

Volume 24 (2021)



Featured Selections:

“Magical Mysogyny Shades,” a short story by Alexia Walz

“In Defense of Twilight,” nonfiction from Corrine Kaleta

Two short essays from the Bernatovich Jail Literacy Program

Two poems by Rose Davey

Two prose poems by Brad Rose

“On Literary Citizenship,” a keynote address from Jaki Shelton Green

Vol. 24 TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fiction

Brian J. Daldorph	The Good Husband	25
Maureen Sherbondy	The Family, Animals	53
Terry Hall Bodine	Ollie Ollie Come in Free	67
Alexia Walz	Magical Mysogyny Shades	72
Fija Callaghan	Sunset at Harry's	91
R. E. Hamon	Messengers from the Past	115

Nonfiction

Jan Shoemaker	Caper	13
Laurel DiGangi	History of a Fur	46
Michael Hettich	Shape-Shifters	57
Corrine Kaleta	In Defense of <i>Twilight</i>	127

Emancipated Stories

Amy Zielke	Getting Shot Saved My Life	33
Kelli Doughman	Nine Miles from Civilization	35

Keynote Address

Jaki Shelton Green	Literary Citizenship	79
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Poetry

Marc Swan	Cadence	9
Sharon Scholl	D Day at 75	11
Leslie Anne Mcilroy	Fox God	12
V. P. Loggins	A Lizard in the Garden	22
	A Lively Mask	24
Ellen Goldsmith	Row Boat	26
	Embers	27
Margaret Wagner	Railroad-Track Scars	29
Diane Webster	Erosion	31
Rachel Squires Bloom	Supercalifragilistic	41
John P. Kneal	Fantasy	42
	Planting	43
Jane Costain	Lilacs	44
Mary Warren Foulk	Estate Sale: An Ode To The Red Shoes	49
Claire Scott	He's Getting Better	51
	I Never Liked Her, My Neighbor Across The Street	52
Mark Niedzwiedz	Roger	54

James Piatt	Sheltered Cages	55
John Krumberger	First Death	56
Mark MacAllister	Rainbow Wilderness	64
	One's Face at Birth	65
L. Ward Abel	Aging	66
Thomas Piekarski	Mortal Men	69
Kurt Luchs	World Records	70
Matthew J. Spireng	How the Curtain Was	71
Rose Davey	Consulia	76
	At a Frozen Pond	78
Lyudmila Knyazeva, translated by Richard Coombes		
	read me your poem	85
Michael Walls	City Scenes	87
Douglas Collara		
	Two Coworkers Discuss News of a Well-Liked Manager	89
Katherine Inez Davis	About the Stains	90
Brad Rose	Another Day at the Office	99
	Charred	100
Allen Strous	Lenses	101
Monty Joynes	The Yellow Chair	103
Andy Oram	House on the Shore	104
C. Vale Stone	Sweet Offering	106
Lynn Hoggard	Ambushed by Love	108
Toti O'Brien	Terminology	109
John Tustin	The Body is Art	110
Nick Godec	Lens of Lazurite	112
Joanne Holdridge	Deep End	113
Marte Carlock	Psychic Powers	114
Brian Fanelli	Gratitude for a Snowstorm	125
Richard T. Rauch	Dead Cat on the Side of the Road	126
Craig Kurtz	New Year	130
Sophia Veseley	Sailboats at Sunset	132

Art

Patricia Joynes	Chair on the Edge	Front Cover
	Chair and Mailbox in the Sunlight	102
	Chair and Mailbox	111
Roger P. Watts	Kiss for a Hero	10
	I'm Retired	21
	Chairs	131
	Bar	Back Cover

Tirzah Dempsey	A Heavy Crown	30
	Sisters Fashioned by Fate	40
	Esen's Exile	45
Carolyn Adams	The Boys	68
	On the Moon	86

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Magical Misogyny Shades
(A woman goes for a walk after a therapy session)

Alexia Walz

The last thing Dr. Hart said to me today was “it’s a long road”. Road to where? Roads are supposed to take you places, to destinations. And there are supposed to be stops on the way. Like 7/11 or Cracker Barrel. Or adult toy shops. Do I get a stop? Do I get to eat lunch at Cracker Barrel on my road to recovery? Or are my Cracker Barrels just me crying while putting away laundry, screaming in my Chrysler in the Walmart parking lot, and failing to recognize the person in the mirror? Dr. Hart would probably say my Cracker Barrels are just singular, key moments. Moments that might make all of this worth living through and moments that do the opposite. Things that keep you on the road and things that make you want to pull a Thelma and Louise. Receiving a sobriety coin and collecting bottle caps in the same breath. Getting baptized and then immediately losing your religion because too much water went up your nose. Falling in love.

I’m not going to Cracker Barrel. We developed goals once, a while ago. Can’t seem to achieve them. One step forward. A hundred steps back. Probably ‘cause I can’t and won’t remember shit. When’s rent due? I don’t know. What’s that thing my mom wanted me to do with her? Probably bullshit. Why does my brother think I’m becoming unpleasant all of a sudden? And why does my therapist think the same thing? And who was my RA my freshman year? Why does my dad want me to bring up the RA to Dr. Hart so badly? Why do I repulse and hyperventilate every time I’m touched? What’s a po’boy? All I know is you can’t get those at Cracker Barrel. Or adult toy shops...

“Hey, baby!”

Maybe you can get them at 7/11. But I’m in Minneapolis. Po’boys don’t belong in Minneapolis.

“What’s your sign, baby?”

Oh. I’m being spoken to. Why do random men always need to speak with me on my walk back from therapy? What’d he even say? My sign? What sign? Why do you want to know about my sign? I’d rather just keep thinking about po’boys.

“Damn, bitch! Ya death or something?”

I meet eyes with him. Ugh. Now I have to ground myself in reality and talk to some sad, sad, man on University Avenue who never learned the importance of the letter f. He’s wearing those sunglasses that make you look like you have five kids and demean women for a living. Probably a car mechanic. But the kind of car mechanic that finds joy in charging women extra for “blinker fluid”. Or an alcoholic stay-at-home-not-because-you’re-a-loving-father-but-because-you-can’t-go-six-hours-without-popping-a-tab-dad. His orange-tinted, misogynistic shades reflect insecure, out-of-touch rays of light into my eyes. Disorienting. “It’s deaf,” I say, hanging on to the ‘pho’ for dear life.

“Oh, I know baby,” he says. “I’m so sorry. My granny’s dog is death and blind. Crashes into everything. She gon’ die soon. You remind me of her.”

“Your granny or the dog?” He’s confused that I heard him. Tells me I’m good at reading lips for a blind bitch. His douchebag shades are good at blocking intelligence. They’re good at blinding unassuming women walking down the sidewalk too, apparently. My eyes lock on his chapped, desert dry lips. He said “both are near dead but the dog proly ‘gon out live ma granny ‘cause she smoke too much. But that don’ matter. I asked you a quechin”

I’m a Gemini. But I don’t say. I usually can’t figure out how to bring my tongue to my teeth after a session of thinking too much. And a session of talking too much with Dr. Hart. She’d say it’s never too much. But how do you explain the weekly emotional thought bender I take when walking from her office? I’d say the daydreams about Cracker Barrel and Mr. Alcoholic Car Mechanic Who Wears Magical Misogyny Shades and Likes Astrology are a bit much. And I’d rather not get verbally assaulted by douchebag dad. No one likes Geminis. But he doesn’t seem like an astrology person anyway, so I’m probably fine. Still don’t know if I’m reminiscent of a grandma or a dog.

He takes a condescending puff of his cigarette to quiet my deafening silence. This puts me off, so I just keep walking. Sometimes it's better to not overthink these things. I hear him scoff as I continue down the sidewalk. He raises his voice at me.

Don't remember what he said.

I guess I didn't like it.

Mind censored it.

Should have overthought more.

Okay.

No, it's not. Fuck.

Uh. Let's see. Um. We could--I could. What if I...wh...hmm. Need...need to do something. Self-soothe. Finger to mouth. But not in it. That's gross. And not helping. I'm—I'm gonna—I—I'll walk faster. Just walk faster. If I walk faster, then I'll get winded. If I get winded, then I'll get distracted. If I get distracted, then my mind will quiet. But it's quiet outside. There's no cars on the road. Why schedule therapy at 8 AM? Depressed people don't wake up early. I'm not depressed, I'm healing. Healing isn't melting down cause man mean and hate Gemini. At least I'm trying. Not enough. Trying's not enough. SSRIs for eight years? Not enough.

Okay. I'm okay. Mind's too fast. Walking too fast. Breathing too fast. Fuck. Hyperventilating. Stop. Stop. Please. Oh God. Please make it stop. Okay, okay. Slow down. Sit down. Find a bench. Lots of bench. In town. What am I saying? Okay. Oh god. I don't--. Where am I? Okay. Okay. Find bench. I'm lost. I can't find bench if I'm lost! Bench, please! Wait. This bench nice. Green. Cold. Wet. Touch green cold wet bench and SSRI will kick in. And then I'll forget about dad man bag. Dad man bag? Douche man bag man with dad douche dog not dead yet granny smoke lot cough bad now. What the fuck? Brain mush, word hard.

Hmm. Okay. Not actually. I'm lost. I was at therapy. Now I malfunction on clammy bench. How do you get lost in your hometown? You get lost when you're reality isn't real. Or when you forget the difference between your and you're. Or when RA boy tell you "you're very pretty" but you tell him "RA not my type" because you like rainbow flag and people with high estrogen levels and you're only 18 anyway so why is he, resident assistant boy, flirting with me, gay resident girl? so you leave his dorm room even though he didn't finish his freshman orientation meeting with you and you go to bed but he doesn't like rainbow flag he likes worshipping red and white and blue flag and ignoring his intuition and trusting his overly high testosterone levels instead so he invades your REM cycles and decides to hurt you and your parents file lawsuit to heal you because they just as out of touch as douchebag dad.

Oh. That's it. Douchebag dad. Douchebag dad.

Mind's quiet now. Silence is loud now. Douchebag dad's words I censored just a moment ago pop into my head: "I bet you a Gemini! I'm Aquarius. Come back so we can compatibilize or whatever."

Kind of charming. Huh.

Maybe I *could* "compatibilize" or whatever. Maybe douchebag dad isn't just some sad, sad man on University Ave. But I can't deny that douchebag dad's voice carried like RA boy's hips thrust and the baritone of his pickup line sent me into a spiral just like RA boy's false naivety helped expunge his criminal record.

But douchebag dad's words didn't cut deep the same way RA boy's chauvinism destroyed me. Douchebag dad is just a man with magical misogyny shades finishing a cigarette. RA boy is a Yelp review about a Cracker Barrel so bad that they give you Prozac instead of Andes Mints at the end.

Let me set the scene: it's September 2009 the financial crisis is in full swing, Silly Bandz are the hottest fashion accessory on the market, and most importantly *Twilight: New Moon* will be released in theaters in a few short months. I'm in 6th grade, and all around me, girls are wearing *Team Edward* and *Team Jacob* tee shirts. Yesterday in class, my English teacher went off on a vaguely misogynistic rant (this teacher was a woman which made the whole thing worse) about the death of modern literature, everyone is talking about/thinking about/being all-consumed by *Twilight*. Except for me. I walk down the halls of the school in my bright pink sweatpants, fuzzy purple sweater and red converse shoes scoffing at the ridiculousness of these girls. I had no time for such nonsense as *Twilight*, I was far too busy with more important pursuits, like reading the *Animorphs* series, and yelling at kids on the playground for playing Pokémon wrong. As you can probably tell, I wasn't one of the popular kids in middle school; I also wasn't one of the smart kids, sports kids, or emo kids. I didn't fit in, and to cope with that I developed a real "I'm not like other girls" complex. I thought everyone around me was a dumb phony. Me not having friends had nothing to do with the fact that I had crippling social anxiety or low self-esteem. It was because I was different and misunderstood, and that made me special, and I clung to this idea for dear life.

Like most 6th graders, I was swept up in pre-teen angst. I was angry at the world and wanted to rebel. During one of many lunches that I spent in the library, I decided that since I didn't know how to buy drugs, the best rebellion would be reading *Twilight*, and holy shit. I would read the first *Harry Potter* book a month later (I was really late to the party) and it would be another year before I would see *Star Wars: A New Hope* and my mind would literally explode. But *Twilight* was my first foray into "Fandom" and it was awesome; finally, there was a thing I liked very intensely that everyone around me liked with the same intensity. Instead of wearing a baggy ill-fitting sweater, I could wear a baggy ill-fitting Team Edward tee shirt. I was moving on up in the world.

I would like to take a moment to pause here and discuss what is perhaps the most controversial and debated texts since the Bible. Let me lay out a few of the things that made me lose my shit when I read *Twilight* for the first time.

- The main character is an awkward clumsy girl who spends most of her time moping around and reading? Hell yeah, that was relatable to a dorky angst filled 12-year-old.
- The vampires. Some people claimed that *Twilight* ruined vampires. To which I respond: ummm, hell no it didn't: the vampires were fucking awesome. Also, how could someone ruin vampires? They. Are. Not. Real. I guess I forgot how realistically Dracula was written, what, with his big-ass cape, and Midwest/Atlantic/British accent. Truly, anything else would be ridiculous.
- I was a very sheltered child. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, whose main character is a pacifist monk, was banned in our household due to violence until I turned 13. One of the last scenes in *Twilight* has a vampire being torn apart limb from limb and burned alive. 12-year-old me found this shocking and thrilling; it really felt like I was getting away with something reading this book. I also just thought vampires fighting to the death was pretty fucking cool.

And so my obsession began. Over the course of a week, I read all four books. I started out trying to read only at school so my parents wouldn't catch me. However, I was really bad at even my half assed shitty rebellion and my parents saw me read on the third day. I think my parents let me keep reading because they were relieved I was finally doing something normal that would in theory help me fit in. My mom took me to see *New Moon* the day it came out. She started reading the books and was on board the *Twilight* train. The *Twilight Saga* was added to the rotation of books that I kept

coming back to anytime I needed to escape from the real world, which was often. *Twilight* is not one of the greatest works of literature ever created; it has more than its fair share of flaws. But none of that mattered to me as a kid. The books let me escape to another world, had characters that I fell in love with, and made me feel less alone. For about a year, I was unashamedly in love with the books.

Of course, things change. School was still a living hell and I also experienced my very first bout of depression that year. In short, I was pretty fucking miserable. The summer after 6th grade, my family moved to Wisconsin, a state that I was unaware had anything interesting other than the Dells. I felt very little as we pulled away from my childhood home for the last time. I clung to the hope that things would be better once we moved. Things had to get better, because I had no idea what I would do if they didn't. After moving I was determined to put as much space between me and my former self as possible. I started wearing outfits that, while still not fashionable, at least had some semblance of color coordination. I got braces and a retainer. I figured out how to make myself blend in. And while I struggled with making friends, I did have a spot and people to sit with every day at lunch. Thirteen-year-old me developed a deep hatred for 12-year-old me, and 11-year-old me, and 10-year-old me and any variation of me that wasn't the one right there in that present moment, so I loathed most of my existence. I tried to pluck what I thought were the causes of my problems. I decided to make myself the opposite of who I had been. I became cynical. Like most of my former self, I threw my *Twilight* obsession into the garbage. At the time when it started to be more popular to hate *Twilight*, I started hating it too, and thought that made me a better person. This venomous hatred for *Twilight* would follow me until the year 2020, where in the middle of a pandemic during the worst mental health struggle of my life, I found solace in the most unlikely book.

Emancipated Stories

The following essays—one by Kelli Doughman, one by Amy Zielke—were written in Spring, 2021 as part of the Bernard and Rita Bernatovich Jail Literacy Program (BJLP) that partners the U. of Wisconsin-La Crosse English Department with the La Crosse County Jail to provide programming for inmates.

The program hopes to cultivate a lifelong appreciation for reading and writing, to facilitate discussions enriched by diverse inmate perspectives and experiences, to model positive, respectful interactions between inmates and co-facilitators, and to provide opportunities for inmates to create and share their writing.

Since its launch in Fall 2015, nine faculty members volunteer on a rotating basis to offer bi-weekly sessions in poetry, nonfiction, short stories, and creative writing for 24 participants (12 males and 12 females) per session. Inmates often generate their own writing and receive feedback from each other and from faculty. Numerous pieces are now published in *Emancipated Stories*, an online collection of writings meant to showcase stories from incarcerated individuals across the nation (www.emancipatedstories.com).

The BJLP has participated in the La Crosse Reads program every year since its inception, providing free copies of the year's chosen book to interested inmates and organizing special events such as the visit of nationally-recognized poet, memoirist, lawyer and prison reform activist Reginald Dwayne Betts, who visited La Crosse in 2017 as part of a program that featured Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. Incarcerated at age sixteen, Betts served eight years and credits the reading of poetry and literature for his survival in prison and his success after his release. In 2016 he graduated from Yale Law School and later completed his Ph.D. in law at Yale.

The BJLP received the 2020 Eisenberg Award from the State Public Defender Board. The award is given each year to a person or program that has had a substantial impact on criminal justice and the indigent defense community. The UWL English Department is grateful to La Crosse County Jail Administrators such as Mike Kiefer for supporting the program, as well as to the daughters of Bernard and Rita Bernatovich, who donated financial assistance to support the program as a way to honor their parents.

Steam Ticket is proud to publish the following essays.

Getting Shot Saved My Life

Amy Zielke

Getting shot saved my life. If roles were reversed, I would have done the same, with results ending in tragedy. He only shot once and had great aim. I would have kept shooting, with disregard to aim. I'm not mad; I'm grateful. In the depths of my addiction, I was finally stopped in my tracks, literally.

In need of another bag, I looked around until I saw a light on at the business up the road. At this point, I was a full blown "meth monster." I already had over a dozen burglary charges pending. Meth tricked me into thinking that breaking into businesses wasn't hurting people because they could just write it off on insurance, right? That's how reckless I had become.

I pulled up to the business and popped the trunk so I could layer on clothes and a ski mask. I shut the trunk, which I later learned woke up the owner living upstairs. I jimmed the door open and entered into what looked like a waiting room, entryway, and hallway all in one. I walked past three chairs then left into the dark room with desks. I was digging in desk drawers when the lights came

on, and I heard a man yell “STOP.” I stood up slowly with my head down and eyes focused on the carpet. I was scared and confused so I crept to the office door, keeping my head down. As I turned my body towards the front door, the man shouted “STOP” again, so I paused momentarily. As my leg advanced, in attempt to walk, I was deafened by the loudest noise I’d ever heard. The entryway was hazy and smelled like something was burning. I was terrified to move. My heart was beating out of my chest, sweat beading up on my forehead, and disoriented by the piercing noise and smell of fire. But the door was only a few feet away. My car was right outside that door. As I was reaching for the doorknob the pieces came together; I figured out what had just happened. There was blood soaking my pants and running down the front of my leg. I took off the ski mask and looked behind me to see the man holding a gun. He looked shocked, and still had the gun pointed in my direction so I sat down in the chair next to me.

I’m grateful in so many ways for being shot that night. The bullet entered the upper back of my thigh and out the front above my knee. I didn’t need surgery, stitches or glue – Nothing but a bandage. Nice shot! I could have easily been killed or paralyzed; but I’m not because he had good aim.

People kept asking if I was mad that he shot me from behind without announcing that he had a gun.

No, I’m not mad.

Yes, he shot me from behind as I was walking away.

Yes, I would have done the same if roles were reversed.

Yes, I’m grateful he shot me.

I’m alive because that man stopped the “meth monster” instead of killing me.

As I sobered up, I began to reflect on my addiction. Meth made me abandon my morals and values. I can’t believe my addiction got to the point that I made people feel unsafe in their own home. That man lived upstairs with his wife and son. The mom in me would have done the same to protect my family. I’m grateful he had good aim so that I could sober up and bear the consequences.

If ever allowed contact with this man, I would send him my Deepest, most sincere, apologies! I hope shooting me, a woman, hasn’t haunted his thoughts. I wish he knew that shooting me was actually a good thing. I’d say this: “I’m so sorry for making you feel unsafe in your own home!

Shortly after my release from prison, I had a conversation with my uncle about how grateful I was. He told me that the man who shot me is his friend and has quite the sense of humor. They saw each other at a restaurant a while after I was shot. The man smiled at my uncle and announced, “I couldn’t find a card at the store that said, ‘sorry I shot your niece’” to which they both shared a laugh. Hearing this made me smile and shed tears of relief that shooting me isn’t haunting his thoughts. I will forever be grateful for that man’s great aim. Getting shot saved me from the depths of my addiction.

Nine Miles From Civilization

Kelli Doughman

Nine miles from civilization. Nine miles into the desert at a treatment center along the Hassayampa directly translated to “Hidden River.” A few experiences of that winter will be forever burnt into my memory.

Just moments after shedding top layers in anticipation of what was guaranteed to come next, the hot sun began to rise over the mountains. Planted firmly in my saddle and stirrups, holding the reins loosely and gazing over the ears of my horse, Sonny; I stared deep into the unforgiving desert. While some struggled to still their horses or come to terms with the dry, thorny terrain—which was to be our home for a minimum of ninety days—Sonny and I were completely in sync, and my mind was fully at peace.

While I loved that ranch, I strongly despised the process of digging deep and recognizing true, underlying fears. My ninety days became one-hundred-twenty days and during that time I found myself in synch with a number of animals who had no trouble reflecting those inner fears.

At one point of particular frustration, I rebelled by taking an evening hike up the base of the mountain at sunset—a particularly dangerous time in the desert. I stood at a fork between the darkness and a staff member who warned me of the trouble I would face if I continued to act out of compliance. It wasn’t the consequences from the treatment center that turned me back, it was the mother coyote that appeared in the other direction and barked at me in a language I was not about to argue with.

I was not ready to “comply” so I chose to walk as far as the stables, stopping in front of Sonny’s run. Well aware of the trespassing ticket I could buy myself by climbing through the bars, I sat on a rock just outside. Sonny came out of his stall, walked up to me, and lifted a hoof to place on the lowest bar at my shoulder level. By then the staff member had pulled up in his truck, perpendicular to us to shine his brights at us. As the spotlights shone on me in the dark of the night, I was fully visible to anyone and anything, including the ranch’s free-range bull.

Had you asked me then—I wasn’t afraid. Not even as the beast lowered his head, stamped his front hooves, and kicked up dirt under his giant belly. I froze, holding tight to Sonny’s shin. Soon, the bull started toward me at a fair speed, head down with angry eyes. I’m not sure what he’d had in mind, but my friend by my side had a different idea. From behind the barrier which I was forbidden to use, Sonny reared onto his hind legs, banged his front hooves on the bars, and landed hard. Swinging his head over me, he sent a message that stopped the bull in his tracks. Not a moment too soon.

For much of the incident I felt small, but even fear was not a word I would have used to describe my emotion. NO, I was exhilarated! I learned from a young age—if you never try something new, even if it scares the life out of you, you may find yourself stuck in a state of perpetual stagnancy. You may never recognize true danger. You may end up defeated by fear. Or so I thought.

While I learned to welcome this type of fear, to embrace the feeling of complete abandon, I have stifled my own emotions to a point of ignorance. Though it was in fact quite blissful, I came very close to losing myself from the inside out.

On the day I chose to accept the fate of my temporary life in treatment, I’d first chosen to walk the sandy road to town. My boots had rubbed blisters into my heels so I was carefully calculating my barefooted steps (but still occasionally stopping to pull thorns out of my soles) when I watched my foot land in a giant paw print. Judging by the size and depth of the print, it was no doubt a mountain lion. The sight of my own footprint alongside a wild cat’s was unnerving and went on for about 100

meters. But it wasn't until the sand intersected with the paved highway when my heart began to pound. I was suddenly filled with fear and immediately chose to go back.

I decided to stick out my time there, then nine months at another center and six more in a transitional placement. But as fate would have it, I didn't really recognize why I'd had such a profound change of heart. I hadn't thought twice about my decision after that day on the nine-mile path. Today I know it was fear that drove me, but what I was afraid of wouldn't become clear until ten years later. Almost four months prior to today's date.

Over those ten years, I brought purpose to life through working with underprivileged kids, adults with disabilities, children with autism, training service dogs, and alternating between educating at a community garden and working at a ski hill. With the loving support of my family, a one in a trillion soulmate, and acceptance into the college program of my dreams, I had everything I could have ever asked for. Unfortunately, it was all eventually overshadowed by a few other things—four to be exact. Over those ten years, I also gained four counts of drinking and driving, along with a full-blown case of alcoholism. Because I managed to receive the third and fourth charges back-to-back, I was sentenced for both in the same hearing. One year of jail time for each—minus the two months I'd already done when charged.

Out of extreme fortune, an alternative was presented. If I completed a program called OWI court, the sentence would be considered served. Along with required classes, continued therapy, and a probe into life, a major requirement for graduation was sustained sobriety. After ten months on bond, which also required abstinence from mind-altering substances, I had proven to myself I could do the sober thing, so I accepted the offer without hesitation.

I will never forget that first day in OWI court. After an initial thirty days of house arrest, I attended my first hearing. As I watched person after person stand before the judge and confess the times they had drank over the past week or so, my mind started to spin and lines became blurred. Even those who had merely been caught through testing were sentenced to no more than a few hours of community service, one night in jail, or two at the very most. Immediately, the fear that had held me to the straight and narrow, the knowledge that if I drank, I'd be sent straight to an extended stay in the country, began to plummet. Though my logical brain was fully aware of it, my primitive brain—the same party where alcoholism reigns—seized its opportunity. Life as I'd known it began to shatter. I cried the entire way home on the city bus.

The next eighteen months were spent in never-ending inner turmoil. My conscience battled constantly as my alcoholism insisted on “testing the waters” and finding the line. Eventually, I accepted the fact that complete abstinence was the only way to get off of the nauseating merry-go-round I had made my life into. But by that time, I was too dizzy to stop on my own. The alcoholism was full-blown and I was at its disposal.

Any sane human would have argued that the path I had chosen was clear, that the cliff was foreseeable. And while I would admit deep down I'd always known I was walking a slippery slope, I didn't understand the true reason why until hitting bottom. When ninety days between jail and residential treatment quickly ended in another relapse, I finally came face to face with fate.

The first two weeks in jail consisted of twenty-three hours a day, alone in a cell with a mat, a sink, a toilet, and a book. For one hour I was let out to shower and make emotional phone calls—usually at fifteen dollars apiece. Quarantine. After multiple anxiety attacks, which for me have a tendency to turn into partial seizures, I was gracefully given a deck of cards and coloring book from a guard who had personal empathy. Denial of mentally accepting the next twenty months of my life was my only salvation at the time.

The day after Christmas I was led to general population. This isn't my first stay here, but for some reason, walking into the cold, windowless block instantly felt different. As I looked up the

stairs to my new room, in my new home, regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't stop my eyes from welling up. Someone immediately said, "Don't start that cry baby shit."

As the first few weeks passed, my reality began to take on a strangely familiar shape. I found myself reliving my past from ten years. Like the vast uninhabitable desert, I am surrounded by bricks that draw lines around a living space. The nights are cold and the air is dry enough to suck the water right out of your body. Though the only wildlife here is an occasional sewer bug, instead of coyotes, there are guards down every path to direct us. And every inmate here is comparable to a free-range bull. With heads down and angry eyes, we attempt to claim our territory. While we strive to maintain our freedom, the truth is, we are in the custody of a rigid system.

Aside from the level of negativity and noise that resonates in these walls (my head is pounding as I write this—undoubtedly magnified by the amounts of salted ramen seasoning I add to the bland meals), I cannot ignore one truth. I am terrified. The fear that began to consume me was only recognizable at first, but until recently I could not describe it. As the months pass and my mind becomes clearer with sobriety, the hardest part has been seeing and fully understanding my life-long underlying fear. The one that has always been my most influential, for better or for worse. A fear I believe we alcoholics and addicts identify with and inevitably bring upon ourselves until we learn to overcome our diseases: the fear of failure.

Knowing life is passing me by while I lose time terrifies me. And knowing that alcohol has the power to jeopardize every relationship and platform I have ever built for myself scares me even more. Alcoholism has blinded me for a long time, even after admitting it to myself. That is exactly what alcohol does, what it is: "cunning, baffling, powerful," as stated in the book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Defining this fear has brought light to my truth, and admitting powerlessness is, ironically, the first step to taking away alcohol's power over me.

After an extensive request to the judge, then a sincere testimonial in front of him, I have been granted the eligibility to spend the last three hundred days of my sentence on an ankle monitor. Initially, I was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. While the physical reality of a harsh jail stay does not scare me, nor did the physical realities of a harsh desert terrain, during the past thirty days since that last hearing I have come to one solid truth: the fear of failure will never leave me. However, what I know now is it's within my power to shift the fear, to blur the lines and spin my perspective. While it served me well at the end of the desert, keeping me where I needed to be at the time, today I will embrace it. Part of me is still terrified to return to civilization where freedom may be a blessing or a curse. But interestingly, without these months' experience, I might not have realized I have the values, principles, and motivation to use my fear to drive myself. As Elon Musk says, "Failure is an option here...If something is important enough, even if the odds are against you, you should still do it."

Tomorrow I go home, but not before being fitted for a G.P.S. tracking device. Though I will be a blinking dot on a map for three hundred days, I refuse to feel small. With the love of my life as my Sonny and family as instinctual coyotes, I will be in full acceptance of my fate, leaving deep tracks along my path. I am in full acceptance of fate and choose to be exhilarated by fear. This experience will be forever burnt into my memory.

Consulia

Rose Davey

In their faces I look for signs
something in the eyes
the curl of the lip like premonition
or some long standing karmic imprint.
I find a mirror
the notch in my forehead
the flatness at the bridge of my nose.
I remember, at twenty-three
he was talking
when he picked it up, just something on hand so softly
by the sink a bottle of something.
I leaned in – hard
plastic, shatterproof.
Sloe-black mural
burned to sparks, flare
dissolve and I thought of fireflies on the old farm when I was young how I wouldn't speak
a word from dusk until they ascended from the fields. He had smiled.
I understand, having been educated
on the causal nexus of our sex, the explosions of violence the stripping off of flesh, equivalent to
a flock of sparrows breaking from frozen earth as much a part of nature.
The nature of violence, death,
the stoppage of air, the loss of blood,
the broken neck,
as themes. Being lost unto nature.
These our childhood stories.
Now five women, tied in burlap bags
dream in the swamp and the police
so tired
collect the bags of women
like litter and ask other women
the alive

to be careful
the boyfriend of one victim
recalls the size of the bag
how impossibly small, this potato sack
could hold his lover
wound like a crescent moon
as in utero.

At a Frozen Pond

This afternoon I prayed.

This is new. The word is dumb in my mouth always
the prayer, like the pray-er, lingers in the cold.

I stick numb fingers into the cold earth
to stay. Tethered, this pattern of frost
a prayer, frost the lover to dust. I keep cowries

to whisper secrets into. What keeps
me here. I wait for it to drift away but it hovers
behind me somewhere above erupting cattails

a bell in my chest jingles weakly. Three times it rings
out then silence. Hearing finally that answer

I turn my attention to skein of geese overhead,
so silent and reconciled in their movement
so unique in their certainty and illusion

I recognize in them all the demands of love.

Another Day at the Office

Brad Rose

It's a law-and-order planet, so the president signed into law a parallel universe. Now everything is lined up shoulder to shoulder, even the double talk. Monday, I noticed my face is too big for my head and my hair's too long for a chainsaw. That was the hardest part. That, and when I realized I was speeding in reverse with the emergency brake on. Can a mind reader be expected to read an illiterate's mind? It's like that time my dentist pulled his own teeth, except my dentist is probably a genius of some kind. What do you say we sink that boat when we get to it? Yesterday, did you see all that stuff burning simultaneously? I would have blacked out, if I hadn't stuck my finger in the socket. That'll be the last time I'll allow my court-appointed attorney to read a synopsis of my hypnosis. Besides, you'd have thought I would have looked better since I was wearing my invisible disguise. Now, here on death row, everyone's lined up alphabetically, by date of birth. What I'd give for another day at the office.

Charred

Trying to simplify my life, so I threw out all my bills and re-financed my sweater. I may be susceptible to disinformation, but I'm not prone to conspiratorial thinking. Like any red-blooded American mammal, I'm just trying to get my money to grow. Now that the government has banned the wearing of pants, everybody remembers things differently. Thanks to the bad blood between us, nobody in this time zone has the same area code. That's probably why they tore down the old bowling alley right after those lazy pinheads went out on strike. What did they expect? Easy street? Yesterday, during the thunderstorm, I nearly fell into that old storm drain, the one near Stubby's. It wasn't my fault I wasn't paying any attention. The lightning set a couple of cows on fire, and Billy was jabbering about the invention of barbeque. I told him, in the old days, everyone just ate raw meat. He shouted, *Look out, Arnold*, but before I knew what was happening--just like that--another one went up in smoke.

Jaki Shelton Green (the first African-American Poet Laureate of North Carolina) visited La Crosse, Wisconsin (via zoom, November 5, 2020) to read from her work and to deliver the keynote address for the 4th Annual Great River Writes Literary Festival. The author of eight collections of poetry, her work has been published in over eighty national and international anthologies and in magazines such as Essence and Ms. Magazine. On Juneteenth 2020, she released her first LP, poetry album, The River Speaks of Thirst, produced by Soul City Sounds and Clearly Records. She has taught Documentary Poetry at the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, and she is the 2021 Frank B. Hanes Writer in Residence at UNC Chapel Hill. What follows is the text version of Ms. Green's keynote address, slightly edited, published with her permission.

On Literary Citizenship

A conversation with Audre Lorde in St. Croix Virgin Islands about six months before her death turned me upside down and sideways. For several days we'd run into each other at a party, a lecture, bookstore, the ocean, or restaurant...and always, she fed me questions. But this one question was unsettling and became the clear map that I needed to self-actualize as literary citizen.

"When was your epiphany that the act of writing is internal, that it pulls out your relationships with experiences that become the vehicles that you need on this journey...for going deep into the unknown landscapes of literature that is growing inside of you."

I wrote the question on the hem of my white linen dress for fear of forgetting.

That question unlocked not answers but all the necessary questions that I needed and was grappling with as a young Black southern woman mother daughter wife lover sister who dared to write poems living in New England... Who dared to show up as the only one in alien spaces in North Carolina long before many of my literary contemporaries called North Carolina *home*.

That journey was challenging but I am grateful for the blessings

from writers who nurtured me and were always open and accessible for guidance, reassurance, lifting me up, accountability, and love. Many of these writers in the 60's and 70's were community-centric, and generous of heart and intellect... Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Amos-zubolton, Amiri Baraka, Robert Hayden, Gary Johnson of the famous Blind Beggar Press Carolyn Forché, Lance Jeffers, Doris Betts, Robert Hayden and later Wanda Coleman, Gerald Barrax, Reynolds Price, Randall Kenan and Nikkey Finney... all ancestors now except for Nikkey Finney, Alice Walker, Carolyn Forché, Gary Johnson.

I remain personally guided by all of them and several more who taught me the art of taking risks, to be masterful with form, how to show up as literary citizen tackling the human condition through a variety of perspectives, how to survive and navigate this citizenship as *other*, marginalized, survivor, how to do the work of moving readers to journey inward in order to understand things, how to stretch the ideas and visions of what we understand and cultivate literary citizenship to be.

When Joseph Polisi was the President of Julliard, he wrote a book titled *The Artist as Citizen*. I'd like to quote him here for additional context: "In titling this volume *The Artist as Citizen*, I have wanted to emphasize my belief that artists of the twenty-first century must rededicate themselves to a broader professional agenda that reaches beyond what has been expected of them in an earlier time. Specifically, the twenty-first century artist will have to be an effective and active advocate for the arts in communities large and small around the globe. These artists must be not only communicative through their art, but also knowledgeable about the intricacies of their society--political, economically, socially--so that they can effectively work toward showing the power of the arts to

nations and their people who are often uninformed about the arts and view these activities with suspicion, occasional disdain, and frequently as being irrelevant.”

This quote delivers me to many questions, especially for myself as a literary citizen where much is required in my service as NC Poet Laureate. That word *required* has truly influenced and instructed how I show up as literary citizen.

Do we understand that witness is a generative act? How does *how* we witness make the world?

How are we changed by what we witness as literary citizens?

How close can we listen? How do we listen each other into being and how do we attend to the ways we make ourselves possible?

How do we develop new work that speaks to the great issues of our time? How do we work with each other in pursuit of that goal? How do we work as literary citizens to create a healthy, supportive, respectful literary community with tenets of accountability, without gatekeepers, without power-plays, without meanness, that has a mission of eradicating bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, classism, and ageism wherever it continues to thrive and threaten?

Over the past few months I've been actively engaged with a variety of regional, national, and international discussions and performances with artists and cultural leaders across arts disciplines to reflect on ideas and issues that shape our lives and challenge our times. At the center of this engagement has been the question...*are we in a golden age of storytelling?* Iconic and next generation storytellers are discussing, exemplifying and embodying the art of the story in the 21st century.

As literary citizens, whose stories are we discussing, exemplifying, and embodying? Audre Lorde once wrote, *“Without community, there is no liberation...but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”*

Many years ago, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and countless others challenged the concept of citizen author within the publishing industry. In order to understand what positions the citizen author currently, and potentially could hold, it begins with a historical understanding of their rise, including concepts of their eighteenth-century antecedents. There has been tremendous growth in the industry especially credited to social media platforms. This emphasizes and has allowed for drawing out relationships between genres, publishers, and the citizen author which provides a more full understanding of the power dynamics involved when publishers, social media, and the citizen authors mix in the current industry, political, and social climate.

How have literary citizens who came before us helped us to think about how we collect, process, report, analyze and disseminate? I think about citizen media and user-generated content as this, in the words of Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University: *“When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools that they have in their possession to inform one another.”*

We, you and I, are the people and we are audience to each other, holding the qualities of civic-mindedness and social responsibility as we continually underscore the link between our practice as writers and its relation to the political and public sphere.

Our voices are unregulated to write about and through The Haitian Earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Syrian Civil War, Ferguson unrest, unrest in our own communities, the Black Lives Matter movement, Covid-19.

I'm often reminded of a historical account I read many years ago about Haitian women who were enslaved. Apparently, Haitian women were punished, were beaten more severely and more frequently than their male counterparts. These women used their only instrument, their only force, their only weapon—they used their tongues. They understood the power of their screaming. Over

and over again in their Creole Patois, they shouted, “We are here, we are here, we are here.” They would *not* shut up. No matter how frequently they were punished, they used their voices.

When I was in Brazil, I was reminded of the story of Escrava Anastacia, an enslaved African woman who lived in the 19th Century whose owners muzzled her because she would not shut up. They masked her mouth. They shut her down. There are statues of her all over Brazil.

And there are stories of women whose tongues were cut out. The power of telling your story—the power of declaration, the power to be brave enough to stand up and say, “I am here,” and to actualize that, even when you’re enslaved—for me that has meant that even though they may have been physically enslaved and physically bound, in their spirits they were free. They knew they were free. And they knew they would only be disenfranchised, would only be the property of someone else if they shut up. I think of these stories often when I’m writing, when I’m asking myself what is required of me as a writer, as a poet. And I’m reminded of James Baldwin, who said the writer or the artist must make art about the time that they live in.

So here we are, bearing witness through our speech, our voice, our tongue.

Alice Walker validated my voice over and over again when I was a young writer reading in all white spaces and continually being asked *Why was I so angry? Didn’t I write about happy things?*

I understood at an early age that when folks don’t have a point of reference or a “from whence to enter” personal perspective then they *other, belittle, scrutinize, minimize, disenfranchise, mute, erase, and often rewrite and reinvent your story.*

Alice Walker validated my creative vision because like her vision, I too was rooted in the economic hardship, racial terrorism, and folk wisdom of African American life and particularly the culture of the rural South. In the beginning of my writing career when white male reviewers were writing trivial reductive reviews of my work I realized that there was no frame of reference in their lived experiences for an appreciation of poetry fueled by the redemptive power of social, spiritual, and political revolution played out through multidimensional kinships among women, among Black women and Black men, among humans and the natural world that I inhabited and inhabited me.

Alice Walker’s activism as literary citizen has always encouraged, directed, and requires me to stand on the side of the revolutionaries, teachers, and leaders who seek change and transformation of the world. I only need validation from the work itself and all the collective interweaving of our stories and our texts as we tell the bigger stories, the other stories, the crying, nasty, gun-still-smoking, crooked-elected-officials, twentieth-century-lynching, black-son-still bleeding-in-the-street, white-son-hiding-an-arsenal-in-the-woodshed, corporate-America’s-wife’s-head-in-the-middle-of-the-night-punching-bag-stories because these stories matter too.

These poems we write will remind us that we are criminally unpaid, but we must write anyway. These stories we write will remind us that we write for an industry that has been too long dominated by white and male gatekeepers, but we must write anyway. These novels we write will remind us to be afraid, but we must write anyway in hopes that we bring justice to the publishing industry. These essays and short stories we write will remind us of all the ones rejected, but we must write anyway so we might revel in and grow through our collective artistry, our collective craft, and all our stories.

As literary citizens what do you require of yourself? Should we as writers be concerned with how we hold traumas of collective racism as a literal blood sport? Are we required to question how we ourselves might contribute to the zombie apocalypse of consumerism?

What new revelatory literature will we create about the historical, social, and cultural forces that conspire to oppress our humanity and all of our ecosystems?

As a literary citizen, can we hear James Baldwin’s question from a long-ago time asking us all *What does it mean to be American?*

As literary citizens, are we reexamining our ancestral migrations not just to investigate our heritage, but to investigate the deep pains of historical displacement for many just like you or me regardless of who we are, where we come from, or who we belong to?

As literary citizens how are we using the literature we create to dissect wisdom, loneliness, academia, intimacy, and identity. I believe we can imagine answering these questions if they matter at all by thinking about what it means to activate our personal literary citizen literacies as practitioners, scholars, writers of action, writers of contemplation, resistance, and restoration continually asking ourselves what is the currency/the worth of your literacy citizenship?

How does your inner and outer, your private and public creative selves become more aligned to sustain life in a threatened world? How do we continue to bend history proving that the past and the current past can be best experienced and reframed through refracted light rather than under harsh glare?

We are here now in this world that is marked and spinning away from routines and repetitions of the familiar, from the boring and comfortable, to the predictable and disturbing.

But it is my hope and steadfast personal requirement to be the literary citizen taking care of all I know that must thrive. I am required as literary citizen to write and sing the daydreams out loud. I am required to bring what I see, hear, and read into the center of the page. I am required to be everything that I look for in my poetry.

Thank you.