

PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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Cover Art by: Katie Hughbanks • “Hold On”

A NOTE TO READERS

Every issue of *Ponder Review* reminds us of the breadth of talent and emotional depth that exists in the creative community. We read every submission slowly, carefully—allowing questions to form as we go and letting the pieces themselves provide the answers. What weighs on people’s minds? Where have their imaginations gone? Most importantly, what emotional truths do they feel compelled to share?

This issue brings a powerful mix: stories that balance hope and darkness; poems tracing loss and recovery; drama and nonfiction that speak to the marrow of being human; and visual art of such variety and depth that it reveals something new every time we look at it. The work explores the edges of being—how we relate to each other, to the world, and to ourselves. Again and again, the theme of transformation emerges. Love, grief, illness, joy—these experiences shape us. We are always on the brink of metamorphosis.

Being on the edge inherently holds risk. We may lose our footing or our way. Yet even in chaos, something in us still reaches out. Still holds on. That’s why we chose Katie Hughbanks’s photograph “Hold On” as our cover art: the title, the bright beauty, the harmony of a drop of water at the moment of perfect balance—this is what we wish for you, for all of us, together. Through the uncertainty of the world today, the pieces in this issue remind us that holding on—whether to each other, to hope, or to the next step forward—matters. To our contributors: thank you for trusting us. Sharing your work is a privilege we don’t take lightly.

Sincerely,

The Editors

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GEOFF COLLINS	
<i>POULTICE FOR THE UNKNOWABLE</i>	1
JANE ZICH	
<i>STARDUST</i>	2
RACHEL TALBOT	
<i>NIGHT PARK</i>	3
MATT GOLD	
<i>1973</i>	10
MAUREEN ALSOP	
<i>THE LAST PLACE I SAW YOU</i>	11
MINYONG CHO	
<i>CHECKPOINT</i>	12
CHAD KNUTH	
<i>HOROLOGICAL WONDERMENT</i>	14
MATT GOLD	
<i>BOYS WITH PAINTING</i>	15
V HOLECEK	
<i>CLUTCH</i>	16
BRYNN HAMBLEY	
<i>SATURDAY'S CHILD</i>	17
V HOLECEK	
<i>URLAUBSFOTOS III (VACATION PHOTOS III)</i>	22
JOSHUA ST. CLAIRE	
<i>MOON HAIKU</i>	23
CAROLINE SUTPHIN	
<i>CIGARETTES</i>	24
V. HOLECEK	
<i>NATURSCHUTZPARK VII (NATIONAL PARK VII)</i>	25
CARLA PANCIERA	
<i>WHATEVER IT WILL FEEL LIKE, IT WILL FEEL LIKE</i>	26
MICHAEL SHOEMAKER	
<i>AZALEAS</i>	27
RYAN T. POZZI	
<i>OSCAR WILDE AND THE TRIAL THAT RUINED HIM</i>	28
JASON GORDY WALKER	
<i>NOCTURNE</i>	33

JOE LUGARA	
<i>BACON STRIP SERIES</i>	34
LINDA EVE DIAMOND	
<i>MAGIC TIME</i>	36
ANDREA MARCUSA	
<i>“New You” Wig Emporium</i>	37
LINDA EVE DIAMOND	
<i>SPINNING LOFTY DREAMS</i>	40
RANDI SCHALET	
<i>THREE YEARS</i>	41
LINDA EVE DIAMOND	
<i>STORY TIME IN THE SHADOWS</i>	42
ROSEMARY ROYSTON	
<i>GHOSTING CANCER</i>	43
BETH SHERMAN	
<i>CHARMING</i>	44
SHAGUFTA MULLA	
<i>It’s MY TURN TO BLOOM</i>	45
STEPHEN STEWART	
<i>TAKING A HIT</i>	46
MICHAEL C. ROBERTS	
<i>ETHEREAL BEAUTY I</i>	53
MICHAEL C. ROBERTS	
<i>ETHEREAL BEAUTY III</i>	54
CLAIRE SCOTT	
<i>CANCER CARD</i>	55
MAUREEN SHERBONDY	
<i>POCKETS</i>	56
SHAGUFTA MULLA	
<i>EMERGING AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN</i>	57
E.B. SCHNEPP	
<i>IF YOU’RE HUNGRY YOU WILL EAT</i>	58
KATIE HUGHBANKS	
<i>MULTITUDE</i>	60
SCOTT ORTOLANO	
<i>THE DAYS</i>	61
WILL HODGKINSON	
<i>THE LAST MATCH</i>	63
MEGAN HUTCHINSON	
<i>PARTING GIFT FROM THE PROPANE FACTORY</i>	71
JANE ZICH	
<i>IN HIDING</i>	72

[PR] Spring 2025

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

ODE TO THE FIRST FEMALE
 (GOLDEN SHOVEL OF “FEMALE” BY LUCILLE CLIFTON)73

SHAGUFTA MULLA

TULIP BLUR.....74

DAVID WESLEY WILLIAMS

SOUTHERN DOGFACE.....75

CONTRIBUTORS77

GEOFF COLLINS

POULTICE FOR THE UNKNOWABLE

There now, breathe in.
Press this against your skin.
Wherever it hurts best
is best.

But they are only words,
you say, not medicine,
and what good are words
when even the true ones lie,

when even the best
of them die,
disturbed, dishonored,
in lieu of what we once knew.

Before invention
was invented, before
you ascended to heaven,
before your hand

pressed flat to the wet glass
trembled, and you left,
knowing
you would not be back.

Rain kissed the dead grass,
cracks split the tarmac.
Your eyes were black dogs
running off into a black night.

[PR] Spring 2025

JANE ZICH

STARDUST



RACHEL TALBOT

NIGHT PARK

“I’m getting out of here,” I say.

“This is where it happened,” Ava responds and stamps the ground with her dirty Adidas.

It’s the middle of the night, and I’m lost in Central Park with Ava, a girl from school I barely know and never wanted to know.

I look down at the worn grass. The trees around us cast barbed shadows. My backpack—heavy with SAT study guides and flashcards—digs into my shoulders. And I’m cold, only a jean jacket between me and a mean October air. I hadn’t planned on being here, and now, I don’t know the way out.

It wasn’t half an hour ago that I left Emily’s apartment. We’re co-editing the yearbook, and Emily threw a kickoff party because her place is enormous, her parents are never around, and there’s beer in the back of her fridge. Standing on the street after slipping out of the party, I put my Walkman headphones over my ears and raised my hand to hail the one cab floating down Fifth Avenue like a pirate ship. It drove right by, as if I wasn’t even there.

But Ava saw me. She was standing outside Emily’s. She must have left the party right after me. She held up the Nikon hanging from a strap around her neck and said, “I have an idea for the cover.”

The avenue stretched out, strangely empty and desolate. I wasn’t sure what she meant. I was buzzed from two beers. I wasn’t eager to go home to my mom and her boyfriend sunk into the couch, the stink from their dinner covering everything. I followed Ava into the park.

The only light came from the lampposts above our heads making circles on the deserted pathways littered with fall leaves. Everything beyond the path was murky blackness. Ava walked ahead of me. Her hair was flat and close to her head, as if she’d cut it herself, hacking away so she wouldn’t have to deal with grooming. Her jeans hung off her narrow hips and the sleeves of her Benetton sweatshirt were pushed up to her elbows, revealing chapped circles of skin.

“Ava, what’s your idea?”

“It’s just a bit further!” Her voice cracked the darkness, and she threw a fist in the air. A rat with a tail like an old shoelace scurried under a bench.

“We should turn around.” I kept my voice low to avoid alerting whoever or whatever might be inhabiting the shadows. Maybe Ava didn’t hear me.

If I'd been smart, I would've turned around. But when I glanced back towards the street, it already seemed an enormous distance away. And I didn't think Ava would go as far as she did.

Ava appeared in our school last year, out of nowhere, mid-semester, and quickly receded into the background. She's in my chemistry class where she'll say random stuff and keep the protective goggles over her eyes even when you don't have to. She's just weird. But she was one of the few people who signed up to take photos for the yearbook, so, what could we do?

In the park, the ground was spongy under my sneakers. We weren't on the path anymore, and I'd lost my sense of direction. I strained to hear car sounds in order to gauge how far we were from the street or the transverses crossing the park east to west. But all I could hear was the light plodding of my footsteps. The air was clogged with a damp swampiness and dog shit. The trees jigsawed together blocking the view of the skyline, normally a reliable compass. Circular, swirling Guggenheim Museum: around 89th Street. Blocky, tall building: above 96th. But in the dark, I couldn't orient myself. The park had been transformed by night, folded in on itself, dark crevices and hidden gaps, a deep backpack with so many pockets you could lose your keys in there and literally never find them.

In the daytime, I know the geography of the park pretty well: where Strawberry Fields is and all the people who still can't get over John Lennon's death; Bethesda Fountain; that rock where we were all hanging out when Emily asked if I wanted to co-edit the yearbook with her. I didn't, but I knew I had to say yes. You don't want to be on Emily's bad side.

If I'd said no, that I'd been thinking of trying out for the school play, she probably would have laughed, called me a theater freak, and then not let me forget it. I know why she asked me. She needs someone reliable, someone predictable who will get the work done. It'll look good on my transcript, I guess.

I figured we were on the bridal path, near the reservoir. Hardened tire marks carved the muddy earth. The reservoir should have been just above us, on a slight incline. Except, I couldn't see the webbed chain link fence that surrounds it.

Ava loped ahead steadily. There was a wrenching noise, possibly a howl.

"What was that?" I was close enough to see that all Ava did was shrug, which seemed brave and utterly insane.

We walked under a bridge. In the daytime, when you're halfway through the arched underside, you can call out and maybe hear a faint echo of your voice filling space. But not at night. I didn't dare make a sound.

"I'm going back, Ava."

She finally stopped and turned around. "Remember that murder?"

“What are you talking about?”

“The girl who was killed in the park.”

It took me a second, but I thought I knew what she meant. It happened toward the end of summer, that time when you can’t enjoy yourself because school is about to start any minute. The headline stared at me from my parents’ newspaper while I ate cereal: *Slain Woman in the Park*. And there was a photo of the crime scene and of the girl when she was alive. I remember thinking she looked familiar. Not that I knew her, but that I could have. She looked like one of the typical popular girls: cute, flirty, and someone I wouldn’t necessarily trust.

But I can’t say I thought about it since. There are a lot of gruesome headlines.

“She was our age,” Ava said.

I realized I was seriously pissed off. Fear can do that, transform into something vicious. You go from this one emotion that makes you feel small and quivering to something like the opposite.

“This has nothing to do with the yearbook,” I said, as if that wasn’t obvious.

And that’s when Ava said we were standing on the spot where the murder happened.

Ava bends and touches the earth gently, almost like a caress. Branches sway lightly, and I hear what sounds like a rusty swing in motion. And now, Ava’s lying on the ground.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I can feel her,” Ava says, her voice dreamy. “Her energy’s still here.”

“That doesn’t really happen.”

Ava ignores me. “She goes into the park with some guy she knows, they have sex, he walks out, and she’s dead. Erased.” Ava’s voice has returned to its gravelly intensity.

I think I can see something moving at the edge of the darkness, a silhouette. It’s low to the ground and moves erratically. I blink and then it’s gone. If it was even there at all. My arms have goosebumps. I let my backpack slide off and hit the ground, giving my shoulders a needed rest.

There must be so much life coursing through the park at night, at this moment, hidden from us, but closer than we know. Mangy squirrels raiding overflowing garbage cans, dead-eyed fish floating in the gross, green water of the big lake. People stalking and roaming and prowling. Not the place it is in the day. The day park is where I learned to ride a bike, where I practiced the monkey bars, where we sometimes hang out after school. The difference between the two parks makes me think of those drawings where at first, all you see is a vase of flowers and then, you see it’s the profiles of two old men

and you can't ever see the vase of flowers again.

"She had no idea what was going to happen to her," Ava says.

"Going into the park at night wasn't so smart."

"You did it," she snaps.

"This wasn't my idea."

"You think women shouldn't go out at night?" Ava asks.

"Will you shut up."

"The night belongs to everyone."

I want to slap my hand over her big mouth.

"In the news they said she was 'sexually aggressive.' She kept a 'sex diary.' Basically, it was her fault that she got killed. Are you okay with that?"

I don't know what that even means, sexually aggressive. Sex in movies is one thing, but it's still abstract, how bodies actually come together so fully. A friend once said, "It's like a tampon, but different," which wasn't so helpful. Sexually aggressive sounds like the feeling that can swirl inside me when I know some boy likes me, the sheer power of it. The potential of it pulsing between my legs as strong as a heartbeat. But it always stops there. What I know are the clear boundaries of my own body, the separateness of myself, my own secrets, smells, desires.

How did sex become murder?

"Bad girls get what they deserve. That's the message," Ava says. "And that's bullshit." The way she's looking at me feels like an accusation.

"Why are you talking about all this?"

She props herself up on an elbow. "Because no one else is."

Now, I get it. Ava likes being outspoken, being outrageous, as if that makes her superior.

A wind blows my hair across my face as I look back down at the ground. Did they have their clothes all the way off or was her skirt pushed up, her jeans slid down? Did she like the way he smelled and tasted?

I think I can detect the faint brushing of cars passing on the avenue. There, night-shift doormen will be standing outside fancy buildings in button-down uniforms under illuminated awnings on Fifth or Central Park West. People will be returning home from parties or movies or whatever. A world of solid demarcations, like carefully filled ovals on a standardized test. The images are galvanizing. I start in the direction of the car sounds. If I have to, I can probably run the whole way out of the park.

"You forgot something." When I turn around, Ava's standing there, holding my backpack. I move towards her, but she takes a step back.

"Give it to me now!" I lunge forward. Ava won't let go of my bag. I want to rip the tufts of her stupid hair out of her skull. I hate her for leading me here. I hate that I followed her. I yank hard and Ava stumbles, her wiry body falling against mine briefly, all her sharp edges. I shove her off me and to the

ground with a surge of strength like a heat filling my whole body. I've never shoved anyone like that.

I'm breathing heavily with the backpack in my hand, and she's just lying there on the ground.

"Ava?"

She rolls over slowly, placing her camera on her stomach and looking up at the trees.

"This world is so screwed up." There's a leaf in her hair. She resembles one of those survivors of a plane crash who crawl out of the woods after months of living in the wild, no longer fully human. And her expression, it's no longer so tough.

It occurs to me that, the way Ava's lying, it's like the crime scene photo, the one in the paper. I remember that the girl who was killed was lying on her back under a tree, a branch bent over her body. There were men in business suits—detectives, I guess—standing around, useless, arriving too late, the princess already under an irreversible spell. I remember it looked odd, the men so casual, like they were waiting at the deli for sandwiches and not standing over a girl's dead body.

"Is this your idea of a photo for the yearbook?"

Ava sits up. "Don't you want to do something that matters? Try to make the world less fucked up and not just accept it all?"

It's weird how people can look different in just a short space of time. Looking at her now, her jaw clenched, the leaf still clinging to her hair, Ava looks cool, a character in a play, a lead with the stage all to herself.

"What's the point of putting together a bunch of random photos and dumb captions?" she continues.

"It's just a yearbook. We're just in high school." But after I say it, I know it sounds lame. I thread the straps of my backpack over my shoulders. The weight on my back is reassuring.

"You know," she says, "at my old school, this teacher told my mom I was 'hysterical.' All because I have opinions. And when I had this really bad stomachache, the doctor was like, 'She's just stressed. It's just her period.' This kind of shit happens all the time." Ava gets up and shakes herself like a wet dog. "People need to stop telling me what I am, what I feel."

"Did you know the victim or something?" I ask.

She looks at me like I'm an idiot. "No. But I don't think she should be remembered as a slut and so she deserved it." She glances at the ground and then back at me. "She can't defend herself, can she? They get the last word."

I think of Ava in chemistry class, the goggles tight on her face so her eyes bulge out and she looks like an alien, but she doesn't care, as if she knows something we don't. Part of me thinks Ava can see through me, see the judgement, see that I might be no better than the people who blamed the girl

who died right here in the night because she was pretty, because boys liked her, because there was something about her you wanted to stifle.

For some reason, it's my mom who pops into my head. She's opening the front door and some policeman's standing there telling her I'm dead. I picture how my mom's face would collapse into a contorted, heartbroken wail. I feel so utterly sad for myself, for all of us, carrying the burden of our bodies, of knowing what to do, how to be, and the unpredictable wilderness of violent possibilities.

The cold has seeped into my bones, and I shudder. I wrap my arms around myself, hugging my own body. Maybe I can feel the dead girl's daring energy wafting up from the park's floor, and it's this that makes me feel so suddenly sad. But it's more likely pity for myself, for the thorny paths and wicked traps that lie ahead and my inability to do anything about it. Will I ever actually like someone enough—trust someone enough—to allow the borders of our bodies to merge. To not feel, for just a little while, the distinct, impenetrable outline of myself. Or, if none of those things will ever happen because of something inexplicably horrible. Because I wasn't paying enough attention, because I was reckless, because I didn't follow the rules or followed them too closely. Something that will erase me.

"What was her name?" I ask.

"Jennifer. Her name was Jennifer Levin," Ava says and looks again at the spot where she had just been lying, the place where the murder happened.

Her face brightens. "Let's write her name." She drops to the ground and begins furrowing. She holds up a rock the size of a Rubik's cube and starts scratching the ground with it, her whole body engaged in the effort. She so completely embodies the act of scratching that they're inseparable, girl and act. Her commitment is as vivid and shiny as a shield.

Off to the side, there's movement near a low bush. I turn to see a raccoon with glistening eyes and a wet nose, bandit black markings around the eyes. I unfurl my arms like wings, like I'm some sort of sharp-beaked bird, and I charge at that raccoon, shrieking as loud as I can. The sounds coming from my throat hardly feel like my own, and they fill the whole night.

The raccoon retreats in a blur into the darkness.

Ava's smiling at me. Her grin is lopsided and luminous, like a flash went off.

We must look so small from the sky, from the height of some bird who keeps spiraling upwards, more and more revealed in its eyes the higher up it goes, until we are just one small part of the swirl of fathomless greens, ocean blues, and transcendent whites. No boundaries between anything anymore.

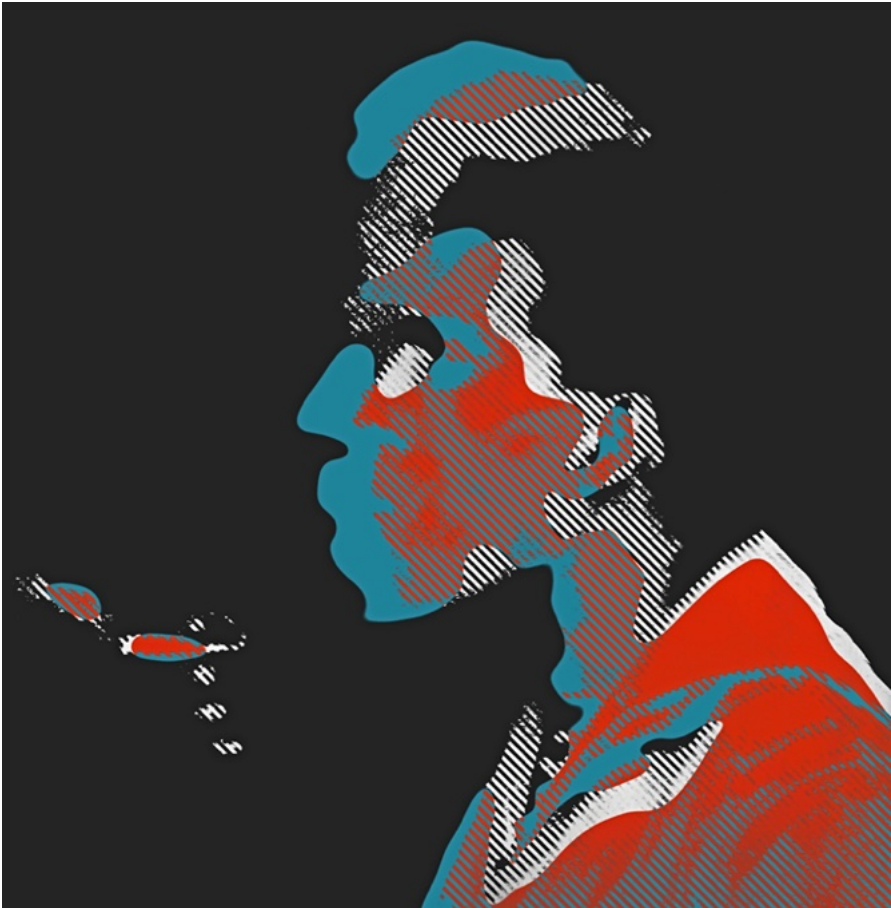
In the park, in the middle of the night, next to Ava, I find a jagged rock in sandy earth, and I get down on my knees, and I scrape and scrawl a

murdered girl's name into the earth, as if it will be permanent.

(August 26, 1986, Jennifer Levin was killed in Central Park by Robert Chambers after the two left a bar on the Upper East Side and entered the Park.)

MATT GOLD

#1973



MAUREEN ALSOP

THE LAST PLACE I SAW YOU

I recognize her as I reopen boxes
She lived for awhile with the other mothers Meredith Monk's
mom howled on occasion like a werewolf

My friend Rosanna said she yelled out *I'm alone where are you?* O werewolf
women, stranger, now strange What iteration's boxed—
up evening, your eyes, oceanic brine—The room asway in monk's

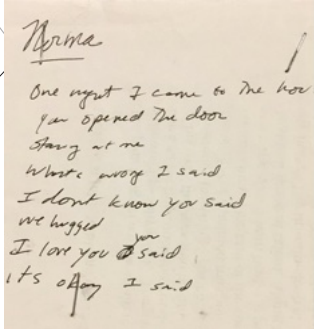
tonsures, the last original nature, monks—
hood—federation—moonstone—werewolf—
grey fairy floss coiffures—suspect, angelic, vertigo, boxing

the sheer sum of sums without understanding
that holy spoken horizon's horizontal box
what I might rightfully imagine as seascape, as bristle, lambswool,
as a child's touch. I sang *Werewolves of London*
to calm myself into the enemy's eyeteeth.

—a geography of invisible wings
soothed the belittled air. You came in close
to that name I held listening

NORMA

One night I came into the house
you opened the door
staring at me
What's wrong I said
I don't know you said
we hugged
I love you you said
its okay I said



Norma
One night I came to the house
you opened the door
staring at me
What's wrong I said
I don't know you said
we hugged
I love you you said
its okay I said

THE LAST PLACE I SAW YOU

CHECKPOINT

An Israeli soldier cocked a rifle. He pointed it vaguely at us, 50 or so Palestinians and me on the mound of dirt before the Qalandia military checkpoint to Jerusalem. I saw a Palestinian man running off to downtown Ramallah. Nobody seemed to be chasing him, but the Israeli soldier facing us furrowed his brow and kept his fingers pressed on the rifle. Someone could die for this, whatever it was.

I had gotten in line only a few minutes before, so I didn't know exactly how it escalated to this. Although I had been beaten with an ashtray, I had never had a gun raised toward me. Still, I knew I must not budge from where I was standing, next to a middle-aged Palestinian woman. It was the safest place for me.

The soldier was tall but had the nervous uncertainty of a teenager, as all of them did at the checkpoint. I swore I'd seen him before. With his shifty eyes and pimples dotting his face, he sat askew like a student I taught at the University of Michigan as a TA. He looked me up and down, holding my passport, and squinted. "Korea? What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm taking a Hebrew class at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem," I said, omitting the part about how I was spending much more time on my two projects of writing my dissertation on the fourteenth-century Persian paintings and analyzing my childhood memories. I wanted to make this encounter in the dingy enclosure as short as possible. I was eager to exit the checkpoint, a lackluster structure in cement gray like an unfinished toll booth someone forgot to paint.

He asked more questions to young, unveiled, Christian Palestinian women, often in Arabic. I sensed a tinge of sex in his voice. I could see him in jeans and T-shirts, flirting with girls outside of the checkpoint, except here, one by one, we went through multiple metal doors and turnstiles.

The soldier's short, scrawny companion scurried off to the back of the checkpoint, like a ball boy in a tennis match. The soldier shifted his stance. For a second, I thought maybe the rifle weighed too heavily on this kid, but I didn't feel sorry for him.

My reflex as a survivor of a nuclear war of child abuse was to keep cool and think creatively when in imminent danger. I stopped following the soldier's every move and looked around to get some clue as to what other Palestinians were doing and, more importantly, what I should be doing now.

Surprisingly, they weren't doing much and seemed almost bored. Their listless faces seemed about to yawn and say, "I've seen this so many times." The middle-aged Palestinian woman next to me, especially, seemed exasperated and had the look of a mom losing her patience with her toddler throwing a tantrum. She sighed out loud, "Ah. . ." I could almost finish her sentence, "Ah, naughty boy, stop crying."

Though I was not desensitized to that degree, I had thought about my own death often, as Koreans normally do. I thought about jumping off a bridge into the Han River when my parents told me we would emigrate to the USA in high school, and my friends talked about dying when they didn't score well on exams. The high suicide rate in Korea, including President Roh Moohyun's, may be indicative of our general view of death as an option.

My grandmother used to say, "Only if I died," when my father showed up drunk at my aunt's house where she lived and made a scene, shouting profanities and throwing around furniture and a TV set. Only if she died, there would be one less person my father could attack.

Alongside the Palestinians, I loosened up. This crazy standoff with an IDF soldier easily fit into my overall life experiences. One could panic for seconds in life-and-death situations, but not for an hour straight, for a month, or for years. Palestinians seemed to have normalized the violence around them so that they could function despite them, as I did, too, as an abused child.

The air in Ramallah was light and crisp, faintly scented by the almond trees. I imagined us sitting around together, sipping cold mint lemonade, and listening to a migrant poet's ghazal. We would only need ornate architecture to render an urban scene from the sixteenth-century Persian painting by Mir Sayyid 'Ali.

Breaking the spell, the ball boy ran back to whisper something into the soldier's ear. Only then did he lower his rifle and instruct us to form a line. Before I had time to feel relieved, Palestinian men gently nodded and stood aside to let me move forward, probably because I was a woman. There was an unwritten rule at the checkpoint: older women first, young women second, and then men, like in a war zone.

Out on the Jerusalem side, I hopped on a Palestinian minibus bound for the Hebrew University and sat next to a woman. The driver waited until the bus filled up and turned up the volume as soon as he pulled out of the checkpoint. "Ya, rabbi, na'aid, hal hobb ilai kan (Dear God, let us repeat the love that was there once,)" Marwan Khoury and Carole Samaha sang lustily their number-one hit, Ya Rab, like nothing happened. Beneath our composed faces, however, lurked old, rotting fractures in our spines, like my memories from childhood.

HOROLOGICAL WONDERMENT

When did we first learn about time in this life?
Was it when we learned to count to ten?

Or was it before then, nestled in our mother's arms
When we cried out to be fed,

Our tiny stomach's clock aching,
Mouths setting off, bodies sounding

Or was it before then, even?
When our flesh said hello to bones,

When our dew drop irises darkened
Behind lids, yearning for the light

Or was it when a part of us raced
To reach our other half

In an ocean as mysterious
As the concept of time itself

And if this is when we first learned
To hurry and go slow

I'm curious then to know
Why, after all of this time

I am just now beginning to understand
That time is just another word for God

However we may measure it
However we may write it down

MATT GOLD

BOYS WITH PAINTING



[PR] Spring 2025

V HOLECEK

CLUTCH



BRYNN HAMBLEY

SATURDAY'S CHILD

CHARACTERS:

Three people (any gender; pronouns can be changed) stand on stage in different sections.

SETTING:

The stage lights are dim. They hold flashlights up to their faces. The following dialogue is snappy, quick, almost tripping over itself.

ONE: I was born on January 20, 1996—

TWO: A Saturday.

THREE: I was born on April 8th, 1995—

ONE: A Saturday.

TWO: I was born on September 23rd, 1995—

ALL: Saturday.

(They all hold up their left wrists. in stark black, a date is written, illuminated by the light of their flashlights.)

ONE: And I only have one year left—

TWO: —fifty-two Saturdays—

THREE: —Unless I can earn more.

(Lights up to full. We are in a simple office space with desks and chairs; perhaps one long conference type table with three chairs spaced around it. Each person sits, mechanically, and begins to work. Perhaps they are typing on computers, perhaps copying text from books—either way it is rote office work.)

ONE: Each word is worth another second—

TWO: Of which I already have precious few—

THREE: So I learn to type—or write—quickly.

ONE: Each paragraph is easily worth a whole minute of life.

TWO: If I can write eighty-six thousand words today—

THREE: Twenty-four more hours.

[PR] Spring 2025

ONE: They're not my own words. It isn't hard.

TWO: What's difficult is keeping pace.

(A moment of synchronized motion.)

THREE: I get one day off a week.

ONE: I work hard for that one day.

TWO: Twenty-four more hours.

THREE: Yes, I guess I'm living for the weekend—

ONE: Saturday.

TWO: But at least I'm living.

THREE: For now.

ONE: As long as I continue to be useful—

TWO: They'll let me keep on living.

(A similar moment of synchronized motion.)

THREE: On Saturday I will finally get to see my spouse—

ONE: My child—

TWO: My mother—

THREE: My friends—

ONE: And we will drink and laugh and ignore the numbers in stark black on each other's wrists—

TWO: Blacker than night, blacker than death even—

THREE: I will pull my sweater down meticulously over those numbers, and I will eat another chip too heavy with salsa and say, "Yes, I'll have another drink."

ONE: In the grey of midnight, I will turn the key to my apartment in the lock, and I will enter—

TWO: I will collapse on the bed in a spread of limbs, peanut butter on toast—

THREE: And I will fall asleep in my clothes, but at—

ONE: —least I have lived in this—

TWO: One precious night.

(A third moment of synchronized motion—but this time THREE breaks off, is wrong, the machine the three of them create steps out of rhythm. Perhaps the lights flicker, dim.)

THREE: But last Saturday as I put my key in the lock and turned the knob, it stuck, and I stumbled in, and I fell—on my wrist.

(Flashlight on THREE's right wrist.)

THREE: And in a moment that was held between the landing and the aching I realized, "I am perhaps falling, now, to my death."

(THREE straps on a wrist brace.)

ONE: They came in, wrist shackled in a black straightjacket.

TWO: The dread started in my stomach, spreading down to my toes.

THREE: I am not left-handed. I cannot type one hundred and twenty words a minute with one hand.

ONE: We cannot speak of it in words. We speak in glances.

TWO: Who knows how much time they will lose, now.

THREE: Before, it was eighty-six thousand words per day.

ONE: And now?

TWO: I'll be surprised if it's more than five thousand.

THREE: From twenty-four hours, to barely an hour and a half.

ONE: And the boss man pretends not to see, just yells to get to work.

TWO: I cannot cry. I simply can't.

THREE: My gaze blurs, but I write. I write with my left hand, my non-dominant hand, trying not to shake.

ONE: I try not to do the math in my head, but I can't help it. A wrist bone will take approximately six to twelve weeks to heal—

TWO: Three point six million seconds of agony, at the least.

THREE: I can't do the math. I refuse to do the math—

ONE: Approximately two point eight million seconds lost to injury—

TWO: And that's the best case scenario—

ONE: Forty-seven thousand minutes—

TWO: Almost five weeks lost, best case—

ONE: And worst case scenario, more than two months—

TWO: And the debt will keep piling up and piling up—

ONE: A desperate rat race against your own pain—

[PR] Spring 2025

(THREE stops working and screams in agony. TWO and ONE are startled, but only for a moment, and keep working anxiously. THREE sits, holding their wrist, sobbing.)

THREE: I work so hard for a living. I work hard to *live*. No choice but to sit here and fade into oblivion six days a week waiting for the one day I have to live a life and not simply breathe. Some days I wonder what the point of it all is.

(A few moments before THREE begins working again. A moment of all three working together, punctuated by another moment of synchronicity.)

ONE: Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be easier to let it all float away...

TWO: To simply silence the alarm and roll back over into sleep...

THREE: To lay in bed, to read a book, to take a walk, to simply be...

ONE: Waiting patiently for the moment when they decide to pull the plug in my brain.

TWO: To take the numbers as an expiration date and cradle them to my heart and let them be true and okay.

THREE: To take the year I have left, to use it to my satisfaction, to die with a 'fuck you' on my lips—

ONE: At home, or in the woods, or standing in the middle of the street, perhaps—

TWO: Letting my dying breath be used in a scream—

THREE: Because oh my god this can't be it. I don't think I can let this be it anymore—

ONE: Eighty-five percent of my day is devoted to a faceless entity, eight five percent that I cannot make a single decision for myself, at least, if I want to continue breathing.

TWO: I have been given, supposedly, this "one precious life", and I cannot even use it for myself, most days.

THREE: And if my life is not my own, then what is?

(A realization.)

ALL: If my life is not my own, then what is?!

(All three stand.)

ONE: They have already tied the noose around my neck.

TWO: I am already at the executioner's block.

THREE: The guillotine is built, the basket placed.

ONE: So why am I working hard to live when so many are simply waiting for me to die?

TWO: If they kill us all, who will do their dirty work for them?

THREE: My life is worth something more than labor.

(Destruction of the office space.)

ONE: Don't threaten me if you don't expect a follow through—

TWO: Don't threaten me if you don't expect a follow through—

THREE: DON'T THREATEN ME IF YOU DON'T EXPECT A FOLLOW THROUGH!

ALL: TIE THE NOOSE AROUND MY NECK AND I'LL LOOK YOU IN THE EYES AS I JUMP!

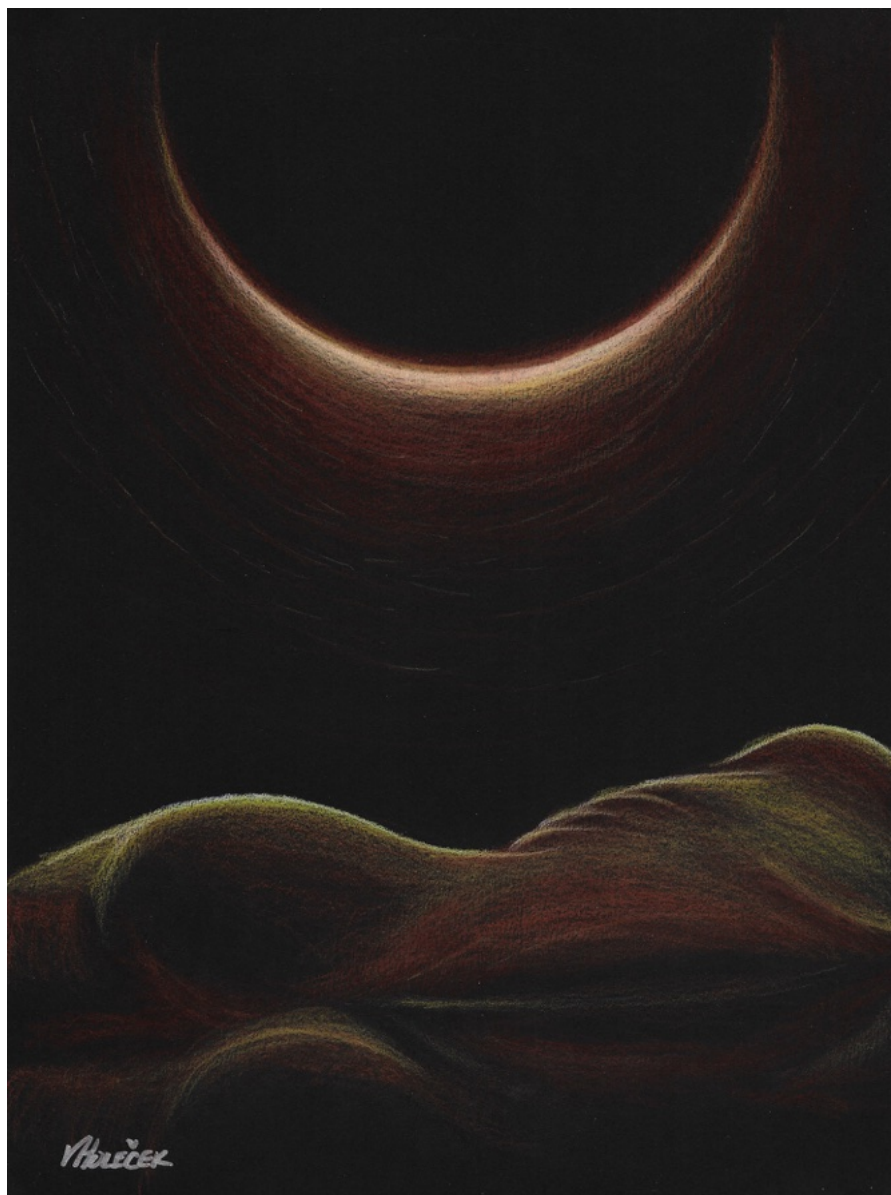
(Sudden blackout.)

END OF PLAY

[PR] Spring 2025

V HOLECEK

URLAUBSFOTOS III
(VACATION PHOTOS III)



JOSHUA ST. CLAIRE

MOON HAIKU

cerulean deepening into the white clover moon

movie projector moon
this flimsy film
of reality

an eye
for an eye
cold moon

day moon
she chooses
the cut

clear day
black vultures circling the mountains
of the moon

the blood
draining from her face
red maple moon

Susquehanna River
the sonder moon
in a trillion pieces

the fog fails
to summit the mountain
dawn moon

as if
I could do better
sliver moon at twilight

CAROLINE SUTPHIN

CIGARETTES

Above all, I hated the smell,
the smoke with muscled arms and violating fingers
probing my clothes, stroking my hair root to ends,
laying claim to every inch of my skin. I hated
its memory seeded in every pore and thread.
I thought of my fine new sweater and watering eyes.
I thought of my coats and scarves and little prides.
I never thought

of her, or why it got worse after Aunt Opal died.
She was always a chain smoker, her life measured in the links
of a butt to a light and back again. She never went
where they couldn't follow, she never skipped a day, or an hour.
But after Aunt Opal, they passed her lips instead
of food or water or medication
or words.

I thought of the blackened ceiling and the little vulnerable skin
tucked behind my thumbnail, but I never thought of
the day she refused the ambulance.
The open door slashed blue winter bright across
her yellowed nest, threw clarity on the stack of mystery novels
and the picture frame dust and the narrow impression
that was her own in the corner of the couch by the ashtray.

I thought of laundering my shoelaces and showering the past
from my flesh, but I never thought of her
shrunken, looking up at that paramedic with the smoothed bun
and groomed brows who examined her with clear eyes,
a woman who certainly wouldn't let her smoke.

I thought with every breath and moment of my escape,
but I never thought of her,
in a bath of loneliness that dried her vocal cords,

of her, unable to dismantle the barricade she built around
the present moment,
a wall that rejects the approach of past or future,

of her, fallen back in retreat to the corner
by the ashtray.

V. HOLECEK

NATURSCHUTZPARK VII
(NATIONAL PARK VII)



WHATEVER IT WILL FEEL LIKE, IT WILL FEEL LIKE

This is the kind of town I will never know
the name of. Passing through. Reading billboards,
and wishing roads like this still passed
pastures full of cows, not pastures
that used to be full of cows. Did I remember
the keys to the cottage loaned to me?
Most first weeks in September, I spent teaching
school. So this is what it looks like out here.
This is how you spend your time without me.
In an otherwise empty lot, a couple embraces.
Two cars, thoughtlessly parked. One door
open. Her head burrowed into his neck.
His eyes closed. This is as clear a goodbye
as the one I marked with a backyard bash
and a live band weeks ago. A celebration
that made it clear: It's over. We can never hold
each other the way we're holding each other now.
Can't hold each other without thinking:
When I let go, I let go. There is no going back.
What I loved, love still, will go on. And I will.
There will be an eagle at the lake where I'm bound,
flying low enough to cast its flawless image.
Six loons will swim together, dive, and surface,
sheeting water, pink with sunset, off their wings.

MICHAEL SHOEMAKER

AZALEAS



OSCAR WILDE AND THE TRIAL THAT RUINED HIM

Early on, I received a rejection for my first book from an agent who responded quickly and kindly. I highlight this because, frankly, she was an exception. Many rejections aren't prompt or gracious. But her feedback included the line, "This is wonderful, but the world of commercial publishing doesn't have a place for a book like this."

I can't speak for her exact reasoning, but I know it usually boils down to how closely a book fits what's popular. Maybe you've heard of Toni Morrison or George R.R. Martin? Neither of them wrote in a style that fit neatly into what publishers were looking for. Martin struggled for years to find an audience at all and nearly lost his agent over *A Game of Thrones*.

Every modern author faces the same tension between art and commercialism. Writing a book is an act of expression, a conversation with an audience. But publishing a book is something else entirely, it's a business transaction. I write because I have something to say, but I also want enough people to read it so I can pay my electric bill—and maybe treat myself to a McRib when it comes back. And what that agent was really saying, though far more politely than I deserved, was: "This writing is really good, but I'm worried no one will buy it, and neither of us will have McRib money."

It's hard not to think of Wilde in moments like that. His wit and sharp critiques of society didn't always align with the market, and his work wasn't an easy sell at first. Only when Wilde's defiance became part of his persona did he gain recognition. Even then, his satirical edge made him an unusual choice for publishers. His success came from a lot of perseverance, a lot of creative rebellion, and a lot of believing in his own voice even when everyone else was scratching their heads about his work.

Born in 1854, Wilde's childhood was steeped in intellect. His father, a surgeon, and his poet mother shaped his fusion of logic and lyricism. His mother, in particular, filled their home with theatricality and storytelling, surrounding Wilde with poets, politicians, and thinkers. He absorbed everything, developing his love of conversation and performance. Even as a boy, he had a sharp wit, often delivering barbed observations that delighted the adults around him.

Wilde's academic brilliance earned him a place at Trinity College in Dublin, where he excelled in classics and won the prestigious Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. At Oxford's Magdalen College, he embraced the role of

provocateur, inspired by John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* shaped Wilde's belief that art should be an end in itself, while Ruskin's lectures reinforced his conviction that beauty had the power to transform the world.

By the time Wilde left Oxford, he was more than a writer. He was a persona. He lectured across America, dazzling audiences with his Aesthetic Movement philosophies. With *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a string of successful plays—*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*—he became the darling of London society. His plays were sharp, satirical, and soaked in Wilde's trademark wit. They entertained, but more importantly, they skewered the hypocrisies of the upper class. The same people he mocked adored him.

While his public persona was meticulously crafted, his private life was far less controlled. Wilde had mastered the art of dazzling an audience, but away from the spotlight, his choices carried risks even he couldn't charm his way out of. But the more Wilde challenged societal norms, the more he painted a target on himself. While he could dazzle the public with his wit, he was also daring them to turn on him the moment his confidence became too threatening. Wilde's greatest talent may not have been his writing, but his ability to turn himself into a work of art.

But Wilde's private life was where art and danger collided. He was married, with two children, yet his love for Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas was an open secret among those who knew him. Their relationship was as toxic as it was passionate—Wilde adored Bosie, but Bosie's drama could fill a five-act tragedy. Things took a turn when Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of being a sodomite. Instead of ignoring the insult, as many of his friends advised, Wilde did something bold and disastrous. He sued for libel.

Had Wilde ignored the Marquess of Queensberry's insults, history might have taken a very different turn. Instead, he made the fateful decision to fight back in court, unaware that his greatest strengths—his wit, his charm, his mastery of language—would soon be turned into the very tools of his undoing. The trial was meant to restore his honor, but it quickly became a trap of his own making. The defense presented a damning collection of evidence: love letters, testimony from hotel workers, and witness accounts from young men who had been in Wilde's company. What was supposed to be a case about slander turned into an exposé of Wilde's private life. His reputation, once his greatest asset, crumbled in real time.

As the courtroom proceedings dragged on, the press circled like vultures. London's newspapers, once captivated by Wilde's wit, now delighted in tearing him apart. The same audience that had laughed at his plays now gasped at salacious details leaked from the trial. The man who had

built his fame on irony and wordplay was now at the mercy of a legal system that had no patience for cleverness. Wilde was no longer a playwright mocking society; he was a tragic character undone by his own hubris.

It was a mistake of epic proportions. The trial backfired spectacularly, exposing his private life in ways he could never undo. His wit, once his greatest weapon, now became his undoing. When asked on the stand if he had ever kissed a certain young man, Wilde quipped, “Oh, dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it.” The courtroom laughed, but in that moment, Wilde had already lost. The jury wasn’t amused, and neither was the judge who held his fate in his hands.

Wilde lost the libel case, and almost immediately afterward, he was arrested and tried for “gross indecency.” Here was a man who had charmed the world with his brilliance, now being prosecuted for daring to live as himself. He could have fled to France; his friends begged him to go. But he refused. Whether out of pride, loyalty, or stubbornness, Wilde stayed to face his accusers.

At his trial, Wilde delivered one of the most profound defenses of love ever spoken:

“The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. There is nothing unnatural about it.”

No matter how beautifully Wilde defended himself, the trial had never truly been about the law. It was about morality, reputation, and power—three forces that were stacked against him from the start. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor. Prison shattered him. Prison was not just a punishment for Wilde. It was a transformation. The man who once commanded drawing rooms with effortless charm was now subjected to a life of silence, humiliation, and deprivation. The cold, hard labor of breaking rocks and sewing mailbags stripped him of the vitality that had once defined him. His health deteriorated rapidly. His soft hands, once accustomed to pen and paper, blistered under the relentless physical demands of the penal system. His digestion suffered due to the meager diet, and the lack of intellectual engagement drove him to despair. Reading Gaol was not designed to reform prisoners but to erase them.

Wilde later wrote that prison had taught him the true meaning of suffering, but it also stripped away his illusions. He, who had spent years delighting in artifice, was now reduced to the barest form of existence. His greatest pain, however, was not physical but emotional. Deprived of

conversation, companionship, and books, he was forced into the one thing he had always avoided: introspection. He wrote of his loneliness and regret, reflecting on the ways he had contributed to his own downfall. It was here that he penned *De Profundis*, a letter of raw emotional reckoning that stands as one of the most profound documents of self-examination ever written.

The man who had once dazzled London with wit and extravagance was now breaking rocks and sleeping on a wooden board. His health failed, his finances were ruined, and his spirit dimmed.

His daily routine was stripped of all dignity. At Reading Gaol, silence was its own form of punishment, broken only by the clanking of chains and the shuffle of feet in unison. He was forbidden from speaking to other prisoners, forced into monotonous labor that mocked the brilliance of his mind. Even letters from friends were limited, their words censored. Wilde had once commanded attention with every sentence he spoke—now, his world was reduced to silent suffering. Yet even in suffering, Wilde produced art. *De Profundis*, his letter to Bosie, is a staggering work of honesty, reckoning with both personal failures and societal injustice.

But Wilde's most haunting reflection on his imprisonment came later, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Where *De Profundis* grappled with his own soul, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* confronted the cruelty of a system that punished love with brutality. Published in 1898 under the pseudonym "C.3.3." (his prison identification number), the poem is a searing indictment of the justice system and a meditation on human suffering. Its opening lines—"Yet each man kills the thing he loves"—echo Wilde's own tragic journey.

There's an irony here Wilde himself would have savored. His trial, his imprisonment, his destruction: these were all meant to erase him, to turn him into a cautionary tale. Instead, they immortalized him. Wilde became not just an artist, but a symbol. His defiance in the face of Victorian morality made him a martyr for authenticity.

He died in 1900, penniless and in exile, but Wilde didn't fade into obscurity. If anything, his legacy grew larger. His plays remain staples of theater. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a cornerstone of Gothic literature. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* still resonates as a powerful critique of injustice. The man once vilified for who he loved is now celebrated worldwide.

Wilde saw the world not as it was—rigid and judgmental—but as it could be. He envisioned a future where beauty was sacred, where individuality was celebrated, and where love was free. His art imagined that world long before society was willing to accept it. Today, his works are performed, studied, and revered across the globe, his wit immortalized in everyday conversation. The world Wilde imagined is not fully here, but it is closer than ever. And at its center—immortal, irreverent, and impossible to forget—stands Wilde

himself.

In Wilde, we find not just a literary genius, but a man who refused to be diminished. His wit, his words, and his refusal to conform continue to resonate. Wilde's genius outlived his circumstances, teaching us that art is not just about creation. It is about defying the world's narrow expectations and lighting the way for those who come after us.

JASON GORDY WALKER

NOCTURNE

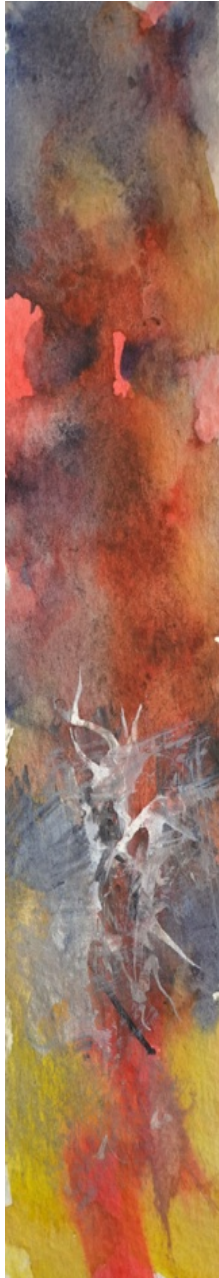
No moon. Raindrops splashed my umbrella.
Lightning surged like a river through sorrow.
I paused the song and cried. No one saw.
You still haunt my dreams, Marguerite.
When you left, I donated my favorite CDs
to false friends. I imagined my tombstone: Failure.
I was a gray ship docked at the horizon's harbor.

[PR] Spring 2025

JOE LUGARA

BACON STRIP SERIES





[PR] Spring 2025

LINDA EVE DIAMOND

MAGIC TIME



ANDREA MARCUSA

“NEW YOU” WIG EMPORIUM

“Back from Cannes?” jokes Jeffrey as I slide into my workstation. “Darling, my limo’s double-parked downstairs.” I smile, but it feels like my face might crack.

In this chorus of hair dryers and the scent of hairspray, my coworkers think I took a personal day to shepherd my neighbor to a colonoscopy. Total lie. At our slipper-sized salon, no one pries. Our business is our business. It’s part of being the best and most discreet wig emporium in Manhattan. And no, I don’t have a limo.

Beside my styling tools sit two salted caramels. I scan the salon for the secret gift-giver. But everyone’s got customers. I pop one in my mouth, but it tastes sickening. My stomach flinches. I automatically feel for the strands of my hair, forgetting they’re now gone.

I’ve not told anyone about the lump on my breast, even Jeffrey, despite his sharing dishy boyfriend details. If everyone knows I’m sick, there’s no escape. I can’t tell my mother, either. She’d blame it on city living and rip into me. “Leaving Centralia was a terrible idea. Come home!” So, I’ve stayed here, free to reach for my dreams safely away from her and her small-minded, boring neighbors.

Last week, I had Jeffrey chop off all my hair before things got obvious. “Ellie, people would kill for your hair,” he said. True. We charge thousands for wigs of real hair. Believing I wanted a chic bob for next month’s thirty-third birthday, he wove two thick black braids and lopped them off. “You look like Anne Hathaway,” he said, spinning my chair so I could see the back, then handing me my orphan braids in a plastic bag.

The cold cap I wear during infusions tortures, like sticking my head in an iceberg. But it can limit hair loss. So far, chemo’s okay. Sick for a day and I still have my hair—but no eyelashes, except for magnetic false ones I affix daily. Here, appearance is prime. Looking *fabulous*, Jeffrey says, is key.

Most of our clients have or are recovering from something awful—chemo, severe infections, some are just plain old. Maxine, the owner, carefully hires stylists who naturally tune to customers. During my interview, she said, “Your Western, PA roots are kismet!” I was stunned. The traits that thrived in that town I longed to escape, could be valued in this glittering metropolis?

Sheila’s arrived for wig restyling with Maxine. She’s lived with metastatic breast cancer for fifteen years and buys a new wig to celebrate every year she survives. Her serenity and cheerfulness amaze me,

considering her brutal medications and hospitalizations. She credits her amazing support system—kind husband, sweet kids, loving mutt, and doting Mom. Not like me whose going it alone, unless you count my apartment's roaches.

Genevieve, my new client, arrives in a navy baseball hat and pout. I touch the cap. "May I?"

She nods and cringes as she watches me study her pink scalp, which sprouts scraggly blond tufts and fuzz. Tears start.

"I straightened it. Then keratin, color, and *this*!"

A plucked chicken. But a beautiful face. "We'll fix it," I say, my voice calm. "By hiding the mess while it regrows." I hand her a tissue. Women and hair—crown jewels. So many assault it for some fantasy and are shocked when their body rebels. Losing it wounds them. We supply TLC and a way forward. And there's always a box of tissues nearby. So opposite to my thoughtless and brusque infusion tech Friday when I complained my fingers and feet throbbed and asked for medication. She said, "No pain, no gain," handed me Tylenol, and the pain management team's phone number. I burst into tears.

Even though my fingers ache, and I itch all over while taking Genevieve's measurements, I soothe her. "We'll get you back to beautiful." She tests some factory-made wigs and smiles while I explain that custom designs take time. She wants both. When she leaves, she beams—yes, beams.

It's busy. Four more appointments back-to-back. Wigs are popular right now. There's no stigma anymore. People want to change their look; others need them. One of my regulars, a newscaster, owns twelve. Everyone's covering up or changing what nature gave them or took. If you're clever, you can snag a \$79.00 artificial one on the web and style it yourself.

After my day's last client, Maxine appears and asks me to switch my next day off. Normally, I'd say sure. I have no partner, nearby family, close friends, not even a cat. "I'll check," I say, already knowing I can't because it's my infusion day.

"Hey, did you leave the caramels?"

"Probably the Candy Fairy. So generous of you helping your neighbor."

"Was nothing." Another lie.

Outside, the heat hits. My scalp itches. My body aches. I need to get home.

"Ellie!" Jeffrey's voice reaches me despite the city noise. I turn and see him jogging towards me holding a red box. "I forgot to give you this," he says, "For your braids."

He inscribed the box with my name and lined the inside with satin. I touch the interior, then look at him. "Thanks!" I say, and manage a hasty hug. "Sooo sweet of you." As I turn to leave, dizziness descends, and I grab a

streetlight pole.

“You okay?” asks Jeffrey. “I’ll walk you to the subway.”

I know I should tell him. He’s my only real friend. But where do I start? It’s everything. I’m alone. In pain. Miles from home with a judgy mother and cancer that might kill me before I’m forty. All I can do is stay here, tough it out. But really? I spend my days hiding things. Covering bald patches.

Jeffrey tucks a strand behind my ear. Half falls into his hand. Startled, he examines my scalp. “Oh, hon!” Then embraces me. I sink into him and begin to cry.

A windy gust blows that might whisk away more hair, but right now I don’t care.

[PR] Spring 2025

LINDA EVE DIAMOND

SPINNING LOFTY DREAMS



RANDI SCHALET

THREE YEARS

Since his last breath,
he's not worrying about where he'll live next,
about having enough cigarettes.

He's not calling his godfather, begging for cash,
stealing his fuck buddies' checks,
squatting in a musty Motel Six.

Was he thinking of his mama,
with her arms crossed,
her phone turned off?

Or did he picture himself--
a boy asleep in my lap,
head lodged against my neck?

Or remember when we sat on hard stools,
visiting through scratched plexiglass?
If he hadn't died that day,

it might have been a month later--
that's what everyone told me.
Time to quit feeling guilty.

[PR] Spring 2025

LINDA EVE DIAMOND

STORY TIME IN THE SHADOWS



ROSEMARY ROYSTON

GHOSTING CANCER

I remove books about you
from my bedroom,

the place I keep my most-loved
ones,

and carry you, highlighted,
dog-eared & tear stained

down dark stairs,
reshelve you

onto a sagging
shelf that holds

boxes of old tax returns
and busted-up appliances.

[PR] Spring 2025

SHAGUFTA MULLA

IT'S MY TURN TO BLOOM



STEPHEN STEWART

TAKING A HIT

CHARACTERS:

STANLEY CYST / JEBEDIAH AMBROSE—male, 30s, an immersed Civil War reenactor

HOMICIDE DETECTIVE CASSANDRA FULLER—female, 30s (the “good cop”)

HOMICIDE DETECTIVE JULIE BRIGHTWATER—female, 30s (the “bad cop”)

SETTING:

Present day. An interview room at a police station. There is a small table and three chairs.

(JEBEDIAH AMBROSE (STANLEY CYST) is seated at a small table in an interview room at a local police station. He is dressed in a full Civil War Confederate soldier’s uniform. DETECTIVES FULLER and BRIGHTWATER enter.)

FULLER: Good evening. I’m detective Fuller and this is Detective Brightwater. We appreciate you coming in to talk to us this evening and for your patience; we realize you’ve been here quite a while, Mr. Cyst.

CYST: Certainly, but I am afraid you are mistaken.

FULLER: (*confused*) Hold on. You are Stanley Cyst, right?

(*Checking her legal pad.*)

CYST: My name is Jebediah Ambrose, an infantryman in the Confederate Army, at your service.

BRIGHTWATER: Oh, I see. That’s your reenactor name—when you play pretend army on the weekend.

CYST: My good woman...

BRIGHTWATER: It’s Detective Brightwater—and that happens to be my name 24/7.

CYST: As you wish, Detective. But to clarify: American Civil War reenactments provide an historical perspective on the turbulent times that have gripped our nation. We educate people on the price of war and liberty on our own soil. So, no, we aren’t merely “playing pretend army.”

BRIGHTWATER: Then I stand corrected. But just for the record: you are,

according to your driver's license, Stanley Cyst, age 37, of 817 Brock Lane.

CYST: That is accurate.

FULLER: And you've already been advised of your Miranda rights and are currently employed as a history teacher at Lakeland Middle School?

CYST: Yes, to both. But today I am Confederate soldier, Jebediah Ambrose.

BRIGHTWATER: I see. Got it. And I take it that you'd like us to address you that way?

CYST: Indeed—my good. . . detective.

FULLER: Fine, Mr. Ambrose. Can we get you anything? A bottled water?

CYST: No, not unless you happen to have a bottle of decent whiskey that I may partake of? I always enjoy a few shots of good whiskey after a battle.

FULLER: Sorry, no whiskey here at the station. But the battle happens to be why we need to talk to you. Why we need your help.

CYST: I'm happy to be of service, if possible.

FULLER: We appreciate that. We really do. Because something quite tragic occurred at this morning's battle reenactment. You may have heard. Someone was actually killed. A soldier—on the union side.

BRIGHTWATER: Yeah, one of you guys didn't play nice and decided to use actual ammo to kill him. Help me understand, Ambrose: reenactors typically only pretend to die during these things, right? I mean, y'all haven't changed the rules to include live ammunition, have you? If so, that's taking this battle reenacting to a whole new level. Perhaps you can enlighten us on the Civil War battle reenactment experience.

CYST: (*Proudly*) Why certainly. Let's see, where to begin? A Civil War reenactment can take three forms. A living history, meant entirely for the public's education. These events show the lifestyle of the average Civil War soldier, but do not necessarily include a mock battle—which is the best part of it all, in my judgment. Then there are public demonstrations, which are smaller mock battles. However, these battles are only loosely based on actual battles, if at all. They are done to demonstrate basic tactics and maneuvering techniques. And, of course, the scripted battles, such as the one this morning. I myself prefer scripted battles.

FULLER: Define scripted.

CYST: Gladly. The battles are planned so that companies and regiments take the same actions done in the original battles. Strictly followed. No exceptions.

BRIGHTWATER: And who determines who "dies" in these battles?

[PR] Spring 2025

CYST: Ah yes, known as “taking a hit.” Many reenactors are reluctant to do so—or at least early into a battle.

FULLER: Why is that?

CYST: Who wants to die early on and have to remain motionless on the ground for the next three hours, sometimes on an ant hill or a cow patty? No fun in that. But based on the historic events of the battle, reenactors are told to take the hit. What are called “fate cards” are also given to units to help replicate the actual killed and wounded during a battle. Then, there is also a lot of “I got you” going on from the enemy firing at you. Occasionally, an unorganized mock battle will go embarrassingly wrong.

FULLER: How so?

CYST: A soldier fires a single shot, and the entire enemy unit falls down. Quite humiliating.

FULLER: I’m sure.

BRIGHTWATER: And funny as hell.

FULLER: Tell us more about being a reenactor, if you don’t mind.

CYST: Not at all. Basically, you’ve got your three types of reenactors.

BRIGHTWATER: Interesting. Who would’ve thought there are three kinds of fake soldiers?

CYST: Again with a petty insult. Shall I continue?

FULLER: Yes, please, Mr. Ambrose.

CYST: The first type is known as a “Farb.” Also known as a polyester soldier, as he spends little time or money on authenticity.

BRIGHTWATER: The fakest of the fake.

CYST: Your disparaging comments are growing quite tedious, Detective Brightwater.

FULLER: Please, go on, Mr. Ambrose.

CYST: The most common are the mainstreamers. These reenactors appear authentic but are missing some of the finer details, such as the proper undergarments and stitching.

FULLER: Are you a mainstreamer?

CYST: Heavens, no. I am a progressive. We are the most authentic reenactors. Hardcore, as we have been described. We immerse ourselves in the soldier role and lifestyle, at least for the Civil War weekend. Why, I even consume the authentic soldier rations of raw pork salt.

BRIGHTWATER: How yummy.

CYST: It is extremely unappealing, but it is what a Civil War soldier actually ate. After all, we cannot order pizzas from Domino's, now can we?

FULLER: Let's talk about your personal experience as a progressive reenactor. How many years have you been involved in Civil War events?

CYST: This is my 15th year. I got involved during my first year of teaching history. Just a natural connection, I suppose.

FULLER: Sure. And in those 15 years, have you witnessed many accidents among reenactors?

BRIGHTWATER: Or deaths—the real kind?

CYST: No, no, no. Why, the most common issues are either sunburn or dehydration. Perhaps an infrequent pulled muscle by an overly enthusiastic reenactor. Nothing more.

BRIGHTWATER: So, what happened out there this morning is a complete, out-of-the-ordinary tragedy? By the way, did you happen to know the reenactor who died? His name was Larry Riley.

CYST: Yes, I knew Riley. Not well, but we'd crossed paths on the battlefield a few times as well as at social gatherings.

FULLER: Did you happen to cross paths with Larry Riley on the battlefield this morning?

CYST: Yes, I believe so, as I did a few hundred others.

BRIGHTWATER: But you actually fired at Larry, didn't you, expecting him to, how'd you put it—take a hit?

CYST: Perhaps.

BRIGHTWATER: No, precisely. You fired your revolver directly at Larry Riley. Know how we know that? One of your fellow reenactors just happened to capture it on his phone. I guess he's a Farb, I mean using your cellphone camera during a Civil War battle is so non-mid-19th Century! But he showed us the video. You aimed and shot Larry Riley, and boy, did he "take a hit." You killed him.

FULLER: So the question is why? Why would you deliberately murder Larry Riley on the battlefield?

CYST: This is ludicrous. And a video doesn't prove a thing. Things are not always as they appear during a battle reenactment. Take, for instance, this Derringer pistol

(CYST has suddenly produced a Derringer pistol and is pointing it in the direction of the detectives. FULLER and BRIGHTWATER are alarmed and unarmed.)

[PR] Spring 2025

CYST: Relax, detectives, but this pistol appears real, does it not?

FULLER: Mr. Ambrose, listen to me very carefully. I want you to very slowly place that pistol on the table and slide it away from you with a closed fist, understand?

BRIGHTWATER: Do it, now!

CYST: (*Amused*) Why, of course. But this is merely a toy cap. . .

BRIGHTWATER: Now! And slowly!

(CYST slowly places the pistol on the small table in front of him, pushing it away to the opposite end of the table.)

BRIGHTWATER: Now stand up and turn around with your hands on your head.

(CYST does so. BRIGHTWATER frisks him.)

CYST: This is not really necessary. I have no other toy weapons on me.

(BRIGHTWATER nods at FULLER and takes possession of the Derringer on the table.)

BRIGHTWATER: You can sit back down, Ambrose.

CYST: I was merely trying to prove my point, detectives: that Civil War reenactments are an illusion. What seems real is not real at all—like when someone dies during battle. In fact, some reenactors die a few times during a battle reenactment. Riley very well could have gotten back up and died again a couple more times this morning. Happens quite often.

FULLER: No, Larry Riley never got up after you shot him. Because he was dead dead. Ya see, a ballistics expert from our crime lab examined your very authentic Colt revolver, and that's how we know you had live ammo in the gun. I'm certain the autopsy results will confirm that the bullet found in Riley's chest came from your weapon. You fully intended to kill Larry Riley.

BRIGHTWATER: We learned something else about your relationship with Larry Riley. You didn't really like him very much. In fact, you hated the guy. I can't say I blame you—since he was having an affair with your soon-to-be ex-wife. She was leaving you to be with him. Man, that has to hurt. Make you very angry. By the way, your reenactor buddies do like to gossip. They couldn't wait to tell us all about it. We took statements from a few of them today. And we chatted with your wife, too. She confirmed it all.

FULLER: So, do you care to tell us your side of things, Ambrose? Now is the time to do so. Look, perhaps this was all a terrible accident. You thought

your revolver contained blanks, but maybe you'd done some actual target practice with it earlier and forgot you had live ammo in the weapon. Tragedies occur like this more often than people realize. Is that what happened in this case, Ambrose? Huh? We want to hear your version of events. Tell us so we can help you out here.

CYST: (*A pause*) Your information is correct. My reenactor colleagues were telling the truth. Larry Riley was indeed having sexual relations with my wife. Their affair had been going on for a few months. When I asked my wife about it, she admitted it and said she was leaving me for Riley. As you might imagine, I was devastated, as I loved my wife. And I thought she loved me.

FULLER: Sure, that's understandable. So then what did you do?

CYST: Naturally, I confronted Riley about it. He confirmed it. Said it was something beyond their control. That they were destined to be together. What a load of manure.

BRIGHTWATER: Is that when you decided to kill him?

CYST: No. Remember, nothing is as it seems on the reenactment battlefield.

FULLER: You keep saying that, Ambrose, but what exactly do you mean?

CYST: Like me, Larry Riley was a dedicated, pride-filled progressive reenactor. Authentic in every way. That's why I decided to challenge him to a duel. On the battlefield. To settle it like gentlemen, in true, honorable combat. No one else was to know, not even my wife. And no other reenactor was to be involved or harmed. It was just between the two of us.

BRIGHTWATER: (*Realizing*) Wait a minute...

CYST: (*overlapping*) He readily agreed. I knew he would. Riley would not risk being branded a coward. Ah, but you have not bothered to check his weapon yet, have you, detectives? For when you do, your ballistics expert will discover live ammo in his revolver, as well. He fired first—but missed. I, however, did not—making it purely self-defense. And now, if you would be so kind, I would like to end our little discussion and contact my attorney.

FULLER: Fine. Absolutely. Oh, by the way, we've already met your attorney.

CYST: You have? You've met Franklin Davis, my attorney?

FULLER: Yes, we have. Remember the Farb reenactor we mentioned a few minutes ago who shot the video of you shooting Larry Riley?

(*CYST suddenly looks panic stricken.*)

FULLER: Yeah, that was none other than Franklin Davis, your very own reenactor lawyer.

[PR] Spring 2025

BRIGHTWATER: I'm guessing you probably want to rethink retaining his legal services for your murder trial—since he most assuredly will be a key witness for the prosecution. Looks like you've already lost this battle (beat) Mr. Cyst.

(CYST simply lowers his head, defeated. Blackout)

END OF PLAY

[PR] Spring 2025

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS

ETHEREAL BEAUTY III



[PR] Spring 2025

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS

ETHEREAL BEAUTY I



CLAIRE SCOTT

CANCER CARD

It showed up in my email today
LYMPHOMA in capital letters
with a note to please print it,
laminate it, and carry it

With you at all times
flash the card to avoid cooking,
cleaning, grocery shopping,
weeding or washing windows

But leave it in your wallet when
spending leisurely hours in book stores
browsing through *Still Possible*
by David Whyte, sampling the poetry

Of Ocean Vuong and Ada Limón
or in coffee shops, sharing stories
with friends, laughing at wigs
and lost weight, lingering

In treasured moments
tucking them away in your heart
cheating? perhaps
but the truth is

I would give anything
to have never gotten
that ridiculous card
in the first place

POCKETS

She becomes whatever
is placed in her childhood
pockets. Jagged rocks found along
sidewalks, a doll's head
ripped from its body,
her father's burning cigarette,
her mother's empty pill bottle,
that flashlight she held
beneath sheets to light a sanctuary
when there was none.

SHAGUFTA MULLA

EMERGING AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN



IF YOU'RE HUNGRY YOU WILL EAT

Everything was rotten, displayed
in its finest furs, across counters

slick with sweetness from ruptured
tomato skins, bruised peaches.

The blueberries though hadn't burst,
had only shrunk in on themselves, dried

to small pebbles—sad signifiers
of what they once had been, cascading

over table edge and counter to pool
on the floor below. Beyond all of this,

beyond the scent—heavy
and a wrong kind of sweetness

that caught in the lungs, scratched
along the throat—there was a scurrying.

Rivers of ants flowing from fruit
and their leavings to baseboard cracks,

into ancient drywall, the spaces
they made home on the boundaries of my own.

When you're hungry you will eat
and any that get in the way of your open jaws,

you will eat them too. In that place
I lowered myself to my knees,

my mouth to all that was there and festering.
Let the spoiled, the remnants, the my-eyes-

were-bigger-than-my-mouth spill out
and down to stain skin, mottle it red

with what might have been strawberry
turned muddied brown, a could-be blood splatter.

KATIE HUGHBANKS

MULTITUDE



CREATIVE NONFICTION

SCOTT ORTOLANO

THE DAYS

You wake up. You feel the ache in your back. You roll onto your side. Remember, you are not supposed to sleep on your side. Reposition. Move the pillow below your knees to create proper alignment. Do not focus on the pain. Do not obsess about the things you cannot control. Do not lie awake until morning. Stay out of the Reddit forums. Remain positive. Do not give in to despair.

Put on the heated brace to loosen your muscles. Wake up the children. Do not worry them. Make a game of not being able to lift them up. Do not drink too much coffee. Caffeine may or may not (or maybe might not) possibly be a contributing factor. Drink the Metamucil. Take your pills. Have some MiraLAX and pray for a bowel movement. Kiss your children goodbye. Do your morning stretches. They may or may not be important to your recovery. But don't do the wrong ones or use improper form. That could worsen your condition. Remember, your stretches have helped you reach this point—or caused irreparable harm that has delayed your recovery. Recovery is still possible! Unless it is chronic. Do not go into the Reddit forums. Remain positive. Do not give in to despair.

Smile like you used to. Wave to your coworkers. Tell some jokes. Ease into your chair. Reposition the cushions. Adjust again. Assure Dan that, yes, you are staying active. You will absolutely look into those workout videos he sent. Tell Colbie that, yes, you will go by her friend's store this weekend. She's right. It could very well be gluten. Smile again to make it seem believable. The meeting is happening. Do not think about your back. Do not let them see you grimace. Do not let them sense how you've changed. You need this insurance. Your family depends on you. Above all, do not think about how peacefully the dead sleep. Remain positive. Do not give in to despair.

Say hello to the physical therapist. Explain that things are still the same. Yes, you've been doing the stretches. Yes, you've remained active. Yes, you know how important that is. Lie about having intrusive thoughts. Now, quick, while he's smiling, ask the questions that you've gotten from the Reddit forums. Resume the poses. Arch your back. Lean your hips to the right. Place the knee firmly to your chest. Repeat ten times. Hold for thirty seconds. Promise to continue the movements at home. Pray that relief comes this time. Feel the pulsating currents of the TENS unit. Look down

[PR] Spring 2025

through the face port. Answer the questions. Remain conversational. Continue to smile. Do not think about the person you were before. Remain positive. Do not give in to despair.

Return to your car. Ease into the seat. Adjust the padding. Ignore the pain in your back. Do not have ideations of suicide. Lean your head against the steering wheel. Take deep breaths. Calm yourself. Absolutely, under no circumstance, do not let anyone see you cry. Close your eyes. Send positive messages to your family so they won't lose hope. Add an emoji. Do not lose hope. Do not log into the Reddit forums. Remain positive. Do not give in to despair.

WILL HODGKINSON

THE LAST MATCH

“This is the only one we have left,” Kevin said, holding up the match.
“Should we use it?”

“The last one? Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” Kevin shook the match box. “You hear anything in there?”

“Check under the sink. There’s got to be another box.”

“There were three boxes when we got here. This was the third.”

Sitting at the kitchen table, Rachel looked up from her hands. “Better not then. We’ll sit out here.”

“In the dark?”

Rachel looked out the bay window. Almost translucent in the blue twilight sky, the moon hovered, eclipsed by its reflection in the sea.

“You don’t have to say it like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Like it’s some special fucking occasion. It’s just night. Just another night.”

“Jesus, Rach, I wasn’t saying it in any way. I’m used to the candle, that’s all.”

“Well, we can’t have it tonight,” Rachel said. “Not if it’s the last match. Let’s just eat.”

Kevin took a can from the cabinet above the sink, levered off its top with the carving knife, and poured its contents into two bowls.

“Clam chowder again?” Rachel asked.

“Today’s speciality.”

“We need to expand the menu, don’t you think?”

“You’re in luck,” Kevin said. “That was the last can.”

They ate in silence watching the sky darken, the unlit candle on the table between them. No stars appeared. The moon yellowed as it rose, transmuting its reflection from silver to brass.

“Don’t see any boats,” Kevin said.

“We haven’t seen any the whole time we’ve been here,” Rachel said. “There are never any boats in this cove. Haven’t seen one the whole time we’ve been here. All those years. Seclusion, wasn’t that what the website said?”

“Right. Seclusion.”

Below them, the sea moved; shells rasped and clicked in the rising tide.

“There should be a clock,” Rachel said.

"A clock?"

"You know, a real one, one that ticks. Then we'd have a soundtrack."

"And we'd know what fucking time it is."

"How long do you think?" Rachel asked.

"What? How long we've been here?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck. I don't know, Rach. You really want to?"

"No," she said. "I guess not."

The smell thickened with the gloom: wax and apple-cinnamon.

"Jesus," Kevin said. "We could open the door at least. Let some air in at least. The whole house stinks of that candle."

"What? You aren't soothed by its therapeutic aroma?"

"It's the wrong scent anyway," Kevin said. "Apple-cinnamon is supposed to be for fall. Like woodsmoke, y'know. Should be lavender, shit like that."

"Well then, I'll just go down to the store and buy the fucking lavender then."

Kevin said, "You could, y'know."

Rachel said nothing.

Kevin said, "Tonight could be the night."

"It could," Rachel said. "But it won't."

"How the fuck do you know?"

"It's been what? A month now. Two?"

"You said yourself you didn't know."

"I know it's been too fucking long to keep track. You seen any headlights since Seth and Priya left?"

Kevin said nothing, rattling his spoon in his empty bowl.

"Got any texts from them? Any calls?"

"We wouldn't know if they were trying to call. We've got no service. Fuck they could be up at that shitstain town off the turnpike, wasted like usual."

"For two months. That's one motherfucking Iliad of a bender, even for them."

"You don't know it's been two months."

"I know that it might be longer than two."

"The cops could have gotten them," Kevin said. "Thrown them in the county lockup or some shit."

"And what, they didn't tell them about us?"

Kevin shrugged. "County cops. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they don't give a shit. Hipsters from the city, fuck 'em right?"

"Every day we've been watching the road," Rachel said. "You seen any cars?"

"Why the fuck would we see cars? We're the last house on the road. Seclusion, right. Break from the grind?"

"I think everyone's taking a break from the grind," Rachel said. "A fucking permanent break."

"Jesus, Rach. Stop that shit."

"County cops," Rachel said. "County fucking cops. You think there even still is a fucking county anymore?"

"Why wouldn't there be?"

"You want to find out?"

Kevin said, "We could, you know. We're gonna have to try. Last match, right?"

"Try the basement," Rachel said. "There's all those old boxes and shit under the ping-pong table."

"I looked there already."

"You sure? All the boxes?"

"I told you I did. What the fuck else is there to do now but look through the old shit we've got?"

Rachel said nothing.

Kevin sighed, put his face in his hands, and looked out at the moon through his splayed fingers.

"We could leave tomorrow," he said. "First light. Walk all day. There'd still be time if we see something."

"What? Like the county cops."

"Yeah. Like the cops. Like another fucking person. We see some Subaru with kayaks on the roof, and we know it's all bullshit, right?"

"Or we see something else."

The surf breathed in the silence.

"We won't see anything, sitting on our asses here," Kevin said.

"Maybe it's better that way. You think of that?"

"Better? You think this is better?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "It's fucking weird isn't it."

"Sitting here, not doing shit? Yeah, it's fucking weird."

Rachel said, "At least they know."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Who knows?"

"They see. The people in all those end of the world movies. They wake up from the coma and look out the window and they see the zombies or the pandemic bodies and they know. 'Well fuck, world's over. Time to move on.'"

Kevin gestured at the window. "World's still there."

"Why don't you go out and see for yourself?"

"Rach, I'm not leaving you."

"You'd better not," she said. "They left, didn't they."

"And they could be back. Tonight."

"Or tomorrow. Always a day away, right?"

Kevin got up, crossed the kitchen, and flicked the wall switch: on off, on

off. Rachel looked at the light-fixture over the table, the strands of cobweb woven in its chain, the frost of dust on its smoked-glass dome. Kevin was still flicking the switch. Its double-click rattled in the silence.

“Stop that,” Rachel said.

“Why? I thought you wanted some music.”

“Just fucking stop, ok?”

Kevin went back to the table.

“You first, Rach.”

“What?”

“You think it’s fun, listening to your bullshit.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say.”

“Yeah you do. We sit at this table and eat the same fucking spaghetti and canned clam chowder from the pantry and we run through the same script.”

Rachel hid a yawn with the back of her hand. “It’s been a month—you said it yourself. I’m sorry my conversation’s not Tarantino grade.”

“And there she goes again,” Kevin said. “Your wit’s as stale as the fucking spaghetti.”

“That’s good,” Rachel said. “Fucking Oscar Wilde over here.”

“Proving my point,” Kevin said. “How many times do we have to go over this shit. You think the world’s gone to shit and Seth and Priya are the fucking walking dead. Ok. What’s next? What’s your plan for survival?”

Rachel didn’t answer.

“Because I counted two more cans in the pantry when I went to get our dinner. Lentil and minestrone. Which do you want? You pick the last meal.”

Rachel said nothing.

“We’ve got to leave,” Kevin said. “Sooner or later, we have to find out.”

“Then leave,” Rachel said. “Leave like Priya and Seth. ‘Drive into town. Check about the power,’ they said. Check with them. You see why it’s taking so long.”

“I told you, I’m not leaving you.”

“Then we stay.”

“We can’t. You know we can’t.”

“You can,” she said. “You want to.”

“It’s not about wanting,” he said. “We need to, Rach. You know that. Look at it this way: we get going, and we get to town and find Seth and Priya in the drunk tank, then we’ll know. It’ll be a story we can tell. That fucked up time the lights went out and we thought the world had ended—no, for real. But if—if—you’re right, then that won’t be a surprise to you, will it?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “But I don’t want to find out.”

“We’ll have to find out.”

“I won’t,” she said. “I’ll sit right here.”

At the side door a knock came. Neither Kevin nor Rachel moved. They

sat, looking at each other across the table, like actors waiting for the next entrance. The knock came again.

"Anyone? Can you hear me?" The voice was loud in its effort at silence: a breathy rasp.

"Anyone? Please let me in."

Rachel pushed back her chair. Its rear legs screeched on the linoleum. Kevin shook his head, holding his forefinger to his lips. Rachel got up. The side door rattled. Behind its lace-curtained window was a darkness more solid than the night. The visitor was standing too close to make a silhouette.

"I can see you." The doorknob turned clockwise. "I know there's someone there." The doorknob turned counterclockwise. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

Rachel looked back at Kevin.

"Don't," he breathed. "For Christ's sake keep quiet."

"If I was going to hurt you, I would have already," the visitor said. "No reason why I couldn't, not now. But it's safe—for now." Once again the doorknob turned.

"Don't do that," Rachel said.

Behind her, Kevin sucked in breath through clenched teeth.

"Do what?" The visitor asked.

"Don't touch the door."

"Okay. I won't touch it. Please, I need somewhere to stay. It's not safe out there. This is the only house I've seen since morning. Walked for ten miles, must have."

"Not safe? Not safe how?"

"Not safe? You fucking around with me?"

"How not safe?" Rachel asked again.

"No shit? You really don't know?" The visitor laughed, and Kevin flinched in his chair. "I've found a fucking time warp. Where have you been the past two months?"

"Right here," Rachel said. "In the house waiting for the lights to come on."

"Right here," the visitor repeated. "Ten miles. Ok, I see it. Hate to be the bearer of bad news, lady, but you're in for a hell of a long wait."

"Tell us." Rachel put her hand on the knob. Kevin sucked in his breath again, as though telepathically scalded by its touch. "Tell us what's happened."

"I will," the visitor said. "Let me in and I will."

"No." Kevin got up, and strode across the kitchen, the carving knife in his hand, its blade a sickle of reflected moonlight. "Step back from the door. Don't get any nearer."

"Ok. Jesus." The step creaked as the visitor moved. His silhouette

appeared in the window, its head a shaggy blur behind the lace.

“Good enough for you?”

“No,” Kevin said. “Not good. Who the fuck are you?”

“What? You want my name address and zip code? Send me a fucking Christmas card? I can give you all that shit but it won’t do either of us any good. We got a lot more important problems now.”

“Want to tell me anyway? Old times sake.”

The visitor didn’t answer. The sea hissed in tandem with the silence.

“Ok,” Kevin said. “You don’t have a name. Gotcha. Maybe that’s too hard. How about this: where did you come from? You said you walked ten miles, right?”

“Yeah—ten, 20, I don’t know.”

“And you’ve been walking for how long before that?”

“I can’t remember. There’s a lot of fucked-up shit going on out here, in case you haven’t noticed—but I guess you haven’t.”

“Fucked up shit,” Kevin repeated. “With you around, I’ll bet there was.”

“Jesus,” the visitor said. “You said yourself, you don’t know fuck all about what’s been going on.”

“I know a few things,” Kevin said. “I know we’ve been sitting here with no power for two months waiting for our friends to get back. You wouldn’t have happened to see them on your rambles, passing by? Honda Odyssey?”

“I haven’t seen anybody,” the visitor said.

“What a coincidence,” Kevin said. “We haven’t either. Until you.”

The visitor said nothing.

“Coming up here out of the dark like some fucking Sasquatch after two months. And who knows what you’ve been doing for all that time.”

“I’ve been surviving,” the visitor said. “Like everyone else. Like you, too. What’s out here isn’t the same as when y’all drove up here in your fucking Honda Odyssey. There’s no Doordash or Ubers, or caramel macchiatos or deluxe fucking Airbnb rentals out in the wilderness tucked away for your wellness cleanse. That’s gone. There’s a new world now. Guess it’s on me to deliver the tidings, and whatever you think of me won’t do fuck all to change the news.”

Kevin said, “Except maybe we do know.”

“Lady,” the visitor said. “Listen. You believe me.”

Leaning against the jamb, Rachel stiffened.

“I know you do. Tell your boyfriend or husband or whatever the fuck he is to let me in. Your other friends—they’re not coming back.”

“I guess they aren’t,” Kevin said. “They leave, and you come back. Funny how that works out.”

“It’s all left, for Christsakes,” the visitor said. “Can’t do anything about that. We’re all we have now, and we need to work together.”

“Yeah, us three roughing it in the Apocalypse.” Kevin laughed. In his hand, the knife jittered, glancing moonlight. “You’re too late with your pitch, buddy. The Walking Dead’s already in its twelfth season.”

“Fuck it,” the visitor said. “I guess you’d better park your ass in front of the flatscreen and wait for it to come back on. Another couple months I’m sure you’ll be getting back to primetime.”

Kevin looked across at Rachel, his teeth working behind his clenched lips. She looked back at him, not moving.

“You know I’m right, lady,” The visitor said. “You open the door, and I’ll tell you everything. I’ll tell you how it is now.”

Still looking at Kevin, Rachel breathed out, stepped forward, and took the knife from his hand.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re ready.”

When she opened the door, the sea breeze blew in, its smell of salt sharp as rubbing alcohol. The visitor stood hesitating. Over a denim workshirt, he was wearing a plaid sport coat that hung to mid-thigh. Its left lapel bore a streak of brown, gone black in the darkness. Mud or dried blood.

“All good?” he asked.

Rachel looked up at the Visitor, nodded once, and smiled.

“Yes,” she said, and, still smiling, plunged the knife into his chest. “It’s all good now.”

The visitor jerked, and the knife with him, but Rachel did not let go of its handle. She stood facing him, watching the blood run out of his mouth and spread like black frost in his beard. He made no sound. His legs buckled and she took her hand from the knife and pushed him backwards off the step.

Framed side-by-side in the doorway, they looked out.

The visitor lay in the spreading blackness of his blood, which merged with the night.

“I can’t see him,” Rachel said.

“We won’t have to,” Kevin said. “We can worry about that when the police show up. Castle doctrine or some shit. Christ, he was trespassing. And that’s not counting whatever he did to Seth and Priya. But we’ll have time now to figure that out.”

“Yes,” she said. “Plenty of time.”

Kevin’s breath shuddered. “Thank God,” he said. “Thank God, Rach. Jesus, I thought you were actually going to let that crazy fuck in.”

“Maybe I was.”

“But you didn’t. He would have killed us too, you know. Killed us both.”

“Yes,” she said, looking down at her hand, at the blood that stained it. “I guess he would have.”

The moon was gone. They sat as before at the kitchen table in the total darkness. Rachel was still rubbing her hands with the paper towel, admiring

the patches of raw pink on her skin, shadows of the bloodstains she had long since erased.

Kevin took the match out of the box, turned it over in his hands, and touched its tip to the candle's blackened wick.

"We could," he said. "We've earned it now. It'd be okay now."

Rachel looked up. "We could," she said. "But let's not. We can wait one more night."

Kevin closed his eyes, sighed, and put the match back in the box.

"Okay," he said. "One more night."

MEGAN HUTCHINSON

PARTING GIFT FROM THE PROPANE FACTORY

where my husband emerges
each day dusky as a coal miner
with likely the same black lung to match,
and burns and scars written on his skin
like the map of an underground tunnel—
a way out.

He returns home—covered in soot
from a day of melting metal to metal—
with his hands clasped
like the calloused shells of a clam.
For you, he says,
and inside are two wisps of Chinese silk—
two spring green leaves plucked from the bud,
with rich veins still filled with rainwater and sunlight—
from a luna moth.

And then I see it. That pair of eyes half-closed,
that thin layer of scales that brushes off
on fingertips like moondust.

He had found it out back,
next to a heap of slag,
crushed
like a piece of scrap metal,
and saw something worth saving.
With the steady hands of a craftsman,
he dusted away guts and crumpled antennas,
and cut the wings from the mangled body.
They carry their own maps, I know.
Their own system of rivers
winding the span of their forewings.

I will keep them forever,
between two clear strips of packing tape.
I will study their creeks and tributaries.
I will carry them with us—
let them peak from the pages of a book,
let them flutter out the car window between my fingers
and never forget their gift of flight.

JANE ZICH

IN HIDING



SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

ODE TO THE FIRST FEMALE

(GOLDEN SHOVEL OF “FEMALE” BY LUCILLE CLIFTON)

To rob an apple tree means there
will be no forgotten apples, that there is
someone who cares about an
apple, doesn't want the good to rot, doesn't want the amazon
to wither, to lose its largeness in
this orbiting world of us.
Eve is the first recycler, she
may have taken what is
a god's, but it was a nourishment, an unwasting, the
same way we open every dark secret
so that life is livable—how what we
name becomes sayable. We cannot do
the burying, can not
let skeletons remain & have
ponderous weight, a borrowed decay to
spread & sink. We all need airing, to learn
the generous currents of wind, the
way emptied clothes dance on a line, the strength
of something invisible that
dries & satisfies, how one swallowed bite opens
our eyes to hunger, gives us
desire. There is a beyond
a vastness within ourselves,
how we herald each birth,
believe each history is
a small, important story. It will be our
tiny account like a container of baby teeth, a birthright
crocheted or just-woven, how we
arrive to smell the hedge of jasmine & smile,
only that. & perhaps the truth of wildness—our
world making itself flecked, shadowed, & mysterious.
How we bite into an apple again & again & smile.

SHAGUFTA MULLA

TULIP BLUR



DAVID WESLEY WILLIAMS

SOUTHERN DOGFACE

Ivy Coldwater passed from Mississippi into West Tennessee. She was on a search for meaning, for purpose, for answers as to life's card-trick mysteries and low stunts. She was unbothered by having travelled all across the Delta and up through the Hill Country without finding what she sought; she had expected to have to cross state lines, if not national borders. Low-Earth orbit was not out of the question, if the old Caddy could get it up.

So now it was West Tennessee. It was farm roads and country lanes, mostly, and old fiddle tunes on the box—sadness, sawed in two and then made whole, in reel time. The singers sang about sweethearts and home, they sang about that old soldier's joy.

The old Caddy made huffs of dust as it went. But otherwise, there was not much stir to these parts. She drove on, past sod farms and signs for deer processing and taxidermy. A road called Berry Bottom and a creek called Muddy. A decorative yard rooster the size of a small man, poised to strut, all banty-like, and a nine-foot wooden bear, intricately carved and stained black, standing on its hind legs with one paw raised, as if begging to differ. Eggs for sale. Soybean fields. Here and there a barn, a house and another, some cattle lowing, and in time a series of red yard signs with white writing that said, simply, "Jesus," as if the savior were mounting a campaign for U.S. Congress, Tennessee's 7th District. She imagined Jesus as a freshman lawmaker in D.C., with wide eyes and full heart, set on lifting the great nation up off the blocks it had been on. But He'd pay hell even getting elected, Ivy thought, with His radical views on peace and acceptance, and how He'd be out of step, gun-wise and just generally, in the armed-to-the-teeth South.

On she drove. More barns and farms, and then a small house in the front yard of which a sandy-haired boy with a tumbleweed gait chased a butterfly with a BB gun. It was made to look like a hunting rifle, pump-action with a sight. Well, Ivy hoped to hell it was just a BB gun. She didn't know about the butterfly. Maybe it was a Mourning Cloak or a Swarthy Skipper or a Southern Dogface. Maybe it was a Common Jezebel, fluttered to West Tennessee on black-veined wings from Southeast Asia, all that way, only to be chased by a boy with a BB gun. She thought about stopping to yell at the boy—"Quit chasing that Common Jezebel, you," she'd shout.

Ivy stopped the car to watch. The boy was about nine, not yet grown into his body. He was all knees and elbows, somehow short and gawky all at once.

He didn't seem built so much as cobbled, out of whatever was handy, popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners, rubber bands and creek mud. But there were hints of what he might be, someday, when he grew into his body. He was skinny as a tent stake, but he'd be solid as a railroad spike, when he filled out. He'd make somebody a fine linebacker someday, or a soldier, one. He already had a hard little fist of a heart beating up from underneath his bright-orange Tennessee Volunteers T-shirt as he chased that butterfly. Ivy could see it; anyone could. And he had a hard little head, though little was the wrong word, on second glance. It was near man-size already, and closer to square than any other shape. Ivy thought they'd have to make that head a special helmet before he could play football, or go off to war. He had a man's eyes, too—dark and vacant, dull as lug nuts, and seeing nothing but that butterfly. They both were approaching the car, the former caterpillar and the future railroad spike.

The one flew in swoops and plummets and the other gave tumbleweed chase, whooping and shooting, or aiming to, all the while. The butterfly seemed safe, for now—the boy couldn't stop running long enough to pump the BB gun, so he was down to making shooting sounds as he pulled the trigger. He seemed to think that BB gun was part Ma Deuce machine gun and part space-movie ray gun, by the sounds he made.

The butterfly hovered over the Caddy and then alighted on the hood. The boy was gaining on it, all this while. When it stopped, he launched himself. Well, flung, more like, without fear or care. He wanted to shoot that butterfly and smother it all in one great act of hurtle and whoop.

He landed on the hood in a heap. He led with his head, the hardest part of him. He seemed to lose a limb—nope, that was the BB gun, which caromed off the hood and onto the country road. The butterfly was long gone, lit out for the northern states, maybe, or back to Southeast Asia, who knew? It was gone before Ivy could identify it, not that she could have, really; she only knew the lovely, silly names they had—the Esmeralda Longtail and the Frosty Flasher and the Ghostwing Meanderer.

The boy didn't move for the longest time, and then he went for the gun. There was a flicker of panic across his face as he patted about for it, to no avail. His prey also seemed to have vanished.

Now he rose onto one elbow, looked about, and saw her. She was standing in the middle of the country road, Ivy Coldwater, a pissed-off woman of peace, protector of small winged things, holding a pump-action BB gun by the barrel like it was a chicken whose neck she'd just wrung. The boy just stared in wonder. For he knew that caterpillars turned into butterflies, but nobody told him what happened next.

CONTRIBUTORS

DR. MAUREEN ALSOP is a psychologist and writer, author of seven poetry collections and a novel, *Today Yesterday After My Death*. Her poems and short stories have appeared in numerous journals including *AGNI*, *South Dakota Review*, and *TEXT*, among others. She is the recipient of several poetry prizes, including those from *Harpur Palate*, *Bitter Oleander*, and the Roderick Centre Fellowship for Regional and Remote Writers (in partnership with Varuna House). Her translations of the poetry of Juana de Ibarbourou are available through *Poetry Salzburg Review*.

MINYONG CHO was born and raised in Seoul, Korea until she was 16 when she immigrated to California with her whole family. She moved to the East Coast to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then spent almost six years in the Middle East for her doctoral research in Islamic art history. She is passionate about sharing her multicultural experiences as an adult who was abused as a child. Her work has never appeared anywhere. *Ponder Review* is the first magazine to publish her work. She now lives in New York City, where she enjoys outdoor climbing, winter hiking, aerial dancing, and writing.

GEOFF COLLINS is a writer and gardener from Milwaukee who has held jobs as a brick mason, farmhand, middle school teacher, solar installer, prep cook, and currently works in biotech. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Whitefish Review*, *Interim*, *Qu*, *Ponder Review*, *Flint Hills*, and others. He lives with his family in the heart of dairy country, where there's always great cheese.

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MATT GOLD is based in Brooklyn, NY, where he divides his time between music and photography. As evidence of the democratizing nature of his approach to photography, Gold has no formal training in the visual arts. His first image, a picture of his cat on a Sony Ericsson Z310A flip phone, was taken in 2008, and he has continued to explore the aesthetic possibilities of that instrument. Gold's work has been featured in numerous publications and journals. Most recently, he collaborated with Jones Soda, for their PRIDE 2023 campaign and was part of Beppe's Election Night Exhibition.

BRYNN HAMBLEY (she/they) is a queer and disabled playwright, theatre artist, producer, administrator, and educator. She earned her BA in Theater from Gettysburg College and her MFA in Theatre. Her work is ephemeral and speculative, focusing on the stories of queer and disabled people across time, emphasizing how hope permeates grief. Brynn's work has been developed with *Dramatic Question Theatre*, *The Brick*, *The Tank*, *First Kiss Theatre*, *Vibrating Body*, and more. Her poetry and short plays have been published in *Coachella Review*, *The Perch*, *The Mercury*, *Best Emerging Poets in America* and others. She is a Dramatist's Guild Member. www.brynnhambley.weebly.com.

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KATIE HUGHBANKS (she/her) is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been published nationally and internationally in more than 65 magazines. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Blackbird Songs* (Prolific Press, 2019) and *It's Time* (Finishing Line Press, 2024). She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky.

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JOE LUGARA is a New Jersey-based artist. He took up painting and photography as a boy after his father discarded them as hobbies. His works, depicting unusual forms and fantastic dreamscapes, are loosely inspired by horror and science fiction films produced from the 1930s through the late 1960s. Mr. Lugara's images have appeared in more than 25 publications and numerous exhibitions. Paintings from his series "Scrutiny" have been featured in both the Winter 2023 *Harvard Advocate* and the Spring 2025 *Lincoln Review*. His first photography book, *The Indicators: 127 Sci-Fi Scenes*, is available through Barnes and Noble.

ANDREA MARCUSA is a writer, watercolor artist, and photographer. She spends part of everyday hiking the paths of northern Central Park in New York City. Andrea's writings have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Citron Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Milk Candy Review*, and others. She's received recognition in a range of competitions, including *Smokelong*, *Best Microfiction*, *Raleigh Review*, *Southampton Review*, and is the author of the chapbook *What We Now Live With*, (Bottlecap Press.) She's a member of the faculty at The Writer's Studio in New York City and a flash editor for Cleaver Magazine.

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Literary Reader, Metonym, Midwest Review, Reed Magazine, Santa Clara Review, Saranac Review, Stonecoast Review, Trickster Literary Journal, West Marin Review, and Winter Tangerine Review. Her paintings are based on imagery from the unconscious, which operates as a dynamic image-creating partner contributing surprises throughout her painting process.