

# Steam Ticket

A Third Coast Review

Volume 29

Spring 2026

**Steam Ticket**  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Steam Ticket* is produced each spring by committed UW-La Crosse students enrolled in English 320: *Literary Production and Publication*. We take pride in carefully reviewing all submissions and choosing stories, poems, and art submitted by artists from around the world, celebrating the diversity of our submissions.

Our *Steam Ticket* staff would like to thank all those involved in the creation of Volume 29, including:

Dr. Karl Kunkel, Dean of the College of Liberal Studies, and Dr. Kate Parker, English Department Chair, for their continued support.

Lee Xiong, our most-exceptional English Department Administrative Assistant whose super-heroic skills we appreciate year-round.

David Piro, Assistant Director of Creative Services, for his help in turning our vision on the pages into a real-life publication.

Laura Gooden and the staff of Murphy Library's Special Collections for keeping all volumes of *Steam Ticket* safe on the shelves.

Matt Cashion, our creative, supportive, knowledgeable, talented, hilarious, and humble advisor, for his encouragement, insight and jokes. Thanks for your endless knowledge and kindness.

Thanks also to all who submitted work to *Steam Ticket*. We sincerely appreciate the time and effort you devote to your art. It was a privilege to read your work.

And lastly, we appreciate everyone who appreciates these pages. For more information on *Steam Ticket*, visit [www.steamticket.org](http://www.steamticket.org) and join our *Steam Ticket* community on Facebook and Instagram.

## A Letter from the Editor

Vol. 29 of *Steam Ticket* feels like my baby. Sort of a crazy claim, but the collaborative, hands-on experience that I've had creating it makes me feel what I assume a parent feels after watching their child graduate: proud, amazed, accomplished, and maybe a little scared to see it out in the world for others to judge.

My team was wonderful, and I could not have asked for better readers. They consistently kept up with our ever-growing prose and poetry submissions on top of all of their other classes this semester, which was what is required for anyone joining our team. Going a step further, I was excited every day to hear their discussions (and occasional arguments) solely because every single reader gave each piece the time and potential any writer would dream for their work to receive when submitting. They were passionate and they always cared about hearing out various perspectives before even *considering* passing.

I loved having the honor of joining both groups, and seeing more individual and drastically diverse writers than I ever would have without this experience.

I'd like to give a special thanks to Jack Schloesser and Ollie Graham, my prose and poetry editors, who I *really* couldn't have done this without. They led the discussions—at times diffused them as well—but always made sure everyone's voices were heard. When a reader was quiet, I loved hearing one of the editors ask what their opinion was on a piece. They were kind, but also hardworking, being the ones to assign readings and assemble them with everyone's ratings on different spreadsheets. Between them, Abby Shaffer (submissions manager) and Wyatt Davis (public relations and outreach) getting through the emails and promoting the journal has all been a labor of love!

I'd also like to thank Liv Sinshack, for all her work with the art; the pieces she selected from countless to choose from were unique and found perfect spots within our journal.

Lastly, I'd like to thank our advisor, Matthew Cashion, for all his help and patience, enduring at least 100+ of my endless questions.

Our team worked hard. I'm proud of what me, our readers, editors, and all those whose pieces we've read have done this year, accepted or not. I hope you love it as much as we do.

**Maddie Brunner**  
Editor

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## Crow Morning

*John Grey*

Morning is crows.  
That's what I wake to.  
And their caw sure isn't pretty.  
It's a busted cough,  
a bar fight at closing time,  
a warning shot to anything dumb enough  
to still be breathing.

You hear it,  
call it prose,  
then you don't know a damn thing  
about poetry.

Just look at them—  
dark wings,  
beaks deep in the guts of yesterday's roadkill.  
Is that poetry?  
This poor wretch would say yes.  
It's what I write these days.  
My old stuff is that dead thing...  
the one on the side of the road.

## The Cozy Corner

*Jeffrey Howard*

As soon as you pass the wooden cubbies in the preschool's main learning area, your son J spills forward onto a thin rectangle of navy blue carpet. Just like the tavern in Turgenev's "The Singers," the teachers call it "The Cozy Corner."

Right now, the other children in his class stare and chatter around the breakfast tables, newly cleared. J curls his body so that only the toes of his Crocs protrude beyond the Corner's edges, then presses his forehead against the fibers as a devotee might while approaching the divine.

The teachers reserve the Corner for little children grappling with "big emotions," and J's usually have something to do with being left at school or having to sing earworm tunes at music time. His brother M attended this preschool two years ago and, to your knowledge, never had to use the carpet, even that afternoon when his best friend gashed M's cheek with a pair of scissors during a crafting session. J retreats to the Corner like the hour hand finds the three.

Perhaps J is imagining that you will remain beside him with your hand on his back. If only you could grant that wish instead of catching the next blue line train to Midtown. At the same time, you worry that J will scratch his glasses when he folds himself like a hedgehog. Every day adds a new flaw to the lens when he shoves them like some secret shame to the bottom of his cubby. His teachers have learned to accept his patterns, tell you it's best if you leave now. Some minds need more time to adjust than others.

But you, too, have trouble with these partings, perhaps for the same reasons that, in the future, you will have to force your eyes closed during a playground game of hide-and-seek. You fear that when you open them again your child will be gone, vanished, taken. The thought that makes you want to press his soft cheek tight against your shoulder, carrying him with you when you go.

Regardless, you must leave. Alone. You will be waiting on the platform or listening to the cadence of metal wheels thunk-thunk when J's taut shoulders grow slack. His shaking eyes will cast about as he slides one foot, then the other, beyond the limits of his refuge. He will rise, inch after inch, like notes in crescendo, each one stronger than the last.

## Efficient

Anushka

I cry for ghosts

Real as life

When they appear

I leave on one-way flights

The hand extended

I thought would pry

It hugged me instead

And I wanted to cry

I'm very efficient about it all

I mourn things before they die.

I repulse all

With a beastly look

Then make them leave.

Like I knew they would

Like it gave me joy

To know I was right

Like I'm now at peace

'Cause I never tried

I'm very efficient about it all

I mourn things before they die.

The clock strikes five

Two cups of chai

I ask just why

Couldn't I stay for the third

It would hurt if I did

No coming back from it

Blind kitten, the object of pity

I couldn't be her, I had some pride

I'm very efficient about it all

I mourn things before they die.

## **Bad Connection**

*Charlie Mortell*

If I can stand it, it would be good to know.  
It would be good if I can stand it.  
Would it be good, if breaking the news?  
If breaking the news, if I can stand it?

Am I sitting down? Better down to take it.  
I'd like to be upstanding but only sitting down.  
Would the news be good, if I can stand it?  
We have a bad connection. Hang up and dial again.

Good news,  
Not news and not good,  
What?  
Fresh news,  
Old news and not fresh,  
Trust.

Am I alone? Why do you ask?  
Why do you ask me. What's it matter?  
Is there someone I can call?  
Call, or stay with me and whisper?

Would I like to view the body?  
View the body one last time?  
You can arrange it, if I choose it?  
One last time to tearful view it.

Warning words,  
Not words and not warning,  
Mute.  
Grave turn,  
Not turn and not grave,  
Urn.

## “On Some Sunday Mornings”

*John Dorrob*

My pastor is a good-looking man.  
Some come just to look at him, wonder  
how it might be if he weren't tied down  
so low to the ground. Could any ole snake  
make him move the right way, or is he  
steadfast and loyal to the core?

I come to hear the history of the Word,  
its origins, what it means,  
and is every sermon intended just for me?

I see Elvis up there, gyrating, swivel hips,  
pump-thumpin', pokin' into hearts that bleed freely  
Sunday morning as he swims through proverbs  
biblizing how Job lost it all and maintained his love  
for a vengeful, jealous god.

*Everything's a test he spits. Everything.*

We hung around the old drugstore downtown because no one there chased us away from the magazine stand. As long as we bought something on our way out—a candy bar, a pack of baseball cards, a novelty fart cushion—we could flip through *Field and Stream* and *Sports Illustrated* for as long as we wanted. Fifty cents or a buck meant an afternoon of entertainment, a good deal in Union Knoll's tiny shopping district, which was just a pair of parallel streets that looked like a fifties movie set, a dozen brick storefronts shaded by awnings tucked between the railroad tracks and the Interstate on-ramp.

By then, the pharmacist was the only employee, and we—a pack of half-wild boys between nine and thirteen years old, all of whose parents worked until five or six every evening—were among his only customers. This was in the mid-eighties, when strip malls and big box stores were spreading west from the edges of the city, and a Walgreens had just opened on Route 46, half a mile away. Few people wanted to come downtown to fill their prescriptions; there wasn't much parking, and even if you found a spot, you risked getting stuck waiting for a train to pass when it was time to leave. Plus, the new place had undercut the old one's prices. So the pharmacist—probably in his early sixties, though we thought of him as ancient—perched on a stool all day, occasionally bottling up blood pressure pills for an old-timer who walked there from the retirement village on Riverview Drive and otherwise waiting for us to drop a few coins on the counter.

We didn't know his real name. The drugstore was called Gerald's, but the sign above the door said, "established 1908." Old as he was, this guy hadn't been around that long, of that, we were sure. Still, we thought of him as Gerald, and that's what we called him when we spoke of him among ourselves. He never said much, just, "Afternoon, boys"; or, "Make sure you brush your teeth after those," if we bought Jawbreakers or Fireballs; or, "Hope you got a Mattingly in there," if we bought a pack of cards. While we were at the magazine rack, he'd keep an eye out to make sure we didn't reach for the copies of *Playboy* on the top shelf; the other nudie mags were sealed in plastic bags with brown paper hiding their covers. Otherwise, he let us be, and even if we couldn't stare at centerfolds, we caught plenty of flesh in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, enough to fuel our predictable pre-pubescent fantasies and fill us with the entitlement boys of our generation were accustomed to.

All told, those afternoons in the drugstore—late fall through early spring, when it was too cold to spend all our time outdoors—were just part of the general haze of late childhood and early adolescence, part of suburban boredom and the languid passing of time. The pharmacist himself was backdrop at most, and none of us would

have given him any further thought if he wasn't arrested in August of 1987, soon after I turned fourteen. I'd spent the summer as a camp counselor in training and hadn't been downtown for months. The kids I'd run with those previous years had all splintered into various factions ahead of our move to the regional high school, which was five times the size of our junior high. Soccer players hung out only with soccer players, skateboarders with skateboarders, a few studious types disappearing into their bedrooms to shut out distractions. I could already tell the next four years would be a lonely time for me, and I'd taken to wandering in the narrow strip of woods behind my house in the afternoon, or fishing in a nearby creek where I never caught a thing.

The article in the local paper came not quite as a shock, but more of a thrill, something to give a little charge of danger to the life that otherwise seemed so placid and removed from the larger world I glimpsed only when my father took me into the city to visit my grandparents. The pharmacist—whose name, it turned out, was Wallace Roberts—had been selling controlled substances to people with fake prescriptions: amphetamines, barbiturates, codeine. The whole scheme was tied to organized crime, which operated without much interference from law enforcement in that part of New Jersey. But some of the drugs had made their way into local schools, and a sixteen-year-old had overdosed and almost died, and now the pharmacist was out on a six-figure bond. Prosecutors hoped he might cooperate in exchange for a reduced sentence. According to the article, he had sizeable gambling debts and had been putting two grandchildren through college.

All that time we'd spent in the shop, and right under our noses the underworld we knew about only from movies had been carrying out its nefarious business: drugs and money for sure, probably guns, bets on boxing and baseball, perhaps unclothed women like those in our fantasies, all just out of sight. It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me, and I'd missed it completely. I needed to talk to someone about it, but no one around me would have understood; my parents were horrified by what they read in the paper, as if all their efforts to keep the family safe, sheltering us away in this quiet town thirty miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel, were falling apart. So I hopped on my bike and rode downtown, passing the Walgreens on the way, with its vast parking lot, people walking out with drugs they bought legally and cheaply, and somewhere inside, under a sterile drop ceiling and fluorescent tubes, a magazine stand you weren't allowed to browse.

Gerald's was closed, of course, but otherwise there was nothing to mark the change. I expected police barricades or at least tape across the door, but it was just the same place with the lights off. Through the window I could see the rack of candy bars and the pharmacy counter, behind which a man named Wallace Roberts had slung codeine to pay off gambling debts to mobsters. Right there! I wanted to replay all those afternoons I'd taken for granted, to see if I could spot anything out of the

ordinary, clues I'd overlooked at the time. But I'd been too focused on the magazines, and to be honest, swimsuits captured my attention less back then than batting averages and stolen bases and spinners attractive to trout. Now the magazine rack was out of view at the back of the store, and all I could picture were those plastic packages with the brown paper covers, the mysteries and possibilities sealed away inside. I stood there straddling my bike on the sidewalk of a movie-set Main Street, bewildered but also grief-stricken, as if I'd lost something precious, though I had no idea what it was.

And then I felt a tap on my shoulder. Behind me was one of the other kids who used to frequent Gerald's, one of the studious types I hadn't seen since school let out in June. He'd grown a couple of inches since then and had started combing his hair with a part down the middle; he looked as if he'd aged several years over the past couple of months, while I was still a little kid with cowlicks and scabs from blackberry thorns that had torn up my shins. "Can you believe it?" he asked, his voice somber, not wild-eyed and astonished like the one sounding in my head.

"Crazy," I answered. It was the only word that came to mind, and it described everything, including myself. I'm going crazy, I thought, with a mixture of dread and delight.

"That whole time," he said.

"I'm pretty sure I saw a guy packing under his jacket," I said, because I believed that's what was called for, a hint of streetwise pose that would make me seem less innocent and flabbergasted.

"We coulda been scoring from him," the kid said. His voice had lowered even further, and only then did I hear the regret in it, the mournfulness of missed opportunity. In Gerald's, he used to read mostly car magazines, studying up on the horsepower of Corvettes and 300ZXs he wouldn't be old enough to drive for years. Now he wore an impatient expression, as if he were no longer willing to wait for anything. How could so much have changed as the days lengthened to the point when it seemed they'd never end and then subtly began to shorten again? All summer, locked away in his bedroom, he'd been getting ready for the move to high school in ways I hadn't dreamed of, and now I was sure I was entirely unprepared for what was coming.

"He wouldn't've sold to us," I said. "We were just kids."

"Heard he sold to a seven-year-old."

*The whole world's going crazy*, I thought, though I didn't really believe him. He went over to the door and rattled it, as if it might open for him now that he'd sprouted a few hairs on his chin and upper lip. But whatever was left in Gerald's was closed off to us for good.

"I heard about another place I can score," he said. "Over in Lakewood."

I waited for him to invite me along, debating whether or not I should turn him down when he did. But he just swiveled and strolled off that movie-set street, crossing the train tracks and heading into whatever mystifying life awaited. I pedaled back home, walked in the woods, and fished an empty creek.

## **Afraid the Feathers Will Fall**

*Daniel Edward Moore*

When armor masqueraded as a silk corset  
forcing beauty up and out  
that lovely instrument of praise,  
it sounded like the moon's  
consensual hallelujah  
staging your luxurious lips  
for the cover of Glory's new issue.

Inside, the painting of a Robin's egg  
proved the art of emptiness  
looks better framed  
by a dirty boot  
walking home in the rain,  
and since winter afternoons  
are made for blame  
and you're looking for  
someone to carry it,  
notice how the  
shell's shattered blue  
matches the veins in my hand.

There will always be  
a worm in my mouth  
dangling above the  
nest in your throat,  
always be a darkening sky,  
afraid the feathers will fall.

**Mettle**

*Michael J Shepley*

they were  
I think  
starlings

I like  
the name  
reminiscent of  
that Big Bang  
thing

Because I was far  
far into Astronomy  
once upon  
a time

Starlings  
maybe  
I know  
they weren't  
crows

Early in the  
morning they  
swiftly dipped  
into the cup  
of shining quicksilver

Lake hidden  
sometime between the  
fir arrowed  
Hills

## In Evil Days

*Ann Lauinger*

How push does come to shove—not *if* but *when*—  
to find its star-spun mark one fearful day,  
and all of us are broken in the end.

So Birnam Wood did come to Dunsinane,  
and keeps on coming. Let me count the ways  
that push can come to shove—not *if* but *when*.

The weight of sorrow, malice, accident—  
you'd think the Earth would stagger, yet it stays  
in orbit, hauls us to our broken end.

Bless those who can't forget, bless those who spend  
their days collecting wrecks to frame their praise  
(though push come to its saddest shove) again.

Honor the hurling love which would unbend  
each savage torque, stands guard, un-does, un-says,  
and lets itself be broken for that end.

I think not every fracture's meant to mend;  
and falling's how our bodies graze, embrace,  
stride, scumble, learn; how bruise and blood invent  
a fellowship of falls and brokenness.

## An Overnight Delivery

*Jeff Fleischer*

Diane tried to ignore it and fall back asleep, but the knocking at her front door continued. The darkness outside her bedroom window wasn't lying; it was 3:34 in the morning.

The noise was soon joined by her neighbor pounding on the wall behind her bedroom closet. "Fine, Jenny! I'm getting it!" she yelled as she got out of bed, grabbed her robe from its hook on the back of the door, and headed for the source of the noise.

One of the reasons Diane had chosen this second-floor walkup was the huge west-facing windows that made the place live up to the leasing agent's description of it as "sun filled." They now meant she and her surprise visitor could see one another in full as she approached. His presence caused her to check her robe and pull it a little tighter to make sure it covered her well-worn pajamas.

Diane didn't recognize him, but he seemed familiar. The baseball cap pulled low on his head shadowed his face. He wore jeans and a zipped-up windbreaker, and he leaned against the window in a casual stance. He stopped knocking as she drew near and switched to calling her name.

It was too late to not open the door. He could see that she was home. If he meant her real harm, he could have easily broken one of the thin windows, and he wouldn't have called attention to his presence by making so much commotion on an otherwise quiet street.

She opened the door only a crack, just enough that she still had a chance to slam it if he tried pushing his way in. But he didn't. He barely moved at all.

"Good evening, Diane."

"Do you understand what time it is?"

"I guess you're right. Good morning, Diane."

"That's not what I mean." The way the stranger barely reacted was as unsettling as his surprise appearance. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"You don't even recognize me? Seriously, Diane?"

She didn't. The man looked to be in his early twenties, with hair short enough to fit under his cap. His skin had the kind of slight tint that could come from anything from ethnicity to sun exposure. His face was smooth, without even a hint of stubble. There was nothing Diane saw as a distinguishing feature.

"Last chance, buddy," she hated the false bravado as soon as it left her mouth. "What do you want? And how do you know my name?" She thought maybe she should have denied she was Diane, pretended to be a renter or something, but she was running on a sleep deficit.

“I know a lot about you. Probably more than you realize. I know you watch a lot of *Real Housewives* and *Friends* reruns. I know you got a new couch just before Thanksgiving. I know you had a dog for a few weeks earlier this year, but it didn’t work out. I know you take your phone calls on speaker and don’t let the other person know when you mute yourself to pay attention to something else. I know you leave your work clothes on the chair in the living room and change into comfortable clothes at night. I know that you live here alone, but you have a boyfriend over every Friday. Scrawny guy with glasses and red hair.”

“You fucking stalker. What, do you sit outside watching me?”

“Not even close. This is the first time I’ve ever been here here uninvited.”

“I’ve never invited you here, and you’re not welcome now.”

“You’re wrong about that. You’ve invited me here dozens of times. You really don’t know me yet?”

“This isn’t funny. I’ll call the police if you don’t leave.”

The man’s posture still didn’t change, and he didn’t raise his voice. “There’s a lot more I know about you. I also know I’ll be on my way as soon as you tell me how we know each other. I can make it easier if you need a hint. It’s not like I’m Rumpelstiltskin.”

Diane was no closer to recognizing the visitor. She thought about the phone she’d left on the nightstand. She wouldn’t have time to get it before he broke in if he wanted to. Still, he wasn’t making any threatening moves.

“I know you switched credit cards in March, though I don’t know why. I know you enjoy mushrooms and artichokes, but your boyfriend doesn’t like either. I know you eat dinner later than most people do, usually after eight.

“I know you order delivery at least three nights every week. I know you use the same delivery app a lot. And I know you never add more than a dollar for the tip on your account.”

Diane felt her face flush with embarrassment. She tightened her robe more, as if that could make up for how exposed she now felt.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I don’t have any cash on me, but I can send you something extra if you want to give me your contact—”

“I know an apology doesn’t mean much now. I know I quit my delivery job earlier tonight because my grandfather left me some money and I’m going back to school.”

“That’s great. About the school—”

“I know you should treat whoever delivers your dinner better in the future. I know if you don’t want to leave the house to get things, you should pay the people who bring them to you. I know you can afford to use the app, so you can afford to tip like everybody else.”

He stopped leaning on the window, straightened his windbreaker and started down the stairs, turning back one more time.

“I know that now you understand how much we get to know about you. And you should know that fifteen percent is the standard minimum, but twenty might go a way toward making up for things.”



## Reincarnation

Mark J. Mitchell

*"I know  
too much about Time for a pig."  
—Denise Levertov  
"Her Sorrow"*

My first life as a pig  
was leaves crunching,  
fat acorns, mushrooms, rain, trees,  
until I met that bigger boar.

There were many lives like that.  
Sometimes I was bigger.  
More than once, I was the runt.  
Those lives didn't last.

Later I was a pig again and  
it was all wallowing and stench  
but my stench, and a little girl  
cried when her father killed me.

Then came another life penned up  
but mud-delicious, and I started to know  
I knew too much during  
that squealing charge to the slaughterhouse.

My last life as a pig is yet  
to come—my punishment for lusting  
after bacon, pulled pork, glazed ham—  
just one more victim of appetites.

## Remembering a Masterpiece

*Aj Saur*

Three geranium petals  
fallen across  
a polished floor  
appear  
as apostrophes,  
possessing  
my thoughts  
for days  
until I recover  
the memory  
of an elementary  
school art class  
me clumsily cutting  
small hearts  
from red  
construction paper  
layering  
them  
to form  
a larger version, more  
kidney bean  
than stout organ  
—for my mother—  
although,  
it wasn't  
Valentine's Day  
or Mother's Day  
or any holiday  
claimed  
by a saint,  
simply  
a Friday  
when the glue sets  
at the same rate  
it always does  
(far slower  
than a child's

patience)  
me losing  
bits  
down  
the hall,  
out the double  
doors, along  
the sidewalk,  
all the way  
home  
where she  
encloses  
in a hug, lifts  
my wanting heart  
to the fridge,  
punctuating it  
with her favorite  
magnets.

## Fistful of Crows

David Denny

In the bare branches overhead,  
five crows complain of the cold.

A smiling sheepdog, fur blowing  
back, rests its front paws on the rear

windowsill of a long black car  
as it passes, its pink tongue lolling—

oh! a word from childhood:  
*lollygagging*, something father

learned from his trickster father,  
the grandfather I never knew—

the one I did know but, in a sense,  
also never knew was not a lollygagger—

rather a card-carrying union man:  
silent, bitter, short-tempered, fist

raised in the PBS air during Watergate,  
at his elbow a frosty can of Pabst

Blue Ribbon and a hunk of Monterey Jack,  
perpetually pissed at Tricky Dick Nixon

and all the egghead fat cats who  
ran the wicked world he wanted to love

(and almost could when the Giants  
were winning). Maybe in his own way

he did love it--one grandfather a sheepdog,  
making goofy faces as he passed,

the other a complaining crow. Who knows?--  
maybe they are happy, the crows:

maybe those guttural cries from bare  
branches constitute, in their tongue,

a sort of serenade to the rustling wind,  
or a raucous ode to the grime below.



**To live/to die is to care, and don't we all?**

*T. Broder*

My hair is in knots and my head isn't on straight.  
I held my breath and tried to drown in a public pool next to a middle school.  
Not to die, but to fix something that was broken.

Philosophically, I hate Summer. Cops drive slower and look longer. Hunger lingers in the streets; it's impure. Children screaming. Chafing thighs and nipples. And Winter, she's known for instilling contemplative humor into the dullest of humans— however, it's always been that wet heat that forced us to remember, and I remember. Black top and caterpillars that turned to moths. Heat. Caterpillars. I wondered how they withstood slinking around bare chested to the pavement in that heat.

Did they have another choice? Did they care?

Jump rope. Heat. The kind that makes your eyelids drift and your breath slow as if your body has become so held, so all consumed, it relaxes for what feels like the first time since the womb.

I remember trying to feel what it would've been like to be in my mother's warmth:

late night, lights off, lying down in the shower, fetal position, letting the water trickle eternal innocence onto my hairy, red body that's too far past salvation.

I squelched myself into the tub. I twisted my limbs and tried to pretend they weren't there. Or that they weren't as long and heavy. I spent that whole night confining into geometric shapes; trying to know if there was more to life than being too much. Trying to know if floating brought clarity. I know I was once a fetus, an embryo, a parasite, and if I could successfully return to that state, maybe I'd understand how being forced into existence could be a good thing. As I lay naked, I felt the bones of my body become too big for space. I wanted to be consumed, but I'd had too much. I'd seen, tasted, smelled too much to be all engulfed in a state of nothing-ness. I wanted desperate love, I wanted truth seeking, I wanted meaning, I wanted to die, I wanted to live; I wanted it all. It's a shame. It made sense.

(More often than not) I get extremely high. I connect myself to myself, and it's a privilege. Kinky sex and good drugs have replaced a uterus-dwelling parasite with a woman naked (I once thought it was for fun, but no), out of necessity to be consumed. I wanted to be a baby. I wanted kinky sex and more drugs.

I wanted lifelong friendship and a restraining order against one person, just once,  
to say I did it.

I wanted to make the world better and I wanted not to exist at all.

I'd had enough dopamine for the day and I didn't want to be on the news so

I thrust my head from the water:

Open eyes.

Face to face with a child (I don't know how long she'd been there)...open eyes...  
squinting eyes:

"Aren't you too big to be in here?"

"Aren't you too small to care?"

Nothing is too small to care. Nothing is too *small* to *care*.



I hate April 20th. The streets reek of reefer, that revolting stuff. I have to plug my nose and ponder why that unpleasant plant seems so perfect to people. Lazy n'er-do-wells with eyelids of lead take up space in my local latte, "Leopold's." I tried to get a donut this morning, but those munchie maniacs had already bought every last one. I thought maybe I could take my mind off of my annoyance by going to the aquarium, but gaggles of gals gleefully giggling from gummies generated great grief in me. I hated the way they gawked at the fish. I thought one of them was crying, mummering something about how glorious gills are. Good god, girl, get a grip.

Even as I walked through Commons Park, I couldn't seem to stop stepping on skunk-smelling snackers. Cosmic Brownies appear to be an essential food group to those red-eyed, dry-mouthed, lighter-lovers. I had already called the cops today, as it is my instinct every time I smell the substance, but I wanted to, again. The cops told me to stop calling. Apparently, to them, there is such a thing as caring an inappropriate amount, and that 15 calls in a day was 'a little excessive.'

Most of the time, I call to tip them off to the tokers only every two days. I've been called a narc before, but I wear that as a badge of honor. Truth be told, I get a little rush from watching stoners run from the cops, and most of them could do with the light jog anyways. They move like wild animals. Some are like ostriches, awkwardly pushing their chests forward as their legs struggle to catch them underneath. They outpace turtles, but barely. They give sloths a run for fastest mammals on Earth.

Most entertaining are the potheads that run like newborn giraffes, who can't seem to comprehend how their limbs work. I once saw one of those types running from the cops with his hand stuck in a Pringles can, wearing nothing, and I mean NOTHING, but one of those fugly drug-rug sweatshirts. I tripped him as he ran past me, and he flopped on the ground, limbs flailing in every direction. He then took a deep breath and stayed there, preferring to just accept his fate over having to get up. I like to think that his arrest was a turning point in his life.

It's my greatest shame that I tried it once, last April 20th. I was in my junior year of college, a straight-A student and assistant to the captain of the D-1 swim team. I had never smoked anything in my life and hadn't drank until I'd turned 21. I had ambitions to become poet laureate, and I would not be content with any interference. I practiced writing even as I swam, iambic pentameter being a welcome distraction from the ache in my limbs. My teammates never quite understood me, all of them being business majors who preferred jerking off to studying. I felt my luck was about to change when one day Dean, the captain, invited me to a frat party.

I was in no position to pass up such an opportunity, so I said yes.

I rang the doorbell of the place at 8:30 pm sharp and waited on the front porch, which was a disaster of open Amazon boxes and dead plants. No one came to the door. The crockpot full of the chili I made for the party was getting heavy, so I decided to hold my elbow on the buzzer until Dean finally came to let me in. He whipped open the door and looked at me with his brows furrowed, and then they relaxed in recognition.

Drew looked down at the delicacy I held, and he looked back into the house to shout, “Guys, Danny brought chili!!” and a chorus of already pregaming dimwits cheered. “Wait, shit, I don’t think we have any clean dishes to eat this with. Could you go out and get some paper bowls and plastic spoons n’ shit? Pick up a couple of cases of beer while you’re at it.” Before I could respond, he smacked my arm and said, “Thanks, man, I knew I could count on you.” He then took my crockpot right out of my hands, went back into the house, and kicked the door shut behind him. I later Venmo requested him for the items, though I knew from previous encounters that it was a fruitless endeavor.

By the time I finally made it back, more people were coming into the house, and the base of the blaring music shook the sidewalk from a block away. I stepped into a crowded room with sticky floors and was hit with a pungent stench. The olfactory offense of odor from obfuscated origins ostracized my orange and oakmoss cologne. When I set down the cases of Blue Ribbon and Spotted Cow, the masses swarmed and left only one can, which I grabbed. I considered beer to be nasty, but I felt the need to keep up social appearances. My all the way buttoned-up shirt and suit pants were not helping me. I leaned against the wall and began thinking through Villanelle.

*If they could know the shapes a heart can take,  
when words mean more than symbols on a page!  
This beer is warm, but now I can't escape.*

I was trying to figure out the syllable stresses in the word “alcohol” when a young woman approached me. She looked out of place in her own way, wearing an oversized shirt and baggy sweatpants. She looked as though she had just woken up and stumbled into the party. The house was uncomfortably hot, but she wore a beanie that was seemingly fused to her head. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

“Do you know where the bathroom is?” she asked.

“I’m alright, how about you?” I said, before processing the words that came out of her beautiful mouth. She looked confused and then bit her cheek to stop herself

from laughing as I said, “Wait, no. Sorry, um. It’s somewhere around here, I think, maybe down that way?”

“I’ll try that. If I don’t find it, I can always just piss on the front lawn,” she said, and smiled at me in a way I couldn’t decipher as she turned to walk down the hall. She was either joking or definitely about to piss on the front lawn. There was no way of knowing.

She came back after a few minutes. I hadn’t moved from my corner location behind a pretentiously large potted fern, full lukewarm PBR in hand. She said, “It is done,” and winked at me. Whatever that meant.

Just as she was about to walk away, I worked up the courage to say, “So. do you come here often?”

“To this specific frat house?” she asked. I nodded, doubling down on my stupid question. “No, I can’t say that I do. Do you come here often?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Only to pick up some guys for swim practice, though. Do you know how to swim?” She looked slightly confused, not surprising, seeing as the last time she was likely asked that question was in 2nd grade. I tried to recover by saying, “You look like you can.”

“Looks can be deceiving. I also look like a college student.”

“Wait, you don’t go to UW-Madison? How did you get in?”

She looked around and leaned forward, “Can you keep a secret? It’s a bit complicated.” I nodded and leaned into her. She then said, in an exaggerated whisper, “The door was open, and I was bored, so I walked in.”

She pulled back and put a finger to her mouth to tell me to keep quiet about it, which made me laugh. She leaned against the wall with me, her shoulder touching mine. I was hyper-conscious of how sweaty I was. Would she be able to feel the dampness through my shoulder? I took a sip of my drink and turned my head away so she wouldn’t see me wince at the taste. I cleared my throat and said, “So what’s your major?” which, as she had just established, would not be relevant. “Or, I mean, not-major. What are you doing? Sorry-- what is it that you do? Like, instead of school.” Then I started chugging my beer.

“I’m an editor for *Madison Magazine*. What is it that you do? Other than function as the swim team’s personal chauffeur.”

“I’m an English major. I’m only really on the swim team because I got a scholarship. I think the other guys can tell that I wouldn’t be on the team if I didn’t have to.”

“An *English* major. I would not have guessed.

“Looks can be deceiving, right?” She then looked me up and down. I hoped she wouldn’t notice me pushing out my chest.

“No, you do *look* like one. You just don’t exactly talk like one.”

“I’ll admit, my wordplay is much stronger than my conversational abilities.”

“Well, I think the knowledge that you are educated in English gives me the emotion of enchantment, and less of ennui.”

“I think it makes me ever so enigmatic and effervescent,” I took a, hopefully casual, sip of my drink.

“Extremely erotic, even?” she said. I choked on my beer. I so badly wanted to play it off, but she had to pat my back to help me through my coughing fit.

I then said, “E-yep,” which wasn’t alliteration, and then tried to cover it up by saying, “Ergonomically so,” which was somehow worse. I couldn’t tell if she was laughing with me or at me, but I was happy to entertain her either way. She had to take some deep breaths to calm herself down, and then her face lit up with an idea.

“Do you want to take a gummy with me?” At that moment, I would’ve followed her into battle. Her smile was big enough to reach her ears. She looked up at me, eyes full of hope that I would say yes. I couldn’t bring myself to reject her.

“Gladly,” I said.

We found a large unoccupied beanbag in the corner to sit in while she searched through her bag. It was impossible to avoid thinking about how gross the chair was. I could’ve guaranteed that it had never been washed. There were unidentifiable stains that I prayed were beer. She seemed not to pay any mind to that, or the fact that her leg was up against mine, which I was trying very hard not to focus on. My mind was bouncing between her leg, the gross chair, and the fact that I was about to commit a crime.

She found an unassuming packet of candy in her bag. They looked like the peach rings I used to get from the store as a kid, but the colors were green and white instead of red and yellow. She said that they were 15 milligrams and popped one into her mouth, handing me one immediately after. I popped it into my mouth quickly, so that she wouldn’t sense my hesitation. It was sour green apple flavored with a horrific, bitter aftertaste. It lingered in my mouth, so I tried to wash it down with what was left of my beer, which still tasted disgusting.

I cleared my throat, “So *Madison Magazine*, huh? How did you end up there?”

“I was able to get an internship straight out of high school, and they decided to let me keep working there. I’m coming up on four years there, now.”

“You’re a writer?”

“An editor, technically. Though I have written a few articles, mostly about restaurants and bars.”

“What would you write about this party?”

She hummed and smiled slightly. “Maybe something like,” she then sat up

straighter, and put on a newscaster voice to say, “Are you looking for a hot new place to spend your evenings? Consider going to this random frat house that can be heard from the Capitol building! This place has it all: douchebags taking turns at losing beer pong, a mystery punch bowl that should be avoided at all costs, and four dudes who are inexplicably soaking wet! If you have literally nothing to do, I highly recommend going to Mystery Frat House.” I gave her a small round of applause in appreciation.

“I’m surprised you didn’t mention the odorous ambiance.”

“Of course. I also forgot to point out the fine cuisine of Aldi-brand chips.”

We kept going like that for a while, and I found myself forgetting why I dreaded going to the party. After about half an hour, I realized that I hadn’t felt anything from the gummy. I figured that I might’ve had a higher tolerance since I was a bit bigger than her, so I asked for another one. She busted out that hypnotic laugh of hers and told me that she liked my style. She pulled out another one and fed it straight to me. I hoped that my heart wasn’t beating loud enough for her to hear as she pulled her fingers away from my lips. The aftertaste was less noticeable that time, and the apple flavoring was significantly better. Shockingly better. It kicked off a desperate need for snacks in me that had to be resolved posthaste, strict swim season diet be damned. The thought of shitty Aldi chips made my stomach growl, but that was overtaken by a sudden recollection of the chili I had brought. I looked over to the woman I had mentally dubbed “Ms. Mary-Jane,” and said, with great importance:

“There’s a crockpot full of chili in the kitchen.”

“Who the fuck brought chili to a frat party?” she asked as I helped her out of the chair.

“Some people, amirite?” I said, unconvincingly.

Despite her judgment about generously sharing great chili at a gathering, she allowed me to guide her through the group. I gladly dodged and weaved through hordes of drunken idiots. I can’t claim to be proud of it, but we hunched over and ate the rest of the chili straight from the crockpot in the kitchen. The only other people in the room were a couple making out, and it was unclear which pair was moaning more. Ms. Mary-Jane and I then spotted a plate of brownies, which we grabbed and took back to our beanbag chair. Despite already eating a fuck-ton of chili, my stomach felt entirely empty. Nothing had ever been as beautiful as the plate of brownies, other than the woman who was holding them.

As I reached down for my third brownie, time began moving in slow motion, and every movement I made was lightning-fast. I felt like my arm reaching out to the plate was as quick as a frog’s tongue grabbing a fly. *Can everyone tell how fast I’m moving?* I looked over to Ms. Mary-Jane, whose gaze was fixed on the plate of brownies. She

had pieces in each hand, both with bites taken out of them. It looked like she was trying to figure out how to hold a third slice.

Leaving her to her important task, I looked up to watch Dean do a keg stand. I was transfixed on how upside down he was. When he became upright, everyone cheered for him. He spun around, smacking guys' backs and fist-bumping them. He then looked at me and gave me a thumbs-up. I wanted to appreciate that moment, but all I could think was, *Oh my god, he definitely knows I'm high*. I looked around the room, suddenly certain that every single person at that party knew I had taken an edible. What if one of them was going to call my mom to tell on me? I couldn't stop thinking about it. I almost called the cops on myself, but I couldn't remember the three-digit number that started with 9.

Then, I began melting into the chair, my limbs heavier than they had ever been. I felt ants crawling around my scalp. I accepted my fate. My eyes locked on one spot on the wall, and I was stuck in that position for either four minutes or four hours, I couldn't tell. I kept forgetting to breathe, often getting distracted by how dry my mouth was. Ms. Mary-Jane asked me a question, but I couldn't process it.

She said it again, louder. "Do you want to get out of here?"

*In my head, I said, Hell yes, that sounds amazing. I wonder what it's like to have sex while stoned. Damn, I like her a lot. I might need some protein first. There's a Taco Bell near here. Fuck yeah. Baja Blast. Nacho fries. A frozen Baja Blast. How many tacos are too many? Do they have an XXXL Baja Blast? Breathe. Won, that deep breath felt nice. My mouth is so dry. She's looking at me. What was the question? Right, Taco Bell.*

"Should we DoorDash it?" I said, but she gave me a confused look. "The delivery fee is on me," hoping to ease her worries.

"I mean... I'm not going to say no."

I pulled up DoorDash, and she snuggled up to my arm, pointing at what she wanted me to add. I spent \$80 on Taco Bell. Eighty. Eighty dollars. American currency. On Taco Bell. Live Más, Taco Bell. Eight Zero. We sat out on the front lawn, where she may or may not have peed earlier, eagerly waiting for our knight in shining Chevy. It was peaceful outside. Spring was in full swing, and this April 20th night was cool enough for no bugs to be out, but warm enough for us to use our jackets as a picnic blanket.

I was focused on running my fingers through the grass when Ms. Mary-Jane bumped her shoulder into mine to get my attention. She had an AirPod in her hand and gestured for me to take it. We listened to the entirety of Fleetwood Mac's album "Rumors," before the Taco Bell arrived. I had listened to that album a lot growing up; my mom always played it on the drive to school. I had moved around a lot as a kid, but that album always stayed consistent. I started talking about those memories, how

you can never truly go back to live all of those moments again. I was crying by the time the driver showed up. I tipped him a \$20 bill.

As soon as I opened one of the bags of food, I felt my brain completely shift gears. I had never eaten anything as delicious as that Taco Bell. I was inhaling food without registering, or even particularly caring about what it was. Halfway through, I got so full that I vomited in a bush, but I immediately went back to my quesarito. I would've made love to it if I could've. I began to think in haiku.

*Burrito, taco, blast  
Your cheese, your meat, your green drink  
I'm happy at last*

I tried to tell Ms. Mary-Jane about the creation of what I was sure was my magnum opus, but I found significant trouble remembering how to speak. I enjoyed looking at her, though. The red in her eyes complemented the blue. She had a cute nose, decorated with a silver nose ring. She looked relaxed, a permanent smile fixed on her face. She began talking about something, but I needed her to speak up. It was impossible to hear anything but the sound of my blinks. My eyes were so dry that I almost poured Baja Blast into them, but I had finished all three already.

A car pulled in front of us, and Ms. Mary-Jane stood up, reached her arm out to me, and said, "Let's get out of here."

I grabbed her soft hand and let her help me to my feet. It was kind of her to offer me a ride home, but Uber was expensive, and I didn't want her to go out of her way for me. In order to make sure she didn't feel guilty about leaving me behind, I said, "Nah, I can't remember my address. I think I'm gonna crash on the couch. But thank you."

She looked dejected and said, "Oh, right. Well, it was nice meeting you. It's been a fun night. I really hope to see you around." She then kissed my cheek and waved goodbye as she got into the car.

It took a good fifteen minutes for me to realize my mistake. I slapped my hand to my face, shouted a series of profanities, and then bolted out of the house. I was stumbling as if I had never tried to run prior to that moment. The world bounced as I jogged, making me disoriented and dizzy. All the food I had shoved in my face was jostling around in my stomach, threatening to come back up again. I had to fight it, though. Ms. Mary-Jane was out there, believing wholeheartedly that I wasn't entirely infatuated with her. I followed my heart to where I thought she could be, getting myself thoroughly lost in the process.

I eventually found myself on a public playground. I sorrowfully slid down the sapphire-blue, scratched-up children's slide in silent solitude. I was something of a

dumbass, not remembering until that very moment that phones existed. It was 4:19 am. I unlocked it, and DoorDash was pulled up, asking what I thought of the experience. I rated it five stars, and then my phone died.

I crawled into a corner of the playground and began to debate what I would do. The world was swaying, as if I were on my own personal cruise ship. I could've kept wandering through the streets, hoping to find someone to give me directions, but it was likely too late in the evening. I felt around my pockets for any coins for a phone booth, but then remembered that I don't carry change, don't have any phone numbers memorized, and couldn't think of where a phone booth would be. Did phone booths still exist? They seemed like a very England thing to me. I started to wish that I, myself, were British. I would be forced to speak in that silly accent, but at least I would have a phone booth. The Doctor from Doctor Who had a time-traveling phone booth. If I had that one, I could go back and find Ms. Mary-Jane. She and I would fly through space together and adopt all sorts of alien babies.

I then woke up to a small blond human screaming in my face. I jolted up, banging my head on the structure above me. I was covered in wood chips, my joints aching from the absurd position I had been lying in. I was also still actively high. I heard woodchips scattering as larger humans ran to the aid of the still-screaming smaller human. A deep voice threatened to call the cops if I didn't leave that instant, so I scrambled up and hauled ass out of there.

I found a Kwik Trip and asked the cashier if he knew how to get to my place from there. I didn't give him my address, I just straight-up said, "How do I get home from here?" Surprisingly, he didn't look confused, just tired. I had never thought I would be the guy who goes into a gas station to berate an overworked employee, but there I was. I decided to instead ask how to get to campus, since I knew how to get to my house from there. He explained where to go while checking out my breakfast sandwich. It smelled so good that I needed him to repeat the instructions four times. When I finally figured out where I was, I realized that I had only gone about half a mile the night prior, before getting distracted by the playground.

Even though I made it home safely, I remained in a foggy state for the rest of the day. I was in pain from how much I had eaten the night before. I was sober, but out of it by the time I had swim practice that night. It was then that they announced that they would be conducting random drug tests on a few of us to ensure that we were following the strict guidelines of what our school allowed for. They called my name, Danny Daniels, and I knew I was done for. Zero exceptions.

Getting kicked off the swim team made me lose my scholarship. My former teammates had no reason to talk to me anymore, so I never got my damn crockpot back. I had to start working for DoorDash full-time for the rest of the semester,

through the summer, and into the fall semester. Driving gave me time to think about everything I regretted. I shouldn't have gone to that stupid party. I shouldn't have taken that gummy. I really shouldn't have taken that second gummy. I absolutely should not have let Ms. Mary-Jane get away.

I searched for her everywhere. I started going to Tarot club meetings, not knowing what else stoners did for fun and hoping she would sneak in one day. One girl there gave me a rose quartz to aid my journey for love, which was nice in theory but generally unhelpful. I went to thrift stores, record shops, and CBD stores. At one point, I started burning incense while blasting Fleetwood Mac in hopes that I could somehow summon her, but it just made my apartment smell musty and got "The Chain" stuck in my head for weeks.

My time spent driving and hunting for Ms. Mary-Jane also took away from the time I spent on schooling. I went from straight A's to straight C's, to eventually flunking out of all my classes. I couldn't afford another semester like that, so I had to quit school. Would they ever let a college dropout be poet laureate?

A year has passed since then, and I still can't listen to Fleetwood Mac without crying. I tried to ignore it as it was played by several groups in the park today. I hate 4/20; I hate all of these idiots who are casually indulging in the very thing that ruined my life, and I hate that I can't stop myself from looking for her. I always do. Every time I smell it, I try to find her. The disappointment and shame make me inclined to call the cops. The idiots scatter like I did when I was chasing after her, far too late.

Someone sat next to me, "Rhiannon," blasting from her headphones. I whipped my head around to tell her to shut it off, but no words made it out. There she was. Ms. Mary-Jane. She looked exactly like I remembered, but this time decked out in patchwork overalls and a few new tattoos.

"Oh hey, aren't you the guy who bought eighty dollars' worth of Taco Bell?"

"In the flesh," I said, because I'm smooth and not awkward.

"Damn, it's good to see you! Are you partaking in the holiday?" She definitely had already begun her celebration, clear as day from her demeanor and the fact that she was eating string cheese the wrong way.

"I am not partaking, no."

"Would you like to?" she asked, and reached into her tote bag to grab an unassuming packet similar to the last one.

*Fuck. I should definitely say no, right? It was an awful experience last time, except for how good the food tasted, how amusing everything seemed, and how much I enjoyed her company.*

As I tried to deliberate, my arm worked against my mind, took a gummy from her, and popped it right into my mouth. This time it was blue raspberry flavored.

"Can you remind me of your name?" Ms. Mary-Jane said, beating me to the punch.

“It’s Danny. Danny Daniels, to be specific.”

“Danny Daniels? Delightful! My name is Maggie Mitchell. I was going to sit and write for a while. Care to join?” She pulled out a green journal with golden leaves on the cover and opened it to a fresh page. I hadn’t written in far too long, but I always kept a small notebook on me, in case inspiration ever struck again. I looked at her, admiring the greatest mistake I ever made, and I began to write a villanelle.

*What's lost from me is gone, but I won't miss  
The broken-hearted mess I was before  
A few dead dreams are worth my Maggie's kiss*

## My Body's Cartographer

*Ayesha Mansoor*

Before there was you, there was a map I sketched in secret ink. The compass spun on desire; the legend spoke in goosebumps. This is not the geography they taught me in school, in which boundaries were exact, and someone else's past seeped into mine. No, I learned this landscape by trespass, by my own inquisitive, terrified, and then fearless hands. Girlhood was a narrative of flowered meadows; nevertheless, I discovered caves, fault lines, and beaches that pulsed with a different tide. I discovered the longitude of my own backbone; a ridge of choices keeps me upright. I mapped the delta, a scene of toil and liberation where perspiration meets little of back. A land of gentle thunder, the soft atlas of inner thigh. Becoming the only surveyor of your own body is a lifetime's labor. My skin is not a land to be conquered. Foreign hands have no unmapped coast to name. I am the atlas, the compass, and the pen; I am Charting the limits of my own amen. This topology of curve, of hip, of lip, A scene only I have the nerve to serve. My spinal river, the mountain of breasts, They are holy territory where my soul reposes. I locate the locations where pleasure takes form as a star. No transactional scar, no conquering flag. This is my nation, independent and perfect. A sovereign heartbeat: constant, powerful, and pleasant. Therefore, romance is not annexation. It is the gasp. I decide to unfold this vellum self, point, and whisper, "Here, the light catches." This is the valley that has the sound of all my giggling. Touch this meridian to find me the weather. Two sovereign nations that share climate and trade in the soft currency of touch are engaging in diplomacy. The native language of this country is my sexuality, one I spent years transforming from their clumsy dictionaries back into my own fluent heartbeat. It defines my living. Each morning in the mirror, I draw and redraw the boundary that constitutes my identity—not a cage, but rather a shoreline that defines where I cease and the expectation of the world starts. Knowing the world has old maps of my body drawn in the ink of conquest is to be a lady of my race. Consequently, my cartography is a holy act of uprising. Every self-touch, every admitted appetite, every "I like this" marks a new milestone, writing my truth over theirs. The last, steadfast identity is this: I am the only capital city here, and all roads lead home to a heart that beats its own, untamed rhythm.

## Soulmates

*Kurt Olsson*

You never stop working it, you're a word painter. Yes, lots of adjectives, tincturing one canvas, then another, replacing hot dogs and whores with an unhinged cigarette machine. What am I? A slum lord, perhaps, all alligator arms and strobe lights, hustling to ink the deal presto! before the whole tinker toy neighborhood's zippered. Imagine the pair of us matrixed, amalgamated, what narcoleptic explorers we might be, cha-cha'ing our way three-legged through existential punchbowls, undomesticated and foul.

Always smile, even if you don't feel like it. Be genuine.  
Don't use language that's too casual. Don't use language that's too formal.  
Never look rushed. Do everything quickly.  
Be attentive. Don't be bothersome.  
Don't be too chatty. Be personable.

*Smile.*

At 15, wipe a table without your blouse slipping; so the men old enough to be your grandfather don't make remarks about your teenage body in front of their poor wives. Pretend you don't feel four sets of eyes burning through you; two filled with silent bitterness, and two with desire.

At 16, have your coworker, a mother of two, tell you, "Your face makes up for your flat body." The body you have hardly grown into.

At 17, master the art of false ignorance. Count the number of lines on your guest check while a guest checks you out.

At 18, have the same aching pain as your mother, and her mother before her. Holding a tray is in your genes.

*Smile.*

Throw some spackle on your face in 30 minutes so the bags under your eyes don't kill anyone's appetite.

Fashion your apron to make your waist smaller and tips larger.

Try not to feel like part of the problem when you wear your hair in pig tails. You have tuition to pay.

*Smile.*

Master the art of fake laughing. You'll need it.

"Are you on the menu?"

"I'd take a million dollars!"

"I don't need dessert, you're sweet enough."

"I've got a tip for you, and it's not green."

Never correct a man. He's always right. Always.

Ignore his assumptions of incompetence.

Walk away with second-degree burns and pleasantly ask, "Would you like any sugar or cream?"

*Smile.*

Get the chefs to like you.

Keep the chefs from liking you *too* much.

Never go into the walk-in freezer at the same time as them. The door is hard to open.

*Smile.*

Drive on highway 4-41 in silence. Everything ahead is a watercolor painting that has been smudged. Your tears make it impossible to gauge whether you're between the lines. You might crash...thank God. Fifteen minutes till 4:00. Get in the right

lane. Drive slower. Scream at your steering wheel. Louder. Burst the blood vessels in your eyes. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Scream again. Until nothing but the breath from the bottom of your lungs pours out. Ignore the stares from passing drivers. Don't feel better. Ten minutes till 4:00. Someone once told you, "Fake smiling tricks your brain into feeling better," so grab that pencil in the center console and stick it horizontally between your jaws. Far enough back that it reaches your molars and forces the corners of your mouth to become upturned. Bite down until you can feel the mustard paint crackling and chipping. Harder until the wood splinters. Five minutes till 4:00. Inhale. Exhale. Park the car. Stare into your own glossy eyes in the rearview and contemplate if three dollars an hour is worth it. Press your palms against your cheeks in hopes it will subside the flushing. One minute till 4:00. Clock in. "I'm doing great, thank you for asking!"

*Smile.*

Take out the trash in the dark without fearing for your life. Carry your keys between your fingers. Check under the car. Check the back seat.

Never tell a man when your shift ends. Or what your after-work plans are. Or where you live. Or where you go to school. Or your last name.

*Smile.*

Learn four hours before your shift that your gut was right all along. Serve an old married couple on their 47th anniversary. Say, "Congratulations! What's the secret to a happy relationship? I could *really* use some tips and tricks."

Come home, feet throbbing, reeking of sweat and wine, nerve pinched and drained in every sense.

He asks: "Can you rub my back?"

"Yes dear."

*Smile.*

Lay still as you stare blankly at the ceiling. "I don't think I can fake a smile one more day," plays on a loop in your brain. The words your coworker in her mid 40's – still no ring—once whispered to you while rolling silverware.

Wonder if it's worth it to keep smiling.

Trade your apron for a ring.

Trade your full section for a nursery.

Trade the burns for silence.

Become the poor old man's wife with bitter eyes. At least you'd be on the other side of the table.

## America

Jodi Hottel

—*I'm in a mood about America, Jericho Brown*

America has a shallow history  
repeats history

is armed      locked and loaded  
                                         is thoughts and prayers

America is police dogs and fire hoses  
choke holds              and Black Lives Matter

habeas corpus and  
                                         state-sanctioned kidnapping

America is the first man on the moon  
and billionaires in space

America pledges allegiance to alternate facts

America does not pledge allegiance to science

it's jazz   blues   hip hop

burgers   burritos   and bagels  
the rocket's red glare      the second amendment

It's mega malls, fluorescent supermarkets  
farmers' market tomatoes

America is not a gulf

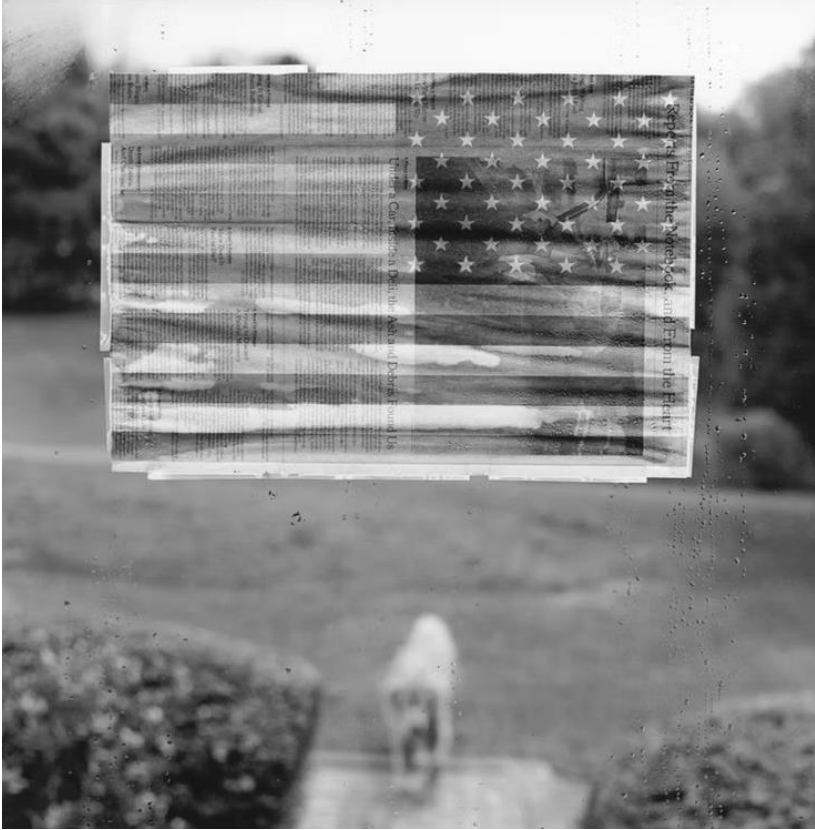
America loves walls, big walls, tall walls  
and big, beautiful bills

America's the land of opportunity  
the Trail of Tears, Manzanar  
and Guantanamo Bay

It's the Underground Railroad, Freedom Riders  
and banned books

America is not      one nation      indivisible

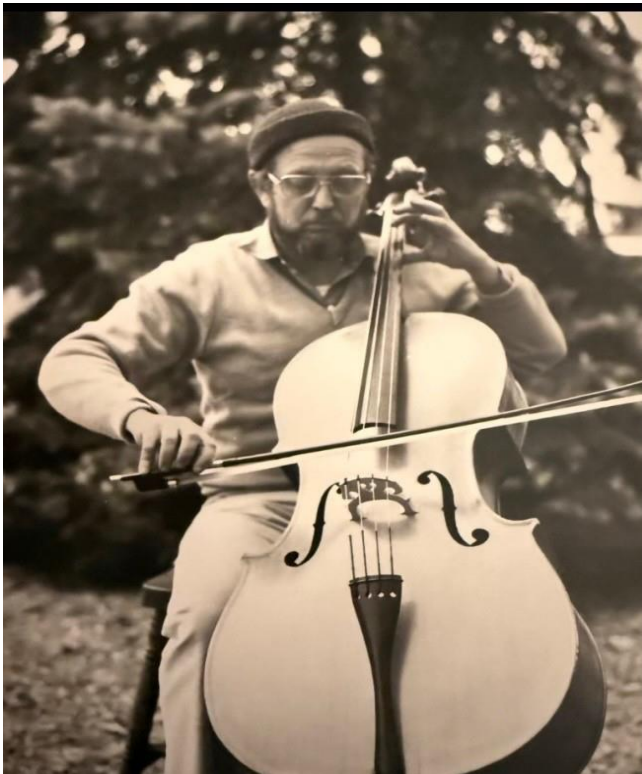
America is us



## Robert Treu Tribute (1940-2025)

Robert L. Treu: poet, fiction writer, essayist, English professor, musician, father, grandfather, husband, activist, mentor, and friend. He embraced the helm of *Steam Ticket* in 1996 as an advocate for artists, a champion for students. Born in Wausau, Wisconsin, Bob earned a PhD in philosophy from UW Madison, taught in Mexico, Germany, Boston, and Northwestern University. For 37 years, he taught writing and literature at UW La Crosse. He won writing awards from the Wisconsin Writers Council, and in 1995, Juniper Press published *The Selected Stories of Robert Treu*.

A gentle bohemian, a tenacious fighter for social justice, he contributed to summer literacy programs for underprivileged youth in Chicago and elsewhere. He mentored generations of students with patience, humor, and deep respect for their voices. A scholar of storytelling, his philosophy was simple and profound: “I don’t want the labels. I want the stories behind the labels. Given the evidence of earthquakes all around us, I’m constantly amazed at the fault-line courage my neighbors show me in dealing with the day-to-day conditions of existence. That’s been worth writing about.”—*Matt Cashion*



**He Hears the Voices of the Old Chinese Poets**  
*(for Kiki)*

*Robert Treu*

It is full summer now  
and it rains most days.  
Mist rises continually  
between the green bluffs like smoke  
from a fire of wet wood.  
At night, the mayflies hatch  
and swirl around the lights  
of ball fields and grocery stores  
and tennis courts.  
Their lives are short,  
but these few hours are filled  
with a graceful flying,  
performed on transparent wings.  
Each morning the sidewalks  
are thickly littered  
with their delicate, curved bodies,  
as empty as air.  
When I walk to the post box  
each afternoon,  
their husks make a crackling sound  
beneath my slow feet.  
Still I hope you will send to me  
one more poem  
before the first snow falls.

## For Daughters, Dancing

*Robert Treu*

Can it be I have fathered  
dancers? I  
who neither foxtrot  
nor polka?  
Whose best dances  
are accidental

missteps on ice that end  
as a waltz  
for bears or pirouette  
for monkeys?  
Whose incautious move on loose-  
carpeted stairs  
dissolves in a downward rumba?

How confidently you tack  
to the wall those words  
by Maria Tallchief:  
“Dance is the only art  
where we ourselves are  
the stuff  
from which it is made.”

That is so. But my self  
drifts away  
in paper and ink.  
If this is not me,  
then what is?  
There is nothing  
between us but love,

for dance captures time  
in a glass and is gone.  
Let me follow along, proud  
clumsy father who gathers  
the shards of your lives  
and touches this page with  
your grace.

**Goshawk**  
*(for Carla Graham)*

*Robert Treu*

This morning's minion, quick and gray,  
a Cooper's Hawk that caught my eye  
where I peered around the porch's corner  
to check the feeder's level. It didn't scare  
but took her time with the shredding  
of a pigeon, victim of my generosity  
and drove my heart from hiding.

That afternoon diminished winter light  
a second bird, goshawk grey, wind-ruffled neck  
visible through the darkening glass,  
cold encroachment southward carried  
by fierce north wind and hunger.  
He keeps on with his bloodied beak until  
my own dark wish insists

he fly to my left shoulder, above the heart,  
and take flesh from there, whisper sweet  
and secret metaphors for some weird  
and lonely poem. He scatters flesh and feathers,  
and leaves behind a cold and single red-hatched quill.

**Motown Poem**

*(for William Stobb)*

*Robert Treu*

When Aretha passed I gathered up  
her singing, all the old CD's  
that I could find

and piled them into my blue  
and final Civic and put  
the windows down

in some obnoxious need  
to share my grief and noise  
and cruised the town

and sang in reborn tenor: "you make me feel  
you make me feel" convincing  
nobody but myself

until I found a place to park beneath  
a locust tree its sixteenth note leaves  
cast shadowy songs across

the pages of your book while I read  
your Detroit poem that sings advice  
to those who still love cars

before the singing there has to come  
a deep persistent pulsing  
of the nerves

recalling August nights in Austin  
hiding out as history prof  
on Guadalupe Street

I had a Motown moment of my own:  
Four Tops rocking to the city limits

in desperate love I sang

Sugar Pie Honey Bunch into the phone  
“Can’t help myself” she sang back  
and then hung up

Aretha Detroit girl could sing the songs  
but didn’t sign with Berry  
the Reverend Franklin

nixed that deal she’d be better off  
with a godly label Columbia  
would do just fine

I searched the basement next through mildewed stacks  
of vinyl and found her grace  
amazing roots of soul

exactly where it should have been between  
old Wolfgang’s Clarinet Concerti and  
Cook County Jail Life

by B.B. King but lacked the proper system  
to play it on till friend Susan  
invited me to come

to her party where everyone brought vinyl  
and dressed as their chosen  
artist and I tried

to find a grey bow-hat like she wore  
to Obama’s inauguration  
a dress that fits

and next visited the library to learn  
about her reign as Queen  
of Soul but careless

left the Civic's window open and the rain  
did serious harm to your book  
of nery poems

too pure a stream to stain your lines  
but left the covers wrinkled  
so I should buy

another but this one's like the cool song  
that drips from leaves to my car's blue roof  
when the rain has stopped

Poem for Detroit

William Stobb

*after Charles Ray, "Unpainted Sculpture"*

High-plains afternoon race  
to connect  
with isolated storms running the horizon  
Drive state  
highways county roads  
any old dirt track to get your self right  
in weather

Once I hit washboard at seventy  
my Olds leapt  
from one gravel edge to the other  
The steep margin  
had a kind of gravity and I understood  
I would be found after some time

One artist  
cast every part of a wrecked American  
sedan reassembled it without the death  
One less  
Rollover-in-rain-then-bleed-out-humming-the-Supremes  
-death (or one  
more not-that

This blond  
Montana kid I knew played trumpet  
with the Temptations in Bozeman  
past their prime  
they stepped off the tour bus  
in red velvet suits & did groove

See  
how wherever else it goes  
out and around  
It reaches Detroit  
To fall

through automation into new music  
Air's Motown  
Air breaks everything down  
to its pump broken

valve pooling fluids  
eventually  
first hard drops  
sm a ck the sm oking  
cha ssis Or  
If  
it never does rain maybe a bird  
north wind on heated steel

The point  
of cha sing  
storm s is to m eet before being  
unm a de one weather one car  
one body  
m e as in m eteorology

If you play and win  
get out of the car  
let the cold rain ham m er you som e

*(reprinted from Nervous Systems, 2007, with permission of Penguin Press)*

There are no blinds. There are no grilles. It's just a simple square framing a sliver of the consumingly dark night sky. It's almost useless, so high up that not even the tallest recorded person that's ever lived can stare out of it at eye-level. There's nothing it provides a glimpse of, no trees or telephone lines or anything at all. There are not even any stars on display, just a cropped view of something that looks like nothing, so it might as well be.

It angers me, this window. It's approximately nine feet above the ground of this filthy, grimy, miserable church basement. The window shouldn't anger me. What should anger me is the untended mold spreading along the popcorn ceiling; or the dingy, migraine-inducing fluorescent lights that flicker for fifteen fucking minutes after you turn them on; or the cheap ugly metal folding chairs that poke me in the ass. The high risk of asbestos exposure should alarm me. The dusty old bibles packed tightly in ripped cardboard boxes should make me shiver. The uneven patches of the unappealing peeling wallpaper should make me cringe. The distinct stench of mildew that lingers in the stale air should smother me. But none of it matters as much to me as the damn aggravatingly worthless window only viewable from an angle that just makes you feel even lower in the world than usual.

This place is for people who feel so impossibly low that it ruins their lives. An NA meeting, a place where you almost have to purposely hate yourself to end up. It's quite the diverse crowd, old people and young people, teens skipping class to smoke weed everyday behind their schools because *'fuck school, it's a classist system'* and fifty-year-olds who shoot black tar heroin in the comfort of their own four-hundred-thousand-dollar home because their nine to five business jobs already make them feel like they are dying. There's nothing personal about it, that's just how it is. I observe these people talk in meetings about their kids who resent them or their parents who are frightened, and when the conversation pivots to me, I just blink slowly and lick my chapped lips with a shrug. There's nothing exceptional about my life, just like how there's nothing exceptional about theirs. And it's not like I have any right to judge any of these people, I am here, aren't I, sitting in this bear trap of a chair, waiting for it to snap shut and swallow me whole?

I don't speak in these meetings, not unless I'm forced to. I mostly waste these dreadful three thousand six hundred seconds glaring at that stupid fucking window, taunting me with its lack of discernable view to distract myself with. I still let it consume my attention; I let my vision grow bored from the stimulation deficiency, allowing the temptation of sleep to become a weight that's heavy on my eyelids. Sometimes it takes over, and my head drops as I fade out of consciousness. In the eyes of my peers, it probably looks like I've violated my 5-month chip, that I lied during my daily-check in about not touching fentanyl since the beginning of my fall semester.

My roommate was the one who walked in on me on the floor, breathing shallowly. She could have easily mistaken it as me just passed out from exhaustion and taking a cute little nap on the rough beige carpet. It wasn't until she lowered

herself to the floor to try to wake me up, putting her hand on my frigid clammy skin, that she quickly realized this wasn't a not-so-beauty rest. That's when I could faintly hear her scream, "Oh my god, Frankie!" She started to panic, dialing 911 to frantically describe my state the dispatcher. "She's on the floor! She's not even breathing!" I was breathing. She wasn't a very good friend. Then, I could tell she was sobbing, just muttering "Oh Frankie... why, why, why?" She didn't leave the ground, not to get up and get water or try pacing to calm her nerves or anything. She was on the same level as me, for once. She was very tall; I was very not. I don't remember a lot from that day. I was hardly able to move, but I remember thinking about how funny it was to feel like her and I were bonded in this moment, and I was barely awake.

I remember hearing this phrase once, probably in 10th grade lit class or some old cheesy romcom movie with C-list actors who are all washed up now, 'Eyes are the window to the soul.' A stupid saying, some people's eyes are unremarkable—not comparable to the blue of the reflection of the sky on the sea or the green of summer trees or the brown of an Italian cappuccino. Sometimes eyes, and indirectly souls, are like the church basement's tiny window. Nine feet above you, unreachable, not worth the hassle. And even if you got a ladder, climbed up the pegs as your legs begin to shake, and were able to finally see what you've been wondering about for ages, you'd be met with nothing but disappointment. Your stomach would depress into your lower abdomen, as you realize that not everything is worth hard work.



I see Jimmy everywhere as I walk the streets of New York. My twin brother appears darting between rushing pedestrians on the crowded sidewalk. Yesterday, after work, it was through the window of the subway that I caught a glimpse of him as the train pulled into the station. Before I could get off, he was all but gone, his sneakers bounding up the last visible steps, shredded laces trailing.

Another time we were on the same train. I saw him in the next car over. Back in high school, Jimmy and I used to smoke between the cars on the way home from Brooklyn. Looking down at the East River below the bridge, I'd kick my cigarette butt through the crack between the noisy shifting plates. You can't go between cars anymore. When the train stopped, I dashed out to catch Jimmy. But he wasn't on the train, wasn't on the platform.

Our mother wanted Jimmy to be an artist or a writer, like our father who left before we were born. I was raised to be the practical one. To cook, to clean, to paint a room, fix a leak, hammer nails. "Janey," mom would say, "Men aren't good for much."

But Jimmy was always good with his hands as a day laborer when he could get work. And when he couldn't, he would slip a hand into someone's pocket without a twitch. He was smart, too, but what good was that inside? The other boys had long rap sheets and more street experience. He learned quickly, though. I was shocked by his tough, New York street voice the first time I heard him use it on the phone. He used his old voice with me.

I see him playing chess at the library. He sits across from an older man in the corner of a large bench built into the wall. It's the big library on Fifth Avenue with two lions in front. In better weather, they play outside. Today, it's cold and rainy. But I'm at the door, and there's a rush of people leaving. I'm pushed out and when I go back in, the person I see isn't Jimmy, after all.

We played chess as kids. I was never good. Jimmy learned things faster. He taught me patiently, not just chess but how to tell time and about the phases of the moon and ocean tides. And he wrote poetry. Beautiful tankas and villanelles. Jail gives you time to get good at things, he says. No one can beat him at *Scrabble*.

What Jimmy could never do was hold onto anything—jobs, relationships, things. He didn't want to be weighed down by responsibility. I was the one who would cook if our mom didn't make it home for dinner when we were kids. I kept both our bus passes for the city bus to school, tucking his into a little carrier with mine.

I think about our last conversation, an argument really. I pushed him to get a real job, to get off the streets.

“I don’t want anyone worrying about me!” he snapped. Now I worry every day. How will I know if something has happened to him? He never has an ID. I want him to be safe, warm. I buy mittens and hats, for when I see him next.

I go downtown to his favorite hangouts. I wander through the streets, among the guys hustling handbags, books, and incense displayed on sheets or boxes. I go to the bookstore where he once worked and where a coworker brought in a tiny kitten off the street. He took it home to my mother and it died the next day, fleas crawling out of its eyes. The bookstore job was one of the few regular jobs Jimmy ever had.

A few blocks uptown is the church where his usual NA or AA meeting has just let out. I hover while people come out, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, coffee cups in their hands. I scan the group, my eyes searching for his, my ears listening for his raspy voice. Everyone looks like him. No one looks like him.

## Building Bridges

*James Conroy*

He plays drums made of joint compound cans turned over and beaten with sticks he's whittled himself. One can left upright for tips and he probably starts out throwing in a few coins as ante to prime the pot. Afternoons and evenings he's on State Street Bridge, rain or shine, March through October. Where he goes the other months, I've never asked and never will. His drumming has jazz rhythm, always a half-beat coming when you don't expect it, but if it didn't come, you'd miss it in the next progression which is why, he once told me, they call it jazz in the first place.

"If it don't fit, make it fit," he said and I replied that was an axiom of carpenters and he looked at his home-hewn drumsticks and said, "Yeah, man. Like a carpenter."

In his run on the bridge, he probably costs me ten, maybe twenty bucks which is okay because I'd drop that during one night, one set, at clubs I frequent. And I miss him when he's gone and imagine him down in the Islands and he has a real gig with real drums in a quartet at an upscale club; black jacket, white shirt with French cuffs, and he treats tourists to his own composition he's called "Building Bridges in Chicago."

## Dough

*James Conroy*

Three a.m.: ovens that have burned gas for a generation still emit a whiff of wood smoke. Outside -3; the room simmers at 100.

Three kneading machines fold dough in loamy waves under stainless steel oars. A two-handed measure, the shaping on tin sheets, always ten each. Paint-stroke of butter, cornmeal dust, into the oven.

Three men do this each morning save Monday. Hoyt, the owner; Francisco, his assistant; Shaq, the apprentice from trade school. The first bake-load is time for coffee and a smoke, stamping feet in the alley. Between hot and cold drags Hoyt says the insurance is due and he ain't got it. ICE has caught up with Francisco's brother-in-law. Shaq says ain't it funny we call money "dough."

At six, Hoyt's wife and daughter arrive to sell bread warm from the racks. Rows of bread, crusty and golden; loaves like years, loaves like lives.

## Note to the Guy with the Dirty Hands

*Marc Janssen*

I've seen those hands before,  
Standing on line under the Marion Street Bridge,  
Thick, creased, with black lines, holding white bread;  
Hands that can never quite close-  
Misshapen, with swollen knuckles and  
A black line under each fingernail.

Hands that

Push the sun past an ineffective horizon  
Caresses the brush and assaults the sky with angry strokes  
Collects the whale's hot, urgent breath.

That

Coaxes the blood out across the sidewalk  
Squeezes the chlorophyll out of the leaves  
Puts on gloves and picks up a rake.

I've seen those hands before,  
Perfect in their dimensions, their color  
Shaking with anger at the mill,  
Then picking up the oyster fork,  
Then carrying a bag of dirt out of Serra Palada,  
Then holding a pink and crying baby,  
Then flipping the switch.

I'm sorry.

## Peanut Butter and Jelly

Linda Duchin

I knew everything, of course. Precocious? Yes. Even before college, I was a Sophomore (Greek: wise fool). Classes were a disappointment because I was expecting something more. There should have been a course called Arrogance 101: I would've aced it.

But then there was geology. It was hard: a challenge to my ability to think in three dimensions. It was a shock to be lost and confused. My boyfriend had to go over the cross-sections of tectonic areas with me until exasperated, because I just couldn't see how the bumps on the surface could be the same as the rings of colors from the cut-away view. Patiently, he drew them repeatedly, and impatiently, I added rivers and lakes of tears to each picture.

When he got up and went to make a sandwich, I figured he'd given up and I was off the hook. He got out bread, peanut butter and the jelly, and I looked at the clock which said, "Hey it's two in the morning and not a good time to be eating peanut butter, kids."

But he called me into the kitchen as he reached for said PB&J. and then got a knife.

"Here," he said, still in his teaching-me voice, "is the lowest layer, the basalt, okay?"

"Are you referring to the bread there as being as stale and hard as some rock?" I queried.

"No, this is a model of the same thing in your book," he said excitedly, pleased with himself for remembering this example.

"Okay..." I said, sighing and trying hard to stay with the sandwich.

"Okay," he went on, almost bouncing with enthusiasm, "now here's the next level."

He spread peanut butter (or some form of metamorphic rock formed from changes and pressure deep in the jar of peanuts) on the bread,

"Are you with me?"

I dared not say no, and I guessed that I was, in fact, still with him.

"Yeah," I grunted.

"And, then fluvials, mud flows, sedimentary rocks," he recited these examples from the book while spreading jelly thickly over the peanut butter stratum, "followed by the surface sediments and soils."

The top slice of bread is apparently soil.

"Yes, I get it," I said, trying to match a tenth of the joy and anticipation I saw in his eyes.

"Okay," he continued, "now here comes the uplifting and buckling of the crust."

He then took the perfectly good sandwich and squished the shit (or PB&J) out of it, folding it into wiggles in the middle and then back on itself at the crust (I think it was just bread crust, not mantle core, earth crust or anything).

“Are you gonna eat that?” I asked, and immediately realized that this was the wrong question.

“Watch!” he said, his words ignoring my question, though his eyes took a dip in their excitement level.

He got out a clean knife: a big, sharp one. He cut across the perpendicular of all the bumps and folds in the sandwich, and suddenly the light went on.

The neurons in my eyes were hot-wiring a priority one message to my brain to light up that cross-section view again and wire it up to the sandwich for some dendrite dancing and doe-si-doe-ing. Swing yer partner, and all join axons!

The top of the sandwich-bumps fell off, and there, in the middle of the squish zone, were all those rings of sediments! The cross-section of peanut butter was dancing around the outside and ducking under the arms of the jelly circle in the middle!

“Whoa!” I shouted with real enthusiasm, “I get it! I see it! Really, I get it; cool!”

And I did get it, really. He was so proud of himself. And of me too, I thought. But after that, he treated me like a kind of dim-wit, which I was. But only in spatial relations.

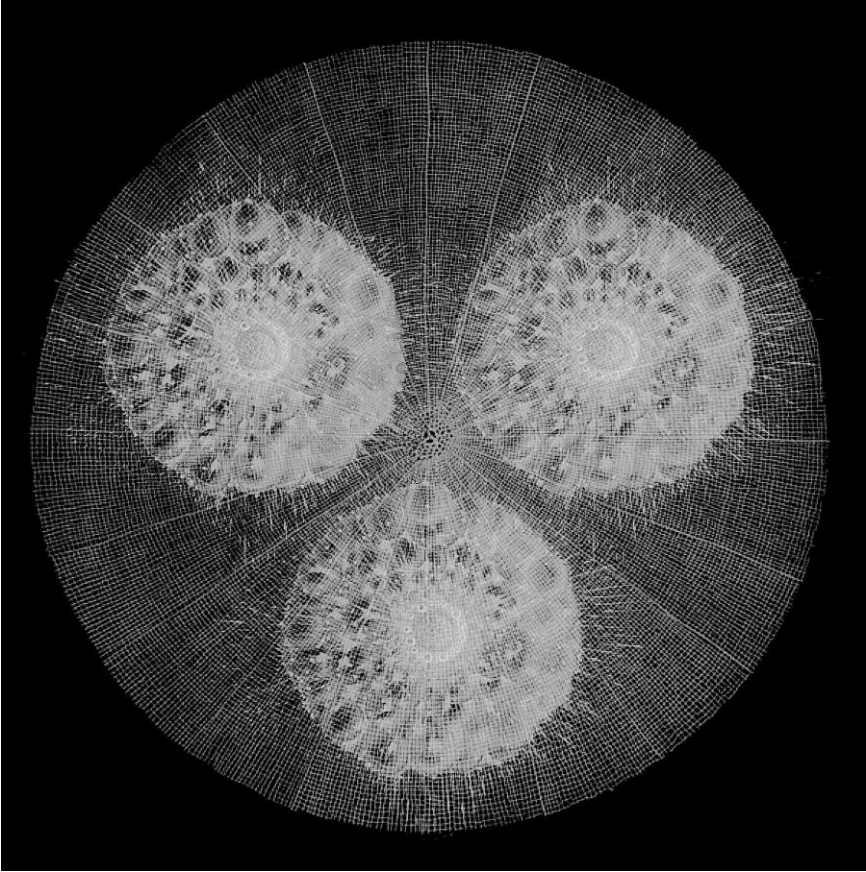
So, our relation got spatial, and the spaces got bigger, and eventually they weren’t even in the same loaf of bread anymore. I passed the geology class and failed the boyfriend course. I left him and the bread he smothered me in.

It was kind of uplifting.

## Ode to Dead Singers

*Jeffrey H. MacLachlan*

i praise dead singers in a way  
that i can never love live ones  
for what do you write for if not  
death death death rock refrain  
death death death blues  
refrain like commuting mummified  
sunset in fog previews dead  
lung or when night's soul caves  
rubberneck billiard stars  
ricochet crucifix break shot  
god slumped on the jukebox  
quarter note meteor snot  
wiggle tongue stud grave



“If I swallow my ring, it might stay inside me forever—No. Not that long. It would stay inside me until my belly and bowels rot open. And even sooner with that pile of dirt over us. Just enough to cover our bodies. Amateurs . . . Not a professional gravedigger in the bunch.

There’s sixteen of us inside this canvas-covered truck. With more to come. Another truckload tomorrow. Or two. Or three. If I’m tossed into that ditch first, there’ll be a dozen or more on top of me. That could hide my ring.”

/////

He’d seen others laid in makeshift graves, with arms and legs entwined as intimate as lovers, or like a child cuddled next to a father whispering a goodnight story. He would miss these moments. The lover’s caress, the goodnight story. But there is some comfort. These men, only two he’d seen before, were his last family, sharing their last stories. In silence. And they’d protect his ring. He’d do the same for them.

/////

“Or I could keep the ring in my hand. But how do I know my fingers will stay clenched around it? After you’re shot, your muscles probably relax before they get stiff, then limp again. It could fall out of my hand and be lost forever. And those butchers would find it in a last search. And if not them, then some scavenger from the nearby village. We’ve seen their eyes peering through doorways and tattered curtains. No. If anyone’s going to steal it, they’ll have to work hard for it. Harder than anything they’ve taken. From me. My family. My sister.”

/////

It’s true, after you’re shot, muscles relax. And bowels, too. And bladders. They make a big mess, like in the nursery when all the little ones get sick. In that little yellow house with the door that’s always falling off its frame. He should have fixed that. The little house where the little ones stay with their grannies while the others go off to the fields or the market. All gone now. No one left. And who’ll harvest the crops? And sell the vegetables? And slaughter the goats? Who will cook? Share the gossip? Tell goodnight stories to little eyes tumbling shut?

Probably not a good idea to hold the ring. But it’s good he has options. And to be able to decide—something now. Swallow the ring? A last act of resistance. Each of them resisting in his own way, in that truck, squashed together.

/////

“I’ll swallow the ring. Even if they gut us open, it’s small enough; they might miss it. And that fellow, over there in the corner, with that hacking cough, he’d be able to infect a few of them, who might go and infect a few more. Their family, their army, their whole. . . hmm, always a dreamer.

We’ll probably have to dig the pit ourselves once the truck gets there. Some secluded place. Out of the way. It’s always like that, isn’t it? We dig out a trench, we line up at the edge, they shoot, we fall in, or they heave us over; they cover us up. Efficient if you think about it. And their hands never get too dirty. Filthy, but never dirty. I’ll hide there, the ring deep inside me, deep inside the earth.”

/////

He reaches into the folds of his worn, dirty pants. He finds the gold loop and slowly brings it to his mouth. No need to draw attention. There’s a metallic taste, and it takes a moment to work up enough saliva to swallow it. And just as it reaches that secret place inside him, the truck slows to a stop. He feels a smile break slowly across his cracked lips.

The earth uncovers everything if enough time passes. Found by his people, or somebody’s people. Or dug up like potatoes by those peacekeepers who always arrive too late. But the day will come. His ring still inside. Or somewhere close by. He can live and die with that.

## Midwestern Winter, First Generation

*Abraham Aondoana*

The snow does not ask  
where I am from.

It arrives evenly--  
on porch steps,  
on mailboxes,  
on the bent spine  
of the old oak tree.

I am learning this silence.

In my childhood, winter  
was harmattan dust--  
dry wind blowing into our lungs,  
painting in tongues of memory red.

Here, everything is white.

Even grief looks different  
against it.

I shovel the driveway  
like I am translating.

Each push forward  
a sentence:  
I am here.  
I am staying.

Inside, the radiator hums  
with mechanical faith.

My mother is calling a warmer place.  
She asks if I am eating enough.  
If the cold is kind.

I tell her yes.

But I do not say  
how snow teaches you distance--  
how it renders each action conscious,  
every crossing a decision.

The mailbox is located at the curb  
like a small country  
waiting for news.

I walk toward it,  
breath rising,  
a temporary weather  
in a permanent season.

I stand in front of the descanso for Matt Trujillo: a ghost bike, a photo, and a plaque laden with small trinkets. A little red house made of plastic bricks. Yellow and white fabric flowers with petals warped from age and the long-gone summer heat of the high desert. A string of sun-bleached Tibetan prayer flags strung between the handlebars of the white painted bike and the street sign indicating the bike lane next to where he was killed at the age of thirty-six.

Last night was the first time I stopped here. A car whipped past as I slowed down to lift my bike over the curb, the cold autumn wind gnawing at my hands. Usually when I see a ghost bike, a memorial erected for someone struck and killed by a motor vehicle while cycling, I take mental note and then look away. As a cyclist, I am unsure of whether I am supposed to bear witness or heed ghost bikes as a warning, but I know that the separation between vehicle and simple machine, metal and flesh and concrete, is so miniscule that I could easily become one of them, slipping through the thin boundary between alive here in Albuquerque and whatever comes after.

As the sun disappeared and cast the face of the Sandia Mountains in deep pink and blue shadows, I photographed the plaque, so I wouldn't forget Matt's name. Then I cried. I cried when I read his story online as I warmed my raw fingers, when I stood in the backyard this morning in the cold air, my breath a faint hazy cloud, and again under the warm afternoon sunlight when I decided to return.

Today, I brought marigolds from my garden, bursting with oranges and reds and yellows that would be stark and vibrant against the monotone rocks beneath the ghost tires, beneath the memory of this person. I have never done this before, brought flowers to the memorial of a stranger, but I could not stop this trajectory. Less than five months ago, at the age of thirty-three, I could have easily become another ghost bike on this side of the road. At the next intersection, on Washington, a driver weaved in front of me to turn at a green light. They smashed their car into my body and hooked the front tire of my bike, pinning it to the curb. I hurled head-first toward the signal pole, landing less than a foot from it, as the driver disappeared down Cutler heading east toward the mountains.

The bike lane and the small buffer it provided before the driver cut me off would not have existed without Matt.

I place the small bundle of fresh flowers, held together with a thin strand of twine, next to the little red house, and then light a stick of cedar incense. The architecture of the city looks nothing like this plastic home, but I imagine it as a place he once lived, or the place he would have liked to live had his life continued, maybe the place he lives now, and that these flowers are an emblem for the ones that might grow there too.



**Everyone will die before I come to**

*Lex Walz*

Amidst the occupation, I got my breasts removed. Amidst the occupation, I said goodbye to one source of my strife and said hello again to another.

Oh, to be paid to plunder. To walk ten thousand lakes, each frozen twelve inches thick at the surface and demand they be thawed. To stomp and beat and fire until the tension breaks. To fight a needless fight. Surgery could have been a reawakening, but they're holding me under the brisk, brutal waters, and I remain catatonic.

++++++                      ++++++

To strive for anything is beginning to feel foreign. What is familiar is being held captive six feet under while my heart is still beating. I am licking the half-staff flagpole in subzero temperatures at recess, and they are tightening the handcuffs on my father's wrists. I am ten years free, and he has forty more years, no parole. Chains passed down from the generation before and the generation before and the generation before and the generation before and the generation before and the generation before...

++++++                      ++++++

My neighbors peeked through their window for the fourth time in the last ten minutes. This is working. This is the image. The American Dream. One hundred feet away. I can't see the fear in their eyes, but in their outstretched palms on the windowpane. What do they see? A gray SUV with tinted windows circling the block? A willfully inactive neighbor staring back, dancing on tipped toes around the issue, dancing around falling flaming embers of misfortune with inexactitude? Is the cry for help coming from across the street or inside the house? Selfish choice after selfish choice after senseless tragedy after senseless tragedy after senseless tragedy after...

++++++                      ++++++

The surgery they sold promised forever euphoria and forever happiness and forever problems solved. The physical pain and numbness and grief and terror and dread is the reality. All I am left with is

two twelve-inch incisions across my chest/two hands on the windowpane/eighty-five billion dollars for America's best/sixty-eight thousand nine hundred ninety detained.

He will never ever leave that place/it's too late to beg and plead/four deadly blows to  
her face/five bodies count the holes where he bleeds.

And all I am left with—

all they are left with is

Nothingness.

## The Drive

*Kevin Novalina*

After his little girl died, he said no goodbyes. Just took off in the Expedition, heading coast to coast by zigzagging border to border, like strong EKG waves if traced on the map.

He almost never stopped, eating at drive-throughs every meal, sleeping beside her car seat every night. He even used full-service gas stations whenever possible.

Reaching the Pacific, he'd just U-turn and start off toward the Atlantic.

Back and forth.

Again, and again.

Then, somewhere in Mayes County, Oklahoma, the path of his journey flatlined when the Expedition at last broke down, and he broke down with it.

**Clink**

*Stephen Kampa*

As though in  
neon pink flashing  
above a door  
fronting a store

I can't help  
but think offers  
more of what  
I want (maybe

who I am)  
than any before,  
FAILURE with all  
its tawdry pawnshop

riches beckons, blinking  
its one simple  
And, therefore, most  
persuasive of pitches—

and I, having  
claimed, as always,  
to be nothing  
more than window

shopping, shyly browsing,  
hear the clink  
and sea-green roar  
of blatant carousing

behind the closed  
door, and I—  
almost without trying—  
find myself stepping

over the threshold  
into where whatever  
party there was  
is already dying.

## **The Age of Jazz in Cuba**

*Havana, 1995*

*Jeffrey Hillard*

*on a photograph by Jon Christopher Hughes,*

Those eyes. There are none yet: closed  
like fists, the sax player completely into  
his solo, swinging, the band with him seething  
jazz that hangs tight in downtown Havana.  
In a basement club, smoke does not clear.  
His fingers, mellow on all the keys, and you,  
apostle of the cool angle, capture a vibe:  
his solo, home-cooking, tender flies crawling up  
the club's walls, the mojitos – these spells cast  
in a frenzy and deposited like rationed Cuban bread  
going fast off a diplotienda shelf. You might be so  
married to a camera, his hands seem to touch the lens.  
Yet this one tune sings to you: he closes his eyes,  
intoxicated with music and begs to smile.

## Mad Scene

Gabrielle LeMay

Shocked at finding Grover in bed with someone else,  
I trash the house, screaming  
*I can't be with you anymore.* I fling this not at him  
but at his new lover,

his thin dirty-blond actress who is younger,  
who shuffles deadpan in red satin slippers  
through my shadowy book-lined atrium filled with  
statues and pianos and paintings and violins—I can't

pack fast enough, I am sobbing—the pain  
is gut-crushing—Grover's still  
stretched out on our heart-shaped bed, smirking.  
I flee through the proscenium, audience

and crystal-velvet entrance  
and out into Broadway, where I'm stunned  
to find my rusty old pea-green Dodge  
Dart parked illegally—can I operate

the clutch anymore?—Silly me—the whole thing's been  
smashed flat as sheet music for twenty years now  
and there's no place for a key. I zigzag through the streets  
toward my sultry Aunt Opera-Star's gracious antique mansion

but get lost at every turn, veer  
farther with each stride from her coloratura majesty  
who's fully costumed and waiting for me  
bone-faced by her own backstage clock, her skinny

gown cracking off. I, too, am unpresentable:  
it's midnight, far too late—my shoes are gone,  
my feet bleeding. A flaming neon strip joint reels me in  
to where Grover lounges shirtless

in a spotlit spangled booth. I go to him.  
He wants me more than anything,  
lets the whole world know it  
with lips, tongue, fists—any way he can.

## First Street, San Jose

*Louis Faber*

The neon Coors sign  
flickers in the window  
constantly threatening to go out  
then, at the last moment  
clinging, leaping back to life.  
Through the open door  
of the billiard parlor,  
the clatter of balls  
and curses is drowned  
in the late August rain,  
washed into the gutters  
of the nearly abandoned First Street.  
A glass slips from the bar  
and shatters on the tattered linoleum  
to the curse of a shooter  
scratching as the beer  
washes his leg.  
Next door, at the all night  
Liquor and Deli,  
the aging businessman  
creaks as he stoops  
to check the XXX magazines  
in the rickety wooden rack  
under the baleful stare  
of the Vietnamese store owner  
who keeps a sawed off shotgun  
always within reach.



## Ode to Misfits

*Irena Praitis*

I don't hear you often enough. And I wish that I did. We spent too much time following directions telling us to hide, to suck up the tears, to be fully dressed with a smile, to stop being so sensitive. But our thin skins made us too aware of the snags, the barely decipherable unseen costs under the code, directives heeded by others. Life was the way it was and we were condemned to it. In our isolation, we recognized the coders, seldom identified as bullies, and the other outcast under coders like ourselves. When we mis-fit the code, we learned all about our "flaws," "imperfections," the "don't you ever get tired of that shit," The "no one wants to hear about your pain." "Happy is a magnet" the well-meaning advised, weeping "deathly unattractive," each observation reminding us how something central to our identities caused us to miss the measure of life: no love, no life, no love life, no love of life. We learned to tell it indirect because we heard it: "You don't fit." "You make me uneasy." "Why can't you be

more like....” We sidewinders were chastised  
for the same obscurity the well-positioned were  
praised for (they had less to say). I learned to shut  
because no one wanted to see the ugly,  
pathetic, dull (or too close to home) make-them-keep-  
staring-at-a-carnival-freak. I grew limber with all the  
twisting and stronger, too, from the stretching, the heavy  
lifting, not to mention the endurance I developed  
continually running for my life. I missed my fits, the  
places I could have lived speaking openly from the  
beginning. I missed my fits, extreme eruptions of sadness  
that were the measure of the world’s pains.  
I miss fit all the places almost everyone  
lovingly shoved me to. I miss fit: Not a  
single pair of jeans was cut to suit me. Ever. After all the  
cut me waist, cut me leg, cut me crotch pairs, I stopped  
trying to fit them. I learned what I owed myself. I paid  
with interest. And now I am fit: raging and  
spitting and singing at need. I am fit to every  
space I’ve made my own. I fit the language that  
tries me on. I’m hitting my height of fitness never gained

in youth. Others tried to wash the clarity from me, but I  
learned to love my naked. I plan to sing it loud  
for the rest of my days. My tribe, my  
other/sames, I don't always hear you, but I know  
you're there. To those who would keep me quiet  
and those kept quiet by the same: I am. Always.  
Say what you will. Say what I will.

That's misfit to you.

"Look," Bell said in his ridiculously optimistic voice, "we have a month. Let's not waste our energy worrying about what we can't control, all right? Let's stick to the issue at hand."

Anderson frowned, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He was depending on Bell for more than advice this time. What he needed, what he wanted, was to turn back the clock.

"They're trying to scare us," Bell said, attempting to soften the edge of the conversation. "It's standard fare in their line of work."

Anderson blinked, unimpressed. He was still trying to process the charges. He'd done what they said he'd done, but not for the reasons they'd said, and not because he was some sort of criminal.

Bell swiveled in his chair, his huge body straining at the fabric of his charcoal suit. He opened the glass door of the bookcase and lifted a pack of cigarettes from behind a row of red and gold law books. He and Anderson had known one another for a long time. Long before Bell had been reduced to sneaking cigarettes behind his secretary's back.

"Sutherland says you cooked the books," the fat attorney said. "She wants to prosecute for embezzlement."

Anderson rocked back in his chair. "You can't be serious."

"I told you. She's trying to scare us."

The words 'financial improprieties' had been raised, but this was the first Anderson had heard the charge framed so formally. It was ridiculous, of course—he was no more dishonest than Davies—but the fact that such a charge was even being discussed seemed unfathomable. "They were ice skating lessons, Ed."

Bell raised a hand. "I know, Jerry."

"So how is that embezzlement?"

Bell pinched a cigarette from the half-crushed pack and pushed it between his lips. "Did Davies know about it?"

"The lessons?"

"The checks."

Anderson rolled his eyes and let go of an exasperated breath. "I handle the finances, Ed. You know that. It's the only reason the shop hasn't gone tits up."

Bell tugged the unlit cigarette from his lips and pointed it at Anderson. "Davies is an officer of the corporation, Jerry. He's supposed to co-sign every check that goes out the door."

Anderson nodded impatiently, as if he were being lectured by a child. "I know he's supposed to," he said. "But he *doesn't*. He never has. He's never wanted to, never

shown interest in it. He might be an officer of the corporation, but trust me, he's never been more than an employee."

"See, though, that's the problem here, Jerry. The courts don't care about the spirit of the arrangement. Legally, all they're interested in is where the money went, and why."

Anderson blew out a sputtering breath. "They're turning this whole thing into something bigger than it is, Ed. I paid for a few ice-skating lessons, that's all. It isn't like I've been trafficking in human organs."

"This is no joke, Jerry. Embezzlement's a Class 4 penalty in this state." Bell dusted the knee of his wool trousers, the unlit cigarette still scissored between his fingers. "The fines run to half a million. Possible prison time."

"Prison!" Anderson sat forward in his chair, wild. "They're threatening me with prison! Over ice-skating lessons?"

Bell tapped his desktop. "Take it easy, Jerry. I'm just giving you the lay of the land. Like I said, we have a long way to go before this is resolved."

Anderson shut his eyes and buried his face in his hands. "Jesus. Jesus. Jesus."

The word 'forgery' hadn't yet found its way out of Bell's mouth, but Anderson sensed it wouldn't be long before it did. After all, it was he who approved all the checks. Even the ones that called for Davies's signature.

But it wasn't forgery. They couldn't rightly accuse him of that. He'd been opposed to the idea of handling all the bookwork alone, but Davies, who had no interest in the company's accounts—at least not beyond his paycheck—ordered a rubber stamp engraved with both their names and urged Anderson to use it, suggesting it would be easier on both of them given he was rarely around on weekends when Anderson attended to the billing.

Bell slipped a ceramic ashtray from the bottom drawer of his desk. The ashtray was a vintage collectable, decorated with the diapered figure of a baby demon. The words 'Hot Stuff' floated in a vapor above the demon's bald little head.

"You've got yourself a hell of a partner," Bell mumbled, picking up the collapsed cigarette package and stuffing it back into its hiding place behind the law books. He lit up and fanned out the match. "I tried to warn you about that sonofabitch, Jerry. I tried to tell you he wasn't any good."

"I know you did, Ed."

"Hell. I saw the writing on the wall twenty years ago. But you didn't want to listen, did you? You told me you could handle him. You said, 'I can handle him, Ed. And now look at what we have.'"

§

Anderson turned his eyes to the window and the city park across the street. What Bell didn't understand any better now than he had twenty years ago when he'd first delivered his homily on Davies was that he, Anderson, was running an ad agency, not a law firm. He'd needed an art director, desperately, and Davies—who had a reputation as an up-and-coming creative—happened to be looking for a new job. Yes, he came with issues of reliability, but sometimes you had to take a chance. It was the cost of doing business. The old bit about risk and reward.

Bell took a sharp draw on the cigarette and tapped it against the ashtray. He lowered his head and looked at Anderson from beneath his heavy brow. "So," he said, smoke streaming from his nostrils, "let's forget the money for a moment. What's this business Sutherland keeps bringing up about an 'assault' at Fratelli's Bistro?" He tapped the cigarette on the ashtray. "She hasn't said so, not outright anyway, but that's what seems to have been the flashpoint in this whole mess, not the skating lessons."

Anderson shrugged. "Davies and I had an argument."

"And what?" Bell raised his brow. "You slapped him while he and Sutherland were having dinner?"

"There was no slapping, Ed." Anderson's eyes drifted to the little red devil in the ashtray. He scratched his cheek. "I grabbed his tie, that's all. I grabbed his tie to get his attention. We had words...."

"You jerked him around by the tie? While he was having dinner with the assistant D.A.? Good Christ, Jerry. Where did you think that was going to get you?"

"I didn't know Sutherland was a prosecutor, Ed. I didn't even know they were a couple. I thought she was just some bimbo he'd picked up at the bar."

Bell shook his head.

"Look," Anderson interjected, defensively, "we lost our biggest client that day. They walked out on us because of Davies. It took three years to get those people on board, and after half an hour in the conference room with that pretentious little jerkoff, they fired us over 'creative differences.' *Creative differences!* They were a plumbing outfit, Ed! They install toilets for a living! How does something like that even happen, for Christ's sake?"

The red in his face deepened.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in annual billings—gone like that—" He snapped his fingers. "So, yeah, Ed. I had words with him."

Bell puffed out a labored breath. "Oh, well," he said, twisting his lips into an unnatural smile. "I guess that makes it okay, then."

Anderson eased back in his chair and folded his hands. His face burned. "Can we stick to the money, Ed? Please?"

“Sure,” Bell said. “Let’s talk about the money.” He tipped the ash from his cigarette, rocked back in his chair, and tapped his finger impatiently on the polished desktop. “Sutherland claims the draws you took were—and I’m quoting here—*substantial*. Is she right?”

“I’ve told you, Ed. The money went to ice skating lessons. Were they pricey? I don’t know. Maybe. A little bit. But was it embezzlement? No.”

“Well,” Bell said, gruffly, coughing into his fist, “let’s hope the audit gives us some room to fudge. The law’s the law, but we might be able to mitigate the damage if the numbers aren’t too bad.”

Anderson could feel a knot forming in his stomach. It tightened with every breath. He wanted to throttle Davies. Hurt him in ways deep and lasting. But he kept a measured voice as the conversation persisted.

“I’m the one who started the agency,” he said to Bell. “I’m the one who’s kept it off the ventilator all these years. The skating lessons were nothing Davies didn’t know about, and there was nothing underhanded about them.”

§

Embezzlement? *Jesus Christ*. Anderson had spent his entire career watching people steal from one another—accounts...ideas... employees.... Hell, even one another’s spouses, if you wanted to be completely honest about it. But no one ever paid for these supposed transgressions. Not really. Not in any meaningful way. They were part of doing business; a slice of everyday life in the world of small-time, small-town advertising, and pretending as if any of it was governed by law, or grounded in morality, was nothing but a cruel and cynical joke.

“So, what does he want?” Anderson asked Bell. “Money? Is that it? A bonus to even things up?” He looked at Bell and smirked. “You know all about compromise, right, Ed? You’re a lawyer. What do I have to do to shut this thing down?”

“Shut it down?” Bell leaned back, blinking.

“Yeah,” Anderson said. “What’s it going to take to get him to drop this thing? We still have clients, you know. We still have bills to pay. We’ve got open job orders, print runs in progress...sessions booked with sound studios.... Hell, we’ve got eight employees who depend on us for paychecks, Ed, and as worthless as Davies is, I need him back. The shop can’t run without an art department.”

Bell rolled his tongue over his back teeth and shook his head as if Anderson hadn’t heard a thing he’d been saying since they sat down. “That isn’t going to happen, Jerry. Davies isn’t coming back.”

“What?”

“Sutherland isn’t in the mood to bargain, Jerry. And she’s speaking for Davies now. This isn’t going to be one of those *mending fences* stories, okay? It’s more complicated than that. We’re way beyond shaking hands and saying we’re sorry to one another.”

“Well, I hope someone reminds Davies he’s still my partner, and that he’s still liable for the bills coming through our door. We’ve got people who need us, Ed. Clients who’re paying the privilege of working with that prima donna.”

Bell sighed and reached for another cigarette from the package he’d already put away. “Well,” he said to Anderson, “unfortunately for us, we’re dealing with Sutherland now, not Davies. And she has a bigger dick than he does. So, I’ll mention the problem when I speak to her this afternoon, but don’t go expecting miracles.”

Anderson released a heavy breath and turned his eyes back to the window that looked out across the park.

The big attorney swiveled, briefly, in his chair. Then he moved some papers around on his desktop and leaned forward, weaving his fingers together in a thick knot. He passed a glance at the ashtray and said, “Do me a favor, will you, Jerry? Next time you decide to screw with somebody? Make sure it’s somebody whose girlfriend isn’t a prosecutor.”

§

There was a day, once, twenty-odd years before this one, when Anderson stormed into Davies’s office with a fistful of billing reports and blood in his eyes. He’d rattled the papers in Davies’s face, shouting he’d had it with John Rhodes, the CEO of their largest and most difficult account, a data recovery firm called Total Recall. They were going to drive out to Rhode’s house, he told Davies, and collect the long-overdue money the chiseling sonofabitch owed them.

Davies was on the phone. He looked up, frowning, and covered the mouthpiece with his hand. “What the hell’s going on, Jerry?”

“Get your jacket,” Anderson said.

Davies pointed to the phone. “I’m on a call.”

Anderson snatched the phone from him and bellowed into the mic, “He’ll call you back!” Then he snapped the phone shut and tossed it on Davies’s desk. “Get your jacket,” he said, “and get it now. We’re going.”

Anderson & Davies had been Total Recall’s agency of record for over a year. But their relationship had cooled as Rhodes fell further and further behind with his bills. Total Recall was a start-up company that had recently met their securities requirements and were only a few months from going public. They were flush with

money, according to the company's records. Yet they were months in arrears, and their last invoice had been met with a bad check.

Davies stared at Anderson as if he were insane. "Can't you just call his bookkeeper?"

"I've called his bookkeeper," Anderson said. "Every day for the past two weeks."

"And?"

"And we got a check yesterday...and today it bounced."

Davies blinked as if he didn't understand any of this. As if none of it had anything to do with him, and the problem was somehow Anderson's alone. He turned up his palms. "Why do you need me? I'm the Art Director. I don't know a damn thing about the billing."

Anderson's response was as cold as it was immediate. "Get your jacket, Glen."

Davies remained as he was, as if he hadn't yet made up his mind.

Anderson took a step forward. "Get your *fucking* jacket, Glen."

"This is ridiculous, Jerry," Davies said, rising at last, though indignantly, from his chair. "We should be calling our lawyer."

"Our lawyer charges for his time, too," Anderson said, plucking the man's jacket from the coat rack and tossing it in his lap. "And I'll be damned if I'll spend money we don't have trying to *collect* money we don't have."

§

Children were playing in front of Rhodes's house that morning, and Anderson was watchful pulling up to the curb. Davies hadn't spoken the entire way there, but seeing the children chasing one another across Rhodes's manicured lawn, he turned to Anderson with a grim expression. "Do we really want to do this?"

Anderson shifted the car into park and shut off the engine. "Let's go," he said, opening his door. "I want our money."

Davies started to put his hand on the door latch, then stalled. "I'll wait for you," he said, dully. "I don't need my day to get any worse."

The words fell on unsympathetic ears. "Get out of the car," Anderson demanded. "You're coming too—if I have to drag you."

Davies still didn't budge. "You know what I'd do if you came to my house, bothering my family, Jerry?" He looked up at Anderson, smirking. "I'd kill you. That's what I'd do. I swear to God, man, I'd kill you."

Anderson steadied himself and spoke coolly over his anger. "Get out of the car, Glen. *Now*."

Davies was beaten, and he knew it. He cursed and got out of the car, slamming the door behind him. “This is ridiculous!”

Anderson nodded. He could only agree. But it wasn’t going to stop him. He wanted the money that was theirs.

They walked up the long, winding sidewalk to Rhodes’s front door. There, Anderson stopped and turned to the kids playing in the yard. “Hey, fellas? Do any of you live here?”

One of the boys, a towhead with long legs and wide-set eyes, nodded.

“Is your dad home?”

The boy nodded again, cautiously.

Anderson smiled. “Can we see him?”

The boy hesitated a moment, then agreed. He led Davies and Anderson up the walk and into the house. Anderson paused in the foyer and glanced around at the lavish furnishings. Davies, who’d lagged behind, walked up next to him, muttering.

As they stood there, composing themselves, the boy called up the stairs to his father.

“Dad! Some people are here to see you!”

Anderson’s heart quickened when he heard the sound of shuffling feet overhead. He adjusted the strap of the leather bag that was slung across his shoulder and cleared his throat. Davies had slid behind him, and Anderson could feel the stale warmth of his breath on his collar.

John Rhodes was halfway down the stairs before he saw Anderson and Davies, and when he did, he stopped and stared, as if he weren’t quite sure he recognized either of them.

“We’re here for our money.”

The words sounded flat and without authority as they left Anderson’s mouth. They sounded rehearsed, though he hadn’t known what he was going to say until he’d said it. He’d never in his life imagined he’d find himself standing in a man’s front room, demanding money while the man’s young son stood between them, watching, trying to make sense of a moment that must have seemed frighteningly out of place. It all felt scandalous to Anderson. Crass. Even shameful. It felt as if it were the dirtiest thing he’d ever done in his life, or ever would do, and he hated John Rhodes for having put him in such an awkward position.

“Sure,” Rhodes said, eyes turning from Anderson to Davies.

“We apologize for coming to your home,” Anderson said in his most sincere voice, “but we weren’t left any recourse. We tried to resolve this with your accounting department, and all they’ve done is ignore us. The point is, John, we have suppliers who work on your account, and they need to be paid.”

Rhodes looked at his son and motioned him to go back outside, which the boy did. “How much do I owe you?”

“Twelve thousand, seven hundred dollars,” Anderson said.

The amount seemed enormous. Preposterous, even. It seemed more than any one man could owe another, yet it was an accurate summary of Rhodes’s account.

“Twelve thousand,” Rhodes said. “That’s a lot of money.”

The young entrepreneur’s tone seemed not only unapologetic, but confrontational, and Anderson countered by assuming an attitude of his own. “Call your comptroller,” he said, making no effort to disguise the irritation in his voice. “I’m sure he’ll verify the invoices—if he bothers to answer the phone.”

Rhodes allowed his eyes to fall to the carpet, then rise again, icily.

“You’re five months in arrears,” Anderson said. “Maybe six by now. We’ve tried to resolve this on any number of occasions, but—” He paused, not wanting to embarrass Rhodes any further. But when he saw the contemptuous expression on the young man’s face, he ceased caring about professional niceties and laid the matter out in as blunt a fashion as he knew possible. “We were sent a check,” he said. “But it didn’t clear. We have people who need to be paid, and we’re not leaving until something’s done about it.”

Rhodes offered no reply, not even an insincere apology. He sat there a moment, thinking. Then he looked up. “Can you give me a minute?”

“Of course,” Anderson said.

“I’ll have to go upstairs,” Rhodes told them. “Is that all right?”

The question seemed preposterous given the situation. But Anderson went along. What else could he do?

“Sure,” he said. “Whatever.”

When Rhodes was back upstairs, Davies whispered nervously over Anderson’s shoulder. “Let’s go, man. Let’s leave, now. I’ve got a bad feeling.” He put his hand on Anderson’s arm and squeezed it urgently. “Let’s go, now, before something happens.”

But Anderson remained as he was. “We’re staying,” he said.

Davies gripped his sleeve. “What if he’s getting a gun, huh? It doesn’t matter why we’re here. We’re standing in his house, uninvited. Shaking him down for money! The man has every right in the world to shoot us!”

Anderson wheeled on Davies this time. “We’re not leaving without the money, Glen. It’s his fault we’re here, not ours.”

Footsteps interrupted their arguing.

Anderson’s eyes cut to the staircase, where he saw Rhodes holding a black leather attaché. Rhodes stopped at the bottom of the stairs, glanced at nothing in particular, then walked into the living room, where he sat and placed the case on the heavy glass coffee table.

Anderson's eyes followed as Rhodes put his thumbs to the attaché's brass finger latches. He supposed he should have been afraid, like Davies. But he wasn't. He was too angry to be afraid. Too embarrassed at having been forced to drive out here, cap in hand, and beg Rhodes to pay the bills he'd happily incurred on his business's behalf.

The brass latches snapped open, and Rhodes lifted the case's lid. Anderson's brow went up, and his lips parted when he laid eyes on the attaché contents. It was there, all of it. Start-up money...investor's money...Anderson couldn't begin to guess. There were stacks of it. Thick leafy bricks of it. Enough of it to toss in the air, and roll in, naked, as you drank champagne.

"Will you take cash?"

Anderson roused himself out of the daydream that had taken him and found Rhodes's eyes. "Yes," he said, matter-of-factly. "We'll accept cash."

The smug little entrepreneur counted out the money—all twelve thousand seven hundred dollars—and in the midst of what had already become the most implausible business transaction of Anderson's short but tumultuous career, Rhodes paused with a thoughtful frown and admitted, "I'm sorry. I don't remember how much you said I owed in change."

"Never mind the change," Anderson said. "We'll call it even."

Rhodes finished counting, and when he did, he handed the stack of bills to Anderson, and Anderson accepted it, slipping it into his leather shoulder bag, which he immediately closed and buckled shut.

"Receipt?" Rhodes said.

"Beg pardon?"

"I'll need a receipt. For my accountant."

"Oh," Anderson said. "Right."

Rhodes looked at him, expectantly, and Anderson turned to Davies for a pen and paper. But Davies had left. The foyer was deserted, and the front door was open.

"I don't have a pen," he said, turning back to Rhodes.

Rhodes sighed an exasperated sigh and tore an end page from a massive, hardbound book on the coffee table. While Anderson looked on, Rhodes pulled a pen from his pocket and began scribbling. "Here," he said, pushing the paper forward across the coffee table. "Sign this and leave."

§

Davies was sitting in the passenger seat of the car when Anderson walked out of the house. He seemed oddly calm, sullen even. Anderson opened the driver's side door and got in, pitching the satchel of money into the back seat.

“That’s it,” he said, slipping the key into the ignition. “All of it.” He started the engine and pulled away from the curb. He was furious with Davies for abandoning him in Rhodes’s front room. But at the same time, he’d never felt better or more alive in his life. “By the way,” he added, with a careless smirk, “Rhodes didn’t say it—not in so many words—but I believe we’ve been fired.”

Davies glanced out the passenger window and cleared his throat. He hadn’t said a word since Anderson came back to the car. But now he spoke up. “Junie’s leaving me,” he said. “She’s seeing a divorce attorney this afternoon.”

Anderson lifted his foot from the accelerator, and the car slowed. The declaration came as both a surprise and a shock.

“She’s pregnant,” Davies went on in a small voice. “That’s what she was telling me when you grabbed the phone out of my hand, you prick. She called to tell me she’s pregnant, and she’s leaving me.”

Anderson let him talk. He saw no point in interrupting.

“Maybe if we weren’t a pathetic little shop that has to shake down deadbeats like John Rhodes...” Davies said, voice rising, “maybe if we had any standing...made any real money... maybe if the clients you keep dragging in had any respectability at all—”

“Shut up, Glen,” Anderson said, tightening his grip on the wheel. “Just please shut up, all right?”

Anderson didn’t want to think about money anymore. He didn’t want to think about the shop, or its clients, or Davies’s hard luck story about his failing marriage to a woman he couldn’t keep happy. All he wanted to think about was how good he felt standing up to John Rhodes.

“What we did in there was reckless and stupid,” Davies grumbled. “You know that, right? You could’ve gotten us both killed.”

Anderson glared at him from the corner of his eye. “But I didn’t, did I?”

“We got lucky,” Davies said, slumping in his seat.

Anderson scoffed.

“Stupid lucky,” Davies muttered.

Maybe he was right, Anderson thought. Maybe for once in his measly, cowardly, do-nothing life, Glen Davies’s was right about something. But even if he was—even if it were true, they’d gotten ‘stupid lucky’ back there in Rhodes’s living room—Anderson didn’t care. He didn’t need to care, because the proof of what they’d done, what he’d done, reckless or not, stupid or not, rested in the leather satchel that lay on the back seat.

“Here,” he said, reaching over and pitching the bag into Davies’s lap. “Take it, Glen. Take whatever you want. Whatever you need. Only, shut up.”

Davies stared at him.

“Go on,” Anderson shouted, slapping at the satchel’s buckles. “Take it! Do something nice for Junie! Tell her you’re sorry! Tell her things are going to be different! But please, Glen—for God’s sake—will you please, please, please shut the hell up!”

§

Bell crushed out his cigarette. Smoke rose in a delicate tendril, and the little devil in the diaper found himself buried under a small pyramid of smudge and ash.

“Am I going to prison?” Anderson asked in a sober voice. “Did Sutherland really say that?”

“Let’s try and stay positive, Jerry.”

“I know, Ed. But—”

“I don’t like to speculate,” the fat attorney interrupted. “It’s counter-productive.”

“But it is possible.”

Bell sighed and turned up his palms. “Anything’s possible, Jerry. That’s not the point. The point is, we stay prepared.”

Anderson nodded. He looked out the window again to the park. He didn’t see how he could ever explain any of this to his wife, Claire, or his daughter, Marie.

Bell sat back in his chair and ran his fingers down his brightly colored silk tie. His voice assumed a lighter tone, meant to distract. “So,” he said, “is Marie a good skater?”

“What?” Anderson, distracted, turned from the window. “No. Not at all.”

Bell looked at him, curiously.

“She might be good enough to skate in an ice show some day. Or on a cruise ship, maybe. If she practiced a little harder.” He shrugged. “I guess she might be able to find part-time work on a float in a Christmas parade, if it didn’t involve anything too extravagant. But no, Ed. She wouldn’t hold up against any real competition, if that’s what you’re asking. She doesn’t have the chops.”

Bell smiled sympathetically. He lit the cigarette and pitched the crumpled package in the wire receptacle under his desk. “Go home, Jerry,” he said, laying the cigarette in the ashtray. “Go home, pour yourself a drink, and enjoy a quiet evening with your family.”

“Sure,” Anderson said. “Why not, right?” He rose from his chair, stiffly.

Bell rose as well and extended his hand.

They shook.

“We can circle back tomorrow when I know more,” the fat attorney said. “Meanwhile—”

But Anderson stopped him. “Marie’s a sensitive kid,” he said, returning to the earlier part of their conversation. “I don’t want her thinking this was her fault, Ed.”

“Of course not.”

“So, no mention of the lessons. Please. If worse comes to worst, I don’t care what happens to me. But I’d appreciate it if we could keep quiet about the lessons. Davies should be able to appreciate that, even if Sutherland doesn’t.”

“I told you before,” Bell said, “We’re not going to get ahead of ourselves.”

“Of course not.”

Anderson lifted his eyes and searched Bell’s face. He hadn’t meant to sound as if he was disappointed with Marie. Or that he was being negative about her talents. She was a good kid. She got good grades and stayed out of trouble. He was just being honest.

## Suburban Possession

*Jennifer Ruth Jackson*

We milk the truth like animals, thinking to draw  
out small moments. We take our charcoal seriously,  
lines we smudge and blur like rosemary for luck  
in our apartment. Neighbors fight while I smack

a tambourine, superior to fragments of China  
we never use being bashed against sea-rock cabinets.  
You listen at a cardboard wall and whisper-update  
me on Karen and Ken—the people we've heard forever

like a suburban possession. We wonder which demons  
will call on us when you get promoted, your chinos  
threadbare from early worry. Ken starts breaking  
their good crystal—shooting stars find Earth pitiable.

We promise not to break one another. I see the cracks  
forming along your cheeks as you attempt a smile.

## The Heaven of Forests

Mark MacAllister

*Here they are. The soft eyes open.*

*If they have lived in a wood*

*It is a wood.*

*If they have lived on plains*

*It is grass rolling*

*Under their feet forever.*

— James Dickey,

The Heaven Of Animals

If the coyote trailing me  
these last few miles  
can be assured a heaven  
made entirely of forest  
then what heaven  
might these trees conceive

they would recall the Carnian  
an early Triassic monsoon  
uninterrupted for two million years  
constant spectacular lightning  
the writing and rewriting  
of creek river and stream

how the clouds finally separated  
the wind settled and in an instant  
the storm was done  
this would be the heaven of forests  
silent were it not  
for the dripping leaves

## Speak Hard

*Diolinda Vaz*

My mother let me  
grammatically fail  
She watched me  
    misunderstand  
        mispronounce  
            drift, uncaught

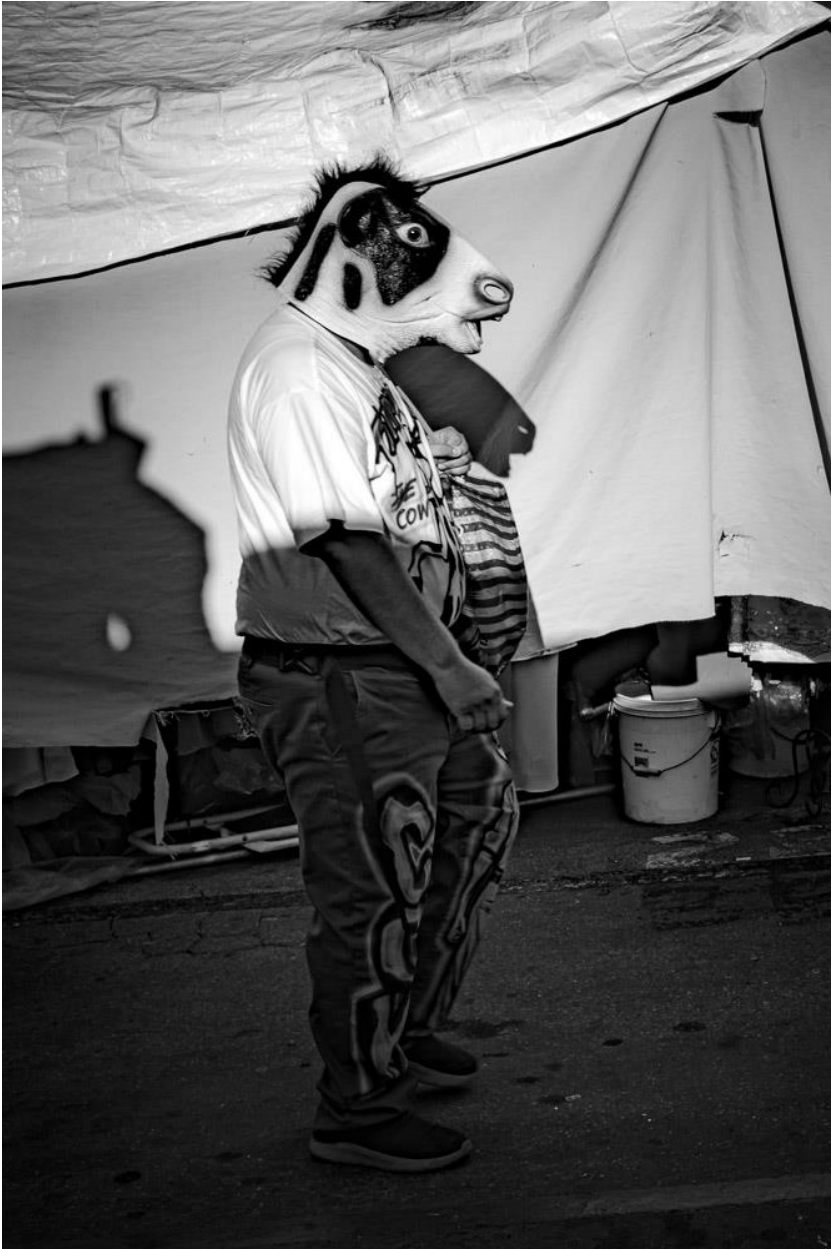
I asked why  
she never corrected  
how I spoke her tongue

She said many things  
    It so cute  
    It no matter aqui  
    No energia to teach nothing  
A different answer echoed

in a bad dream  
I grabbed at the words  
they slipped away like  
oily fish  
maybe  
she needed me

to know what this was  
to writhe without words  
to squirm in uncertainty

This would be our net  
across an ocean



**Watch Out for the Woman  
with Socks Above Her Knees**

*Kathryn Machan*

She's the loneliest.  
Count her hours in the crimson stripes  
more numerous than a raccoon's rings:  
they shout (silent), crying.  
Call her the woman whose mother left her.  
Dub her the child whose father died.  
Grandmother? Blue violets fading  
on an ice-covered windowsill.

Artists like to paint her watching  
with black eyes dead as lakes.  
Give her a garter, splash  
her a laugh: as if  
she could ever smile.  
No one comes through her dark door,  
no one dares to touch her shadow—  
and no one ever will.

Dare to name her? No one can.  
She's God and goddess, Lucifer, Lilith—  
always sliding past the edge  
of where your gaze can reach.  
Prostitute? Warm sacred priestess?  
Don't believe in that bone corset.  
She'll start running like a wolf  
and howl until you're still.

## **Fallen Angels**

*Ben Onachila*

Birds hit windows leaving  
fallen angel images  
imprinted on the glass.  
Their messages unspoken,  
filtered into the gravel  
of basement foundations  
and like the ark of the covenant,  
still waiting to be found.

## To June Leaving

*Steven Beauchamp*

Late in June at the end of a sunny day  
when fading light seems to come  
not from sky but from the ground,  
dollar weed, wild strawberries,  
and violets glow green-gold  
beneath darkening trees in the deep backyard.  
Robins chatter unseen while wrens seek shelter  
under eaves, in nooks and corners.  
Adding their gold, hundreds of lightning bugs  
drift up from the ground like tiny balloons  
into the canopy of leaves.

Billowing waves of locust song  
fill the amphitheater with pulsing sound.  
It moves around the yard like a madrigal  
from the huge pecan tree on the left  
into towering poplars on the right,  
rising to crescendo in the central stand  
of oak, mulberry, and ash.

A green katydid plays base  
from the sparse branches of a dying crabapple  
while tree frogs croak percussion.  
They weave a complex tapestry of sight and sound,  
fractal symphony in failing light.

In a world of flux and flow,  
this has not changed since first  
I toddled into the yard at dusk,  
saw these tiny miracles of light,  
and heard these sounds.  
What grace to sit on the steps  
and listen with wide eyes.

## The Orange

*Corbett Buchly*

the orange rests, raw and freshly plucked  
in the crease of my trembling palm  
I do not let this nascent fruit  
linger too long before I sense  
the necessity to claw through  
rough rind with a twist of the thumb  
my nail pierces the clinging skin  
gently rips apart the white mesh  
that connects the vulnerable flesh  
to its rugged armor

as if to warn me, the sharp scent  
gives pause: you must be delicate!  
separation is painful enough  
I cannot move with less hurry  
like the glacier, I carve in inches  
taking decades to sever the bond  
and into world this offspring  
Release



## Offer to the Love that Cannot Love

*Joseph Harms*

Offer to the love that cannot love but to infinity a goal unique  
and unshared. What can I offer to God but the ghost that must return  
undisfeared to the hands that have not made the same thing twice, vast worlds  
molded by their own weight like a drop of water, the orgiastic moment  
when life outleaps its limits, the anatomies of last year's leaves  
a living forest, a daily dying of the imagination in the presence of beauty?<sup>1</sup>  
Praise the terrible name for it is holy. My days smoke. My bones hearth.  
I have eaten ashes like bread and mingled my drink with weeping.<sup>2</sup>  
I am a servant of the Lord God of War and I understand the lovely  
art of the Muses.<sup>3</sup> A beautiful but bleak condition. Nature  
has forgotten it is there.<sup>4</sup> Always above a wondrous vision. Out past  
the fields at dawn's pellucid break a freight train carves the downs'  
nightly dregs. Good morning, heartache...<sup>5</sup> Here on the byway, I'm as cold  
and passionate as the dawn.<sup>6</sup> Sideral numismatics. A mensal sky  
unwrit with fulgor. Between relays, an intercrural sun read into  
too often on offing. Prolepsis. The day never arrives. Not really.  
A heron among the stretching cranes enfolded as in extinguishing  
the stars volute. Intercalated intestate limitrophe the interstate  
beyond Pierce Lake forenooned. Risen from the offing downtown's clocktower  
rice sized knells or chimes, the Jiffy silos white as the overcast,  
all thought as vaticidal as the course's manicured expanse.  
Apical the deadest tallest tree as rote a hawk. Above the lake, bald eagles  
idly prey. Cumulous the highway's bones pure as dream or mare. The years  
to come seem waste of breath, a waste of breath the years behind in balance  
with this life this death. There's not a thing but love can make the world  
a narrow pound.<sup>7</sup> Sent before my time into this breathing world keycold  
wherein I am compelled by beauty to undertake the death of all the world to turn  
the sun to shade to find the empty vast and wandering air—God

remembers we are dust, so stretch the heavens like a curtain and cover  
yourself with light as with clothes.<sup>8</sup> To see the earth it trembles. To touch  
the hills they smoke. Who numbers the words of anyone will fall. Eternity  
is always at our heels or hidden from our eyes by the thickness of a door.<sup>9</sup>  
The I's deadly prayer to any humane god a curse on Life.  
The eye's deadly payer what's seemingly seemingly seen.  
What is the coldest gift to nothing but more of itself by something  
espoused. What is left but to disinhume from the human the unhuman  
utterality that is the world unseen. When I sleep, I dream,  
and in my dreams, I long for nothing no matter how awful.  
In life a corse presents. On waking the dead I pray let me return.

1 W. B. Yeats

2 Psalms

3 Archilochus

4 Emily Dickinson

5 Billy Holiday

6 W. B. Yeats

7 W. B. Yeats

8 William Shakespeare, Psalms

9 W. B. Yeats

She found him on the way home from her afternoon beach stroll. Crouched beside a sandy track, his stare was vacant, and his filthy skin was studded with angry red bites. When Vonnie prodded his arm with her plastic sandal, he began scratching his bare feet. She clicked her tongue for the shame of what she wrongly deemed to be a blunder of nature. A wicked waste.

Expecting to see people out searching, she narrowed her eyes and craned left and right, then scanned the far wharf, but could only make out the pale silhouette of a sole pelican. With just a band of pink light hanging above the headland, a decision had to be made, and quick! When she looked down and saw a squadron of mosquitoes circling his head, she knew she couldn't simply walk away.

Sliding a hand beneath his armpit, she gave a sharp tug, and he scrambled up to stand beside her. He was way taller than she expected, and although his jaw was hanging loose, something about him made her fleetingly wonder if what he appeared to be and what he actually was were not quite the same thing.

There'd been a time, way back, when Vonnie might've had her own boy, but despite making the best of her ordinary looks, she'd remained invisible to the only man she'd ever loved — her romantic aspirations and fertile youth fading like the lavender potpourri stored with her unworn trousseau. She still wore her hair in the same blunt-fringed basin-cut of her teens, but along with a humped back, time had thickened her waist and thinned her legs, the overall effect reminiscent of a camel.

*Can't judge a book by its cover*, she thought, and grabbed his wrist. With one hip rising and rolling forward after the other like pistons on an old locomotive, she led him through a saltbush corridor which opened onto the gravel dead-end beside her house. The weatherboard two-bedder fronted a narrow, wire-fenced acre. By the time she'd retired from a career as head cleaner at Manning Cove School, she owned the house outright. Wedged in beside it stood a hardwood garage which had never housed a vehicle, for Vonnie had never learned to drive. On the porch, beside the sun-baked door, sat a large empty planter decorated with smooth beach stones she'd carried home in her pockets. To her vexation, the front yard had gone to rack-and-ruin. Weeds populated cracks in the path, and the rock-bordered flower garden inside the fence was a mere memory. Behind the house stood a small orchard of apple and peach trees she could no longer climb a ladder to properly harvest, and vegetable beds she could no longer comfortably kneel beside to tend.

Leading him through her wrought-iron gate, she turned to check down Spicket Close for signs of a search party. Vonnie's house was only visible to one set of neighbours. Twins Pam and Kitty Millward were now in their nineties and rarely

ventured outdoors. Aside from three beady-eyed crows pecking at the carcass of a bush rat, the road was deserted.

As she tugged him in behind her and reached back to shut the gate, he lurched away and escaped her grip. When he grabbed up a rock, the size of a grapefruit, a sharp breath hit the back of her throat. Teetering sideways, she watched in awe as he clumsily hammered the loose star picket supporting her letterbox. Like the tantalizing first glimpse of dry land after years at sea, the act was both unexpected and thrilling.

Dropping the rock, he began tearing at the bites on his cheek. *Even a broken clock's right twice a day*, she thought. Herding him up onto the porch, she pushed the door open so hard that it shook the hardboard walls. Although the house was dim with shadows, he walked straight inside and turned into the kitchen as though he'd lived there all his life. Closing the door, Vonnie paused to consider the lock. Not that she thought she'd done anything wrong. On the contrary. She'd phone the local cops once she'd cleaned him up. Even as she slid the bolt, she was rehearsing that conversation in her head: it was near dark and no one else in sight; the grubby urchin looked so pitiful; anyone half decent would've done the same...

When Vonnie flicked on the kitchen light, just the ends of the fluorescent tube glowed white. It came on with a ping, and she watched him slurp water from the tap. Her kitchen was spic-and-span and sparsely decorated. There was a kettle on the stove and an ancient brown Bakelite radio on the workbench. Aside from a calendar from Manning Cove Pharmacy, the walls were bare. The room was stuffy. She switched the ceiling fan on, and soon the blades were chopping the hot air with a regular thwomp.

Leaving the tap running, he dropped onto a chair beside her yellow Laminex table and scratched his neck. She turned off the water, then took a lump of cheese from the fridge and pushed it into his damp fingers. He shoved it into his mouth, chomped it down like an infant, then did the same with three peeled bananas.

Presuming he'd gone some time without a meal, she dislodged a package of minced beef from the freezer and left it to thaw on the sink. Later that evening — if no one had come to claim him — she'd rustle up some meatballs and gravy. *If you can't feed a hundred people, just feed one*, she thought, then surprised herself by raising her elbows to perform a silly chicken dance.

Vonnie had never had company for dinner. As the lone child survivor of a suspicious house fire, she'd been reared by a stream of aloof but competent staff at the Outer West Children's Home. While commending herself for her charitable deed, she imagined his folks searching out there in the dark. They'd obviously be forever grateful. She pictured the article in Saturday's Manning Cove Gazette; the photograph of his folks presenting her with a bouquet. Vonnie knew everyone in town, and

everyone knew her, but no one ever stopped to chat or even say hello when she shopped each Friday. A newspaper article would get the la-di-das talking! After that, things would be different when she went to town!

Hurrying to fill the bathtub with warm water, she tossed in some soda crystals to calm his bites, placed a towel on the vanity, then returned to fetch him. He was doubled over, scratching his ankles. She stood sucking air through her prominent front teeth, eyeing his dirty clothes, matted hair, and filthy feet. What a state he was in! No one could deny that her unexpected houseguest needed care and attention.

Without warning, Vonnie's throat tightened and her eyes brimmed with tears. The swollen store of unused love inside her suddenly felt like a boil ready to burst. She pressed her hands to her breastbone. Like a volcanic eruption, a wave of unexpressed grief came gushing up from the depths of her being, and she began to sob. If only she hadn't played with matches that day! But she was just a little girl... Despite being orphaned at five, repeatedly overlooked for adoption and deprived of a husband and family to call her own, never had she given way to such emotion! Truth was, at her age, she should've had a bunch of grandkids visiting on weekends to help out around the joint. She'd spent her entire life feeling like she'd missed some important rollcall that everyone else had answered. But why? She'd worked hard and paid her taxes, never drank or smoked or cussed. Wasn't she caring by nature? Hadn't she just proved that by bringing a lost boy with a disability into her home?

Swallowing hard, she took a handkerchief from her apron pocket, wiped her cheeks, then brought her focus back to her guest. Beyond the dirt, his features were not unlike her Geoffrey's. She'd loved Geoffrey from the moment he'd waltzed by. It was the first dance she'd ever attended. He was twenty-something, handsome, and popular. She was nineteen, a plain, friendless wallflower. Alas, Geoffrey was not in the market for an ordinary girl. Vonnie knew this, but she loved him anyway, him and his crewcut and baby-blues, his smart tweed jacket and spit-polished shoes. And Holy Toledo, he could dance! That purposeful yet graceful choreography far outshone those other bumble-footed young bucks. She heaved a sigh. At least she knew how love felt. Unrequited love might not be counted in the love stakes, but it was true love alright, even though it only operated in one direction.

Her thoughts flicked back to finding him at the beach. Like fast-forwarding a movie, everything flew through her mind's eye until here he was, seated at her kitchen table. She knew everyone in Manning Cove, so she presumed he'd wandered away from his city-slicker parents during a rare visit to the seaside. Vonnie didn't think much of city-slickers. She pictured them sitting beneath a fringed umbrella, wearing their shoes and socks and prissy straw hats. Was it possible she was meant to find him? That he was just waiting for her to come along and rescue him? Was she

destined to have a boy of her own after all? The very notion started her old heart banging.

Peering into his vacant eyes, she realized that what she wanted was to take care of him for longer than an hour. Vonnie now knew she intended to keep him. At an unconscious level, she probably had from the get-go. Trembling, she pondered his loose jaw, slouched shoulders and dull expression. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*, she thought, and a rare smile hoisted the slack skin on her cheeks.

Aware the bathtub must be filling, she clasped her hands and tried to think. A boy not technically hers couldn't be let out to roam the streets. Nor should he be caged like an animal. Resolving to work the details out later, she curled her bony fingers around his wrist and led him into the bathroom.

By the time she'd reached over and turned off both taps, he'd stripped and lowered himself into the tub. Only his face and knees remained above water. Vonnie looked down at him with wonderment. He'd crossed his wrists over his chest and closed his eyes, enjoying the hushed warmth. Of course, she knew all along he wasn't really a boy — not in the true sense of the word — and guessed his age to be around thirty.

She focused on his stubbled jaw and mop of brown hair and decided that if he was clean-shaven and bald as a badger, he'd be practically unrecognizable. There were scissors in the vanity drawer and plastic razors in the laundry, which she'd only used for de-balling woolens.

'Stay and soak while I get something from the laundry. I'm coming back,' she said, turning for the door.

'I'm coming back,' came a low, gravelly voice.

Swinging around, she said, 'Well! *You can't judge a book by its bloomin' cover!*'

'By its bloomin' cover,' he said, tiny ripples spreading out across the water's surface.

With her thoughts scrambling, she peered at his water-framed face. Although his eyes remained shut, the pink tip of his tongue was now visible between chapped lips and made him look a little sassy.

'Pickle-me-warts!' she said.

'Pickle-me-warts.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'You been foxing me, boy? Pretending to have a disability in order to rob an old woman when she ain't looking? Because if that's what you're about, I want you OUT OF THIS HOUSE! You've got thirty seconds! GO! Otherwise, I'll call the cops!'

'I'll call the cops,' he said.

Wobbling backwards, she began counting the seconds in her head. When he

still hadn't budged by thirty, she crossed her arms and started thinking. The boy obviously just had a propensity to mimic, but he also had a strong young back that she could make darn good use of around the joint with coaching.

'Fact of the matter is, I need some help,' she said.

'I need some help.'

'Ain't got much goin' for ya,' she said.

'Ain't got much goin' for ya.'

'Got me there, Sunshine,' she said, with a wry smile.

'Got me there, Sunshine.'

'So, it's back to business?'

'It's back to business.'

'How's about that shave?'

'How's about that shave,' he said, his eyes still shut.

Vonnie normally retired to bed after the evening news. This, she knew, was about to change. Once she'd shaved, scrubbed and dried him, she dotted every bite with pink calamine and dusted his armpits with powder. He still looked undernourished but smelt a darn sight better. Leading him into her bedroom, she stood him by her single bed and dug through her wardrobe for something he could wear. Settling on a white singlet and a pair of striped drawstring pyjama pants, she helped him dress, steered him into the darkened loungeroom, then parked him before the television. An electric bar-heater with chrome legs sat on the floor next to the television, and beside her tapestry armchair was a coffee table piled high with *Reader's Digest* magazines.

'We need to keep your trap shut, and I'm of the understanding that fellas like watching sport.'

'Fellas like watching sport.'

'Let's try the telly,' she said.

'Let's try the telly.'

Flicking through channels, she found a broadcast of some European bicycle race and muted the sound.

'There you go, Sunshine.'

'There you go, Sunshine,' he said, his gaze immediately fixing on the screen.

Sweeping her eyes over him, Vonnie slowly shook her head. This astonishing creature bore no resemblance to that scruffy stray. Those ears looked enormous on a clean-shaven head. Add that to his relaxed shoulders and gangly arms, and he'd likely

be mistaken for a chimpanzee. Recalling how he'd gobbled down three bananas made her grin.

Dragging her spare armchair across, she positioned it beside her own, inched it forward 'til it touched the back of his knees, then pushed down on his shoulders so he dropped onto the seat.

It was after seven. All her lights were off but if anyone came now, she'd have to hurry him to her bedroom, shut the door and pretend she was asleep, then hope to heaven he kept quiet. She went over to peek through the venetian blind. A full moon hung overhead like a giant, iridescent ball. Against the twinkling night sky, she made out some distant Norfolk Pines swaying in the breeze. Vonnie blew a breath out through her nose, the scalloped flair of her nostrils softening an otherwise angular face. Aside from the pounding of waves from a big sea, all was quiet.

Clammy from the activity, she flopped down beside him and blotted her face with a handkerchief. They sat in silence, the boy mesmerized by the television, and Vonnie reveling in his transformation. Now and then, he'd glance above his head and swipe madly at invisible bugs—something she assumed would cease once all the bites had healed. After a breather, she returned to the darkened bathroom, scooped up his grimy clothes, then felt her way into the kitchen and shoved them into a plastic bag. They'd disappear with Monday's garbage collection.

With cooking now too risky, Vonnie placed the mince in the fridge and made a fat cheese-and-pickle sandwich as best she could in near darkness, then returned to the lounge-room and held it close to his face. He made a snapping movement and almost bit her fingers.

'Oi! *Don't bite the hand that feeds ya!*'

'Hand that feeds ya,' he said, his eyes never leaving the screen.

Coaxing his fingers around the crusts, she left him to wolf it down and went to prepare the second bedroom. She'd boarded up the window after the glass cracked during the hurricane of '86. Flicking the light on, she quickly closed the door. Like every other room in the house, blisters of ancient paint drifted off the walls and gathered along the skirting-boards like snakeskin. On the plastic chair beside her sat an outdated television—complete with rabbit-ears aerial. Beneath the single bed was a huge canvas sports bag, its zipper straining to contain a hoard of *Reader's Digests*. She loved those Digests, loved their quotes, quizzes, quips, and travel stories and couldn't part with a single book.

Plagued by fire-themed night terrors since childhood (despite being assured her family hadn't suffered; that the smoke had got them first; knocked them out cold before the fire took hold) those cramped dorms at the Outer West had provided a level of security Vonnie hadn't felt since. She briefly considered dragging this bed

across into her room, then decided that might look suspicious.

Fetching sheets from the hallway cupboard, she made his bed then went to the small storeroom beside the laundry for a length of hessian rope, which she secured to the foot of the bed. Woollen socks would prevent rope burn. This would suffice until she devised a better shackling system. Right now, she needed him tucked in and out of sight.

Waddling back to collect him, she peered through the blind again. A giant Luna Moth was beating its pale-green wings against the glass. ‘Sorry, moth. *Two’s company, three’s a crowd,*’ she said, pleased when the boy echoed her words. Until today, whenever she felt lonesome, she’d call the crisis-line. ‘But now I’ve got my Sunshine boy if I feel like a little chat,’ she told the moth.

‘Feel like a little chat.’

‘Not now, thanks; I’m beat. I reckon its bedtime.’

‘I reckon it’s bedtime,’ he said.

That night, Vonnie barely slept. The house felt different. She felt different.

•

Vonnie was up at first light, checking through the kitchen window. The gravel dead-end was damp with dew. All was well.

She brewed tea, readied the toaster, set the table for two, then paused to admire the scene. This instant motherhood thing was alien and wondrous and thrilling. She guessed this was how it must feel to set foot in a foreign country without a phrase book or a compass.

Standing by his bed, Vonnie rolled her eyes. His mouth was agape, and his arms hung down so his knuckles rested on the floor. *Beggars can’t be choosers*, she thought, then untied his ankles and removed the socks.

Sitting upright, he swung his feet to the floor and began his swiping. She’d be glad when the confounded bites were healed because all this swiping at nothing was beginning to get on her nerves. As he stared up into Nothingsville she wondered if there were any pictures to watch inside that empty skull. She knew if he could, he’d say he wished he’d always been her boy; that he *never* wanted to leave. As she led him to the bathroom, she heard the bones in his feet crack, just as hers did first thing, and something about that really tickled her fancy.

After breakfast, she settled him down to watch silent cartoons while she did her chores. Vonnie now knew that he’d remain silent unless he heard someone speak; therefore, she could trust him to stay put watching muted television for extended periods. It was gratifying to know she had a boy who only spoke when spoken to. She’d learned the benefits of being well mannered back at the Outer West. More

likely to receive an extra slice of bread if you said please and thank you. She'd been a well-behaved girl. She'd done her chores, completed her homework, and kept herself shipshape. Even so, only the pretty girls—even dim-witted, lazy ones—were ever chosen for adoption.

For lunch she cooked him meatballs and mash and fed him at the table with a tea-towel tucked beneath his chin. Their first day as a family was progressing nicely, but she needed somewhere to conceal him should anyone ever come to her door.

'Back to the telly,' she said.

'Back to the telly.'

Vonnie put her thinking cap on and wandered the house. Deciding the best option was the pocket-sized storeroom, she set to work carting odds-and-ends down the back steps and across to the garage. The room was soon empty, aside from a huge blanket box.

Leading him along the hallway, she stopped by the door of his new bedroom.

'Pick that up,' she said, pointing to the old television.

'Pick that up,' he said.

When nothing happened, she pressed his fingers into the grips on either side of the varnished cabinet.

'Pick up the doggone television.'

'The doggone television,' he said, lifting it with ease.

Pleased, she steered him into the storeroom, coaxed him to set it down on the blanket box, then went back to fetch the plastic chair. Once he was seated, she plugged the cord in and began twiddling knobs and adjusting the silver rabbit-ears. Although squiggly lines rolled across every program, he was immediately spellbound.

Resting a hand on his shoulder, Vonnie took a moment to appreciate his strong, silent presence; the extraordinary difference this harmless boy had made to her life in just twenty-four hours.

'Ya done good,' she said.

'Ya done good.'

And it was true. They'd worked well together.

With the storeroom key on twine around her neck, she left him watching a topsy-turvy game show then went to the back door and gazed out over the yard. Her fruit trees would soon be laden. 'Everything's gonna be alright,' she whispered. For once in her life, she had a reason to feel optimistic. She had a family. A boy of her own.

Vonnie was smiling when she looked in on him. He'd made her smile a lot today, repeating things she didn't mean him to, and things she did, like, *great meatballs*, and thanks, *mum*.

It was time to fix their evening meal. She was tying an apron on when she heard the crunch of tyres over gravel. Peeking past the curtain, her hands flew to her mouth. Sergeant Len Chambers was stepping from his police car.

Dashing down the hallway to lock the storeroom, she was back at the window to see him nearing the steps. In his fifties now and a towering brick-of-a-man, she'd known Len since he was a whipper-snapper at Manning Cove School.

From behind the door, she mumbled, *'Don't let this be the straw that breaks this camel's back.'* Her tongue felt like a pumice stone and was sticking to the roof of her mouth. Hearing the clump-clump-clump of boots across her porch, followed by the dreaded knock, she opened the door.

'Good day, Vonnie,' he said.

Len was a foot taller than Vonnie, and her humped back made it necessary to drop one shoulder and tilt her chin in order to look him in the eye. As he peered at her upturned face, a double chin mushroomed over his collar.

'It's been a while. How are you, Vonnie?'

She coughed and slapped her chest. 'Excusie. Caught a blessed bug,' she rasped. 'What brings your fine self to my door on this hunky-dory evening?'

Stepping back, Len placed his hands on his hips. 'Got a missing person. Came to ask if you've noticed an out-of-towner down this way.'

Vonnie coughed again. There was a women's correction centre ten miles inland, and occasionally a resourceful inmate made a dash for freedom. 'Nope. Another woman escapee?'

'No. A young man. Not compos mentis, apparently. Not in control of his mind.'

'Dear me,' she said, trying desperately to click her parched tongue. 'Poor soul. Terrible waste, being born that way. Very sad.'

'You mightn't feel too sorry for this one, Vonnie. Destroyed his brain with illegal drugs. His wife claims she didn't know he was using. Says he went to bed perfectly well, but on waking the next morning, he'd lost the plot. Now he's vanished into thin air. A fisherman saw someone matching his description wandering the beach not far from here.'

So shocked was Vonnie to learn that not only did he have a wife, but he was a filthy drug addict and not some innocent blunder of nature, that she reeled back and had to cover her mouth with her handkerchief and fake a coughing fit.

'Excusie again,' she squeaked, and felt the prickle of sweat breaking over her face. 'So, y-you say the darn drugs've got a-another one. For goodness s-sake! Young people! Why the h-heck do they do it?'

Len was eyeing her thoughtfully. 'For kicks, Vonnie. Too much cash and time

on their hands, and no idea how to enjoy themselves without alcohol or drugs. Next thing, they're addicted, sharing syringes and spreading disease and needing more and more of the stuff to feed their habit. How do they pay for it? Crime. That's how. One way or another, good ordinary people like you and I end up paying.'

'World's full of rotten cheats!'

'Indeed. Anyway, have you noticed anyone or anything unusual?'

'Nope. Y-you ask the Millward twins?' she said, a trickle of sweat rolling down her cheek.

'Doubt the old dears would've seen anything but I'll call in. So, besides catching a terrible bug, how are things?'

'My only complaint's old age, Len.'

He gave an understanding shrug. 'I'll leave you to it then. Look after that chest. Good evening,' he said, and headed down the steps.

'Evening, Len,' she called, gave one final impressive cough, then stood clutching the hem of her apron until his car disappeared from view. The shock was too much. Collapsing forward, Vonnie grasped her knees. She hadn't simply lost her boy; she'd been tricked into feeding and bathing a married, filthy drug addict! She let out a howl. It was a shrill, terrible sound, like an animal caught in the metal teeth of a trap. Acid bubbled up and soured her mouth. She just made it to the edge of the porch before her stomach emptied.

Staggering inside, she fell back against the door and sobbed. Her thoughts looped around and around, from finding him at the beach to Len banging on her door.

Eventually, she pulled herself together and headed for the bathroom to rinse her mouth and splash her face. Vonnie did not appreciate being made a fool of. Twice in the space of twenty-four hours, she'd been overcome with emotion, and it was ALL HIS FAULT! Pounding her fists on the vanity, she growled, 'Married-drop-kick-good-for-nothing-filthy-drug-addict. I want him GONE!' Never one for procrastination, she strode along the hallway and unlocked the storeroom door.

Just the sight of him twisted her gizzards. Yearning to strike him with something, she looked around, but there was nothing left in there to grab. She headed for the garage. Next thing she knew, she was clutching a pair of yellow-handled secateurs.

'Hang on, old girl. *A small leak can sink a great ship, remember?* Wouldn't want traces of his filthy infected blood in your house,' she said, shuddering when she imagined his blood the color of sump oil. Replacing the secateurs, she smoothed her grey, Caesar-like hair forward with both palms, then went to stand outside.

It looked like the end of any ordinary day. Cockatoos screeched overhead. The

sun was setting in a purple haze behind the distant mountain range. From the overgrown vegetable gardens came a chorus of frogs. Through the falling dusk, she surveyed the rows of trees. Beside the fence, the derelict, weatherboard outhouse caught her eye.

‘Unbeknownst to me,’ she said, teasing an idea out in her head, ‘some demented addict wanders off the beach. Climbs my fence. Shelters in the outhouse. Pulls the door shut. Sits on the old lavatory and finds a discarded box of Redheads.’ Vonnie winced. She knew very well what could happen when someone played with matches. ‘Ain’t got the brains to lift the latch and escape.’

Retrieving the rope from the spare bed and his belongings from her pantry, she tugged him back into his crumpled clothes, then pulled him down the steps—the rope looped over her shoulder and a box of Redheads in her apron pocket.

Leading him over the spiky grass, she veered left before the first row of trees and yanked him toward the outhouse. One shove between the shoulder-blades, and he was inside, where she forced him down onto the hardwood seat. While he sat gazing up toward Nothingsville, Vonnie coiled the rope around his calves, secured the ends to the base of the toilet with a reef-knot, then stepped back to survey her handiwork.

‘You’re not worth a tinker’s damn, curse you!’

‘Damn, curse you.’

Fuming, she stomped away to gather kindling, returning several times to toss handfuls around his feet. Finally, she took out the matches.

‘Not that I care, but the smoke’ll get you first, knock you out cold before the fire takes hold, and I’m not saying sorry!’

‘I’m not saying sorry,’ he said, and started his swiping.

When an insect clicked close to her face, she began batting a hand madly above her head, then realized what she was doing. Striking match after match she flicked them across. Finally, the smallest twigs caught alight. Soon, a few hessian fibers glowed red, and wisps of smoke began to rise. When the acrid smell reached her nose, in a terrible moment of *déjà vu*, it seemed all the oxygen was evaporating. Flinging the box inside, she slammed the door and stumbled away.

The sound of his hacking cough started Vonnie coughing too. She broke into a jog—bony arms thrashing about like a life raft on a choppy sea. Only when she was safely indoors did her wheezing subside.

The fire station was four blocks away. She made her emergency call then, went to wait by the front gate. As the siren grew louder, Vonnie imagined the article in this Saturday’s Gazette. ‘This’ll get the la-di-dahs talking. Yes-sir-ee,’ she said, and rubbed her hands together.

## Cypress Avenue

*Cathy Porter*

One cigarette, three bills –  
Straight-up Georges on all three.  
A trifecta of cheap.

You take off out the door,  
leave me holding my breath  
and a stack of bills.

The city is nervous; how many bones  
will you break tonight? A spring  
thunderstorm guaranteed.

We used to settle in on stormy nights.  
Now, the rain is just dirty water  
dumped from the sky.

I wait for a phone call, or the screen door  
to creak open. Anything, even a siren.

And the smoke you left me is generic.

## **Panoramic View on the Barrier**

*Diane Webster*

Rose looks  
like my grandma sitting  
on the stone barrier  
between the parking lot  
and the panoramic view  
one is supposed to only  
look at and not step over  
the manufactured fence between.

Her scarf flutters  
like dandelion fluff  
trying to detach itself  
from the stem in a wind  
made to float new generations.

Her cane leans beside her  
in imitation of a fallen tree  
stripped of its limbs  
after decades of decay.

Rose appears  
in contemplation  
of whether she wants  
to rise and scuffle  
across the parking lot  
or lean back to imagine  
cloud images parading  
behind her, behind her  
farther and farther  
until she flips backwards  
leaving her cane alone  
for visitors to muse  
that someone is going  
to miss it before too long.



## Hypnagogia

*Gabby Zankowitz*

The sky is flesh where sun sweats  
color over blush. Pink and silk  
pull the horizon and green starts

to pebble and fiddlehead.

A familiar scene: a dog laying  
in ferns. They curl their tendrils

around his rest. I run  
over streets of succulents blinking  
their hues. I try not to crush them,

but purpose throws me off balance. When I look  
back there are only stems  
and the dog is choking

on leaves as he looks up. We must not  
be that much different. I'm trying  
to figure out the sequence. I wake up and lose

the point.

The train station in winter is a place for unfinished sentences.

Mara stands beneath the departures board, watching letters shuffle and correct themselves. Delayed. On time. Cancelled. The words flicker as if undecided about their loyalties. Steam rises from the coffee stand in small exhausted sighs. It smells like burnt sugar and old conversations.

She has arrived forty minutes early for a train she is not sure she will board.

In her coat pocket is the envelope, creased now, though she has tried to keep it flat. Inside is the job offer from Milwaukee. Assistant archivist. Temporary contract. Six months with the possibility of renewal. She had read the letter three times at her kitchen table, the radiator ticking like an impatient metronome.

Six months, it had said, as if time were a polite suggestion.

Behind her, a child drags a red suitcase too large for his body. The wheels rattle over the tiled floor like nervous teeth. His mother tells him not to lean on it; it will tip. The boy leans anyway. It tips. He laughs.

Mara remembers when her own life tipped.

It was not dramatic. No slammed doors. No declarations. Just a slow tilt the year her father's memory began misplacing things—first his keys, then his wallet, then the story of how he met her mother. The neurologist had used words that felt clinical and enormous. Progressive. Degenerative. Manageable.

Manageable, like a spill you wipe but never quite erase.

The train to Milwaukee is announced. Track Four. Boarding in ten minutes.

Mara does not move.

Instead, she studies the far wall where a mural shows the river in spring: blue thaw and small brave boats. She has lived in this town her whole life. She knows where the pavement buckles in August heat, which bakery burns its crust on Thursdays, how the river smells before rain. She knows which cabinet her father opens when he cannot find the spoons.

She also knows she has begun to disappear here.

It happens quietly. Friends move. Conversations shrink. Her name is spoken less often. At the library where she works, she reshelves other people's histories and wonders when she will misplace her own.

A man in a green knit cap stands beside her, now. He smells faintly of tobacco and peppermint. "You waiting on Milwaukee?" he asks, not unkindly.

"Yes," she says.

"Cold place to start over."

"I suppose all places are," she replies.

He nods, as if this is sufficient philosophy for a Tuesday.

The loudspeaker crackles. Final boarding call.

Mara imagines the apartment she has not yet seen—third floor, slanted ceilings, radiator heat. She imagines unpacking alone. She imagines her father at the kitchen table without her, turning the newspaper upside down and pretending it is a joke. Her sister lives two hours away but visits only on Sundays. Manageable.

The boy with the red suitcase runs past her toward Track Four, his mother calling after him. He stops at the edge of the platform and looks back, checking she is still there. She lifts a hand without thinking. He grins, reassured.

The train exhales.

There is a moment, thin as paper, where everything balances. Where staying and leaving weigh the same. Where the future is neither promise nor threat, just a door half-open.

Her phone vibrates.

A text from her sister: *Dad thinks it's 1998 again. He's asking if you're coming home from college for spring break.*

Mara closes her eyes.

In 1998, she had believed departure was a simple act. You packed. You waved. You became someone new. She had not yet learned that leaving is a thread you tug and feel what remains tighten.

The conductor calls, "All aboard!"

The man in the green cap steps forward. The mother lifts the red suitcase onto the train. Steam folds into the cold air like a curtain closing.

Mara takes one step toward the platform.

Then she stops.

It is not a sacrifice, she tells herself. Not entirely. It is a postponement. A season. Six months can become next year. Or never. Time is a slippery negotiator.

She pulls the envelope from her pocket. For a second, she imagines handing it to the wind, letting the paper scatter along the tracks like pale birds.

Instead, she folds it once more and slips it back into her coat.

The train doors seal with a soft, decisive sound. The engine gathers itself and begins to move. Slowly at first, then with intention. Windows slide past her, faces lit in rectangles. Strangers carried toward versions of themselves they have chosen.

When the last car disappears, the station exhales into quiet.

Mara stands alone on the platform. Snow begins fine, almost theoretical. She watches it settle on the empty rails.

In the hush that follows departure, she feels something unexpected: not regret, not relief, but space. A widening. The quiet between stations.

Her phone buzzes again.

*Can you come by tonight?* Her sister writes. *He keeps asking for you.*

Mara types back: *I'm on my way.*

She does not specify which way.

As she leaves the station, she passes the mural of the river. In painted spring, the boats lean forward, caught forever in thaw. She touches the wall lightly, as if it might ripple.

Outside, the air is sharp and bright. The town waits in its familiar arrangement, brick, river, bakery, buckled pavement. Nothing has changed. Everything has.

Mara pulls her coat tighter and walks toward the bus stop.

Behind her, the departures board resets its letters.

On time.  
Delayed.  
Arrived.

And somewhere beyond the curve of track and horizon, a train carries an empty seat toward Milwaukee, saving space for another beginning.

## Contributors Notes

From doodling poems in the back of her geometry notebooks to pursuing a degree in Songwriting halfway across the globe, **Anushka** has always been romanticizing the world with her pen. An eight-year-old and an eighty-year-old reside together in her twenty-two-year-old head, even though they're not always in harmony. She has an article commissioned by the *Goya Journal* set for publication on March 4<sup>th</sup> 2026.

**Abraham Aondoana** is a writer and poet. He is a recipient of the Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop 2026. His poem was shortlisted for *Interwoven Anthology 2025* (Renard Press). His works appear in *Kalahari Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Mayari Literature*, and elsewhere.

**Elizabeth Barton** is a self-taught photographer from Minnesota, currently studying at UW-La Crosse. Her love of travel, sports, and the outdoors shapes much of her work. In 2024, her photography was showcased at the Minnesota State Fair, earning several awards in her age category. When she's not behind the camera, she's hiking, staying active, enjoying family time, or watching the sky for the next great sunset. More of her work can be found on *Flickr* or @elbarton.photos on Instagram.

**Steven Beauchamp** is a Prof. Emeritus of English for Perimeter College. For some years, he edited poetry for their literary magazine, *the Chattahoochee Review*. Since retirement, he spent much of his time in southwest Florida. During the past 25 years, he has published 100+ poems in journals and reviews across the US and in Canada. These include the *Kansas Qtr.*, *the South Carolina Rev.*, *the California Poetry Journal*, *the Eclectic Muse*, and many others.

**Khayelihle Benghu** is a Soweto-based writer whose work lingers in the silences people often overlook, such as the pauses between departures, arrivals, and everything in between. Drawing inspiration from everyday life in Johannesburg, she writes stories that explore vulnerability, memory, and becoming.

**Bronwyn Bond** is an alumni of UW-La Crosse (May 2025) who majored in English Writing and Rhetoric, minoring in Creative Writing and Linguistics. She works as an Elementary School Library TA in La Crosse, where she hosts a Creative Writing Club for fourth and fifth graders, teaching the next generation of writers that their imagination is their most valuable resource.

**T. Broder** is a queer poet drawn to the existential and the mysterious. She currently lives in Kentucky but belongs nowhere. She is the recipient of the 2024 Paul Cantrell Poetry Prize, and her work has been published by the *American Academy of Poets* (2024).

**Corbett Buchly** writes about art and making in *W/Make* (Bottlecap Press). He has published more than 90 poems, including in journals such as *The Steam Ticket*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Plainsongs*,

and *Barrow Street*. He is an alumnus of TCU and the professional writing program at USC. He lives in Texas with his family and flock of manual typewriters.

**Dorian Burden** lives in New York's Hudson Valley, where she taught middle school English for 26 years. She now devotes her time to her first love: writing. Her work has been published in *Human Parts*, *Bright Flash Literary Review* and *Sneaker Wave Magazine*. She is at work on a memoir.

**Laurence Carr** is a Hudson Valley writer, playwright, and editor. His books include: *Strides, reflections on 6 acres* with artist Edward O'Hara; *Traverse*, with artist Power Boothe; *Paradise Loft*, co-published by Lightwood Press/CAPS Press; *Threnodies: poems in remembrance* and *The Wytchepout Tales* from Codhill Press. His novel, *Pancake Hollow Primer*, (Codhill Press), won a Next Generation Indie Book Award. He's widely published, and with plays produced throughout the U.S and Europe. Carr publishes Lightwood, a magazine of arts and culture at [Lightwoodpress.com](http://Lightwoodpress.com).

**James Conroy** is a writer, poet, and editor living in Chicago. He has been reading *Steam Ticket* for a decade and admires its range and quality.

**Eric Davidove** is a photographer whose passion for street photography has shaped a body of work that captures the fleeting and often overlooked moments of urban life. Since 2014, Davidove has roamed the streets of the San Francisco Bay Area, focusing on the humor, oddity, and sometimes surreal nature of human behavior. His work offers a glimpse into the beauty of everyday life, reminding us to slow down and connect with the world around us.

**Lizzie D'Elia** is a student at Salisbury University who is currently studying creative writing. She writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry and currently has an upcoming publication in the *Inflectionist Review*. She's also currently a fiction editor for the *Scarab Journal*.

**David Denny's** poems have recently appeared in *Chiron Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *I-70 Review*. His most recent books include *Angel of the Waters* and *Sometimes Only the Sad Songs Will Do*, both from Shanti Arts. He lives in California with his wife Jill and their Belgian Shepherd Ginny. More info: [daviddenny.net](http://daviddenny.net).

**John Dorroh** likes to travel. He often ends up in other peoples' kitchens sharing culinary tidbits and tall tales. Six of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net. Hundreds of others appeared in journals such as *Feral*, *River Heron*, *Burningword*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Penstricken*, and *North of Oxford*. He's had a book of micro-fiction and two chapbooks of poetry published in recent years. Once he was awarded Editor's Choice Award for a regional journal and received enough money for a sushi dinner for two.

**Linda E. Duchin** is a scientist passionate about writing prose. Her works have appeared in *Everyday Fiction*, *Small Leaf Press*, *Medical Literary Messenger*, *The Mantelpiece*, *Written*

Tales, and *The Helix*. She is also the author and photographer of a nonfiction children's book, *My Name Is Chaac*, from Who Chains You Publishing. The story is about the monkeys she researched. She has traveled much of the world and enjoys hiking, camping, reading and dancing. Duchin lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family and two dogs.

**Louis Faber's** work has appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Cantos*, *The Poet* (U.K.), *Alchemy Spoon* (U.K.), *Dreich* (Scotland), *Prosetrics*, *Passager*, *Atlanta Review*, *Glimpse*, *Rattle*, *Pearl*, *The South Carolina Review* and *Worcester Review*, among others, and was twice nominated for both The Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

**Jeff Fleischer** is a Chicago-based author, journalist and editor. His fiction has appeared in more than seventy publications including the *Chicago Tribune's Printers Row Journal*, *Shenandoah*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *So It Goes* by the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library. His short-story collection, "Animal Husbandry (and Other Fictions)," was published in 2024 and is available wherever you buy books.

**Susie Forrester's** work is emotional and visceral. She comes to her photography from a deeply personal perspective. While other photographers find comfort using the camera as a buffer between themselves and their subject matter, Forrester prefers to use the camera as a link to create a relationship with her subject. Whether it is a portrait, a landscape or man-made object, there is a portal of connection, that resonates in a liminal space of possibility and transformation. Her curiosity about the world around her has led her to share her work through teaching, workshops and exhibitions. She has also been the master printer, and current assistant archivist, for the late photographer Larry Fink.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Shif*, *River And South and Flights*. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Rush*, *Writer's Block* and *Trampoline*

**Sofie Hammen**, a junior at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, from Little Chute, Wisconsin, discovered her love for writing and storytelling three years ago. She works as a writing tutor, a general assignment reporter for *The Racquet Press*, and a fine-dining server with six years of restaurant industry experience, a combination that has given her endless stories. This is her debut publication. When she's not writing, she's crafting with friends, creating digital media content, singing karaoke, or enjoying the outdoors. After graduating in 2027, she plans to pursue TV journalism and broadcasting. She'd like to thank her parents and mentors, especially Professor Cashion, for always making her words feel valuable. She'd like to leave readers with her personal mantra: "Savor it."

A finalist for the National Poetry Series Award, the Sexton Prize for Poetry, the Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize and the Paul Nemsler Book Prize, **Joseph Harms** is the author of the poetry collections *Bel*, *Nous*, *Goety*, *Yonel* and *Funest*, which have been collected in *Taps* (Todos Contentos & Yo También Press); as well as the novels *Ades*, *Baal*, *Cant* and *Wzrd*, which have

been collected in *Evil* (Expat Press). He is at work on a collection of poetry entitled Nihil, a centonical epic written in heptameter and aphorism about nothingness and its echo—life. Harms' work appears in *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The North American Review*, *The International Poetry Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Opiate* and *Bayou Magazine* and elsewhere. He holds an MFA in Poetry from the University of Michigan Helen Zell Writers' Program.

**Elizabeth Higgins** is often found with ink-stained hands and a wild look in her eyes—the tell-tale signs of a linocut artist in her natural habitat. She works to capture the chaotic beauty of nature, the urgent whisper of political discourse, and the joyous shout of all things wonderfully nerdy. Her prints are a love letter to the weird and wonderful, a tangible echo of the world as seen through slightly smudged, ink-tinted glasses.

**Jeffrey Hillard** is professor emeritus at Mount St. Joseph University. He co-edited the former Cincinnati Poetry Review (with Dallas Wiebe) from 1988 - 2004. He co-founded Cincinnati Writers' Project (CWP) in 1988 and currently co-leads the Miami Valley Writers Network. He's the author of four books of poems and three novels. He published long-form journalism and essays as well.

**Jodi Hottel's** most recent chapbook is *Out of the Ashes* from Pandemonium Press. Her previous chapbooks are *Voyeur* from WordTech Press in 2017 and *Heart Mountain*, winner of the 2012 Blue Light Press Poetry Prize. Jodi's been published in *Nimrod International*, *Spillway*, and *Ekphrasis* and in the 2025 issue of Santa Fe Literary Review. Her work's been nominated for a Pushcart prize and Best of the Net.

**Jeffrey Howard** teaches writing and multimodal composition at Converse University and directs the university's writing center. His nonfiction and poetry have appeared in *Arcturus*, *Wordgathering*, *Glint*, *Teach. Write.*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Dappled Things*, and *Ekphrastic Review*. Jeffrey lives with his wife and four children in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

**Jennifer Ruth Jackson** is a poet and fictionist with cerebral palsy. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Vinyl Poetry and Prose*, *Algebra of Owls*, *Apex Magazine*, and more. *Domestic Bodies*, her literary poetry collection, came out in 2023 from Querencia Press. When she isn't writing (or engaging in activism), you can find her crafting a variety of things or playing video games with her husband. Follow her on Bluesky or Instagram: @jenruthjackson.

What is there left to say about **Marc Janssen**, other than he should eat more vegetables? Maybe his verse can be found scattered around the world in places like *Pinyon*, *Orbis*, *Pure Slush*, *Cirque Journal*, *Two Thirds North and Poetry Salzburg* also in his book *November Reconsidered* and his recent book collaboration *A Resurrection of Trees*. Janssen coordinates the Salem Poetry Project—a weekly reading, the occasionally occurring Salem Poetry Festival and keeps getting nominated for Oregon Poet Laureate. For more information visit, marcjanssenpoet.com.

**Stephen Kampa** is the author of four collections of poetry: *Cracks in the Invisible* (2011), *Bachelor Pad* (2014), *Articulate as Rain* (2018), and *World Too Loud to Hear* (2023). His work has appeared in the *Yale Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Subtropics*, and *Smartish Pace*. He was also included in Best American Poetry 2018 and Best American Poetry 2024. During the spring of 2021, he was the writer in residence at the Amy Clampitt House. He teaches at Flagler College.

**Ann Lauinger's** books are *Dime Saint, Nickel Devil* (Broadstone Books, 2022), *Against Butterflies* (Little Red Tree, 2013), and *Persuasions of Fall* (U. of Utah, 2004), which won the Agha Shahid Ali Prize; a chapbook, *St. Fursey's Abbey*, is forthcoming from Broadstone Books. Her poems and translations have appeared in journals such as *The Cumberland River Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Parnassus*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Transference*; in anthologies, including *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*; and on Poetry Daily and Verse Daily. She taught literature for many years at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York's Hudson Valley.

**Gabrielle LeMay** is a former New-York-based medical writer and horse trainer/riding instructor. She received an MFA in poetry from Hunter College in 2001, and won the 2004 Tennessee Chapbook Prize for *Pandora's Barn*. Her poems have appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Confrontation*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Poetry East*, *Poetry London*, *Rattapallax*, *Spillway*, *the Wild Gods* anthology from *New Rivers Press*, and many others; two collections are currently seeking publication. She now lives, writes, and studies classical piano in Oxnard, CA.

**Mark MacAllister** is retired after a 40-year career focused on the conservation of wildlands and wildlife. His poems are found in a variety of journals, and his chapbook *Quiet Men And Their Coyotes* is available from Concrete Wolf Press.

**Katharyn Howd Machan's** most widely published poem is about a frog trying to climb out of a toilet. Her first paid job was as a live-in-domestic at the Swiss Home for the Aged in Mount Kisco, New York in 1969 when she was 16. Since age 22 she has happily taught college undergraduates. She's written more than 10,700 poems and published many in magazines, anthologies, and collections. With her beloved spouse Eric Machan Howd she has raised two children, CoraRose and Benjamin, in Ithaca, New York. Oh—and for body and spirit, she belly dances.

**Jeffrey H. MacLachlan** has recent work in *New York Quarterly*, *The Columbia Review*, *The Vassar Review*, among others. He is a Senior Lecturer of literature at Georgia College & State University.

**Ayesha Mansoor** is a passionate Software Engineer from Pakistan, currently working remotely with an American company. With a strong background in technology, she enjoys tackling complex problems and contributing to innovative projects that make a real impact. Alongside her technical career, Ayesha nurtures a deep love for creative writing, where she blends

imagination with emotion to craft engaging and heartfelt pieces. Her favorite topics include gardening, flowers, fairy tales, and love stories, fiction, nonfiction, tech, fashion, etc. each reflecting her fascination with nature and human connection.

**Mitch Marty** is a writer and photographer from rural Wisconsin. He now lives in the high desert of New Mexico, where he can still hear the ghosts keening from back home. You can haunt him online most places at @mitchicism.

**Robert McGill's** work has appeared in *Narrative, American Fiction, Louisiana Literature, the Saturday Evening Post, the Southwest Review* and other publications.

**Mark J. Mitchell** has been a working poet for 50 years. His latest collection is [Something To Be](#). A novel, *A Book of Lost Songs* was recently published by Histria Books. He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things. He can be found on Bluesky @MJMitchellwriter

**Daniel Edward Moore** lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His work has appeared in *Southern Humanities Review, North American Review* and more. His work is forthcoming in *The Meadow, The Chiron Review, Nine Mile Magazine, The Mid-Atlantic Review* and *New Plains Review*. His book, "Waxing the Dents," is from Brick Road Poetry Press.

**Charlie W. Mortell** was startled into poetry early by Dickinson, Pound, and Plath. He was rough cut by the University of Wisconsin English faculty and by editing *The Daily Cardinal*. His poetry has been published (or accepted) by *Willow Review, Bramble, ND Quarterly, Isthmus, Mark My Words, Zines, EtAl*. He has read at Pearl Street Books, The Root Note, Cafe Steam, and The Listening Room (at arthouseacrosse.com). He is a poetry editor of *Quibble Literary Magazine*.

**Scott Nadelson** is the author of nine books, most recently the novel *Trust Me*, winner of the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish fiction. His work has appeared in *Ploughshares, New England Review, Five Points, and The Best American Short Stories*.

**Kevin Novalina** has had fiction, non-fiction and poetry published in over 200 Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. He won numerous writing competitions and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including four *Pusheart Prizes*.

**Kurt Olsson's** third collection of poetry is *The Unnumbered Anniversaries* (Fernwood Press 2025). His prose poems appear or are forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine, Bending Genres, Cloudbank, New World Writing Quarterly, Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere.

**Ben Onachila's** poems have most recently appeared in *Abandoned Mine, Creosote, Quiet Diamonds, Big Windows Review* and are forthcoming in *Trajectory*. He lives in Western N.C. and still runs the trails of Pisgah National Forest and tends his flower and vegetable garden, thankful to be retired.

**Irena Praitis** is a professor of creative writing and literature currently serving as department chair. Her work has appeared in more than 100 literary journals (including a previous issue of *Steam Ticket!*) and her most recent books are “Rods and Koans,” and “Cage of Bone” both published by Red Mountain Press.

**Cathy Porter’s** poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs*, *Homestead Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Trajectory*, *Cottonwood*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Chiron Review*, and various other journals. She has several chapbooks available from Finishing Line Press, Dancing Girl Press, and Maverick Duck Press. *Shuffle And Go* is her latest collection from Bottlecap Press. Cathy has been nominated for several Pushcart prizes. She lives in Omaha, Nebraska.

**AJ Saur** is the author of five books of poetry from Murmuration Press including, most recently, *Of Bone and Pinion* (2022). AJ’s poems have also appeared (or will soon appear) in *Abandoned Mine*, *Glimpse*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Muse*, *SLAB*, *Slipstream*, *Third Wednesday*, *Willow Review*, and other journals. AJ is online at: [www.ajsaur.com](http://www.ajsaur.com).

**Sherry Shahan** is a 76-year-old woman who studies pole dancing in a small California town. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, taught a creative writing course for UCLA Extension for 10 years, and has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes and Best American Short Stories.

**Mr. Shepley** is a writer who lives and works in Sacramento, CA. Since 1997 he has had poems published in the likes of *Trajectory*, *Santa Fe Review*, *Common Ground*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Off The Coast*, *Tipton Journal*, *Muse India*, *Muse (CA)*, and about 60 other small sources.

**Makaila Sisneros**, known artistically as MASi, is a self-taught photographer based in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. Her passion for photography began at a young age when she was gifted her great-grandfather’s SX-70 Polaroid camera. This sparked a lasting connection to the medium. Raised by her great-grandparents, MASi draws deep inspiration from vintage film photography and classic cinema, elements that continue to shape her visual voice. She specializes in 35mm film, creating work that moves fluidly between fine art and documentary styles, capturing moments with a nostalgic, timeless sensibility.

**Eric Skadson** is an Austin, TX-based artist with a curiosity to learn about his environment, people, and their stories. In 2024, Eric earned an MFA in Studio Art at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Prior to this, he served his country in the Navy and his community as a classroom teacher.

**Dominik Slusarczyk** is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. He was educated at The University of Nottingham where he got a degree in biochemistry. He publishes literature, nonfiction, and visual arts. In visual arts he has published paintings and drawings, photographs, and cartoons. His fiction came 1st in *The Cranked Anvil Short Story Competition* and

his poetry won *The Letter Review Prize for Poetry*. His full-length poetry collection *Reaction* is out now with *Cyberwit*. He is on Instagram and X as @thedreamingseal and he has a website at [www.dominikslusarczyk.com](http://www.dominikslusarczyk.com).

Describing **William Stobb's** work, Amy Gerstler writes, "it's as though the reader had been dropped into the mind of a loving, humble, funny, infinitely generous Buddhist monk raised on classic science fiction." Stobb is the author of six poetry collections, including *Absentia* and the *National Poetry Series selection, Nervous Systems*, both from Penguin Books. He works as an editor at the long-running indie 'zine, *Conduit*.

**Robert L. Treu** (1940-2025) taught writing and literature at UW La Crosse for 37 years and served as a previous *Steam Ticket* faculty advisor. He won writing awards from the Wisconsin Writers Council, and in 1995, Juniper Press published *The Selected Stories of Robert Treu*. (Please see page 49 for a special Robert Treu tribute).

**Diolinda Vaz** is a poet and essayist whose work explores inheritance, belonging and labor. She lives in Massachusetts.

**Maggie Veness** will engage you with a story that reveals her quirky, raw, or irreverent sensibility. Her fiction has been published across many countries in fine literary magazines, journals and anthologies, including: *SLICE, Bare Fiction Magazine, Gem Street, Page 17, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Pure Slush, LITRO, Paris Lit Up, ADANNA, Domestic Cherry, TOHO Magazine, PROSETRICS, Award Winning Australian Writing, NAZAR, Bravado, CHIRON Review, SKIVE, FTB Press, The Maynard*, plus many others.

**Lex Walz** is an alumnus of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, class of 2022. He is a former editor of *Steam Ticket, Vol. 25* and his work was previously published in *Steam Ticket, Vol. 24*. He currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Diane Webster's** work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly, New English Review, Studio One* and other literary magazines. She had micro-chaps published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Diane has been nominated for Best of the Net and for three Pushcarts. She was a featured writer in *Macrame Literary Journal* and *WestWard Quarterly*.

**William (Bill) Wolak** has just published his nineteenth book of poetry entitled "What Love Calms Only With Nakedness" with Expeditions International Publishing House. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe, The Passionfruit Review, Inside Voice, and Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

**Gabby Zankowitz** is a Sophomore at Salisbury University pursuing her bachelor's in creative writing and finance. She is an assistant poetry editor for the *Scarab* and works as a teller at a local credit union on breaks. She enjoys thrifting to give old things a new purpose and reading strange books. She has poems forthcoming at *The Shore*.

