates both of you—is filled to the brim with ghosts / rats / mold / a dumbwaiter sealed after someone tried to climb in to rob the apartment. You share a fear of the back room with the stolen cross and the fire escape, the time you were both suicidal in your youth (but for you it took longer to move away), an obsession with well-preserved New Yorker pea coats belonging to your grandmother, and lies, and tendons, and screws in your lungs, and you can't breathe. No one has died. Someday, they will.

And you try to turn off the love you have for everyone. You fail, lie, cry in the car on the way home, wear sunglasses to the supermarket, and grief grows mold on your heart.

There was a man I once loved. Perhaps you know this story. He told me I drape images around my truths, like a kaleidoscope of trauma, and in the center of the poem is one singular fact. He assumes every other line is a lie. He assumes that when I say I was caught in a nightmare, sliced near the dollhouse, clinging to bedding and the stone which was fed to me, I must mean a dream my brain conjured in night.

9.

There have been several days this past semester when I have been on campus until almost eight o'clock at night, even though I had gotten there at nine in the morning. There is one day I remember when four students visited my office over the course of twelve hours, each confiding in me about a violence that had occurred. Each violence I had to report. Several of these students have requested I attend their reporting sessions with them.

My colleagues begin telling me I will eventually get over these stories. They instruct me to dissociate; eventually, I will learn not to take student trauma home with me. Other colleagues tell me I need to learn how to be stronger. I need to learn to set more boundaries with students.

“What do I do when they come into my office suicidal? Post-trauma? Just having been raped or hit?”

“That shouldn't be happening, but it is, because you are kind,” several people tell me. “You are kind and young. For example, no one tells me these stories.”

*I know, I want to respond. Because I would never tell you my stories.*

Drape is a funny little word. Soft. Suffocating. Could kill you if it wanted. Almost me. Must not let it.

10.

I am in my colleague/friend's office. It overlooks the trees at the side of the school. The floor is awash with green light; his walls are lined with literature and theoretical texts. Even though he has children already, he reminds me of the father I never had. I trust him to guide me, even if he isn't always right, even if he doesn't always know what to say. He didn't ask for this, after all, to work with someone like me, who needs so much reassurance.

That day, I start crying in his office. It is the third time I have done this. In response, he tells me a story about a Dr. Phil-type doctor who had a young man on his show who couldn't stop crying. He said he couldn't get over something that had happened, and it plagued him at night.

“And you know what he told him?” my friend asks me.

I smile, knowing he is about to make a joke; wondering why I decided, specifically, to cry in his office.

“He said, ‘have you ever tried just getting over it?’ And the man was like, ‘Oh my god, no I have not!’ And it totally changed his life.”

11.

My mother has been sick the entire semester. One day, her arm goes numb at school. The doctor finds something wrong with her nerves. One of them is swollen. I remember that night, and every night since, I stop sleeping.



Her doctor calls it an *unidentifiable lump*. I think about it when I look at the calcium deposits in my arm, wondering if people can see the faint traces of my self-harm scars. Wondering who can see the new ones I made last Wednesday.



I tell my friend a student of mine has a history of self-harm. She has butterfly tattoos on her arm and in class, she folds paper butterflies. One day—a Wednesday, to be precise, the day I feel sickest, the day people wouldn't stop pointing it out—I go to teach, even though I feel awful. Upon starting class, I know I am unwell. I asked the students to fill out their feedback for me, as it is the end of the semester. While they do this, I don't want them to feel vulnerable, so I excuse myself to go to the restroom. Once in a stall, I start crying. I breathe in and out. I practice the grounding exercises my therapist told me about. I stop crying for just long enough to head back to class. When there, one of my students asks if I'm okay. He has a *carpe diem* tattoo on his arm. I don't know why, but this does me in, and I start crying in front of them. The girl at the front makes me a blue paper butterfly and I take it with me to the back of class where I fold its wings in and out, to mimic fluttering. The room itself is filled with a ladybug infestation.

Their final assignment is a braided essay. Many of the students have written braids about their careers, major field of study, and a story from their personal lives. But more than half the class has written about trauma: violence, sexual assault, abuse, addiction. I read their stories and try to be objective. I leave them comments about how I am proud of them, and happy they are alive. Then I have the uncomfortable conversation with my colleagues about being sick, and I immediately go home and relapse. My fingers and wrists go numb. All week, I feel pins and needles on-and-off.

This time, I sob. In the shower, with the fan on, so my partner can't hear me. A few minutes prior, he has taken a cup out of the dishwasher and thrown it on the ground. He had been making food and doing the dishes with one headphone in his ear while I was trying to talk to him about what happened that day. He told me my stories were stupid. The first thing he did was inspect the cup for any cracks. Then, he apologized to me.

I sat in the bottom of the shower. It was the first time I had done that in years. And then I started hurting myself. It is a miracle I stopped, however briefly. I know if I keep continuing into the Spring of 2025, I will have entered my nineteenth year of self-harm.

12.

In truth, there is no good way to talk about the basement where everything was stolen from me. Sometimes I think you aren't listening. When you say words like *fish*, *moon*, *sun*, and *river*, I understand your stories as *freedom*, *delight*, *aggregate fruit*, and *the wound which runs through the forest whose surface reveals my face, whose depths have eaten my blood*. Forgive me, I do not remove myself from the narrative. I live in the cycle of the past.



I will never understand why my mother didn't stop me when she first found out. Now that I am older, I think about all the things I can't control. My father speaks to me once a year; the rest of the time, he is a void. When I worry he has passed away, I look up obituaries. I only find out news he is receiving research grants. His daughter, my half-sister, is likely reading this poem. Red always reminds me of blood. When

I speak to my mother on the phone, she makes me laugh, I think about the time we got *coco helado* in Manhattan and nothing was wrong between us. I wonder if I can't stop because I am an adult and I must make myself stop, but I don't want to. Earlier I used tweezers to peel strips. I wish you understood me better, but I don't know how to explain myself to you. If you're reading this, I've given up trying. Yet I'm still trying. I wish you knew me before I hated autumn. Back when I was living in chilly New England and crunching yellow-green leaves beneath my boots. You likely would have been sick of me just the same, but the pain of this revelation would have been extreme. Lately, I am numb. My mind is overgrown with moss. It is the eighteenth year, and I am tired of trying to stop, I am tired of trying despite. Are you listening to me? *Quiero volver a nuestro pasado. ¿Y qué haría diferente? Nada, nada.*

13.

I remove men like him from my life, they are familiar winter husks, technically unripe until someone decides they're in season. The men of my past are thieves: there was maximum love, soon it was cleaved from my body, and the women I told pointed at my blood and laughed. *Isn't that supposed to be inside?*



Do you typically tend towards variety seeds, or are you interested in an overripe god growing in the back garden? My sugar is content, my mind is picked clean: this is the last stage before my consciousness is knocked out near the back door. The dinner before the eating, the refrigeration before extended silence, optimum storage is your body tucked inside my regrown heart, but your nose sniffs out my brokenness and as soon as we're done eating you apply pressure to the stem before ripping your body free from mine.

14.

In your hot pink bathrobe, trying to figure out if you should have a little sugar or honey or blood. You tell them you want more, so someone trades your heart in the night and macerates it in a bowl of blueberries. Soon your skin is peeled. Your body is a broken antler, and baby, you're out of fear again.

It was unclear when would be the last day. French toast in the diner and ice cream melting beneath the lights, syrup shimmering like a mirror; you want to talk about love, but there's tragedy; you want to talk about blood, but there's mackerel and sourdough toast. Mother has brought hundreds of tomatoes from the farmer down the street, and you wear a dress of glittering fish scales. The two of you sit on the windowsill and smoke while the demi-sec chills on the porch. Someone bundles snow. There is moonlight and there is exhaustion. In the center of everything is the hot anger you feel, all those lilacs that bore witness, the pine needles, and the sun shining, regardless, your memories are messy now, your heart is a black hole. Try to find yourself after it's all over. It's confetti time and you hate when people raise their voices. Whenever anyone slaps the table, you erase half your face. You scream on the inside. All the time you think, *I should let it go*. The unfathomable part of this grief is you are still alive, but a part of you has died. Soon, appear small ceramic plates with those lovely rabbit faces. In your wildest dreams you are living in springtime; you have never met the reeds, mallards, pearls, coffee mugs, substances, teeth, the men. Your next thought is about broken legs and slicing into round yellow onions with slim knives but none of that will make it better. Surely this butcher paper will soak up all the blood. This poem could fix things. The next line might deliver what you truly want to say. Just think: the healing could be a river.





Susanna Lang  
**Theba Pisana**

Walk out of the trees' shadow  
into a meadow drained of color  
by summer's heat and drought.  
And here, these small snails,  
hundreds of them, radiant  
and precise as galaxies  
clinging to the fragrant branches  
of a shrub—

And if they were galaxies,  
only appearing solid because  
we can't see inside their miniature  
spirals? Among so many,  
one galaxy at least must be  
habitable, and inhabited  
by beings who know better  
how to live.

I want to visit that place,  
turn my face up to the white  
brilliance of its stars.

Nancy Nolet  
**GARY**  
Ceramic

Dave Harrity  
**Parhelion**

The sea rolled up & the cliffs  
never lost a single stone  
Think of all the dawns  
without you, each second expanding Obvious  
from this angle:  
light reminds water of  
it's depth, surface  
There's nothing  
that isn't new  
in each breath  
absent in each cresting  
Then this &  
this & this flare creased over  
some endless waves below  
tucking themselves into the shore

Greg Schwartz  
**#488**

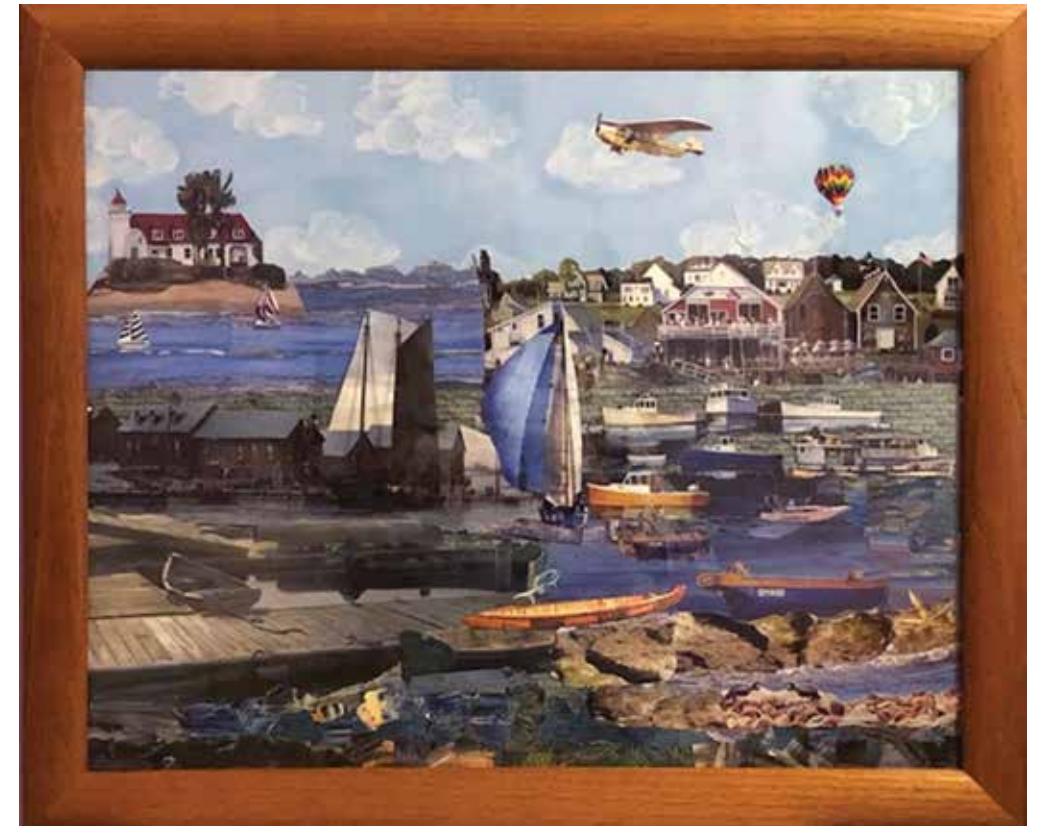
a gull's cry—  
moonlight  
on the water

Shirley J. Brewer  
**Towing a Boat, Honfleur, 1864**

*Towing a Boat, Honfleur, 1864*  
Claude Monet, oil on canvas  
Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester

Early Monet—age twenty-four,  
already a Master of Sky,  
that precise moment when night  
consumes the sunset. Not before  
the language of peach and gold  
softens the canvas with enough heat  
to warm this museum space.

I take a long breath and lean  
like the fishermen to bring in the boat.  
The lighthouse casts a hopeful beam—  
a balm across centuries and seas.  
Eternal eulogy to the Captain of Light.



Judy Lewis  
**Sea Air**  
*Painting*



## Cari Oleskewicz **Moka Pot**

Out of my suitcase comes the cool, metallic moka pot with the red handle that's a bit charred on the bottom because I am clumsy with gas stoves. We are both new to Phoenix, although I have traveled here five times in seven months, sometimes for a long weekend and sometimes for twelve days and never exactly for the right amount of time. Now, we live here because maybe this man and I did not break up. Maybe we decided to have a relationship instead of an affair, and when he suggested, maybe casually or maybe seriously, that I get out of Florida like I've always wanted and move west, I do it.

My sister hates the idea. "Won't you miss your cozy, yellow cottage?" she asks, which is really her way of asking if I'd miss her. The last time I moved away, she read my journal and we did not speak for four months. I understand her fear and the way it can easily catch fire.

After unpacking, my own fear pushes me out of my new home and into the streets of my new city. It has a terrace, but what will I do with a terrace in Phoenix, where it is 114 degrees? I do not live with him, only near him. Who could imagine my moka pot in his claustrophobic apartment, cluttered with action figures and VHS tapes and abandoned nostalgia?

Or maybe the moka pot never makes it to Phoenix. Maybe it's used on the same stove top in the same yellow cottage, one Florida year after another. Maybe it has not seen the inside of my luggage since we came back from Italy together. Before the pandemic.

This moka pot has made coffee on a gas stove for a short list of exes: Andy. Anthony. Eddie. Even for Rob, the two-night stand. But never for this man in Phoenix. He would not have agreed to an espresso anyway.

There was never any coffee at his place when I'd visit. We'd get one out on our way to wherever we were going; whether that was his office for a day or Bisbee for a weekend. When he went off to work without me, I'd walk to Esso, his favorite coffee shop. I'd order a cappuccino and sometimes a cookie. I'd pretend I belonged there without him.

It is early in the morning. The sun is lazy to rise in northern Florida. Eager in Phoenix, I remember, but in no hurry here. It's time to make my coffee.

*} "I'd pretend I belonged there without him."*

This is how the day begins. Me at the stove. The moka pot heating. My kitchen smelling like beans and bitter. The cats are hungry. The birds are landing hard on the feeder outside my front window, which looks out at the porch.

It is not awful here, even though it's Florida. Even though I have a bleeding heart that's learned to hold the silt of steeped grounds, unable to stitch itself back together.



Jessica Furtado

# A Love Potion for Sisters

We've stolen Marie's roses again,  
the petals red-faced as anxious school children  
and just as eager to please. We still need  
a bit of lavender, a few sprigs of rosemary  
to coax memories to stick like honey  
on the roof of a mouth.  
When we can't find what we seek,  
we hide beneath neighbors' windows  
and pillage landscaped gardens  
for forgotten dandelions, substitute provisions.

This is how you make a love potion:  
tell your little sister there's magic  
in the wide-open blue eyes of hydrangeas,  
a cool sting in the sweet of mint.  
Tell her that everything has a boiling point,  
and the temperature for this concoction  
is the same clime as her fevered forehead.  
Tell her to put each petal and snapped branch  
into the mouth of the stock pot in your mother's kitchen,  
fill it with cold water, near to kissing the brim.

Like many things in life, the process  
is mostly intention, a bit of action  
in stirring the pot, adding heat. I'm not willing  
to tell you that love is as easy as being  
a thief in the light of the sun. I'm not telling  
you that the stems won't miss their lost buds,  
their bold blooming. But Marie knew all along  
that we were stealing, and fertilized those roses  
just to see two sisters huddled up  
like new rabbits on her manicured lawn.



## Louie Land Olethros

poplars lean backwards  
greener and sparser  
on windward side  
where is my woman now

Michael S. Harper, "Where Is My Woman Now"

In the barrens, the tombstone stumps of what once were poplars,  
mountaintop naked and muddied, cut clean  
but bleeding brown sludge in hurricane downpour, sluicing backwards  
and forwards under a sour sky. Logger wallets grow greener,  
bulging with cash converted from fallen logs, the yield of saws and  
trucks groaning with bounty. In exchange? One hill is sparser,  
clear-cut, titan and sapling uprooted to feed the iron  
mongers. I shield my eyes, face windward,  
whirring chainsaw teeth devouring my side,  
lightning on my tongue, trying to remember where  
I'd carved my initials in bark. The only certain thing is  
toppling. For what will they repurpose my  
bones? A rocking chair for an old woman,  
a grandmother grateful for the breeze blowing now.



Valentine Schneider  
**Venus on the Hilltop**  
*Digital photography*



## Sierra Sonberg

# The Mundane Life of Gertrude Humphrey

The pigeons looked weird today. Big black blobs instead of the usual frumpy gray ones. Gertrude Humphrey didn't care. Birds were birds; she was going to throw the breadcrumbs out regardless of whether they were common finches or flamingos.

Flamingos, thought Gertrude. That'll be my story tonight.

The black birds startled at the next round of breadcrumbs, strong wings and loud caws disrupting the quiet of the park. Something hard and cold clipped Gertrude's cheek before landing with a shimmer on the pavement. She adjusted her fur hat and picked it up: a single gold earring.

One of the birds landed on the bench beside her, cocking its inky head. Waiting for something. It reminded her of her old beagle, Elvis, begging for scraps of meatloaf. Her dear Bernard never gave in, but Gertrude wasn't afraid to slip him a bite or two every so often.

"Thank you for the gift. I'll put it somewhere special."

The crow dipped its head and flew off.

Gertrude sat on the bench until the cold nipped at her toes, then stuffed the earring and empty bread bag into her purse and headed home.

"Mom, you forgot your spectacles again," greeted Howard as soon as Gertrude stepped into the apartment. Her son's stick-straight figure stood in the living room holding the blurry pair of aforementioned spectacles.

"Did I? I thought my eyesight was just declining."

"I find it difficult to believe you were at a bridge tournament without your spectacles."

Gertrude slipped her spectacles on. Howard's face was just as red and scrunched when clear as it was blurry. "That is because I wasn't at a bridge tournament. Certainly, that was the plan this morning, but I was abducted by a flock of flamingos on Madison Avenue before I could make it to the community center."

"Mom. You need to get out and spend time with people your age. Stop wasting your life feeding the birds."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Howard, dear. Now, what's for dinner?"

There were no pigeons today. Just Gertrude, her breadcrumbs, and her crows. She threw the crumbs with a little more force, beige spoiling the birds' black feathers.

She narrowed her eyes at a crow that got an inch too close. "What do you want?"

Its beak was slightly misshapen, crooked like Howard's nose. *Psh*. On Gertrude's husband, may he rest in peace, it was endearing. On her son, it was a reminder of how far the apple could fall from the tree.

"You appreciate me visiting the park, don't you?" she asked no bird in particular. A few of them hopped in response, then swallowed the last of their breadcrumbs and flapped away.

Gertrude wasn't bothered. They were better than the crowd at the community center, that's for sure.

She wrapped up the remaining bread—there would be no time to visit the store tonight and she didn't want the birds to be hungry tomorrow—and pushed herself to her feet.

CAW!

Gertrude had the good sense to duck as a group of crows flew past her head. Unfortunately, her reflexes were slow and the birds clipped her hat, which tumbled to the pavement.

"That's my favorite pillbox!" she griped, willing her weary bones to bend enough to reach it. The crow with the crooked beak hopped over and scooped it up.

"Give that back, you dreadful thing!" Just like Howard. She knew it. Always taking what he didn't deserve.

The crow flapped its wings in her face, and suddenly it was perched on her shoulder, talons

padded by her peacoat. It dropped Gertrude's hat onto her head, askew, and cawed into her ear. Her hearing aid blared with feedback.

"Ah, thank you, dear."

Another bird squawked at her feet like a mewling cat. Looped around its neck was a golden bracelet; it dipped its head and the jewelry rolled onto her shoe. Yet another dropped a shiny earring—silver, dripping with false diamonds, and sadly not a match to the one gifted the previous day—before her like an offering. The gifts piled up, a stack of shining objects ranging from glinting gum wrappers to an antique bronze hair comb.

Some of which were surely stolen.

"Thank you all. You are very generous. But I'm afraid I can't accept these."

She stepped around the pile and was greeted by dozens of raised wings and garish caws. Her hearing aid acted up again and she covered her ears.

"Fine, fine! I'll take them, you infernal beasts! But there will be none of this tomorrow, you hear me? No tiny presents." The crows stared at her with their beady black eyes. They could not have understood her, but at least they had stopped whining, and that was good enough for Gertrude.

Gertrude handled every gift with care as she deposited them into her bag, and the flock was appeased.

"You were not searching for buried treasure in Montauk, Mom," Howard said through a bite of soggy green beans. Terrible table manners. She didn't know who had taught him to speak with a full mouth, but it surely wasn't her and it surely hadn't been her dear Bernard.

"Stop wasting your life feeding the birds in Central Park," he continued. "Those greedy pests will get their fill from all of the clueless tourists."

"The beans are bland."

"I called the community center today and signed you up for a sewing class tomorrow. I would offer

to escort you, but I have an executive meeting bright and early. The reservation fee was ten whole dollars, so don't even think about flaking."

Gertrude was doing more than thinking about flaking. Pawning off even half of the silver and gold gifts still stashed in her bag could pay for a year's worth of community center classes; flushing ten dollars down the drain was nothing if it meant maintaining her mundane routine. Wallowing her days away under the sweetgum trees with only birds to bother her seemed a good way to go; listening to her middle-aged son prattle on about finances and retirement communities did not.

The crows were impatient today. They fluttered from the bench when Gertrude arrived, leaving a blanket of charcoal feathers on the green metal. Relieved at the lack of stolen trinkets, she pulled out the half-loaf of bread and threw a handful of crumbs to the flock.

Poor things had been waiting longer than usual; Gertrude had to take the long way to her usual spot, because, despite his "bright and early" meeting, Howard was still home when she left. And she was certain he had watched out their tenth-story window to make sure she went right instead of left, so that's what she did. She rolled out her aching ankles and picked out the crow with the crooked beak from the flock. He was stealing a large crumb from another bird. Gertrude shook her head. Howard Junior, certainly.

Her crows were so lovely in the morning sunlight: never just black, but a rippling sea of slate and navy and purple.

A shadow eclipsed the flock. It was too square to be a cloud. Gertrude looked up, then squinted, certain her old eyes had finally expired. She didn't mind; then she wouldn't have to worry about her annoying spectacles.

As the object soaring through the sky came into focus, it became clear that Gertrude was not seeing things. What she was seeing was a horde of

disobedient crows, carrying what looked to be a... a painting? One with a shiny golden frame.

"No. No!" She waved her arms and shook her head at the sky. "Naughty birds! I told you no more gifts! Where did you take this from?"

The crows lowered the painting into her hands. Seeing as the choices were either to drop it on the dirty ground or grab it, Gertrude chose the latter. It was nearly the size of the suitcase stuffed in the back of her closet, and about as hefty as it, too.

She set it carefully on the bench, admiring the pastel brush strokes that came together in a delicate blue bridge over a pond of water lilies. In the lower right corner, a signature: Claude Monet /99.

Gertrude wasn't one to spend hours at museums pondering the meaning of art. It was just color on canvas, a picture to admire, something adorning a stamp or bringing life to a boring beige wall. But Monet she knew; she had a copy of this very painting hanging above her bed and a postcard of his *Woman with a Parasol* from her trip to Paris with Bernard tucked into her vanity mirror.

Yes, Monet she knew. And she knew this painting was supposed to be hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art at that very moment—the wailing of police sirens in the distance confirmed it.

Gertrude stepped away from the bench, much to the crows' dismay. A chorus of caws followed her as she started down the path. Being arrested for art theft was a great story to torment Howard with, but not something she wanted to experience firsthand.

"Stupid crows. I should've stuck to pigeons. Should've known..." she grumbled to herself, weaving further into Central Park. The wingbeats behind her told her she wasn't alone.

A young woman walking her shaggy dog side-eyed Gertrude as she passed. Gertrude smiled in response. As soon as she was out of sight, Gertrude whirled around as fast as her stiff joints would allow. Oh, she was going to let those birds have it.

Her words died on her tongue when she saw the precious painting hanging from their talons, ten feet above the ground.

"Oh dear."

Howard Junior landed on her shoulder. Gertrude turned back around and pretended she didn't see

them. She walked faster. The birds followed. She stopped. The birds stopped.

Well. This was a problem.

***"Gertrude stepped away from the bench, much to the crows' dismay. A chorus of caws followed her as she started down the path. Being arrested for art theft was a great story to torment Howard with, but not something she wanted to experience firsthand."***

Gertrude could see two ways out of this situation: One, she left the park and the birds followed with the painting wherever she went. Eventually, someone would see and she would be reported and taken into custody, and Howard wouldn't be able to bail her out. Two, she accepted the painting and dumped it somewhere nobody would ever find it. Logically, two was the best choice—the one that left her the innocent party—but the part of her heart that still belonged to Bernard protested. She couldn't destroy the painting.

So what did that leave her with? Becoming a criminal over a crime she didn't commit? The only other option was to... return the painting.

"Give that here," she hissed to the crows. They flew lower and she hugged the Monet to her chest, folding her coat around it. The gold frame stuck out of her collar and the outline was clearly visible beneath the thin fabric. Well, that wouldn't do at all.

Howard Junior squawked in her ear when she started walking home.

"Will you stop doing that?" she demanded, adjusting her hearing aid. "I'm putting your gift somewhere safe. I just need to pick something up first."

Gertrude was a sight to behold as she inched through the Upper East Side, a feeble old lady clutching her coat with an entourage of crows

behind her. People were too annoyed with the crows to pay attention to why she was holding her coat, and for that she was grateful.

"Stay here," she instructed the birds at the foot of her apartment building.

They rustled their wings and fought for a perch on every lamppost and trash can and windowsill they could find. All except for Howard Junior, whose grip tightened on Gertrude's shoulder.

So Gertrude, the painting, and the ornery crow rode up the elevator and went into the apartment together.

"Hello? Mom?" came Howard's voice from the couch, muffled by the static of the television.

"Howard? What are you doing home?" She prayed he wouldn't turn around as she plucked her puffiest winter coat from the hook.

A pause. "Ah, I'm enjoying my lunch break. How was the sewing class? Do you know enough now to stitch up that hole in my best suit?"

A single glance at the grandfather clock cut through his casual lie. 9:00 a.m. No self-respecting finance company would give their employees a lunch break so early. She stared at the back of his balding head, struck once again with the disappointment that he was not—and could never be—Bernard. How dare he so blatantly lie to his mother about having a job. Tsk.

"I'm afraid not. The teacher was terrible; her instructions were so bad that one of the other ladies sewed her finger into the pillowcase. They spent thirty minutes trying to separate it. A waste of money, really." As she blathered, she set Howard Junior on the kitchen table and switched her coat, cinching the belt as tightly as possible so the painting was secure.

"Have a good day at work," she said pointedly, opening the front door.

"Stay away from the park, Mom."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of going there." She had much more important things on her plate—she suddenly felt the urge to get a taste of the arts and visit a museum.

Gertrude strolled up the front staircase of the Met. To the couple on the bench or the speed walking businessman on the sidewalk or the

frazzled security guard standing at the entrance, it looked like she was alone. They didn't notice her feathered friend on the lamppost or the flock on the roof, nor the runt digging through the trash can—silly bird, she had just fed them all!

"Good day," Gertrude greeted the guard. She talked like someone who would visit the Met and walked like someone who would visit the Met: one foot in front of the other. She was painfully aware of every corner of the Monet poking her skin, barely concealed by her puffer jacket.

"Stop right there, ma'am."

Gertrude kept walking.

"Ma'am! Stop!" Heavy footsteps approached. A hand grasped her shoulder, inches away from brushing the painting, and turned her around.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry. My hearing isn't what it used to be." She fiddled with her perfectly operational hearing aid and the guard's hand fell away.

"No worries, ma'am. However, I do need you to leave. The Met is closed today. There was a robbery this morning and all wings are closed for investigation."

"A robbery! Oh my! Why would anyone ever steal a painting?"

He nodded gravely. "The world's full of dangerous people, ma'am. Stay safe, and come back next week to see our new exhibit of Greek vases, generously donated by Mr. Walter Bareiss."

"Thank you, young man. Have a lovely afternoon."

So Gertrude hobbled back the way she came, down the stairs and past the crow in the trash can and another businessman and the couple in deep conversation on the bench. She stationed herself beneath a window, partially concealed by a small, sad tree, its leafless branches instead blossoming ink black. Howard Junior swept down from his perch and pecked at her coat. She swatted him away.

"Yes, yes, I know it's a gift! But it's safer here, don't you think? On display for everyone to see what good taste you crows have?"

Another crow landed on her hat and cawed.

"If I don't return the painting, there will be no more visits and no more bread," Gertrude warned. The squawks and rustling of feathers quieted.

"That's what I thought. Now help me reach this window, please." She patted her arms, feeling

slightly embarrassed as she attempted to signal them. They were only birds, albeit clever birds that seemed to understand and cling to her every word.

Gertrude held still as the crows swarmed her, talons poking through her sleeves as they latched on. She wobbled as they lifted her up, up, up to the window. She wedged her fingers under the ledge and tugged. It didn't give.

"Could I get a little assistance?" she looked up to the crows. Howard Junior broke from the flock and pecked at the latch. He looked up at her like, *you try*.

She pulled the latch and the window unlocked, sliding open as easily as her favorite letter opener through an envelope. "Well. They could certainly use some better security."

The wing Gertrude tumbled into was devoid of life, much to her relief. She slid the window shut on all of the crows but Howard Junior, who clung to her stubbornly. She would never admit that she was growing used to the weight of the little bird on her shoulder.

Gertrude skirted around a display of amphorae as quietly as she could, but the room was an echo chamber and every click-clack of her shoes on the polished tile carried through the space. Hazy memories resurfaced as she meandered through exhibits and up the grand staircase. Muscle memory. She could almost see Bernard's pristine Oxfords, always one step ahead. Howard's hand-me-down loafers, always one step behind. Why hadn't she grabbed his hand—so much smaller at the time—and pulled him up to walk alongside her?

Keys jingled from an exhibition over, followed by heavy footsteps, and she hobbled into the nearest cranny she could find, praying Howard Junior would have the good sense to keep his loud beak shut. She pressed her back against the marble wall, wishing her puffy coat wasn't such a garish shade of green. The officer—it was an officer, she could see now—drew nearer. His eyes were wandering, and with every surface so polished, it was only a matter of time before he noticed her reflection.

Howard Junior rustled his feathers and, before Gertrude could catch on, took to the air with a shrill caw. The officer perked up, alert—"Why, that

no good..."—and chased Howard Junior down the corridor, leaving Gertrude on her own.

Oh. Good bird.

Gertrude weaseled her way into the exhibition gallery the officer had come from. The 19th and 20th Century Masters collection was massive—there were colorful Renoirs and Picassos and Van Goghs displayed pristinely along the walls.

And there, a flash of empty eggshell wall barricaded off with caution tape, the perfect size for a particular Monet. The officer's shouts in the distance led her to believe Howard Junior's distraction was still working, so she unbuttoned her coat and slid the painting out. Now, how to get it hung up again...

The hooks were too high for her to reach, even on tiptoe, and her arms shook from exertion as soon as she lifted the painting above her shoulders. She leaned against the wall and tried to shimmy the painting up that way. Oh, if only Bernard could see her now.

A loud thud scared her away from the wall. Was the officer back?

*Thud!* Again, from the window. Three of her crows stood on the ledge, waiting for her to let them in.

She did, begrudgingly. "Would you like to help? You are the ones who got us into this mess."

The crows tittered but did as she asked, grabbing the painting and lifting it higher. Gertrude clapped her hands. "Lovely! Just a bit higher on the left..."

All of the birds flew higher.

"No, the left." She paused, remembering who she was speaking to, then pointed instead. "That side should go up. Perfect."

She dropped her arm, a proud conductor finished with her symphony, as the crows ever so gently set the painting on its hooks. As Howard Junior shot into the room like a torpedo, the officer and his loud keys right behind him.

The officer looked at the painting. He looked at Gertrude.

"Ma'am, you're under arrest."

"I hope you're here to grovel."

Howard Junior opened his crooked little beak and unleashed an ear-splitting squawk.

Gertrude scowled. "At least behind bars you pests will finally leave me alone."

The crow lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Gertrude felt a pang in her chest, an emotion that hadn't visited in a while. Guilt wasn't necessarily a welcome visitor, but she reveled in the feeling of something other than anger or guilt or emptiness.

She pushed her fingers through the bars of her cell with a sigh, patting the bird on his head. He was soft, softer than she expected for such a raucous thing.

"I didn't mean it, you know. I appreciate your company."

He opened one beady eye as if to say, *prove it*.

Gertrude tore off a large chunk of stale bread and slid it through the bars. He immediately perked up, grabbed it with his beak, and flew away. With a sigh, Gertrude retreated to her rock-hard cot. One would think they would treat the elderly with care, even if they were alleged thieves. The blank white ceiling held her attention.

Everything left or died eventually—dogs, crows, husbands—so Gertrude didn't understand why she kept falling for it. The whole "caring" thing. Well. Now she could spend the rest of her life as she wished: unbothered and alone in the comfort of a monotonous routine. There would be no more putting up with Howard's ungrateful attitude or telling off the crows for their thievery.

No more warm meals to come home to or creatures relying on her visits.

Suddenly the white ceiling seemed duller than before.

So, maybe her life wasn't as vibrant as the Monet, but it still had color.

*Clang!*

Gertrude jolted upright at the sound of metal against metal.

*Caw! Caw!*

Howard Junior had returned. He tapped his beak on the shiny object at his feet. A key.

"The chicken is dry," Gertrude noticed. "Very bland."

"Work was very busy today," said Howard, mid-chew. "If you are going to complain about my cooking, you could try it for once. Instead of spending all day at the park."

"Ah, but I wasn't at the park all day. I became a felon and flew through the streets with my crow friends."

"Get a life, Mom."

She smiled in Howard's direction. "I appreciate your company."

He blinked. Set down his fork. Looked down his crooked nose. "I'm not Dad."

Behind her son, through the windows, she could see her crows. Beautiful brushstrokes of jet and cobalt against the watercolor sky. Maybe tomorrow she would try her hand at cooking. Maybe tomorrow Howard would come with her to the park. Maybe Bernard hadn't left her all alone.

"No," she agreed, "you're not. You're Howard."



## Ollie Mon Transgression

Appear to me through the eyes of your god—  
as a burning bush, as smoke and  
mirrors.

Tell me again how he descended  
as a dove to deliver you  
what he couldn't say through  
his word—how I tore apart  
Christ's image through my transformed  
shape, how I mutilated myself  
into fractals that disperse  
among his tender creations.

Remind me how awful and perverse  
it is to be enveloped by some unseen,  
sick contagion that creeps and  
slips into bed with innocence.

Does his face shine upon you  
through your own light, holy  
flame? Will your savior laud  
your insistence that I must ask  
him to crawl inside my heart and  
carve out the vile parts of my soul  
that cannot be unborn?

In your final desperate hours,  
will you still be his "good and  
faithful servant"? Will he coddle  
and caress you for your blessed  
persecution, or will he spit you out  
onto judgment's fiery tongue?

I've met the one that you mold  
in your hands. I departed, but to you  
I never knew him.



Ivy Choe  
**Play Pretend circa. 2018**  
*Acrylic on canvas*

## Lily Girard Senescence

The reality is that all of us living together was only temporary; it's the growing apart that's permanent. Eventually, the call of our great-grampa's green bird clock will curdle like the milk left in our Disney Princess cereal bowls until its hoots and caws cease altogether. Favorite mugs shatter on hardwood floors, and beloved soccer balls are abandoned in fields unbeknownst to pigtailed teammates. I no longer understand the stories I wrote in my first diary; the names and faces escape me, and the pencil marks have faded. A periwinkle haze has rolled over my childhood bedroom, obscuring the little purple flowers Mom painted on the walls.

With our first teenage lovers, the napes of our necks are invaded by more than just deer ticks. Loyal pets lie under the trees of homes we no longer call our own. Same with the poems I wrote, and I'm not sure if it's appropriate to cry over lost dogs and unfinished sonnets when I wouldn't allow myself the relief then.

I hated being young – the stillness and quiet of Dad's rules left a young girl unable to scream when she crashed her car, as if he were there in the passenger seat, clutching his head and complaining about the noise. I whispered as I played with my dolls. I apologize when I laugh.

I hate growing old – people look at me funny when I repeat the inside jokes I mistakenly deemed universal. When aunts ask me what I'll do with my major, my dream job is separate from "what I'll probably do." My sisters are only a call and a few miles away, but I put the strange in estranged. I will not visit. I despise their stupid boyfriends and their fancy corporate jobs. I long for them to straighten my hair before school on Friday mornings and to listen to burnt CDs with Mom while we wait for their ballet lessons to finish.

In the back of Mom's Toyota, the numbers of a paperback math booklet are illuminated by the orange glow of the overhead lights. My mind is elsewhere: I cling to the barre in the ballet studio. I watch my sisters in the mirror. Plee-ay, air-uh-besk. Plie, arabesque.

## Mandira Pattnaik Before the Barbarism

*I know these are for scholarships*, says Tara as she inspects her knee—black, bruised, and bony—and examines the cloth of her tattered salwar, one that rebels on the basting stitches. We play in whatever clothes we have at home; don't even have proper sportswear.

Janki pouts. Her lips dry and flaky, and her hair that's not seen oil in months, but she has second-hand Nike shorts borrowed from a brother who went to town to drive trucks after his sports career was going nowhere.

Janki says, *We're dead, are we not?* Everyone turns to look at Janki—she's snickering, chortling, giggling. Gauri turns her gaze to each of us and points her index to her temple, murmuring just under her breath, *Everyone's gone crazy*.

It's an inside joke—easier to think of ourselves as if we're dead, as though we are cruising along in our afterlives. No pain, no grudge, no unhappiness.

We stand in the queue when called; wait. Our hockey sticks, also worn out and generally forgiven in our endless defeats, are held in a tight sword-like grip. For what? *Scholarships!*

The coach signs papers at the head of the queue, resting the sheets on his other palm, the recipients will get to travel to Jammu. Special Camp. National games 'probables' will be selected after the Jammu camp.

We're hungry. We haven't had a drop of water since being called to practice at seven in the morning and now it's twelve noon. The heat draws sweat like blood—we *are* dead.

Our captain, Vimla, assists the coach in selecting. Vimla shoots sharp words and slurs like spit on and off the field. I hear her as she says in quick succession—*Come—and out! —No! That's not how you doo-o-it; Go practice, lazy bags; Scum; Daughter of a—*

The last bit is thrown at Janki. She turns away from Vimla and the coach, and faces us. Instead of a bowed head, she scowls; it feels as though she's boring into each of us still awaiting our turn with eyes like a dragon's.

We watch her fly like a bullet and back to the end-corner where the discarded hockey sticks are piled up. Others may think she'll be off to a quick practice soon to improve her chances. A selection would mean a better life for her; her debt-ridden father's farm loans paid off if she moves beyond the scholarship.

***“It's an inside joke—easier to think of ourselves as if we're dead, as though we are cruising along in our afterlives. No pain, no grudge, no unhappiness.”***

I know otherwise because I know Janki better than the others. I continue to gaze at her, see her snap. Instead of slumping to the ground, she keeps standing, hands on hips, head drooping now that she's away from public gaze. An eagle flies above, a weak whistle. Janki considers the moment.

My eyes stray back to the coach and Vimla. Vimla's irritating call, *Hurry up—Hurry up—Hurry up, we don't have all day*, is dispatched like a siren across the field. She wants the queue of fifty-six to move faster. The girls look nervous. I move a step or two keeping up with the queue. My chance will come after the twenty-third girl has shown her skills.

I turn my head to check back on Janki. That very second, I see Janki pick up her stick in a flash as though she remembered something. She raises it kite-high like a warrior queen. Facing the bleaching sun, I watch as she charges at cra-a-a-ash-speed to where Vimla is barking orders. Now a skull will be broken, I am sure.

The whoosh of air takes a moment. The queue is broken, and we, aspiring hockey girls, dash ahead to witness what's to ensue, appearing shell-



shocked but secretly excited at the prospect of a justified retaliation—yes, Vimla should be taught a lesson. But before we can swallow our desire for drama, gathered around the imaginary stage in a curious half-circle, we find Janki coiled at Vimla's feet, hockey stick still held in grip, fainted from exhaustion and heat.



Ani Kassian-Howard  
**My Love**  
*Watercolor*



## Christine Ma-Kellams

### Slim

Here's the thing: you went first, and I never followed.

Bacon, water, rice, grass. What do these have in common?

You tell me not to eat uncured meat; there was a rumor at the WHO's latest convention during a poster session overrun by academics. Something about red meat being a carcinogen up there next to cigarettes and booze.

I say, "Here's to trying."

You reply, "That's not funny."

"I'd like to die young. It's more tragic that way, and people forgive you more for what you never did apologize for."

"Don't be an idiot."

I tell you, "Anyhow, everything causes cancer. Tap water has trace levels of radioactive materials. Rice has arsenic now, did you hear? And grass has Roundup on it, which will probably go after your internal organs after it goes after the weeds."

"You should've been the one to go to medical school," is your reply, and I know that means I'm right.

The next time I go over to your apartment, you show me the new Berkey Water Filter and its dual ceramic towers, sheathed in food-grade stainless steel. I spot the new weeds sprouting in the driveway like stray ingrown hairs; I see the bag of rice, untouched in the pantry. That's when I know you love me. But love never solves anything, it just makes things more grave.

The cancer concern, of course, is a ploy to distract from the real problem, which is death. You can't escape it and I can't find it. I hope God exists so I can question him on his sense of irony, which appears as serious as his egomania.

Miami, before the days of global warming, is just another town by the ocean where the

mojitos run thick and the water runs thin, like wrong blood. You visit me at the condo by the beach. I lend you my shirt with the fishes on it, big, colorful and bright, to distract you from the woman you used to call your wife and now don't call anything at all, so irrelevant she is to everything. You put it on obediently.

*"The cancer concern, of course, is a ploy to distract from the real problem, which is death."*

"Where to?" you ask.

"You hungry?" I say.

"I can eat," you concede.

"Is there something you'd rather do?" I know better than to ask you outright. When I told Dad that I like boys and he told me "Good luck with that," your only response was, "So do I, but you don't see me telling everybody." Your political and personal convictions could easily be summed up as, "It's none of your goddamn business."

"What about our rights?" I asked you.

"Marriage equality?"

"You want to get married?" you asked back. It was enough to end the conversation.

Back in Miami, because neither of us still want to get married, we go to the bars instead in search of other youth. We are not young ourselves, but we are men and men are wood, so age is less of a number and more of a rhetorical question that needs no answer.

At *Azucar*, shirts are optional but beauty is mandatory, unless you have something else to offer. "I'm a doctor," you say to the doorman, who eyes your sideburns, translucent chest, and unwaxed arms poking out of the world's ugliest Hawaiian shirt, which is no small feat.

"You sure?" the man asks.

You nod solemnly.

"I've got this funny rash behind my knee," he says. He curtsies, lifting his board shorts and putting your hand below his thigh, where femur meets tibia, a modern day Abraham eliciting a promise from his servant. "You tell me what it is, I'll let you in."

You withdraw your hand and squint, wringing your wrists as if pathogens could be shaken off if only we knew the secret formula of rhythm and beat. "Ringworm," you pronounce. "You probably got it from a public shower or an unchlorinated pool."

"There's a worm in there?" the doorman says.

"Any antifungal cream will do," you reply, bypassing the details of the problem to get straight to the solution.

The doorman lets us in. You spend the rest of the night diagnosing problems of a different variety, ones that don't require any medical knowledge but likewise involve putting hands in places where pathogens might lurk. This is 1980. If we knew then what we found out three years later, we would've gone to eat instead.

At first we think it's pneumonia, a residual from a flu that won't quit. The coughing, the aches, the fevers—they stretch over seasons. What starts in the spring rolls into Thanksgiving, then the New Year. You order labs for our T-cell counts; mine look low but yours look abysmal.

"Hey, it resembles my credit score," I joke.

You are too tired to laugh. "Explains the fatigue," you observe.

"You think it's something else?"

"It could just be any virus."

"Or cancer," I add.

You look at me with reproach. "We're too young for cancer. And both of us, at once? What are the odds?"

The problem with odds is they mean anything is possible.

We are not alone. In Uganda, they simply call the disease "slim," the greatest euphemism ever.

Bathhouses are the first Angeleno casualties after Bobbi Campbell, whose Newsweek cover with the love of his life (also named Bobby) makes AIDS a household name, one that people dare not whisper but reference constantly whenever they explain the necessity of toilet seat covers and their sudden distaste for public pools. Soon every establishment with a body of water gets an inspection.

You try everything. Ginkgo biloba, exercise, and gardening evolve into more drastic measures like swapping your own blood with that of a healthy man, one who tests negative and has no taste for any dick that isn't his own. You borrow medical equipment from the lab tech sympathetic to your condition and do the blood transfusion in our living room. You shrink-wrap all the furniture as an unnecessary precaution; you are too careful to spill anything.

I stand and watch and cross my fingers; if I'm lucky, I'll get to go first. I prefer to remember you as the brother who does everything better, who is shorter and not as good looking but smart enough to get your MD without resorting to a med school in the Caribbean, who doesn't give a damn because he can afford to, and no one can tell you otherwise, including myself.

You are always cold now—you get thinner until your flannel melts into the tweed couch and I have to look to find you buried. It's like in the movies: superheroes never die; you never see blood—they just evaporate.

Your disability check comes the same day you go. Your breathing gets more shallow until you

resign from breathing at all. Your body is a mollusk emptied of its contents. Where you were once soft and pliable, you are now a shell, useless and calcareous, unable to offer protection from the elements that hound you until there is none of you left. I hold your wrist, the bones crispy and weightless, but cannot force myself to look at your face. We were born the same but are no longer twins, not on this day.

I take your check to the bank. I show your ID to the teller and cock my head to the side. “I got a haircut today,” I say, to detract from the inconsistencies between our brow ridges and the crooks of our noses. She says, “Good for you” without looking up from her fingernails thwacking the keyboard, long and coppery and glittered, like a stripper’s nether regions. She hands me the bills, forcing a non-Duchenne smile. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“You have a nice day,” I say, meaning it. If a man dies and there is no one there to record it, is he really dead?

Turns out, he is not, at least according to the entities that matter. Your disability checks are no match for my new lifestyle, which involves finding the most exciting ways to replace you. I take a twelve hour flight to São Paulo to find the boys who surf trains and try to learn a thing or two. At the *Estação da Luz*, I look for young men without backpacks; those who travel light by necessity have little to lose. I find a trio in torn denim and new polyester, a sure sign of the things I want the most: enough poverty to merit a cheerfulness that borders upon desperation, enough swagger to pretend to be any trivial thing I want. Purchasing a ticket, I follow them into the belly of the train. I linger but keep my distance; few countries in the world are as forgiving as the one we come from.

It doesn’t take long before the tallest boy of the group stands up on his seat and starts fiddling with the straps encasing the fire escape hatch above his inconsistently shaven head. He snaps the metal pieces decorating the four corners and adjusts the attached vinyl strips, loosening

them like old shoe laces, or a gentleman’s tie. His comrades guard him on each side, staring at his fingers so that when their time came, they would not be caught fumbling. The whole process reminds me of the same difficulties involved in undoing a woman’s straps with one hand—an endeavor I only tried once, but you mastered with your long line of monogamous girlfriends who marveled at your ability to stop precisely when they removed all their clothes, and revealed themselves to lack the equipment you were searching for. “Why bother with the girlfriends?” I had asked you once, when I suspected that the two of us were more similar than either of us let on. “Do you even like any of them?”

*“I find a trio in torn denim and new polyester, a sure sign of the things I want the most: enough poverty to merit a cheerfulness that borders upon desperation, enough swagger to pretend to be any trivial thing I want.”*

“I can appreciate a nice thing when I see it,” you insisted. “I never lied to anybody.”

These boys need not lie either; none of their countrymen appear to register their impending exit from the train, or care. After the hatch opens with a sudden sucking sound, the tall one disappears, an act of parkour so seamless I can’t remember if I saw his legs depart his body. His friends are not so skilled; the one needs to hoist the other, and the last one standing curses softly after those who left him behind. He jumps, grabbing the lip of the opening. When it becomes apparent that he can’t pretzel himself up and out, he pretends to do a pull up, as if strength training on a moving train was a quotidian practice.

I am reckless but not God; I can’t tweak the laws of gravity that prevail over my upper body strength, or lack thereof. Hoisting one’s torso over a moving carriage is a young man’s game, I gather. Age is a bitch, but physics is her taskmaster. I order a *cerveja* instead and ask the other passengers why they do this.

“Kind of dangerous, isn’t it?” I say, pointing to the thumping of the roof. “*Peligroso, no?*”

“*Perigroso, sim,*” a woman replies. “*Mas é para as garotas.*”

“For girls,” her younger counterpart translates.

I nod and descend at the next stop without saying goodbye to my friends perched above. I’ve got no time to try to change their minds.

Back in Miami, the collection notices form a little shrine by the door, yellow and frail, a house of cards built on money I don’t have and soon won’t need if the retrovirus that took you will make the return trip for me. Like other altars I could’ve constructed, this one also reminds me of my mortality. So call it divine inspiration when one day it hits me: I could die early. Thanks to Photoshop and the internet, a death certificate with my name on it can be manufactured with twenty-eight pound bond office paper and your old HP printer; the gold embossed seal from Office Depot says “Excellence” in a banner under the words “Official Seal,” but it’s in the kind of script that makes reading painful and therefore unnecessary. It comes in a pack of fifty. I take one and save the forty-nine; this is the most planning ahead I’ve done since 1983.

I make a copy and mail it off; when the credit card balance comes back as zero, three weeks later, I realize that this is what being born again feels like. Jesus was right: to die is to gain. No matter if he was speaking of a different kind of ending, a different variant of reward.

Once my death is official—a bureaucratic magic trick that expels all of my problems—I subsume yours. Your Chase Sapphire lands me in Paris, where the men are small but their lives run large and irreverent: butter, wine, pâté.

“Any country that stocks crème caramel in the refrigerated section of the grocery store next to the milk is one I’d like to call home,” I tell the other

expats in Le Comptoir Général over consumables named after ethnic groups we only know from television and novelas (Zulu cocktails, Jamaican black cake, Columbian poulet, *ropa vieja avec moros y cristianos*).

“You think the grocer’s a trip, wait until you see the catacombs,” says the only other American at the table.

“A graveyard?” Just because I am dead does not mean I want to be buried.

“The drugs you can find down there are—” Here, Roger kisses his fingers, then licks them, and I briefly remember that you used to do the same thing with Cheetos. “—Immaculate.”

“And the bodies?” I ask.

“Plus, everything is free,” he adds, ignoring the question. “The lodging, the food, *le accoutrements*.”

“The dead, they respect a different kind of order,” Alistair confirms. Alistair is old but British; there are boys, albeit not as many men, who are into that kind of thing.

“I’ve got this”—I wave your cerulean blue card around—“I can take care of myself.”

“Some things you can’t buy with credit,” Roger reminds me.

“What year is this?” I say. It’s more of an accusation than a question.

“Like crystal,” he continues. “You need a lot of stimulants to party in the dark, but the cataphiles are usually generous with their drugs.”

“Without Wi-Fi and electricity, you’d be surprised how nice blokes get when it comes to sharing their toys,” Alistair says.

“What can meth do for me?” I ask him.

“Anything you can do, you can do better on meth,” Roger avers.

“Except maths,” Alistair admits.

“Who needs math in a cave?” Roger says. “But the sex, the sex is definitely better.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say, standing. “I’ll have to find out for myself.”

True story: antiretrovirals and methamphetamine are the perfect cocktail. What the legal drugs took away in my will to get and give dick, the

illegal ones gave back; with my libido chemically restored and my viral load undetectable, I became myself again, albeit as you. In the underground city beneath Paris, I tread water between the Boutique of Psychosis and The Medusa Room in my thigh-highs, an old pair of Hunter boots dating back to when the shoemakers still took themselves seriously as a rubber company. The limestone is wet to the touch, but its dust is dry in the mouth. I'm thirsty, and for more than just drink; the only solution is to find a party and join it. Underground, the rules are luckily different; cataphiles take and give alike, flippantly and with good cheer, devoid of the annoying rules of reciprocity that dictate life with windows and doors. I follow the faint whine of Ben Folds crooning about the perils of being male, middle-class and White, until the auditory crumbs lead me to a chamber lit with miniature LED lights and overrun with bottles, brown and clear. A small man in khaki and leather nods at me, then grabs my hand. I notice the whip in his, lean and severe, and wonder what Jesus would do in situations like this. God, forever the strong, silent type, does not indulge my curiosity. So, I forget him briefly in the hours that follow, when the fire from carbide lamps light up rocks cradled in silver spoons and all the things that one man can do to another get explored in spaces where the living mingle with the dead.

By the time I awake, you are the last thing on my mind. But once above ground, even sex and water require payment. When I reach in my damp pockets, I pull out the blue card with your name on it. Propitiation, isn't that what we need? You taught me the word in high school, when you were studying for the SATs and I was chasing after a boy at church, one who gave heathens what they wanted in the hopes that flirting to converting was a thing.

"Propitiation, noun, meaning atonement," you had said.

"I dare you to use that in a sentence," I replied, disbelieving that you could.

"Jesus is a propitiation," you offered. "You tell your buddy that, see if it gets him off."

I laughed but followed your advice; it worked. Now that you're not here, it is unclear who can propitiate the sins I am racking up as quickly as I can. Life is a competition; he who dies most happy before getting caught wins. You played it safe and lost; I want to be an emergency.

Only when Chase starts calling do I find out that credit limits exist even for those with perfect credit scores. I fly back to Miami using funds from a successful GoFundMe campaign for my former self's memorial, a self that no longer exists but requires memorializing.

In the condo, standing, wearing the shirt with the fishes, I finger the forty-nine golden seals I have left, wondering how many times you can die before my luck—or cheer—runs out.



Marie Scarles  
**Open the Gates**  
*Mixed media collage*





## Gene Kendall Chloe

It was the sweetest of dreams, something unexpected, something that brought alive in Edgar feelings he didn't know still existed. Though enmeshed in sleep, Edgar experienced a tremor of excitement tingling throughout his skin, the sensation of his cheeks blushing.

Her name was Chloe, and though it defied belief, her cherubic features, the gentle tone of her voice, had been recreated faithfully in this dream. Edgar hadn't seen the girl in weeks—was telling himself that he didn't miss her, that allowing his leisurely thoughts to turn to her so often was foolishness he should've outgrown years ago—yet this dream, this gift from the heavens, had brought Chloe back to him.

The dream toyed with time the way dreams do, presenting their first meeting and Edgar's wish of domestic bliss as something less than linear. One second, he was holding his bimonthly stack of books against his chest while she looked on with those brilliant eyes from the counter. The next, they were cozying up on the couch.

But the backdrop of their conversation, a friendly debate on whether Poe had revealed too much of himself in his work, ping-ponged between both locations. And some snippets of their playful-yet-erudite banter would even occur in locales he'd never visited, like the shores of Maui, glimmering orange during early evening sunset.

It was a taste of something pure and beautiful. But only a taste.

A sharp, droning sound that had no business in this peaceful realm of fantasy jolted Edgar's head off his pillow. Squeezing his eyes, tasting a bitter film on his lips, Edgar attempted to confront reality. Not that he desired to face such a horrid thing, of course.

Edgar turned to his left, to the nightstand that contained his glasses, eyedrops, and alarm clock. Even half-asleep, he predicted the time: 6:00AM.

It was an alarm clock in name only, truthfully. Edgar couldn't remember the last time he'd set the

buzzer. No, the noise that jostled him awake came from outside his bedroom, outside his house.

And, as always, it came at 6:00AM.

This was the sound of his hated neighbor, a privileged snot by the name of Bentley, always tooting his car horn before leaving at this obscene hour. On his more charitable days, Edgar assumed the man was giving a blast of the horn as a mischievous goodbye to his wife, who was perhaps standing on their porch with a sideways grin on her porcelain face.

Less charitable mornings had Edgar assuming the intolerable *wreep* was an insult hurled in his direction.

Why this young and handsome Bentley would choose to abuse Edgar in such a fashion, he couldn't guess. It's not as if Edgar ever had any dealings with the man. They'd only spoken once, both collecting their morning papers one Sunday, not long after Bentley had moved into the subdivision.

Edgar endured the small talk with a courteous smile on his lips. Within seconds, had sized Bentley up as typical of his generation—coddled, superficially urbane, and ignorant of anything that approached genuine culture. When he wasn't busy nattering on about himself, he was taking sips of coffee from a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* mug.

Still, Edgar had maintained his composure and, in his estimation, had done nothing to cause the young dunderhead offense.

Reflecting on that morning, Edgar was positive his face didn't drop one centimeter when Bentley revealed he was employed at the state government's Disability Services office. That department happened to be the one supplying Edgar with checks twice a month. He chose not to reveal this to Bentley.

On the worst of the mornings, a groggy Edgar would entertain fantasies of Bentley keeping an eye on him through the kitchen window. Perhaps monitoring Edgar's alacrity when raking leaves, or surreptitiously following Edgar as he went about

Madison Lane  
**Un Homme Et Une Femme**  
*Drypoint print*

his regular errands in town. It was an appalling thought, the idea of his neighbor spying on him, counting the grocery bags Edgar could lumber around with no obvious pain.

That early morning *wreep*—was it a taunt? A signal from the young gentleman with the wheat-colored hair and dimpled chin that he was on to Edgar? That he was conspiring in the open to rob Edgar of this early retirement?

Edgar did have these thoughts on the worst of the mornings, and this was one of them. He yielded to the paranoia for nearly an hour, puttering around his minimalist kitchen, preparing a breakfast of bland toast and blander oatmeal.

While pouring his second mug of coffee, he spotted his visitor on the back deck. He shuffled over to the refrigerator and removed a leftover plate of hamburger steak. Opening the back door, his face remained lugubrious as he bent over and placed the chilly dish on his deck. “Eat up, Chloe. Might not be your favorite, but it’s what’s on the menu.”

Why he’d named this copper-colored shorthair Chloe he didn’t know. He hadn’t expected to still be dreaming about the human Chloe all these months later, that much he was sure of.

But it wasn’t fair to the real Chloe, he now realized, naming some stray cat after her. Even if they did have the same color hair, and a similar spark in those emerald eyes.

Truth was, Edgar had every reason to despise this stray. Chloe was the same breed, same color, as the mascot for Feline Feasts cat food. He was working the floor at the Feline Feasts cannery twelve years ago when his accident occurred. Twelve years since he’d received a well-deserved settlement and well-deserved government disability payment, regardless of what the sickening yuppie next door believed.

“Do you little feral monsters dream, I wonder?” Edgar asked, watching Chloe approach the plate. “You have fantasies about the hunt, don’t you? I’ve read something about that. But the past, memories, dreams about what could’ve been... you’re not lucky enough to have those, are you?” He stroked the animal’s russet fur, kept muttering to himself. “Lucky, unlucky, whatever.”

Edgar should’ve named the stray Frida the Finicky Feline, after the brand’s mascot. Not Chloe. But it was too late to change things now.

A descending sun was turning the sky an intoxicating shade of lavender, but Edgar had hardly noticed. Seated on his front porch rocker, Edgar’s nose was planted firmly in his book.

He’d gone by the library this afternoon, following lunch at his favorite diner. Utilizing the library’s computerized card catalog (he’d never forgive them for retiring the real thing), Edgar assembled a stack of books on the science of dreaming. The woman at the counter was pleasant and professional, but she wasn’t Chloe.

Ignoring the falling sun and its majestic sky, Edgar was completing the fourteenth chapter in this particular tome. He’d been suspicious of this one, thanks to the back cover photo of its spikey-haired author, someone who resembled a skateboarding hoodlum more than a doctor, but the man’s words had a ring of authenticity to them.

Tonight, he would return to sleep, armed with new awareness. He’d manipulate his resting brainwaves and nudge his subconscious in the proper direction. His dream of Chloe would return, would even surpass last night’s in passion and intensity.

Right now, though, Edgar found his concentration assassinated by the arrival of his neighbor. Bentley, returning home in his impeccably white coupe, walking to his front steps and greeting a wife he didn’t deserve, tousling the hair of their freckle-faced boy...all very sickening, indeed.

What had Bentley accomplished today? How many claims had he denied? How many victims of a soulless system had he spied on, searching for minor contradictions in statements that could deprive them of life’s necessities? And how long before Bentley’s attention turned Edgar’s way—assuming it hadn’t already?

If he had to go back to that cannery...

If Edgar had to do that, had to endure the sneering looks of his coworkers when he dared to crack open a book during his lunch hour. Listen to their vulgar conversations, their trivial complaints,

their ignorant political rants. If he had to go back there, what remained of his soul would surely die.

With a huff, Edgar’s attention returned to the book. His plan for the evening would be diligently executed, with rigorous attention to each detail. He had every expectation of success.

Four weeks later, Edgar had experienced no success. Only fleeting dreams of no substance, not worth remembering. And, every weekday morning, the raucous, contemptible sound of that *wreep*.

6:00AM Why so early? This man worked in an office, not a farm. Not a warehouse. Not a cannery.

This morning, Edgar gaped at the alarm clock for twenty minutes, descending into another hole of self-pity, before rolling out of bed. After his feet hit the floor, the daily routine commenced. Breakfast. Coffee. Leftovers in the fridge for Chloe, The Feline. He’d been remembering lately to set those out early, allowing them to warm up some before placing them on the back deck.

The feline Chloe revealed herself before Edgar had finished his first cup of coffee this morning. Had her plump face pressed against his back window, mewling her demands. Edgar adjusted his robe and stepped outside, plate in hand.

“Turkey noodle casserole,” he announced.

“Made enough to last two nights, but sure, why don’t you enjoy yourself?” The cat didn’t hesitate, diving into the dish. “I mean, I live but to serve you, correct? Not as if I’ll have anyone to join me for dinner any decade soon.” Edgar slumped against the wooden railing. Anyone *human*. Anyone who could appreciate a well-crafted joke, or pick up a book because you thought she might like it.

“The books I’ve been reading, lately...I thought they would help. Thought they could at least give me some way to escape into dreams. It’s funny, actually. I rarely remembered any of my dreams. Didn’t give them any thought. Then, that one hit. The big one. The one that starred your human doppelganger.

“I was one hundred percent ga-ga over that one. I’m still trying to get back into it. Still failing every night, but giving it my best.

“Why did I care so much? Well, it’s different for humans. The bonds we develop—it’s more than a simple mating dance. Far more than a quick, effortless encounter. But, in fairness, some people have what appears to be an easy time with it. They meet their beloved and they exchange vows and go about their way, bonded for life and producing their freckled offspring.

“Others...we have a harder go at it. Even when you find the right one, you’re not guaranteed a happy ending. This ‘right one,’ your special someone, she can sink some sharp hooks into your heart.

“She can do that, even though you only ever saw her behind that counter at the library. Yes, I’ll admit with some embarrassment, a man can become enchanted even though his beloved never engaged him in anything more than some polite chit-chat about books and the dangers of an increasingly illiterate society.” A small, melancholic sound came from Edgar’s lips.

“The feminine mystique has its ways of charming you. Preventing you from acknowledging things that should’ve always been obvious.” Edgar’s brow furrowed as thoughts contested internally. “Her smile...it was kind, but it also hinted that perhaps she was humoring a lonely patron.”

He spent a moment alone with that realization.

“But...but people like me, they can dream, can’t they? Repaint reality; edit out some troublesome details. Dream about a lovely young woman with an electric smile and light ginger hair who could quote *Wuthering Heights* from memory. Dream they don’t do foolish things like graduate college and skip town and leave a pathetic old man even more alone.”

“In a world containing a small shred of mercy, those unfortunate individuals could dream such travesties never occurred. Dream about what might have been.” Edgar opened his eyes and realized Chloe had finished her meal. In apparent gratitude, she nuzzled her head against Edgar’s leg. “I thought they could, at least.”



Edgar didn't know if his realization from that morning, his surrender to harsh reality, had played a role in tonight's breakthrough. He had to entertain the possibility, however; the thought that his subconscious would only allow Chloe to visit after he'd made some peace with the truth of their relationship.

It was healthier this way. A salubrious fantasy that treated Chloe more like a Tinseltown starlet, an airbrushed image on a magazine cover, instead of the one who got away. Edgar had made peace with the reality that Chloe was as unattainable as those models and actresses, and his dreaming mind gave the okay for her return.

After waiting for so long, exerting every iota of willpower, the dream had returned.

She was there in the distance, behind her desk. Looking up from her paperback, she noticed him, a smile traveling up her face into those glittering eyes.

"Well, look who's back," Dream Edgar said as his greeting, spreading his arms wide, dropping his books to the carpet.

Dream Chloe leaned over her desk for the hug. "You know that I could as soon forget you as my existence!" she said, tears forming.

"A Brontë quote? Still your favorite, I gather?" he asked, not leaving the embrace. Edgar planted his face into her shoulder. "Chloe—what right had you to leave me?" he asked, his voice choked.

"Oh, I guess I'm doing it, too," he realized, now taking a step back and maintaining a respectful distance. "I'll admit, Chloe, I've been re-reading your favorites since you left. Maybe committed some of them to memory, myself." He took another moment to soak in her presence, to experience the joy of her jeweled eyes and buttercream skin. "Chloe, the wait, it's been intolerable..."

She nodded assent. "Time brought resignation and a melancholy sweeter than common joy."

"Right...right..." Edgar muttered, studying the room, noticing the library's interior had been replaced with his living room since last he looked. "You don't have to keep quoting...well, anyway, it's so good to have you here." He squeezed Chloe's palms, felt a rush of delight and nervousness when he appreciated they weren't standing anymore.

This dream, this expression of his ensorcelled subconscious, had relocated both of them to his couch. She was close to him now, close enough the heat of her body simmered.

"You wouldn't think me forward, dearest Chloe, if I moved closer...moved closer for a kiss?"

Her face somehow became even brighter. "I love Edgar, and Edgar loves me. All seems smooth and easy; where is the obstacle?"

Resisting his nerves, Edgar leaned closer—closer and closer until only a molecule of air existed between his mouth and Chloe's. His lips parted, his eyes squeezed shut, and Edgar prepared himself for the sweetest taste of ecstasy.

*WREEP.*

Edgar's eyelids flashed open. In disbelief, he screamed. "*No!* Not now! Not like this!"

Reality had returned Edgar to the dark of his bedroom. The reality of a subdivision and a nearby neighbor with an irritating habit of honking his car horn every morning at 6:00AM

The indignity had finally reached an intolerable level. Lying in bed, his eyes shooting deadly beams of hate at the ceiling, Edgar decided to end this lunacy.

His initial plan was a simple one. So simple, he had immediate doubts. Sugar in the gas tank? Could that work, or was it an aging urban legend?

Research at the library that morning confirmed his misgivings. Most likely, for any automobile of the modern age, the sugar would have to outweigh the gasoline before the car would even notice. There were other options, however. Bleach. Hydrogen peroxide. Soda. He could go by the store. He could try each one, keep trying until he discovered one that worked.

On his front porch that evening, Edgar spied Bentley returning to his picture-perfect family. Saw the kisses hello and the tousling of the hair and the "*You're getting so big, sport!*" He kept watch, joined occasionally by the feline Chloe, and waited three hours for the lights to go out.

Under the cover of night, Edgar tiptoed into his neighbor's yard with a bottle of his concoction and executed his plan. He prayed for a visit from

Dream Chloe tonight, prayed she could forgive him for committing such a deed. Tomorrow morning, if fortune smiled on him, there would be no unsolicited alarm interrupting their bliss.

*"The indignity had finally reached an intolerable level. Lying in bed, his eyes shooting deadly beams of hate at the ceiling, Edgar decided to end this lunacy."*

6:00AM did arrive the next morning, as it typically does. It was not accompanied by Chloe's visit, but also missing was the sound of the *wreep*. And Edgar, still cotton-headed in the lessening dark, was diligent in confirming this was a weekday.

No *wreep*. Barely the sound of a bird chirping. He peeked outside his window and discovered Bentley's bone-white coupe remained in the driveway next door. In fact, Bentley was circling the vehicle, speaking to someone on his smartphone.

He didn't seem upset. Didn't seem suspicious or angry. Was merely presenting the facts of the situation to the individual on the other side of the call, and good-naturedly chuckling about how he expected the rest of this day to go.

Edgar told himself this didn't bother him. Maliciousness didn't rouse his actions, only practicality. With that car silent for the next few days, Chloe would return to his dreams, and their love story (as unusual as it was touching, he knew) could continue in peaceful, uninterrupted joy.

A few hours passed. Edgar was resting on his couch, perusing another book dedicated to the art of dream manipulation. This one was based on Eastern philosophy, more metaphysical than he would've preferred, but he was open to whatever lessons it might teach him.

Edgar understood that car wouldn't be towed away forever. And while he tried to fight off any

disappointment when considering Chole's previous no-show, it would be the most tragic of lost opportunities if she failed to appear this evening.

His studies were interrupted by a knock at the door. Keeping his thumb inside the book, holding his place, Edgar crept to the keyhole and investigated.

Bentley. Standing there, still smirking contently like he did that morning when they met all those months ago.

Not answering would be suspicious, Edgar reasoned. So, with no obvious joy, he opened the door.

"Hi, neighbor. Hope I didn't interrupt anything important."

Edgar, evading eye contact, muttered that everything was fine.

"Anyway, I realize this might sound a little nutty, I guess, but I've got to ask you. My car...well, this morning I couldn't get the thing to start. I just talked to my mechanic and he says someone—get this, it's nuts—someone poured a substance into the gas tank. I couldn't believe it, but he's adamant. So, what I was wondering—have you seen anyone around my car?"

Edgar, smacking away the dryness between his lips, realized he was still holding that book. Though it was irrational to hold any guilt, to assume that Bentley could instantly discern his interest in the topic, Edgar discreetly maneuvered to the entryway table and set the book aside. "Why, no," he said, returning to the doorway. "No, I haven't."

"No one suspicious going around our lawn?" Bentley's smirk hadn't faded.

"No."

The feline Chloe quietly made her appearance at that moment, bouncing casually up Edgar's front steps. Bentley acknowledged the feline with a soft chuckle, then turned his attention back to Edgar.

"Well, I'm just asking around. It's a crazy thing. Teenage pranks, I'm guessing. I'll be keeping an eye out on your place, too, Edgar. Try to make sure these hoodlums don't pull any nonsense at your place."

"Ah. Thank you," Edgar replied, attempting to hold his face still, to prevent it from deteriorating into a scowl. Uncomfortable with the silence that followed, Edgar offered some words to Bentley—



something superficially complimentary that would bolster this dullard's view of Edgar as a friendly neighbor. "You seem to be handling all this with a cheery disposition."

Bentley gave a casual shrug. "Well, not like it's the end of the world. Only thing is, I had to miss my daily breakfast stop."

Edgar submitted to dark speculation. A favored waitress at the café; a young waif flattered by the attention. Or perhaps his mistress. Another married coworker, or a pretty darling unaware of Bentley's home life. What else would motivate a "family man" to leave his home at the ungodly hour of 6:00AM each morning?

"Oh?" asked Edgar with a bitter grin. "No breakfast with the family? No words of encouragement for the young one before he heads off for school?"

Bentley's attention had divided itself between Edgar and the feline, now performing a coquettish march around Bentley's legs. "I give 'em each a kiss on the cheek before I head out. See, my mom's over at Sunrise Acres. Moved in after my dad passed away six years ago. She expects me over each morning for biscuits and coffee before I head for work. Then she gives me the peck on the cheek before I go."

Edgar's proud lips turned down into a frown. One he swiftly removed from his face.

"Maybe the whole thing's silly," Bentley continued, "and Sunrise's a great facility, but I think she gets lonely out there. If it makes her feel better, gives her something to look forward to, then I don't mind heading out early."

Edgar spoke, almost without thinking, his voice barely above a murmur. "Loneliness...it's not always an easy thing."

"By the way, is this your cat?" Bentley, now on his knees, stroking the feline, asked in his chipper tone.

"She seems to think so. Though I suppose some of the blame can land on me. I do feed her leftovers each morning."

"Guess everyone has their routine. This one"—Bentley made a comical pointing motion atop Chloe's head—"in case you didn't know, likes to hang around my car early in the morning. A time or two, I've even

caught the furry munchkin napping behind the back tires. I always give a toot of the horn to make sure the little devil knows to get out of the way."

Edgar recoiled sharply. All moisture left his throat. "Yes...and you do that...every morning..."

"Yeah. I try not to forget. My wife told my son not to name the stray, but he's settled on 'Copper.' I dunno—I kinda like it."

"Hm. Well, I've been calling her Chloe. No, ah, no reason."

Bentley looked at Edgar with a roguish grin. "Yeah, about that...you know this is a boy cat, right?"

Edgar had never thought to check. Thanks to his bad knees (a gift from his days at that damnable cannery), he couldn't even conceive of crouching low enough to do such a thing.

"Mm, are you certain?"

Bentley lifted the cat, turned it the opposite way and raised its tail, to show off. "Hard to deny, neighbor."

Edgar dipped his chin. "In that case, I suppose I'll have to reconsider her...his name." He took the cat formerly known as Chloe in his arms and tugged on the door to close it. "And please know you have my gratitude, regarding those hoodlums and your watchful eye."

Carrying the cat over to his couch, Edgar plopped heavily on the cushions and released an audible moan. Making a bed of his lap, Edgar's feline companion flicked an ear and yawned as the first ripple of guilt began its journey throughout Edgar's stomach.

Bentley. A man, a family man, and not some ogre. What he'd always presented himself to be. And today, an innocent victim of Edgar's malice. Not that it seemed to overly bother the chipper gentleman.

Chloe. A fantasy. Untouchable, even in dreams. Destined to remain that way. Edgar's failings, his crooked attempts to ensure her return, had tainted him. Made him unworthy of her consideration.

Caressing the feline, Edgar sought some distraction. He contemplated new names for his furry companion. Had a gentle laugh at himself, at his obliviousness, for getting such an important detail so wrong for so long.

Yes, it was amusing, and also a little embarrassing, the way Bentley had proved him

wrong. As if Edgar truly needed a stray cat's genitals aimed at his face like that. Not even aimed, he considered now. More like pointed.

More like shoved.

Who would do something like that?

And the smile on Bentley's face as he broke the news. No hesitance. No gentility when informing Edgar how wrong he'd been.

More than a little embarrassing, Edgar considered now. Something done as a taunt. An *insult*. The guilt rippling in his stomach shifted; moved on to a queasy self-consciousness. Then, within minutes, to anger.

This respectable family man. So conscientious, always with the easy smile. But behind that veneer? Yes, something sinister, Edgar had decided. Someone who'd allowed his mask to slip, and done so foolishly in front of a man wise enough to peer through his deception.

Edgar, perhaps, wasn't deserving of another visit from Chloe. But Bentley? That cocksure braggadocio was deserving of another dose of humility.

Edgar brought the feline companion to his face, locked eyes, and asked if the stray concurred. Its quiet mewling, to Edgar's ears, sounded like fervid agreement.

Matthew Mitchell

# Sandbags and Sets

Sami and I played spades together. Joker, joker, deuce. She snuck a pill of dope in her womanhood, and nodded as we smoked. Her fan of cards unorganized, she insisted on keeping score. We won eighteen times in a row. No sandbags, no sets. Our bidding was immaculate. I loved the way she cooked the books. I helped fill out her paperwork. Her finger was rotting in her knuckle. It was soon to fall off. It held her last shootable vein, sunken, and often missed. She showed me pictures of her son. He was three, almost four. The T.A. told her she was going to die. She told him to fuck off. She taught me to light our cigarettes off the toaster's red beam when the T.A.'s took our lighters. We told each other we were probably going to die. They sent us to a place we couldn't stand. Insurance did fuck all, we did less. She left, I left, I returned. She dropped me off some Marlboro Blacks. She finally found a new vein to hit. She was set a second time. Big Joker trumps Little Joker. She died before her finger fell off.



Judy Lewis  
Vintage Travel  
Mixed media collage

Stephen Witty  
Old Men

Old men  
Like me  
Lick our lips  
In symmetry  
Mere transitory

Beings as we suck  
The marrow  
Blind forces  
Dragging out  
The remnants

Drain us, down to  
The last dregs  
Of ourselves  
Still salivating  
At the blood-red

Animal meat  
The aftertaste  
Lingering  
Deep red wine  
Washing it down

And at the end  
At last — to  
Our veiled host  
With gnarled fingers  
We raise a glass

Marlene Olin  
Gaslit

**Walter is taking a stand.** He glances at the oak floors, the cedar closets, the crown molding, outside the bird feeders. The boxes filled with begonias in the spring. His house in Woodmere may not mean much to most people, but to Walter each part defines the whole. It's his Alamo, this house. His fort in the wilderness. The tip of the Titanic before its last heave. He's never leaving this house, no matter what.

Don't all people make mistakes? Last month, Walter crisped the kitchen. He set the kettle to boil then lay down. He didn't mean to take a nap. He just meant to close his eyes and rest. But lately time has had a way of escaping. It's like the sand is leaking from the hourglass and falling on the floor. And all of a sudden, the smoke alarm was screaming, the kettle was melted, and the counter was black.

Then last week he decided to visit his friend Sam. But landmarks that once seemed familiar now look oddly strange. A trip that should have taken twenty minutes took four hours. One minute he was staring at the windshield and the next minute he was entering New Jersey. How the hell did he manage that?

Sure he went to doctors. Before his wife died, she taped a list of names above the phone. They took brain pictures, bone pictures, pictures that left little to the imagination. Then they gave him a bunch of pills to thin his blood. *They're like Roto-Rooters*, they said. *They break up the plaque, clear out the sludge.*

The doctor had ladylike hands. Smooth hands. Each nail was perfectly mooned.

One finger pointed straight up as he spoke. *Only don't hit your head, okay? These pills cure one problem and cause another. Bleeders. You don't want any bleeders.*

**He tapes Post-it's all over the house.** *Turn off the oven! Your pills are over the sink!* But last Thursday, he left his wallet at the Walmart

counter. Then on Friday, he left his car keys at the supermarket. So far he's been lucky. He's stickered his name and number to most of his possessions. If he's patient, if he waits by the phone for a week or two, a kindly person usually brings them back.

So he waits. And he waits and he waits. But soon Walter grows hungry. He needs his Raisin Bran to keep regular. And when you get to a certain age, regularity is a gift. By Saturday, he's desperate. Against his better judgment, he decides to ride his son Buzz's old bike to the Quik Stop.

In the garage, he finds a dusty air pump and plumps up the tires. Then he rings the bell on the handlebars and can't believe it works. He layers a sweater under his winter coat and wraps three mufflers around his neck. Soon he's ready to go.

Only, the bike's shaky. And it's cold out. His face is frozen, his legs are wobbly, the wind is pushing him back. And he forgot about the ice on the sidewalks. They're like skating rinks, the sidewalks. So instead of pumping, he puts his feet on the ice and pushes. After two or three blocks he's only halfway there, but his legs are cramping and his head is woozy. Each foot forward feels like the Bataan Death March.

When the bike slides out from underneath him, he's both a little surprised and a little relieved. A child with a snotty nose sidles up and asks, *You okay, Mister?* But for the life of him, Walter can't answer. Looking around, he has no idea where he is.

**Buzz gets the phone call at work.** *Are you the son of Walter Snodgrass? He's at the hospital on Main and Fifth. He's got a sprained ankle*, they tell him. *And a bit of delirium, too. Says his name is Jim Bowie. Says he's taking a stand.*

Buzz hangs up the phone and makes some quick calculations. Of course, his father doesn't think he's Jim Bowie. Jim Bowie is Walterspeak for saying *fuck off*. But despite his father's insistence, Buzz knows better. His father is sinking, and he has to act fast.



Of course, a few doubts linger. But while one part of Buzz feels sorry for his father, the other part sees dollar signs. Walter’s eighty-one years old. His house may be dilapidated but just the property alone is worth at least a million bucks. If they sell it, the family could pocket a fortune. Walter would be taken care of, and Buzz could pay off those credit card bills.

Sure they could send him to an adult community, someplace warm with palm trees and pickleball. But why spend the money when a perfectly nice apartment is available free of charge? His wife Agnes has already done the legwork. A little bit of paint and some legalese will take care of the rest.

**They’re in a courtroom.** A lawyer in five-inch heels and an ass-hugging skirt points to Walter and whispers to the judge. Meanwhile Walter’s thoughts are scattered like bird seed. Just one look at his son makes his blood pressure percolate. And all at once he’s walking through a tunnel. Then someone turns off the lights.

By the time the rescue squad arrives, Walter’s eyes have popped open. But now there is no going back. Somehow the belongings of a lifetime are condensed into three boxes. His car is sold, the bike tossed. They shove Walter into the back seat of Buzz’s car, ducking his head like he’s some sort of criminal. Then his son and the wife yak yak yak in the front seat for the next twenty minutes.

**Here we are! says Agnes.** His new home is more than an embarrassment. It’s a humiliation tucked inside an afterthought. The garage lies twenty yards downhill from Buzz’s house. Snow runoff, refuse from roof gutters, castoff relatives—everything that flows downstream finds its way there. Walter is ushered up a set of stairs, his hands white-knuckling the handrail, his feet struggling to find purchase on the icy steps. A studio apartment had been fashioned over the garage years ago for his grandson Trey. Walter blinks. He remembers the walls covered with Grateful Dead posters, the bedspread splashed with neon colors, assorted skulls sitting on a shelf.

*It’s from the Martha Stewart Collection. Don’t you love it?* says Agnes. It looks like someone threw up

flowers. On the bedspread, on the curtains, on the tablecloth. To cover up the scent of mildew, the stench of potpourri fills the air.

Walter has no idea where all of his belongings have gone. His wife’s sideboard filled with china. His stamp collection. His coins. Then finally they speak to him. Slowly, like he’s a simpleton. Loudly, like he’s deaf.

*We’ve disconnected the gas line to the stove, Dad. Just to be safe. But you’ve got a nice little refrigerator. And inside here you’ll find some glasses. And this drawer has some forks and some spoons. But no knives.* Wink. Wink. *We thought it safer if we gave away the knives.*

The appliances, Walter remembers, were purchased at a garage sale twenty years ago. What do you call stuff that’s old but not yet antique? Walter calls them crap, but Agnes says they’re *vintage*.

Meanwhile Agnes is waltzing around the small room. *Ta dah!* she shouts. Pasting on a smile, she pulls back a long flowery shower curtain that circles the world’s oldest bathtub. It already looks dirty, the cast iron showing where the enamel chipped off. A second shower curtain reveals the toilet. She flushes it proudly to show that it’s working but Walter can just guess what that bowl looks like. He’s too afraid to look.

*Will I get internet in here?* Walter asks. His grandson had given him a laptop last Christmas. Then he showed him how it worked. *I believe I need a Wi-Fi password.*

*Sure Dad,* they say. *Sure.* Then they lead him to the dinette and sit him on a chair. Agnes pats his head like he’s a kindergartener. *Dinner’s at six, Dad. We’ll bring you a plate if you like.*

But Walter’s having a good day. The synapses are firing. His mind is sharp, and his thoughts focused. He’s not going down without a fight.

**His first lifeline is his friend Sam.** He could always count on Sam’s horse sense. Buy low. Sell high. Keep your kids close and your friends closer. But good old reliable Sam is practically hyperventilating on the phone. Each word ends in exclamation points. And suddenly Walter feels his options narrowing, his lifelines shredding like dental floss.

*We’re heading to Florida! says Sam. A three-bedroom in Boynton Beach! A golf course! A clubhouse! Gladys is never cooking again!*

Walter closes his eyes. He can smell the salt air. He can taste the piña coladas. And all at once, he finds himself struggling for breath. The very concept of jealousy has always been foreign to him. But life in Florida glimmers like Christmas. Envy is a stone in his throat.

**Thanksgiving proves inspirational.** The turkey is smoking in the barbeque. Meanwhile, Agnes has lined up a bunch of plastic lawn chairs encircling it for warmth. No matter the weather, she hates having guests over. Their butts crease the couch cushions. Their shoes leave imprints on the rug.

Walter plops himself down next to Trey and his four-year-old great-grandson Kip. The family resemblance is unmistakable: their complexions ruddy, their hair glued to their heads in rust-colored tufts. The three of them shiver while the turkey’s cooking, making small talk through chattering teeth.

There was a time when Walter worried about Trey. A bout with drugs. A few stints in rehab. But now, Trey is working construction and running a furniture business on the side. And though Kip’s mother is out of the picture, he is raising the little boy fine. The only time Trey asks for help is on Saturdays. His meetings are on Saturdays. Some people need church or Raisin Bran. Trey needs his Saturday meetings.

The child, as always, is restless. He looks at Walter with open eyes and boundless trust. *You have a surprise for me today, Gramps?*

His wife had a knack with kids and always had a small present on hand. A piece of candy. A little toy. It was a thousand small acts of kindness that made her special. Walter doesn’t have much, but still he tries.

From a pocket he extracts two Hot Wheels cars that he bought at the local drug store. Kip rewards him with a hug and a kiss. Then the boy splays on the ground and runs the cars between their legs. A world within a whorl. *Zoom. Zoom. Zoom.*

**Meanwhile, dinner is proving a disaster.** Buzz is hovering over the grill, sweating in forty-degree

weather. The sky’s getting dark. Their stomachs are churning and everyone’s cross. *For the love of God,* says Agnes. *What’s taking so long? My sweet potatoes are ruined!*

Bombarded by complaints, Buzz cranks up the barbeque, but the gas hisses and the grill crackles. Sparks fly everywhere. *Give me some water,* he shouts.

Agnes’s parents are sitting off to the side. Of course, the boy doesn’t know better. He assumes that Agnes’s father is drinking water from his water bottle. He assumes that all grandpas look like Santa with a bulging gut and a big red nose. With the best of intentions, Kip puts down his car, grabs the water bottle, and plops it in Buzz’s hand. One squirt of gin is all it takes. The explosion rattles the trees.

*Boom!* Kip says, clapping his hands.

*That’s right,* says Walter. *Boom.*

**The following Saturday, Trey brings Kip for a visit.** Ever since Walter moved in, Agnes and Buzz choose Saturdays to make themselves scarce. But the arrangement suits Walter fine. He and Trey have some computer time together, then Walter babysits Kip while Trey goes to his meeting.

Today Walter flourishes an old box of party favors he found stuffed in a closet, birthday candles, a banner, stuff Agnes probably used ages ago. Stretching the latex, Walter’s hands seem to work on muscle memory alone. The lungs are another story. Huffing and puffing, he feels like his chest is going to burst. With shaky hands, he slides the neck of each balloon over the faucet. Then he remembers to fill each one halfway.

*They’re called water balloons,* he tells Kip. *Watch.*

Together they walk outside his apartment and stop at the open stairwell. Then Walter leans over and drops a balloon on the asphalt.

Kip tries one next. His little fingers clench and unclench the balloon and together they watch it fall. The child’s face is a wonderment. And when the balloon hits the ground, they both shout in unison, *Boom!*

**Walter’s computer skills slowly progress.** Each Saturday, Trey teaches him a new trick. He emails his friend Sam in Boynton Beach. He creates a new bank account, applies for a Mastercard, and orders his cereal online. Unknown to Buzz and

Agnes, Walter had put aside funds for a rainy day. There's a safe deposit box downtown filled with certificates of deposit. There's a fishing cabin in Montana and a condo in Cabo. Now that it's pouring out, Walter figures it's time. And no one is more sympathetic to his plight than Trey.

**It's another Saturday.** The ice has disappeared from the stairwell. Blasts of cold no longer seep from the window panes. But for Walter, one obstacle course simply replaces another. Now he has to face the sludge of spring. Driving rains. Muddy yards. He knows he has to act soon. It feels like his life is sliding, hydroplaning off the road, and heading for a crash.

The three of them are sitting on the floral couch, watching TV from a black and white maybe sixty years old. It's another vintage special, a garage sale find, courtesy of Agnes. Three channels and rabbit ears. Any minute Walter expects to see Kukla, Fran, and Ollie. He blinks.

*If you think things are bad now, says Trey, wait until summer comes. You see that crack?*

An inch of daylight sneaks in every morning under the front door. Like all the other insults in his life, Walter has tried to ignore it.

Trey's sipping an iced tea slowly, making the sips last. He talks like an escaped convict, like someone who dug his way out of hell using only a battered spoon.

He points. *Roaches the size of Volkswagen Beetles crawl through that crack. Not to mention the ants. Armies of ants. Ants in your bed. Ants in your food. I used to set off a bug bomb once a week. Then I'd find the corpses days later.*

**Day after day Walter sits at the computer researching.** His whole life is now a race against the clock, the good days barely outnumbering the bad. Though he takes his pills, his decline mounts a steady progression. Still, he perseveres—his knobby fingers poking at the keys, his ass half off the chair, his eyes squinting and straining.

If only the computer cooperated! The Google algorithms drive him wacky, second guessing his thoughts and steering him sideways. He types in *gas leaks* and gets advertisements for hemorrhoid creams. He types in *arson* and finds arthritis cures.

He types in *propellants* and learns more about Propecia than he ever cared to know.

Soon a strategy unfolds step by step. When he's through, he phones his cohort in crime, Sam.

***“An inch of daylight sneaks in every morning under the front door. Like all the other insults in his life, Walter has tried to ignore it.”***

*They won't give you jail time, says Sam. Don't worry. Worst case scenario, they'll just think you're nuts.*

For the first time in months, Walter feels in charge. He's the master of his destiny. He's the captain of his ship. During the day, he's busy plotting and planning. And when he sleeps he dreams of sieges and skirmishes, of William B. Travis and Jim Bowie, of roaring cannons and coonskin caps.

**It's nearly summer when the stage is set.**

Walter manages to slide out the stove, flip on the valve to the gas line, push the stove back. The insect foggers stand like soldiers on the kitchen counter. The matches are dry. An ancient space heater is ready and waiting for deployment.

Trey drops off the boy and heads to his meeting. And when he returns, Walter ushers them toward the main house. The lawn chairs are still in place from Thanksgiving. The sun is out while blades of grass are poking through. Only the flowers are unhappy, the tulips in their boxes limping like old people, holding out as long as they can.

*Have a seat, says Walter. Then he waves his arm and directs them. A pitcher of iced tea stands on a small table while Kip's Hot Wheels cars sit on the ground.*

Trey narrows his eyes. *What's going on, you crazy old coot?*

*Get your cell phone ready, says Walter. You're gonna be making a call.*

**He's been rehearsing the steps for weeks.**

Walter hobbles as fast as he can to the garage. Then he turns on the space heater, the foggers, and lastly the old gas stove. The burners spit and sizzle as he leaves the apartment. The scent of gas fills the air.

He makes it down the steps in ten seconds flat just like he practiced. Then he races over to Trey and the boy. A smell like burnt rubber reaches them first, then a *pop pop pop* like firecrackers. Soon the flames will find the gasoline and the paint cans. Walter is counting the seconds under his breath. By the time they reach the street, fire is flaring from the windows. The explosion nearly knocks them off their feet.

While Trey calls 911, Walter and Kip watch. The building's destruction is part inward and part outward. Though the roof is collapsing, planks of wood are soaring into space. Meanwhile the sirens are getting louder, and the neighbors are gathering. Walter waits and watches. And sure enough, one last explosion rocks the pavement. The walls shoot upward while the tub and toilet come crashing down. Walter grabs Kip's hand. A tornado of smoke circles overhead. Ash is raining from the sky.

*Boom. The child whispers. Boom.*

**The heat. The noise. The waiting and the watching.** Like a camera lens, the picture before Walter opens and closes. Voices in the distance surge in and surge out. Trey. Buzz. Agnes. A stranger with a badge. A man with a firefighter's hat. Like all of the turning points in his life, the fire is both more and less than Walter expected. Soon night will come, and the crackling will turn to quiet. Cinders will flit like fireflies. A social worker will be consulted. Insurance claims will be filed.

*Walter, you okay?*

It happens suddenly. It's as if a hand reached from the heavens and turned the dial. All at once, there's no distinction between Walter's inward and outward selves. When he closes his eyes, sparks shoot across his eyelids. Everything is out of focus. The sun is eclipsed, and the ground beneath his feet begins to tilt.

*Walter. You okay?*

Since when did the world turn wooly? Someone tugs at his sleeve then yells in his ear. *Hey, Walter. Can you hear me? Hey, Walter. You okay?*

But the old man is searching the horizon. It's the end of the day, and he's listening for hooves. The calvary is coming, and help is on its way.





## Corey Onerheim **There May Be Blood In Your Daiquiri**

One time, on a busy Saturday night when I was a barback at a famous West Hollywood restaurant, I saw a bartender nearly rip off the upper tip of his left index finger. He was drunk, got careless, tried peeling an orange rind for an old fashioned, and blood spurted everywhere, including the ice in the well (I asked to change it to which point I was told “No” by my general manager). As he ran off for Band-Aids and antiseptics in the office, the drink and the orange zest that damaged him so severely stood on the service well mat. Because it was busy, the server grabbed the peel, dropped it in the drink, and ran off to his table (the customer ended up tipping \$200 on a \$180 tab).

A few years later, I was working at a small Italian restaurant near Melrose. It was a steady lunch, and I was making an Oat Milk Cappuccino and a Whole Milk Latte for my guests at the bar. The server next to me was waiting for his table’s food because the kitchen had misread an order. In crude fashion, the sweaty hirsute cook whipped out the pastas without much tact. When the waiter grabbed one of the pappardelle dishes, he noticed a long string of hair intertwined with the noodles. Instead of asking for a remake and delaying the already imperiled order, he grabbed the long strand and pulled it out of the dish. After a quick inspection, he served it to the table. I presented my guests their respective coffee orders and looked at the woman relishing her pappardelle, having no idea of the depravity that her food had been desecrated.

She left happy.

Eating at restaurants is not so dissimilar to the human mind. Contradictions confront themselves on a minute-by-minute basis. Every thought and emotion manifests itself in some form or another during service. And no one has any idea of what’s actually occurring in the deep recesses of the subconscious (the floor being the conscious mind and the kitchen and bar serving as the collective inner psyche).

We’ve all heard tales from chefs and cooks and the hell they indulge in. And, to a certain extent, bartenders, or mixologists, a pretentious term I personally loathe, have enjoyed marginal pedigrees of celebrity for their own innovations and stories. But chefs and cooks have enjoyed greater social mobility because, in many ways, it’s a taxing trade to master, and the lack of alcohol involvement entices the Food Network audience. Furthermore, Chefs attract real money in opening restaurants. Cuisine is the backbone of this entire industry, and alcohol is considered a luxurious, albeit important, accoutrement to the entire paradigm.

But bartending should still be treated with equal measure with respect to the culinary arts. Serving can be a difficult skill to master if you work at *Spago*, but bartending is the apotheosis of the BOH (back-of-house) and FOH (front-of-house) mixed together. You have to deliver high quality drinks consistently while maintaining face and giving guests great service. This is why you don’t learn bartending via serving. It takes a specific animal to really thrive as a bartender.

Now, I have the privilege of working in Los Angeles, a place that is routinely viewed with condescension. The food is inconsistent, the service, on average, is slow and messy, and what is *sui generis* to Hollywood restaurant culture is just that: Hollywood. A celebrity endorsement makes a restaurant while quality doesn’t. Just ask Thomas Keller about his failed Beverly Hills endeavor. This is a city where you don’t go out to eat and drink good food and cocktails. In Tinseltown, you go out to be seen and cling to social relevancy. Not to say that New York is exempted from these tendencies, but at least virtuosity takes precedence there.

This being said, the political instincts you develop working as a bartender in L.A. supersede them all. In environments where excellence is a priority, the need to develop political skill sets is diminished. If you’re



an incompetent server in New York, you're fired. If you don't know how to make a gimlet in Chicago, fired. In the City of Angels, however, you can shake manhattans all you want so long as you are six-foot-five, have a six pack, and on the cover of a lusty bestseller romance. Also, you can be a slow bartender who avoids work so long as you tickle the sexual urgings of the spinster manager.

God, I miss New York sometimes.

Suffice to say, it's difficult to command respect when you're a bartender from Los Angeles once you travel outside county limits. But you do learn how to walk the tightrope, and, as a bartender, this is the main skill that makes you so indistinguishable and valued compared to anyone in the hospitality business. You learn how to make ten tickets at a time while juggling all eight guests who have walked into the bar at once while putting on a smile. You have to look pretty and sexy while working your ass off. This is how you rise up to the hot bars in L.A. This characteristic is what entails your meatloaf in a city whose denizens are notorious for holding grudges.

Not to say that you don't learn this in other food and beverage scenes, but I have seen countless times abrasiveness tolerated at restaurants outside of Los Angeles. So long as you do your job and excel at the steps-of-service (plate setting, de-crumbing, correct utensils, etcetera) you'll keep your job. That won't fly in Hollywood. Everyone bullshits here, and you smile through the pain or you'll get a reduction in shifts, regardless of whether your talents match Dale DeGroff.

In L.A. I've seen adequate bartenders get fired for reporting on fellow staff to HR. I've seen models with no experience get hired based on looks. I've seen incompetent bussers promoted to the bar team in less than two-months-time. Currently, I work at a bar where the guy who has the most shifts doesn't know how to make a Negroni, but he's best friends with the staffing manager. These idiocies are not exclusive to this city, but it's hard to survive, in the long run, at hot spot destinations if you don't have a mastery of the basics.

And this is why bars like *Tao*, *Employees Only*, *Apotheke*, and *Death and Co.* come to LaLa Land while the vice versa doesn't occur. Even the chefs behind the famous *Horses* hailed from New York. There's an intangible integer here so parasitic you become infected with it once you move to Los Angeles. People are just lazier in warmer climates compared to more industrialized settings. Maybe it's all the sunlight we get. I'm from Hawaii, and I can attest that lack of seasonal weather affects your work ethic. Just go to Waikiki Beach and you'll see what I mean. In spite of all the shortcomings, it offered me an opportunity to rise up the ranks by outworking others and capitalizing on their mediocrities. A Soap Opera Actor may get staffed at a fine dining establishment without knowing the specifics of blanco, reposado, and añejo tequilas, but you won't get hired for other opportunities, and if you do, the hot looks you posses can only conceal the fraud for so long.

But, no matter what, you've mastered the exteriority of the business. People skills are the most important attribute to possess as a bartender, and, as I've already elucidated, personality goes a long way. The ability to entertain guests and create an unforgettable experience for them is paramount. A man of stoic disposition is not someone who can thrive as a bartender. You have to either be a misfit or Don Rickles, and anywhere in between, to really make a career out of crafting cocktails, which is the real nuts and bolts of the trade.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that most drinkers have had a bad old fashioned. Just like most people have had a bad sandwich. As much as I mock rhetorical questions, I have to ask: *How is that so?* The ingredients are fairly simple, and the instructions couldn't be clearer. So how can the creation of such inferiority occur? One word: heart.

Anthony Bourdain called this the pleasure business, and it is. You are in the service of bestowing jubilation upon others. That's the business at its core. And many aficionados have reiterated since the Caveman times that good food and good drink only come from the soul. Any artist worth his salt knows you cannot create without some fire in your belly.

This is probably the most important lesson I can ever teach a bartender. You have to feel it in your bones. For a cook, it's the actual process of preparing the food and ingredients that have been mixed together. For

bartending, it's the actual shake. Some drinks take longer to mix than others. Paper Planes, which consist of Bourbon, Amaro Nonino, Aperol, and Lemon Juice, in equal parts, take longer to mix in order to blend the alcohol with the citrus. Though one shake too long and the drink becomes overly diluted.

Margaritas, however, only require a few movements. Generally, drinks that only have one base spirit should require a few good shakes. Mojitos are another good example, as are Daiquiris. It's a good rule of thumb to follow if you ever want to make cocktails at your home.

But that understanding is only second to the bartending investing his passion and fury into the drink. The shake is where everything is created. Personally, I like to shake my drinks one at a time in order to give each cocktail its due time and energy. There's nothing wrong with double shaking, but I prefer focusing solely on one thing—not to say that I make one drink at a time, because I easily make five drinks at once by pouring the ingredients into the tins sans the ice, but I will give each cocktail its due.

Personality and heart are the main qualities needed to succeed in this business, on paper; yet, the mixology books won't tell you what it really means to be a bartender. You're in the pleasure business, sure, but you're also dealing with alcohol, a substance that attracts the lowest of humanity. I've seen people have full conversations at the bar by themselves, talking to thin air, until I have security escort them out. I've had an actor from an Adam Sandler movie indulge in Salty Dogs, call my coworker the n-word, and tell the women servers "My left nut loves you," and stay for five hours at the bar because the manager is afraid to 86 a "celebrity." And I've been in situations where my coworker calls out sick on a busy Saturday night, and I have to tend bar and service 300 covers by myself. These are the things they don't teach you in Bartending School, which never made sense to me.

Before I was a Bartender, I was a barback for five years. I worked at *Osteria Morini*, Chef Michael White's famous restaurant on Lafayette in SoHo that Anthony Bourdain cited as one of his favorite restaurants in New York. I spent a year at *Beauty & Essex* where I worked high profile Kardashian events. I experienced a year and a half of working with Lisa Vanderpump at one of her restaurants and all the insanity that entailed. And I worked, right before the pandemic, at *The Highlight Room* in Los Angeles, famous for its rapper and baller parties. I've learned my craft the good ol' hard way.

Working under bad and great bartenders is how you become good. I barbacked for a bartender who was incarcerated for stealing money. I worked with someone who had legit schizophrenia, and he would warrant tips such as this: "Fuck You!" I've dealt with bartenders who were so serious they would rarely get over a 20% tip, and oftentimes settle for 18%. Yet, I've also had the privilege of being taught by the fastest and the best personalities you can meet. Bartending school is only for those who want to work at *Olive Garden*. Not that there's anything wrong with that. You just learn better from the ground up, as in anything with life. And then I became a bartender.

People have such a ridiculous negative perception about servers. The funny thing is I knew a few that own multiple homes and have children who own their own restaurants. A busser I worked with made so much money in America that he had five properties in Mexico. If you enter the restaurant with judgement, chances are you are the fool. You can't develop an opinion about someone if you don't know all the facts.

Bartending, however, is a profession that doesn't have as negative of a connotation. When you tell people you bartend, their face lightens up a bit. They don't necessarily take you seriously, but they'll find you interesting at the very least.

Much to my chagrin, I have to say that there is a science to mixology (I know, I can't stand the word, but I still use it; at least I don't have the tattoos, the silly mustache, and wear the inane hats). As mentioned before, personality is the most basic quality to becoming a good bartender. You don't have to be Bob Hope, but you have to entertain your guests and crack jokes. Additionally, you have to crank out consistent, quality drinks with both speed and efficiency, and you have to maintain your workstations (a dirty bar is a sullied mind). Lastly, you need to have an extensive knowledge on cocktails, spirits, and mixtures.

And this is just the basic level of staying employed. I'm tempted to equate the barkeep's endeavors to the trails of the sex worker. The more knowledgeable and skilled you are, the higher income you yield. Just like a hustler, If you're a dirty bartender, you won't work in the fine dining establishments that can pay for a mortgage on a house. And if you're not talented in making your customers happy, you won't get those high tips (anyone who has ever been to a strip club and dealt with a less than enthusiastic dancer knows what I'm talking about).

Here's one sad truth about life: it's not about how hard you work. The flip side to this: it's not about how smart you work either. From my experience, you have to craft yourself a work ethic that is both equally smart and but equally consistent. You need to have the ability to give it your all on a moment's notice, but you have to prioritize your energies.

With bartending, guests are always first. If you have twenty tickets and you find yourself alone at the bar and a party of five approaches, it's necessary to stop what you're doing, greet them and hand them menus. Also, it helps if you're charismatic to some degree (I recommend all bartenders to take acting classes, which is a superfluous suggestion because a lot of bartenders are failed actors or in between gigs). Most people I know who have been in the industry for more than five years are tainted with a touch of bitterness. I'm a man who tries to have a lot of hope in humanity and think positively. But this resolve gets tested on a daily basis. Alcohol ignites the demons of others, and you're going to deal with awful people. And if you give off any impression that you can be taken advantage of, they'll attack like truffle pigs.

Bars have been and always will be paradoxical by nature, unless you stumble upon a place that only serves mocktails and is somehow still in business. For centuries, pubs have united people. Most born into this world were conceived as a result of one too many cocktails. It's indisputable that alcohol has done a lot, ironically, to advance humanity.

The obvious flip side, however, is that alcohol has destroyed many lives. I have met countless guests who have bankrupted themselves by going to bars and drinking the most expensive of spirits. Plus, bars attract predators and all kinds of miscreants. Dealing with these people every-night has made me a little jaded overtime.

Most of us are in the business for one simple reason: it's too much fun. In spite of how much we bitch about the work, there is a joy in creating cocktails. And there is also fulfillment in making people happy. The successful bartenders make great drinks at a fast pace while maintaining a smile on their faces for patrons. It sounds simple, but it takes years to perfect this.

But the money has to be right.

S. Isaac Feny  
**Six Steps Twice**

Flowers  
like my pigtailed  
grow from someplace like dirt  
I think I can make a last stand  
take a drag from a cigarette and then  
remember its one day at a time but -I've lost-

Doll's half  
way house not full  
Breathe in breathe out breathe in  
I missed my son's wedding today  
my sister danced with him in place of me  
why can't I scream without a needle pinch -Breathe out-

Six steps  
Six steps twice is  
not as many as twelve  
This time I will hit the pavement  
running because I'll be running for me  
Not for my kids not for my mom not for the dead  
I wept this time I will hit the pavement -I skinned my knee-

Not I  
My tongue re-laps  
up cycled methadone  
My addiction not I not I  
My sponsor thinks I should not call my mom  
'mom' and instead refer to her name as 'Eve' as Eve's  
daughter has not been treated as all of Earth's daughters should  
Four more steps but officer, it is getting hard to walk the line  
and my life is one drag from a cigarette when I was so sweet sixteen  
I must make an incision in my gut where all my guilt burns the food I chew but  
sorry is not going to cut it but I'm so close -*my son is having a grandmotherless child-*

Bad mom  
I wept I wept  
A weeping cigarette-  
Misstep

# High School Creative Writing Contest

Grub Street congratulates Yosselyn Quintanilla and Evangeline Fehskens, our Volume 74 High School Creative Writing Contest winners.

This year, the high school contest was judged by a small group of Towson University juniors and seniors who read every piece with care and attention. They deliberated carefully before selecting one prose winner and one poetry winner. They also elected to name finalists in both categories.

Prose winner **Evangeline Fehskens** is a junior at the Friends School of Baltimore. She enjoys the English electives at her school, and her teacher Rob Travieso has been a prominent figure in her journey as a writer. She loves music and her brother, and she is probably thinking about dogs right now. She hopes to continue writing throughout her life.

**No Webbed Feet** is a charming and thrilling short prose piece, in which Fehskens offers readers the beauty of that which we take for granted. It begins on a beach in Edinburgh with a playful substitution of frog for fog, and then takes readers on a wild ride through strangeness, mortality, and a girl who drags the bodies of dead frogs from the lapping salt water because, “Weirdness is important to your world.”

Poetry winner **Yosselyn Quintanilla** is a senior in Patapsco High School and Center for the Arts’ literary magnet. She is the Co-Editor-In-Chief of their magazine *The Chrysalis* and was previously featured in last year’s issue with her poem “the after.” Her writing explores themes of grief, addiction, and resilience, drawing from her life experiences with the hope of reaching people.

**High, Brother** is a tour de force that uses a traditional and difficult fixed form, the sestina. Sestinas are 39-line poems whose line-ending words repeat in a spiral pattern through six, six-line stanzas before resolving in the final three-line stanza, where all six repeating words are used. The contest judges were struck by Quintanilla’s ability to use the poem’s form as a way to engage with the dizzying passage of time. Quintanilla maintains expert control over craft and story as she asserts a series of parallelisms and paradoxes which emphasize the speaker’s sorrow as they come to see their brother for who he is, not who they wish him to be.

Grub Street would also like to congratulate the students listed below for their submissions, which we found compelling. We urge all finalists and students who submitted to the contest to continue writing. Every submission was read and examined with great admiration. We hope everyone eligible will submit again next year.

- Poetry Finalists:  
Aldrin Badiola, “The Mourning and Under the Glory”
- Prose Finalists:  
Elena Friese, “As Insects”  
Jia J. Johnson, “A Boy and a Girl; A Girl”  
Claudia Wysocky, “The Acceptance of My Name”

# Evangeline Fehskens No Webbed Feet

Edinburgh. The beaches are Froggy, covered in frogs. Frog is like fog, but instead of gray waves of clouds, there are green waves of frogs. Not many in the water though. There are some that swim, but they stay shallow. Stay safe. You know how it is. A lot of them sit there and bellow or croak. The bellowing is cooler though; bellowing is a group activity. Bellowing together as a herd of frogs. A green wave of a herd of bellowing, swimming, frogs. It is hard to say how long the Froggy weather will last, though it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be hard to say, I mean. I know everything that is now and then and soon to come. I know all about the frogs. I don't know when they will leave. Maybe they know when I will leave. If I could laugh now, I would. Foolish. I don't leave, or rather I cannot. Stuck in the sky, telling you tales of the Froggy weather. They leave. I will not leave. They return. I remain. They drink too much of the saltwater and they drown and bloat. Green bellies up to the sky. I drink light. It tastes like morning until it tastes like nothing. Today it tastes like Tuesday. They go somewhere when they die, if you're wondering. (I know you are wondering because I know about you). I don't know where they go because they go above me. I watch them as green light shoots out of their bellies and flies above where my head could be. They go up. I remain. They look young when they die. I don't know if they are, they could be as old as the ocean. It's something I should know, but I don't. I don't know because I decide not to. The ignorance makes me feel closer to you. More human. I want to be young. I want to *feel* young. I am not old, I cannot feel old. But I am not new. I see them become new. I see them die. I want to die. I want to become new. I want to have arms, I want you to give me something to grasp. I'm all spirit, but I am sinking. I suppose it's not much of a life I'm living. Watching the frogs, watching you, listening to the waves. Before, when the frogs

were newer, I had a fascination with similarity; some of them seemed identical to me, yet within their herd, everyone could tell them apart. I lack similarity. I lack the assets to deem similarity and distinction. I lack the things that distinguish them from each other. No green shiny back. No spots. No eyes. No webbed feet. Nothing.

I know things about you. I know about the emptiness of talking. The sky holding the wind. Honeybees. Black coffee. Rekindling old habits. Boundaries. Shea butter. Release. I see it all. Perhaps I don't *know* it. But I want to. You all have stories, the frogs have stories, even the ocean, permanent like me, has a story. I wish I could split myself in two, but there isn't one of me. There is nothing to split. I wish I could smoke a joint before breakfast. I wish I could worry about forgiveness. I wish I could have a drawer full of denim. There are a lot of things I wish for. I know how you all wish on shooting stars, I do it too. Though I wish for things, though I lack things, there is plenty I know. I watched the world grow. I knew the earth before the sky knew of you.

There's a girl I watch who has a cabinet full of china. It's cheap, she bought it from a tacky antique store. Lovely cheapness. That's how she describes her home. The plates are adorned with animal figures; baby lambs snuggled by their mothers, jumping frogs on lilypads, hunting dogs panting, duck in mouth. She thinks the plates are beautiful. Her boyfriend thinks they're silly. He calls them whimsical. He calls her whimsical. I don't know if he loves her. When the weather is Froggy, she covers the china plates in dead crickets and saunters down to the beach. Arms full of crickety plates. She holds them with grace. Sometimes she slips up and forgets to kill one. They jump on her, attacking her with wrath. She giggles at them before she pops a living one in her mouth. The frogs swarm her, saluting her and greeting her joyfully with their bellows. She's a queen to



them. That's what I call her. Queen Froggy. I don't know her real name. I could learn it, but I choose not to. I like Queen Froggy. She's more human than a lot of you. She's not terribly distinct, but she is weird. Weirdness is important in your world. People don't notice normalcy much. She likes to wear polka dot tights every day. She has a pair in every color. Sometimes, if you look closely, you can see little faces she's drawn in on the polka dots. She's covered in tattoos and she thinks about death a lot. There's a big cricket on her left thigh, and a big frog on her right. She thinks about her parents every night. She's only twenty-three. I know why the frogs love her. She's the most lovely thing they've ever seen. Pretty polka dot tights and inked skin. She's custom in every way. No one looks quite like her, though she's not terribly extraordinary. Of course, they mostly love her because she feeds them. I love her because she drags the dead ones out of the water. She sees the green light, too. She sees their spirits shoot up. She knows to wait until their light is gone. She wades into the sea, and they come to her. Their bloated corpses surround her and she collects them in a satin bag. It's not waterproof. She buries them in her backyard.

I know who I am. I love her because she knows who she is. The day she dies, I am going to catch her light. I'm going to reach out and hold onto it. I'll keep her for as long as she lets me. I know I can. I know she'll die in the ocean. It's what she wants. It's still Froggy today. She'll saunter down to the beach around ten, I think. Every Froggy day, a small part of me prays she'll drown. I am starving for the day that I catch her light. I crave her playfulness and her spirit. If I could die, I know it would be for her.

## Yosselyn Quintanilla **High, Brother**

I am five again, and you are nothing,  
plucking strings, focused on being cool.  
In a way that keeps you above all, high  
and mighty, wiser and older.  
Charming away until nothing is left.  
I am five again and you are my brother.

Summer days with you by my side, Brother,  
were everything even with nothing.  
And sometimes I pretend you never left.  
I am eight again, and I want to be cool.  
I want to grow up, be wiser, and older,  
just like you. Happy and living high.

But life is no longer a constant high.  
I no longer soar with you, Brother.  
Instead, I only become older.  
And wish that you'd be nothing,  
that the burning memory would soon cool.  
But I never seem to shake that you left.

I am nine again, and you left.  
You are sixteen and high,  
no longer itching to be cool,  
only wanting to be my brother  
away from me. As if I were nothing,  
as if I deserve to grow lonelier and older.

I am twelve and much older.  
My smile is all I have left.  
I am different now, nothing  
that you would distinguish, high  
or sober. Your brain is rotted, Brother.  
And I wish to be younger and cool.

You were never my cool,  
older,  
brother.  
You left,  
high,  
with nothing.

Greg Schwartz  
**#515**

falling  
on the barbershop floor  
the setting sun

Theo Johnson  
**At a Stoplight on  
Martin Luther King Jr Blvd**

The light turns  
and I come to a stop.  
A man in a wheelchair  
rolls by outside my window.  
I look in my rearview the moment  
that his face passes  
just beside me, so close  
my hands would have brushed his  
if I'd kept the window open.

If I'd kept the window open  
my hands would have brushed his:  
Just beside me, so close  
that when his face passes  
I look in my rearview. The moment  
rolls by. Outside my window,  
the man in the wheelchair  
comes to a stop.  
The light turns.



## Albert Phillips Jr. We Fit The Description

*What the fuck you looking at?* was all I could think on a summer afternoon as I walked across Mosher Street with Tyrik, Melvin, and Eddy while a police officer in his cruiser stared us down like we didn't belong in the neighborhood.

A few moments before Officer Stare-A-Lot locked his eyes on us, Eddy grabbed some dime bags of weed and stuffed them in his white crew sock like a Thanksgiving turkey. In the late '90s, cops weren't hip to checking socks while randomly stopping and frisking Black people, so that was the perfect stash spot.

I was the connector of my crew—something like the plug. Eddy was from Down Da' Hill. He spent his summers at football camp, chasing girls, listening to Three 6 Mafia and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, and smoking whatever gas the hood provided—resulting in his lips turning as black as his skin complexion. We became friends at St. Anthony's of Padua, a Catholic school in East Baltimore. We likely helped them hit their quota for Black students.

Tyrik was from over Callow Avenue in Reservoir Hill. He looked like a young Swizz Beatz, even to the shape of his head, with slightly darker skin and light brown eyes. My godbrother, we were connected since single digit years, and I spent many nights and days at his house since his room was like an arcade. From *The Sims* to *Ninja Turtles*, he had all the games on nearly every gaming system.

I moved to Cedonia when I was thirteen, but I grew up in Sandtown where I met Melvin at seven, so I'll always consider Sandtown home. Melvin was the same age, but my mustache and goatee made me look a few years older. His parents were older and less strict growing up, allowing him to lose his virginity and drink malt liquor well before his teenage years.

I brought a Down Da' Hill guy and guys from other hoods to Sandtown. That made me feel like a legend.

Honestly, there weren't many differences in Baltimore hoods. They all had dope boys, poverty, drug addicts, terrible schools, vacant homes, too many police—and a lot of misguided love combined with decades of trauma and disinvestment, but we still somehow found ways to separate ourselves.

"Y'all ain't moving no fucking work over here," said Ed, as we walked the scorching block, headed to the Upton subway station. He and Melvin used to always go back and forth about whether East or West Baltimore was more notorious for shit that plagued our communities.

"Boy, you stupid. We move work on this side. Fuck is you talkin' 'bout?" replied Melvin. They kept me laughing and shaking my head with their random hood debates every time we linked up.

The jokes stopped when we crossed Mosher Street, just past the corner store where two dollars could get you a Blueberry Faygo, Blue Ranch Doritos, and a few Peanut Chews. The officer who had his eyes locked on us hit a U-turn and drove towards us while a second police car sped out of an alley like Batman. Seconds later, a third police car appeared out of nowhere. Cops were all over the hood in cuts like bandages, so ain't no telling where this pig was hiding.

"Get your hands up now!" the alley officer yelled after jumping out of his cruiser with his pistol drawn. This cop was closest to me, maybe ten feet away, with his firearm pointed right at me. Fearing the worst, I threw my hands up and froze.

"Get down on the ground, now!" yelled the same officer. I guess he was in charge. All the cops had their guns pointed at us at this point, but he was the only one talking. He was the H.P.I.C. (Head Pig In Charge).

We all followed orders and quickly made our way to the pavement while keeping our hands extended out in front of us like we were doing a yoga move. They didn't handcuff us, though. They didn't have to. A few pounds of trigger pressure could end us. That type of dominance—the kind that determines if you



make it to your high school graduation, make it to manhood, make it to your bed or a casket—was more effective than any handcuff could ever be.

There was a weird calmness among us. We went from coppin’ weed and laughing about random hood stories to the most well-behaved and orderly people in the world. We were trained to be subservient when police were around. Parents told us to be wary when they entered our domain. Teachers told us to wave at officers and thank them for their service when we saw them on the street. The streets were filled with stories of the Wicked Cops of the West who broke jaws, broke into homes, and broke laws. We were hypnotized by their Maryland-flag encrusted badges, the red and blue flashing lights of their vehicles that amalgamated symbols of danger and tranquility, and the thought of being a dead nigga in the street.

*“The streets were filled with stories of the Wicked Cops of the West who broke jaws, broke into homes, and broke laws.”*

A few years ago, before I moved to Cedonia, I watched a police officer chase and beat a disabled Black man in the alley behind my Sandtown apartment. The “perpetrator” had a pirate hook instead of a left hand and walked with a consistent limp. That didn’t stop one cop from smashing his face into the rocky alley pavement. No one saved the one-handed man. No one was going to save us either.

While my friends were as respectful as students who got called into the principal’s office, internally I battled with indignation and inquisitiveness. The heated asphalt from the summer heat pressed against my face, just like the one-handed man some years prior. It was my turn for this cruel and usual rite of passage. I wanted to get up and yell, “Why the fuck are y’all stopping us? We ain’t doing shit,” but I refrained from a Samuel L. Jackson tone and decided to calmly ask the officers why they stopped us.

“Your man right here fits the description of someone who was reported to be walking around with a gun in this neighborhood,” the H.P.I.C. said, finally placing his firearm back inside its holster. Then, he proceeded to tell us that a white tee and some khaki pants were the outfit of the supposed gun wielder who was running around Sandtown terrorizing people.

This was 2004. Every Black boy in every Baltimore hood had a white tee. Snap music made them trendy, and my closet was full of them, just like the rest of my friends. Most cost around five dollars, they matched most outfits, and came in every size you could imagine, including the 3XL I was wearing. Lord knows how many Black boys faced our fate that day.

After the cops finished feeling us up and down like club bouncers, they gave us some yellow pieces of paper that described why they stopped us. I guess they were receipts for making us plank on the ground while we got treated like criminals. I guess they were our freedom papers.

The paper gave a number to call to make a complaint or to ask for more information, but I knew all I needed to know. So, I threw it into the nearest gutter. I figured even if I called, my grievance would not be heard because Tyrik “fit the description.” So, after we dusted ourselves off, we headed to Upton Metro Station en route to Mondawmin Mall to book some girls.

Susanna Lang  
**The Widow Speaks to Elijah**

1 Kings 17:17

There is no breath in him,  
in my son—

What can you say to me,  
man of God?

What can you prophesy?  
Only this morning

he was full of words, laughing;  
he sang,

and now he lies still,  
his blood

clotting on the pavement. What will you do  
in God’s name?

So many sons left breathless  
in the streets.

So many, and now mine, who was all  
I had left.

# Contributors

Emmy-award-winning writer **Amy Bass**, Ph.D., is Chair of the Division of Social Science and Communication at Manhattanville University, where she is a professor of Sport Studies. Her many titles have nothing to do with coffee, but include the bestselling *ONE GOAL*, for which she shot the cover.

**Matti Ben-Lev** (he/him) is a queer nonfiction writer whose work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Corporeal*, and elsewhere. Matti graduated from Towson University, where he served as a poetry editor for *Grub Street's* 72nd volume! He is an MFA candidate in nonfiction at George Mason University and a reader for *phoebe* and *So to Speak*. For fun, he reads, hikes, and attends concerts. You can find him at mattibenlev@gmail.com.

**Elena “Gaele” Bishop** is an undergraduate EMF student at Towson University. She has always suffered from nosebleeds. As a young child, Gaele would often have a tissue shoved up her nose, solving puzzles alone in her grandparents’ living room. Now, twenty-one-year-old Gaele spends her time working on scripts, gaffing for school projects, and running around on student film sets all while wearing a tissue in her nose.

**Shirley J. Brewer** serves as poet-in-residence at Carver Center for Arts and Technology in Baltimore, Maryland, and on the board of directors of *Passager*. Her award-winning poems appear in *The Comstock Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Poetry East*, *SLANT*, and many other journals and anthologies. Shirley’s poetry books include *A Little Breast Music* (Passager Books, 2008), *After Words* (Apprentice House Press, 2013), *Bistro in Another Realm* (Main Street Rag, 2017), and *Wild Girls* (Apprentice House Press, 2023). In January, 2020, Shirley was interviewed at the Library of Congress by former Maryland poet laureate, Grace Cavalieri, for her long-running series, “The Poet and the Poem.” shirleyjbrewer.com.

**Evan H. Brisson** works at a public library in Raleigh, North Carolina where he facilitates a poetry club that meets on the third Tuesday of each month. He has also taught composition and literature at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina. His work has been featured in *ONE ART*, *Cinematic Codes Review*, and *streetcake*.

**Sarah Burrier** is a senior at Towson University studying illustration. She primarily uses pen and ink, but enjoys working with a multitude of mediums. Immensely inspired by the genres of science fiction and fantasy, she seeks to elicit a feeling of escapism in the worlds that she creates. Find more of her work at sarahburrier.com.

**Chuck Carlise** was born on the first Flag Day of the Jimmy Carter Administration and has lived in fourteen states and two continents. He is the author of the collection *In One Version of the Story* (New Issues Poetry & Prose) and the chapbooks *A Broken Escalator Still Isn't the Stairs* and *Casual Insomniac*. His poems and essays can be found at *Pleiades*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Southern Review*, *Nimrod*, *Verse Daily*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, where he directs the Ashland University Low-Residency MFA and the Ashland Poetry Press.

**Ivy Choe** is a self-discovered artist who sees her work as a product of the culture that surrounds her. Exploring the expressive world of avant-garde and favoring a tertiary palette, her work is often described as muted and moody despite its dynamic use of color. Her pieces “Joseon Women Bathing in a Stream”, “Say, Can You See?”, and “Play Pretend Circa. 2018” are her first published works, featured in Volume 74 of *Grub Street*.

**Anna Sophia Claudio** is a Filipino writer who hopes to work in the publishing industry in the future. She is also a student at Towson University studying English and psychology. Recently, she has taken up photography as a hobby and is especially enthralled with film. These are her first published artworks.

**Lorin Drexler** is an American poet, fiction writer, musician, songwriter, and music producer. Originally from Chicago, he currently resides in Mesa, Arizona, and graduated from Columbia College with a bachelor’s degree in Creative Writing. His work has appeared in *tNY Press*, *Litro Magazine*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *Maudlin House*, and others. Lorin was also an award recipient in the 2019 Tempe Writing Contest.

**Elizabeth Eakes** has a Master’s degree in Writing, a pet frog, and a Fujifilm camera. She has an essay published in *Croak* and has written a children’s nonfiction book for Sourcebooks (forthcoming). Elizabeth fell in love with photography in 2023, and thanks to Fujifilm’s bluetooth compatibility, now has 30,000 photos in her phone’s camera roll. She’s excited to have one of these photos featured in *Grub Street*.

**S. Isaac Fený** is an English major in his senior year at Towson University. Some recurring themes within his work include the continuation of life after childhood abuse, family dysfunction within the cycle of addiction and recovery, and the preservation of innocence. Isaac is actively writing lyrics for his band Miss Mary Rose. By structuring the band’s lyrics with poetic technique and critical themes, he strives to bridge the gap between lyrics and literature.

**Kelsey Fitzpatrick** graduated from Towson University with a BFA in Arts and Design in 2020. She currently works as the graphic designer for Smyth Jewelers in Timonium, Maryland and as a freelance graphic designer for multiple companies. Kelsey has always had a passion for photography, both recreationally and professionally. She has photographed weddings, maternity photos, and more. You can find her work and contact information at kelseyfitzpatrickdesigns.com.

**Jessica Furtado** is a multi-passionate artist whose visual work has been featured in *Wild Greens*, *Muzzle*

*Magazine*, *Waxwing*, and elsewhere. Her writing has appeared in *SWWIM*, *Rogue Agent*, and *Stirring*, among others. Jessica’s poetry was a finalist in *Best of the Net* (2020), and her debut chapbook *A Kiss for the Misbehaved* (2023) is available from BatCat Press. To see what she’s up to next, visit Jess at www.jessicafurtado.com.

**John Gallaher**’s most recent collection of poetry is *My Life in Brutalist Architecture* (Four Way Books, 2025). Gallaher lives in northwest Missouri and co-edits the *Laurel Review*.

**Lily Girard** is an English Writing major and a Women and Gender Studies minor at Towson University. When she is not writing poetry about the plights of girlhood, she can be found crocheting funky hats for her friends, playing her purple kazoo along to Fleetwood Mac songs, and enthusing about Medieval Europe to anyone who will listen. Her other published works include “Madame Lily’s Wonder Emporium,” featured in *Our Voice Magazine* 2018.

**Jen Hallaman** lives in Cleveland with her husband, baby daughter, and two twenty-pound(!) cats. She works at a local independent bookstore where she spends her lunch break writing poems. Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The Shore*, *Roanoke Review*, and others. Find her at www.jenhallaman.com.

**Joel Harris** is an emerging poet, recently nominated for the *Best of the Net* award and a 2025 Pushcart Prize. His poems are forthcoming in *Heavy Feather Review* and have been published in *Bayou Magazine*, *The Normal School*, *Bellingham Review*, *petrichor*, *Full House Literary*, *Poetry London* and elsewhere. He has edited and contributed to *The Alpha Barrier of North South Dialogue* and *The Twilight of America’s Omnipresence: China’s Aggrandizement in a New Era of Multipolarity*. He studies at McGill University.

**Dave Harrity’s** poems, essays, and erasures have appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Ninth Letter*, *Ecotone*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Forklift, Ohio*. His most recent book is “Our Father in the Year of the Wolf” (Word Farm, 2016). A recipient of an Emerging Artist Award and an AI Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council, he resides in Louisville.

**Findley Eve Holland** is a Canadian writer currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Professional Writing at Towson University. This is her first publication. She is currently working on a memoir as well as her first novel. When not writing, Findley can be found hiking, sewing, or playing with her cat.

Once upon a time, **Eddie Jeffrey** was a cemetery groundskeeper. He later worked at a medical school where, in 1807, a mob destroyed an anatomy theater for fear the cadavers used for instruction there were provided by grave robbers. His work has appeared in *Star 82 Review*, *PARAGRAPHITI*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *The Three Quarter Review*, *O-Dark-Thirty*, *Thrice Fiction*, *JazzTimes*, and other print and web publications. He reads fiction and creative nonfiction for *The Baltimore Review*.

**Theo Johnson** is a second-year undergraduate student at Johns Hopkins University, studying creative writing, math, and film. He grew up and attended high school in Washington, D.C. and now lives in Baltimore, Maryland, which he proudly calls his second home. His poems and short stories have appeared in *Warehouse*, Johns Hopkins University’s student-run literary journal. He shares the poems and stories that hide around every street corner.

Though **Ani Kassian-Howard** has made jewelry amateurly since about ten-years-old, in 2020, the pandemic allowed her exploration of metalsmithing and 2D art. Upon this, she developed her wire-wrapping skills using semi-precious crystals and silver wire, selling products through Instagram and Etsy and creating her online storefront Waltz and Theory. In fall 2021, she began pursuing a degree in metalsmithing

& jewelry concentration at Towson University under the Art + Design major, and is now able to execute her ideas into metalsmithing. She hopes to continue exploring and mastering her artistic skills, as she greatly enjoys open-ended yet technically challenging approaches to jewelry and metalsmithing.

**Gene Kendall** has lived in many places but is usually surrounded by more deer than people. His work explores drama, music, and pop culture with wit and no small amount of sympathy for the losers and also-rans. He’s drawn to protagonists that say the wrong thing, actively resist their character arc, and possibly save the day by accident. His work has appeared at *The Saturday Evening Post’s* New Fiction Friday series, the *NoSleep* podcast, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *CBR*, *Gentlemen of Leisure*, and *Not Blog X*.

**Katie Kenney** is a recent graduate of the University of Denver’s Publishing Institute. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. She lives in New England with her cat Mabel.

**Charlotte “Daisy” Knauth** is an undergraduate English and psychology student at Towson University. When Daisy was three, the only things that calmed her anxiety attacks were reading and art. When she is not writing, reading, or working on visual arts, she can be found rewatching television series with her *Doctor-Who*-namesake dog Rory, making Pinterest boards for her characters, cooking without recipes, obsessively listening to music, working at a preschool, and spending time with her friends.

**Louie Land** is a professional writer, asexual artist, and escaped academic based in central Pennsylvania. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *Abraxas Review*, *FRiGG*, *Solum Journal*, and elsewhere. After nearly a decade in higher education, he now works full-time as a writer at an engineering firm. When not writing, he is likely reading, running, or masquerading as a jazz-rock guitarist.

**Madison Lane** is an undergraduate at Towson University studying art education and painting. She is in the midst of rediscovering her painting style and has been experimenting with combining abstract and representation. Her work often focuses on memory, synesthesia, nature, and little moments of everyday life. You can find more on her Instagram @mad.lane.arts!

**Susanna Lang** was the 2024 winner of the Marvin Bell Poetry Prize from *december*. Her most recent chapbook *Like This* was released in 2023 (Unsolicited Press), along with her translations of poems by Souad Labbize, *My Soul Has No Corners* (Diálogos). A new translation of Souad Labbize’s poems *Unfasten the Silk of Your Silence* was just released by Éditions des Lisières. Susanna’s fourth full-length collection of poems *This Spangled Dark* is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. Work appears in such publications as *The Common*, *Asymptote*, *American Life in Poetry*, *MAYDAY*, *Rhino Reviews*, *Cider Press Review*, and *The Slowdown*.

**Judy Lewis** is a self-taught collagist. She uses construction materials from wallpaper books, fabric scraps, greeting cards, and clippings from old magazines. Materials are glued onto mediums such as mannequins, canvases, cardboard, and wood. She particularly enjoys recycling discards and describes her collages as taking pieces of many things, combining them, and making the results more pleasing than the individual pieces. Her collages can be personalized to reflect a recipient’s favorite things and are made as unique gifts for special occasions.

**Christine Ma-Kellams** is a cultural psychologist, college professor at San Jose State University, and author of *The Band* (Atria Books). Her other writing has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *HuffPost*, *Salon*, *Business Insider*, *Electric Literature*, *ZYZZYVA*, *The Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. You can find her online at christinema-kellams.com.

**Jenny McBride’s** writing has appeared in *StreetWise*, *The California Quarterly*, *Common Ground Review*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *300 Days of Sun*, *Inscape*, and elsewhere. She makes her home in the rainforest of southeast Alaska.

**Sierra McNew** is a pharmacist and writer living in Baltimore, Maryland. She writes within a variety of fantasy and science fiction realms, but her true love is urban fantasy. In her writing, she explores worlds similar to our own—with a little bit of magic. She’s drawn to stories where magic and science intertwine, the fantastic meets the macabre, and everyone has something to hide. In January of 2025, she will complete her MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University.

**Matthew Mitchell**, originally from Sparta, New Jersey, is currently a senior at Towson University. After years of battling addiction, he now finds himself nearing three years clean and finally in a position to pursue his passion for writing. Aside from poetry, Matthew enjoys film noir and fantasy football. He lives in Baltimore with his fiancée Kelsey.

**Sam Moe** is the author of six books of poetry. Her most recent collection *RED HALCYON* is forthcoming from Querencia Press in 2026. Her debut short story collection *I MIGHT TRUST YOU* was published by Experiments in Fiction in Spring 2025. She has attended the Sewanee Writers’ Conference and received fellowships from the Longleaf Writer’s Conference and the Key West Literary Seminar. Sam has also received writing residencies from The Writers’ Colony at Dairy Hollow and Château d’Orquevaux.

**Ollie Mon** is a poet currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in English at Towson University. He is also a singer-songwriter folk musician and makes music under the project name *Serendipity Row*. Mon’s second full-length album, which is centered around themes such as transness and leaving religion, will be released in late 2025. You can find his music at <https://linktr.ee/serendipityrow>.



**Nancy Nolet** relocated to Baltimore to obtain her philosophy degree at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Alongside her multi-decade real estate career, she is pursuing her Master of Fine Arts at Towson University. For many years, Nancy explored various forms of artistic expression, but it was during a mixed-media workshop in her mid-twenties that she discovered her true artistic medium. Her work examines the interplay between raw materials and man-made industrial objects by constructing whimsical sculptures from salvaged materials. Drawing inspiration from the surrealist and steampunk movements, she aims to ignite curiosity through compelling representations of the world’s mysterious, bizarre, and formidable creatures.

**Cari Oleskewicz** is a wandering writer loosely based in Gainesville, Florida. Her work has appeared in a number of print and online journals including *Literary Orphans*, *The Fourth River*, *Taos Journal of Poetry*, *Lime Hawk*, *Parentheses Journal*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Mom Egg Review*, and *The Marbled Sigh*. She is currently at work on a memoir, learning Estonian, and planning her escape.

**Marlene Olin** was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. Her short stories and essays have been published in journals such as the *Massachusetts Review*, *Catapult*, *PANK*, and *World Literature Today*. Her work has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*.

**Corey Onerheim** is the author of “There May Be Blood in Your Daiquiri,” a featured creative nonfiction piece.

**Konstantinos Patrinos** is a Greek-German writer. His work has appeared in *RHINO*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *Hunger Mountain Review*, *The McNeese Review*, *Saranac Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Berlin and teaches high school political science and philosophy.

**Mandira Pattnaik**’s work appears in *The Cincinnati Review* *miCRo* (2024), *The Rumpus* (2024), *IHLR* print (2024), *The Emerson Review* print (2024), *Best Microfiction* anthology (2024), and *Best Small Fictions* anthology (2021 & 2024), among others. Her writing has secured multiple nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, Best Microfiction, and listing in Wingleaf Top 50 (2023). Mandira is the author of eight published/forthcoming collections, including “Glass/Fire” (2024), “Girls Who Don’t Cry” (2023) and “Where We Set Our Easel” (2023). Mandira’s debut novel is under consideration. Visit her at [mandirapattnaik.com](http://mandirapattnaik.com).

**Albert Phillips Jr.** is a Baltimore-based writer and educator whose work encompasses the alchemy wrapped within contemporary and past Black life. He often writes stories about the intricacies of family, Baltimore life in the late 90s’, and the necessity of community. He earned a B.S. in print journalism from Morgan State University, M.Ed. from Johns Hopkins University, and he is an MFA candidate at the University of Baltimore. Follow him on Instagram [@theambitiousblackguy](https://www.instagram.com/theambitiousblackguy).

**Marie Scarles** is a writer, artist, and organizer from the marshlands of Mystic, Connecticut, living and working in Brooklyn, New York. Her work appears in *The Believer*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Rumpus*, *About Place Journal*, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA from Rutgers University. Say hello at [mariescarles.com](http://mariescarles.com).

**Valentine Schneider** is a queer artist who spends too much time indoors for someone who claims to love nature. After graduating from Towson University with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, they intend to become an animal-assisted therapist and dog trainer. They often spend their time birdwatching, mitigating dread, and yearning to go home to see their puppies. You will never be able to find them.

**Greg Schwartz** has held many jobs from copier technician to title insurance agent to fitness instructor, and plenty in between. Some of his poems have appeared in *Frogpond* and *New York Quarterly*. In a pre-fatherhood life he was the staff cartoonist for *SP Quill Magazine* and a book reviewer for *Whispers of Wickedness*.

**Kathleen Seltzer** is a writer and visual artist. She was shortlisted for the 2024 CRAFT Short Fiction prize. “I Went to Jail” is her first published piece. She lives on the eastern end of Long Island, New York.

**Sierra Sonberg** is a computer animation student at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. She adores storytelling and hopes her creations can have a positive impact on the world around her. Her work has previously been published in *Impostor: A Poetry Journal*. When she’s not writing, she can be found reading, drawing, doing logic puzzles, or playing *Just Dance*.

**Elizabeth Stevens** is a graduate student in the Professional Writing Program at Towson University, and lives in Baltimore County. She uses writing to explore the ways evangelicalism has affected her relationship to her gender and sexuality. Her work has been previously published in *Another New Calligraphy*. If she was a cryptid, she would be the Loch Ness Monster, because she too would like to hide at the bottom of a lake where no one can bother her.

**Brett Stout** is an artist and writer originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He is a high school dropout and former construction worker turned college graduate and paramedic. He creates mostly controversial artwork while breathing toxic paint fumes from a small cramped apartment known as “The Nerd Lab.” His work has appeared in a vast range of diverse media such as art and literature publications by University of California, Los Angeles and Vanderbilt University.

**Jason M. Thornberry** is a disabled writer whose work appears in *World Literature Today*, *JMWW*, *LETTERS*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Welter*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Entropy*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. Jason teaches creative nonfiction at Seattle Pacific University and lives in Seattle with his wife and dog. “Negative for Any Bleed” is the first chapter of Jason’s upcoming memoir.

**Stephen Witty** lives in south-central, rural Colorado beneath the Collegiate Peaks, where he works via internet as a Jungian psychoanalyst.

## About the Cover

The cover art “Immune to the Environment” initially came about as a temporary tattoo project. Since it would be placed on the body, I began to think about the immune system, and how the microscopic world can seem so alien to us.

This piece is my artistic representation of immune privilege, in which certain parts of the body, such as the eyes, are limited in their immune response so as to prevent damaging inflammation. I find this concept and the human body fascinating and mysterious. I integrated antibodies, a white blood cell, neurons, and eyes to illustrate the often underappreciated complexity and delicate balance of the immune system in my own fantastical, surrealist way.

*Amy Bass  
Matti Ben-Lev  
Elena "Gaele" Bishop  
Shirley J. Brewer  
Evan H. Brisson  
Sarah Burrier  
Chuck Carlise  
Ivy Choe  
Anna Sophia Claudio  
Lorin Drexler  
Elizabeth Eakes  
Evangeline Fehskens  
S. Isaac Fený  
Kelsey Fitzpatrick  
Jessica Furtado  
John Gallaher  
Lily Girard  
Jen Hallaman  
Joel Harris  
Dave Harrity  
Findley Eve Holland  
Eddie Jeffrey  
Theo Johnson  
Ani Kassian-Howard  
Gene Kendall  
Katie Kenney  
Charlotte "Daisy" Knauth*

*Louie Land  
Madison Lane  
Susanna Lang  
Judy Lewis  
Christine Ma-Kellams  
Jenny McBride  
Sierra McNew  
Matthew Mitchell  
Sam Moe  
Ollie Mon  
Nancy Nolet  
Cari Oleskewicz  
Marlene Olin  
Corey Onerheim  
Konstantinos Patrinos  
Mandira Pattnaik  
Albert Phillips Jr.  
Yosselyn Quintanilla  
Marie Scarles  
Valentine Schneider  
Greg Schwartz  
Kathleen Seltzer  
Sierra Sonberg  
Elizabeth Stevens  
Brett Stout  
Jason M. Thornberry  
Stephen Witty*