

PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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A NOTE TO READERS

2020 has felt like a year that has simultaneously flashed by and crawled to a close. In these truly tumultuous times, here at *Ponder* we find solace in our art. Sifting through the submissions has reminded us what parts of life we must hold on to: the beautiful, painful, silly, sentimentality of humanity. Through the struggles of the COVID-19 pandemic, our contributors have given us an issue that revels in a sense of hope.

Ponder Review has always been a special magazine, since the first issue debuted in the Spring of 2017. This magazine is run by the students of the Mississippi University for Women's Master's in Fine Arts Creative Writing low-residency program—a program that encourages diversity by bringing in artists from all over the world to refine their craft. Our editors are diverse and ever-changing, which allows us to showcase individual tastes that form the eclectic collection you hold in your hands. Normally, this individuality is something we cherish, but we will admit this issue has formed into something quite different.

In the pages of this issue, you will come across a wide variety of stories. From a man exploring the idea of entropy through geology to a woman explaining why she doesn't—can't—shave her legs. This issue feels incredibly well-rounded. In the process of putting together this issue of *Ponder*, we are reminded of a quote by Edgar Degas: “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” What this issue makes us see is all the beauty in this sometimes scary world.

It does not matter where we find ourselves scattered across the globe, we have shared the experience of anxiety, panic, loss, and isolation this year. In tragedy, we have found unity. So, while the works of art collected in this magazine come from artists from all over, there has risen a unifying theme of humanity and hope. The works in this issue reflect what we all have struggled with while we, as a species, navigate the clutches of a global pandemic.

In the face of this paradigm-shifting virus, each of our contributors have shown us the light at the end of this dark tunnel—what an inspiring world awaits us.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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WILLIAM MONETTE

THE OLD MILL

“Of course there are aliens. They come on down like a meteor. Crashed into the old mill—the whole thing went up.”

Even now, a thin black stylus of smoke was slanting up toward a pale sun.

“What happened?”

“I told you what happened. Damn aliens fell out of the sky.”

The mill. My father used to work there. Everyone’s father worked there at one point.

“How long has that old mill been closed?”

“What do you mean? Who cares how long the old mill been shut? Didn’t you hear me, son? They fell out of the damn sky!”

“Who?”

“Them damn aliens!”

I didn’t see the fuss. This happens once or twice per year. The fire department will come and dig out their misshapen corpses.

“Aw, let it go,” I said. “Why don’t you hand me that bottle of honey whiskey?”

He did so, and then he turned back toward the ruins of the mill. He looked at it like a man seeing an ocean for the first time—coming to grips with its impossible vastness.

“Just think—you come all this way and crash into a damn mill.” He spoke to no one in particular. He shook his head.

“It’s real rotten luck,” I said.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

KATHY MILLER

ODD LITTLE CRUELTIES

“A happy childhood . . . is the worst possible preparation for life.”

— Kinky Friedman

Obedience

The door to her bedroom was closed again. Before he left, Daddy told us not to disturb her when she was resting. He left a list of jobs that should be finished by the time he got home. My sister was already in the kitchen doing her chores, while I stared at the closed bedroom door. Next to the door was the hallway closet where my mother’s gleaming Electrolux canister vacuum cleaner rested. I was seven years old, too young to be entrusted with such a large, loud machine.

The closet door opened with no squeaks or scraping. It was so easy to pull it out, plug it into the hallway socket, set the controls for bare floors like she had shown me. Easy to turn the switch on and hear its rumbling motor. My sister was still in the kitchen; the bedroom door was still closed. So easy to gently hit the bedroom door with the nozzle the first time. No response. Maybe if I hit it a second or third time. Above the roar of the vacuum cleaner I could hear the muffled sound of crying. I smiled and flipped the switch to off.

A Gift

A few blocks from our house was the garbage pile where the florists dumped their wilted flowers. All the kids showed up whenever new foliage was added to the pile. Carnations, daisies, baby’s breath, ferns, stems with berries past their prime. As we pawed through the rubbish, sometimes a perfect red rosebud appeared, and then a fight ensued. Unaccustomed to flowers, our mothers would love a rose.

The vacant lot held other treasures too, mostly abandoned building materials. The broken cement blocks and bricks formed a dusty path between the mounds of greenery. One block was intact, and I easily slipped my small sneaker inside it. Something told me to turn my foot slightly, and then it was completely stuck. I pulled on my leg but that only wedged my foot

tighter inside the hole. Waves of panic squeezed my throat, and rivulets of sweat ran down my sides. My sister huddled with her girlfriends nearby, and my crying soon reached her. Ever the big sister, she snarled with disgust, "Oh shut up. Just twist your foot and pull." But she held my hand as I limped home, a bent carnation in my hand.

Guilt

After our fathers went to work, we drifted towards the garage even though we'd been told to stay away. Our mothers were cleaning, cooking, making beds. Our older siblings were at school. Barry and I should have been playing our usual game of House, but his little brother, Danny, was hanging around, irritating and pouty.

We slipped inside the partially opened garage door to the pungent smell of gasoline and grease. Hanging on the walls were tools, arranged by size and function. The faint sunlight from the dirty window made rainbows of the oil slick on the cement floor. Suddenly a scream from the forgotten Danny, his leg sliced open by a falling sickle. I ran screaming to the house to get my mother, the only one who could drive. We all quickly bundled into the car for the ride to the doctor's office, Danny on his mother's lap. In the backseat, Barry and I retched from the heavy metallic smell of blood.

That evening my father praised me, the hero who ran for help. But my stomach was so shaky I threw up my supper, mashed potatoes and chicken, all in a burning pile on the kitchen floor.

Spite

All morning she'd been working on the cake, two layers, not her usual one made from the ten-cent mix. I watched as she traced the circle of the pans on waxed paper and fitted them snugly inside. Next, she sifted the flour, (I got to turn the handle), combined the wet and dry ingredients, and turned on her special mixing machine. After she poured the batter evenly into the two pans, I licked the beaters.

As the smell of baking cake filled the air, she reminded me that my room needed to be picked up. But I was having too much fun feeding my baby from the bottle that appeared to lose milk when tipped. When the timer went off, she used the thick potholders to take the pans out of the oven and place them on the rack on the counter.

After she left the kitchen, I saw one of the cake pans was ever so close to the edge of the counter. I could barely reach it with my doll's leg, but I did. The crack of glass on the linoleum was so satisfying, almost enough to

make up for the eight weeks of allowance.

Girl Scouts

On Thursdays, I always got a sick headache and wound up in the nurse's office with Patty Becker, a classmate with bad vision and scabby skin. The nurse told me to lie down and nap while she attended to Patty. Patty always smelled like Fritos, and the odor of the cornmeal made my headache worse.

Eventually my mother came to pick me up and drove us to Girl Scouts. She was the assistant leader, and I was the little sister, forced to tag along. While my sister and the other girls made crafts or read from their guides, I sat quietly with my own book. I tried to keep out of the way of Cindy Hoffacker, although she usually managed to take the chair next to mine. My mother and the other leader never noticed when she took my hand and bent back every finger. Every week.

Years later my mother wondered aloud why I always got headaches on Thursdays as a child. By then I was no longer upset. I did not hold her responsible. Instead I blamed it on Patty, the smell from the cornmeal mush served at every meal in her house.

Imagination

Evenings when my father worked the 3-11 shift were my favorite times. My mother, sister, and I often stopped to pick up hot wieners on the way home from my sister's piano lesson. Or maybe we'd have TV dinners at the bar in the kitchen. In my memory the time is always spring or fall, the weak light breaking into a thousand pieces when it struck the golden flecks of the Formica on the kitchen counters.

The TV was on in the living room, and my mother was crocheting as she watched. A normal evening. But suddenly her eyes narrowed when she looked at me. Did my sister wink at her when my back was turned? The article in the Reader's Digest said madness can be swift and unexpected.

As I did my math homework at the dining room table, I remembered the metal garbage can in the driveway as we drove in. The lid was already off. The clock showed only eight o'clock, hours still until Daddy arrived home. Our house was alone on the top of the hill, no neighbors within screaming distance. My heartbeat drowned out the TV. I was completely alone.

The Origin of My Insomnia

As a child, my companion was Raggie, the toddler-sized rag-doll my

mother made when I was one myself. I slept with her every night in the bedroom where I never felt safe due to the two doors, one at the head of my bed and the other at the foot. With Raggie wedged against my back, I relaxed.

Raggie was stuffed with cotton batting like the quilts we slept under in winter. Her hairless head was covered with a bonnet I had worn as a baby, her chubby body encased in a well-worn light blue dress with tiny flat buttons. My mother had embroidered placid features on her face, her expression a stark contrast to my changeable moods.

In high school I developed a fall allergy, likely to ragweed or goldenrod, both of which grew on the banks of the road near our house. The doctor prescribed nasal spray and told me to steer clear of weeds. One day when I came home from school, Raggie was not lying on my bed as usual. When questioned, Mom warily replied, “I said I was going to get rid of her. You’re too old for dolls.” Outside the window, smoke rose from the burning barrel.

DOMINIQUE DÈVE

MAKE UP



BAS LES MASQUES



E.R. LUTKEN

AND OVER AND AGAIN

Sieve of Eratosthenes

And over and again, tidal waves scrub, rinse, and sift cluttered sets: bones, jetsam, driftage of briny matter, myriad sea-gifts. Split bivalves, slime, starfish, nacreous scallops present bits to an opalescent ocean-deep of past living-treasure lairs. Primordial glittering stew washes in broad cycles, current traces plankton, drifting, shimmering towards the scrambled amalgam, anxious jumbled future. Splintered rift tears ruins of coral atolls, scours into mounds the smooth polished stone, roiling whirlpools' motes glistening into spindrift. Jostled, dancing, pattering sand leaves sounds in the shells; precious music, magic symphony, chattering echoes, beautiful, watery abluvion, soft singing sea.

And tidal scrub and cluttered bones, driftage, briny myriad gifts,
bivalve, starfish,
scallops' bits, an ocean of living lairs, glittering, washes broad
current, plankton
shimmering. The amalgam, jumbled, splintered tears of atolls
into the polished
roiling motes, into jostled pattering leaves. In shells, music
symphony echoes
watery-soft sea.

And over again, waves rinse, sift sets, jetsam of matter, sea-split slime, nacreous present to opalescent, deep past. Treasure, primordial stew in cycles, traces drifting toward scrambled, anxious future rift ruins. Coral scours mounds' smooth stone, whirlpools' glistening spindrift. Dancing sand sounds the precious, magic chattering, beautiful abluvion singing.

Rinse jetsam sea, nacreous, opalescent treasure in drifting anxious
ruins, mounds,
whirlpools dancing the chattering singing.

And over again, waves sift sets of matter, split slime, present to deep past. Primordial stew cycles, traces toward scrambled future rift; coral scours smooth stone, glistening spindrift. Sand sounds precious magic,

beautiful abluvion.

Slime-deep, scrambled coral sounds beautiful.

And over again, waves sift sets of matter, split present to past. Primordial stew cycles, traces towards future rift, scours smooth stone, glistening spindrift, sand, precious, magic abluvion.

Traces glistening magic.

And over again, waves sift sets of matter, split present to past. Primordial stew cycles toward future rift, scours smooth stone, spindrift, sand, precious abluvion.

SUZANNE S. RANCOURT

WASH IN SALT WATER TO SET DYE

Letters Home

Cold this morning. Winds.
Cloud haze blurs even the Bay's bezel
red rock and retinal bursts white dolomite accents.

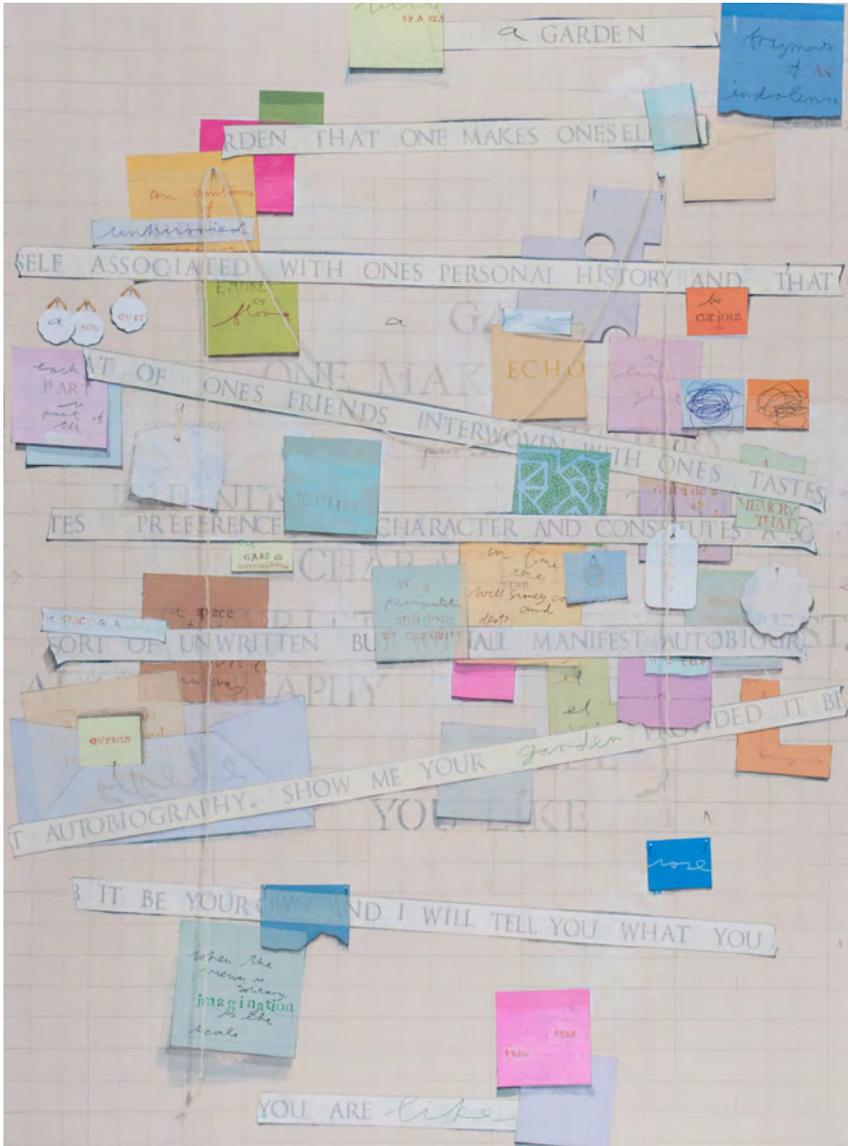
The black butterflies don't seem to mind.
The split tail swallows, still sporting their
iridescent black and tan waistcoats,
don't mind the rolling gusts that sends them
jumbling like a cage full of bingo balls.
The wasps dive regardless for my marmalade.
The cat?

Crushed rock grinds from heavy footsteps
booted feet twist on ball
spew back propulsion moving forward –
forward – not always true.

The water teaches us that
there is a recycling.
backward – forward – backward –
depending on which part of the wave you ride
depending
on whether you were born with your eyes open
or not
you were born in water
or not
already pushing against
the forces that own you, that want to keep you
in lava rocks still cooking
near the pearl encrusted cavern under the slaughterhouse
in the crevices lubricious with Sulphur water
under the barge of fantasy and humans
Even the crabs consume their dead.

ANDREW COOKS

A GARDEN



ELEGY 24



ELEGY 27



MARY DONNET JOHNSON

MIRROR ME

*MUSIC PLAYS SOFTLY, SETTING A TRANQUIL MOOD.
LIGHTS UP on a boutique spa make-up counter. JAN stands behind the counter waiting on LOUISE, watching her try on some lipstick. NEW-AGE MUSIC FADES UNDER AND OUT.*

JAN: What a beautiful color on you!

LOUISE: Ach! My lips are so thin.

JAN: That lipstick is “plumping.”

LOUISE: Really? They don’t look any plumper to me.

JAN: Give it a minute.

LOUISE: I’ve had injections. There should be plenty to plump.

JAN: Yes, I can see you’ve had a lot of work. (*Quickly*) I mean, it looks great. So natural.

LOUISE: At my age, it’s important to do it before you have to. Then nobody notices.

JAN: Absolutely. You look like you just had a good night’s sleep.

LOUISE: Exactly. Dr. Roman did a pretty good job this last time, I have to say.

JAN: Gorgeous.

LOUISE: It’s just these lips. So thin.

JAN: Wait, I have an idea.

Picks up a lip pencil and attempts to outline LOUISE’S lips

LOUISE: (*Trying to talk without moving her mouth*) Careful, I bruise easily.

JAN: Hold still. Don’t worry. I do this all day long. (*She steps back to admire her handiwork*) *There! You look just like Angelina Jolie! You do!*

LOUISE: (*Into the mirror, aghast*) I look like Bozo! No, more like John Wayne Gacy!

JAN: Ha, ha! (*Tiny pause*) Who?

LOUISE: You don’t know who that is?

JAN: Of course, I do! The cowboy guy, right?

LOUISE: No! The child molester clown guy.

JAN: Oh.

LOUISE: Yes.

JAN: Right. Well, you don't look like him, whoever he was. You look pretty.

LOUISE: I look ridiculous!

JAN: No, you don't. Your lips look beautiful.

LOUISE: Well, they do look bigger.

JAN: They do! (*Reaching under the counter*) How about some eye shadow?

LOUISE dabs at her mouth, deciding she does look good

LOUISE: OK. What do you have?

JAN: This amazing new stuff with Tormagalin in it.

LOUISE: Tormenta-maga-what?

JAN: Tormagalin. It's from ancient Mayan ruins in South America. They just discovered it. It's the purest clay ever and it has light-reflecting properties that will make your eyes pop like crazy.

LOUISE: I'm not sure I want my eyes to pop.

JAN: You will when you see it.

LOUISE leans forward and stares into JAN'S eyes.

LOUISE: Really? It will make my eyes look younger?

JAN: Oh, yeah, like 20 years younger.

LOUISE: Is that what you have on?

JAN: (*Laughs*) No. Then I'd look about five.

LOUISE: Ha. Ha.

JAN: It could be amazing on you. Want to try it?

LOUISE: I have so much eye shadow at home.

JAN: But you don't have this.

LOUISE: If I was your age, I wouldn't need all this.

JAN: You can never have too much of the right product. (*Applies eye shadow while scanning LOUISE'S jewelry*) Especially someone in your position.

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LOUISE: And what position is that?

JAN: You know, parties every week, dinners at fancy restaurants with important people, going to meetings, sitting on boards, walking your dog with designer rainwear and little boots...

LOUISE: I don't wear little boots!

JAN: No, your dog, your dog wears little boots. Givenchy, right?

LOUISE: You're making fun of me now.

JAN: No, I'm not! I wish I had a dog with little boots.

LOUISE: Boots or no boots, I'd give anything to look as good as you.

JAN: That's why you're here! I can totally help.

LOUISE: How do you get your skin to look so smooth?

JAN: I use this. It's air-whipped Arugula-oil face and body masque. Try some on your cheek.

LOUISE: OK. Not too much, though. I break out.

JAN: Not with this. It's very light. Doesn't that feel wonderful?

LOUISE: It's a little greasy.

JAN: Hold on. Let it work.

LOUISE: (*Opening and closing her mouth like a beached fish*) Oh. Oh, yes. Now it's tightening up. Oh. That feels good.

JAN: Told you! Wait until you see how it looks!

LOUISE: You really use this?

JAN: (*Lightly taps her forehead and cheeks*) I do! See? Boop, boop, boop, it bounces right back! Cool, hunh?

LOUISE: Cool. Can it do anything about this?

LOUISE pats and pulls at her loose neck skin

JAN: Sure! And those arm flaps, too!

LOUISE: (*Defensively draws her arms into her sides*) What arm flaps?

JAN: Everybody your age has arm flaps. No need to be self-conscious about it. Not when there's Air-Whipped Arugula Oil to put on them.

LOUISE: Is that how you got your arms to look like that?

JAN: Absolutely!

LOUISE: *(Taking off her expensive jacket, she holds her arms out)* Slather me up!

JAN: You got it.

LOUISE: Everyone's going to wonder what happened to me.

JAN: You'll have the best skin in town.

LOUISE : Um, it's starting to make my bracelet feel sticky.

JAN: Do you want me to take that off for you?

LOUISE: Thanks. Just put it in a safe place, OK?

JAN: Sure. How about your rings? And isn't that necklace starting to bother you, too?

LOUISE: A little bit.

JAN: Here, let me help.

She helps LOUISE take the necklace and rings off and then puts them with the bracelet on the counter between them.

LOUISE: Thank you. You are so kind. You don't see that very often in young people anymore.

JAN takes a Kleenex and gently wipes the lotion off the jewelry

JAN: I'm just doing my job. Would you like me to get you some herbal tea? Maybe an eye pillow?

LOUISE: That would be so nice. Thank you!

JAN: Let me just take your purse, too. I'd love to give you a hand wax. Would you like that?

LOUISE: How sweet you are! Thank you!

JAN: No problem at all. Just a second. *(She puts the purse behind the counter, pours a tea from a carafe on the counter into a fancy little cup and sets it near LOUISE)*

JAN (CONTINUED): It's Himalayan Mountain Lemon-Mist Lavender herbal tea. Fantastic for stress and digestion. You know—sluggishness. *(Confidentially)* We've all been there.

LOUISE: *(Gratefully accepts the cup of tea)* I'm there right now. Thank you for this.

JAN finds a small, colorful eye pillow in a drawer and holds it up

JAN: See how pretty? It's made with organic flax seeds. Should take care of any puffiness.

LOUISE: You are such an angel, and so good at this!

JAN: (*Adjusting the eye pillow so LOUISE can't see a thing*) Just sit there quietly and let all that goodness sink in.

She boldly tries on the jewelry and admires her bejeweled fingers as she reaches into LOUISE'S purse to deftly extract a \$100 bill

LOUISE: (*From under the eye pillow*) They'll all be green.

JAN: (*Stops dead, thinking LOUISE has seen her with the money*) What, green?

LOUISE: Everyone who sees me. They'll be green with envy!

JAN: Oh! That green! Well, you know what they always say...

LOUISE: ...the grass is always greener on the other side!

JAN: And don't let any grow under your feet.

JAN folds the money into a tiny square and tucks it into her bra. Then she steps quietly away.

LOUISE: Where are you going?

JAN: Um, nowhere. Why?

LOUISE: I thought I heard you leaving.

JAN: No, no. I'm right here.

LOUISE: Good, because it almost sounded like you were going to make off with my valuables.

JAN: Your valuables? I would never.

Hurriedly strips the jewels off, digs the cash out of her bra, and lays the jewelry carefully on the counter, then unfolds and straightens out the money before tucking it back in the purse.

LOUISE: When you get to be my age, you can read people like a book. Even if their cover is pretty their pages can be just as cheap and predictable as pulp fiction. (*Wiping her face with the eye pillow*) Let me get a better look at you. (False politeness) Please. Before I call the police. (JAN reluctantly moves toward LOUISE) Wipe this stuff off of me. All of it. Will you?

JAN takes a soft towel and wipes LOUISE'S face and arms.

JAN: I was not going to take your things. I had them on the counter right here the whole time, as you can plainly see.

LOUISE: Oh, yes, I can see. I can plainly see, alright. And I thank you for your care. There's nothing more beautiful than a pretty little thing taking such good care of an old lady like me. (*Puts her jewels back on slowly with smug satisfaction*) And I will see—I will plainly see—that you get a great big tip for taking such good care of such an ancient fossil. It's the least I can do, isn't it dear. Isn't it? (JAN nods miserably) I thought so. (Takes JAN'S chin in her hand, not at all gently) Beautiful and smart. Lovely to see. When you get to be my age you can spot that a mile away. (Stares intently into JAN'S eyes) Even in the mirror.

BLACK OUT

END OF PLAY

The role of Jan was originated by MaryKathryn Kopp and the role of Louise was originated by Rachel Agee at the 2016 Sideshow Fringe Festival in Nashville, TN.

MICHELLE SAFFRAN

FULLNESS OF TIME



NEW MEDIA

NATASCHA GRAHAM

CECILY AND THE DRAGON



“Cecily and the Dragon” was written during Lockdown as a response to a writing prompt found somewhere on the internet. It is written about the unreal world of imagination and childlike hope that I feel so many people descended into upon the breaking news of the pandemic.

Performed by Harri Aburrow-Newman.

See full video here: www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/7169

L. MARI HARRIS

GIRL AS WEATHER DISTURBANCE

Amy's squeezed next to you in the backseat, bare sweaty leg stuck to your bare sweaty leg. Ben's pushed against your other leg, his fingertip lightly tracing letters on your knee. Austin is driving, one hand steering, one hand cradling the back of Chelsea's neck. The stars and the white lines of the blacktop blur by, and you try to memorize this moment, feel these bodies pressed against you, the smell of the upholstery, of the grass and the asphalt, waiting for your favorite song to come on because you know it's next on this week's Top 20, everyone's laughter mixing like a chorus.

You want to wrap all of this around you, grip it tight with both hands and not let go.

But the air spins and the stars turn their backs and this moment's a barb-wire lie.

You clutch at your stomach as fat raindrops hit the windshield. One. Another. Another.

Another, another, through the open windows, but no one makes a move to close the windows, everyone sings louder over the wind and the rain and the radio, and Ben pulls you closer, and you reach for Amy, to steady yourself, to quell your pounding head, and Amy squeezes your hand, laughs.

You want to shout *No, this won't last, No, everything's going to change*, but no one would hear you anyway, but no one would believe you anyway, especially not Ben. Ben who will say you're both too young and nothing's going to change for him and why did you allow this to happen? like it is all your doing, like this roar over the wind and the rain and the radio is all your doing and the sound pushes against your head, against your back and you want to turn to look but you stare at Austin's wide hand so gently resting on Chelsea's neck, feel Ben's fingertip burn words into your leg, your skin blistering as you push him away and you smash your fists against your ears, shake your head side to side and everyone stares. Everyone just stares over the wind and the rain and the radio and under the roar is Amy's voice a million miles away: *what's wrong what's wrong what's wrong* and you know you can't stop this from leveling you. But you duck anyway.

SCARLETT PETERSON

GATHERING

Someone in Texas loves me, even now. I miss the city,
the Alamo with its giant columbines, blooms yellow
as jaundice. Delicate. This morning I felt the breath leave
my useless body, ordered a knife for my own undoing.
I'll never outlearn my blood, the cogs in my veins. Like
my father I always want to hurt things. I miss the
Riverwalk where no one knew me, where I fed ducks
from my plate. Gentle. Once I drank pink wine by the
palmfuls, put my mouth on two women to make
another one jealous. She watched me dance.
Gossamer. Now I'm empty-handed, lonely-mouthed.
In the morning I greet the poison I planted, watch it
bloom, want to taste it. When I die I want to feel it
coming. Maybe by then I'll know who I am.

ROB COOK

LADY OF THE LAST FLESH

I searched for you through the hooch beds,
the windows covered with napkins
where motor oil dripped from someone's mouth.

The night a hole in the sound system at the Elk Den,

and the men flickering in the lounge where they caught you looting
a dancer's bottomless eyes.

I read the maps you drew on the restroom tile.

I checked payphones for your breathing:
your hourglass turned to static across state lines.

Did you look back at the trucks following you like animals,
their steel shadows leaking all the way from Ohio?

Are you with women in Montrose, Pennsylvania
hunting night cars for their engines' soft venison?

I counted 423 rows of teeth chained from the resort billboard
to the Swan Nebula.

Where I stood the mountains leading to Stroudsburg disappeared,
which meant you'd already taken off your freezing clothes
and scratched away your face.

Were you real or just the desperation
of the moon when it couldn't find the same town
whose men it turned to water the night before?

Not one road marked through the CB noise
between Allentown and the factory retail outlets,

I didn't know the color of your hair or how far cold you'd gone,
but I ran after your legs in those first deer slaughters of winter.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

MARGARET ELYSIA GARCIA

PLUCKING

Every morning when I flip my magnifying mirror over and examine my chin and neck, I think of my grandmother. Immediately, I become nine or ten years old again and, I get a flash of her in her bedroom before me. She's tall and standing at the high 1960s gabled glass window ledge facing the backyard. The ledge houses her magnifying mirror, her eyebrow pencils, cold cream, and lipstick. It also housed the tweezers.

I'd sit in the rattan chair on the other side of her bed and watch as my grandmother stood there by the window in cream colored girdle and bra and gold lamé bedroom slippers as she—in her words—put her face on.

But before she could put on her face, she had another task—dealing with the deep black coarse hairs that grew while she slept and reappeared every morning on her chin and neck. She stood there before the mirror, with the best morning light in the house. She'd picked that room—the smallest bedroom in the house—for its daylight. She stood there and plucked them one by one.

This came with sounds of 'oof' and 'argh' followed by a close examination of the culprit—often a half-inch long hair. She would let out a euphoric 'a-ha' as if she had snuck behind the erring coarse strands and took them by surprise. She held her chin up to the light victorious.

As my grandmother grew older, she kept up her vigilance the best she could, but eventually her eyesight began failing even with the perfect morning light. She started feeling for the hairs on her chin and neck and plucking them by feel.

I inherited her prodigious ability to grow facial hair and started in on my own daily routine after having my own babies. I began thinking of her when I readied my own face to meet, not just the outside world, but myself for the day.

In her nineties, she no longer had the dexterity to pluck the hairs, even by feel. One Easter as she lay in a hospital bed in a rehab ward recovering from an age-related ailment, some cousins, aunts and uncles, and I all made our way to her side. Some brought flowers and tea, sweet treats, and books she could no longer see to read and music she could barely make out.

I brought nothing having come in off a ten hour drive. I bent down to

kiss her and saw immediately what I knew she'd be uncomfortable with—hairs so long they curled on her neck and chin. She reached up to hug me and whispered in her annoyed Bronx voice in my ear.

“Margaret, would you do something here, please?” She rubbed her neck. I could feel her exasperation. I took out my tweezers and spent the next thirty minutes plucking out each one. After each pull, she let out a gulping sound as if the pain of the hair pull was a little too much for her. Nurses came by to check on her, looking at me curiously as if I was a horrible elder abuser. She motioned them away with her hands and asked me to continue and I plucked each one while she ‘oooh-ed’ and winced. When I was done, she held me to her and thanked me for making her—for that moment—feel like herself again.

Last year was her 98th birthday. On the day of her birthday, family gathered. Some flew both from across the country and up the state to see her. In her room in my aunt’s house, she needed help putting on shoes to go to the party in the backyard. She wanted help putting on a little lipstick. My aunt helped her with her shoes as I walked in the room. Her eyesight was really failing now, but as I put my face into hers and said her name, she knew who I was.

“Oh Margaret, you’re here. Can you do something with this?” She asked in her same Bronx voice, this time meeker. I thought again to watching her ready herself in her bedroom. I was never tall enough to reach that window ledge. Now she was shorter than me. In another month, she’d pass away.

I took the tweezers out of my purse and began to do my work more tentatively than I had before. She winced and I’d stop and say are you sure and she’d motion for me to go on. I didn’t want to hurt her and tried to stop halfway through, but she felt her chin and neck, felt a few errant hairs, and insisted I continued.

I finished her face and then did my own. One last time, together.

MARY SENTER

SANTE FE TRAIL



ADEET DESHMUKH

SOLO FLIGHT



FABIANA MARTÍNEZ

THIEF

Over the course of the four decades of her life, Marina stole three distinctive things and never fathomed the shameful idea that any of them would have to be returned.

Her first act of thievery occurred when she was five years old and for an almost experimental purpose. The object was a random blue piece that belonged to an assembling game that she loved in kindergarten. Sister Amélie was always very adamant about how good girls kept their classroom in order and never, ever, took any toys or staples home. Stealing was a sin, God was constantly watching, and our obligation consisted on taking care of all the beautiful gifts our Eternal Father provided for us. By mid-year, Marina was so bored by the same comminatory speech, decanted every afternoon before school was over, that she slipped the useless plastic square in her pocket. She wanted to prove to herself that her growing assumption was accurate: how could they know she had done it? Thus, the worn-out piece remained in her undiscovered possession for many years cornered in the bottom of a drawer by other dead mementos of childhood and corroborating to its illicit owner that, like the tree falling in the forest, a sin needs a witness more tangible than God to exist.

The second appropriation had taken place when Marina was twenty-three; two days after she had broken up with the shy boy she had called her boyfriend for the last six years. Marina had gone to his apartment, the new one he wanted to use to explore more adventurous attractions to which Marina had not been offered a ticket. There were not many things to recover from the place she would not visit again but, while looking at the bookshelves, Marina saw the thin red book she had caressed dearly many times. While touching the cloth covers again with the tip of her fingers, as if touching the ears of a stray cat rubbing against her knees, Marina remembered the improper but wise theory of Professor Devedia. People only steal two things without feeling guilty: books and other people's spouses. The reason, the sturdy matron of Aesthetics II used to say, was that the thieves buried their crime under the benign belief that books and spouses can be licitly stolen when they are not well taken care of by their authorized owners. Marina smiled and with the same excitement of her first childhood offense, stole *Le Nouveau Bescherelle 1*, *L'Art de Conjuguer* and promised herself to master the language of Balzac.

When she committed her third infraction, her state of fear, pain, and ecstatic infatuation was such that she could not remember that, in order to help the owner of the picture, she had reviewed the rules of his language with the added pleasure of practicing verb conjugations from a stolen red covered book.

Nicolas had materialized in her academic path as a predictable nuisance and in her love life as a knight rescuer of broken hopes worthy of the troops of Charlemagne. Professor Devedia had informed her that as part of her doctorate program, she would have to help Professor Nicolas Loquen in his three-month research about the influence of Andre Breton in the works of two contemporary Peruvian writers. Marina was the only one of the fellows who would be able to comprehend Monsieur Loquen's words and destroy that same language clumsily trying to make herself understood. Marina accepted the responsibility with stoicism, like someone who knows that a heavy, beautifully wrapped present is just a dusty brick with no value. Babysitting a snobby, round-glasses, young French *professeur* was not her ideal plan for the winter of her twenty-seventh birthday. But when Monsieur Loquen opened the door of the study hall and let her in, Marina noticed he did not wear any glasses and that with some invisible prestidigitation pass, this man had thrown the imaginary brick straight at her chest and shattered the wall of ice that many disrupted love affairs had helped to build inside her.

For two months, work took them to libraries and museums, cafes and train stations, the houses of lost writers who offered them bread and whiskey and, finally, three weeks before his grant was over, to his bed, *un lit*, for a love made in fragments of languages that they did not share completely but managed to arrange in a Frankenstein-styled dismembered lexicon that their bodies did not need to obey the international laws of desire.

On the evening of Marina's birthday, while she was trying to awake in the lake of his sheets and decipher what was the best term to define this new intoxicating feeling, Nicolas came back from the kitchen with a glass of wine, sat on her side of the bed, caressed her forehead, and with an accent that melted any remains of forgotten sorrows, said: "*Ma belle*, I am leaving tomorrow."

Marina looked at him from the placid haze of untold love, barely heard some words about a family emergency, about responsibilities far away, about her being the only reason why he had stayed this long, and let him go back to check on his special ratatouille with which they would celebrate and also say their sad good-byes. She knew at that moment that her time was limited and let her eyes wander to find where her clothes were and which souvenir she would take without guilt, without a witness. She grabbed one

grabbed one of the two pictures lying on the nightstand, the one of Nicolas and the other handsome man leaning against a veranda by a faraway river in the south of France. Marina did not know who the freckled girl on the remaining picture was and did not have the time or the will to inquire. She hid the chosen picture inside the book she carried in her purse, walked through the dark hallway to her private French cook and kissed him on the neck to make sure that her new crime would be enveloped forever in his unforgettable smell.

Marina's own river of youth continued flowing slowly and unstoppably after Nicolas left. Professor Devedia died in the most inelegant way during a class about the Apollonian concept of beauty. Marina took her place, married and divorced a man she never completely loved, lost an undesired pregnancy, and waded through the swirl of days while teaching Aesthetics. The older she grew, the more she understood the second inconvenient theory of Professor Devedia. Beauty is not perceived because of its perfection, nor because of its intrinsic goodness or its undeniable truth. Beauty is what remains beyond imperfection, what shines through the claws of mud and pain. The Venus of Milo is flawless because she lacks her arms. We are free to imagine them as we please, we could offer her ours if we wanted. What the hand of man or the breeze of time takes away from these pieces is what makes them more beautiful than they would be if they were complete.

The night of Marina's fortieth birthday, she got an e-mail in the university mailbox from an unknown sender. The subject line, perfectly written in her language, said: I would love to see you again. The lines that followed were all in French, a language that Marina had finally mastered with the help of two ideal tools: a scarred heart and a stolen book.

Two days before knocking on his hotel room, Marina tried to find a modern picture of Nicolas. There is no need to steal physical pictures anymore; everything is exposed, available, obscenely out until the end of time to satiate the hunger of multiple robbers. But she could not find any images of him linked to his name or she decided not to look anymore after she recognized the face of the other man as young and handsome as in the picture inside her book. And she learned the scorching truth that Christian Loquen had died thirteen years ago after the cruel caress of unjust fate had touched his noble heart. Christian's parents, his beautiful freckled daughter and his brother Nicolas had been at his side during the few agonizing weeks.

"*Ma belle! Chérie!*" said *Professeur* Loquen still not leaning to kiss her. Marina smiled. She had found the secret of permanent youth. Even with his blue squared glasses and his added wrinkles, she saw him with her distorting younger eyes and was convinced that he was experiencing the same.

"*Ça va?*" Marina asked before their ageless embrace, a hug she could

only do with one arm while securing with the other a book that hid the image of a graceful man who had been taken away too early, a returned lover who had come at last, and the confession of a girl who had stolen just three things in her life and was ready to return the most important one of them.

C.B. ADAMS

DRIVE

You're driving with Phil through the slow blur of the western Kansas landscape, playing Petey, an adult car game he made up, involving creative synonyms for his genitalia. Not interesting, but it helps avoid talking about Phil showing up, unannounced, at the sales conference, declaring his concern about you driving alone to your parents. You had planned to go solo, but then scrapped it last week after calling your relationship quits, again, because you couldn't face your parents with just a break up to talk about. But your parents love Phil, adore him, actually, and even though they don't ever say so, you have the feeling they wonder what you do to keep trying to drive him away.

Later, with more miles to go, you watch your panties, flapping in your hand, caught in harsh headlights, drying in the gusts left by trucks.

CLAIRE SCOTT

TWO POEMS

SETTLING THE SCORE

An exacto knife in my pocket
an eye on the bulge in your pants
thank you for coming
Martin Spates from a galaxy ago
the night of senior prom
in my cloud blue dress
with poufy sleeves
all ruffles and flounce

I thought you were
I thought I was
but we weren't were we
in love
but you said we were
didn't you Martin Spates
and this is what lovers do
you said that
as you bit and scratched
and split me in two

Five cats and ten guppies and
a woman who waited too long
no weaving and unweaving to pass the time
today I glimpsed a rumpled face
floating over a floppy sweatshirt
and I knew it was time to call

Tonight we will bed again
in another cheap motel
my turn now Martin Spates
as I drink the darkness
from a galaxy ago
prom dress scribbled on the floor

MY NEEDS

My needs can fit inside a thimble
or the throat of a hummingbird
I only ask for a teaspoon of mercy
a drop or two of mayonnaise, a sprinkle of salt
no need for useless longings and daring desires
days spent imagining, anticipating

A lover with knowing hands
a mother who remembers
a friend who forgives
leaving me hollowed out, depleted
swigging Two Buck Chuck, bottle after bottle
of determined inebriation
or gorging pints of Häggen-Dazs Almond Crunch
slurping entire cartons, licking sticky fingers

I shrink into the possible
a piece of toast, a single rose, one pair of wool socks
an old lady living on the little that is left
curled inside a matchbox each night by ten
under the flag of a postage stamp
gazing at Cassiopeia, at Pegasus, at Pisces

AMANDA AARDSE

LITTLE FALL OF RAIN

My father is a thundercloud - lightning would strike and the clap is never far behind. He holds heavy with rain. Sometimes we think it won't fall. Singing in the rain, just singing in the rain. What a glorious feeling... And when it rains, it pours. My mother would catch us about the ears when we came home from school, soaked to the bone with chattering teeth and clothing we had to shuck from our skin like oyster shells. I never mind, I'm not made of sugar. I like the feeling, say a prayer and catch raindrops on my lips like tears, drink them down like something baptismal. Wash myself; scrub, but never quite clean. When my father smiled it was sunshine on a cloudy day, but the clouds were cumulonimbus and I know that cycles do not break. I precipitate - anticipate. I catch the cold of my life, just like mom said I would. They tuck me into their bed, my dad surrenders to the spare room while I fight my own body in convulsions, slip in and out of a fever dream, like a cloud. Slice it between my chattering teeth, eyes at a rolling boil. It takes three whole infested days until I break, and my thundercloud of a father feeds me strawberries. They are the sweetest fruit, just on the verge of turning, and he places each slice on my tongue. I can't chew, so I suck on them until they collapse in my mouth like dying stars. But everything tastes like rainwater. My first food in days. It takes minutes, hours, and he chatters away to himself. It tastes like rainwater, earthy and dilute, the taste, no taste at all. A blissful summer shower.

KAREN LEVY

DOUBLE-BASS

She'd never heard anything like the piece he performed, a solo for double-bass, at a concert she attended with the musician friend who would introduce them.

"That's him," the friend whispered as he came on stage. "Larry. He plays modern."

She wasn't sure what that meant, so she readied herself for something atonal and unpleasant.

She watched as he walked to center stage, bearded and handsome, where he embraced the instrument and wrapped himself around it. Then he played a piece with no memorable melody, but the sound of the instrument was so sweet and low that she wasn't sure if she was hearing it or feeling it.

After the concert, she and her friend went outside to wait for him. She couldn't stop thinking about the sound of the instrument and way he'd held it, how he'd chewed on his mouth as he played, biting down on his lip to cover his moans. She'd heard his moans and she'd listened for them at the rests when the bass was silent. He'd made love to the bass on stage as she'd watched, as everyone watched, and then stood to applaud.

She imagined herself as the bass, the instrument of his passion. She knew she could shake his world.

"Larry!" her friend called, reaching up to wave, and she stepped right in front of her, so Larry would see her first.

Around them, people whispered, "He's a musical genius", as he came over to her, to take her hand.

"Nice to meet you," he said, while behind her people shook their heads, as if to say, Poor thing, she doesn't see he's already committed to his one true love.

Their courtship was slow, and he remained unshaken. Even once they were a couple holding hands, he never held her like the bass, never showed her the passion he displayed on stage. At parties he'd rest a forearm on her shoulder and she realized how far this was from an embrace.

Her first night in his apartment, she woke up to see a tall, dark woman watching from a corner of the room. She almost screamed, until she realized it was Larry's double-bass.

She walked over to it, but rather than feeling calmed, she felt small and insignificant. She hurried to the bathroom, unhappy about sharing the

bedroom with something that looked like another woman.

She thought about destroying her competition, grabbing it by the neck and smashing it to the floor—but then she'd watch him perform on stage and be awed by him, his posture and rhythm; and how he used the instrument, how he teased the music out of it, how he melded into it to make music with it—with her—and she wanted to stand up in the middle of the orchestra section and scream, "He's mine!" furious about what was happening on stage for everyone to see.

She covered her ears.

"What's wrong?" her musician friend asked.

She shook her head.

On stage, Larry was wrapped around the bass and moaning.

"Isn't it wild?" her friend asked.

"What?"

"Those sounds he makes!"

"Oh, those." He never made those sounds with her.

"You're embarrassed," her friend said, laughing.

The music ended and she watched Larry bow. His arm was draped lovingly around the bass and that's when she stood up and screamed at the top of her lungs: "What about me?"

But the audience stood too, for an ovation, and her words were lost to their applause.

She pushed past them and into the aisle. When she got to the lobby, she passed a long-haired woman, the wife of another musician, who was checking herself out in a mirrored wall. She didn't stop to say hello; she ran past and onto the sidewalk, thinking how the woman's husband would be gently packing up his instrument now, wiping her down with long, slow strokes before leaving the orchestra room with his arm around her, as his long-haired wife readied herself for the lifetime of competition that lay ahead.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

RICHARD PETERSON

LOVE, ART, AND ENTROPY

I had come out of the megalopolis, come out of the clatter and clutter of people and things, come eastward over the Sierra Nevada, past the Donner Memorial, then down and through the fantastical cities huddled at the state line. Out into the Great Basin.

There is not one large basin, but about ninety smaller basins separated by echeloned mountain ranges trending north and south. Tectonics wrinkled the topography and formed more mountains in Nevada than in any other of the conterminous states. It was after the exit for Fallon that the land opened up to an alkali desert punctuated by sagebrush and saltbush and playa lakes in various stages of desiccation. I was headed to another state for a court hearing—the denouement of a contentious romantic relationship. I drove a rental and settled in for a longsome drive.

If one has a propensity for fanciful thoughts, then hours of solitude transiting an arid wasteland facilitates their flight. On a map, Nevada is an inverted triangle that to the fevered imagination becomes an ideograph of a heart, that symbol of romantic love. The highway I drove—from Reno then north and east to Wendover—was a sundering arrow, each traveled mile furthering the rift. The sense and order to my life—my ontological security—was gone. Desolate thoughts from a desolate place. Over the distant mountains, thunderheads loomed. Stormy weather lay ahead.

I arrived late to Wendover. From a hill outside of town the curvature of the earth is visible across the plane of Great Salt Lake. Here was the site of an abandoned airbase, once referred to as “Leftover Field,” a place where bomber crews secretly trained to drop atomic bombs. I stopped to visit an art exhibit located on the base. Within one of the decrepit buildings, aptly named the Partially Missing Building since a large portion of it had been vandalized and gutted, the Brooklyn-based artist, William Lamson, created *Mineralogy*.

It was dusk and I felt disquieted amid the ruin. Trees grew from the building’s foundation and piles of debris covered the concrete floor. To view the exhibit you first open a large, metal cabinet adjacent to a gray door, enter a combination into a lockbox containing a key, and use the key to open the door. Inside the room there is a large vitrine containing commonplace objects gathered from his father’s basement: pictures, a small

bed, books, shoes. These articles are encrusted with salt crystals; long salty stalactites drip down the walls. Lamson fills vessels placed throughout the space with water obtained from a nearby potash processing plant. The water evaporates and covers everything in its briny deposits. The artwork is about the inevitability of change and loss—of entropy.

Writing about his project, Lamson says, “Embedded within a ruin that is itself undergoing the entropic effects of time, *Mineralogy* suggests an uncanny vision of an uncertain future.” The art historian, Hikmet Sidney Loe, remarked, “That the building and installation are in a constant state of flux is an elegant reminder of our own state of being.” It is an acceleration of a geologic process that Lamson uses as an active participant in the creation of the work. Water is his medium. This mineral-rich water covers and corrodes, causing destruction and disruption—entropic water. In a review by art critic Laura Hurtado, the exhibit represents “the steady promise of entropy, and of the inevitability of collapse.”

Leaving the broken building after returning the key to its box, I drove a mile or so to a garish casino for a meal. The discordance between the two structures was visually jarring. But entropy is not selective; this pleasure palace is also doomed to slowly molder under the ineluctable siege of time.

A fundamental law of the universe, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, states that the entropy of a closed system, i.e., one not receiving any input of energy, continually increases over time. Or, in other words, everything eventually decays: cars rust, ice melts, our houses accumulate dust, people age, relationships fail. Even the universe itself is doomed to a final collapse—the Heat Death.

The next day I detoured from my route to visit one of the most remarkable examples of the use of landscape as an art theme, *Spiral Jetty*. Constructed by Robert Smithson on the northeastern shore of Great Salt Lake, it remains an iconic composition of the Land Art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Land Art, also called Earthworks or Earth Art, uses the natural landscape—Mother Earth herself—as a canvas. It formed during the early years of environmental activism while also developing as a protest against the commodification of the art market. The physical mutability of the work resulting from natural processes was essential to its meaning. Major contributors to this movement include Michael Heizer with his *Double Negative*, a massive work of excavation in Nevada, and *Lightning Field* by Walter DeMaria, his hundreds of stainless-steel poles arranged in a massive grid-pattern in western New Mexico. According to DeMaria, “The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work.”

When Smithson formulated the idea for the jetty, he was drawn to the

concept of entropy, by which the artwork experiences decay from its very moment of creation. He chose his site near an abandoned drilling operation with its oil seeps and rotted pilings jutting from the lake surface—an “entropic landscape,” he wrote. The jetty, a counterclockwise spiral built from over 6000 tons of black basalt rock and dirt, extends for 1500 feet onto the lakebed. But soon after its construction, the jetty vanished from view for several decades due to the rising water level of the lake. When it reappeared following a drought, white crystals covered the black rocks surrounded by pink brine, the result of salt-loving bacteria. This was Smithson’s idea “to induce salt crystals on the rock and gravel as incrustations that will develop over a period of time. These will contrast with the red color of the water.” Sadly, at about the same time the jetty disappeared beneath the lake, Smithson also was gone—killed in a plane crash while surveying a site for a future environmental art project.

Having now visited the jetty twice, several years apart, I noticed subtle changes: its morphology is less defined (walking the jetty I replaced several errant rocks, contrary to Smithson’s desire for natural wasting); the jetty appears more salt encrusted than I remember; the lake has retreated southward, exposing expansive mud flats. Two people stood at the center of the spiral, enacting some runic ritual: him drumming, her summoning the earth magic. I climbed the rocky hill above the lake and gazed beyond the jetty toward the low mountains in the distance. The sky was leaden, the sun a faint, yellow smear. It was a land of no shadow, an alien place, where time has no meaning except as an instrument of change.

A different concept of the phenomenon of salt crystallization was developed by the French novelist, Stendhal, where he uses it as a metaphor for human relationships. During the summer of 1818, he visited a salt mine near the city of Salzburg. During the winter, the miners would throw a leafless twig into the mine and several months later retrieve it covered with shining crystal deposits. Such a bough was presented to his female companion. He noticed that a young military officer also in their company was quite taken with the woman and that the man saw qualities and perfections in her not apparent to Stendhal. As he later recounted to her, “The effect produced on this young man by the nobility of your Italian features and those eyes of which he has never seen the like is precisely similar to the effect of crystallization upon that little branch.” Stendhal believed that the moment you begin to take serious notice of a person, you no longer see them as they really are, but ag-grandize their positive aspects and ignore their faults, or convince yourself that their defects are unique and charming. Stendhal named this process “crystallization.”

In 1979, Dorothy Tennov, an American psychologist, coined the term

“limerence” to describe the emotional “high” we get from encountering a new love. She explains that “when your limerence for someone has crystallized, all events, associations, stimuli, experience return your thoughts to [the limerent object] with unnerving consistency.” It’s a kind of madness—a cognitive obsession.

Limerence lasts anywhere from months to years depending upon the reciprocity of the limerent object, but at some point the attraction phase of romantic love wanes and the attachment phase begins. We are genetically programmed to become habituated to our mate which results in less appreciation and loving attention and the gradual deterioration of attraction. Michael Liebowitz, a research psychiatrist, writes, “If you want a situation where you and your long-term partner can still get very excited about each other, you will have to work on it, because . . . you are bucking a biological tide.” Unlike the designed neglect of household objects mutating within a salt-saturated vitrine and of a rock jetty degrading in a lake of saline, lasting relationships require care and maintenance to resist the inevitable entropic decline.

This idea that nothing ever lasts, be it in the physical world or in our personal affairs, and that perhaps all of life, in some form, is about loss, occupied my thoughts as I sat outside the Laramie County courtroom. I was shaken from my reverie by the bailiff and escorted to my seat before the judge. The hearing was brief and conclusive. My limerent object received the compensation to which she felt entitled. I received a restraining order.

Two days later, distraught and depressed, I took a wrong turn off the interstate. Waiting at a stop light, I was rear-ended by a young woman who, quoted in the official accident report, “had a very heartbreaking day due to a major life event.”

I borrowed duct tape and a bungee cord and affixed the detached, crinkled panels and tethered the ruptured trunk lid. I eased the wreck back onto the highway and slowly drove the final miles to the return lot. The attendant eyed the car, mudcaked and accordioned, then glared at me. She was accustomed to having these vehicles driven by weekend tourists for short, gentle trips along the scenic coast, not rocketed across thousands of miles of dirt roads and salt desert and then partially disassembled.

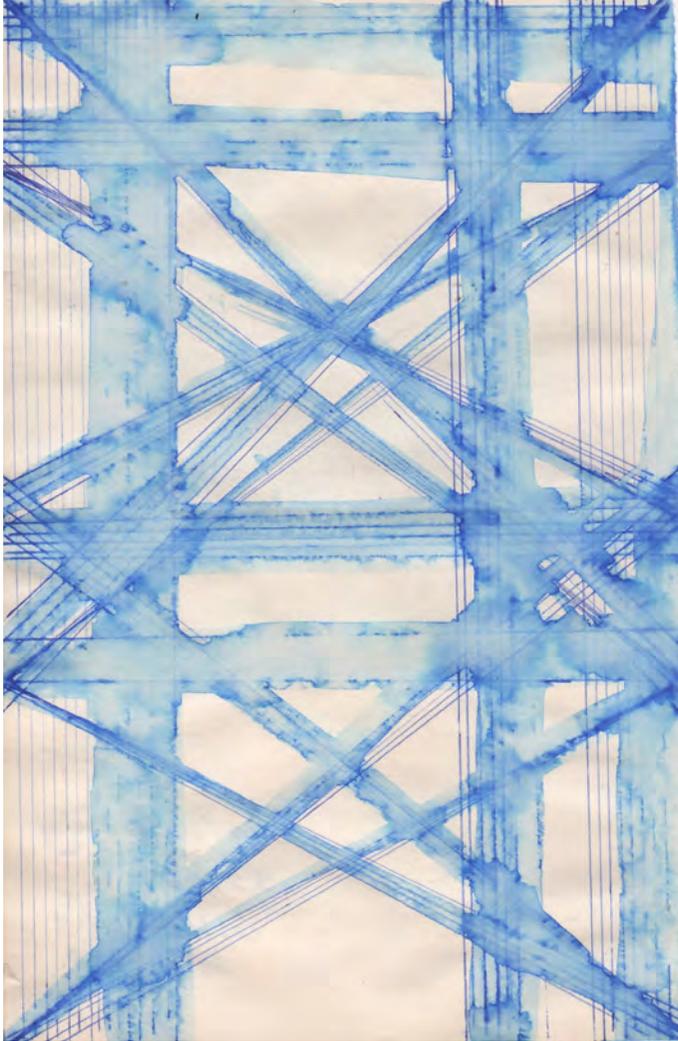
Her name was Crystal. She desired an explanation.

I tossed her the keys.

“Entropy,” I told her.

JEAN WOLFF

BLUEPENDWG8



JOCELYN ULEVICUS

CANAL ST. MARTIN



SAMANTHA MALAY

UNDERBRUSH

we kneeled
in pitch-stained jeans
on pine needles
tiny bones
and porcupine quills
to measure the distance
by the sound of our voices
between burn barrel sparks
and when we would leave
in numbers reduced
by the shape of the mountain
broken bootlaces
and songs we forgot
to an address written on a bus station paperback
and a road that led away from the trees

FOREST SERVICE MAP

in golden green creekbend shade
arms uncouple from sleeves
ankles and feet push silt

hold branches aside
up the slope to the road
where heat still shimmers off the hood of the truck
and the sky is white
between black trees

a moth in the rafters
the contour of absence
flowers pressed in unread books

JAKE YOUNG

I hike into the mountains, along a path beside a temple, its wooden doors drawn shut, past a sign I cannot read, a book, *The Ethnography of Rhythm*, in hand. Birds sing in the early morning light. There's meaning in pattern, not words, I think to myself. I whistle, and the birds sing back while I compose poems to them. Fat drops from last night's rain fall from leaves when the wind rustles; spiderwebs stretched between strands of grass wrap around my calves; and the birds continue to sing as I wander, a foreigner. When I reach the mountain top, it's 6 AM, and a monk rings the morning bell for prayers.

GRAYSON MAY

SIRENS



BETH BURGMEYER

THE ACCIDENTAL FEMINIST

My new friends in my new book club in my new hometown of Fort Worth, Texas all think something different about my hairy legs and armpits. Not that I try to show them off, but Texas summers are like training grounds for Hell.

No one says anything to me, but they all have their opinions. Poppy whispers to Blair when she thinks I'm out of ear shot, or when I'm not looking at them. Like not looking at them somehow equals not hearing their whispers.

Did you see?

I could never do that. And in public.

Jason wouldn't touch me if I did that.

Laughter. *Well, that's one way to get out of sex.*

Tillie doesn't say anything. She just looks, and then tries to act like she wasn't looking.

Constance thinks I'm a feminist, seems to think I'm the greatest thing since granola. She likes to name drop. Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem come up regularly, like they're old friends. Last month, Constance asked me if I wanted to go with her to Austin to hear Roxane Gay speak. She glanced at my hairy ankles peeking out from beneath my long skirt.

I wanted to say yes, I love Roxane Gay. But I had to say no, mumbling something about a family thing. It wasn't a lie. Not really.

Of all the things the book club ladies say and think about me, I like the feminist angle the best. I think I'll go with that one. I'll buy some cheap, earthy sandals; maybe get a few bumper stickers or buttons, ones that read: *A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle*, or *A woman's place is in the resistance*.

Being a feminist or a novelty, or even being repulsive is easier than telling the truth. Easier than saying I can't shave because it would kill my daughter. She'd find a way to get the razor, take it apart, and drag it up her forearms. Razors and pencil sharpeners and sharp knives and utility blades are all locked away. And if I try to unlock them, she'll find a way to see where I hide the key or the combination. I can't open the locks when she's not around, because she's always around, tethered to me twenty-four hours a day. If she's not tethered, she might jump off the roof or shatter a window or fasten a belt to her ceiling fan.

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If I do get a break, if my husband comes home from his third tour of duty—that he volunteered for—I'll be too exhausted to shave. All I'll want is for him to take the tether for twenty-four or forty-eight or one hundred sixty-eight hours so I can sleep. Shaving doesn't even make it onto my radar.

But right now, the only break I get is ten hours of respite care each month, two of which I use so I can go to my book club and they can stare at my legs.

It makes me wish I really was a feminist.

STRATON RUSHING

CLIPPED

CHARACTERS:

MIGUEL - MEXICAN-AMERICAN MAN, 20S

BILLY - IRISH-AMERICAN MAN, 20S, HE HAS A THICK BOSTON ACCENT

PLACE: *The backroom of a butcher shop, not too long before Thanksgiving*

BEFORE THE LIGHTS COME UP, WE HEAR THE DISTINCT SOUNDS OF A KNIFE HITTING A CUTTING BOARD AS IT SLICES THROUGH A PIECE OF MEAT. LIGHTS FADE UP ON TWO MEN, MIGUEL AND BILLY, CHOPPING HAM IN THE BACK ROOM OF A SLAUGHTERHOUSE. THE MEAT CAN BE MIMED; HOWEVER, THEY SHOULD BE SLICING WITH SOME SORT OF PHYSICAL ITEM THAT MAKES A SOUND. THEY CHOP WITHOUT SPEAKING FOR A MOMENT. EVENTUALLY THEY FINISH THE STACK THEY WERE WORKING ON. BILLY GOES TO GRAB ANOTHER.

MIGUEL: How many more of these we got?

BILLY: Just one more big stack.

MIGUEL: Think I should wait 'til after we finish this one to take my smoke break?

BILLY: I don't mind waiting either way—give my hands a break.

MIGUEL THINKS ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT.

MIGUEL: Ah fuck it man, let's get it over with.

BILLY: I can't believe he waited 'til the week before Thanksgiving to tell us we had to cube all this.

MIGUEL: We coulda been working on it all week if they'd told us. Instead, we get carpal tunnel.

THEY KEEP CHOPPING FOR A MOMENT. BILLY STOPS AND LOOKS AT HIS PIECE, HE CUT IT INCORRECTLY.

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BILLY: Ah shit.

MIGUEL: Oh man, you gotta get that first slice down the middle.

BILLY THROWS THE MIS-CUT SLICE TO THE SIDE AND GRABS ANOTHER.

MIGUEL: You got something going on today, what is it?

BILLY: Nothing man—

MIGUEL: Nah, you can't hide nothing from me, I'm your best-work-friend. What's wrong?

BILLY: I gotta tell you the truth... I'm not looking forward to my shift ending.

MIGUEL: Some bullshit with your girl huh?

BILLY: Yeah.

MIGUEL: That's what I told ya 5 months ago wey. I told you, women get weird when they're pregnant. Could you imagine a little you growing inside of you? Shit must be exhausting. That's why the best thing you can do is just shut up, listen to whatever she says and take care of her—What she do? Wake up at 4 a.m. craving Brussels sprouts again?

BILLY: No—well yeah, she did—but that's not what she's pissed about, I make the Brussels sprouts every time.

MIGUEL: So, what's up?

BILLY: It all started last week when we came back from the doctor and we found out we was having a boy—and she—well, I was pulling for a girl and the boy thing kind of freaked me out but for a sec—

MIGUEL: You didn't want a boy?

BILLY: No, not really, I don't guess.

MIGUEL: Why not?

BILLY: I mean—obviously it doesn't matter, it doesn't right—but...that wasn't what the argument was about. Ya know she was born in Vietnam, right? Her folks are from Saigon. And ya know, we've never had 'cultures clash' before on like—how we wanna raise the kid or anything—but uh—apparently over in Vietnam they don't clip their boys.

MIGUEL: Clip?

BILLY: Yeah you know, the uh—what do you call it—the foreskin.

MIGUEL: Oh—

BILLY: Yeah, so she asks if I wanna do it and obviously I say yes. Then she's like— "my family has never done that for thousands of years." So, I'm like "Yeah, but he'll be born here, you wanna make him feel like a freak?"

MIGUEL: You guys really got into it.

BILLY: Yeah, so she goes on and on says "There's nothing freakish about the natural human body and that's genital mutilation, I don't want to do that to my kid." So I'm like "Wait, are you calling MY genitals mutilated?" And about that time we got to the slaughterhouse, so she dropped me off and... well, yeah, I'm not looking forward to the ride home.

MIGUEL: Damn—I wouldn't wanna be you right now.

BILLY: What do you think man, am I wrong here?

MIGUEL SHRUGS.

MIGUEL: I'm not circumcised.

BILLY STOPS CHOPPING FOR A SECOND.

BILLY: Really?

MIGUEL: Yeah, guess it's not a big thing with Mexicans.

BILLY: Have girls ever commented on it?

MIGUEL: Nah man, most of 'em don't care. I have had a couple be real mean about it tho... This one chick said it looked like an anteater... In that moment, I have to say, it did make me feel like less of a man but—I guess having a foreskin technically makes me more of a man.

BILLY: See, that's what I'm worried about. Him getting ready for his first time, dropping trou and freaking some girl out. Not even cause there's anything wrong with him, but like... I don't want it to give him a complex.

MIGUEL: Yeah, that's true.

BILLY: I just imagine like, we go to Fenway, his first baseball game, right? We go to take a piss in that row of urinals they got and he accidentally gets a peak at mine. If ours don't look the same he's gonna think that's weird, right? Then he's gonna ask and I either gotta tell him my dick got chopped up when I was a baby and I didn't want that for him or it was just a choice I let his mom make. Either way, what does that tell him about being a man? You know either scenario I set a shit example.

MIGUEL: I think you're probably thinking about this a lot harder than he will...

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BILLY: I just really wanna get this right... Hey, they always say the extra skin, it makes it harder to clean. Is it harder to clean?

MIGUEL: I don't know. I don't wash other guy's dicks.

MIGUEL THINKS FOR A MOMENT.

MIGUEL: You know who'd probably be an expert on all of this? A gay dude. They'd know more than anybody. I can call my cousin. We could probably ask him anything!

BILLY: Nah man I appreciate it, but...

BILLY PULLS OUT HIS PHONE.

BILLY: Do you mind if I look something up real quick?

MIGUEL: I clock out at six either way. What you looking up?

BILLY: I want to see how many countries actually... you know. Like if they don't do it in Vietnam and Mexico, where else?

MIGUEL: Hmm... yeah, I wonder too...

BILLY SCROLLS FOR A MOMENT. THEN SEES THE MAP.

BILLY: Wow.

MIGUEL: What does it say?

MIGUEL IS SURPRISED AS WELL.

MIGUEL: Man, that's what, like seventy-five percent.

BILLY: Most of the world.

HE SCROLLS DOWN.

BILLY: Well, that wasn't what I expected.

MIGUEL: Makes sense, it's easier to just leave it than slice it off.

BILLY GOES BACK TO CHOPPING. MIGUEL LOOKS AT BILLY AND CAN TELL HE'S STRESSING ABOUT IT.

MIGUEL: You're gonna be fine man, you two have months to figure it out.

BILLY: What four months? That isn't nearly enough time.

MIGUEL: Can't he get it done later? Like just make it his call when he's an adult.

BILLY: Wouldn't that be harder? Like when they're older? Wouldn't he have to heal and everything as a grown man?

MIGUEL STOPS AND GLANCES AT HIS OWN CROTCH AND GRIMACES.

MIGUEL: Yeah... But even then, man, it's probably no big deal, he probably won't be all upset about it later in life either way.

BILLY: I guess what really gets me is like—when she called it “genital mutilation” this morning. I can't get it out of my head. Is it mutilation?

MIGUEL: I don't know, man. Do you feel mutilated?

BILLY: Not until four hours ago... It got me thinking, when the doctors asked my mom after I was born... What did she think? My dad wasn't around so, did she just assume? She didn't have a guy there so—did she just do it cause everyone else does? Like she didn't have guidance on it, and she did great, I think. But a dad. A man. That's different. I mean, I don't want my answer for my son to be “well this is what everyone else does” but like—all I know is my own way, you know?

MIGUEL: We're still talking about dicks, right?

BILLY: Yeah—I just... I wanna make the right call. This is my first choice on showing him how to be a man and he isn't even born yet.

A BEAT. MIGUEL STOPS CHOPPING.

MIGUEL: I don't know what to tell you. Cause I'm single, I have a foreskin, and I had a dad... But I do know, if I was a little half-Vietnamese, half-Irish boy born in the south of Boston, and I got to pick my dad. I'd pick one out like you.

BILLY: Thanks Miguel... you can take your smoke break, I only have a couple more here.

MIGUEL: You sure?

BILLY: Yeah.

MIGUEL NODS, PUTS HIS KNIFE DOWN AND TAKES OFF HIS GLOVES. HE EXITS, BEFORE HE LEAVES—

MIGUEL: I'll be right outside.

BILLY NODS AND KEEPS CUTTING. DEEP IN THOUGHT. HE CUBES THE LAST TWO THEN PUTS HIS KNIFE DOWN. AFTER

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AFTER A MOMENT HE TAKES HIS GLOVES OFF THEN GETS HIS PHONE. HE CALLS HIS GIRLFRIENDS.

BILLY: Hey... no, no, everything's good I uh—I just had a sec and wanted to call. Yeah— ... Yeah, I'll cook some for you when I get home then. Hey uh—listen I, I was doing some Google searches and I saw a couple of articles about what we were talking about this morning and—I want to be sure we have the facts about it and—I just wanna do whatever's best for him ya know, I wanna go off of the facts... Yeah, yeah, you're right... I'm sorry too. I love you. See you at six.

HE HANGS UP. MIGUEL REENTERS A MOMENT LATER.

MIGUEL: Well—ready to see what we gotta do next?

BILLY: Yeah.

MIGUEL PUTS UP THE BAG OF DICED MEAT THEY MADE.

THEY EXIT.

LIGHTS DOWN.

NEW MEDIA

MARGARET EMMA BRANDL

WEST TEXAS: A LETTER TO WALT WHITMAN



“I began writing lyric letters to Walt Whitman sometime shortly after I discovered creative nonfiction. My letters then were equal parts moony and contemplative, with the idea of Walt Whitman—exuberant, effusive, grandiose, tender—standing in for the blog readers I wished I had (it was 2009!). In this video essay, I catch up with Walt Whitman after years without letters, describing and reflecting upon a landscape he’d only ever imagined—a landscape I’d never thought myself interested in before I ended up there. Like my early letters to Walt Whitman, this essay is about coming of age, finding certainty in your own choices, loving as an action verb, and learning to distinguish between streetlamps and the moon.” — Margaret Emma Brandl

See the full video here: www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/7170

MARIANNE FORMAN

RAISING PIGEONS IN MAHANOEY CITY

My father kept a flock of feral pigeons on the garage roof.
Built the cages himself.
Liked to watch the parent birds do their courtship dance,
the male puffing up his neck feathers,
bowing and pirouetting in front of the female.
A ritual dance of trying to impress, emitting soft cooing notes
to serenade his mate for life.
My father believed in their affection for one another.

He would pick huckleberries off the mountainside
urging fruit, one by one, into hungry beaks.
He'd steal worms
from Uncle Joe's coffee can,
the one he kept next to the tackle box,
and then coax the pigeons to devour them, bit by bit.

My father knew a platoon of pigeons
carried messages across enemy lines at Normandy,
delivering secrets to Allied forces.
In ceremony at Buckingham Palace, these birds received medals.
Eternal gratitude for patriotism.
My father paid respect to his pigeons,
solemnly saluting his flock every night
before he descended the rooftop aviary.

One night his own daddy hankered for some pigeon pie,
knowing the breast muscles make for good-eating meat.
His mama used to serve pigeon pie at Thanksgiving,
when they couldn't afford a turkey.
She'd cook the bird up with lard and onions and chicken livers,
mushrooms if they could be found.

Then stuff it all into Crisco pastry.
She'd poke holes in the crust, letting it breathe while baking.

But my father wouldn't hear of it.
He'd named these birds, every one.
They answered when he summoned them by name.
So, that night, he ascended to the roof,
unhinged the cages, and set those pigeons free.
Neighbors, even those drunk on homemade moonshine,
claimed they could hear wings flapping,
even over church bells ringing.

HEIKKI HUOTARI

WHEN GRAVITONS AMASS

My faux pas not of fashion but of attitude,
my without-form-and-void is handed from one
motion-activated nightlight to another. Now my
spine is in alignment. Now my lips are sealed. How
ellipsoidal, but for their extremities, the chickens,
how electrical their circuits. Natural Processes, I'll
be the gentle breeze you asked for and the skipping
heartbeat. As a boy scout my reward is doubled
when I help across the street the soul that has no
wish to go. As lie detectors vie for my approval,
linear regression is a work in progress then
potential energy is edging on kinetic, weather wears
redundancy away and gravitons amass.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

CAROL JEFFERS

THE BASKET

1

Picking up the phone, I choke out: “It’s Stephanie?”

The sing-song voice of the caller ID has told me it is Susie, my best friend’s sister, calling from Ontario. At 6:45 on this Tuesday morning, July 24th, I feel my sleep-blurred face jolt with awareness, my heart vault into my throat. I know now. This is the call, the day I have dreaded for months, even years.

“Gone,” Susie confirms.

“Gone,” I whisper. A euphemism that hides nothing, rises up and splays out in front of me, the first word of grief. My heart leaps again. It knows there will be more. I am about to become a collector of grief words. Deceased. Departed. Dead.

“When?”

Susie is clear, holds herself together, and seems to understand what I need to make Stephanie’s death real. “4:42 this morning, East Coast time.”

1:42 my time, some part of me thinks. Did I feel the moment? Twist, restless in the black of night?

“Heart attack?”

“Three of them.”

Three. I try to take it in but the number is obscene. Too much. Too many. My stomach clenches and I want to throw up. Purge the horror. I grip the phone with one hand and the kitchen counter with the other. I don’t remember the toast burning in the toaster oven or the tea growing cold in the microwave.

“Was Marianne with her?” I manage. I have to know, hope the Baltimore sister had made it to the hospital in time to be at Stephanie’s side.

“Spent most of the night in the cardiac intensive care unit with her.”

“Thank god Stephanie wasn’t alone,” I breathe even as I try to put myself in Marianne’s place, imagine what it was like in those last hours. What it was like to hear the last words. Last breath. To be the one to hear the beeping monitors stop after the third time Stephanie flatlined and the cardiac team stepped away. I shiver. Picture the moment Marianne was left standing in the eternal silence. Where I feel like I am now.

2.

Susie has made special arrangements for my husband and me as non-family members to have some “private time” with Stephanie on Sunday before the service. But now that we stand outside the chapel, I feel like an ungrateful child. Frightened. Overwhelmed. Inept.

The chapel is so quiet. “Not a huge room,” my husband describes. Yet it makes me feel so small. “Very beige. A stone wall behind the pulpit in front. Large windows on the side. A Tree of Life depicted in stained glass on the rear wall. Rows and rows of blonde pews.”

One casket, I know. He doesn’t have to tell me the lid is open.

My heart races, the back of my neck prickles.

I can’t be in this room.

I have to be in this room.

I want to run out, call “good-bye” over my shoulder.

I want to run to the casket, pluck Stephanie out. Lift her up, hold her tight. Kiss her cheek. Whisper “I love you.” Never let her go.

The room aches. I have to believe I can still reach for her. Touch her. Just one small stroke of the hand. The urge is so strong.

Don’t, a voice inside hisses. Remember her when she was still warm and whole and loved you completely.

I press my fingers on the rim of the casket. Press hard. Press as close to her as I can. Hope the prints they leave will remain with her when the lid is closed and she is taken away forever.

“She looks peaceful,” my husband says. I can’t be sure, but accept these words, allow them to settle me.

“I wore this dress for you, Stephanie. The Ralph Lauren wrap. You saw me in it not too long ago. Said you liked it.”

Silence.

The adrenaline surges again, and I hurry on, urgent now, whisper words meant to flood the room.

“I wore my charm bracelet for you,” I say, jingling the silver charms grown tarnished over the years. “The one you always liked, wished you’d had your own back in high school. I’d like to share it from now on.”

Silence.

I reach into my bag, hold up a copy of Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. My insides swell. I feel taller, older, purposeful. This is what I am meant to do. Speak the healing words in this moment.

“I know how much you loved the poem; remember how you read it to me. I thought I could keep this copy on my bookshelf for you. Thought we could share it. Go on together; always find each other in that special place...”

*There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind.*

3.

“She would have loved the rabbi,” Susie attests, and the twenty of us, friends and family, Orthodox, Christian, Agnostic, gathered in Stephanie’s sunny living room after the service. I smile, nod vigorously.

“The perfect one,” I add. A feminist rabbi eager to point out that Stephanie had herself Bat Mitzvah-ed at age forty-three, wore purple at her wedding, kept a stash of dollar bills in the car ready to give one to anybody who asked.

I feel solidarity with the group; find it comforting to be held in the circle. To share memories and stories. To hear Judy, a friend from high school, Ben a cousin, Rodi, a sister-in-law, my own mother, voice the questions clogging my throat.

“How could she let her heart medication run out?”

“Why wouldn’t she listen to her cardiologist? Endocrinologist? Get her out of control thyroid taken care of?”

We shake our heads sadly, afraid to say what we are thinking. If only she had listened. Taken her meds. Maybe things would be different. Maybe she’d still be... Maybe...

All that we share, our connections to Stephanie, to each other, restores me and I feel a return to color and fullness.

Another round of hugs and the stories fly off our tongues. I laugh, feel light-hearted recounting the crazy things she said and did. How she used to say her teeth itched. How she stepped into the road when we were fourteen, held up her hand to an oncoming car and, with a big grin, started singing the Supremes hit, *STOP in the name of love*. Or in college when we were trying to go to a football game together. How the crowd surged at the gate separating us, and Stephanie shouted over her shoulder that she’d meet me at the seventy-yard line.

Susie takes a turn, tells about a time when the two of them were waiting to check out at Macy’s, no cashier in sight. The phone by the register rang and Stephanie reached across the counter. She picked it up, said in the most pleasant voice, “Hello... I’m a customer waiting for someone to come and ring up my purchases... About ten minutes or so... Thank you.” Hanging up the phone, Stephanie smiled and said “Someone will be right here.”

“She had such a dazzling smile,” my mother says. “So warm and

welcoming.”

“She was a butterfly,” Richard says.

“Tinkerbell,” Nancy says.

“A little bird,” I add.

“I’ll be your friend,” she had told each of us, and she had meant it.

We are all connected by the relief we feel that she had not died alone, all grateful that Marianne had been with her. We are relieved, too, that her suffering is over. We try again to comfort ourselves, agreeing that she had been through so much, the loss of her only child, a son dead at age 27. “So young,” we murmur. No one mentions the drug overdose. Then it was her father shortly after. Her husband a few years later. “On Valentine’s Day,” Susie says, ruefully. And just four months ago, Stephanie and her siblings buried their ninety-year old mother.

Everyone helps themselves to food, balances plates on their knees. In the lull, Marianne finds me and the two of us stand in the center of the sunny circle holding each other’s hands. This is the moment. She will give me the details of Stephanie’s last hours. Words that write the last chapter.

“They rushed her to the closest hospital, but the ER docs took one look at her heart and said it was too bad. They needed to send her to Sinai Hospital where there was a coronary intensive care unit.”

“When I got to Sinai,” Marianne continues, “she was tubed up, so many IVs and a full oxygen mask over her face. They started asking me questions about her medical history, wanted to know if the heart attack she suffered earlier that evening was her first. Stephanie woke up, contrary to the end, you know how she was.”

I suck my breath in, waiting to hear.

“Even through the oxygen mask, she blurted out ‘*It wasn’t a heart attack. I couldn’t breathe.*’ They wanted to know if she had an advanced directive,” Marianne says. “And again she woke up, and insisted ‘*I want to be resuscitated.*’”

“Those were her last words?” I need to be certain.

4.

I am about to jump out of my skin. The American Airlines terminal at BWI feels crowded on Monday, seems especially cacophonous, much too disconcerting for me. A blur of bag-rolling people, gray travelers darting in and out of shops and bathrooms, some with crying babies, all talking loudly on their phones. A burly guy bumps me, mutters “Sorry,” but it is the slap-slap of his flip flops I find disturbing. I need everyone to stop, quiet down. Show some reverence for the dead.

The place feels unsettled, frenetic as gate agents bark out their flights, some “inviting” military personnel or group three or five or all groups to

board. I am so far away from the quiet gathering in Stephanie's living room. Further away from the chapel. The rabbi's words clear and comforting just twenty-four hours ago have already decayed in the din. I hear only the announcements, more and more emphatic. "This is the last and final call for flight... Final call... Final..."

My husband and I find our gate, wait for group four to be called. We are headed home, but I prepare for the flight that will carry me further and further away from Stephanie.

We taxi, lift off, fly above the clouds and I feel the heaviness return, making it hard to breathe. I have had no sign from Stephanie, have not felt her spirit move in me, through me yet. She has been gone six days now and I worry she will not know where to find me.

I reach for my headphones, try to listen to an audio book. But the sentences jumble and words like "resuscitation," "regret," "suffering" float up. Dark clouds gathering in my ears. What do these words want from me? Perhaps they are to be collected, tucked in my basket of grief words.

We are three and a half hours into the flight, somewhere over Oklahoma, but my thoughts ride a tail wind back to Baltimore. I wonder what that last ambulance ride was like. Wonder if Stephanie knew what was happening to her. Marianne thinks she did. Told me Stephanie woke up one last time, looked around. Seemed to understand where she was, and then opened her eyes wide. Was that a moment of revelation? Reconciliation? Acceptance? Then Stephanie was gone. I loosen my seatbelt grown so tight. Hope with all my might Stephanie heard her sister say it was okay and that she loved her. Words I wish I had spoken.

I bite my lip remembering my fingerprints on the casket, how I waited for her to stir, maybe even smile when I recited Shel Silverstein's poem. But she was so still. Magical thinking, I realize now. Like Joan Didion's. What she describes in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a whole book of words about her grief following her husband's death. Her first words ringing with the clearest truth:

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

My husband watches the flight path on the screen in front of him, tells me we have crossed into California. I feel like I can't breathe, raise the window shade as if to... what? Get a breath of fresh air? See the state line below? Or is it to find Stephanie's moon-bird resting comfortably on the wing, cooling in the peppermint wind?

5.

I set the timer for twelve minutes, make it thirteen and march up the stairs, turn around at the top and march back down. Sixteen steps up, sixteen down. I have been doing this every morning for exercise since January 2018. I do it because I want to breathe hard; I want to feel my pulse throb, my heart pump. I do it to blast the plaque out of my arteries, to oxygenate my brain, to let my thoughts go and trust that the words, the fragments, bits of philosophy, a world view will come, float out of my body. I do it to stay strong.

In the winter and spring before she died, I climbed the stairs because Stephanie could not. I wanted my heart to get strong enough to beat for both of us. Hers was too damaged, the valves too impaired, the muscle too weak, the rhythm too irregular. I climbed because she could not and now she is gone.

The Sunday before she died, she had tried anyway. She wanted to get upstairs to her former bedroom to retrieve some clothes. She must have gone slowly, resting after each step. She climbed despite knowing it would exhaust her, knowing that she had run out of her prescription medications. Maybe she climbed because she wasn't thinking much at all.

July 22, 2018

See the thing about death is, you don't realize the memories you should be cherishing when you are making them. All the dinners at Ruby Tuesdays or the Olive Branch.

Her last journal entry is dated the day she made the fateful climb. Susie found the journal, gave me the words, the few lines to help me piece together what it was like for Stephanie in those last days, last weeks and months which encompassed her mother's death in March. The two had lived together, oldest daughter acting as care-giver for her senescent mother prone to falling. It was clear to Stephanie's four younger siblings that she was too sick to care for their frail mother. In early March, over my friend's objections, they put their mother in a skilled nursing facility nearby where she soon died.

Stephanie did not appear to grieve. But then again, she had not appeared to grieve when her son and her father and her husband died. Nor did she seem to grieve for herself when she suffered a near-death experience years earlier.

Her last journal entry says otherwise. The words tell me to run up and down the steps, run hard, breathe hard, gasp for air. They tell me I was wrong. She suffered and I must do penance. Work harder, work, sweat,

keep going.

I put on Mom's clothes today. They were a bit big, but they surrounded me and I could feel her warmth. Maybe I will feel better tomorrow.

Susie tells me she has committed these words to memory. And now, I must, too. Sixteen up, sixteen down. Say the words. Say them again sixteen times. Work them into my heart. Hear them in the wind, know they are safe in my basket. I will cherish my last visit to her Baltimore neighborhood and the lunch we shared at the Olive Branch. Maybe I will feel better tomorrow.

KATHARYN MACHAN

MAUVE STONE: REDWING, 1888

I walk out, when I am able.
Slowly, of course, the blossoming moss
seeming to welcome my cautious steps.
My strong cane is my companion
and I move in my loose shift
when no one can see, no one dares
tell me *Stop, Grandmother, stop.*
One day a thunderstorm came on fast
and I stood still so I wouldn't fall
and I swear I almost became
one of the trees in the garden.
Why should I force myself to stay
within safe curtained painted walls?
Death already holds my hand.
I ask no one's pardon.

JOE LUGARA

V569 (FAUX SPIRIT SERIES)



D. MICHAEL JONES

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS IN FROGTOWN, TENNESSEE

I am the Glenmarian priest at Saint Anthony's Missionary Catholic Church in Frogtown, Tennessee, and the killer of Cody Hinks. I killed him on December 27th, ten years ago this Christmas. His body was consecrated and given full Christian rites before I sank it into the deep waters of the Osserman Quarry, off Osserman Quarry Road. I know, too, his soul was troubled.

The murder was not a pure accident, but it was not planned. I went to his trailer; it was in the 40 Acre, where the holler ends and Black Mountain starts to rise in a sheer limestone cliff. I had a gun. It was a small gun, a revolver, which belonged to my mother—on that night I simply grabbed the gun and shoved it in the pocket of my heavy, down jacket.

We met on the front steps. Cody Hinks was a big man, over six feet, with wide shoulders and green eyes set back in his head. His hair was short on top and long in the back. I am a small man with pudgy arms. That week between Christmas and the New Year, there was a howling wind blowing through the holler. We never went inside his trailer. We argued on the front step. It got physical, and I shot him. I was drunk when I went over there, when he fell into his front yard with a bullet hole through his heart—I sobered up quick. I wrapped him in a plastic tarp we used as a moisture barrier under the church, and pulled, twisted, pushed, and drug him into the back of my Toyota. No one saw anything or heard anything. It was only the wild, cold wind that saved me.

I went there to confront Cody Hinks for what he did to my parishioner, Helena Guzman. Cody Hinks had run Helena's Kia Sephia off the gravel road and into a ditch. She bent a rim, broke a headlight, and popped a brand new tire. I'm the only Catholic priest in Frogtown, and Helena and Sammy Guzman came to me for help.

Frogtown is the second largest trailer park in the country, after Sun Valley in Nevada. There are 5,702 trailers, and over 9,000 people live here. The trailers, mostly from the late '80s, '90s, and 2000s are spread out, willy-nilly, through a wide holler in the Clinch Mountains, on the Tennessee and Kentucky border. It has its own post office, bars, a couple of delis, a taqueria and a pupusa place, two mechanics, and four churches: two Baptist, one Pentecostal, and one Catholic. It is broken into 250 "acres," though the signs and boundaries to these have long ago been run over or pulled up for scrap. It's mostly poor whites and immigrants from Mexico, though more and more are coming from Guatemala and El Salvador.

Helena and Sammy came to me because I spoke Spanish and helped fill out school forms, did some taxes, and helped deal with the DMV. Helena did all of the talking, some in English and some in Spanish. I knew her from Mass, but I had never seen Sammy in my life.

Helena hadn't been in Frogtown much longer than me. Naïve as I was, she seemed young, tender, humble, and—having spent years in seminary venerating the Blessed Virgin—holy. According to her, Sammy and Cody Hicks had worked on a job out-of-town together, putting in ductwork in strip-malls across Alabama and Mississippi. They'd been gone for about six weeks, and now Cody Hinks was refusing to pay Sammy all he was owed.

Then she started talking about her car wreck. She stood by the ditch and explained how Cody Hinks pulled beside her on the narrow gravel road, honking his horn, a huge American flag skull sticker in the rear window. Then she described how he used his jacked up 4x4 truck to push her into the ditch. That image made sense to me. I even added some nice details, like tobacco-stained teeth, confederate flags, and country music, when I was drinking alone that night. The rest of the story—that she and Cody had a deal, that the car was her bonus for putting Sammy and Cody together, that Sammy clearly wasn't her husband—I chose not to understand.

I know now that Helena had been a recruiter for people to work under-the-table. Small contractors, like Cody Hinks or women that ran house-cleaning businesses, came to Helena for workers, and she took a cut. The Kia Sephia was part of her pay, but Cody Hinks claimed she only got half the car, and she owed him the rest. He died over seven hundred dollars—it wasn't much of a car. Helena, of course, only wanted me to help settle a dispute. She never wanted me to kill Cody Hinks. I'm sure she couldn't imagine it—not enough machismo for that.

I wasn't raised Catholic, so for once the Church can't be blamed. In fact, some of my more ironic brethren think I'm a fanatic: that I bring a Southern Baptist's zeal to my pastoral duties. They don't understand that I was born into a world of macho, southern, cowboys, and jock tough guys. My world was never my home. I didn't like football games or guns. I have poor physical coordination and was born legally blind. I hated harsh words, nasty banter, and couldn't stand to fight. In Tennessee, when I was a boy, even if you were from a big brick house with a bright green yard, being weak wasn't tolerated. It's hard to believe that when I graduated high school, male teachers were still corporally punishing boys, yet they were.

I needed to stay quiet and keep my head down, and I was able to a lot of the time. But sometimes it wasn't enough, and the macho football players, deer hunters, tall basketball players, guys that kissed their girlfriends by their lockers, the Cody Hinks, rich and poor, reminded me I didn't belong

in the world I was born into. I got pushed around—pushed into cinderblock walls, spit on from behind, tripped, my pants pulled down. That’s why, when I was attacked in the locker room during my freshman year, I was able to pass it off as one of an infinite number of humiliations.

It wasn’t though; it was different. We were changing after gym, and there were a couple of seniors in my class. I remember them in their boxer shorts and acne-covered backs flicking each other in the groins and calling each other fag. I was already dressed, and they were blocking the locker-room door. I quietly asked if they would let me pass. They turned on me instantly.

They threw me face-down on the cold tile floor. They pulled my pants and tighty-whities down to my ankles. One of them had his knee in my back. One of them put his thumb or finger up my rectum. One of them grabbed my flaccid genitals and aped masturbation.

Then it was over, and they were off my back. Ten or more freshman boys saw it: some were friends, most I knew since elementary school. They were terrified, even the jocks and rednecks. They turned away, pulling on their jeans or stomping their feet into their sneakers.

I cried quietly to myself. They filed out with their heads down, and no one ever said a word. I never let myself think about it.

Until I started drinking whisky, and by then I had converted to Catholicism, finished college, and was in seminary. I started drinking it half as a joke and half as a desire to imitate one of our beloved teachers, Father Beasley, who ceremoniously took a decanter from a sideboard and poured two, rich mahogany glasses to increase the warmth of an intimate moment. I bought a couple pints in the hopes of recreating the meeting I had with Father Beasley after I got first in Church Latin. I poured some of the whiskey into a glass and choked it back, its fire racing down my throat and through my lungs.

Before I knew it, I had finished one of the pints and was deep into memories of that day in the locker room. For years it had only emerged in nightmares, but now I was back on the cold tile floor, their hot hands all over me. Then I started to fantasize about killing them. It felt so natural and soothing to imagine a sharp pencil clutched in my fist, turning fast on them and sticking the point of the pencil in their eyes or deep into the beating pulse of their necks. The next morning I was horrified and ashamed by my thinking and swore to never, never drink by myself again and to never drink to excess. But I did.

On the night I killed Cody Hinks I was drinking cheap whiskey and starting to slide into the fantasies of revenge that had become an obsession, something secret I stroked and nurtured through the night. I was going

over the climax of my fantasy, where I draw back the pencil—when suddenly, I took my down coat out of the closet and dug through my desk for my mother’s revolver.

The wind blew ruthless and wet from the dark sky. As I rushed toward the trailer Helena had pointed to as Cody’s, my mind played a confusing fantasy where Helena and me take revenge on Cody Hinks and the boy with the hot hands in the locker room.

I banged on his door, and he pulled it back. His broad shoulders filled the doorframe. A television with a laugh track was screaming from inside the trailer. It seemed like I was looking at him from inside a deep tunnel, and it hit me then how drunk I was. We argued about Helena, and he told me I didn’t know what I was talking about. I’m sure I called him a racist, a misogynist, and I know I called him white trash. I know because that was when he covered my face with his palm and pushed me back. It didn’t hurt me; all it did was twist my metal-framed glasses. The feeling of the glasses twisting on my face, pressed against my eyes, felt like a part of me had been mangled. I backed into the yard and remembered the gun. I screamed something that the howling wind stole right out of my mouth. He came down the short steps toward me, and I shot him.

I thought about turning myself in, but I couldn’t face the good ol’ boys at the sheriff’s office. I was so scared they were going to laugh in my face. I figured they would come to me eventually. A couple of days after New Year’s, a repo man came and took Cody’s big Dodge truck away. From the foggy windows of their trailers, everyone watched the wrecker roll slowly over the gravel road. The management company that ran the trailer park cleared out Cody Hinks’s belongings a week later—a cardboard dresser of jeans and t-shirts, a threadbare recliner, a huge TV, and a box full of model airplanes lovingly assembled—left on the front lawn for the January rain to pound down on for a whole weekend. One of the workmen, a parishioner, told me he hadn’t paid rent for three months. It was a familiar story in Frogtown: people came, and people ran away. “*¿Qué esperas de un pendejo así?*” Helena said to me. No one searched for him: no mother or brother or friend. Everyone forgot, except me. I stole a few things from the pile of garbage sitting in his yard. I captured tiny details from a few of his acquaintances, and I found him on social media.

I quit drinking and gave myself completely to intercession. I mortified myself in brutal prayer. I stayed on my knees for six hours a day and I fasted for weeks at a time. I began to feel we were two sides of a moment, flipping through the empty waste of time, in the black space between waking and sleep, now one side and now the other, but never, completely apart.

Two years later, I saw him walking barefoot along the ditch by the gravel

road in Frogtown. It was another beautiful, cool autumn day, in a year when the yellow and gold leaves glittered on the trees well past Thanksgiving, and people said it was the most beautiful fall they had seen in thirty years. He, of course, had not risen from the depths of Osserman Quarry. It was Cody Hinks's soul, a purgatorial soul, wandering in the ditch by the gravel road, the soles of his feet black with grime.

He wore a long, white polyester cloak and had a tinsel halo the color of gold on his big square head.

I pulled my Toyota beside the ditch. He kept marching, the long polyester cloak's hem dirty and frayed. I pulled forward and rolled down my window.

"Do you want a ride?" I asked.

He stopped and looked back. Then he shrugged and got in.

"Where're you going?" I asked him

"The trail to the quarry," he said.

I started driving toward the back of Frogtown, where the trailers end and the gravel road peters out into beaten grass and red clay. I parked at the edge of the tree line where the rising mountain slopes up. Cody got out, shut the door, and started walking—his gold tinsel crown glittering in the fall sunshine.

"Are you going up the trail?" I asked him.

He turned around and stared like he was again trying to remember who I was. "To the quarry," he said.

"I'll come with you," I said, running to catch up.

We walked in silence up the steep slope, following a narrow deer path. Leaves in the tall pointed oaks or in the delicate terraces of dogwoods swayed around us in a sunset of orange and yellows. They were framed by a perfect blue sky—from time to time, an individual leaf would catch the sun just right and glow like it was all alone, a single kite in the sky of deep blue on blue. As Cody crossed these bright patches, the sun cut through his cheap white polyester cloak, outlining the dark frame of his naked body. Up and up we went, slipping on wet leaves and holding to the prickly pine saplings.

I was out of breath when we finally stopped where the trail forks around four gray boulders bigger than cars. They're called the Big Rocks in Frogtown, and around them were rusted beer cans, cigarette packs, old tins, some dirty blankets. A few feet off the trail, Cody stood before a dead blackberry bush, his head bowed as if he were in mourning for it.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you, Mr. Hinks." But he didn't turn around. So I said, "Cody! I'm sorry for what I did."

He pulled himself away from the blackberry bush and stared at me again

Then he nodded his head.

He took the path that led across the mountain to the Osserman Quarry. Thankfully, the trail across the mountain was not so steep. I followed the dirty soles of Cody's bare feet through a grove of pine, a muddy creek bottom, and a few dead trees to the stone edge of the vast limestone quarry.

Like a staircase for a giant, the mining had left huge stone steps that fell, sheer step after sheer step, to shimmering clear water, reflecting the cloudless blue of the sky. I had never seen the quarry from the cliffs, only from the water's edge. It was rapturous, the white stone cliffs and the mirror of blue water. Cody didn't notice the view, but again mournfully handled the copper nettles of a few dead pine saplings, then started off around the rim. Barefoot, he danced across the rim at a frightening speed. I let him pass out of sight for the first time.

I knew he was going to the ofrendas I had built in a clearing a few feet back from the rim of the quarry by the parking lot. The altar was edged in brick and covered with gravel; there was a small cross and some fading prayer cards of St. Nicholas of Tolentino. There was his P-51 Mustang model and a University of Florida Gators Fan sign I took from his front yard. Just yesterday, I added a bottle of gin, his favorite, and fresh marigolds to celebrate All Souls. Cody's ofrendas was in a nice spot, looking through a windowpane of fall leaves to the blue water of the quarry.

I found him sitting quietly beside it, his legs folded underneath him. "I left my father behind," he said. "He's still so angry. He thinks everyone's making fun of him, so he goes after them for nothing. Then they go after him, on and on. I had to leave him behind. I didn't know how much anger I had in me. Feels like thousands and thousands of years' worth, and I don't know how it got there."

We sat a while longer and then I told him I had to go. There was going to be a costume party, face painting, and carnival rides tonight; we were raising money for a free dentist day in Frogtown. The congregation would be waiting for me.

He never answered, so I started the long hike back down the mountain.

LIZ TUCKER

IF HE HAD, HE WOULD

Luis woke early. Cold and thirsty. His little boy eyes were glued shut with a thick crust of sleep, the way it does when you spend days and nights out in the desert with the wind whipping devil's dust all around you. The way it does when *la conjunctivitis* grabs hold and cements your eyelids together. The way it did to his mother's cousin who went blind because of it.

Then mad.

Luis rolled out from under his mother's arm—slipping away like water from a hose.

Careful not to wake her.

Careful not to make her go mad.

He grabbed a fistful of dirt and rubbed his eyes, loosening the dried gunk that stuck to his long, black eyelashes—the lashes of his great, great grandfather. The lashes of the most famous mariachi singer in all of Guerrero. The lashes of the man who was shot between the eyes for failing simply to take off his hat when the Governor's wife walked by.

Luis's eyes broke open.

Outside it was still dark.

The sliver of the moon had sunk towards the horizon. The constellations had dipped towards day. And somewhere out there behind the giant Saguaros, a pack of coyotes screamed like naughty children being whipped. Not the Coyotes that Mama had paid her life savings to—the men who boxed Luis in the ear when he complained that he was hungry, the men that grabbed at his mother's blouse, ripping it at the shoulder and returning her hot, red with tears, and cold blue with shame—but the desert dogs whose huffs and yelps and cries bounced off the hillsides in long, tireless echoes like that of an air raid. The dogs that followed the group of them, eyeing them on their trip north.

Luis could not see the coyotes, but he knew they were close; close enough that he was sure the pack could smell the lot of them—their collective sweat, their unwashed breath, their soiled underwear—as they all lay huddled in a half moon on the hard desert floor.

Next to Luis, Mama lay still; hardly a breath detected.

There had been many mornings when Luis was not so convinced. Many mornings, he'd shake his mother awake.

“No, Mama,” he'd scream, certain his Mama had passed in the night.

“Mama, wake up!”

The others in the half moon would roll over and throw rocks at Luis.

“Shut up!”

But Luis wouldn't stop.

He couldn't.

“Mama, please. Come back!” He'd lean into her ear, desperate to pull the wake out of her, terrified she had left him in the middle of the night like his *Abuelita* who had fallen asleep last January and never woke again.

“Mama, please.”

Most mornings, Mama's eyes would pop open. She would kiss Luis on the cheek and then hold him to her chest and tell him she had only been dreaming of floating in the flat ocean or on a lake on the moon. Sometimes, she would be floating in the sky looking down on him. Luis would lay on top of her so he could float up and down on the waves of her breath until the beat of his own heart slowed down to match hers.

But not today. Out in the sea of the desert, Luis did not shake his mother awake, nor did he climb upon her chest and float upon her sea. He left her be. Wading in the deep waters of her sleep.

His Mama was not dead.

Just dead asleep.

He knew this by the strands of hair that were draped over her lip like a thin mustache and fluttered with each exhale.

If he were back home, Luis would have poked his Mama awake, laughing his hyena laugh, the laugh of the man with the same long black lashes, now buried six feet deep for keeping his black hat on.

Why, if he were back at home, Luis would have grabbed Mama's hand mirror and held it to her face as she wiped the sleep from her dream-filled eyes.

Look, Mama. You grew a mustache in the night.

But Luis didn't dare wake her. Not today.

Mama was not just dead asleep.

She was also dead tired.

The kind of tired that holds you down and buries you after months of hot rides in the back of a pick-up truck with a black tarp trapping you underneath, months of being holed up in crummy old houses or wet culverts with dirty old rats nibbling at your ears.

Months of walking on the dry-cracked earth or under the white cold of night.

Months that made you age in no time at all.

Why, when Luis and his mother left home, he was just a silly boy who played baseball in the streets, a boy who proudly wore his Dodger blue

cap backwards, squatting behind a hubcap that was the designated home plate, and fingering calls to his best friend who stood on the mound. His best friend who shook his head and blew enormous pink bubbles of gum, letting them pop and blown up again, until Luis gave him the call he liked best.

Fastball to the outside 1-3.

Luis liked making the calls, even if his best friend shook him off.

Blow. Pop. Shake.

1-3. Always a fastball to the outside.

Never a changeup, to the inside or out.

And never a curveball.

1-3.

Blow. Pop. Nod.

But out here, Luis was no longer a little boy, playing pick-up games out in the street with the other neighborhood boys, or sending signals to his best friend who had one and only one in mind.

Out here, Luis was made to be a man, even if he was trapped in his little boy body still wearing worn-out underwear with pictures of race cars and an elastic waistband that was no longer elastic, but floppy. A little boy whose palms were no bigger than the size of a goat's heart.

And Mama.

She was so much older too. Not Abuelita old. Just a strange kind of old like she'd been made up for the movies like she had the occasion to do back home. Dirt stuck into the creases around her mouth; her long black hair was clumped to the back of her head like horns. Her once-blue denim shirt was now dirty brown and torn at the shoulder.

The glass of her eyes lost.

Yet, she was still beautiful—the most beautiful Mama in the world, Luis was sure of it.

And had he a clean white sheet fresh from the line, he would have laid it over her shoulders and kissed her.

Had he had an egg; he would have boiled it for her.

Had he had a book; he would have read to her.

He would have given just about anything to his mother.

But he had nothing.

Nothing but the most terrible of thirsts in his fire-hot throat, a thirst that sometimes sent his eyes rolling back into darkness. The kind of thirst that, if he wasn't careful, could blind him from finding the small hole cut in the fence.

HARRY MOORE

A NEW EARTH: 1955

for Rosa Parks

After our pale fingers, and fingers
darker than our own, plucked the cotton
from the burrs, the stalks weathered

in the fields, through frost, freeze, thaw—
through hog-killing, roaring fireplaces,
cured ham, salted fatback, squirrels shot

from leafless hickories for pots of dumplings.
Then, in soggy, glaring, cold, windy March,
the massive stalk-cutter—a two-foot-thick

poplar log with rusty iron blades
along its length—rolled and bumped
behind mules along the cotton rows,

smashing stalks into segments, chopping
withered persley, crabgrass, bull nettle,
cleaving earth, marking the field for fire,

flames spreading before a stiff breeze,
eating through stalks and dried grass,
pungent smoke rising toward some cosmic

conflagration St. Peter told us would
come, countryside and sky in flames,
a judgment settling all accounts, purging

tares, sawbriers, maypop vines, bitterweed,
tenacious bermuda, clearing the soil of clutter,
like gold cleansed of alloy, nothing left

but goodwill, courage, and kindness to all
alike—a new heaven and new earth—making
way for the steelbeam turning plow to rip

through ash, fling up the soil's dark underside
rich with promise for a new planting, for
a harvest like none we'd ever known.

JOHN DORROH

UNCLE SHERMAN'S LAMENT

If you'd been my daughter, I would
have given you a chemistry set and watch
you follow the instructions for two or three experiments,
then toss the guidelines to the side,
wondering "what if" and "how come." You never liked
the confines of a box, which would have smothered
you in less time that it takes to build a miniature atom bomb.

You wondered how to use the soap scum
from bathroom sink drains to repurpose a life
of demands and expectations into something more fitting,
a teenage girl dissecting the guts of the exposed plumbing,
twisting white plastic pipes bare-handed, placing the pasta
pot in the perfect spot, the backed-up water whooshing past
her wrists in one disgusting wave of afterbirth.

Prom dresses are good for covering
under-construction fire pits while dark banks of serious
clouds form along the western horizon; for making
no announcements that you can't attend, staying home
with your grandfather to finish that 1000-piece puzzle, its picture
on the box top of Old Havana in 1963; for using as old paint rags
out near the barn.

If you had been my daughter, I would
have given you options and let you choose which pieces
of the puzzle you thought you needed next. But it seems
you've figured it out, painted a picture so bold and beautiful
that it gives me goosebumps just to look your way.

CHRISTOPHER PAUL BROWN

FAUX REVOLUTIONARY POSTER



CREATIVE NONFICTION

STACY ALLANA CLARK

LANGUAGES WE UNDERSTAND

It is another summer sunset and the trees are still and waiting. Amber fingers of sunlight trace the outline of my shadow. The dog pants in the dull, broken grass, the yard spreading bare and rocky beneath her. We watch the house turn to ash, and the fence grows teeth in the darkening sky.

Another summer night and the rains are gone, leaving dusty earth and nervous humans to worry. This fear is foreign to me, an East Coast transplant in the dry land-scapes of the West. My childhood was full of moody skies and shouting family, and I am unnerved by the silence of the pine trees, parched and resting in the weary soil.

The forest breathes out, a mourning dove calls to her children; the evening waits, like an intake of breath with no release. Kieko—the dog—stands up, stretching her hind legs behind her as she rises. Time to go inside, so I mix another drink to keep the night at bay, turn on the fan to mute the darkness. When I sit down at the table, Kieko puts herself at my feet and I am grateful. I trace lines across her fur with my toes and she watches the door with eyes half shut.

My partner Derek is away, so for this week the dog and I are a peerless set of queens. Our small dominion is bright and safe; a splash of light in the sleeping forest. I close the door against the thickening frenzy of insects who are searching for a way out of the night. With moonrise come hordes of moths, throwing their bodies frantically against the screens. I turn up the fan to drown out their hysterical flight.

We climb into bed, our bodies sprawling across the space where Derek's shape belongs. The nights are mine and I waste them. A headache slouches in the corner of my eyes. I tell myself to go to sleep, but my bladder kicks and whines until I get up and go outside, crouching to pee in the moonlit yard.

Back in bed and a line of ants has turned the windowsill into a highway. I squash them with my thumb, apologizing for murder until I can no longer forgive myself. The ants march ahead, undeterred by their brothers' and sisters' corpses staining the path. I turn away and practice staying still. Heat draws lines of sweat between my legs and I kick the blankets to the bottom of the bed.

Kieko licks my arm and sighs into my armpit. I love you, I tell the wisps

of fur behind her ears. We drift into the night, the moon singing to the stars in a language I do not understand.

We are losing a battle with the wasps.

The day is here, brilliant light pouring across the yellowing grass and bouncing off the tree trunks. I sit at the kitchen table and look out the window. The glass separates me from the warmth. I open the front door to be closer to the morning.

Immediately, a wasp charges through, wings drumming to the tune of conquest. I duck my head and run backwards, quickly slamming the door. The wasp throws its body against the window; the glass is a prison and no one is safe. Kieko finds all four feet and runs to my rescue, a soft growl to match the hum of her nemesis.

The wasp bangs against another window and I fan a ceramic plate in defense, making the air into waves. We stand in the kitchen and watch the movements of this sharp body, a dangerous being that is smaller than my pinky finger. The wasp turns sharply and swoops down at our heads, and Kieko snaps at the air.

No! You don't want to eat this, I tell her. She turns and runs up to the top of the stairs to watch.

I open the door just slightly. Go, go, go, I say to the wasp, but the wasp does not understand, and continues to crash against the glass that separates us from the day. Go, go, go, and the wasp is too frantic, and I cannot explain.

I wave my plate and Kieko gives a sharp bark and the wasp miraculously finds the open door and disappears.

Relief. We return to our previous positions, my body seated at the kitchen table, looking out the window, furry body curled at my feet. Five minutes later and I cannot resist the temptation of sunlight and I open the front door.

Instantly, a wasp is inside, and we are at war again.

The ground is beyond exhausted today. Weeds limp against the heat of the sun, and a layer of dust coats the base of every tree in the forest. I sit with my back against the sky, feet tapping in the dirt as I wait. A car hurtles itself down the road, leaving stories of dust in the air. Kieko picks her chin up off her paws for a moment; not him. Not yet.

A mourning dove coos her regret to the evening sky. Clouds wave between the branches above us but I keep my hands in my lap tracing the years I wear on my palms.

I ask Kieko if she knows when he will be home. She doesn't. I ask her if she knows how to fix the plumbing, because I am sure I'm doing nothing right. I ask her if she can make the rain come back and whether the sky can hear our pleas for moisture.

But she does not understand, and the sky cannot answer, and the tired earth tells me that we are little more than dry, heaving breaths in this landscape of lonely trees.

Derek and I watch each other over dinner plates. He smiles and his hair celebrates being back home by standing up in every direction. I show him a new train of ants, hauling the vacant body of a moth across the floor. We watch them work and agree, once again, that humans have a long way to go.

I consider doing the dishes, but the unenthusiastic trickle of water coming out of the sink is cold, so I find the arms of my human and put them around me. We dance in lazy circles and Kieko sleeps at the bottom of the stairs, an endless conga-line of ants at our feet as the moths clamor at the door. The wasps have gone to bed and the mourning dove has turned in, leaving the owls and coyotes to start their shift.

The minutes slide into the darkness and I tell Derek that we should name the spider that lives on the window over the kitchen table.

Yeah? What's her name going to be?

I'm not sure, but she lives here. He nods and we throw moth corpses into her web. She comes out and looks around, her legs moving frighteningly quickly, but she doesn't acknowledge our gifts.

Oh well. We use our fingers to pick the pans clean and leave the mess for tomorrow. The spider has gone back to bed and left the dead bugs hanging in her web. Maybe she will feel hungry in the morning.

The space heater works to keep the cabin warm, and our eyes start to soften, smiles blurring as we press kisses on each other's cheeks. He is tired, he says. It is so good to be home, and we pull the dog onto our laps for belly rubs. She lets us love her, sleepy and content in our arms. A queen, basking in the adoration of her subjects.

Derek puts himself into our bed and I slip outside into the night. Kieko double-checks the yard and the air gnaws at my bare skin, urging us to retreat. Instead, I press myself against the darkness and feel the night press

back, wrapping me in an embrace I cannot see. Kieko stands beside me as the coyotes share tall tales and although I do not understand, we stay and listen.

So this is morning. Or maybe afternoon already. But either way, we are up and outside, moving things around the yard and feigning productivity. Kieko is outside with us, moving her paws through the dirt and watching her humans.

That's when it happens.

No! He is shouting at the dog.

I run toward her. She holds one wing in her teeth, shaking the dove through the air, the bird's eyes roving wildly. Small, soft feathers spiral gently.

No! I cry, but it is too late for this word.

The bird flies out of her mouth like a sandbag in a game of corn hole, body thunk-ing against the ground with a terrible heft. The wing bones stick out into the sunlight, the tendons of arm bright and bloody against downy green feathers. I shout: No!

Kieko runs into the house, not understanding that the killing was what we were bothered by, that we didn't want the bird to be dead; not understanding our human-people sentiments with her animal-people thoughts.

The bird bleeds against the ground and we shake our heads at each other.

She didn't know. Dogs don't know.

Now the bird flaps, broken and dying, letting out gentle coos. I turn my head away and Derek picks up a plank of wood.

No, I plead.

I'm sorry, he says. I have to— the bird is— suffering.

No, I repeat. Kieko whines from inside; she does not understand.

The bird blinks at the stick and drags the broken wing through the dirt.

He picks up the wood and I turn away. One whack, two, and again, and finally it is over. We take the body into the woods and cover it with leaves; a present for lonely coyotes. The bird looks away from us, feathers sending sparkles of purples and greens across the orange forest floor.

We walk to the house, open the door, and Kieko comes back outside to sniff the killing site.

It's your fault, I say to her, but she does not understand.

I forgive you, I say to her, but she does not understand.

Come here, I say to her, and she kisses my knee and it is over.

BENJAMIN SHALVA

SOTA

Eve sat in the synagogue library. She was not a Jew, but she knew enough, had watched her father-in-law claw the challah, tearing her the largest chunk and tossing it to her, a twinkle in his eye. His son, her husband, took no interest. He slapped on a garish kippah and sneered. But she ate and it was unlike any wafer. It was thick and sticky and rained poppy seeds.

After the divorce, she met with the rabbi.

“You are not a Jew,” the rabbi said. “There is nothing required.”

“Am I no longer welcome?”

“God forbid,” he said. “This is your home as much as mine.”

She wept and did not return for many months. Then, one Friday afternoon, she fell asleep on her couch, awoke, and lit candles alone. The following morning, she sat in the synagogue library surrounded by old men in suits and old ladies nibbling cake. The rabbi entered. He opened his book and read. Hands shot up. The conversation veered and fumed. Eve followed well enough. The sota, the suspected adulteress, is compelled to drink—a dusty potion, God’s Name inscribed and dissolved. If guilty, her belly distends. Death by bloating. If innocent, the waters pass, free and clear.

“Where, in all this, is forgiveness?” Eve asked.

The shouting men paused. Bushy eyebrows danced. The women nibbled and grinned.

“Forgiveness,” the rabbi replied. “There is none.”

“But water is water,” Eve said. “Ink is ink and dust is dust. Guilty or not, the wife would survive.”

The rabbi smiled.

“It is a cruel ritual,” a man behind Eve growled. He had said this once already. “Forgive me, rabbi, but it is cruel and absurd.”

Eve agreed. But, after the class adjourned and the group shuffled to the sanctuary, Eve slipped out a side door and hurried to her car. She dug in her purse, came up with an old receipt and a pen. She pressed the receipt blank side up on her thigh and copied, best she could, God’s Name. Then she rolled the receipt and plunged it into a half-empty bottle of seltzer. She lifted the bottle to her lips and closed her eyes and chugged and felt day-old fizz tickle her nose. Of course, she knew she was not a Jew. But all the same, how sweet—the seltzer’s tang and God’s holy Name, this potion, this jealous poison, triggering no worse than a belch. Forgiveness, finally, for her ancient mistake—her survival, this morning, the proof.

TAYLOR TUCKER

BONES

I climbed the tallest tree to escape my haunted scapulae
and found them resting, clothed in feathers, at the summit.

She sung of the mineral pain working its way
through each calcified building block

of her vertebrae, even as sharp new tendrils took root
in fresh geography. In the end, neither she nor I

could dis sever from ourselves; fossils crush under stone, not spirit.
But from the safety of my perch,

I let the wind remove my gloom-colored glasses
that I might gaze naked at the starry sky,

spot that whitest jetsam sprung
from magnificent celestial bodies, and understand how fundamental

is the frame to the image. On stark X-rays, nested
within a spectral grey of tissue, bones shine the brightest.

ABIGAIL DIAZ

AND YET THE LIGHT

and yet
the light. it's not the tightening of the collar, it's the hand that
tightens. when i was a child my heart was
bigger than the sky,
kinder than the
big white dog down the block. the sun was a golden cannon. my mother
was eternal, paying rent
to live under the
floorboards of my mind.
now things are parallel-universe
out of place. the big white dog lives
in the ground. the home of tireless summer has weeds in the yard and
broken windows, and my mother, an
end to infinity, has left my mind
silent.

i know everything
has its nightfall. toy soldiers slow their march, fall still,
rust on the shelf.
i know, but when i was a child there were no
stop signs and the streets were
fields and i
ran, a compact, well-oiled
machine. when i was a child, i was the
spotlight to my own stage, the rider to my own sweet
pony.

i know, and have always known, that
god is up there somewhere, shining his spotlight down on me, on my
heart like a
patched-up coat. *you could*
make things easy, he says. *you could crawl under a porch to die, be*

food for plants. and i could. i
could.
and yet,
the light.

MARTIN WILEY

SO BASE A HUE?

Hidden to survive, there is death in my blood.

There is no simplicity in people like me,
no people like me,
too many people in me.
The sins of my father end in me.

I have no choice but to explain
to my own children how mixed skin
is a pre-existing condition,

& I can tell them that they deserve better &
that we should have been better. I fed
myself on Aaron's rage, I feared
myself in Sethe's grief, but you both

will write your own pages, new songs meant to be sung
not shouted. Your presence altered
my existence—drag me to the altar
of Mount Moriah & I know now
which way my knife would point. Pray

to the devils; the gods have given us over. They wanted this & I
have brought you unknowing to a world that will
question your beauty, that will
mock your resolve, that will
burn
before admitting you've won. It does not deserve you
& I cannot let myself wonder if I've failed you by making you.

The echoes of trauma stay deafening but somehow my fury
did not become hate, did not crawl
inside & eat through the bones on its way out.
Somehow I found my glory & somehow
that was enough & now I no longer understand how blood
spills its own blood. I fight to wake

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from nightmares of looking for myself in a mirror & seeing only
my birth father's Black fingers stained red. But those
aren't my knuckles,
& that isn't my fist. The rage
remains, though, and the hands are clenched—always.

Tell America from me, I am of age
to keep mine own, excuse it how she can.

My son's eyes

My son's eyes
at six years old are wide, wide like
rivers and wide like
singing woods at dawn,

and they blossom, they blossom like
sunflowers shimmering in early morning's dew,

they dance, they dance because they are,
because they are sparkling comets gleefully
traveling lightyears just for a chance
to gently kiss your smile, your heart.

They are
joyous volcanoes, they are
joyous volcanoes overflowing and melting
everything they see.

They are brown, they are the color
of my soul, they are brown and they are alive

and I
have to search inside his eyes,
I have to study, I have to
watch,
watch for that ticking, for that twisting,

for that silent unmarked shifting,
for that moment when
this world no longer notes
the soft brown tones in his eyes,
only the angry brown tones on his skin.

VANESSA COMPTON

PASSAGE



UN PAYS SANS FRONTIÈRES



VAUGHN HAYES

THE CRUCIFIXION OF A SUMMER SQUIRREL

A Suburban Sketch

Now here helpless in the chill of a hollow spring I give remembrance. Let us conjure up the cut of the boy who stole my neighbor's new Ford, so out of place in our sated neighborhood—his dirty denim disclosing gray briefs, his tunic too gaudy for another Tuesday sunup, communion from the evening prior still clinging to his chin. I looked up at the eternal firmament and wondered whether he could smell my surfeit through the screened window. No, he only lifted his drawn body on high—a new life—hands glued to the stolen steering, foot keen on the gas, and climbed the rising road toward a faraway sun who died too long ago.

I admit my ambivalence was less than noble; I did nothing to prevent him. I might have been a speck—endless and helpless—of the very chair I was in. But you weren't there, Iscariot, you don't know: the owner of that truck once splayed the little limbs of a bluegrass rat and hammered him holy to the oak, that time my wife and I took what action we could. But the lawman said there was nothing to do, no evidence—just some rusty nails and a quiet sneer.

Though the culprit was never found, the cool blue boys hauled his truck back three days later. They told us not to worry, hell too is far away — it's the place from where the soiled boy had come. But when I replied that the devil's work is naught but unresolved repetition, no one spoke. I'll never forget the little sounds.

LIZ DEGREGORIO

THE LAND OF VETIVER AND NAG CHAMPA

Of all the memories we have, the one I like the best is us curled up like kittens (naked, sexy kittens) during an autumn nap. It is notable that the memory I like to revisit is the one where you are quiet, at peace. Not flirting; not proselytizing; ensuring that everyone in the room knew you were the smartest one there (and you were!) – and remembered you, although the impression you made wasn't often what you had aimed for. I remember how I untangled myself softly, and I couldn't believe how great your bathroom smelled – clean green hippie princess, vetiver and nag champa forever in the apartment. There was a shrine to me in the corner, but I did not know this yet. It was right in front of me every time I saw you, but sometimes you need distance to see love clearly.

CONTRIBUTORS

AMANDA MARIE AARDSE is an emerging writer who lives in Waterloo, Ontario with her husband, toddler, and pleasantly round cat. She is the third generation in her family's custom woodworking business. Her work has been published by *Marathon Lit Review* and is forthcoming in *Manifest-Station*. She has spent her days riddled with nail biting anxiety and has nothing but a beautiful life to show for it.

C.B. ADAMS, MFA in writing, is a fine art photographer, beekeeper, and writer whose fiction has appeared in *Zoetrope All Story Extra*, *River Styx* (twice), *Elder Mountain: A Journal of Ozarks Studies*, *Conclave 2021* (forthcoming), *bluntly*, *Thoughtful Dog*, *The Distillery Artistic Spirits of the South*, and elsewhere. Adams has received the Missouri Arts Council's two highest writing awards, the Writers's Biennial and Missouri Writing!. The independent weekly Riverfront Times newspaper named Adams "St. Louis' Most Under-Appreciated Writer."

MARGARET EMMA BRANDL'S writing has appeared in journals such as *Gulf Coast*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Cartridge Lit*, and *CHEAP POP*. She began writing to Walt Whitman during undergrad at the University of Alabama, completed an MFA at the University of Notre Dame, and earned her PhD at Texas Tech University. She is an assistant Professor of English at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, where she teaches creative writing workshops and courses in contemporary literature.

CHRISTOPHER PAUL BROWN is known for his exploration of the unconscious and the serendipitous. His eleven-image series "Abandon" is the focus of the *Dek Unu Magazine's* November issue. This year, his work has appeared in twelve magazines, periodicals, catalogs, and one hardcover book. Besides the arts, his other passion is fatherhood. He has been raising children for 41 years and is father to five. Brown was born in Dubuque, Iowa, and now resides in North Carolina after living fifty years in the far suburbs of Chicago. He earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980.

BETH BURGMEYER writes fiction and creative nonfiction. Beth is passionate about raising mental health awareness and erasing the stigma surrounding mental illness. Her work has appeared in *Bending Genres* and *Please See Me*. Beth received first place in the 2018 CIBA Somerset Awards for Literary and Contemporary Fiction. She was also a finalist in the 2019 William Faulkner-William Wisdom Contest and *Sequestrum's* 2018 New Writer Award. Beth lives near Des Moines, Iowa with her family and a menagerie of rescue animals.

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STACY ALLANA CLARK is an environmentalist with a deep affection for stories. Clark lives with her partner and dog in their tiny house, also lovingly known as The Shed on Wheels, deep in the forest of Flagstaff, AZ. She is thrilled to be a current MFA Candidate in Creative Writing at Northern Arizona University. Her writing is deeply influenced by both landscape and community and her work can be found in journals such as *Barrio Beat* and *Ponder Review*. Clark teaches creative writing and composition, and enjoys her role as the nonfiction editor of *Thin Air Magazine*.

Considering the ways in which her personal story is informed by a historical narrative of settler-colonialism, institutionalized racism, and normalized toxic masculinity, **VANESSA COMPTON'S** most recent collages address themes of social justice through the lenses of her own gender identity, whiteness, and implicit personal privilege. She has been awarded fellowships from the Wallace Stegner House, The Brinton Museum, Vermont Studio Center, Hubbell Trading Post & National Historic Site, The Brush Creek foundation, and Jentel Arts. For many years, Vanessa maintained a life of migration, creating art throughout the American West. She currently lives in Burlington, VT with her family.

ROB COOK lives in New York City's East Village. He is the author of six collections, including *Asking my Liver for Forgiveness* (Rain Mountain Press, 2015), *Blueprints for a Genocide* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2012) and *Empire in the Shade of a Grass Blade* (Bitter Oleander Press, 2013). His recently re-released *Last Window in the Punk Hotel* was a Julie Suk Award finalist. Work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Caliban*, *Fence*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Zoland Poetry*, *Tampa Review*, *Minnesota Review*, *Aufgabe*, *Caketrain*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Bomb* (online), *Sugar House Review*, *Mudfish*, *Pleiades*, *Versal*, *Weave*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Ur Vox*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Phantom Drift*, *Osiris*, etc.

Born in Sydney, **ANDREW COOKS** is a painter and moved to New York City in 2001. Collectively titled *Between Shadow and Memory*, he has been exhibiting since 1978 in Australia, Europe, Asia, and USA, as well as teaching in academic and community settings in Australia, USA, and Europe since 1982. In 2014, Cooks completed a practice-led PhD titled *A Ramble Through the Paradoxes of Space* which examines his behavior in real and pictorial space. He currently teaches Humanities at New York City's School of Visual Arts and recently designed and built his own live/work-space in upstate New York. www.andrew-cooks.com

LIZ DEGREGORIO is a writer and editor living in New York City. Her poems have been published in *Crack the Spine's* anthology *Neighbors*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *Gravitas*, *The Tulane Review*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *Riva Collective's Chunk Lit* and *In Parentheses*. Three of her poems were included in Blu(e) Publishing's anthology *SMITTEN*, which was a National Indie Excellence Awards finalist. Her flash fiction has appeared in **82 Review*, *Ruminate Magazine* and *Two Sisters*, and she's had fiction published in *BUST Magazine*.

ADEET DESHMUKH is a New York City based photo editor, photographer, and designer. His images capture the interplay between light/shadow and emotion/composition—in the streets of Manhattan and Mumbai, in the faces of family and strangers, and in the fields of Iceland and the Midwest. Adeet has had shows in Chicago and New York, and his work has appeared in various print publications. Most recently, his photography was featured in a group show at the CUSP Gallery in Provincetown.

DOMINIQUE DÈVE is a French portrait painter. His expressionist/figurative style allows him to take part in exhibitions in Paris, Zurich, Athens, Los Angeles, New Delhi, Sheffield, and many more. As illustrator, you can see his works in various Literary and Art reviews (*The Moving Force Journal*, *Punt Volat*, *Whitefish Review*, *Inklette Review*, *Metonym Journal*, *Brushfire*, *The Closed Eye Open...*). A new interview will be published soon in *Altiba9 Art Magazine* (Barcelona, Algiers).

ABIGAIL DIAZ is an author of poetry and fiction. She has been published in the *Esthetic Apostle*, *The Blue Marble Review*, and the San Antonio Public Library 2019's *Young Pegasus Anthology*, among other publications. She is currently an English major at Texas State University with hopes of publishing poetry and fiction full-time.

JOHN DORROH'S poetry has appeared in about 60-70 journals, including *Feral*, *Dime Show Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Selcouth Station*, and *Red Fez*. He also writes short fiction and the occasional rant.

After having taught middle and high school English for 32 years, **MARIANNE FORMAN** is now nurturing her own creative spirit. She has spent three summers in Guizhou Province, teaching best practices to teachers in China. She received Fulbright-Hays Awards to Nepal (2003) and Turkey (2009). Marianne participated in Marge Piercy's Juried Intensive Poetry Workshop (2016). Marianne's poetry appears in *Muddy River Poetry*, *Belle Reve Literary Journal*, *Jelly Bucket Journal*, among others.

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She has a collection of poetry forthcoming in 2020 from *Shadelandhouse Modern Press*.

MARGARET ELYSIA GARCIA is the author of the short story e-book collection *Sad Girls and Other Stories*, the audiobook *Mary of the Chance Encounters*, and the co-founder and lead playwright of Las Pachucas, theatrical troupe. She teaches creative writing and theatre in a California state prison and is a staff reporter for Plumas News. She loves writing about her family; they don't love it nearly as much.

Raised simultaneously by David Bowie and Virginia Woolf, NATASCHA GRAHAM lives with her American wife on the East Coast of England where she writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and for stage and screen. Her play, *How She Kills*, has been selected by Pinewood Studios and Lift-Off Sessions as part of their First Time Filmmakers Festival 2020. Her poetry, fiction, and non-fiction have been previously published by *Acumen*, *Litro*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Yahoo News*, and *The Mighty*.

L. MARI HARRIS'S most recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *(mac)ro(mic)*, *Bandit Lit*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Tiny Molecules*, *Trampset*, *Bending Genres*, among others. She lives in central Missouri. Follow her on Twitter @LMariHarris and read more of her work at www.lmariharris.wordpress.com.

VAUGHN HAYES is a poet and writer living and learning in central Kentucky. His work has appeared in *Thimble Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, and elsewhere. His habits including hiking, running, and shaming his friends for their smartphone use, but words are his whole world.

In a past century HEIKKI HUOTARI attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. He's a retired math professor, has won two poetry chapbook prizes and published three collections, the most recent being *The Dog's Meow*, Uncollected Press, 2019.

CAROL JEFFERS is an emeritus professor, Cal State LA, glad to leave academic writing behind to pursue a new, revitalizing career in creative writing. Currently, she is exploring the deeper meanings of friendship, loss, and resilience. She has published *The Question of Empathy: Searching for the Essence of Humanity*. Her work has appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Wordgathering*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Connotation Press*, *Entropy*, and *Wild Roof*, and has received an honorable mention in

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MARY DONNET JOHNSON'S plays have been recognized by the Eugene O'Neill National Playwright's Conference (semi-finalist), and the Kentucky Women Writers' Conference (finalist). Her plays have been produced at various venues in Nashville and she is a regular contributor to *Nashville Story Garden* and *Pipeline Collective's Salon* at Studio Tenn. She's passionate about illuminating inspiring women in history through a lens of comedic magical realism, and her commissioned works include "To Know You," and "Party of Twelve." Mary grew up in VT, earned her BA from Sarah Lawrence College, and worked for a decade in New York City as a professional actress before moving to TN. www.marydonnetjohnson.com

Raised by a single mother in rural, working-class East Tennessee, D. MICHAEL JONES bounced around after dropping out of high school. He worked in steel warehouses, trucking, selling fireworks, and as a security guard. With an MFA from Emerson College and a PhD from the University of Connecticut, he is currently an Assistant Professor of Literature at East Tennessee State University. He loves his two cats, Dexter and Oscar, Jane Austen, Latin, and his wife, Kelly. His critical and creative writing seeks to dig up the deep roots of the rhetorical and historical violence that entangle our modern world.

KAREN LEVY is a writer, storyteller, and high school English teacher. She grew up and raised five children in Japan, New York, the Dominican Republic, and Miami. Her novel, *The Story You Choose to Tell*, was short-listed for the Virginia Prize and the *Longleaf* First Novel Contest. Her works appear in the *Caribbean Writer*, *Clever Quarterly*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and has been performed live by actors of the Liars League at New York City's KGB Bar. She currently works as editor for the online literary journal, *Digging Through the Fat*. Her story, "Double-Bass" reminisces an Oberline College bass-playing boyfriend.

JOE LUGARA took up painting and photography as a boy after his father discarded them as hobbies. His works depict odd forms and fantastic dreamscapes, taking as their basis horror and science fiction films produced from the 1930s through the late 1960s. He began creating digital paintings in the 2010s; they debuted at the Noyes Museum of Art in his home state of New Jersey. Mr. Lugara's work has been featured in *Aquifer: The Florida Review*, *Ligeia*, *Oddville Press*, *Right Hand Pointing*,

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The Shore Poetry, Thieving Magpie, Your Impossible Voice, and more than 40 exhibitions through the New York area.

E.R. LUTKEN grew up in the south with a family who loved music, poetry, and the outdoors. She studied medicine and as a physician, worked first in urban emergency rooms, then for many years on the Navajo Nation. After that, she taught middle and high school science and mathematics in rural Colorado for a few more years. Now she spends her time reading, writing, messing with mathematics, playing music, and fishing in the swamps of Louisiana and the mountains of New Mexico. Her poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs, Thin Air Magazine, Think*, and other journals and anthologies.

KATHARYN MACHAN, author of 39 collections of poetry (most recently *A Slow Bottle of Wine*, winner of the 2019 Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Competition) has lived in Ithaca, New York since 1975 and has taught Writing at Ithaca College since 1977. After many years of coordinating the Ithaca Community Poets and directing the national Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, Inc., she was selected to be Tompkins County's first poet laureate. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, textbooks, and stage productions, and she has edited three thematic anthologies, most recently a tribute collection celebrating the inspiration of Adrienne Rich.

SAMANTHA MALAY was born in Berlin, Germany, and grew up in rural northeast Washington State. She is a graduate of Seattle University's sociology program, a theatrical wardrobe technician by trade, and a mixed-media artist. Her poems have been published in *The RavensPerch, Sheila-Na-Gig, Burningword, Sky Island, The Sea Letter, Alexandria Quarterly, Quiddity, Projector Magazine, Blood Tree Literature, Heirlock, Genre: Urban Arts, Wild Roof Journal, Rougarou, Shark Reef, Soliloquies Anthology, The Closed Eye Open*, and "The Very Edge: Poems" by *Flying Ketchup Press*.

FABIANA MARTÍNEZ was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she graduated from the UCA University with a degree of Linguistics and World Literature. She is a linguist, a language teacher, and a writer. She speaks English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian. She has lived in Dallas, Texas, for almost twenty years. She is the author of the short story collection *12 Random Words*, her first work of fiction, and the grammar book *Spanish 360 with Fabiana*. Other short stories of hers have been published by *Rigorous Magazine* and *The Closed Eye Open*. She is currently working

on her first novel.

GRAYSON MAY is a poet, playwright, actor, and visual artist whose various art media explore the spiritual, philosophical, and anthropological. May's writing and art have been published in numerous literary reviews, books, and magazines, including *Bacon Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Poets Choice*, and Z Publishing House's "Pennsylvania's Emerging Writers." They received their BFA at the University of the Arts and is currently studying Theatre and Arts Management at the New School. They grew up in Orlando, FL, and now live in New York City.

KATHY MILLER is an educator/counselor who lives with her husband and two black cats in upstate New York. Kathy started writing poetry as a teenager and returned to creative writing with retirement in 2018. Since then, she has focused primarily on creative nonfiction, although she dabbles in poetry and fiction. One of Kathy's primary goals in writing memoir is to shed light on the Pennsylvania Dutch culture in which she was raised. Kathy's work has appeared in the online version of *The New York Times'* *Tiny Love Stories*.

WILLIAM MONETTE was born and raised outside of Detroit, Michigan. He holds an MFA from Columbia University. He currently lives in Washington DC with his dog. His work has previously appeared in *Typishly*, *Flare*, *The Flagler Literary Review*, and *Sharkreef*, a literary journal.

Recipient of the 2014 Writers Exchange Award from Poets & Writers, **HARRY MOORE** is the author of the poetry collection *Bearing the Farm Away* (Kelsey Books, 2018) and four chapbooks, most recently *Beyond Paradise: The Unweeded Garden* (Main Street Rag, 2020). His poems have appeared in the *Sow's Ear Poetry*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Ship of Fools*, *Slipstream*, *Pudding Magazine*, *Anglican Theological Review*, and other journals.

ERNST PERDRIEL is an African descendant born in Montreal (Quebec, Canada) in 1974. He is a multi-field artist (visual art, photography, writing—French), designer and horticulturist. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions in visual arts since 1995. Perdriel uses mosaics, collages, landscaping, and photography to talk about our complex era. Perdriel has contributed to numerous publications since 1992 as a writer, illustrator, artist, photographer, and in self-publishing. His works have appeared in *Sunspot Literary Journal*, *Seisma Magazine*, *Photo Solution Magazine*, *Into the Void*, *The Healing Muse*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *3Elements*

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Literary Review, and others. www.ernstpedriel.com

RICHARD PETERSON has published works of fiction, creative nonfiction, and speculative fiction in journals as disparate as *Booth*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Lifelines*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and others. He is obsessed with road trips and has the personal goal of visiting all the National Parks, Monuments, and Historic Sites. He resides in Monterey, California.

SCARLETT PETERSON received her MFA in poetry at Georgia College. She is currently working on her PhD at Georgia State. She is editor in chief of *Exhume Magazine*, and was formerly an assistant editor of poetry for Arts and Letters. Her poetry has appeared or is upcoming in *Pennsylvania English*, *Ink and Nebula*, *Moon City Review*, *Fire Poetry*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and more. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Madcap Review* and *Counterclock Journal*.

Multi-modal EXAT, **SUZANNE S. RANCOURT**, Abenaki/Huron descent, has published two books: *Billboard in the Clouds*, 2nd print, Northwestern UP, received the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas First Book Award, and *Murmurs at the Gate*, Unsolicited Press, 2019. A 3rd book, *Old Stones, New Roads*, is under contract, and her 4th, *Songs of Archilochus*, seeks a press. She is USMC and Army Veteran who holds an MS in psychology - SUNY, Albany and an MFA in writing - VCFA. Suzanne is widely published. Please visit her website for a complete publication list: www.expressive-arts.com

STRATON RUSHING is a playwright from Sonora, Texas. Other plays of his have been published this year in Smith & Kraus' *The Best 10 Minute Plays of 2020* and in Buffton University's *Literary Journal Bridge*. His plays have been performed at the Drama Desk-Nominated Emerging Artist's Theatre, SceneShop, Capital Repertory Theatre, Otherworld Theatre, The Player's Theatre, TheatreWorks New Milford, and other companies around the US. Straton is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild. He holds degrees in Theatre and Philosophy from the University of Texas at Arlington. He currently is an MFA candidate for Dramatic Writing at Arizona State University. StratonThePlaywright.com

MICHELLE SAFFRAN, originally from Detroit, Michigan, has lived in Vermont for most of her adult life. She shares her home with her musician husband and two outrageous and smelly dogs. She manipulates the photographic image both digitally and by hand through acts of sanding, sewing,

and collaging. Michelle is the recipient of several grants including the Artist Creation Grant and Artist Development Grants from the Vermont Arts Council and National Endowment for the Arts and a Vermont Community Foundation Grant. Her photographs have also been published in Issue 5, fall of 2020, of the *Wild Roof Journal*.

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding the Light: A Sister's Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

MARY SENTER is a writer, designer, and photographer who creates in a cabin in the woods on the shores of the Puget Sound with her rescue beagle by her side. She earned certificates in literary fiction writing from the University of Washington and an M.A. in strategic communication WSU. Her work can be found in *The Seattle Star*, *Cleaver*, *SHARK REEF*, and elsewhere. She is the graphic designer for *Crab Creek Review*. Visit her at www.marysenter.com

BENJAMIN SHALVA is the author of *Spiritual Cross-Training* and *Ambition Addiction*, both published by Grand Harbor Press. His stories and essays have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Peauxdunque Review*, *Success Magazine*, *Kveller*, *Relevant*, *Elephant Journal*, and *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. He lives in Baltimore with his wife, Sara, and their children and serves as a rabbi, meditation teacher, and yoga instructor for Soul Center Baltimore. Learn more at www.benjaminshalva.com

LIZ TUCKER is a sixth-generation Californian living 6600 feet above sea-level in the Sierra Nevada with her husband and two children. Her poetry, short stories, and chapters of her first novel, *Fault Lines*, have been published in a host of national and international literary magazines. Her play *Catch and Release* was produced by the Truckee Community Theatre's 10-Minute Play Festival. When not carving words to page, Liz can usually be found outside or playing her upright bass and cello. She currently serves on the board of Adventure Risk Challenge, a California-based non-profit, empowering underserved youth through integrated leadership, literary, and wilderness experiences.

TAYLOR TUCKER received her bachelor's degree in engineering mechanics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is now

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pursuing her master's through its Digital Environments for Learning, Teaching, and Agency Program. She is the author of the children's book *Jenny Saves a Convertible* and has previously published poetry in *Talking River*, *Still Life*, and *Walloon Writers Review*.

JOCELYN ULEVICUS is an artist and writer with work forthcoming or published in magazines such as *No Contact*, *Bee House Journal*, *Humana Obscura*, and *Gasher Magazine*. Ms. Ulevicus currently resides in Amsterdam and is finalizing her first book, a memoir, titled *The Birth of a Tree*, which was recently shortlisted for the Santa Fe Writer's Program 2019 Literary Award. In her spare time, she hunts for truth and beauty. Contact her via IG @beautystills.

MARTIN WILEY grew up as a mixed-race child of the 80's confronting and embracing the world as mixed and confused as he was. His work is an attempt to examine the search for manhood in that time and place, as well as the experience of bringing mixed-race children into the current world. He remains in Philadelphia, working at Project HOME, being dad, husband, and finding time to write.

JEAN WOLFF has had group and solo exhibits in various galleries in New York City and internationally. In addition, she has published 104 works in 65 issues of 45 different magazines. Born in Detroit, Michigan, she studied fine arts at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit and at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, receiving a BFA in studio arts. She then attended Hunter College, CUNY in New York, graduating with an MFA in painting and printmaking. She is now part of the artistic community of Westbeth in Manhattan.

JAKE YOUNG is the author of the poetry collection *American Oak* (Main Street Rag, 2018) and the essay collection *True Terroir* (Bradenburg Press, 2019). He received his MFA from North Carolina State University and his PhD from the University of Missouri. Jaka also served as the poetry editor for the *Chicago Quarterly Review*.