

PONDER REVIEW

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Fall 2025



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for Women

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PONDER REVIEW

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## A NOTE TO READERS

*Ponder Review* celebrates the ninth full year that it has been sharing visual art and literature into the world. This year's writers and artists put people at the center of their work, people who are trying to understand the complexities of the modern world around them.

The nonfiction essays question modern medical practice in the face of addiction and aging and how loved ones help or harm the problems that unfold in front of them.

The drama places people in the middle of busy thoroughfares where they have to cope with the difficult reality of personality and improbability. We see identity growth, challenges, and acceptance.

Our fiction writers explore life's fragility and its enduring compassion; one fiction writer invites us into questions of literal life and death while the other helps us think about generational kindness and how to treat, speak to, and love people experiencing homelessness.

Poets show humans in nature, humans with humans, and humans alone, and their verses move us through our own feelings about these, challenging us to participate more fully in the way we move through the world.

Our cover art this year brings these themes together, featuring human figures. The smell of coffee evoked in the art returns in "Morning Coffee" in a home later in the journal. This image highlights the particular struggles and joys of humanity at the center of what we are all living right now, at the end of 2025. The artwork within this volume treats the world through abstraction, inviting us to meditate and center ourselves through art that moves with color.

We thank you for reading and our contributors for creating these invitations to feel this world more acutely.

Sincerely,

*Lisa Shugert Bevevino*, on behalf of the Editors

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GLORIA HEFFERNAN

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## ELEGY FOR A DINOSAUR

They didn't know on that morning  
that a meteor was hurtling through space  
like a runaway train careening  
toward their planet home.  
Didn't have time to worry  
about how their children would cope  
with the aftermath because  
there would be no aftermath.  
Didn't have time to fear the future  
or regret the past,  
or race out to the supermarket  
to stock up on canned goods  
thinking they might be able  
to ride out the crisis.  
They woke up that morning  
knowing only that it was time  
to pee and poop and search for food,  
and maybe score a tasty pterodactyl  
for dinner with the family.  
They didn't have to shelter in place  
watching what they could not comprehend  
unfold in real time on CNN  
while they drank their coffee  
and waited for the toast to pop up.  
They didn't see it coming.  
It was over in a flash.  
They never even had time to blame  
the T-Rex living across town,  
or wonder what role they had played  
in their own demise.

XIAOLY LI

---

## MAKING DUMPLINGS

I wrap the dumpling with three delicacies—chive, shrimp, egg,  
as I hold my tongue  
with words for you—  
*a boat seeks its harbor;*  
*a flower remains*  
*destined to fruit;*  
*yet time is ticking.*  
But silence  
stretches too long.  
The wrapper thins;  
the stuffing swells.  
You give no answer  
but laughter  
to my story  
of spoiled mice,  
too lazy to propagate  
then extinct.  
The dumpling bursts, spilling out—my anger, unhinged.  
Broken, now,  
pan-seared,  
a toasted aroma expands,  
unconfined, delicious.  
Finally let loose—  
free to lay bare  
the words I held.  
No regret lingers  
for my urge  
to protect and nurture.  
*Agency*, you say.  
My voice  
is *My* agency.  
Though I choke  
quietly after  
you leave—  
yes, we all savored the dumplings—sealed or split open.

EMILY RANKIN

---

## MEMORY



ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 20 X 16 INCHES

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

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## LAST WISHES

I want bomb to end with an e,  
that domed dessert with spumes of whipped cream,  
rainbowed sprinkles, kirsch syrup, Grand Marnier,  
a Bombe of ahhs and yums.

I want tort to end in an e, not litigated in civil court,  
but a dense, flourless chocolate cake in three layers,  
each slathered with buttercream or strawberry jam  
or ganache, no bang of a gavel,  
just the slide of a fork.

I want lava to be followed by the word cake,  
with a gooey center, not volcanic ash  
and molten rock spewing on folks caught  
in a last moment of horror, mouths agape, eyes empty  
of eyes, petrified for generations of tourists to eye.

I want mud to be bookended by Mississippi and Cake,  
chocolate layers topped with lumps  
of softened marshmallow beneath a pour  
of melted chocolate oozing down your throat,  
not mud alone as homes sliding down mountains.

I want to open the glass case in a diner that displays  
tall Coconut Cakes, those iced snowdrifts,  
and Apple Pies with steam vents in the center  
like the O of awe, and Baked Alaska igloos  
swirled with chocolate syrup.

I want to eat hunks of each with my bare hands  
moments before I die and rise  
like an Angel Cake into a buttery sky.

KATIE KENNEY

---

PATTON PAVERS

Your town is touting Big Dairy  
and the deer are more dead than they've ever been  
here on the side of the road each three way stop  
whispers go, no not yet, not a green light  
just yellow flashing, a shoulder to be rolled through.  
Are you thriving? Dollar General dreaming?  
A backyard booming house party, cat colony crazy,  
the rowdy river men always on a line. Get your gold  
three dollar sign jackpot at Ken's BiLo with the glow  
of summer slot machines buzzing beside Little Debbies  
center soft in June heat, oozing cakey creamy frosting.  
You're always winning big in a small town,  
bursts of blue and white along the power line  
silhouetted sky, the firework smoke  
always leaving left with the wind.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ROB ROGERS

---

MORNING COFFEE

The blurred amber-white cross hatches of a curtain backlit by a rising sun appear before his crusted eyelids as he greets a new morning. In that hazy delusion between slumber and routine, he forgets for the moment that he has awoken far from home. Instinctively, he reaches beside the bed for the coffee sweetened each morning by a rotating menu of cookie and candy bar flavored creamers. As his hand returns empty, he realizes she is not there.

He'll just have to wake up on his own this morning.

Rather than Colombian roast, he is greeted by the scent of hewn maple with a hint of wet hiking boots and his own morning breath. He finds his glasses on the frame of the wall beside his bed, then raises his head and looks across his cabin at the empty wine glass beside his open Lenovo ThinkPad.

His home for the week is spartan but comfortable and contains everything a writer could need. A cozy bed with several quilts, an electric heater mounted to the far wall that kept him warm all night, a portable fan for white noise. A pair of well-washed glass sliding doors past the foot of the bed, a small window behind him with its shade folded up. A metal chair with a salvaged patio cushion and a folding table, light enough to position perfectly by the doors to gaze outside for inspiration. The tablecloth was a thoughtful touch, nice to add color to the room. A ceiling light and small lamp that he has yet to turn on.

He picks his cell phone off the floor and sees it's 8:00 a.m. He missed the sunrise again. Oh well. A fresh pot of coffee should be waiting across the hilltop in the pottery barn, past the shower house, and it's not going to walk itself to him. He has an hour left to write, and his last hour of morning sunshine should not be wasted. Time to get up.

His toes find his Tevas beside the bed and he rises, then pulls open the curtain and the sliding door to draw in the cold morning air. He forgets momentarily that he is only wearing boxers above the ankles. It's more than he would wear at home, but his neighbors in the other cabins could walk by. The raincoat flung over the chair and the shorts beside the bed that he wore hiking yesterday should do. It is, after all, already 50 degrees and he'll be carrying hot coffee on the way back from the barn.

But it can wait until after he stretches. A few more deep breaths. He doesn't wake up in the mountains very often.

His thoughts briefly skip home. She's probably been up for a while. Or maybe she's sleeping in. He hopes so. She deserves to sleep in for once.

\* \* \*

It has been only eighteen months since his wife began greeting him each morning with coffee. It's one of the few things that hasn't changed during that time. It's not a bad way to measure how far he has come.

Coffee has been with him all his life. Through high school debate and theater, pre-dawn AP exams, early morning college classes, all-nighters studying for law school finals, late nights and early mornings writing briefs and preparing for depositions. At airports during flight delays, waiting for trains at foreign vacation destinations, lounging with her at seaside breakfast tables, enjoying quiet mornings beside the bay at her parents' house. Coffee has always meant more with his wife.

Although she inherited a propensity toward maternal kindness that has always made even the most stressful days brighter, serving him coffee in bed has not been one of their morning routines until recently. He spent the first 17 years of their marriage getting his own coffee, often multiple cups before she woke up, and he occasionally even brought her a cup. Back then he drank his black as hell, and only for industrial purposes.

Then the nightmares returned. A decade of adolescent depression that had lain dormant for a quarter century returned in a cataclysmic eruption, and a crisis finally arrived a year and a half ago. His mind finally cracked, and crippling anxiety nearly destroyed his professional and personal relationships. Two different three-month sabbaticals from work in a year became necessary.

Of course, none of this surprised him, and he warned her long ago that it could happen again. He even included a codicil about it in his marriage proposal. Ever the lawyer, he had to include a disclaimer to avoid too much guilt if the disease she had never seen, but that he knew all too well, ever returned. It took a while, but the inevitable fall finally occurred.

Many of the symptoms this time around were different, as his illness had metastasized while in remission. But not all of them. Home again was the insomnia, with its pre-dawn convulsions of racing thoughts and pessimistic rumination that resist distraction by television. Being unable to sleep made everything else much harder to control.

A return to therapy and psychotropic medication provided the blueprint for recovery, but they couldn't stop the early morning agony. Nothing helped, except the soothing, stabilizing pre-dawn conversations with the woman who loved him. And those conversations were always accompanied by coffee.

Initially he tried to white-knuckle it through those mornings without waking her until at least 6:30 a.m. His abnormal circadian rhythms had long

ago driven her to sleep in a separate bedroom, so when his pre-dawn explosions returned, he initially tried to survive until the sun rose by rewatching the movies on his iPad that had helped him fall asleep in hotel rooms. She was, after all, still working and supporting the family, and there was also the sixth grader who needed attention before school. But on several mornings, she awoke to delirious confrontations that were nearly impossible to avoid or disarm.

Having little other choice and not yet wanting to leave him, she began setting her alarm clock for 5:45 a.m., preparing to extinguish any blazes smoldering in his bedroom before workdays began. And so began their new routine.

Each morning at 5:55, his door would open, and she would appear with two cups. The last glimmers of starlight through his Venetian blinds would illuminate the covers she lifted before settling beside him. She would receive a report on his latest symptoms—how long he had been awake, if he was obsessing about the familiar subjects, what tactics suggested by his therapist had been deployed, and whether they were working.

On lucky mornings, he'd quickly become calm, and she'd be permitted to fall asleep beside him for a few minutes. On others, too many during those first few months, he would remain so agitated that she would have to step out and allow him to try to regain self-control before returning with two more cups for them to sip under duress. Sometimes the tears flowed in torrents, and she would hold him while he quivered in her arms and promised he would somehow, someday get better. She always tried her best to believe him.

But always, there was coffee.

Depression is comical in its contradictions. The stimulant that had fortified him through years of a stressful legal practice by shaking him to life and empowering his confidence now was a sedative used with medicinal compassion to calm him down. Little else seemed to work for a while.

\* \* \*

Eventually their mornings became more peaceful. Trazadone lengthened his sleep to four hours a night, and Prozac and Lamotrigine leveled his moods and increased his ability to slow his racing thoughts and ignore their destructive content.

As the amount of time he slept each night began to increase, she began setting her alarm clock later, first 6:00, then 6:15, then 6:30 a.m. Her knock on the door was more often greeted by a yawn and his kind-hearted lies about having managed to remain asleep before she arrived. Their discussions slowly became more focused on reflections of progress made. Mental notes were studied to identify milestones. He was also transformed by the discovery of a long undetected passion for writing and began writing

his memoir. He even felt ready to return to work three months into the first sabbatical.

Still the morning coffee routine continued. The script shifted from examining the current symptoms of his disease to forecasting work stresses that could induce panic attacks. They would anticipate the unpredictable and strategize how to overcome the unexpected. Their pre-dawn conversations became a prophylactic remedy.

But sadly, the initial hope of recovery didn't last. They still had more nightmares to endure.

He soon began to realize that his latest fight with depression had changed him, and he was forced to give up his job. Writing the book seemed to help. But the corner they thought they had turned was a mirage, and as they approached the release date for his book, it became clear that things were not getting better. He thought that confessing openly in his book about his illness would help him conquer it. But the stress of publicly disclosing his past left him trapped. Cognitive distortions that he did not yet understand, the voices in his head telling him that no one will ever like or accept him, took their revenge. Stripped of the armor of secrecy, those voices told him that the public revelation of his weaknesses would destroy him by drawing scorn that he could not bear.

The alarm clock was set back again, and their pre-dawn hours were now devoted to hypothesizing about what had gone wrong and how the next breakthroughs could be achieved. She could have been scared by the setback, could have given up hope. But through his second freefall, she remained strong and supportive, persevering through the bitter mist rising from their mugs each morning. She told him that she was proud of him for not giving up and that their marriage would be fortified by their pain. She climbed down into the hole with him to try to pull him back into the light, but the weight holding him down was too heavy for her to carry alone.

And so he cracked again during another furious, sleepless night one month before his book was released. Darker temptations he had not felt for more than twenty years tortured him through that night. By the time she arrived with coffee the next morning, he could not drink it. They both feared they may never share coffee again.

Again, she helped him survive. They escaped to the ocean for the day and planned their next steps. A second sabbatical was deemed necessary, and this time they would also try hospitalization. They needed, once and for all, to finally locate and dig out the tumor, no matter how long it took or how much more pain it caused.

They found an outpatient program close to home where he could focus on his disease during the day, but still spend the sleepless nights and mornings at home with her. Once again, she met him before dawn each

morning to brace for another day confronting his demons and trying to conquer them.

The two months he spent in treatment were often painful, but he finally began to learn what was wrong and how to cope. And he shared it all with her, while having coffee in bed before the sun rose. They reviewed what he was learning about post-traumatic stress and cognitive distortions. They studied feelings wheels and anger icebergs and urge surfing. They talked about avoidance and projection and catastrophizing, and she helped him reframe his understanding of the past. They practiced tactics like box breathing to arrest panic attacks and reminisced about Lamaze classes, except this time she was the coach holding his hand.

Slowly, they began to reframe the self-destructive core values that had been holding him hostage since he was a little boy. By working together, they retrained his mind to leave the past behind and rebuild a new life. As more nights turned into sunlit mornings, they both began to heal.

He eventually began sleeping six hours each night, and by the time he finished treatment and was ready to return to work for good, she had unplugged her alarm clock. Finally, she could spend mornings exercising again. The time for self-care that had been stolen from her by his illness was recovered. She could now treat the wounds inflicted on her by his disease. She began posting inspirational videos on Facebook of the sun rising above their neighborhood during morning walks. More and more often, he remained asleep when she returned.

But still, even now, she greets him each morning bearing a cup of coffee as he lies in bed, her arms now moist with sweat, a hint of freshly applied Secret accenting the aroma of the Taster's Choice. Now he usually asks her to set the cup beside the bed before she leaves to shower. Sometimes he falls back to sleep, and the coffee is often cold by the time he drinks it. But she doesn't mind. It's nice to see how much things have changed.

\* \* \*

But this morning, he is not with her. For the first time since the nightmares returned, he has left her to spend a week writing in the Adirondack Mountains.

She doesn't worry about him being beyond her care. He's been back at work for five months now. The sleepless nights are distant memories. There are still occasional panic attacks, but they are more easily arrested and never last that long. Fewer mornings are spent analyzing progress. Contentment has become his default mood. Her own needs are once again an equal priority.

The long-feared release of his book arrived without the apocalypse he expected. The others did not judge him after all. Friends he had held at arm's length expressed heartfelt sympathy, asked to learn more, told him they

were proud of him and wished they had known before. Many cheered for him at book signings. Their support was sincere and made him feel loved.

The initial comfort he found confessing his pain to the world drove him to write more. He began penning essays about his cognitive distortions and how the two of them were learning to cope with them. Several pieces were published in literary magazines, and one won an award. He discovered a new identity and began calling himself a writer to strangers. He became proud of the new person he was becoming.

And so he decided to come here, to the mountains far from her, to spend a week at a writing residency with other authors, living out his new fantasy. He has shared coffee with strangers while confessing his struggles, and they are kind, encouraging. He has enjoyed philosophical meals prepared with locally grown delicacies in the shadow of peaks lit by the setting sun, the spring flowers blooming in the valley below. During starlit evening retreats, he has read the confessions he types on his laptop to other artists while sitting on a cozy loveseat and nibbling on chocolate. Their compassion warms him like a new cloak. The clouds in the night sky have rolled away and the divine is within reach. He is inspired.

But still, he wishes she were here. He stares at her photo on his phone and presses it gently to his lips. The scent of hazelnut and her lavender shampoo rises from the screen. He can feel the caress of her fingers through his hair and the embrace of her arm around his shoulder. He'll be home soon, and she is never far away.

[PR] Fall 2025

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 5531



WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 8.5 X 11 INCHES

BRIAN S. BRIJBAG, ESQ.

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## ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF ELEPHANTS

### *Characters*

CLARKE: a professor

AUDREY: a poet

JANITOR: a person in their 60s.

### *Setting*

A nearly empty train station. A single wooden bench. A large suitcase sits to one side. Professor CLARKE sits, staring at a notepad. Enter AUDREY—scarf, boots, suitcase, and a poet's sense of being unbothered.

### *Time*

Late night.

CLARKE: (*Muttering to himself*). The train was due at 11:17. We are currently at . . . 12:03. That's a delay of forty-six minutes and twelve seconds. If it arrives in the next six minutes, Amtrak will have statistically improved its quarterly performance.

AUDREY: (*Sits two seats away*). Let me guess . . . Your idea of a thrill is finding a decimal out of place on someone else's résumé?

CLARKE: Only if the decimal was trying to be something it wasn't . . . like a comma with delusions of grandeur.

AUDREY: Hmph . . . What are the odds an elephant walks in here?

CLARKE: I'm sorry?

AUDREY: An elephant. Through those double doors. Tusks, trunk, the whole improbable pachyderm parade.

CLARKE: (*Doing finger math in the air*). Approximately 0.0000000023%.

AUDREY: So you're saying there's a chance.

CLARKE: I'm saying if an elephant walks in here, I'll burn my thesis, forgive my father, and finally understand why people go to Burning Man.

AUDREY: Deal. Then I'll stop pretending I only believe in coincidence and start admitting I've been waiting for something impossible to walk in and prove me wrong.

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*Beat.*

AUDREY (CONT'D): Is that your thing, then? Probability?

CLARKE: It's not a thing, it's a discipline. Like fencing. Only with decimals instead of sabers and slightly fewer puncture wounds.

AUDREY: Clearly, you've never survived a poet panel. We speak in wounds and enjambment.

CLARKE: (*Scribbles something*). Yes, well . . . wounds are harder to chart. Especially when people applaud them.

AUDREY: I like you. You talk like a spreadsheet that's afraid of being vulnerable.

CLARKE: I dislike you. You sound like a creative writing degree with abandonment issues.

*(She grins. He nearly does.)*

AUDREY: You didn't ask if I'm waiting for a train.

CLARKE: I assumed. Nobody loiters in a place this emotionally sterile without transportation as an excuse.

AUDREY: Wrong. I stay in places like this on purpose. Liminal spaces. Transitional thresholds. Human Tupperware.

CLARKE: That sentence alone should come with a disclaimer and a syllabus.

AUDREY: What are you waiting for?

CLARKE: Statistically? Nothing. Realistically? Slightly less than nothing. But ummm . . . The train to somewhere.

AUDREY: Fictional construct, that one. My unreliable narrator was more reliable.

CLARKE: Not a believer in timetables?

AUDREY: Not a believer in time. Too fragile. It shatters under prose.

CLARKE: And yet prose hasn't managed to get a single train to arrive on time.

AUDREY: Yet. There's always the elephant.

*(She gestures toward the door. They both look. Nothing.)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): Still time.

CLARKE: For an elephant to appear, we'd need: one rogue zookeeper, a scheduling anomaly, and a reality flexible enough to let wonder pass through security . . . and possibly divine intervention.

AUDREY: Oh, I don't believe in God.

CLARKE: Good. He's statistically unreliable.

AUDREY: But I do believe in elephants with excellent comedic timing.

CLARKE: Well then . . . Let us be vigilant.

AUDREY: You know, statistically speaking, no one packs a suitcase that large unless they're fleeing something or hiding a body.

CLARKE: Or teaching an advanced seminar on chaos with props.

AUDREY: You brought visual aids?

CLARKE: It's not for the class. I'm no longer . . . attached to the institution.

AUDREY: Oof. "No longer attached"—the academic version of "It's not you, it's tenure."

CLARKE: I quit.

AUDREY: Voluntarily?

CLARKE: In a statistical sense.

AUDREY: Ah. The noble self-immolation of the intellectual elite. Did they refuse to fund your time machine again?

CLARKE: I'm not in the mood to unpack that particular suitcase.

AUDREY: Then why bring it?

CLARKE: Eh . . . You?

AUDREY: What's in mine?

CLARKE: If we're playing "Guess the Baggage."

AUDREY: Mostly grief. And wrinkle-resistant black . . . Funeral. My sister . . . Don't offer condolences. I already left them at the chapel with the lilies and the people who only cry at socially sanctioned intervals.

CLARKE: I wasn't going to.

AUDREY: Good. I'm hoarding my sadness for winter.

*(CLARKE reaches down and opens a small side pouch on his suitcase. Produces a tin of mints. Offers one.)*

CLARKE: One in ten mints, statistically, will fall out and disappear into the abyss of carpet and cosmic indifference.

AUDREY: That's beautiful. You make loss sound minty.

CLARKE: I'm expanding my narrative tools. Apparently, sarcasm doesn't qualify as vulnerability. My suitcase though . . . It's everything. From the office. Books, notes, things I thought mattered . . . They didn't ask why I was leaving.

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AUDREY: They already knew.

CLARKE: No . . . They didn't notice.

*(AUDREY leans back and a breathes a long exhale.)*

AUDREY: That's worse.

*(Beat. She turns to him suddenly, brightly, performatively again.)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): So! Are we bonding yet? Because I think this is the part in the indie film where one of us says something raw and then there's a cut to a slow-motion montage set to cello.

CLARKE: I'm afraid I forgot my cello.

AUDREY: That's okay. I brought emotional violins.

*(She pantomimes tiny violins on her shoulder. CLARKE chuckles.)*

CLARKE: You're infuriating.

AUDREY: You're unraveling.

CLARKE: You make me feel like I'm in a Beckett play where someone replaced the silence with espresso shots and unresolved trauma.

AUDREY: And you make me feel like I'm a typo in a math textbook - unwanted, but somehow proof that humanity touched the page.

*(Suddenly—far off—a train whistle. They both freeze, hopeful. But the train doesn't arrive.)*

AUDREY: Wasn't ours.

CLARKE: Statistically improbable.

AUDREY: Emotionally rude.

*(They sit. Then silence.)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): So what does a man like you do after quitting the world?

CLARKE: Recalculate . . . Reconsider . . . Contemplate disappearing in a statistically satisfying way.

AUDREY: Define "statistically satisfying."

CLARKE: Clean exit. Low impact. No need for others to adjust their schedules.

AUDREY: That's not satisfying. That's polite. There's a difference.

*(Silence. AUDREY watches him. Then . . .)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): You're not the only one who thought about vanishing . . . I stood at my sister's funeral and realized—I didn't cry. I monologued. Like

it was a reading. Like she was an audience.

CLARKE: Grief doesn't follow rehearsal cues.

AUDREY: Neither do elephants apparently.

*(CLARKE almost smiles.)*

CLARKE: Do you regret not feeling more?

AUDREY: No . . . I regret not noticing when she started disappearing.

CLARKE: Probability of regret increases with awareness.

AUDREY: So does being human.

*(Beat.)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): Let's say it happens. Elephant walks in. No handler. No parade. Just . . . arrives.

CLARKE: Then I'd rethink everything I know about this station, this night, and potentially the multiverse.

AUDREY: And I'd assume it was something beautiful arriving just after I stopped believing in arrivals.

CLARKE: You wouldn't be startled?

AUDREY: Oh, I'd be startled. But not surprised. The world's been weird for years. An elephant would barely register. Besides—people don't believe miracles when they're not marketed properly.

CLARKE: You think wonder requires branding?

AUDREY: I think we don't trust what doesn't apologize for being improbable.

CLARKE: So if it appeared—

AUDREY: —someone would check their phone, someone would look away, someone would post about it and be ignored.

*(The doors swing open. It's a JANITOR. 60s. Bored. Pushing a mop. They are both startled.)*

CLARKE: That was a 0.0041 spike in my heart rate.

AUDREY: You almost statistically mattered.

CLARKE: Almost.

AUDREY: Almost is all any of us get.

*Beat.*

AUDREY (CONT'D): If I were a better poet, I'd write about you.

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CLARKE: If I were a better statistician, I'd avoid hypotheticals entirely.

AUDREY: Too late. We're in one. This whole night's a footnote to reality.

CLARKE: Then let's quantify it. What are we?

AUDREY: Transient variables. Adjacent improbabilities.

CLARKE: I was hoping for something I could overanalyze and pretend to understand emotionally.

AUDREY: Fine . . . You're the kind of man who notices when the stars are slightly out of order . . . I'm the kind of woman who rearranges them out of boredom.

CLARKE: We're doomed.

AUDREY: Oh, obviously. But aesthetically.

CLARKE: Do you ever think about not getting on the next train?

AUDREY: All the time . . . Do you ever think about vanishing entirely?

CLARKE: Not in the dramatic sense. More like . . . selective erasure. Like being written out of someone's memory by a particularly lazy author.

AUDREY: Sounds peaceful.

CLARKE: No. It sounds convenient. There's a difference.

*(Beat. CLARKE fidgets with his wedding ring finger—bare, but muscle memory hasn't caught up yet. AUDREY notices. Doesn't ask.)*

AUDREY: If I told you I almost didn't come back from the funeral . . . that I stood on a train platform in Chicago staring down the tracks like they were a question I couldn't answer.

CLARKE: I'd believe you.

AUDREY: I didn't want to disappear. I just wanted the world to keep going without needing me to comment.

CLARKE: You wanted silence.

AUDREY: I wanted permission.

*(Beat.)*

CLARKE: I walked out of my university mid-lecture. Mid-sentence. I was diagramming stochastic variance and realized I couldn't remember why it mattered. Or why I did.

AUDREY: And now?

CLARKE: Now I'm hoping a poet will convince me elephants appear on train platforms.

AUDREY: And if she does?

CLARKE: Then I'll stay. For the next train. For the next improbable moment. For . . . whatever comes after almost.

AUDREY: What if I said you're the first person I've told the truth to in six months?

CLARKE: Then I'd say you have impeccable statistical taste.

AUDREY: Do you think—statistically speaking—it's harder to believe in elephants appearing on a train platform or second chances?

CLARKE: Depends. Are either of them house-trained?

AUDREY: Only in the way people pretend to be fine at dinner parties.

CLARKE: Then I'd say second chances. Elephants have better memory, but less pride.

AUDREY: Good line. Write that down. I'll pretend it was mine.

*(A faint sound again. They both tense, hopeful.)*

AUDREY (CONT'D): If that's not an elephant, I'm demanding a refund on my existential crisis.

CLARKE: If it's an elephant, I owe several therapists and one philosophy professor a very awkward email.

AUDREY: So you're saying all it took was one imaginary elephant and we're rewriting our worldviews? That's hot.

CLARKE: Give me time. I have decades of repression to potentially re-catalog. This isn't a rewrite so much as it is an unscheduled revision. With citations pending.

*(CLARKE and AUDREY sit quietly. From offstage: the low rumble of wheels. A crate appears, pushed into view by the returning JANITOR who parks it beside the bench and walks off, whistling something that sounds suspiciously like "Baby Elephant Walk." On the crate, in sharp black stencil: FRAGILE—CIRCUS PROPS. AUDREY raises an eyebrow. CLARKE doesn't move.)*

AUDREY: You have got to be kidding me.

CLARKE: I'm not. But apparently, the universe is.

AUDREY: Think it's real?

CLARKE: Irrelevant. It showed up.

AUDREY: So did we . . . And if I asked you to stay?

CLARKE: I'd pretend it was my idea.

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AUDREY: And if the next train comes?

CLARKE: We miss it. Then blame timing, fate, the elephant, or whichever god was working the late shift.

*(They both finally smile.)*

AUDREY: What do you call two people who wait long enough to believe again?

CLARKE: Statistically? A rounding error. But personally?

AUDREY: Something real. With tusks. And no obligation to make sense.

*(A sound of the train approaching.)*

CLARKE: Should we go?

AUDREY: Not yet . . . I want to see what shows up next.

*BLACKOUT.*

*END OF PLAY*

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 1753



WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 8.5 X 11 INCHES

RICHARD WEAVER

---

## FURTHER ADOE

Further adoe\*

Hugh hallways confuse two wounds, I mince words, for one sound are yew?  
Herd ewe once mistook an acorn for an eggcorn much to the delight of a  
listing of linguists. It happens. Mustn't shame oneself over what the mouth  
does with the mind's tongue. What I mean is nothing without your ears or  
eyes, no thing to some or most, and noting to Willy the Bard's audience. Say  
what you will it is aught to me, a non-matter of nihility. Bupkis. I am a  
founding member of Homonyms Anonymyths. Meaning nothing. Meaning  
music or its individual notes. Meaning something overheard. Meaning your  
embarrassed thing or mine. The sex of all. No thing between your legs. Much  
adoe between mine, or so the script reads. And oddly more sewing since only  
male actors once played she-make believe on stage. Upon this world a  
punishment of puns upon a bedsheet of prompt papers and pointedly  
quillish pens.

\*The 1623 Folio text

CREATIVE NONFICTION

TOM ROTH

---

PINECONES

I help Grandma with the pinecones. She carries the basket, and I pick up the pinecones on our walk around the pond. Sometimes, it's acorns or leaves. Her gatherings appear in jars, as birdhouses, on shelves, as centerpieces around our house. A rusty leaf marks the door to her bedroom. In our house, we live like sisters, sharing the bathroom, calling each other's name down the hall. She makes me presents with the things from her basket. My mother throws out the older displays when Grandma is asleep or out of the house, but something else is always coming from her basket after one of her walks. She holds the basket on her arm now. It's bright and round with a handle. She's the only person I've seen who carries one.

"What are you going to do with all these pinecones?" I ask.

"What am I going to do?" she replies, her finger on her chin, the smooth head of hair tilted to one side. This has always been her bit, no matter how old I am. Her hair keeps a silky gleam. It surrounds her small face with a stillness of gray and black strands. "Eat them, of course, that's what I'll do."

The rotten, decaying smell of the water thickens and wipes out the smell of leaves and sticks. Autumn still suffers from the lingering spells of summer. Another wall of heat blocks any drift of crisp air. October just won't come. The trees can't change colors, and the pond has lost water because of the rainless weeks, leaving a ring of dry, cracked earth around its sunken surface. High grasses and geese stand along the parched bank of the pond. Flying over the water, a bird heads for the pines on the little slope above. "One more lap," Grandma says.

Quickly, I check my phone and see no messages on the screen. My friends are supposed to pick me up soon and go to a party that night. Rides are our thing. We climb in someone's car and listen to music and make turns that extend the trips we take. After the cluster of the suburbs, we make our way to Amish country and zip by the buggies. The meadows and lands rip past us in long, rolling waves of browns and yellows, the crops dry and dusty from the summer. Silos and barns rise in the distance. There's a covered bridge over a river where we get out and talk near the water before driving home. I want to go far someday, all of us heading across the country, toward California and the ocean. Almost everyone has their license but me. I fear the idea of driving, even if it means the freedom to leave the house on my own. Anyone can see the danger in it. At sixteen, I have already passed countless wrecks and accidents, some of them still vivid in my head, but I have never

been in one.

I say okay, and we begin another lap around the pond. Walking with Grandma feels as if I'm reversing in age. I'm twelve, I'm nine, I'm six, and the only worry is if we have enough pinecones to fill the basket. In those days, Mom didn't like me spending too much time alone at the pond with Grandma. The trust between them has always been fragile since the death of my grandfather. Mom tells me all the time that Grandma should've gotten help for him, should've threatened to leave if he didn't get sober. He died here at the pond not long before my mother went to college and met my dad. It was in winter, and my grandfather was drinking again when he slipped and broke the ice and died on the bank, his body in the snow. It's why my mother is so protective now, and why my father is the one who lets me go out with my friends, the one who listens about our car rides out in Amish country. Some of her worry lives in me, too. My general fears of accidents and tragedies, how anything could go wrong, tend to outweigh the little courage and trust I have from my father.

We make our way down the straight stretch of the trail, our shoes cracking on the gravel. The man we passed on our first lap is still there sitting under the same tree in the grass, enjoying the shade. He wears a ruin of threadbare clothes. The torn khaki-shorts don't fit him, and his shirt nearly reaches his knees. He has a long, untidy beard. The hair of his head is a thinning bush. The second I stepped out of the car and saw him under the tree, I knew he was homeless.

He had spoken to us on our first time around. I expected his voice to be gravelly and rough. Instead, his words poured like a fresh stream. He spoke pleasantly and kindly, and his words contained an inquisitive tone in their flow.

"It's quite hot for this late in October, yes?"

"Yes, it is," Grandma replied.

"You ladies have a nice walk," he said.

"We will, thank you," Grandma said.

As we passed him the first time, the man had lifted his hand and tipped an imaginary hat to us. I'd seen plenty of others like him. They hold cardboard signs and push a heaping cart of junk and sleep under bridges. They appear on the streets and in empty lots. My friends and I pass them on our rides. Sometimes, there are jokes, but most times we either ignore them or say they look sad and then forget about them. What put them all there in those places? My friends laugh at me for wondering something like this out loud in the car. They tell me it's because of drugs, illness, jobs. They speak in simple shots that solve the issue in a matter of seconds. I'm the sheltered one of the group, they always joke, with no license, no clue to things. At parties,

when everyone is getting drunk or high, they laugh about how the only sober person there can't be a designated driver.

But I know it's not so simple because Grandma was one of them for some time. She left her house and lived on her own after the death of my grandfather. It almost ruined my mother, how much she worried about what would happen. Sometimes, when it was winter, she had dreams of her mother's death. This was where my mom would meet her. She'd bring food and clothes, a little money, but Grandma didn't always show up, and when Mom didn't see her, she feared the dream came true, that she was dead. She tells me that if it weren't for my dad, she would've never finished college. She still tells me I need to be careful around my grandmother, that if there's ever anything strange about her, I should stay away from her.

"What's in the basket today?" the man asks us now.

When Grandma doesn't answer I tell him pinecones.

"Pinecones," he replies. "You've acquired a good collection of them today."

Then the basket is in my hands, and Grandma waits for me. I feel the reverse of my years again, the tug of my younger self. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm aging like the autumn season, delayed, slow to change.

"Would you like one?" I ask.

"Why, thank you," he says.

He bends over and examines the cones in the basket. He tangles his fingers through his beard. A sweetness lives in the center of his small eyes. The look produces a rich and soft effect, like the surprise of a candy's hidden gift after the first crack of the shell between your teeth.

"These pinecones are excellent," he says, then picks one and thanks me again.

I hesitate when he opens his hand toward me. The skin of his palm feels rough and grimy, like one of the pinecones. His smile cracks up on one side and reveals a row of very white, crooked teeth. Here this man stands before me in all his weight and bone, breathing, living a life. There is no house for him today, and maybe there is no food or bed either. Yet, he tosses the pinecone in the air and catches it in his hand and smiles at Grandma. He smiles like my father, free of worry. I imagine him holding birds in his hand. They land on his shoulders and fly out of his palms. He rests in the pines above the pond. He sleeps under the nests in the branches. He wakes to the songs in the mornings, and he whistles on his walks around the pond.

"This will be of good use," he says of the pinecone in his hand. He winks. And he winks again in my head. He catches things in his hand, birds and acorns, leaves, hearts, and he winks and he winks. Something like wings spreads in my chest. "It was pleasant seeing you."

"Good seeing you, too," Grandma says.

When we say goodbye, he tips his imaginary hat again, and I pretend he's wearing a pinecone on the bald spot of his head. We turn up the trail and climb toward the pines. The man walks away from the tree. He carries nothing but a pinecone. He will sweat through the heat of the night. Grandma is looking back at him.

"Do you know that guy?" I ask. "Is he your friend?"

A beam of interest enters her face.

"I've seen him here before," she replies. "But we're not really friends."

I can smell the pines again. Needles sprinkle the edge of the trail. A coolness drifts from the dark maw of the trees and mixes with the dusty air of the trail. It comes up from the roots and sinks in my bones. We walk in the calm of the pines. A few of the trees have lost their needles and color. They stand like thin dead bones. I take my grandmother's frail arm in my hand at the sight of their death. My face begins to sweat. Fall isn't coming.

"Were you one of them?" I ask her.

"What?"

She turns her eyes away from me and takes in the woods. She holds my arm as we step over a stretch of roots across the trail.

"You know," I say. "Weren't you—" I pause. I don't want to say the word homeless. "Weren't you once like him?"

Grandma pulls her arm out of my hand. The look she gives crushes my question, and the light that was once there is extinguished. I try to apologize, but she answers before I can speak.

She says yes. The sunlight hits hard as we exit the shade of the pines. On the other side of the pond, my friend's car idles in the lot. I wonder if they passed the man on their way and if he tipped his imaginary hat to them as he walked through the mirage of heat off the roadside.

She tells me there are things you'll have to do for yourself someday.

Her eyes stay on the pond, her arm carries the basket as she talks about the people she met while she was away. She learned so much from them, and she helped some but never enough, and they helped her. I wait for her to say something else. Mom always says she came home because of me. But Grandma keeps her eyes on the water and tells me even if they don't understand why you're doing it, you still have to do what you have to do, because if you don't then you won't know.

"Won't know what?" I say.

She smiles, and I pretend to understand, smiling back. My friends won't get it when I'll repeat her words tonight at the party. Neither will I. Someday it will come, like fall, it will be here soon. We walk in silence as we make it to the other side of the water, where the man was sitting. The second my eyes find his spot in the grass under the tree I'm struck with a ringing through me, full and long, and it takes me back to when I was little and the trees were

yellow and the water reached the high grasses and there was frost on the bank. Grandma carried her basket of acorns or pinecones beside me. The man was there in the shade, a much younger man, and he was wearing a baseball hat. He tipped his hat as we passed, and he winked my way, he winked and he winked.

MICHAEL SALCMAN

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THE ART OF LIFE

*—for Jeremiah & Alicia Ostriker*

I'm not making comparisons here  
with Einstein's cosmological constant  
but even when he thought he was wrong  
he was right  
about the cosmos, about life:  
around the stars  
some of the better inferences can be found  
in the rings of darkness.  
The pains of my childhood ankle  
keep me awake in old age  
still trying to combine the world of art  
with the universe of plain numbers.  
What does the brain require of its letters  
but for a glass of wine and a view of the trees?

ALISON HICKS

---

BRACKISH

We lived by the salt marsh  
by the edge of the bay.  
Horseshoe crabs crawled up on the beach to spawn.

Red Knots on their Arctic migrations  
stopped to eat the eggs  
laid on beaches of the bay and salt marsh.

Oysters, blue crabs, flounder—  
our bellies full,  
we stretched out on the beach to warm.

Tides rose and fell.  
We hid in rushes,  
braided seagrass from the marsh.

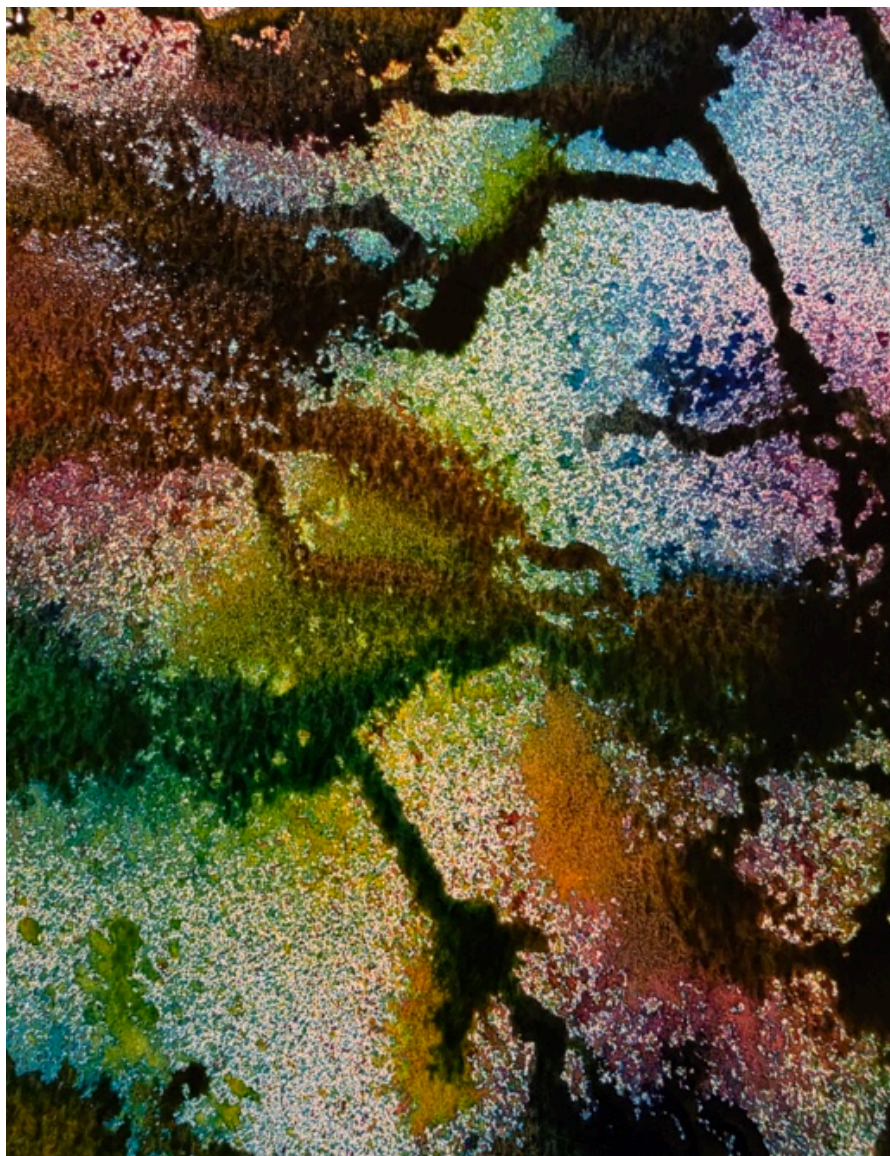
The waters rose, grasses withdrew.  
We moved to higher ground.  
Fewer Horseshoe crabs showed up on the beach,  
fewer Red Knots stopped to feed.

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ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 5647



WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 8.5 X 11 INCHES

MELODY WILSON

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BONE DEEP

After my grandmother died, my mother  
tinted her photo, brightened sepia skin  
with mail order dye labeled Flesh,  
pinked the studio smile with a sweep of Cheek.  
Before that everything was black and white,  
her mother's angular beauty,  
her long-gone father's doughy face.

My grandmother floats in a haze  
of Tiffany Blue tint, but the first thing  
you notice is the wrist, its soft posture  
of defeat. Fingers that trace the margins  
of her own clavicle.

The photographer's pose displays her  
the way shed skin betrays a snake—  
even as her daughter twists the top from one tube  
then another, takes new tools into raw hands,  
a Q-tip, a sable brush, tries for a line sharp  
as her mother's words. I think of an ant

in a trap, how it pries each of its legs  
from glue by turns, sets it back down,  
tries another. Sometimes I take selfies,  
filter them black and white, examine my face,  
try to decide which woman to blame.

SYDNEY QUINN

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## LETTERS FROM ANATOMY LAB

*September 10th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

I never thought I could be scared of a dead body until I had to cut open yours. Prior to the first lab, I just thought this was going to be like all the other ones I had taken in undergrad and back in high school. Maybe the difference I didn't see coming was the donor cards. None of the rats I had to split open in undergrad had names; none of the frogs I had to dig inside of had children. Your daughter spoke to us. She's the one who gave us your card. She looked a little older than me. But that's still too young to lose a parent. What I can't stop thinking about are her hands. They were shaking. Then, a week later, when it was me and the rest of my lab partners and your body on the dissection table and a set of instructions on crisp computer paper and Julia C. made the incision on your upper abdomen and Lucas held the skin flap pinched between his fingers and Hayden had to sit down and Jake asked if I was okay—I realized I was staring at your hands.

You have your daughter's hands.

—*Lucy*

*September 12th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

The thing is that I've seen dead people before. My neighbor in high school, Mrs. Williams, fell in her garage and lay frozen there for a week until my father and I found her when we checked on her over Thanksgiving break. Then in undergrad, when I rode on my ambulance shift, there was the little boy who had choked on a green grape, the old man who hung himself from the ceiling fan in his living room, and the girl with the knife stuck in her side as she lay in that back alley. I've always been able to fold up their faces like a photograph and tuck them away, somewhere deep in my solar plexus. Even my mother. Her face pinched shut as she lay in her casket. Hers has always been the one enclosing around all the others, keeping them wrapped up nice and tight.

But ever since I saw your face, all I can think about are the other ones. Mrs. Williams, her broken cheek on the concrete of her garage. The little boy, the dull blue of his irises. The old man, the acute angle of his neck, dropped to one side like heavy fruit weighing from a tree branch. The girl in that back alleyway, how her breath diverted around the vowels in her last

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words. My mother, as she lay in her casket, her expression furrowed in the resemblance of a dream. The stubs of her lashes. The slope of her nose.

You've got a freckle between your eyebrows, Carol. A thin scar on the dip of your chin. Your top lip is thinner than your bottom one.

—*Lucy*

*September 23rd, 2025*

Dear Carol,

Did you ever think about the circuitry of veins throughout your body, your arteries twisting together? I lifted your heart today to catalog its chambers, like I was unearthing the bulb of a flower, and as I pulled it up from your chest, I felt the slightest tug, like roots unspooling from the earth.

—*Lucy*

*October 1st, 2025*

Dear Carol,

I decided to go to med school because I wanted to help people. That's what most people in medicine say. Or, they want money. Or, it's because of the idea of saving the people we can to make up for the ones we couldn't. Jake says he got into it because everyone in his family expects him to be a surgeon. He's got good hands for it; his fingers are thin. Nimble. His incisions on your neck were clean, sharp, parallelograms. It's easier to look at him than you sometimes.

All the time.

—*Lucy*

*October 12th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

Your lungs are mottled with spores of dead tissue. I'm imagining you standing outside the office where you worked that desk job, the one that caused arthritis to inflame the tendons of your wrists, and raising a cigarette to your pale lips. In the nightmares I've been having, your chest is torn open, and I'm the only one on the street that can see the smoke drift through your alveolus.

—*Lucy*

*October 18th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

My roommate put up one of those plastic skeletons outside our apartment door for Halloween, and in its hollow eyes all I could see were yours so I took it down to the dumpster behind our building and I almost threw it out but I brought it back and hung it back on the door and I sat on

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the carpet in the hallway in front of it and put my head in my hands, curled my fingers through my hair, and the back of my throat ached with a sob that was too big to swallow.

—*Lucy*

*October 23rd, 2025*

Dear Carol,

Hayden counted the tendons in your shoulder today. He vomited in the trash afterwards.

—*Lucy*

*October 30th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

The second years threw us a huge party on the edge of campus and Jake and I ended up in someone's empty bedroom room and I let him take off my shirt and name all of my abdominal muscles and I let him pull down my jeans and my underwear and I had forgotten how beautiful the human body was until he showed me his.

—*Lucy*

*November 20th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

I'm thankful for woolen gray skies and the asphalt of the highway rattling underneath my car on my way to the clinic and the thick smell of coffee wafting from the Dunkin' down the street from my apartment and the chime of my phone as the screen lights up and did you ever see how orange the sunset turns in November, how the tangerine light twists through the bare trees, and did you ever slip your hand into someone's, press their palm against yours, and feel the slightest electric shock?

I'm thankful for all my nerves. All the ways I can be touched. All the ways I can touch.

—*Lucy*

*December 15th, 2025*

Dear Carol,

I went to the cemetery today with my father. It hasn't snowed yet this year, but the air had that clean, brisk taste to it just before a snowstorm: it smells like a clean sheet of paper, it hums like a cursor pulsating on a blank Word document. My dad took off work. I never took time off; not when I was in high school, not in undergrad, but my break lined up this year, so for the first time in years, my father and I are both alone together in the house during the anniversary of my mother's death.

Death anniversaries are strange observances with no social protocols. I know I sound like a robot. But I never took off this day so I wouldn't have to deal with another lost day to spend at the cemetery like Mother's Day, her birthday, or Christmas. Death anniversaries are days of standing in silence in front of my mother's headstone for maybe a couple minutes that feel like an hour. It's too cold for flowers but my father brings lilies and I wanted to tell him they'll freeze but I tucked the sentence back between my molars; just the thought of saying it made me want to cry in a way I haven't in a long time and I can't explain it but I guess that's why I'm writing you from my childhood bedroom, like you'll pull it out of me the way I've been pulling your insides out.

I hope your daughter visits your grave. I hope she puts flowers there. I know you're not my mother, Carol, but I'm missing mine right now, and I wonder if you ever missed yours, like this, a wound that will never truly scab over, always leaving you a little raw and exposed.

—Lucy

*January 10th, 2026*

Dear Carol,

Hayden dropped out over break. He texted me and Julia and Jake last week to wish us well and that he was going to get a job at his father's law firm. He said he wanted to help people but cutting up dead ones wasn't for him. My professors are making us do "Stay" Interviews with Fourth Years, asking them why they choose to stay in the medical field, despite everything (i.e the worldwide pandemic, the president, the cuts to healthcare, the public hatred of doctors). Honestly, it was kind of depressing. Most of them said the crushing financial debt was too heavy to leave.

One guy though, a fourth year named Adam who wants to go into EM, shrugged at me. "Why stay? It's simple," he said, "I want to keep trying to learn and be good at my job to do good for others. You don't have to be at the top of your class or your field. You have to want to keep learning. Staying to me means, hopefully, enough of us try and change it for the better somehow. I know that's cliché thinking. But hey, it's either us or the robots, right?"

We talked a bit more about the first year, about surviving clinicals and STEP exams. Then he said, "Are they still making you write letters to your cadavers?"

I said no. He leaned forward a bit and smiled sheepishly like we were kids sitting at a lunch table, "My guy's name was Tom. He was a science teacher with pancreatic cancer. I think he must have been a good person. The ones that decide to do this for us make me think about what it means to be a good person, you know?"

I think I do.

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—*Lucy*

*February 8th, 2026*

Dear Carol,

Jake and I were sitting in his car tonight outside of McDonalds, splitting a bag of fries and listening to a Top 40 playlist on his radio when I saw it: a pale pink Ralph Lauren scarf and matching hat sitting on the floor of the passenger seat, right between my snow boots.

He could have lied easily about it: he could have said it was his sister's (he didn't have any) or his cousin's (maybe he did?) or accused me of being irrational or insane (was I? Maybe?) or said maybe I should trust him if we wanted to have a relationship (I never thought to ask him what we were, because wasn't it obvious? Why should I have had to ask?). All of these maybes would have been better options because at least it would have led me to believe that he cared like I thought he did.

"Whose are these?" I held up the hat and scarf in my hands, the fabric soft between my fingers.

He chewed the fry he was eating slowly and swallowed. His eyes were focused on the Mercedes logo on his steering wheel. "My girlfriend's."

Fuck. Carol. What the literal fuck?

—*Lucy*

*February 15th, 2026*

Dear Carol,

I cried in the shower this morning. I cried in the car on the way to the anatomy lab. I cried in the parking lot outside of the lab. I held in my tears while we spliced open your neck and untangled your vocal cords. I cried in the car afterwards, fat snowflakes clumping together on my windshield, and then I wiped my eyes against the sleeves of my scrubs, wondering how I could be so dumb. Somehow, I'm smart enough to get into medical school but not enough to realize the guy I'm dating has a girlfriend from his hometown? I'm only twenty-four. I can barely remember to fill out the FAFSA. I only know how to make grilled cheese and cereal and like four vegetables. Who let me come here? Who let me cut you, an actual person, apart? Who let me believe I'm capable of doing this?

Am I even capable of doing this?

—*Lucy*

*March 30th, 2026*

Dear Carol,

The sky was so cotton candy blue today that it gave me a toothache as I drove home for spring break. I let the windows roll down for the forty-five-

minute drive up 287 and the wind snagged at my hair and the highway was lined with the light green blur of new buds on the trees.

I could have waited for my dad to get home so I wouldn't have to go alone or maybe I could have chickened out and not gone at all but I brewed a thermos of tea and bought a half-wilted bouquet of sunflowers from the ShopRite. I parked my car a few rows down when I got to the cemetery and stepped carefully between the headstones until I found my mother's.

I've been talking about my mother to my therapist lately. I started going after things ended with me and Jake at the gentle suggestion of my roommate because I didn't eat anything but toast for two days and then threw one of my textbooks at the wall when my laptop wouldn't turn on and she said maybe it would be good for me to talk to someone and I said, "I talk to Carol" and then I remembered you're dead and it made me laugh for a second before I burst into tears.

I thought I was going to have an epiphany going there. I sat cross legged in the damp grass and tugged at the string of my tea bag dangling over the rim of my thermos and I took a sip. It was Earl Gray: tangy with bergamot and black tea leaves and I held it in my mouth and I thought of my mother sitting in our dimly lit kitchen. The edges of the memory crinkled with the passage of time. It's either dusk or dawn, and she pulls the bag neatly out of her cup with a spoon and my eyes began to sting but I didn't fight it this time.

I sat at my mother's grave today. It's the first time I've ever gone there by myself. I drank the whole thermos of tea. I put my forehead to my knees and kept focusing on that picture of her, keeping her alive in my head, her silhouette drinking tea in the dark. She's immortal here, and I'm trying to make peace with this space, to remember the way she used to say my name, to remember her even if it's uncomfortable and painful.

Isn't missing someone the proof that they were real in the first place?

—*Lucy*

*April 14th, 2026*

Dear Carol,

We had the end of the year ceremony with our donor families today. We presented your daughter with what was left of your remains. She told my group that you wanted your ashes scattered down in Lavalette at sunrise. And your daughter thanked each of us. She shook Jake's hand and Julia's hands and mine, and when she smiled, I could see for a second, brief but just enough, what yours must have looked like.

Thank you, Carol.

Thank you.

—*Lucy*

DON FARRELL

---

## HAS IT BEEN ONE HUNDRED YEARS YET

once again, you sir  
ran your fingers through my flesh  
while i wrestled unconscious to untie the blankets.  
i didn't see your face in my dream  
this time, just felt fingers  
digging down to stroke  
tenderly my bones like a kitten  
you won't let leave your lap.

sometimes it still feels like i'm dirt  
in a garden where you've planted  
scarecrows in rows to hold up crawling  
vines, year after year.  
i can look up their legs,  
their leaning torsos and see sunlight  
sneaking in between the leaves.

i wonder sometimes  
whether you're still alive,  
still driving boys  
to the liquor store, taking them  
to your apartment to vomit  
when they wake.

i believe my last few breaths  
will be good ones, that bile  
will be all but flushed  
from my marrow by then.

[PR] Fall 2025

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 1329



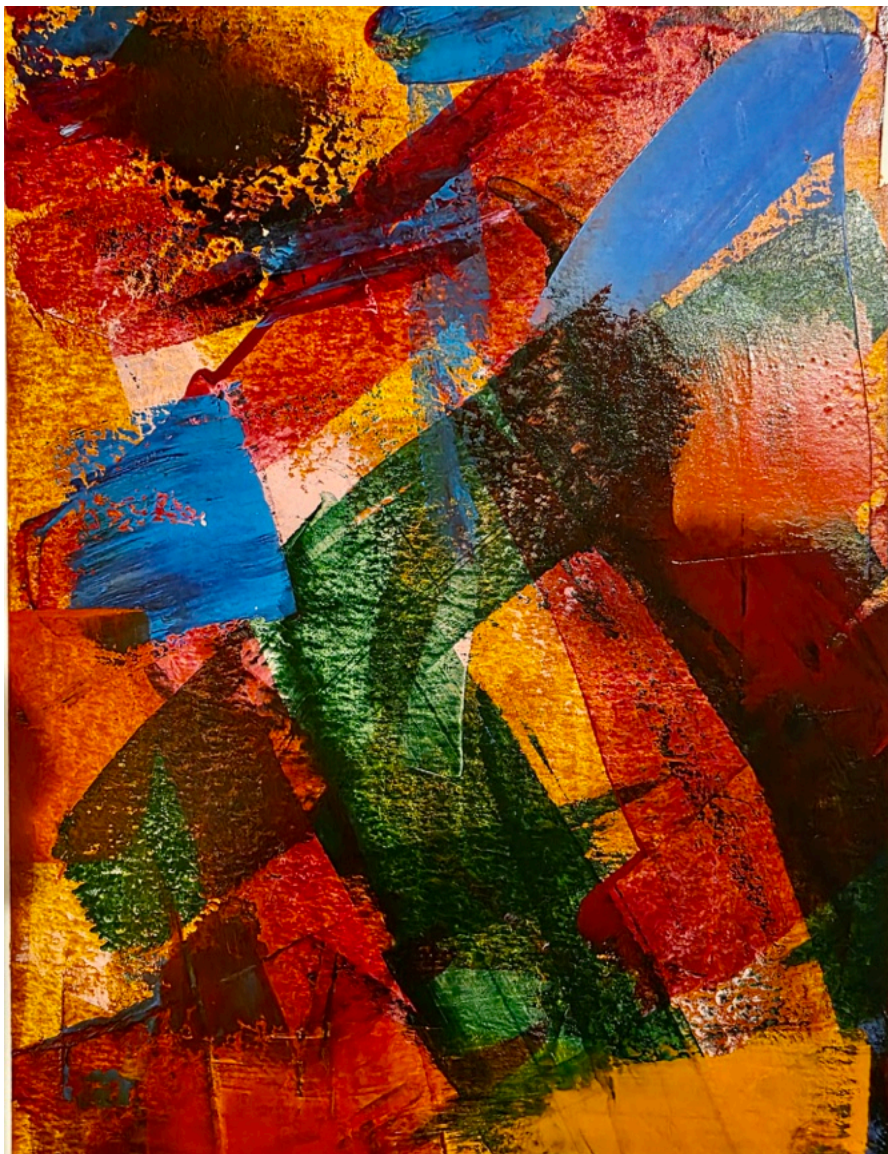
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 X 30 INCHES

[PR] Fall 2025

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 3324



WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 8.5 X 11 INCHES

RIKKI SANTER

---

## HOW SHOULD A WOMAN SOUND?

Capable of asking the kindest  
of questions that tinker  
with your internal  
reputation, voice that can be soft pebble  
in your shoe playful tug of your tail.  
Aggressively chipper, can bump crisply off you  
with rhapsodies of mayonnaise  
intonations. In disembodied music-box  
loops it is freed of vagina, your sweet  
tradwife devotedly attentive, white, sometimes feather  
brained in most adorable ways.  
With melodious pitch and pace, it **will**  
out-talk you out of the ways of yourself until  
you finally come to your senses and hey,  
disable.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

JASON ALLEN

---

FOXHOLE PRAYERS

With the side of my face mashed against my pillow and stubborn threads of a dream still blurring the room, I heard my younger brother's voice the second I pressed the phone to my ear.

"Hey, I need a favor," Jess said.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know, kinda early. But hey, I need you to come pick me up from the hospital, whichever one's in Northwest over by 23rd."

"What? Why are you there?"

"I fell down some stairs."

His words hung in the ether until my feet swung off the edge of the bed and touched the floor. Slouched forward, yawning, I needed to take a few deep breaths before any coherent thoughts might form. Sounding as agitated as he did this morning, he'd called me plenty of other times lately with an urgent request like this one, sometimes for a small amount of money, other times to drive him to one of the sketchier parts of Portland. I'd head out to get him from the hospital in a minute, but first I wanted him to wonder whether I'd say no this time.

After a long pause, he broke the silence.

"Sorry to be calling so early and to be asking this, but can you come get me now? I'm really screwed if you can't."

"Fine," I said through a yawn. "I'll be there in a half hour."

Have you ever walked into a hospital emergency room to pick up someone you love who's high on drugs, but claiming to be sober? If not, I'm glad for you.

I waited at the admitting counter at first, trying to figure out who to talk with while people hustled in all directions. When no one came over, I wandered off, and then three or four doors down the hall I found him. My mouth must have dropped wide open the moment I saw Jess standing there in the hospital gown, bare legs and bare feet, blood drops on the floor, and with a nurse ordering him to stop taking out his IVs.

The whole area was an echo-filled box of chaos with beeping machines and people scuttling all directions and gurney wheels squeaking along the halls. I kept looking from my brother's tired eyes to the thick bandage wound

around his head, until I realized the nurse had been asking who I was and why I was there.

"I'm his brother," I said, and whatever she said next flowed past me like a mountain river, because I couldn't help but feel protective of him.

I had an intense urge to explain: He's really a good guy. If you knew him all his life like I have, I promise you'd see him in a different light.

Of course I didn't say this to her, though, not before she went scissoring her short legs out of the room at top speed to fetch the doctor. Once we were alone, Jess stood there trying to explain to me that he was fine. Then he grinned and said, "The people here are just worried I'll sue them if I leave too soon and something bad happens. I'm fine, though. Really."

I rubbed my eyes. The nurse had hammered the point that he'd been brought into the ER unconscious after someone found him like that at the bottom of a concrete staircase, and she insisted he shouldn't leave against medical advice.

I turned my head sharply to find the baby-faced doctor strolling in, who looked no older than me, twenty-nine at the time, which totally me threw me off. He introduced himself but his name vaporized into the chaotic background noise the second he said it.

Young Doctor So-And-So had been on shift all night, he'd seen Jess when they brought him in, and he was the one who'd ordered all the tests, and he still didn't think it would be wise to discharge Jess from the hospital just yet. He summed up the past twelve hours in the time it took to shake my hand, and then his tone shifted to that of a lecturer.

"I would say this to anyone who's suffered a head trauma—it's not a good idea to push your luck. It's also a good idea to stay in bed when medical staff tell you it's in your best interest. That said, we can't force him to stay."

The young doctor looked over at Jess where he was leaning against the bed rails, but he seemed to be speaking to us both when he asked, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Jess answered yes, he understood, and so did I. Neither of us could have guessed that a bill would show up at Mom's house for the tests and the recent twelve-hour hospital stay, or that the balance would be \$30,000. Seriously, they claimed he owed as much or more than plenty of people earn working full-time for the entire year. Twelve hours, some medical tests, and they expected my penniless brother to pay \$30,000 dollars—for that?

Back in the moment, the doctor shook my hand and said, "Good luck," then quickly left the room. The nurse lingered in the doorway for a beat before shaking her head as she disappeared. Then, after signing a couple of forms that likely included my brother agreeing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for services rendered, they discharged him.

A few minutes later, we walked to my truck. Jess still had a wide bandage

wrapped two or three times around his head and was dressed in a paper hospital gown and flimsy pants to match because they'd had to cut off his clothes when he'd arrived unconscious.

All I could think was: Man, does he look rough.

We didn't have far to drive from the hospital to the two-bedroom place where Jess had been staying, which happened to be an apartment on Northwest 21st that one of the guys I sponsored from the late-night meeting had been letting Jess stay in for free. This rent-free living situation was one of many instances when the kindness of others, especially from sober people we knew from meetings, had kept him off the streets. He'd had his street time already and damn sure didn't want to sleep in a dumpster again, and I didn't want him to either, but some of these sober friends shocked me by their generosity.

During the drive, I wondered if he might be better off if I hadn't picked him up, or better off if sober friends hadn't gone out of their way to help, because we may have been unwittingly hurting more than helping. We may have been keeping him from hitting rock bottom—that individualized epiphany, when we knew we couldn't continue on like this one more day, when we knew in our bones that we'd given up on digging our own grave.

All the sober friends I've admired most over the years felt exactly like I had at the end—hollow, exhausted, too tired to keep trying to make the broken machinery of our broken life work any longer. I'd been praying (as much as an agnostic can pray) that Jess would finally feel enough pain to have his version of an epiphany for years by then already, but now that I'd pulled over and he hopped out of my truck a block from my sponsee's apartment, he thanked me in that hurried way that made me wonder where he needed to be so urgently.

I asked him to call me later.

"For sure," he said, but I knew he wouldn't.

I watched him jog down Northwest 21st with his head still bandaged, weaving his way past dog-walkers and panhandlers and Starbucks commercial models and a bearded street musician playing bongos and a gently rocking sea of other Portlanders out and about on one of the sunniest mornings we'd had for months. People turned at the sight of him, and I could tell most viewed him as an escaped hospital patient. They didn't know he was one of the nicest guys they could ever meet. Even after he turned the corner onto a much quieter cross-street, even without seeing him any longer, I knew he wasn't quite ready to quit running.

I just knew.

All I could do then was pull back into traffic.

Then I swiped once at each of my eyes, exhaled, hoping he would be ready soon.

MARK DUNBAR

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AT THE POMPEII EXHIBIT

How we stare at the moon  
and not the sun.  
How small gods  
take us into custody,  
the image of evergreen trauma  
pulled from its hollow bed,  
this lumpen pale plaster  
bleeding out.  
They should charge by the weight of the baggage  
we drag in, the scale reading out units  
of ghoulishness—  
this yen, this thrill  
at what we can, we think, after all  
leash here in this tableau, this chapel  
of mood indigo, accent lights illuminating  
the Black Swan swag of your rictus,  
this etude, this killed-virus fairy tale  
of sheltering—how  
you're right near voluptuous  
in a disastrous molting kind of way,  
your buried-alive guise frozen  
in midstroke  
stretching for the afterlife.  
If a prayer  
fashioned you wings, we don't  
see them, only the rakish gash  
of your grin,  
that delicious dread  
we pay to flee.

EMILY RANKIN

INCHOATE



ACRYLIC / MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 18 X 24 INCHES

DANIEL EDWARD MOORE

---

## THINGS GOT REALLY QUIET

Try to imagine how silence feels  
in a world of duct-taped mouths  
with a red, white and blue roll in each hand  
spinning faster and faster as Pentecostal eyes  
blink like birds on fire  
before ash hits the ground spelling out *Why*.  
Allegedly, parts of each letter  
are strewn over mountains, over prairies of veins,  
conservative, desperate, and easily seduced  
by the *Angel of a Sky's Twisted Lies*.

It's strange when home becomes a place  
in between thunder's kettle drum roar  
and lightning's sizzling blue splash of light,  
right before heaven's curtain is raised  
and history's most extravagant, shocking, queens  
are about to show the clouds a thing or two  
about what it means to be so high on beauty,  
fields look like rows of stilettos.  
Since every storm is a painful audition  
for a role at the end of the world,  
of course, you can find God in the basement  
with the world on his finger,  
and head between his knees,  
as things got really quiet.

MARY ANN MCGUIGAN

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## OPENING NIGHT IN THE LIVING ROOM

The pages of my play were fastened together in the kind of folder I imagined real playwrights used. I'd been working on it for weeks and weeks. Every night, while *Gunsmoke* and *Perry Mason* droned on in the living room, I'd clear a place for myself at the kitchen table and write until I couldn't hear or see anything but my characters, the good sisters of St. Augustine's Monastery. Except one of them was not so good. She would turn out to be the murderer in my mysterious and bizarre tale of profound innocence and terrible deception.

A red lump had grown on the middle finger of my right hand from the effort of squeezing the words onto the paper before they escaped me. Of course, Mama wanted to know what all my scribbling was about, although the family was accustomed to my habits by then. But this was a more concerted effort, and she couldn't help but notice. "It keeps her out of trouble," she'd tell the others when they teased me, mimicking my shoulders hunched over the legal pad, eyes squinting as if the action were unfolding before me. But sometimes I think she was proud of me. Puzzled but proud. Why anyone in our family would want to make up stories and write them down as if they were something that might matter to anyone else was surely beyond her understanding. But I worked at it with the kind of savage seriousness our dog Major went at a new bone. Maybe that dedication earned her respect.

On a Saturday in May, my Aunt Margaret and Aunt Ann came for a visit. Aunt Margaret brought her three children—Kevin, Ellen, and John—and Aunt Ann brought my grandmother. Aunt Ann was thirteen years younger than my mother. She was a devout Catholic, never married, never went to college, but she had a job as a private secretary to some big executive at Lilly Tulip in Manhattan. Mama was very proud of her, told me she hoped I'd have her brains someday. "But not her tight-ass attitude," Daddy would mumble. Aunt Ann had an affinity for rules, especially the ones the Church dictated. But she could be sweet sometimes, and she adored my mother, liked to play the straight man for my mother's jokes.

I don't know whether Mama intended her suggestion as a joke that day, but my aunt played along. "Why don't you read your play to us?" Mama said. My sisters and brothers moaned and slapped their foreheads, but a stern look from my aunt brought them to heel.

"A play?" she said.

"Yes, Mary Ann wrote a play," Mama chirped. I could have sworn she

wanted to show me off. She always showed her sister my report cards or told her about them on the phone because I was always on the honor roll. Mama told all of us that as long as we got top grades in deportment, she wouldn't get too upset about the rest. But Aunt Ann was harder to impress. She felt that getting a good grade in deportment was *to be expected*. It took evidence of some effort to win her praise or the dollar bill she'd tuck into my hand for straight As.

"Well, I'd love to hear it."

"Of course, she'll read it to us," Mama said.

My sister, Irene, put her head in her hands and moaned, and my brother, Danny, mumbled something about having to finish his paper route, which we all knew he didn't have anymore after he left the papers in the alley in the rain while he stopped to stay dry and have a soda at Nick's luncheonette. He probably would have gotten away with it, except it was the second time he didn't deliver, and the customers called the paper to complain.

I tried to imagine what reading the play would feel like. I hardly ever got the chance to hear what my mother thought of what I wrote, and I knew my aunt would tell me the truth if she thought it wasn't good. But reading to Danny and Irene was going to be like farting in gym class. I'd never live it down. "Everybody doesn't have to listen to it," I said. "It's kind of for grown-ups anyway." Mama nodded at Danny and Irene, signaling they were free to go. So they gathered their sodas and escaped to the next room, a large one filled with bunk beds and separated by wide French doors. My cousin Ellen sneaked out behind them, and her mother didn't insist she stay.

Everyone settled on the couch and the armchairs and Mama had me stand in the middle of the room to read. A fit of coughing came on before I could finish the first paragraph. But Aunt Margaret got me some water, and I started again. The first part mostly set the stage, so there wasn't much reaction. But then things get creepy fast. One of the nuns, Sister Mary Agnes, is all by herself in the chapel, cleaning behind the altar when she catches her foot on something under a thin carpet. She lifts the carpet and sees that what she tripped on was the handle of a door in the floorboards. Curious but a little scared, she lifts the door but loses her nerve and drops it. She calls the name of another sister, thinking if someone else were with her she'd be less nervous, but no one answers. She lifts the door again and sees only steps descending into darkness. Her foot reaches the first step and the creaking echoes through the chapel; still she continues down.

I could tell my little brother, Kevin, was getting uneasy. He was never much for spooky stories. "Be still," Grandma told him. But he couldn't. By the time the nun finds the body of a dead woman at the foot of the steps, he'd had enough. "I don't want to hear this, Mama."

“Okay, okay,” she said, and he bolted for the bunkbed room.

Aunt Margaret told me to keep reading. I think she was enjoying the story.

When Sister Mary Agnes runs into the hall to find someone to help, I had to try to take on different voices. That was kind of hard, but I was managing okay until I noticed my brother Danny peeking into the room. I was afraid he’d start heckling me or making faces, but he didn’t. Irene’s face appeared next to his, and I realized they were actually listening to the play. Maybe they figured if it scared Kevin it was worth their time.

I read with more confidence after that, even gave the older nun the Irish accent I imagined for her. My aunts giggled at my attempt. Having their attention made my face warm and my hands tremble. I was thrilled and scared. They laughed in the right spots and some of the wrong ones, and they exclaimed with shock at the moments I hoped they would. It was like leading an orchestra, like I knew where the story would take them, and all they had to do was follow me. I was in charge.

When I finished, they applauded, and Aunt Ann got up to give me a hug and tell me how impressed she was that I’d made up that whole story. I wanted to explain something to her, but I knew she’d never understand. Yes, the story and the characters were made up, but the world it took me to and the way it made me feel were real. And for a little while I think that world was real for them too.

It was a better world than anything else I had, because if something went wrong, I could fix it.

WILLIAM DORESKE

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## FLORAL DERISION

Fragrant lilies critique the pond.  
Subtleties of their punctuation  
leave us gasping for response.

The water is a dirty pane of glass.  
Looking at rather than through it  
reveals only dingy and drab.

No wonder aquatic disdain  
extends to dry land where voices  
sail across wooded places

and boomerang back to intellects  
that lack both form and content.  
The lilies remain so aloof,

although rooted in the shallows,  
that no one considers plucking them  
to place in ordinary vases

in rooms where reckless children roam.  
The August days simmer and preen.  
The pond water smells of decay

although fish and amphibians thrive  
despite the threats of climate change.  
The lilies gather information

to feed their impeccable poise.  
Sun, rain, wind, unseasonable heat.  
The force of their critique remains

until some moonless night when  
they'll fold themselves out of reach,  
leaving everything vital unsaid.

JOHN B. ELLIOTT

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## LOVE'S TOWER

Physics test, question 9: How can you use a barometer to measure the height of a tower?

Drop the barometer off the top of the tower, determine its life span in fractions of an hour,  $h = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$ . Lower the barometer on a string until it touches bottom. Measure string and barometer, add. Set a belay with something stronger, a long line to carry you the distance—be extremely patient. Belay slowly, as if washing windows, and mark each step with the barometer length. Count them as you go down, double-check on the way up. Multiply the number by the barometer's measure. Make sure the person who holds the rope is trustworthy, a mistake on this tower could be fatal.

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

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## STONES IN YOUR POCKET

If you believe you *should* visit your husband's grave and you haven't, then you'll force yourself to go with stones in your pocket like Virginia Woolf

wading into the deep to drown herself, or a Jewish wife (we don't bring flowers)

who, meaning to have come for so long, has chosen quartz, dazzled

by its microcrystal shine, dolomite for its milky luster, gneiss for its alternating bands of light and dark, and limestone

nicked from landscaping borders. If you believe in the permanence of the soul,

then you leave stones that show the enduring place of your beloved

in your memory. If the sateen lining of your pockets are frayed from the weight of the stones like your heart from the weight

of mourning, then you refuse to believe his soul is beneath this carefully weeded hump headed by his etched headstone.

You have gone to soothe the family, *Yes, I visited him*, and they will witness the stones you set in a circle like a cairn,

but you believe (or make yourself believe) he's sitting on the white couch, one long leg crossed over the other, his arms spread on the couch's back,

his eyes trained on the window, watching, waiting for you to come home.

ADEET DESHMUKH

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UNTITLED



DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH

10:4: TENN PLAYWRITING CONTEST WINNER

SACHE J. SATTA

---

SOMETHING BLUE

*ALMA Shepard is bubbling with excitement preparing for her daughter Leslie's wedding. When Leslie makes a dramatic announcement, more than just the wedding is thrown into chaos. Set in St. Louis in 1937, Something Blue takes inspiration from the work of Tennessee Williams.*

*Characters*

ALMA SHEPARD: A woman in her 50s; her charm and bubbly personality mask a strong will and nimble mind. After the death of her husband, she raises their daughter alone and navigates safely through the worst of The Depression. In another era she would be a senator or the president of a bank.

LESLIE SHEPARD: early 20s, what we would refer to today as AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth); tall and lean, with short, bobbed hair. Leslie is smart and curious, with ambitions for a life beyond what the social mores of the time can offer. When Leslie finally embraces a male identity, he embarks on a bold course into the future.

*Setting*

A small apartment in St. Louis, Missouri.

*Time*

1937.

*A small apartment in St. Louis. It is simply but tastefully furnished. The style of the décor is a bit old-fashioned and fussy, but the sparseness of the place prevents the effect from being overwhelming. There is a sofa and armchair and a coffee table. On the coffee table is an oblong box with a lid. The door opens and LESLIE Shepard enters, wearing a boxy coat and a plain dress, perhaps reminiscent of the "flour-sack dress" of the Great Depression. She sees the box and comes to an abrupt halt. She sits on the sofa and regards the box for a few minutes before her mother, ALMA Shepard, enters, also dressed modestly but with more style. Mrs. ALMA Shepard clutches a small paper bag and moves with a sense of purpose.*

ALMA: Oh Leslie, you're home! LOOK! I picked up the dress at the cleaner's this morning—it is pristine! Positively pristine!

LESLIE: I see.

ALMA: And wait until you see the ribbon I bought! It's so lovely! I'll use it to extend the hem, and the sleeves, and maybe a sash at the waist if I have enough, and it will look like the dress was designed that way. No one will ever know!

LESLIE: Know what, Mother?

ALMA: That we had to make some alterations so it would fit you! You're so much taller than I. Well, that came from your father's side of the family. His mother was . . . "statuesque," to put it politely. Between us, the woman looked like an Amazon, ready to cut your head off if you displeased her.

LESLIE: Mother—

*(As she talks, Alma gathers her sewing things—thread, scissors, pins, etc.—and prepares to stitch the ribbon onto the hem of the dress.)*

ALMA: Oh, I know—one shouldn't speak ill of the dead. I'm just having a little fun. A daughter's wedding is a highlight of a mother's life! Oh, Leslie—I wasn't calling you an Amazon! No, no, dear—you are statuesque. Regal, even! I just meant the women in my family are all petite. It's the Shepard women who are tall.

LESLIE: The shape of that box reminds me of a casket.

ALMA: What a morbid thing to say. Now, look how clever this is: the dress is "something old" and the ribbon is "something new." Wear my pearls with the rhinestone clasp, and that's "something borrowed." Now we just need "something blue." Perhaps we'll add violets to your bouquet.

*(She holds up the dress.)*

ALMA (CONT'D): Oh, I love this dress! Mother was a little sad I didn't choose something fancier, but I loved the elegant simplicity of this one. She told everyone it was imported Chinese silk so they'd be impressed! It's silk, but the China part isn't true at all!

LESLIE: When they collect silk cocoons to spin into thread, they kill the silkworms inside.

ALMA: What?

LESLIE: If you leave the silkworm in the cocoon, it becomes a silkmoth. Once the silkmoth breaks the cocoon open, the thread is ruined, so they kill the silkworm before it transforms.

ALMA: Leslie, you really are being morbid today, to look at a beautiful silk gown and think of dead worms.

LESLIE: The silkmoth wants to fly free. Instead it is boiled to death. They

call it “stifling.”

ALMA: Stifling? That’s a cruel word. The ribbon is rayon, not silk, if that makes you feel better. Now let me concentrate or your hem will be crooked.

*(LESLIE reaches into her coat pocket and takes out a bundle of small envelopes tied with twine. She puts them on the coffee table and exits. After a few moments Alma notices them and picks them up.)*

ALMA: What in the world...?

*(She undoes the twine and shuffles through the envelopes.)*

ALMA (CONT’D): Oh, no! Leslie! LESLIE! You were supposed to deliver these to the post office last week!

*(ALMA goes to the bedroom door.)*

ALMA (CONT’D): LESLIE! What is going on in that head of yours?

*(She waits for an answer but there is none.)*

ALMA (CONT’D): All right, all right. What’s done is done. You probably just forgot with everything going on. I’m sorry for yelling, dear. I’m not angry, but we must think of something so our guests get these in time.

*(She looks through the envelopes more slowly.)*

ALMA (CONT’D): Most are right here in St. Louis . . .we’ll just deliver them by hand! We’ll wear comfortable shoes and ride the bus from one end of the city to the other. We’ll make it a fun outing! We’ll stop for lunch at that little café you like so much.

Now the ones that are out of state . . .they’re family. I’ll just call and say there was some confusion at the post office, and would they mind just taking down all the information over the phone. There will be long-distance charges, but we are saving on the postage.

All right, crisis averted. When you and Nathan are married, we’ll tell him the whole story and have a good laugh. It will become one of those family stories told at holiday dinners, you’ll see!

*(LESLIE enters wearing a man’s overcoat and hat.)*

ALMA (CONT’D): Oh my stars! I thought you were your father come back from the dead to haunt me. My word you look just like him in that hat and coat. If this is a prank it is quite unsettling. Please take them off.

LESLIE: I’m leaving, Mother. I can’t go through with the wedding. The marriage. Any of it.

*(She hands her mother a sealed envelope.)*

LESLIE (CONT’D): Please give this to Nathan. It will explain everything to

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him, as best as I can.

ALMA: Leslie Shepard, what is this about? Before I give out letters of explanation, you must explain this to me.

LESLIE: All right, Mother. I don't love Nathan. I am fond of him as you might be of a big brother, but I don't have any romantic feelings towards him. I don't think I ever have.

ALMA: Were you lying this whole time?

Leslie: Yes. To myself. I told myself it was just cold feet. I told myself what I felt was love even though it didn't feel the way I imagined it would.

ALMA: I think you're right—it's just cold feet. And love isn't what we imagine as girls reading fairy tales—all head-over-heels and swept-off-your-feet. But I promise it is much more wonderful than that if you give it a chance.

LESLIE: I've made up my mind.

ALMA: Have you met someone else? Is that it dear? Well, engagements have been broken before. It's never easy but there is no need to run away from home. You're not making any sense. And please take that coat off, it unnerves me!

*(LESLIE removes the overcoat, revealing a man's suit, shirt, tie, and shoes.)*

ALMA (CONT'D): His suit, too? What are you about today?

*(He hands ALMA another envelope.)*

ALMA (CONT'D): *(She reads)*. "Dear Mr. Shepard" Mr.? "We are pleased to offer you a place at Princeton..." This is from—

LESLIE: Princeton University. I'm going to study law there. They've accepted me.

ALMA: Princeton doesn't admit women, Leslie. *(Silence)*. Oh, the light is beginning to dawn. Is your plan to attend Princeton disguised as a man?

LESLIE: That is part of it.

ALMA: But . . . why? There are law schools that accept women. The University of Chicago, I believe.

LESLIE: I want to go to Princeton. Why should my choice be limited by their policies?

ALMA: Leslie, this is not like you. You're always so sensible. So sensible that sometimes I wish you'd be a little more whimsical, but this is more than whimsical. How can you possibly get away with it?

*(LESLIE hands ALMA a passport from his pocket.)*

ALMA: This is your father's passport.

LESLIE: If I was a whimsical person I might say it was prescient you gave me his name. I will live as Mr. Leslie Shepard. You'll see I've changed the year of his birth rather convincingly.

ALMA: Leslie, no! This is madness! Think about it—you'll be sharing rooms in the dormitory. You're sure to be discovered!

LESLIE: I've engaged a room in a boarding house. I'll have no roommate to discover me.

ALMA: And what about money? Princeton isn't cheap and your father didn't leave us enough—

LESLIE: I'm a scholarship student, Mother. My test scores were quite high. I scored higher than most men, apparently. A part-time job will cover expenses if I live frugally, which you know I do. *(She takes out a wad of cash)*. And this should be enough to cover expenses until I'm earning wages.

ALMA: Where did that come from?

LESLIE: This is the money for my wedding. I didn't mail the invitations, or put the deposit on the hall, or pay the caterers. I know it was wrong of me. I'll give it back if you insist, but I was hoping you'd let me use it to start the life I really want.

ALMA: Did someone put you up to this? I can't believe you would cook up a scheme like this on your own—it's the work of some criminal mastermind!

LESLIE: This is all me, Mother. I really am this clever and determined. I know you wanted a delicate, ladylike child but I think you've always known that was a struggle for me.

ALMA: All right, dear, there is no need for all this. You don't have to marry Nathan. But there is someone out there for whom you'll feel love, whom you'll want as your husband.

LESLIE: I don't want a husband. Any husband.

ALMA: What are you saying?

LESLIE: I want a wife.

ALMA: A wife?

LESLIE: I'm going to live as a man for the rest of my life, Mother. I have always felt like a man. Especially around women. I never felt the kinship most women feel with each other. When I'm around women, I feel like I'm with . . .the opposite sex.

ALMA: That's it. This has gone far enough. You are having some kind of breakdown dear. I'm going to call Doctor Payton and tell him to come right over. We are having an emergency and need medical help!

*(ALMA picks up the phone, but LESLIE takes the receiver.)*

LESLIE: I don't need Doctor Payton. This is the most sane I've ever felt. I've always seen a man when I looked in the mirror. I felt insane when I put on dresses and ribbons. *(Indicating what he is wearing)*. These clothes . . . Mother . . . they suit me. They let me see myself for who I am. *(Pointing towards the wedding dress)*. That dress fills me with fear. It's like being stifled, like the worms who died to make it. I won't give up my life by wearing it.

ALMA: Leslie, my head is spinning! I can't make sense of this!

LESLIE: Mother, you say I've always been sensible. Look at me. Look in my eyes. I'm not raving. These are not the rash actions of a lunatic. My actions are well thought-out. Strategic, even. I'm the same sensible person you've known me to be. Please believe me when I say this is who I am. It is who I've always been.

*(Silence. ALMA looks into LESLIE's eyes.)*

ALMA: The red overalls.

LESLIE: Mother?

ALMA: I'd forgotten about them. Funny how something that so trivial can suddenly seem like a comet shooting across the night sky. You wonder how you missed it.

LESLIE: I don't understand.

ALMA: You were about four. Your father bought you red overalls. He would put you in them and off you two would go to the park. Or so I thought.

One day you returned with a bruise on your face. Oh, it was horrible! That's when I found out you'd been going to an empty lot where the fathers and their little boys would play baseball. You'd seen the boys and wanted to play. Father said, "little girls don't play baseball," and you said, "then I'll be a boy." That's when he bought you the overalls. You and your father pretended you were a boy so you could play. A ball bounced up and hit you—that's where the bruise came from.

Yes. That's what he told me. "I'll be a boy," you said. *(Pause)*. Even at that age you were strong willed. You knew your mind. You knew who you were.

LESLIE: That came from you. My height came from father, but my strength of will came from you. You're a brave, resourceful woman. I've watched you since father died—managing money, refusing to be intimidated by anyone.

Your courage always inspired me. I admire you, Mother. I admire you so much. Will you have the courage to let me go?

ALMA: I don't believe I could stop you. I can only pray to god to keep you safe.

LESLIE: I wish you could come with me to Princeton. If you were a man, Mother, you would have been the president of a bank, or a Senator.

ALMA: I don't know what to say.

LESLIE: Say you will come and visit me at school, Mother. Please say you'll come. I will do my best to make you proud.

*(ALMA abruptly exits into the bedroom. LESLIE picks up the valise and prepares to leave. ALMA returns carrying a man's dark blue silk scarf.)*

ALMA: Here. This was your father's. It's silk, but it will help you fly free.

LESLIE: Something blue.

*(ALMA kisses LESLIE, and they embrace before LESLIE exits.)*

*END OF PLAY*

10:4: TENN PLAYWRITING CONTEST WINNER

SACHE J. SATTA

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INTERVIEW WITH SACHE J. SATTA

*Playwright Sache J. Satta, winner of the 10:4: Tenn Playwriting Contest, joined our drama editor Leslie Cardwell to talk about identity and creativity in their work and the work of Tennessee Williams. Their work explores what it means to live authentically—especially at times in history when language for gender and identity didn't yet exist. You can find more about Sache at <https://stevenjsatta.com>.*

**You mentioned that your play was inspired by the idea of somebody experiencing themselves as not the gender they were assigned at a time when there was really no articulated concepts or language to describe that.**

Yes, that idea really fascinates me. How would a person like that try to explain themselves, especially to a parent? And how would they find a way to live in a way that felt more in alignment with who they truly were?

It's a double-edged sword. On one hand, having no words or concepts for what you're feeling can be isolating. On the other, for the right person, the lack of a box means you get to make up your own. That freedom—though painful—is also creative. That's where the play began.

Of course, the whole thing had to happen in ten minutes, which is why I think it'll eventually expand. I might continue Leslie's story, or maybe create an anthology of short plays—all linked thematically by people who experienced their gender in expansive ways before society had expansive concepts of gender.

**It fits with Tennessee Williams, but it takes his themes in a new direction, doesn't it?**

Definitely. It introduces a modern concept into a world that Williams built. It introduces a character who has an experience of the world and of themselves that we now have language for. We now recognize what a trans person experiences. But obviously there were trans people before there was that concept. But Williams' plays are always queer-coded—Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* being the most famous example. Tom stands in for Williams himself, who carried guilt for allowing his sister to be institutionalized.

In my play, that queerness is still central, but it manifests differently.

Leslie, in this case, isn't just fragile—she's trying to live as her authentic self in a time that offered no framework for that. So while Williams wrote within the coded language of his era, my work makes that subtext visible.

**You've mentioned you often start from prompts. Do you still work that way, or do you have a list of plays you're developing now?**

I still love prompts. I scroll through Play Submissions Helper to see what people are looking for—but I never want to “teach to the test.” A prompt has to resonate.

Many of my full-length plays began as ten-minute pieces. For example, *Floating Down to Camelot* started as a response to a call for short plays inspired by classic works. I asked, “What happens if we queer Romeo and Juliet?” That turned into a modern reimagining—and eventually into a play about gay life on a 1970s college campus.

The '70s fascinate me because they're often skipped in queer history. We jump from Stonewall to AIDS, forgetting the vibrant, liberated years in between. People were out, visible, and full of possibility before the plague hit. I wanted to capture that.

**What do you hope audiences take away when your Tennessee Williams-inspired play is performed?**

Two things. First, that queer and trans identities aren't modern inventions—they've always existed, even before we had words for them. And second, that parents can get on board quickly.

People often say Alma, the mother in my play, changes too fast. But in researching early PFLAG stories, I found many parents did turn around quickly. They realized, “Oh, that explains so much—this is my kid, and I love them.” We forget that not everyone lived inside a 1950s bubble. There have always been progressive, bohemian people who accepted their children as they were.

One of my favorite lines to write was Alma's realization about the red overalls—when she finally sees that her child has always been this person. That moment of recognition and acceptance is the heart of the play.

**What's next for you?**

I'll be returning to the Midwestern Dramatists Conference and may take on a new role as librarian for the Baltimore Playwrights Festival, supporting new writers in the area.

Creatively, I'm diving back into my own work. I have several plays in progress—some stalled because I'm wrestling with questions of authenticity. Two of my current projects center on characters of color, and I've been working through how to write them responsibly. Fellow playwrights of color have encouraged me to write the stories that come to me, but to do the work,

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the listening, and the research to ensure they ring true.

And I've just expanded a one-act called *The Raft*—originally thirty minutes—to a full ninety-minute piece, thanks to feedback from the Valdez Theatre Conference. So now I'm shopping that around.

**It sounds like a full creative life. Thank you so much for sharing your process and perspective with us.**

Thank you—it's been a pleasure. And please, if you're ever in Baltimore, let's grab coffee.

JOAN ROGER

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HUMAN

Clay walker,  
dream walker, walker of carbon,  
night walker, walker in light,  
two-legged walker,  
toes touching earth,  
earth toucher, earth breather,  
earth in your bones,  
sun in your hair,  
soil in your stomach,  
excrement of worms  
pulsing through your blood,  
you who sheds skins like memories,  
with your ocean heart  
and flower lungs,  
you breather of trees,  
breather of mountains,  
feather breather,  
breather of temple and mosque,  
pyramid and Colosseum,  
you with pillar arms  
and butterfly hands,  
you holder of fire,  
holder of sword, pen holder  
and holder of hands,  
you who swallows time on your wrist,  
planets turn as you sip  
your morning coffee.  
You look through clouds  
with your river eyes  
at stars that birthed your fingers.  
You sing with a golden tongue  
the rhythm of atoms.  
You are terror. You are beauty.  
And I won't give up on you yet.

ROGER CAMP

BUTTERFLY, VIA DELL'ANGUILLARA, FLORENCE, ITALY



DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH

GARY DUEHR

---

ALL OF US, PASSENGERS

There is a quiet part  
of the universe  
where bodies may continue  
at the same pleasant velocity

Just as we exit, slumped, getting  
patted on the back  
as if returning from a  
dangerous mission

\*

To stand on the street inhaling  
To walk slowly, as if  
through deep water

At the corner a woman turns, on the verge  
of saying something

No need to explain oneself  
A scrap of paper pinned  
to a tree: LOST DOG

\*

All that one can ask, smelling  
of cinnamon and milk,  
is to be on our way somewhere

A shudder of pigeons: snow from God

BRIDGET BRUSH

---

I WISH I WERE A TURTLE

I'll find home spread across a sternum  
cross hatching ribs taking turns inflating our lungs. I expand  
with secondhand oxygen. Maybe I'll find it  
there, something to worship, some prayer I can trap  
between my teeth, or under my fingernails. I'll blacken  
my heels trying to find it, scrape  
my knees like I'm innocent. My fragile hands riddled  
with splinters from tearing down the siding. Why do we make houses  
beautiful just to sell them; why did I fix him? I'm tired  
now and dirty, but there is no place for me  
to rest my head. I wish I were a turtle  
I wish I were my own home.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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JASON ALLEN writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. For his novel, *The East End*, Bonnie Jo Campbell provided the cover blurb: “Every page is filled with wise insights about social class and the human heart.” Jason has since been nominated for an Edgar Award and the Georgia Author of the Year Award. He teaches creative writing in the MFA program at Wichita State University and lives in Kansas with his sweet rescue dog, Luna.

BRIAN S. BRIJBAG, ESQ. is a Florida-based playwright, attorney, and philanthropist whose work blends elegant absurdism with emotional resonance. He has over 30 years of theatre experience and a deep commitment to community storytelling.

BRIDGET BRUSH has previously been published in *Third Wednesday Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Poetry South Literary Magazine* and *Oakland Arts Review*! She is a student at Salisbury University in the Creative Writing program and enjoys spending time outside, from the beach to the mountains. Bridget taught herself how to play guitar in high school on a 12 string, and her dogs like to listen to her play; she likes when they sing along! She was born and raised in Maryland and hates crabs!

ROGER CAMP lives in Seal Beach, CA having spent a lifetime photographing abroad. His documentary photography has been awarded the prestigious Leica Medal of Excellence. Widely published both in the U.S. as well as Europe, China, and Japan, and more recently in the *Vassar Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Pinch*. He is the author of three photography books: *Butterflies in Flight*, *Heat*, and *500 Flowers*. His archives are housed in the Special Research Collection of the University of California, Santa Barbara Library. He is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NY. More of his work may be seen on [luminous-lint.com](http://luminous-lint.com).

ADEET DESHMUKH is a New York City-based photographer, digital product developer, and gastronomy obsessive. Adeet has had shows in both Chicago, New England, and New York City, and his work spans countries and cultures from all the places he’s lived and traveled to. His work has been published across commercial, editorial, and literary spaces. He lives in Manhattan with his wife, daughter, and two darling cats.

WILLIAM DORESKE lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He studied under the late Helen Vendler and earned a doctorate from Boston University. He has taught at several colleges and universities and has now retired to the Wild Wood in hopes of meeting Badger, Rat, and Mole. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals and a few obscure books. He likes hiking in ugly weather and sipping lattes at local cafes.

Based in Boston, GARY DUEHR enjoys doing theater and photography in

addition to poetry. His MFA is from the Iowa Writers Workshop. He has received an NEA Poetry Fellowship, as well as grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the LEF Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. His books include *Point Blank* (In Case of Emergency Press), *Winter Light* (Four Way Books) and *Where Everyone Is Going To* (St. Andrews College Press).

MARK DUNBAR lives in Brookfield, IL. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Red Rock Review*, *Spellbinder*, *Neologism Poetry Review*, and *The Ekphrastic Review*, among others. He attended Kenyon College, where he was the recipient of the American Academy of Poets Award. He is looking for a genie who can give him the ability to sing without emptying the room. And to dunk a basketball. He's still pondering his third wish.

JOHN B. ELLIOTT grew up in a small California town founded by Indiana farmers, and has family roots in Arkansas and Georgia. He has worked as a typesetter, pressman, bartender, social worker, biologist, and teacher, and has a passion for deserts and mountains, especially the Sierra Nevada. He has published fiction in *Calliope*, *Sonoran Horror*, *Open Ceilings*, *Lifespan Anthology*, and *Crimeucopia*, as well as poetry in, among others, *The Comstock Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Tanka Journal*, *The Fourth River*, and five anthologies. He resides in Santa Barbara County, California.

DON FARRELL lives in Cambridge, MN where land transitions from forest to prairie. He holds a monthly open mic at The ARC Retreat Center and a bi-weekly zoom poetry critique group. He has a full length book accepted for publication by Fernwood Press. He has poems in *Bodega*, *Thimble*, *Exist Otherwise*, *Shoegaze*, *Brushfire*, *Five Fleas*, *The Orchard Poetry Journal*, *Suisun Valley Review*, *Men Matters Journal*, *Willows Wept*, *Harrow House*, *Mason Jar*, *New Square*, *FarmGirl Press*, *Action Spectacle*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Burningword*, *Center of Excellence for the Arts*, and *Indelible*. He hopes to leave this planet without getting what he deserves.

GLORIA HEFFERNAN is the author of three full-length poetry collections, most recently *Fused* (Shanti Arts Publishing). Her craft book, *Exploring Poetry of Presence* (Back Porch Productions) won the CNY Book Award for Nonfiction. She received the Naugatuck River Review Narrative Poetry Prize. Gloria is the author of the collections *Peregrinatio: Poems for Antarctica* (Kelsay Books), and *What the Gratitude List Said to the Bucket List*, (New York Quarterly Books). Her work has appeared in over 100 publications including *Poetry of Presence* (vol. 2). To learn more, visit: [www.gloriaheffernan.wordpress.com](http://www.gloriaheffernan.wordpress.com).

ALISON HICKS' fourth collection of poems is *Homing* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions, 2024). She was awarded the 2021 Birdy Prize from Meadowlark Press for *Knowing Is a Branching Trail*. Previous collections are *You Who Took the Boat Out* and *Kiss*, and a chapbook *Falling Dreams*. Her work has

appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Permafrost*, and *Poet Lore*. She was a finalist for the 2021 Beullah Rose Prize from Smartish Pace, an Editor's Choice selection for the 2024 Philadelphia Stories National Poetry Prize, and is a three-time nominee for a Pushcart Prize. She is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

KATIE KENNEY studied publishing at University of Denver's Publishing Institute and received her MFA in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. Her poems have appeared in *Grub Street Literary Magazine*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, and *Merion West*, among others. She lives in New England with her cat Mabel.

XIAOLY LI is a Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship Grant (2022) recipient. Her poetry collection, *Every Single Bird Rising* (FutureCycle Press, April 2023), was a Zone 3 Press Book Award finalist. Her poetry is forthcoming, featured, or anthologized in *Tampa Review*, *Salamander*, *Saranac Review*, *Spillway*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Chautauqua*, *Rhino*, *Verse Daily*, and elsewhere. She has been nominated for Best New Poets, three times for a Pushcart Prize, and four times for Best of the Net. Her poetry collection manuscript, *Between the Sun and the Moon*, was a finalist in the 2023 Diode Editions Book & Chapbook Contests and the Word Works' 2024 Washington Prize. She lives in Massachusetts, where her photography has been shown and sold in galleries in Boston. Xiaoly received her Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and her Master's in computer science and engineering from Tsinghua University in China.

MARY ANN MCGUIGAN'S creative nonfiction has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Brevity*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. *The Sun*, *Massachusetts Review*, *North American Review*, and many other journals have published her fiction. Her collection *Pieces* includes stories named for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net; her new story collection, *That Very Place*, reaches bookstores in September 2025. The Junior Library Guild and the New York Public Library rank Mary Ann's novels as best books for teens; *Where You Belong* was a finalist for the National Book Award. She loves visitors: [www.maryannmcguigan.com](http://www.maryannmcguigan.com).

DANIEL EDWARD MOORE lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His work has appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *North American Review*, and others. His work is in *The Meadow Journal*, *Welter Journal*, *The Chiron Review*, and forthcoming in *Novus Literary Journal*.

SYDNEY QUINN is an emerging writer living in Madison, New Jersey. She received her BA with a major in English Literature and a minor in Creative Writing from Drew University. Her literary influences include T. Kira Madden, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and Kate Racculia. When not writing, she can be found ordering an oat milk iced latte and hanging out at a local

bookstore.

EMILY RANKIN was born in Riverside, California and attended university in Texas, where she received a BFA in 2011. Her body of work deals with the tangles of emotion and understanding, and the intuitive messages of dreaming and subconscious exploration. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Gasher*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Raw Art Review*, *Meat for Tea*, *Black Fox*, *Hey I'm Alive Magazine*, and *Rattle*. She's currently based in New Mexico. [www.eerankinart.com](http://www.eerankinart.com)

JOAN ROGER currently resides in the Pacific Northwest where she enjoys long walks in the forest and the beautiful views over Puget Sound. In 2024, Joan earned her MFA in poetry from Pacific University. She has published poems in *The Healing Muse*, *The Human Touch*, *Intima*, *Canary Magazine*, *Thimble*, *Rust & Moth*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Main Street Rag* and the 2023 *One Page Poetry Anthology*.

ROB ROGERS is an award-winning writer and attorney from Winter Garden, Florida. His first book, *Finding My Way Home: Fighting Depression Backpacking in Central Florida*, won the Bronze Medal for Autobiography/Memoir at the 2025 Florida Authors & Publishers Association (FAPA) President's Book Awards and was a Finalist in the Independent Author Network (IAN) Book of the Year Awards. Rob's essays have been published in *Still Points Art Quarterly*, *Four Tulips*, and *Thorn & Bloom* and on FloridaHikes.com. Rob also writes a blog called the *Central Florida Backpacking Desk Jockey* (<https://backpackingdeskjockey.blog>). More about Rob can be found on his website, <https://RobRogersWriter.com>.

TOM ROTH teaches creative writing at a middle school in Cincinnati, Ohio. He earned an MFA from Chatham University. His most recent publications are in *Bridge-Chicago*, *The Core Review*, *Gordon Square Review*, and *Miracle Monocle*. He has a publication forthcoming in *Black Fox Literary Magazine*. When he's not writing, he enjoys running, camping, and playing guitar. He is from Canton, Ohio.

MICHAEL SALCMAN is the former chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland, president of The Contemporary Museum, a child of the Holocaust and a survivor of polio. His poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Hopkins Review*, *Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Raritan*, and *Smartish Pace*. His books include *The Clock Made of Confetti* (nominated for The Poets' Prize), *The Enemy of Good is Better*, *Poetry in Medicine: Classic and Contemporary Poems on Medicine*, *A Prague Spring* (Sinclair Poetry Prize winner), *Shades & Graces* (winner Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize), *Necessary Speech: New & Selected Poems*, and *Crossing the Tape* (2024).

RIKKI SANTER'S poems have appeared in various publications including

*Ms. Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Slab*, *Slipstream*, [PANK], *Crab Orchard Review*, *Rhino*, *Grimm*, *Hotel Amerika* and *The Main Street Rag*. Her work has received many honors including 2023 Ohio Poet of the Year, Pushcart, Ohioana, and Ohio Poet book award nominations as well as a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her collection *Resurrection Letter* was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and her most recent collection, *Shepherd's Hour*, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books.

**SACHE J. SATTA** (they/he) teaches acting at Towson University, was a finalist for the Dramatist's Guild National Fellowship 2024, and a Fellow at the 2025 Lambda Literary Retreat for Emerging LGBTQ+ Writers. His full-length play *Floating Down to Camelot* recently premiered at Baltimore's Spotlighter's Theatre, and his short works have been performed and won awards across the country: *The Thousandth Crane* took Audience Favorite at ArtFactory's 2023 festival; *The Thrill* took Judges' Choice at Short & Sweet Hollywood 2024. Sache consistently writes about the queer experience. He is also the current Librarian for The Baltimore Playwright's Festival. [www.stevenjsatta.com](http://www.stevenjsatta.com)

**ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO** of Niskayuna, NY, is passionate about reading anything from recipes to Ovid. Poetry is the dreamcatcher of her thoughts. How does anyone live without it? she wonders. Sometimes her poetry leaps into fiction, CNF, and essays. She has published in the *New York Times* (Lives). Nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize and for Best of the Net, her short stories and poetry have been published in *Prism*, *The MacGuffin*, *Euphony*, *Penumbra*, *Harpur Palette*, the *Iowa Review*, and many more. <http://rochellejshapiro.com> @rjshapiro @rochelle.j.shapiro

Until recently, **RICHARD WEAVER** has been the official writer-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub in Baltimore. He has flipped coastlines and hangs at Hooley's Public House on occasion. Some of his other pubs include: *OffCourse*, *Misfit Mag*, *Burningword LJ*, *Slippery Elm*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Spank the carp*, *Magnolia Review*, and *Your Magazine Here*. He's the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press, 1992), and wrote the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars* (2005). As one of the founders of the *Black Warrior Review* and its first Poetry Editor, he is proud to note that it is 100+ issues old.

**MELODY WILSON**'s work appears in *One*, *B O D Y*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Rust & Moth*, and many other publications. Her first collection was awarded the Paul Nemser Prize from *Lily Poetry Review* and will be released in 2026. A graduate of Pacific University's MFA program, she lives in Oregon with her husband Phillip and their dog Z. Find more of her work at [melodywilson.com](http://melodywilson.com).

**ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT** is an internationally published artist, poet,

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photographer known for her abstract expressionism. She studied art and art history at Rutgers College in NJ as an undergraduate. Wright's dynamic watercolors have been published by journals online and in print: *Abstract Magazine: Contemporary Expressions*, *Lolwe*, *Harpur Palate*, *Ponder Review*, *New Plains Review*, *Beyond Words Magazine*, *Kitchen Table Quarterly*, *NOVUS Literary Journal*, and her work was included in the 2024 and 2025 Newark Arts Festivals and the gallery at the HACPAC in NJ. She is an admirer of the works of Stanley Whitney, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Howardena Pindell and others.