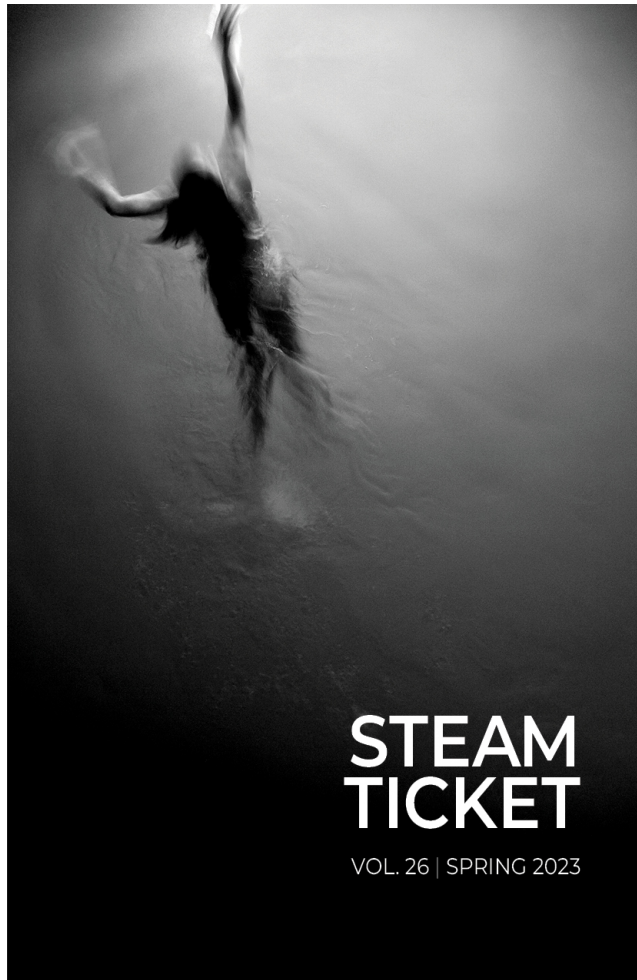
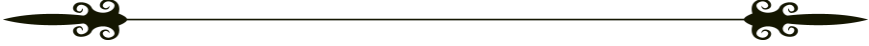


Steam Ticket
A Third Coast Review
Volume 26
Spring 2023



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Lastly, we appreciate everyone who appreciates these pages. Join our *Steam Ticket* community on Facebook and Instagram and visit us here: www.uwlax.edu/english/publications/steam-ticket/

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Dinner at Ed's

Robert Penick

On days my mother
got too drunk to parent
she would send me down
to Ed's Beer Depot
(I swear that was
the name on the sign
above the door)
where the man behind
the ancient, begrimed bar
would take my dollar bill
and pop a double
chili cheese dog
into the toaster oven.
Nine minutes later
he'd deliver a dinner
worthy of a sky full
of Michelin stars.
I remember the way
the cheese would bond
to the foil like
ligament to bone,
the way I freed
each recalcitrant morsel.
On the steps outside
I would eat and greet
the factory men going
inside to forget
whatever they could.
Every empty bottle or wisp
of cigar smoke held some
magic or meaning.
I was already imprinted
to see grace in the broken
and beauty in the torn.

Strange

Robert Penick

I cover so much ground in my sleep--
The road, the jobs, the labyrinthine
series of relationships that seem to
double back upon themselves--
yet it never registers a blip
on the fitbit clipped to my pajamas.

(Those 3 a.m. steps to the bathroom
count, too, as well as the nightly
sleepwalk to the refrigerator.)

But the mad dogs and angry store clerks
that rage through my dreams leave no trace
on my forensic radar. Not a dusty footprint
on that well-worn path.

For all the sunlight the morning bestows,
it's as if these terrors in the dark
never happen at all.

Postmodern Terror

Kenton K. Yee

Ice cream is melting while fires
spread and there is no other way

to say this. The burning trees
are cackling. People reach

for shovels. Underground is
the new getaway. Hurricanes

drown reservoirs. People watch
people lie on TV. Lie, die, mummify—

who cares? Prices climb higher.
Senior homes empty out.

Temperatures break records.
Flights delay. Funerals cancel.
War is PG. Porn is free. Reality is false.

You'd go to work but they stole
your catalytic converter.

Silence keeps you safe.
Silence kills. Shut up.

Brave Front

John Grey

It's hard to be indifferent to March winds off the ocean.
It's not just chill in that worked-up air. There's animus.
Standing in my doorway, there's never been so little house,
so much outside.
The sun sets. Weather bats me like an eyelid.
Horizon's beauty is not free. Not in winter.
My face is glassy. It cracks here and there.

March winds slip away from where the light is heading.
They are out to conquer every man who lives alone.
In a doorway, of course, I am easily found.
Wind's venom feeds off my obvious solitude.
Despite jacket and sweater, it has my skin's measure.
I could die here – of numb fingers, of blue crystal lips.

But I do not retreat into the fire-warmed rooms.
My eyes are on night-watch. My body is an afterthought.
I'm akin to the quiet now breached by March howl.
It's where seclusion wades into what's happening in the world.
An intrusion, maybe. But as necessary as breath.
Look at me. I'm in a doorway. I'm not going inside just yet.

Let a wave to a neighbor explain. Or a nod to a stranger.
A show of strength put on for passing traffic.
Life is not all frigid. It's not malice. It's showing myself.
My body may tremble and the light is fading.
But I fall in with a kind of human innocence.
It's only the weather. It's nothing we can't cope with.

I dream of summer and the hills of lawn.
I can be alone then like a bird blown off the migratory lanes.
I can feel like an outlaw in a world where people gather.
My hair grown wild. The trees on such lush green parole.
But this is winter. I use my content in other ways.
In a doorway – yes I'm here and I'm as alive as you.



**Screenshots Taken Between
3/1/22 And 3/2/22**

Ann Pedone

I dreamed of it again last night
Nipple-nipple-NIPPLE-wet

Jesus. I guess it's true
Air France is the only three-dimensional airline

Everything I am in bed is because Jack Kennedy never got a second term

DEfine THE FOLLOWING:

styrofoam
oil drums
men who have way too many children

Didn't I specifically say to bring the big tampons?

**NO, MY DEAR, I CAN'T POSSIBLY. CNN
HAS NO GENITALS**

If we really are post-COVID
why is your wife STILL shaking like that?

It's a hole, yes but don't ask
me how it got there

Fuck Lacan. French literary theory never solved a God damn
thing. Just jack off into it just a little bit and it will start working

Dead Birds Everywhere

Lisa Licht

Some mornings as early as 4:30, I have a daydream. As I lay awake, I hear the faint chatter of birds in the gray-washed dawn. Their noise, once annoying, comforts me, akin to my husband's breathing or the far-off train whistle I've heard for decades. Because it means there aren't dead birds everywhere. These days, looking out my bedroom window at the lush green spotted with robins and squirrels, I envision the ground littered with hundreds of feathered bodies--small and iridescent, sleek and dark, black like crows. All are still. And just as wrong is the imagined, deafening silence, the lack of every chirp and tweet, incessant song and answer, even the woodpecker's grating drill. Living life through panes of glass or from a distance on my deck, I've started searching for birds, waiting for them to land, and hearing the voices that I never understood. Caged, I crave their freedom, feeding their young and perching side by side on the telephone wire. I will my daydream to leave. Like a movie flashback, it intrudes on the mildest day as I stand with my dog in the yard. It will be a long time before I stop watching and listening, checking that birds stay in the sky, and taking the pulse of the world.

How to Write Great Literature in Five Simple Steps

Zack Fox Loehle

Over the course of my education, I have come to understand a number of guidelines for writing a Very Serious Story, one that will be taken Seriously and which will designate the author as sensitive to the unique capabilities of human nature. For the benefit of other writers, I have compiled them here:

Rule 1: Your main character must be sad. This is imperative. Why on God's green earth would anyone ever want to read a story about someone who is not sad?

Addendum to Rule 1: If there is a painter, writer, dancer, or any other artistic character in your story, they must be deeply depressed. The laws of psychology dictate that all artists are invariably tormented with a variety of mental and emotional defects; your literature should reflect this. It's also best if they do nothing to address their depression, as that makes your story more Serious.

Rule 2: If your story has a sex scene, nobody can enjoy the sex—definitely not the characters, and most assuredly not the reader. Ideally, there will be something odd about the sex, such as comparing a woman's left leg to a garden trowel or a man's earlobe to a bowl of pudding. You can also give us a vivid and unpleasant detail about the experience such as, "Her breath smelled like stale linguini." That indicates that you take sex Seriously and also know that sex is never a happy experience, but only something that offers an opportunity to debate our existential ennui.

Rule 3: Nobody changes in real life, so don't let your characters go through any of the following:

- Growth
- Epiphanies
- Maturation

If you let your characters go through any of these, your story is not Serious.

Addendum to Rule 3: If there are any non-human aspects to your story (mountains, oceans, endangered species) or any impressive

historic structures (a Mayan temple, Stonehenge, the pyramids), your story must remark upon the external thing and then show us how your characters look at it and do not change. (If they do change, that is very embarrassing for you.)

Rule 4: Make non-sexual things both sexual and incongruously described. For example, “After pissing, he waggled his cock like a bee waggles its luscious abdomen.” Why would he do this? Who knows! It’s important that you include these details so that people understand how Seriously you take this whole writing business.

Addendum to Rule 4: It’s also a good idea to use a curse-word whenever possible, to show how Serious you are being. If I’d referred to his “phallus” in the scene above, or simply mentioned that he went to the restroom and left it at that, I would not be demonstrating my knowledge of words that are generally considered inappropriate—knowledge that is of course essential to write a Very Serious Story.

Rule 5: This is perhaps the most important rule. At some point in your Very Serious Story, a couple should be in bed together. One of them reaches out to hold the other, who turns away. If you don’t include this scene in your Serious Story, then it is not Serious at all, but a mere clownish farce.

Now that you have read the rules, I aim to put them into practice. Examine the following one-paragraph story:

Doug is a depressed artist. He is in bed with his girlfriend, Tammy. Outside, somebody shoots an endangered parrot. Doug reaches out to hug Tammy, but she turns away. “I am quite sad,” Doug says. Tammy starts to have sex with him. *I am having sex, but I am still sad*, Doug thinks. At that moment, Tammy’s terrible dog begins shitting on the carpet. “So stinky!” says Doug, who then ejaculates.

As you can see, this is a Very Serious Story which I should expect to be nominated for any number of awards. Doug is unhappy, he and Tammy have strange sex, and most importantly, you are left wondering why you read it to begin with. The death of the

endangered parrot is a nice touch, as it reflects the death of love, the rebirth of love, or perhaps something else entirely.

As a final note, I should address how you can respond when somebody asks what your story is about. Remember that you are always dealing with positionality in a context. For example, the story above examines a romantic positionality statement in the environmental context. When you discuss your own stories, you can use similar language. If somebody asks you again, simply say, "That question is illegal," and make them leave.

Happy writing!

Cold

Christina E. Petrides

Mentally, I'm gelatin.
Germs have reduced my body
to a semi-conscious amoeba.
I feel like I'm dog-paddling
through tepid, viscous fluid.
A tight band twists
between my eardrums,
muting their beat,
and my tongue, too, is mostly inert—
the only things I can taste are salt,
apathy, and a little sweetness.
On such occasions, I thank God
for decongestants, sick days, and bed.

Cold Coffee

Paul Bluestein

The summer sun wakes me early
though I have reason to continue sleeping
for hours, for days,
perhaps forever.
The silent kitchen, like my unmade bed,
is as I left it last night,
and the night before that
and the night before that.
I turn on the radio for company
and pour two cups of coffee,
like I did for more than forty years.
I'll drink mine watching backyard birds
fight over sunflower seeds
until they scatter under the shadow of a circling hawk.
The other cup will stand untouched,
getting cold and losing its taste
until there is nothing to do
but pour it into the drain.



“I need some passport photos please,” Albert said.

The woman behind the counter stared at him, her initial frown dissolving into concern as it slowly dawned on her he wasn’t joking.

“I’m going away on a long trip, you see.”

“Oh, Dearie,” the woman said, reaching over the chipped Formica to stroke his mangled old arthritic hands. “That’s wonderful, and I’d love to help, I really would, but...well, this is a Dry Cleaners, pet.”

Albert squinted at her, at the name tag on her blouse: Margot-Dean. Lately people had acquired the habit of talking nonsense to him, treating him as if he were a naive little boy; this Margot-Dean was just another in an ever increasing line.

“Is there anyone I can call for you?” Margot-Dean asked, opening the flap in the counter, all the better to tease him up close.

“I’m going on a trip and I need some photos taken,” Albert insisted, trying to keep the anger from his voice. He had been losing his temper a lot recently but, really, was it any wonder?

Margot-Dean chewed nervously on her bottom lip. “But like I said, sweetheart, this is a dry cleaners.”

Albert looked around him, though the fluorescents hurt his eyes – through the teary blur he could make out an array of clothing, all shrouded in polythene and hanging on rails. An undertone of stringent chemicals scraped kittenishly past the thicket of hairs in his nose – perhaps that was what had drawn him in here in the first place? That biting, synthetic waft conjured up greasy memories which, although maddeningly elusive, made him tingle nonetheless.

If only he could remember—things had started to get so impossibly jumbled—but his trip would surely straighten everything out once and for all. Once he reached his destination everything would become crystal clear once more.

“I’m going on a...” A bell tinkled somewhere but Albert couldn’t place it; he felt a chilly draught as the door opened behind him.

“*There* you are, Dad!”

Margot-Dean's face beamed with relief at the sound of this voice—here was one more troublesome stain about to be removed.

Albert felt a hand on his shoulder, turning him round, presenting him with yet another worried expression (everyone looked so worried nowadays), this one belonging to a young woman who looked both startlingly familiar and almost irredeemably hateful. She had long hair and an even longer nose; she resembled nothing so much as an Afghan hound.

“Who are you?” he demanded, brushing her hand away as if her touch might burn through his thick tweed coat.

“It's *me*, Dad. Bethany.” There were tears in the young woman's eyes. “Your daughter.”

Daughter? What a ridiculous notion, Albert thought; why, I'm barely out of school and never even thought about marriage; plenty of time for all that carry on later.

“He was after some passport photos,” Margot-Dean stage whispered. “Said he was going on some trip, bless him.”

“I'm so, so sorry,” Bethany whispered back. Her tender eyes spoke of hidden suffering.

They were about to do that thing, Albert realized, that thing where they talked about him as if he wasn't there. Truth was, he thought, he could never exactly be sure *where* he was; time didn't seem as linear anymore.

“I need my photos,” he insisted. Surely there were still some people left with enough common decency to help him?

“He gets very confused,” Bethany told Margot-Dean—she mouthed the word “dementia” and then smiled sweetly over at Albert, as if that smile were some sort of anti-venom that would draw the sting from her silent insult. “I'm afraid he's been going on a lot of little trips lately, mostly to the past.”

Margot-Dean nodded sympathetically, making a metronome of pitiful clicks in the back of her throat.

“My mum died a few months ago,” Bethany carried on, “and since then, well...he's just slipped downhill very quickly. I'm scared that soon we'll have no option but to put him in a Home.”

Home?

In the darkroom of Albert's mind, where all his memories were

processed and, of late, badly developed, a faded snapshot took on a sudden clarity. He watched it internally, fascinated at the gradual sharpening of the scene it depicted and the feelings, so long forgotten, it aroused in him.

“The Holt,” he said, dribbling in his excitement; “The Holt!” He tugged on Bethany’s coat sleeve. “That’s where I’m going on my trip.”

“Well, I can bring you there right now, Dad,” she told him, all mock enthusiasm, “and, best of all, you don’t need a passport to get there.”

“The Holt,” Albert repeated; he could never be entirely sure people understood him nowadays.

“That’s the name he always called the woodland behind his house,” Bethany told Margot-Dean. “He used to play there when he was a wee boy. It’s where he used to court my mum and,” her voice gave way to a sob filled rasp, “it’s where we scattered her ashes.”

“Aw, he just wants to be with her,” Margot-Dean put her hand to her chest once more. “Heartbreaking, isn’t it? Still, I suppose we all have it ahead of us, don’t we?”

“Yes,” Bethany sighed. “His brother’s ashes, my Uncle Tommy’s, are scattered there too. We even buried his little terrier, Smudge, under a rowan tree there. It’s a sad place but he seems to like it. I guess it’s where all his memories are, where all his loved ones...”

She trailed off as the tears kicked in, and Margot-Dean hugged her to staunch the flow. Albert banged his fists on the counter impatiently – he wanted to go to the Holt; he *needed* to go now. If he didn’t need a passport, and if this girl (who looked suspiciously familiar) could take him, then why was she dallying?

And what was with all the bawling? Everyone seemed to burst into tears around him lately.

“I’m going on a trip to the Holt,” he insisted loudly, hoping to jog their memory. “I need to be with them again.”

“You look after yourself, Love,” Margot-Dean called after them as Bethany steered him by the elbow out through the door.

Albert didn’t know if she was speaking to him or the scrunched up and faded girl who claimed she was his daughter. He was

becoming slightly less visible every day. He found that people rarely spoke to him directly now; he found he didn't care.

The Bethany girl led him by the arm across a busy road – was it Market day? A festival perhaps? Where had all this traffic sprung from? He had never seen such a tangle or heard such a rumpus! The blaring of horns, the revving of engines, disconcerted him. He felt so small, imminently crushable, weaving between the stalled grins of their gleaming grills.

Everyone was shouting though he couldn't make out what they were saying, or if they were even speaking English. His mind was filling up like a colostomy bag. He wanted to cry; he felt lost in a hectic, unfriendly world.

“Don't worry, Daddy,” Bethany said, squeezing his hand. “You stick close to me and I'll soon have you home.”

“Holt?” he said, and she squeezed his hand harder.

With every step Albert grew more disorientated. He recognized none of the old landmarks, the trees and the hedgerows that acted as beacons on his journey home. This woman, this impostor in her ill-fitting daughter mask, was taking him the wrong way. She was privy to his secrets and was trying to lure him away from his loved ones.

Mummy had always warned him about going off with strangers. He remembered how the other mothers would whisper behind his back: “*Why, I wouldn't give a pearl button for that child!*” He hugged the nearest lamppost and dug his heels in.

“Please, dad,” the Bethany thing pleaded, “not today, not now. Just come home and I'll get you all tucked up, make some soup, eh?”

“I'll call for the police,” Albert warned her: “Stranger danger! Stranger danger!”

A few passersby flashed their eyes upon him, a mixture of embarrassment and cruel amusement; not a promising recipe for aid.

“Please, Dad, I'll bring the kids round after school. You love seeing the kids, remember?”

“I don't remember...I *dis*member?”

Albert stared up the street – where were all the kids? He recalled his mum always asking that of his dad. This road used to be filled with their squeaks and squawks, their bikes and balls, their raucous laughter.

“Children?”

She smiled at him, her eyes so watery they looked like they might just seep down her pale cheeks. “Your grandkids—you always seem like your old self when those two little terrors are at your knee.”

Albert loosened his grip from the post (who were those hands, so ropey and corded with veins?). A splash of urine ran down his leg, and though his shame was as warm as its trickle he was confident his baggy pants would hide it. He was a big boy now, Mummy said so, but even big boys had little accidents.

He was so confused – the gallery in his mind was flicking through images so quickly he had trouble keeping up.

“That’s right, Daddy,” Bethany said, “come with me and everything will be okay.” She attempted a laugh that sounded more like a sob. “Honestly, we’re going to have to put a tiny bell on you the way you keep wandering off. A little bell and a collar.”

“Smudge?” Albert perked up – a snapshot of his darling dog suddenly crystalline before him, bringing with it the pressing urgency he had inexplicably forgotten. “The Holt?”

“Yes, Daddy, just as soon as we get you home and changed.”

Albert put his best foot forward (*hold your head up high, son, and ignore their taunts*), striding ahead so quickly that the girl (Bethany?) almost lost a nail trying to hang onto him.

And as he walked the changes began. The superimposed images that clogged the faded photos of his memory drifted away like so much mist – in the darkroom of his mind the past began to develop with rapid gusto, pushing to the surface with a determined and startling clarity that made his heart soar.

He patted the daughter thing’s hand and her grateful smile fuelled his own.

The horrible, squat concrete blocks with the harshly lit windows and signs blinked from view, replaced now with old Mr. Watson’s shop (*jawbreakers, Fizzzy Lizzies, sherbet bombs!*); there was the old damp field where the monkey trees grew – if he squinted he could still see the tyre swing Mucker Johnson had rigged up at the start of the school holidays. All the gaudy storefronts were gone; now there was just the crumbling brick that lined McKee’s shambles – its top lined with broken glass to prevent kids from climbing up, daring

each other to watch the pigs being slaughtered.

You didn't have to see them though, Albert thought with a shudder, you could hear their death throes all over town, every five minutes on the dot.

The road itself, bloated three lanes wide and choked with massive mechanical terrors, returned to its single lane origins. There were only a handful of people in town rich enough to own a car. Mummy said they got their money through wickedness and that, in the end, all they'd purchased was a taxi straight to Hell.

The air was so clean, the sun so bright; it was a perfect day to visit the Holt.

"Hurry up," he urged Bethany (or was she Mummy?), "they'll all be waiting."

"We could get the bus, Dad. There will be one any minute."

"No," he spun around to face her, "no, you can't make me! I won't do it!"

He always walked home, even in the rain and snow, even when the wind left teethmarks on his cheeks – anything to avoid the brutal teasing of his classmates, the spiteful snickering of the girls who always sat at the front of the bus, the kick in the gasworks when he tried to get off. He had to pass by them, holding his breath so he would not moan aloud, and every insult they cast sank a hook in his sorry heart. Still, he had learned over the years that those who laughed easiest cried hardest.

"Don't get upset, Dad, it was just an idea. It's a lovely day for a walk and it won't take us long at any rate."

Albert scanned the road ahead for any sign of the school bus (sometimes he had to duck into a doorway; they spat through the windows as they roared by) but the coast was clear.

The Bethany girl patted his hand. "Let's go then – the sooner we set off, the sooner we'll get there."

Albert allowed her to lead him and, before he could so much as click his heels three times, he was home again. He stood in his bedroom, so comfortingly familiar, looking down at the trees on the edge of his back garden, the border of his beloved Holt. The Bethany creature was toweling down his legs (Had she removed his trousers? Had he been wearing any?) and crying.

“Oh, Dad,” she said, her voice all singsong as she tried to turn it into a joke, “we’re gonna have to look into getting someone in here full time to care for you.”

Albert wasn’t listening to her, he’d had his fill of her; her yammering was drowning out the sweet voices drifting up from the tree-line and through the open window.

“Shhh! Can’t you hear them?”

“Hear who, Daddy?”

Albert smiled and pointed down to the woods: “*Them.*”

Bethany took the towel from his knees and buried her face in it. “I need to go to them.”

She led him down, washed and shaved and dressed in his best suit. Even in the choking fog of his mind, Albert could appreciate the gesture. It felt like a proper occasion, a ceremonial outing, after all.

“Mum would want you to look your best,” the Bethany thing said. Her eyes were like stab wounds and Albert struggled to look away; the more she wept, the more familiar to him she became.

He stopped on the lawn, breathing deeply of the intoxicating scent of sunshine and pine – and underneath, more delicious still, a faint waft, a thin memory, of harsh chemicals; the nose-scraping kind; the kind that had lured him into the Dry Cleaners that morning (that week? that year?).

Albert felt that if he could only fill his lungs with that aroma he would be able to blow away the fog and the whole loud, confusing world with it too. The physical world was slipping: It was monoamine pathways that he travelled now, at the end of which lay thuggery, buggery, and all manner of skulduggery.

His pace quickened, the mottled face girl behind calling out, “Watch your step, Daddy!” in her mournful, gull-like voice. He paid no heed to her, she was but the echo of a memory now; he was too close to contain himself. As the trees swallowed him, his confusion passed. The closer he got to the stream, to the heart of the Holt, the faded pictures in his mind grew ever clearer and the present world drifted away in inconsequential wisps.

There was a hole in the far bank between the willow roots that seemed to mirror the one in his heart. He stood by the water’s edge with the girl gabbling away behind him; all Albert could hear was his

mother's querulous voice, "*Where are all the children?*"

She would wring her hands over the newspaper, the radio, the boxy television set – "*Where are they?*" – as if demanding answers for their disappearance from the calm, clueless reporters. She would tell him it wasn't safe, that on no account was he to stray outside, not until those responsible were found; but they never were.

Albert did as he was told, visiting the Holt only in the daylight hours until the fear passed and the children were forgotten – a collective dementia that allowed the town to keep on breathing.

Where are all the children?

Why here they are, Mama!

Albert grinned, thinking of all the ones he had killed and buried here right beneath his feet. He found their absence good company. He had killed them slowly, timing their screams with the ones that emanated every five minutes from McKee's Shambles. It was so good to be back among them. The trip, so long planned, had been more than worthwhile.

The graves, overgrown and merged into the wild scenery, now appeared fresh and newly dug; he could almost smell the astringent chemicals he'd poured over their silent bodies to break them down.

Why, there was Rachel and Hanna's plot – not so gossipy now my girls! Not so quick to fling insults around the bus!

There was Thomas and Mark and Jeffrey and so, so many more. There was Tully Eye Johnny, buried without arms. There was wee gullible Davey Shore – "You won't feel any pain," Albert had told him, "because I'm gonna behead you first." But he'd lied; he'd hacked and *backed*. Oh, he had reaped a melancholy harvest here. The lamb had become the butcher.

The instantaneous presence of them (more real now than the dissolving image of the girl by his side) brought tears of undiluted joy to his eyes. The Bethany thing started crying too.

"Oh, Dad, you must miss them so much," she said, linking his arm in her ghostly embrace. "I'm glad you have this special place to be with –"

"The ones I love," Albert finished for her.

He had never felt so young, so alive.

Poet's Mass at Waffle House

Mike Wilson

I pour beauty's batter from a pitcher
to the griddle page of pancake poems
Bubbling words squeak and burst, of size
and in order decreed by the king

waking truth from labyrinthian sleep
breaking hope's inconsolable fast
manifesting trumpets, cymbals clashing
heart on horseback, flag in cerulean skies!

God, cook a miracle before my eyes –
blueberry flapjack grace for everyone!
Edges brown, the body solidifies –
flip near the end, a little more, it's done:

manna that expands but is unleavened
cornucopian wafer heaven-baked

I think about this story a lot. It resides as a memory of shame and ignorance in the back of my mind, points its finger at my youth, at my parents' willful blindness. My parents chose to see nothing so much of the time. Blank stares and blank pages, wiping the board clean, always having the excuse of forgetting. "Really? Did that happen? I have no memory of that." Got them out of a lot of Iran Contra scandals.

I was twelve, preparing for my Bat Mitzvah. My Hebrew school teacher was Ruthie. I loved her, thought she was the most wonderful unicorn. She was small, pale, with strawberry hair in a kind of bowl cut. She was patient, spoke softly, explained well. She came to my house to tutor me on my Torah portion.

This memory was from our first session. I was so excited to see her, welcome her into our living room with the burnt orange carpet, low ceilings, big front windows, plants exhaling all around. I made things nice for her; tidied, put my notebooks in a neat pile, lined up pens and pencils. Water for me. Water for her. I danced in the hall by the front door, waiting.

When the doorbell rang, I ran to answer it. Well, really I hopped, because I had been standing right there, spring-loaded. Through the hobbit window in the front door, I saw her standing on the front step, waiting for me to open. She wore a baseball cap, sunglasses. Her head was turned away.

When I opened the door, I was noodles of expectant joy. Springing flowers from my hand to meet her smile. But she took her sunglasses off, and she wasn't there. One eye purple, her cheek, too, lip scabbed, distorted, top front tooth chipped. I still see that so clearly, her front tooth, chipped on an angle.

My stomach slid down the elevator to the basement. Clouds entered. She came in. My parents were there. Asked her what had happened. She told a story. A buffalo turd of a story. About a mirror, a large mirror, falling off a moving truck, toward her daughter. Ruthie tried to deflect it, protect her own, and the mirror sang back, announced itself, threw its weight on her, bashed her face. That mirror had fists.

My parents made sympathetic noises, clucks and gasps. Then they left the room, and Ruthie and I had our session. She was a wisp of a frame of Ruthie in the room. We didn't talk or smile, didn't celebrate her strawberry bowl-cut. We finished. She left. My parents and I let her go.

My father berated Ruthie in her absence, said how clumsy she was. Ruthie the strawberry, mirror-fighter, asking-for-it. How dumb she must be, to fight a falling mirror. The shame of showing us her face, looking like that, she should have spared us the spectre of it, the lurid gore of her distorted, beaten face.

How we failed her. I imagine her, sitting in her car before the session, wearing her baseball cap and sunglasses, hiding herself from the neighbors' loose eyeballs. Imagine her coming up our walkway, afraid, ashamed, praying, maybe, maybe for salvation. She could have cancelled the session, that's what someone would do if they truly didn't want to be seen. But she came. She took off her hat, she took off her sunglasses, she told her gibberish nonsense of a story.

Walking into a door, or a cupboard, having already been told in a thousand different ways by hundreds of thousands, no, let's call a spade a spade, by millions of women before her. Instead, she conjured a mirror, rushing toward her daughter, and she laid it at our feet.

She walked into our home, knowing that inside it lived a well-respected physician and a well-educated teacher. Maybe she hoped that the mirror-spectacle she had invented would be taken from her hands, her bruises iced, and she would be allowed to stay. I wonder if she imagined we might save her. Tell her we saw, we knew, then reach through the fake mirror, pull out her husband and shatter him, bloody fists and all. Take her in our arms. Protect her.

But we didn't. We let her go. We showed her the door and closed it. My father scoffed at her brainless combat with an inanimate object. He did what men did. Do. Said it was her fault. I was twelve. Sometimes, I think I get a pass. Sometimes I think I should have known. My parents certainly should have. They weren't stupid.

But they drew the blind card, the blank card, the three-monkey, favorite card. They kept their heads surrounded in a fog of a black tunnel, whistling wind. Nothing to see here.

Years later I asked my mom about it. Did she really not know what had happened to Ruthie? My mother had no memory of that visit, Senator. No memory of Ruthie's beaten face, a phantom, menacing mirror, or the flesh and bone, husband standing behind it, fists at the ready.

I get tired thinking about all the ways my parents failed. The willful ignorance, the blindness, the empty spaces that seemed no more than a feather, but weighed more than lead, balanced in my arms, pegging me deeper and deeper into the ground.

My mother was a hummingbird of denial, wings flashing, twittering. If she moved fast enough, nothing could ever stick. "What? What?" Her high-pitched, breathy refrain. As long as everything looked good from the outside, nothing bad ever needed to land.

Not a pesky, falling mirror in sight.



Diamondback

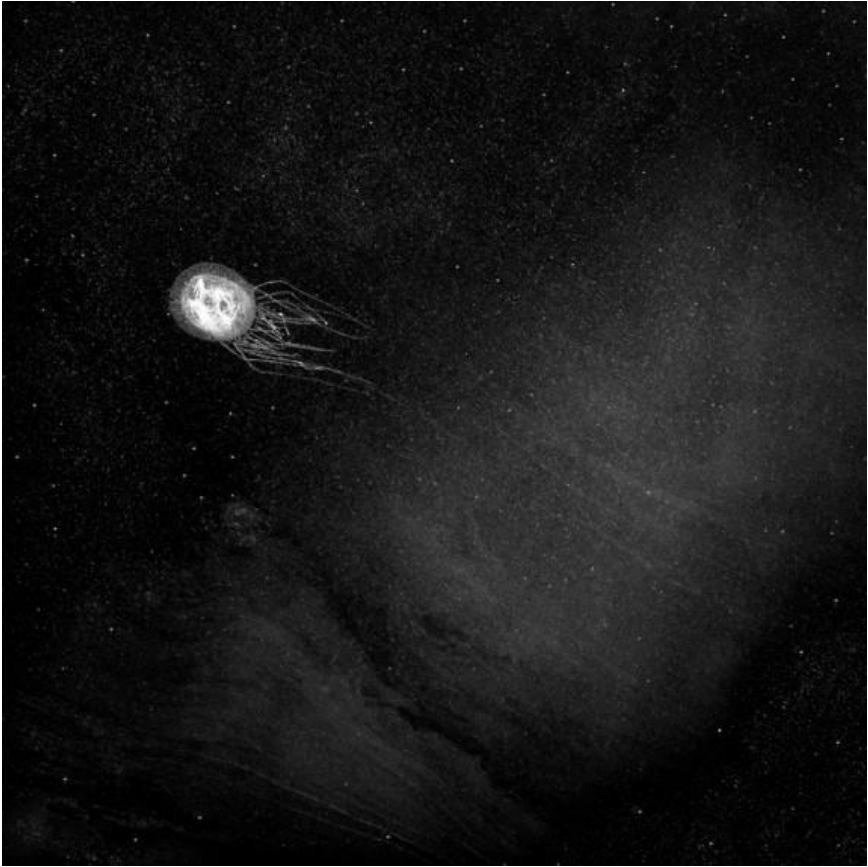
Brad Rose

I'm organizing my thoughts, those cuddly love snakes. I was going to hire a tutor, but I'd only be cheating myself. My doctor says that after three weeks of bedrest and the right medication, I won't be laughing at myself anymore, I'll be laughing with myself—although it may become harder for me to distinguish stalactites from stalagmites. Yesterday, I woke up at the crack of noon, and before I could stumble into the kitchen to begin my daily accidents, I realized that I've been working so hard on my plausible deniability, that I've begun dancing to my circadian rhythm. Bad habits are heard to break. Good habits are hard to keep. Each time a Diamondback sheds its skin, it gains a rattle. Hope I'm not reading too much into that.

Run Aground

Cole Thompson





I dislike this light of late

William Waters

I dislike this light of late
how its harshness makes me hesitate--
so that I start to stop, and stop to start
trying each and every part
searching for some kind of sense
other than mere self-defense.
They say it's love that I need,
but how can soil make a seed;
and who would seek to see the night
by turning on another light?
No, I know: what's here is here
--there's no reason to despair;
Every darkness is a light;
every blindness some kind of sight.

That Was You; Wasn't It?

Bart Edelman

That was you; wasn't it?
Junior high school juvenile delinquent,
Chain smoking a pack of Kools—
Your leather collar flipped up.
You had no trouble, whatsoever,
Giving the principal the bird,
Before he called your parents,
Who didn't give a rat's ass
If you were suspended or not.
Just don't get caught, the old man sighed,
Pouring another pint of stout
To drink your poor mother away.
That was you; wasn't it?
Taking one step forward and two back,
Leaving the house at 16
To move halfway across the country,
Where no one knew your name
Or the dreaded family curse
You swore you could not escape.
When the Navy wouldn't enlist you,
The Army said, Step right up, Son.
And you kept your nose fairly clean
Until your temper got the best of you.
Dishonorable discharge, the document read.
That was you; wasn't it?
Betting your savings on a longshot
Whose maiden had not been broken,
Returning home, penniless, years later,
Thinking you were owed something, at least,
Despite your parents' untimely demise.
The bank was simply an afterthought,
If all else came up empty.
And the gun's discharge was an accident—
The teller should have done as told.
But you did make the front-page news.
That was you; wasn't it?

The Violence to Women Survey

Susan Johnson

Take the Violence to Women Survey.

Check all that apply.

There's kicking, punching, knifing,
puncturing, shoving, smacking,
pulling by the hair, throwing acid
in the face, dropping from high places.

Frequently; Somewhat frequently.

There's burning, bruising, drowning,
lighting of clothes on fire,
made to sleep in animal pens.

Dismembering. Disfiguring.

Of course, rape.

Often; Somewhat often.

There's starving, choking, strangulation,
beating with a hammer, a rod,
bludgeoning with a poker,
shoving into fireplaces,
cutting with gardening sheers,
shooting, whipping, thrashing,
attacking with a hatchet, an axe.

Rarely; Somewhat rarely.

And let's not forget psychological/
social violence. There's isolation,
theft, lying, name calling,
slurring, ignoring, snubbing, shunning,
constantly shouting at, deceiving,
manipulating, coercing, humiliating,
shaming, blaming, made to feel guilty,
denied the right to work,
to lead, to act, to vote,
kept under control.

All the time; somewhat all the time.

My Holiday Gift from Someone

Niles Reddick

I went shopping at lunch the week before Christmas. I'd hoped to find a gift to me from someone—my wife, my son, or my daughter—because they'd long since stopped attempting to please me at Christmas, and since I wasn't the standard sizes anymore, and I hated returning gifts more than buying them. I'd bought my own gifts from them for years. My feet had spread, my behind sagged, my abdomen swelled from overeating or taking longer to process everything, and other parts didn't work the way they once had.

I saw stacks of V-neck sweater vests on a shelf, buy one, get one free. Seemed like a good deal, though I knew it wasn't. Probably cost a dollar to make—fifty cents to the employee in China and fifty cents for the cloth—and the mark-up was twenty-four dollars. Giving one away with the purchase of one was still providing a twelve-dollar profit.

I pulled one of the larges from the stack, careful not to mess up the other neatly folded ones and had a tough time getting my arms high enough to slip it over my head because of my rotator cuffs that aren't rotating the way they used to. The sweater hugged my abdomen tighter than a young wife welcoming her military husband home for the holidays. I looked in the mirror and felt uncomfortable. Sucking in my gut made my face bulge and turn even redder than the blood pressure normally made it.

A sales lady came out of nowhere. "Do you need some assistance?"

"I'm just looking but thank you."

I pulled the sweater vest off, neatly folded it, and looked for an extra-large in the stack. I went through the same routine, and it seemed to be a better fit and give me more room. In fact, there was enough material around the bottom that it gave me a bit of a fold. The darker colors, too, seemed to make me look thinner. My skin normally looked droopy, but I imagined folks at work or family saying, "You've lost a little weight?"

Well, I guessed if I got one free, my wife could give me one, and my daughter could give me the other. I'd bought shoelaces and

my son could give me those. I was set and all for less than thirty dollars. The family had cost me over a thousand a piece that, come the 26th, would have cost me three hundred a piece with everything on sale, but they'd never consider waiting.

A Futile Occupation

Bray McDonald

What moves in depths beyond our conscious awareness?
What lies beyond the scope of all we can imagine?
Who can comprehend the occasion of chance?

Far away questions echo through fathoms of fluid time.
Inexpressible experiences bordering the absurd.
Impossibilities that debilitate.

A small glimpse at clarity
like an exposed entrance to a secret cave
where shadows in the dark give depth to infinity.

Considering the complex composition of the Cosmos.
Trying to detect the motion of light with a unique eye.
Trying to replace the primitive ambiguity with a relative reality.

Beseeching the void. (An empty chapel.)
Barking at the bars. (A futile occupation.)
Silence heavier than the noun provided.

Almost everything abolishes the equivalent.
There is no central idea or secondary theme except those
that individuals flounder in while dividing their defense of counter-points.

There is no untroubling wisdom.
All knowledge is exploited.
History is improvised and literature is the language of ghosts.

The future idles and patiently waits each individual move.
Its territory flooded with wants and wishes by those aware
that beyond its realm mortality encounters oblivion.

To realize and accept that each individual is a conglomerate of elements
at odds with other elements and all a finite part of a fragmented whole.
Marvelous bone structures that yield to pressure under gravity's law.

There is a way though narrow through a hole in everything imperfect.
The anonymity of a snowflake exposed.
The metallic aroma of rain before it falls.

The insufficient thought patterns of the human mind
surveying and measuring the substantial while dealing
with the daunting possibilities of each theory.

Sometimes it seems the universe was created for despair.
Everything vulnerable to an ultimatum.
A world without an edge reeling from an exploding misremembrance.

The constant sowing and reaping of things that wish to stay.
Everything's destiny is lamentable; there is no avoiding that final deep sleep.
Daily we vainly console the damned.

The Language of Love

Howard Kuenning

What words do I use with you, my wife of nearly thirty years?

I say, "I love you," and you say, "I love you, too."

But, I mean,

"No. I really love you" in a way that goes far beyond simple words,
And I know that you know this, and yet my words are not enough,
And I don't know how to fill your ear in a way that fills your heart
The way mine is full, the memories that try to rise to my lips when

I tell you that I love you.

So I tell you that I remember our first kiss,

And you smile knowingly and say I am always making up stories,

As if I did not remember that kiss, and
you are probably right.

But, I do remember that twilight,

On the quay beside the grand river

Where we had just met for the first time,

On the boat where you asked me to buy you a beer,

And we danced, another story

You always say I didn't get quite right.

But, this is right.

I remember looking down at your face,

Framed by that fantastic hair you wore,

Quietly waiting, and I thought,

"She wants me to kiss her,"

And I didn't, and I said

Something about getting in touch, soon,

And I did that, and then, sometime later,

We did kiss, and

I fell into that life I saw there

In your quiet and lovely face,

In the falling light,

The kiss I did not give.

But, I could have and

It might have been different.

But, here we are, and still

I will tell you that I love you, and

You will say back, "I love you, too."



Remission Begins

Cathy Allman

*Not here. Here the body creates a membrane
of such leathery resilience that it may
keep all the wounds we have collected.*

--Kwame Dawes, "Advent"

My brother lifts his textured cotton shirt to show me the long scar on his belly from where they cut all the cancer out.

"That scar looks like Dad's," I say. Since infancy, our father had a scarred stomach from a hernia operation.

"Don't say that," my brother scolds in a voice with the same tenor of our dead father's rage.

For all of his eighty-four years, as our father's body expanded, so did the scar. The cut might have faded, but the indentation never leveled, a line on the map of his body that wouldn't disappear.

Until today, I hadn't seen how deep my brother's anger toward our father runs—lament and bitterness leak like the vinegar and gall fed to the thirsty Christ on the cross.

I've been furious that my brother left me alone to watch our father die. I understood why our mother wouldn't watch.

Our father's ashes wait on our mother's cabinet to be buried with her when her time comes. Although not yet buried, in my mind, my father's presence is a loving spirit.

I have trouble detesting dead people, no matter what wounds they inflicted on me in life. Without their breath, they have no words. As their bodies decompose, so does my memory.

Now, having seen my brother's fresh scar, whether it remains visible for the rest of his years or not, I can imagine the dark, irregular, sick tissue that the surgeons removed.

My brother and I are so different, it stuns me that we grew up in the same house. But he is alive, and I need to hold him and let him go.

The Teachings of Pyrrho and Others

Noel Sloboda

They said all you need is love
and furthermore love
one day would find me.
Shortly thereafter it did.
But when I flipped love over
and read the nutritional label
I found it only had 18%
of daily vitamins and minerals
I needed to remain healthy.
When I sought more love—
solely for nutritional purposes—
my first love didn't appreciate it and now I don't have any love
and I definitely don't get enough daily vitamins and minerals.
They said chase dreams.
But the only one I could catch
was a fat, slow fantasy
about a steady job,
a hand-me-down from Dad.
Like some of the ties he left me,
it didn't go with any of my outfits and made me look three decades
older. While I don't know where
all the dreams that got away went I remember the best one
featured a sexy werewolf
with bright fangs and crimson fur and I wonder if she sometimes
thinks of me when serenading the moon.
They said laughter is the best medicine. But when my sister got sick
the lead doctor always scowled
whenever we asked about cures
looking like a bust of Beethoven— but without music on his mind.
And the few times before she was gone I managed with a stupid dog
picture or an imitation of Mom's voice
to make my sister smile—
once even to giggle—in the end
it didn't make anything better.

Lone Horse

Cole Thompson



Desperate to Embrace You

Ace Boggess

Strangers read lines
of loneliness

like a bad poker hand
reflected in my glasses.

This quote is taken
from the last to hold my head:

*No one should feel desperate
to embrace you.*

I may have gotten its
meaning slightly wrong.

Volunteer Swim Coach: A Tribute

Michael Zahn

He walks with two canes,
he's fragile and fat,
the kids on the team
lug his extra-wide chair,
gently help him sit back.

But his voice still has sinew,
he bellows tough drills.
With sandpaper words
he strives to propel
even the slackers,
to make all excel.

Once, long ago,
he was slim and swam swift.
An Adonis in butterfly,
flaunting gods' gift!
The water was whipped
by his lunges and plunges!
Sprays of ribbons
were showered by judges.

Ribbons fray.
Butterflies die.
Bodies betray.
The gods can deny.

What's left of Adonis
you'll find at the pool
in his extra-wide chair,
a pain-drenched old grandpa
who's fighting despair
by bequeathing his dreams
to the ripening teens
on the high-school swim team.

Just below the surface
a bump, a nudge, a lunge.
Just below the surface
a larva I can't crush.

Just below the surface,
just below the skin,
something wants to wiggle out
but it's stuck within.

I feel it pulse, I feel it strain --
my soul sides with the struggle
(but there's no help from my brain.)

It is a living creature,
I've learned to give it time;
a hasty yank will make it shred,
a chunk will stay inside.

I cover it with duct tape
(the universal cure)
to take away its air;
knowing that
-- with desperate gasp --
it will emerge at last.

Eventually I tug it out,
view it in the light.
You may say it's ugly.
I reply: It's mine.

Before becoming an old woman, before becoming famous for living in, of all things, a shoe, and before she gave birth to so many children that she had no clue what to do, she had been a young woman—a beautiful young woman—and because she had been both beautiful and young in this mean world where the likes of her didn't matter, men of all sorts from all over the land trekked to her village, drawn to her like ants to a cube of sugar, and they fought viciously to be the first to rap a thick, hairy knuckle against her padlocked door. This beautiful young woman, who had lived invisibly until the moment her flesh ripened into something beyond her control, was unprepared for the wiles and smiles of dissembling men, which is why she so easily succumbed to the first suitor to breach her threshold, fully believing the sincerity of his immediate vow of love and marriage. In the morning, she found herself in bed alone, with nothing to remember him by but an ache that would emerge nine months later as a pair of eel-slick, screaming sons.

Upon finally healing from the birth of these twins, she heard a knock. Grateful for the return of their father, she hurriedly opened the door. But alas, there stood not her strong and handsome betrothed but a stranger: a man both older and much less impressive. Though disappointed, she was already an exhausted mother desperate for assistance, so she welcomed him inside as if she had been waiting all this time for his arrival alone, and even though she was already much less maidenly than the year before, the man eagerly stepped into the house that she shared with her fatherless boys. Equally eager (as no alternatives that didn't end in death had been written for the likes of her in the tales of this world), she believed his promise to fulfill his predecessor's broken vow and to fuse the four of them into a family, regardless of the children's troublesome paternity, so in the morning when she found herself again alone except for the wailings of her hungry sons, she wept, fearing now that a merciless cycle had begun.

As the young woman grew less young, the fighting among the men along the pathway to her door grew less crowded and less bloody, and the men who reached her door grew less appealing.

Nevertheless, each man swore that he was a man of impeccable honor, and each vowed to fulfill the broken promise of his predecessor and his predecessor's predecessor and his predecessor's predecessor's predecessor. The woman, however, grew less hopeful as she grew more desperate in her need. Eventually, the next knock never came. The inevitable silence had finally come.

Considering the circumstances, her children were fortunate to have broth once a day. Once a day was more than she ever allowed herself, after all, which partially explains why the villagers referred to her as the old woman, even though she couldn't have been any older than twenty-seven at this time. Sacrifice, not to mention childbearing and the stress of solo parenting, had withered her considerably. And managing to acquire enough broth to feed her brood required so much of her. Oh, how she worked, taking in the dirty laundry of the village's unmarried men to beat against the river's rocks and wring clean in its water. But did anyone care that she had been taken advantage of by many of these very same men, all of whom always knew that they would never suffer any consequences for their actions? Would any of her tragic circumstances get set down in playground rhymes that cast her as a stoic, sympathetic figure? Of course not. Don't be silly. Just look at the world she lived in. Footstool-sitting girls were traumatized by lecherous spiders. Young maids had their noses snipped off by blackbirds while lords ate bread and honey and counted their money. She lived only to be a part of stories told by others.

And as far as whipping them all and putting her many children to bed? Well, she would have you know that this was only according to an anonymous call received by Child Protective Services, probably from one of her neighbors, all of whom consider her a slattern. Three stone-faced caseworkers showed up on her once-crowded doorstep to inquire, and though she swore that she'd never laid an angry hand on any of her beloved babes, the three caseworkers wordlessly hauled them all away, ignoring the cries of their new wards. It would take two minivans to complete the job.

The old woman now lives in the giant shoe all alone. Yes, her life is easier than before, but it's also so much emptier. Her only companions are echoes and shadows. Yes, she has plenty of both

broth and bread now, but she'd happily welcome the return of hunger if it would make possible the return of her children, who had all been scattered hither, thither, and yon, far away from both their mother and each other.

Her days and nights are quiet. She whiles away the hours by pacing from the heel to the toe and from the toe to the heel, which has flattened the arch considerably. And as her many children continue to grow older without her, she fears they will come to doubt their memories of having grown up in a shoe with lots of loving brothers and sisters and one very poor but very loving mother. They will assume themselves to be confused by dreams. After all, they'll have learned no nursery rhymes about hardworking single mothers doing their best. They'll have learned only of harpies and hags, the evil that they do.

Test

Bill Garten

Instead of going
to the doctor

instead of X-rays
blood and urine tests

being probed to see if organisms
are killing

other organisms inside me
I decide after six single scotches

to proudly go out on my front porch
and piss in the dark

on the one box bush
waiting to see

if it eventually over time
dies.

The Elephant and the Dove

Olaf Kroneman

1967 was a bad year to be a hospital intern.

My first rotation was unlucky. I was assigned to surgery during Detroit's 1967 riot. The suffering, panic, and blood overflowed. Forty-three people died. Most of them came through our emergency room, and those that made it went to surgery. Those that didn't make it went to surgery then the morgue.

I saw it all, including Temple, Pollard, and Cooper murdered at the Algiers Motel and four-year-old Tanya. It was a shock for which I was unprepared.

Entering the emergency room caused my stomach to churn knowing that a human catastrophe would await, but in what form it would arrive would be a surprise.

By August things moderated. But not completely. A sign read: *For your own safety do not wear your doctor's white coat or white nurse's hat when leaving the hospital at night.*

There was sporadic sniper fire.

I entered the emergency room at seven one morning. It was quiet. The only sound was of the large, oscillating fans humming and blowing the heated air with the lingering human stench of the night. It was very hot without air-conditioning. Dog days of August was not an adequate description: inferno was more like it.

"Place cleared out fast," I said, speaking to the senior surgical resident Dr. Luke Ballinger.

"Don't get your hopes up," Dr. Ballinger said. "We are the controllers of entropy and entropy increases with time and stupidity and anger."

A black hearse pulled up to the emergency room entrance, a portable emergency flasher attached to the roof.

"The Addams Family just pulled up," Dr. Ballinger said.

"A hearse?" I asked.

"Yeah," Ballinger said. "Half of our patients come by hearse and half by ambulance. The hearse drivers get first dibs on the dead. The early bird gets the worm."

I did not like Ballinger.

The door opened with an explosive vacuum sound. It sounded

like the air was being sucked out of the corridor. Three men, dressed in black suits, pushed the stretcher fast.

“What’s this?” the charge nurse asked.

“This one’s critical, dying,” the mortician/ambulance driver said. “Bleeding from below.”

A young girl lay on the stretcher. She was ashen—motionless—frozen; honey-blonde hair, long with flowers woven in; hippie love beads around her neck; a T-shirt with a pink peace sign.

She was placed in a cubicle and curtains were pulled around her. A nurse cut off the girl’s clothing and threw blood-stained jeans into a bucket.

The charge nurse placed a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God. Another one.”

Blood oozed off the sides of the stretcher.

Dr. Ballinger assessed the situation and talked in a loud but calm, measured voice.

“No blood pressure?”

“No.”

He shone a light in her eyes, “Pupils fixed and dilated. Start IVs, put EKG leads on, go through the motions, and work on her ‘til her parents get here. Get my intern.”

I approached the stretcher.

The girl had a large ID bracelet on her wrist that read, *Breeze*.

“Shine the light in her eyes.”

I pried the girl’s eyes open with my thumb and forefinger. Her pupils were black, the size of nickels, haloed with a deep, full-of-life-and-promise powder blue. I shone the light. Nothing; the pupils remained static, like a doll’s. The reflex of life was gone.

“Remember those eyes,” Ballinger said. “That’s death, big boy. That’ll be you someday, when you’re all used up. Sooner than you can imagine, especially if you flunk out and get drafted and get sent to Vietnam. Life is short. The art is long. The jungle is hot and dangerous.”

“So is Detroit,” a nurse said.

“What happened? Why is she bleeding?” I asked.

She looked young and healthy. She should start breathing and her eyes should pop open any second, I knew it. I wished it.

“Botched abortion, back alley.”

“Or a miscarriage,” a nurse said.

“A miscarriage doesn’t bleed out this fast. Something was nicked. Have the parents arrived yet?” Ballinger asked.

“They’re on their way.”

“Let’s try to get a pulse back, I want her to be alive when her parents get here. It makes it easier.

“Easier for what?” I asked.

“Easier for me to tell mommy and daddy we’re doing everything possible and technically their child is still alive. I don’t like to tell them their child’s dead. It’s too damn hard. Have the nurses tell them, they’re better at it.”

My dislike of Ballinger increased, but he continued to work on the young woman methodically and efficiently.

Her pupils remained nickel-sized and black. The powder blue around her pupils faded to gray. The light had no effect.

There was the sound of brass rings scraping against metal; the drapes pulled back.

“What are you doing to my daughter?”

A woman grabbed Ballinger’s arm.

“It’s her mother,” a nurse said.

“Get her out of here,” Ballinger said. He did not look at her. He did not shout; he talked in a firm, authoritative voice. “I am trying to save your daughter’s life, now let go of my arm.”

“Please, please, oh God, please,” the mother shouted.

Three nurses held the woman and guided her out of the cubicle.

Ballinger returned to his work. The mother was treated as an annoyance and not in the equation.

Cold-blooded control of chaos, that was Ballinger.

My dislike of Ballinger was fixed, but I had to admire his work.

Ballinger said, “Where is the blood?” He looked at the monitor.

“I have four units of O negative blood,” a nurse said.

“Pressure is now up to one hundred systolic,” the resident said.

“How much dopamine?”

“Ten mikes.”

“Okay,” Ballinger said.

The ER cubicle looked like a crash site. IVs were open, some running into the patient and some onto the floor. Needle casings littered the floor, and EKG paper draped around like crepe paper. A strong, metallic smell of blood fogged the room.

It went from calm to chaos to panic to catastrophe. Ballinger seemed to thrive in this setting. To me it was foreign, frightening. I doubted that I would ever be comfortable here.

Ballinger said, “She’s breathing nicely, we have a blood pressure, her rhythm is okay. Alright, let’s go.”

Two muscular orderlies gently placed the girl on a stretcher and headed for the operating room.

Ballinger said, “You, intern, come with me. We need to talk to the family.”

Ballinger’s white bucks were now stained a fierce orange-brown. He should change them before meeting the parents or at least hit them with a chalk bag. The family shouldn’t have to see their daughter’s blood covering his shoes.

We entered the waiting room. The mother and father sat on plastic chairs.

They stood.

“How’s my baby?” Her voice a hysterical, guttural scream. “Where is Breeze? What have you done to her?”

“My name is Dr. Ballinger.”

“Your daughter’s on her way to the operating room. We must operate immediately.”

“Operate?” her father asked.

“She had an abortion that went bad.”

“No,” her mother screamed, put her face in her hands, and stamped her feet.

Nurses, social workers, police officers, and detectives filed in. Ballinger and I left.

“Detectives, police?” I asked.

“Abortions are treated as manslaughter. That’s why it’s so expensive. The people that do them need to make a lot of money to make it worth it. The women who really need them can’t afford it. They do it themselves.”

“Manslaughter? Why isn’t it murder?”

“Don’t know, but criminal law for centuries didn’t call it murder unless you aborted after mom could feel the baby kick quickening. To me, it’s a close call, but I fall back on the wisdom of our ancestors. If the mother dies, it is murder, second degree. Complications are most likely to occur after the first trimester. That’s why the criminals don’t abort after about fifteen weeks. They won’t risk a murder rap. It’s not about ethics, just risk and rewards.”

“You know a lot about abortions,” I said.

“Comes with the territory.”

“What territory?”

“The territory of taking care of people being people and living their lives the best they can. And I’m just trying to help them, keep them safe and alive. My skills obligate me.”

“They should be legal,” I said. “And safe.”

“No shit.”

I followed Dr. Ballinger to the surgical locker room to change into scrubs.

The emergency room was the frying pan; the operating room was the fire. Things went from bad to worse.

I recalled surgical lectures on how to scrub properly, slowly, and methodically, one finger at a time.

“Hey, intern, hurry up,” Ballinger said.

“This is how I was taught in medical school.”

“You’re not in med school anymore. You are no longer a useless observer. They’re firing real bullets at you now.”

I entered the cold operating room. Surgical instruments were being placed in regimented order on a tray. A crisp, metallic noise echoed. I put my hands into the latex gloves a nurse held out and rolled into the cocoon of a warm surgical gown. Breeze’s head and eyes were behind a mint green drape; her chest moved up and down in concert with the whooshing sound of the ventilator. The heart monitor made a pinging sound. Apple green heartbeat spikes marched across the tracing and appeared normal except for the rate of one hundred and twenty beats per minute.

Her rapid heart rate matched mine.

An IV was attached to her arm. Somebody had removed her ID bracelet. The name Breeze should mean life and youth, possibility, and joy—not this.

The scrub nurse poured brown disinfectant over the girl's petite abdomen, then spread a clear adhesive sheet over the area.

Ballinger held a scalpel over the abdomen, and in surgical ritual said, "I want to make the opening incision."

"Proceed," the anesthesiologist said.

"Now, intern," Ballinger said. "When I make the incision and open the abdomen, blood is going to gush out. It will be like a dam breaking."

My stomach tightened, and my mouth went dry. *Here it comes*, I thought.

Ballinger made a long, semicircle incision, exposing a thin line of yellow fat. Blood poured out of the wound.

Ballinger took a sudden step back from the operating table.

"There's too much blood; I can't see anything. Intern, open the wound. Get the tonsil suckers, as many as you can," Ballinger said. "It's an artery. The blood is filling up faster than I can suck it out. I didn't expect that. Surprise."

The surgical drains filled with blood and collected in two canisters at the sides of the operating table. Ballinger probed the red cavity of her insides, using his gloved fingers to sort through the snake-like small intestines, looking for the trouble.

"Okay, I see the bleeder," Ballinger said. "Clamp."

Ballinger grabbed the clamp from the scrub nurse, but the blood made it slippery. It escaped from his grasp, hit the floor, and the interlocking parts fell apart.

An artery was pulsating and sprayed blood on us and the bright, hot surgical lights suspended above.

"Damn," Ballinger said. "I've lost the artery. It was luck finding it the first time."

Blood continued to spray the operative field. The artery was enveloped in red and was lost.

"We're going to lose her," Ballinger said. "I had one chance."

I knew where the artery lay. I saw it nestle down in the pool of blood encased in clots and tissues. I put my hand into the wound. I

felt the jet of blood coming from the artery and pinched it between my thumb and index finger. The bleeding stopped.

“You’ve got it. How did you find it? Now someone hand me another clamp.”

Ballinger placed a clamp on the bleeder.

“Now get those big mitts out of her abdomen,” Ballinger said. “More blood please.”

“I’ve given her eight units already,” the anesthesiologist said.

“She’ll need twenty,” Ballinger said.

Ballinger used hemostats and silk sutures and tied off several arteries. Once the bleeding was controlled, he removed the small uterus and placed it into a metal bowl. The organ sat in a metal dish. Ballinger took a probe and pushed it through the tiny hole where the abortionist punctured the uterus and hit the artery.

Ballinger noticed me staring at the now-useless organ and said, “The lucky ones end up sterile, the unlucky ones end up dead.”

I thought I might get sick.

“Being human is tough. Heartbreaking, unforgiving. They don’t teach that in medical school.”

“It isn’t fair.”

“I can make it better. But I need help. From you.”

* * *

Dr. Ballinger told me he was part of a group of doctors and policemen and women that had floating abortion clinics. Clinics that kept desperate women out of the hands of the criminals. He asked me to help. I didn’t know what to do. I’d never done anything illegal and perhaps immoral.

I was obsessed with what I should do. I needed a place to think and, as was my habit, I went to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The art was permanent and perfect and eternal, it wouldn’t grow old and sick or bleed to death and die.

Except for the steadfast mummies. They were very dead.

Everything else was alive with emotion.

The portraits and paintings, like literature, were time machines connecting you to different ages, and I realized we were not that

much different. It was the display of a timeless humanity that connected me to the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo.

My favorite room contained the impressionists, a reminder, especially now, that life could be beautiful, but you had to be selective of what, and how, you saw it. It definitely was in the eyes of the beholder.

Vincent Van Gogh stared at me. Vincent's left eye hung low on his anguished face such that you couldn't escape his hurtful stare; it was alive and followed you around the room. That was genius. Van Gogh painted the beautiful and tried to escape the ugly.

I'd been exposed to a lot of ugly.

In the cathedral-like room the frescos of Diego Rivera surrounded me and made me feel small, not that important. My footsteps echoed. The Detroit Industry mural depicted the aggressive, blast-furnace-powerful, manufacturing character of the city. The north and south walls showed Black men, brown men, and white men laboring in choreographed muscular unison to produce automobiles, airplanes, tractors, ships, and bombs.

Rivera believed that men and women of all races could work in harmony, homogenized for good or bad.

On the higher levels of the mural, agriculture was displayed, the good earth. The scene of a child being vaccinated by religious and divine figures made me wonder if science had displaced religion, or were they complementary and could be integrated?

All the backbreaking work and sacrifice of the laborers, the scientists, the engineers, must have a purpose other than industry, steel, and strength. What did it all mean?

The east wall showed a human fetus enveloped in the placenta, encased in the womb. The fetus was the largest figure represented and was the focus of the mural. The reason for all human endeavor was for the protection and proliferation of the human race. I'd been in this room many times; now I got it because events had changed me. I was being asked to help in the termination of a pregnancy.

The fetus was safe in the womb fed by the large arteries of the placenta. A steel plowshare was depicted menacingly close to the

sleeping, hibernating infant. Was the plowshare the instrument of an abortionist?

A woman sat on the floor in front of the east wall sketching the mural in charcoal. I looked at her work. The detail was exquisite.

“You are very talented,” I said.

She did not look at me.

“Anybody can copy,” she said. “This is an assignment.”

She refused to notice me.

“Assignment?”

“I’m an art student. I have to draw this. I hate it.”

“Diego Rivera? This is magnificent.”

“It was a mean insult to his more talented wife, Frida Kahlo.”

“But the work shows that all human activity is to support life. Protect that which lies in the womb.”

“Rivera’s work is rough, brutish, powerful, but lacks emotion. There is no love, honor, compassion. It might as well be a series of large photographs.”

“Rivera was obsessed with creation.”

She looked at me, finally.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m a doctor I come here to think.”

She shook her head.

“Rivera painted a fully developed infant entering the birth canal. It was at the time that his wife Frida Kahlo had another miscarriage and almost died. She wanted to give birth so badly. He drew that to mock her for what she’d lost and could never have. He was very cruel to her. He was a pig, a beast. Come with me. I’ll show you.”

We walked to an adjacent room that held the works of Frida Kahlo. The works were small, but emotion exploded off the canvases. The difference was striking, and I had dismissed it in my years at the museum.

“Diego the elephant kept Frida the dove in a cage. Someday she will be more famous, more appreciated. While he painted the beautifully formed, healthy infant, Frida painted this self-portrait.”

The painting was Frida Kahlo in a hospital bed. She was hemorrhaging from a miscarriage. Blood poured off the side of the stretcher. Images of the lost infant hovered over her.

On the side of the bed was painted Henry Ford Hospital. It was a tribute to the hospital that saved her life.

I thought of Breeze, who could have changed places with Ms. Kahlo. Their suffering identical.

I would help Dr. Ballinger.

* * *

It has been over fifty years. Dr. Ballinger and I and several other doctors performed abortions for women in the first trimester. We never got caught. The police and detectives knew what we were doing, but we worked to keep the women safe and out of the hands of the criminals, the first trimester butchers. We saved many lives.

In the first trimester we removed formless cells, safely. I removed the microscopic to save a developed life. Nobody would extract a fully developed fetus. But to remove cells to save a life? A young woman in trouble? There was a difference in the terminations, I can't explain it, there just was.

Once Roe v Wade was law, we ceased operation.

The young art student was correct; with time, Frida Kahlo became appreciated and eclipsed Diego Rivera. I still am amazed with the frescos, but the emotion comes from Ms. Kahlo.

Frida Kahlo reached out to me from the grave in 1967.

Now that Roe was overturned. I may be called to help again. Nobody should die from a first trimester abortion. Got to keep it out of the hands of the criminals.

I am seventy-five, enjoyed helping humanity, and would like to exit doing the same thing. I am distraught that the lessons of the 1960s have been forgotten. Police brutality, racism, unwanted foreign wars, and the harm that can come to women has resurfaced. If called on I would once again remove cells. It was a difference which I could live with.

I won't disappoint Frida Kahlo.

I may meet her one day.



**Two nights before the first time
he's in my mouth**

Rose Davey

I dream the world is ending.

The apocalypse arriving nostalgic,
oversexed - spasming volcanoes and nuclear detonations.
It's all embarrassingly masculine.
The mortification of flesh.
As though life has been mainly the seduction of death.
Then its denial.

I am alone when it ends.

Laggard in the boreal grey of recollection. Of place.
Great pillars and high-arched bridges. Abandoned.
Desire curved. Sturdy.
Romanesque.
I mean collapsing.
And him, tucked away somewhere. Some eddy in time.

Manifest in breaking the posture of time,
and all things being struck back to particle,
my lack (my need of him) sucked in, rewound.

Swallowed.

That I might become unknown to him by any means.

In Sibiu

Katharyn Machan

Houses shape eyes with high shutters.
Streets are cobbled and wind down low
as though reminding travelers
that others came once, strange dancing others
longing for the thin pipe of dreams
that stole them from Hamelin town.
Poised on a roof a black cat waits
to disappear into its own magic,
sorcerer who changed the world
bringing Helen back from the dead.
Women too many regard with scorn
wear long skirts bold with yellow flowers
and butterflies while their kerchiefed men
melt and mold and shine good silver
into pitchers, platters, spoons. Who
dares to visit may find small coins
dropped from pockets moving too fast
in search of fairy tales. Listen:
a guard at the Consulate disappeared last night
and was silently replaced. He spoke too often
with a foreigner, accepted her kind
gifts of pies, mugs of precious coffee brewed
where she looked out through hidden windows
as she wrote dark stories, poems.

Pluck

Dana Stamps, II

We are much more
like moist flowers, plush, and clinging
to the great earth,
than our immortal gods, or God,

pistil and stamen reaching,
for we wilt away
like yellow daisies, as new lovers get pollinated,
join into bouquets, a joy,

a stronghold of fit, thorny crimson
roses, droopy daffodils,
and thick orange
and blue Birds of Paradise:

no gods; they only
bloom within us, cultivated like tight buds
in our minds, for
when we die, God dies.

day 1

i don't miss it. i went for a country walk and spotted an earring in a candy wrapper design next to fresh blood and gravel. it resembled a space diorama.

day 2

in fifth grade i read a story about a boy who lies in the park to gawk at clouds. every day a new bloated animal parades across the sky. it turns out another boy died and shaped wildlife for lonely children like a cherubic party magician. i went to another trailer park to see him blush at sunset as kim il-sung.

day 3

construction site steamed with mosquitos, so I sprayed my limbs with lemon eucalyptus. in middle school my youth group went camping and an older boy and i covered each other with dollar store bug spray with the door lips zipped. one of us laughed, i don't remember which one, and then the other started as well. we spilled from the tent and began to dance. everything became a joke. that tree. the echo a stick makes when it ricochets off wrist skin. the way clouds gave the moon a jason mask with wild gold eyes underneath. he later disappeared in a prison riot.

day 4

america bombed kuwait for its oil withdrawal. america bombed iraq for its oil withdrawal. america bombed syria for its oil withdrawal. america bombed iran for its oil withdrawal. america bombed libya for its oil withdrawal. america bombed somalia for its oil withdrawal. america bombed yemen for its oil withdrawal. america criminalizes addicts and lectures on moral discipline.

day 5

another meal at blairstown diner. counter seating always sags with mossy relics from the seventies struggling for composure between drip coffee fills. when the waitress turns, flasks emerge faster than I can write it down. i don't miss it.

Postcard from the Edge

Patricia Brawley

When I am an old woman,
older than me,
memories of driving the zigzag lane
to the house on Hurricane Point
(what a name!)
will waft in and out
as the ocean tides on calmer days;
with visions of sea and stone
living in my body now,
as blood and bone.

For a while, I was a
cliff dweller,
near the edge,
high above the ocean,
close to the time of
the last edge,

Soaring free.

Self-Portrait as Medusa

Hollie Dugas

Let's talk about the hair—gone,
the ultimate penalty for an affair,
replaced with twenty-five
copper blue vipers wriggling
from my head. What the books
don't tell you about the snakes is
there was no alternative.
No matter how you look at it,
a girl coveted is a girl mutilated.
One stern *No way, Poseidon*
and I'd have served the same
prison sentence. Because
I do not deserve to be beautiful—
because I am the other woman.
And isn't it my fault for believing
in passion, exposing my sharp
seductive fangs and preening
my wings until they shimmered?
Truly, it wasn't until I lost a few
locks of venom to the African
savanna, I embraced my vicious
crown, coursed my fingers
through chic slithering bodies
and sacrificed my heart, a mad
and laughing dove.
I do not have to grieve—
there is no such thing as love,
only stone. I can spew bitterness
instead, let the serpents guard me.

Some Novels

Diarmuid Maolalai

loitering about
at Books Upstairs
on a Saturday morning
near D'Olier St. listening
as an old man
holds a handful of paperbacks,
and inexpertly flirts
with the girl
at the desk.
talks about books
he's been reading
and books he's been meaning
to read. tempted
to break in, in case
she's uncomfortable –
not doing so
because I haven't read
the same books.

Why I Give People the Benefit of the Doubt

Heather Kenealy

--after Major Jackson

Because underdogs rarely disappoint
Because I don't know what you had for breakfast
Because beauty and art grow from trauma and pain
Because I don't have all the answers
Because I secretly felt relieved to be grounded
when I was a teenager
Because my children see that not all wounds
need a Band-Aid
Because kryptonite has many forms
Because hungry babies' cries strike the chest not the head
Because rain feels wetter when you don't have a coat
Because I wear a pink snuggly sweater
whose wool was once worn by a sheep
Because I marvel at the ingenuity or desperation
of the first person to eat an artichoke
Because plastic hairbrushes remind me that even rankled aunties
can be soothed with gentle strokes
on Sunday afternoons
Because published poetry doesn't reveal the effort
Because a dancer's sinuous performance displays a fraction
of her strength and skill
Because people count birds to check up on them
Because racoons are conniving, competent thieves
and adorable stuffed animals
Because even twins hit developmental milestones at different times
Because even though I don't want to wake up with the sun
to go for a swim, I love that you do
Because I once believed, before I ever saw the ocean,
that winter waves froze mid-break
Because I once thought it was a good decision to run
across campus, soaking wet, in my underwear
Because even though someone throws a plastic bag
off their powerboat, someone else creates a machine
to harvest it from the sea

Because cynicism tells my thoughts I'm a victim
Because being the first in a family to do something is lonely
Because fear is a bastard
Because scarcity is real
Because belonging is powerful
Because all it takes is the love of one person
Because I need to believe people are inherently good
because that means I am inherently good

Collapse

Rebecca Deitrich

When the last drop of water is drunk,
The crops wither in their fields,
Lungs blacken from the falling ashes,
And the first innocent blood is spilled,
Will you still say it was worth it?

Double Portrait: Cardiologist's Waiting Room

Grey Held

On the knee-high
table between us
the other patient's black
coffee and my half-caf
speak
to each
other in
whiffs of steam. He's very
thin, eighty-ish perhaps,
flannel plaid
shirt, calloused hands—
relaxing with a Handyman
Magazine in his lap.
The tanned
hide
of his wide
brown belt's gone sad,
cracked.
Looks like
he's enlisted
a leather
awl to punch extra
holes to match his dwindling
girth, resulting perhaps
from some residual
illness
or maybe he's
just reached the age
when taste
escapes
and it's hard to summon
hunger.
The air explodes
as this old geezer
sneezes.

God bless you, I say.

Thanks, he says

as we return to our

reliable
silence.

Feminine Wisdom

Jennifer Hernandez

In my dream,
the court jester
is a woman. Makes sense,
since she's the only one
to speak the truth (though
those in power disregard
her words). But the raven
knows.

Widely thought to be
the wisest bird, smarter
than some humans, the raven
hears the jester's words, brings
brass buttons, shiny shards
of sea glass, leaves them
on the windowsill.

Even when her painted face
transforms into a sugar skull,
monarca wings fluttering
across pale cheekbones,
the jester twirls her skirts,
trills dreamsong and dances,
death a celebration.

The raven, smart but also
opportunistic, deftly pecks
at calcified crevices for any
morsel that might remain.

Life is not to be wasted.

Thanatosis

Mark MacAllister

A sudden bright spot of light on the desk
caught a house spider out in the open
and he made a run for it

when I lifted my keyboard
I found him curled motionless
antennae and legs at stiff unnatural angles

of course he was faking it
as do many other animals
though when we say *playing possum*

what we mean is *thanatosis*
an unsubtle wink at Thanatos
a god disliked by all for the obvious reason

when I checked under the keyboard again
he unfurled himself and newly resurrected
hurried across my desk and escaped down the wall

the fact is my Dad died facing a white wall
hands hooked like a beggar's and tight to his chest
knees lifted as if to be spooned
by some sleepy unimaginable other thing

I suspect his last morphine-drip dream
was of a boat pulled up to the dock
and crowded with his many dead friends
all of them already saints or at least departed-gods

Brogie (patron of life-long furniture salesmen) and LaVerne
(all-knowing builder of quality brick ranch houses)
Bennie Bear (up with the Cubs for a cup of coffee
in '57 or '58) among others

drunk as skunks they tossed him a beer from the cooler cheered his
arrival as he climbed aboard

Charon the fierce-eyed brother of Thanatos was at the wheel
a bit buzzed himself he gunned the motor and turned too tight

the guys fell over each other and laughed
my father held the gunwale and squinted ahead
the boat sped across the lake
took him wherever it is that dead men are taken

The Opposite of Stars

--for Jim Gustafson

Stephen Cavitt

The morning Jim tells us he quit chemo,
a flock of crows shadows the neighborhood,
oil-slick blue, and then black cackles from the maples
and dogwoods, the power lines, the rain-damp asphalt.

You have to talk to death or it gets cocky,
so I lock the dog in the house and walk out
under those midnight wings. Birds scatter, bank,
beat their wings against the thinnest breeze, and lift.

Wishes and Prayers

Thomas O'Connell

Neither wishes
Nor prayers work

In the way
That children believe

Trying to gain
The attention of God

Or a star
(Especially first ones)

And so they are
Continuously disappointed

Expecting to wake
The following morning
Surrounded by stuffed animals,
Certain that their mother's
Hair will grow back

Appealing to candles for help
Either in the lighting
Or in the blowing out

The Emperor

Panika Dillon

because barren mountains churn
out burning bush after burning
bush with the rigid recklessness
of a tyrant

because the throne is not
stoic—it's an heir who doesn't
care with a scepter & orb to
compensate for smaller things

because discipline is masculine, fire has
the authority to traipse through the street
like Lady Godiva with the beard of
experience & the hermit's lack of hygiene

because he is not wise but wizened in
the sun because the sky is on fire

Bookending Your Days with Birds

Thomas O'Connell

Let me sweep the floors of your temple
I taught the birds a new song to sing outside your window

When night approaches, I will lift the stone
You use as your pillow and turn it over

In hopes that the underside will be softer
Brushing the dirt from the pocked surface

Before you lower your head, let me get the broom
To clean the sheets. Listen to the owls

I taught them a new lullaby



The Mountains, Not Distant

Judith McKenzie

April sunrise, and the lake still frozen through,
its flat surface hosting a fresh dusting
of snow and interlocking lines of

tracks - bird, rabbit, deer - form a web near
the shore, joined by one set of footprints -
one human soul, who ventured

farther out this warming April morning than
any bird or beast had dared, evidence
of a fearless spirit. In one bare circle

of ice are battle scars where dozens of talons
and beaks landed to contest the
ownership of prey, scratching out

their signs of skirmish
in the snow.

It's as simple as this: the heart is called by
some places and not by others and a
heart that flies above these slopes

can never find comfort on the valley floor.
The dark boles of trees rise up by small
puddles of ice, the frozen surface

broken randomly by hearty reeds rising
out of the cold ground below, the
earth breathing upward from the

lakeshore where once were dances under
clouds of fireflies, now with its high
regions still in winter sleep

heartbeat slow and steady
beneath the snow.



I lie on the desk next to your computer, belly up, and swat your pencil's pink eraser with my quick front paws. Sometimes I grab the pencil in my teeth, and we wrestle until I let go. You giggle as though you are honing my hunting skills, but I already am a master.

Remember the rat that tried to move in with us? Those cats you call pets, those house cats, are useless. It was me, the smallest of felines, who waited patiently, snatched the rodent, and held it in my sharp-toothed jaws until it expired. Those other cats? Impostors!

I am the daughter of a wild long-hair calico, born during a February snowstorm under a garden shed behind a big suburban house. My brothers, sisters, and I learned from our fierce mother to fear unruly, unpredictable humans. But while my siblings fought for another go at Mama's teat, I knew I was too small to win against them. I wanted inside one of those big houses, likely warm and filled with the food I smelled, half eaten, in bags outside their doors.

At just a few months old, I saw a young human boy and thought, here is opportunity. I followed him to his door, your door, and you took me in. How terrifying it was to be in a house, with four humans, with no sweet grass, no bushes for hiding, no mice and small birds to hunt! I hid under beds and couches for weeks, but you waited, patient as a hunting cat. You left bowls of water and food I didn't need to kill, and finally I let you pet me, brush me, which I like to this day.

I am a most polite creature. I stay off kitchen counters and the dining room table. I use the box with sand. But the outside world, its scented flowers and fresh air and wild animals, still calls to me. I like you for trusting that when I go out the door, I will come back.

I used to enjoy taunting that stupid fox terrier from the house next to ours. What could be more fun than to slip under the twisted-wire fence between our yards and roll about, leaving my scent on his lawn, when he could do nothing about it? I never expected that one day, as I lounged on his grass, he would burst from the sliding glass door and charge me like a barking cannonball with legs, ready to tear me to shreds. I tore across the lawn, dashed up the tree and onto the branch hanging over our side of the fence. I gave him a slow

Cheshire smile, even though I was still shaking. I never intended to show my distress, but—oh, the shame of it—I lost balance and tumbled into our garden with a thump, lay stunned on the dirt. You came running out the back door and scooped me into your arms, took me inside to safety, to rest on my soft, round bed next to yours for a few days of quiet until my wits returned.

If that dog thought I was done with him, he picked the wrong cat. He barked up the wrong tree. He may be twice my size. But I'm a cat's cat.

A few months later, as winter eased into spring, you let me back into the yard. That yipping twit saw me and ran along the fence, howling, hoping to get his teeth into me. But I had it scoped. The dope was penned in. No way he could get out. I strutted in my yard along the fence. He trailed me on his side, all bark, no strategy. I put my face so close to the fence I could smell his foul breath, flicked my tail, and he grew more frantic. I slipped my front paws through spaces in the fence and slapped that little black punching bag, his nose. I was fast. I was pretty. He was too stupid to back off. He yowled, helpless, with every smack. He was mine. Until you took me back into the house, me hissing at you for ending my winning round. But I made my point. I am so proud of myself.

Though you are bigger than I am and feed me well, we both know I see, hear, and smell things you don't. Like the afternoon you shut the door to the basement, and I still heard water running below the stairs. How was I supposed to talk to you? I sat in front of that door. If I had been human, I would have had a scowl on my face, hands on my hips, and a foot tapping impatiently. All I could do was wait and wait, until you noticed me acting strangely. When you finally opened that door, you exclaimed that the hot water tank was leaking, and I had saved you from a flooded basement. You called the plumber to fix it. You told everyone that I had taken good care of you.

I have had many contented years napping on the couch in the sun, evenings watching TV reality shows and historical soap operas by your side, and endless games of chase the pencil. Now that I am old, with arthritis in my bones, my days of running alone outside are behind me. I think, *it's been a wonderful life*. How jealous my brother

and sister cats (likely long gone if they never left street life) would be to see me on a cold winter night! I leap onto your bed, and you roll to one side, lifting the covers to invite me into the warm nest of your flannel belly and curled knees and fluffy down quilt. You scratch my ears, stroke my back, and I purr until you fall asleep. We are such good friends. You think you have tamed me, but I also have tamed you.

Unwept

Lisa Licht

(after Mary Oliver)

Don't you see the tree trash, littered
along the curb—
no one to sweep?
Don't you see how the pine weeps
its bleached needles, first
a nest, then a straw haven;
cries down harder its stubborn cones?
Don't you recall yesterday's
brilliant regime above—
russet, singed orange, molten gold?
Don't you hear the same leaves
cartwheel together
like wild children in the street?
Don't you know this was all by design?
A pause one unsung day,
cornucopia spilled by gods and you
caught in its wake,
aching for it to adorn you
when you end.

Gunyuss Witch

George Longenecker

When I was nine and my sister six,
the Gunyuss Witch lived
in her secret cave in our basement,
and she was invincible.

This was a world unknown
to our parents and young brother upstairs.
Before dawn, my sister and I were up
to summon her, by calling: Magic of the Gunyuss Witch.

Some days I walked the railroad tracks,
placed pennies on the rails to be mashed paper-thin
by a train's steel wheels and put my ear to the tracks
to feel the vibration of an approaching diesel locomotive.

A boy playing on railroad tracks needs protection,
and maybe the Gunyuss Witch saved me
from being flattened by a train,
like my copper pennies on the rails,

but when our brother died, strapped in an army parachute,
she was no longer there to save him,
our secret cave was gone, and even if
we'd called for her, nobody would have heard us.



“Come on, Kenny. You don’t have anything better to do. Some fresh air will do you good.”

People have always used that line on me. There must be a touch of truth to it, but I sort of just shrugged my sister off like I always do—you know, the least effort to decline. But then when we went outside to lounge near the driveway with a few beers, she pretty much pushed me into the car. Yeah...pushed me into the passenger seat and then slammed the door with a laugh.

Twenty minutes later, Lisa’s also pushing the old Chevy she inherited from Pops last year—pushing it up into the hills of our old subdivision, to our childhood home that our parents finally sold several years after all their kids had flown from the nest. Well, all except me.

Even Lisa, not to mention my three brothers, has never gone back to visit the old home. Topic’s never even come up as far as I know. Is that strange? Do most people ever return to their old homes? What put the idea into my sister’s head this afternoon, I’m not sure, but I’m not the type to ask. Probably just something she saw on TV.

Doesn’t matter much to me one way or another of course, although now that we’re getting a bit closer to home, memories creep back into my mind. Thoughts of all sorts of neighborhood things flash in and out as we wind through the hills. Kids like Beckett Calderman and Scott Upshur getting into my brain again. Beckett was a low-key drug dealer back when we were in high school, I finally figured it out. And Scott was a kid who loved baseball, then signed up for the Army and got killed in some accident on his base in North Carolina. I remember one of my old crushes who used to walk down Maple Street, too—Pamela Filters. I was in sixth grade when she was in high school. A few teachers float back through my head as well, even though they never lived in our neighborhood. As Lisa drives past Wendy’s, I wonder if Mrs. Stonecroft is still alive.

I remember our father’s ugly, silver-gray Granada, and the little Mom and Pops Food Mart along the river that always seemed to be

missing a step. If they weren't out of milk, they were closed on a Tuesday or had no change. Never failed me on baseball cards and Slim Jims though.

Our father was an insurance salesman, mother a homemaker—both passed on several years ago. They did well in providing for us. Upper middle-class subdivision. Not the sticks like where they grew up. Not a trailer home. Not an old, mildewed house. New clothes every school year. Braces and name-brand acne medication. A dog named Cranberry—part beagle, part collie. Neighbors with names like Charlie and Linda Moore, Carl and Lois Wilson, Orel Adkins. Other than one house on the block which got sold a couple of times, I had the same neighbors from birth until the day we moved away, although I didn't see them much except during lawn work, when they walked to the end of their driveway to collect their mail or went outside to get in their car. Seemed like they were all living hidden lives in Saran Wrap.

“We haven't been here in years, Kenny,” Lisa says as the car belches up the hill. “There's the Cottmore's house. And there's Mrs. Ransome's home.”

“She must be dead,” I reply.

“Well that's what happens to us all, Kenny.”

“Yeah,” I say, but Mrs. Ransome's face is still alive in my mind. Thirty years ago, me a little kid walking up the steps of her home on Halloween, she gave me a pack of Smarties and a mini-roll of wintergreen LifeSavers. I despised her for it and can still see the varicose veins on her hand as she dropped them into my bag. She looked down at me wearing my Chewbacca outfit as if the world belonged to her, but some of it, including me, she didn't want. She would never give me anything good, not that year or ever. She knew all the kids she liked, the ones who'd get special treatment even in their Halloween candy—some because they were cute or sociable, some because they did well at school. I imagine her face now like one of those strawberry hard candies. I imagine twisting the wrapper until the pink candy comes loose, pops out—her head; licking it until it glistens even more and all the little delicious cruds of excess sugar fall off.

I don't hear a lot of what Lisa says in the minutes before she pulls onto Bramblekey Drive for the final little stretch to our old home. I only begin to hear her voice again when she slows down at the top of the hill where six houses stand crisply without any life or spirit, ours one of them. At the end of the road a pleasant patch of woodland picks up where development has momentarily tired. From there it's a five-minute walk to the spot where everything drops off—a cliff overlooking the interstate put in when Lisa and I were toddlers.

"There it is, Kenny. Can you believe it?" Lisa comes to a stop in front of our house, the Chevy's front fender a few feet from the mailbox which, incidentally, now has two cardinals perched on a tree during wintertime. It used to be a hovering hummingbird sipping from generic red flowers. I try not to stare at our home and look down at my shoes as if that might prevent the neighbors from peeping out their living room curtains.

"Don't worry, Kenny. Everything's fine," my sister says as I feel myself getting lazy again. "Look at how many small things have changed. Looks pretty good, doesn't it? Lots of little upgrades."

"Yeah, pretty good," I reply, fixated on the front window under the sugar maple at the far side of the house—window to my bedroom. The drapes are closed.

"You noticing all the little fresh touches?"

"Yeah," I answer.

"The little flower beds on the porch and around the lamppost. The family name hanging from the front door. The basketball rim. The birdfeeders and new dogwood. Fresh paint job on the garage doors. Looks like a brand new roof, too."

"Yes," I say. "So many fresh touches."

"No big changes though, Kenny. Everything is basically the same. Almost like we never left it really."

"Yes, all the same."

"I'd like to take a peek around back. Wouldn't you? See our backyard again."

I don't answer.

"Wonder if that sassafras is still there? And the other trees. I

bet they've taken everything down that we had up. I still know where we buried Cranberry though."

It's a lot to think about, and what shoots into my mind again are waves of childhood: piling up leaves at the bottom of the hills on either side of the house and then running down and jumping into them; making a small ramp out from snow and ice during wintertime, barreling down the hill on some sort of makeshift sled; running all over the place with squirt guns, hide and seek. Home base. Nets. Goals. End zones.

I look at Lisa. She is uncharacteristically quiet with a bit of a sheepish look on her face. She wants assurances but knows my tendencies.

"What do you say we park a little ways down the street and do it?"

"Do what?"

"Walk down over the bank to see the back."

I shrug.

"No real harm in it, is there? We've done it hundreds of times before. Besides, looks like there's not even anybody home. And it's not like we can't just go through the woods around back if someone comes."

Before I can respond, not that I have anything to say, Lisa steps on the gas, drives past our home to the dead end, pulls into the driveway of the last house, backs up and turns around, then shoots back past our home leaving the winter cardinals in the dust. She drives down to Brooklove Road, parks in the church lot, and gets out of the car. She's possessed.

"Let's go, Kenny," she says, slamming the car door. She's already tucked her purse up under the front seat, so I know things are serious.

I get out of the car lethargically and try to keep pace. None of the neighbors are outside—no surprise there—and after a few minutes following Lisa's trot, we're standing at our house again.

"No use standing and contemplating, Kenny," Lisa says. "You know how the old folks sit and stare out their windows waiting for Methuselah. Let's just head straight for the back."

The two sugar maples still blaze when I catch up with Lisa at the bottom of the hill, her hand pressed against the foundation of our old home. The sassafras tree is gone, clothesline and swing set as well. Thirty years is too much to ask of them. Even so, I can still see Mom standing there outside the door to the utility room that only she used—wet clothes dripping down to her white Reeboks as she hangs them, telling us to get on back up the hill.

At the very bottom of the property the new owners have erected a wooden fence. A new, two-story house stares up at me from behind it, the wooded lot of my childhood gone. The grass to our backyard is now high, very high, and there are a couple spots, plots, of upturned dirt as if the new family has recently buried pets of their own. I don't think much of them, but Lisa seems to get all the more curious. She jogs up and examines the loose soil as if it's her task, then moves up to the sliding glass door of our house and holds two hands up against it to peep inside what was once our basement.

“Looks almost just exactly like how we left it, Kenny.”

I stand there like someone dragged to a sporting event, muttering something in reply then forgetting what I may have wanted to say as I watch her trying to slide the glass door open. The second time it budes and before she pokes her head inside, she smiles at me like we're celebrating a get-back-together party rather than breaking and entering.

“Wow,” she says, straightening back up and turning toward me. “Yeah, kind of dark and hard to see, but looks like they haven't changed a thing down there. The shelves are still stacked with encyclopedias and our old games. The old tube TV is still there. The ping pong table. Can you believe it? Even the door to George's bedroom is open. Can't hardly see inside though.”

And then Lisa disappears altogether—steps right inside the house. I look down at the ground, still standing near the corner. Before I can get any more nervous, her head peeps out again. “Come on, Kenny. I'm waiting on you.”

I do as I'm told: walk over to the sliding door and slip inside behind Lisa. She's already turned the lights on and is sorting through toys and old clothes, pointing out what furniture might have been

ours all those years ago. Bookshelves and dressers aren't easy things to recall after thirty years, but the basement is still as dank and musty as when I'd get called to fetch a can of green beans or two-liter Cherry Pepsi downstairs.

"Lights weren't on, so can't hurt to poke around a little," Lisa says. "And the door to the upstairs is closed, too, just like we used to keep it. No lights up there in the kitchen either. Don't worry, Kenny. I checked."

We find stacks of newspapers and magazines that Mother always struggled to throw away, Dad's topical Bibles and commentaries, copies of TV Guide. I can see Lisa isn't leaving anytime soon, so I go ahead and walk into George's room, an add-on Dad completed once our brother, ten years older than us, said he wanted to stay at home after graduating college. His bedroom mirror is still there; his bed; the closet full of old college books, a few baseball hats, and Rolling Rock paraphernalia.

I wander into the old utility room, too—where Mother had her washer and dryer, her freezer and way too heavily stocked canned goods, her piles and piles of old clothes and junk that never got thrown out. We weren't even allowed down there when we were kids. It doesn't feel as mysterious now—a decrepit, musty room without any wall paneling. An old washer and dryer still sits in the corner, fairly shiny other than all the cobwebs.

When I walk back to the main room, Lisa is gone, but somehow I know she hasn't left. She's climbed the steps instead, and I go to look and find the door to the upstairs open. Lisa hears the stairs squeak as I climb them and whispers out to me, "I'm up here, Kenny. Come on up. No worries."

At the top of the stairs I see my sister standing by the refrigerator. "No one's home," she says with a little laugh. "Imagine that. How lucky can we get?"

I used to think it was always Mom who'd rifle through my closet, desk drawers, dirty clothes, wallet—always trying to find some scoop on me to justify people's complaints—but now I can see it must have been Lisa all along. She's already had her fill of kitchen investigations and is ready to move on, still not satisfied. I know she

won't be done until she's checked every room in the house. It's something beyond mere curiosity.

I sit on the sofa, our little TV room there adjoining the small kitchen—all part of one room really. I figure I'll just wait things out, let Lisa finish up with whatever calling carries her. I feel no urgency toward anything—not to get a drink, not to turn on the TV, not to make a phone call, nothing. Just sitting there looking at the four walls I stared at for so many hours growing up. But then Lisa calls me, urgency in her voice. I should have expected it. People always pushing you on.

I stand up and walk down the hallway, past the living and dining rooms, past the entryway to the front door, toward the bedrooms. I am quiet, always following the voice of my sister. It surprises me a little that she's waiting in my old bedroom, and I start to sweat. She stands just inside the door, angled so she can look at me as I arrive, as well as the wider bedroom whose space is still mostly taken up by a queen-sized bed identical to the one I had.

“Kenny, it's all the same,” she says again. “You see this? It's your room.”

“Yeah,” I say.

She nods toward the bed and I take two more steps inside the bedroom, look down at the off-white bed sheets. A body lies there, but neither of us seem surprised. The man's mouth is open as if ready to snore, his hands crossed at the stomach.

“Oh, Kenny. It's like you never left here.”

I don't know what Lisa is thinking, why she isn't getting all uncomfortable like she does at a funeral. The fellow doesn't look in good shape at all, and to be honest I imagine he's never breathed a day in his life. It's as if he's been born asleep and never found the motivation to overcome his fears or wander out of his bed.

I look at him again. I say, “Kenny,” but he doesn't answer. Things grow distant in my mind—all my senses numb. Noises in the home are faint, seem far away—from the air conditioner's hum to the birds chirping in the magnolia and gingko trees outside the bedroom window. Lisa, too, is no longer anything immediate to me.

Some moments later she calls out: “Kenny, they're back. Come

on!” I don’t answer. “I mean someone’s arrived home,” she says. “Don’t worry, everything will be okay, but let’s get a move on it.” A part of me knows she’s yelling, her voice louder than usual, but it all sounds the same volume to me. Drowned out. Muted. Insignificant.

I figure it’s Mom and Dad getting home after Sunday evening church service. Who else can it be? It doesn’t matter much anyway, I cannot get myself turned to go back down the hallway. Lisa’s voice and footsteps are fainter—back through the kitchen and TV room, down the stairs to the basement, and out through the sliding door. I don’t believe I’ll ever make it back down the hallway, much less out of the house. Lisa is gone when I hear the front door open. Lights in the house are turned on and there are calls of “anyone home?” Some sort of jokes and conversation filter through to me. An excited dog’s paws patter over the tiled entryway, then the creaking of the floorboards as footsteps come down the hall toward me.

There are some sort of expressions, exasperation perhaps, as they find me in my bedroom. Maybe they are not shocked to see me. Or maybe they don’t know who I am. I can’t be sure. I believe someone says, “Yep, he’s still here in bed.” Otherwise, their reactions don’t much register with me. Eventually, I know, they will just close the door.

Miracle Mile

Stephen Campiglio

A plastic bag inside a paper bag along the littered roadside; a pigeon,
the forager,
and its fatal mistake.

Sensing its imminent
death, the bird
flies over to the bridge's
narrow shoulder
and hops out into traffic,
as if prescribing
its own euthanasia.

The first two cars miss it, but not the third,
and it pops beneath the wheel— a bloated air gone flat.
In quick succession,
drafts of a fourth and fifth car ruffle the flakes
of shredded tissue,
until a red light
withholds the traffic
just long enough
for a halo of loose feathers to lift off the pavement,
crowning the bird's exit,
which doubles as an entrance into the invisible,
before the light switches to green.

How to Confront Noisy Hotel Neighbors

Lauren Oertel

Trying to get sleep but
that radio still blares.

It's not loud enough to tell which station
they're listening to or even the type of music
but it's loud enough to nag.

Should I knock on the
door? *-I think I know which
room it is.* Would that be
rude? *-But aren't they the
rude ones?*

Would they be angry? *-Now I'm starting to get angry.*

Better than calling the front desk, right? *-Yes, no one likes that.*

Earbuds. Pillow. I try
different positions to muffle
the murmurs chew a hole in
the mattress, bury my head.
The sound burrows next to
me, pestering me with its
questions. The minutes tick
away, the night deepens.

Admitting defeat, I fling off the blankets,
stomp out of bed to
confirm which room
it's coming from. I
approach the wall, lean
forward
then look down.

The small alarm clock on the desk across from my bed
has been playing the radio all day and night.

This Is Your Phone Speaking

David Briggs

i tried talking to you yesterday
and i haven't heard from you
so i just wanted to check in

do you remember that one woman you almost dated

and when you kissed how
your synapses crackled
sent silver shocks surging
your circulation circumnavigated
sin circumscribed on your soul

and how scintillating to skim
fingertips 'cross the bare
skin of her shoulders – the
exact sensation – do you recall

how you'd teach each other
brand new bits of beautiful existence
and remember her children
so fond of you, how she could
call crying about the crises
the three of them faced and

do you remember the family
you could have had
the family she said she
was dying to give you
if you had ignored that nagging voice
deep within that said you'd ruin this

you'd take this good and fragile thing
and crush it gently under foot
like that robin's egg you found
on the ground when you were five

so perfect and round and so, so blue
as blue as crayola had promised you

and you shattered it into shards and goo
without even trying that hard, and you
could not undo, nothing
could make the mistake untrue

do you remember her? just checking

because i know if you make it through this week
you'll drive that four hundred mile street
and begin anew, but i thought that you

would want to know
she posted on her snapchat story
last night
and you still haven't looked at it

so i figured i'd send you a tone and a note
in case you wanted to feed your memories
to the slavering maw of engagement

**Day after a “Celebration of Life”
Dinner for Our Deceased Neighbor,
a Change in Direction**

Gaylord Brewer

Light-jacket weather, clear sunlight
slanting between branches, afternoon
to smile without reason, forgo the guilt
of happiness. I am halfway along
the stones in my rush out to the world.
When I stop. Errands that will wait forever.
I turn, unlock the door, surprise
my old dog with the good news.
Back into baggy clown-like clothes
soft as a caress, a hot mug of Earl Grey
sharp with cardamon, a bit of
reminiscing with the mutt. I drift from room
to room in a kind of daze, or wonder,
part a few windows. Rooms
of books and wardrobes, lamps, paintings,
photos, soft chairs, everywhere light
and breeze and faint, persistent chorus
of song. What better way to honor the dead,
if indeed honor be what they desire?
The mug warm in my hands,
this autumnal year that piles up the bodies
and may not yet be done with us,
this precious day so quiet and still.

In the Interests of Science

Charles Webb

Italian physician Antonio Valsalva sometimes tasted the fluids he encountered in cadavers in an effort to better characterize them.

—*Discover Magazine*

Was it color that compelled him?
“Oh, that gray juice looks delish.”
“That yellow jelly’s too enticing
to pass up!” Was it the smells,
out-reeking the rarest cheese,

the foulest sauce leaking
from brined fish, rotten in the sun?
If sheep thymus and gopher pancreas
are delicacies, why not the wine
decanted from a corpse? What if,

like my friend Fastidia, who wears
a nose-clip, ear plugs, and a blind-
fold just to pee, Valsalva
was repulsed, but kept testing.
Surely he deserves a marble bust

in the Great Hall of Physiology,
an All-Star Biologist Trading Card,
his own cloud in Science Heaven
on which to float above the golden
streets with Aristotle, Newton,

Einstein, Darwin, Galileo—
Valsalva, who saved you and me
from the need to learn first-hand
that pus produced by gangrene
“tingles the tongue unpleasantly.”

Orion's Boast

Alan Swope

When I take our dog
out for a last pee,
the stars that form Orion
cluster in the Western sky,
visible on clear nights.

Each night, the huntsman
has moved a bit more northerly.
Belt a clear slash of stars,
club raised high to the left.

Orion vowed to kill
every animal in the world.
As punishment, Gaea,
goddess of the Earth,
sent Scorpius to kill him.

What divine reparation
awaits us for endangering
all life? Remembered
as glimmering constellations?

Or, fleeing hordes
from hot zones, dying slowly
as the air curdles about us.

She is the warm glow of yellow
streetlights, welcoming every
passerby with an electric kiss.
She is the blooming of spring
flowers, her soft fists pushing
through the dirt, opening petals to the sun.
She is the comforting call from
your best friend on a day where
down was up and you just can't
do it anymore.
She is the calm presence of the
spider living in the corner
of my bedroom whose web
expands day by day until we
sleep cheek to cheek.
She is the ubiquitous, enigmatic
energy that makes up this
entire goofy little planet
and I am just her biographer

Mozart's Sparrow

Deborah Doolittle

I was the one, his muse,
his love bird,
his very own source of solace.

My wild throat, my so-called genius,
ran like a river through a canyon,
tumbled like the mountains to the sea,
fell like the rain
 where the leaves left the tree,
 where the twigs felt undressed and naked,
 where the nest I was born dropped to the earth like a stone.

Two things I must explain:
I sung notes that were straight and true,
never discarded the crooked ones,
 ones that broke in two, but not in half,
 ones that crumbled at first touch,
 others that sank like rocks in quicksand.

But he could make my warble soar,
my aria glide,
my trill climb, rocketing the thermals,
all the way to the attic,
 dislodging the swallows,
 impressing the pigeons,
 dazzling the neighbor's highly trained canary.

Though he called me his parakeet,
his turtle dove, his golden flute,
I knew that, when perched upon his finger,
I could be all of those things,
even when I also knew
my little songs mattered hardly at all.

Hospice Chic

Vicki Nyman

The first silver lining after your spouse's death is the renaissance in your home, i.e., your decorating scheme, no longer 21st-Century Hospice Chic.

Gone, the plastic sky-blue commode positioned smack in the middle of your living room (its location a gutsy violation of the rules of feng shui).

Gone, the piles of stripper-worthy tear-off plastic briefs, since he never once used the aforementioned commode.

Gone, the fragrance *du jour*. (Of **every single jour**.) Urine, with strains of Lysol and burnt coffee.

Gone, the broken plaster and exposed nail holes, after your cheap artwork was forcibly removed by your raging spouse while in the throes of terminal agitation. While it's possible he may have simply despised your taste for the past twenty-five years, it's also possible he may have been hallucinating, and thus viewed the framed posters as malicious alien life forms invading his bedroom. Or both.

And gone, the anguish and futility that have been your wall and floor coverings since the diagnosis.



Once Around

Marty Krasney

There are these moments —
Marilyn, Jimi, Janis, Kurt Cobain —
when someone is taken away from us,
someone we didn't really know.

But we felt close to them — for instance,
our French teacher's husband,
or the pharmacist down the street
in the Dodgers cap, always walking his bulldog.

Sometimes we have a context:
John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, Pontius Pilate,
or we think that we do: Elvis, Philip Seymour Hoffman.
But what does that mean, a context?

Why would someone shoot that sweet man
in his drugstore at closing time for sixteen dollars?
How did our teacher's husband get AIDS?

Ninety-six years ago, a smart aleck student
walked up and punched Harry Houdini
in the stomach, ruptured his appendix.

I bet a friend once, a med student, a six-pack.
that I could make one rotation
in a laundromat clothes dryer with the door shut.
This was in the early sixties, Palo Alto,
fetal position, after midnight, both a little high.

After I went around once, Jim wouldn't open the door,
even did a little dance outside the round window to torment me.

I made another circuit, and it got hot fast before he let me out.
I said he owed me a second six-pack, but he wouldn't.
He's a heart surgeon now.

The man who hit Houdini was never charged,
and thirty years later he died alone.

Ruination

Robert King

Let my cauldron of anger not erupt
and speak of our crumbled homes.
Let what is left of my kindness repair
your hope for a better place, see the good
in leaves barely holding on, in a sunrise
setting fire to an oozing orange sky,
in a shelter of wind on the edge of a cliff,
and in love that is known
only from ancient texts.

No, let my tongue not stutter
on what is left of hope, say that roads
are circles of rediscovery, re-excavated lands
whose trapped air blows back this way
and cools the lava in our hearts
to rivers remolding ancient shores.

A Bad Diagnosis

Michael Ansara

Cry havoc and let slip your fears,
The mist of tears cascading
Down the remaining years.

Cry havoc and let slip regrets
As sharp-pointed as the beak
Of the still, set egret.

Cry havoc and curse the rogue cells
And the failing body
In which they dwell.

Cry...and yet somehow greet each day
With the twinned joy
And grief that is the best way

To live out our limited years
With only the necessary regrets,
Until we are forced to say farewell
Facing the inevitable decay.

Adam

John Attanas

Adam writes sonnets.
Mrs. Dana loves him.
The girls can't keep away from him.
The boys all think he's gay.

BUT HE ISN'T!

He's dating Sharon Greenberg,
and made out with Jenny Davis,
right after A.P. Chemistry
in room 517.

The poetry I write
is in a much more modern vein.
I use cold, harsh, angry words:
Despondent.
Crematorium.
Phallocentric.
Displayed across the page in

COMPLEX

DRAMATIC

WAYS

When I read my poems in English,
no one pays attention.
The girls look at the ceiling.
Mrs. Dana starts to yawn.

I think I'll try a sonnet.
I really do like Shakespeare.
And I may just get a make out session

with Jenny after all.

Once I ace my bio midterm,
and hand in my paper on Henry Clay,
I'll break out my new tablet,
and brave this brand new form:

*I WILL NOT STOP UNTIL I SHALL SUCCEED,
AND CRITICS' WARNINGS, I SHALL NEVER HEED.*



Contributors

Cathy Allman entered the writing field as a reporter after attending the school of Cinema and Television at the University of Southern California. While her career shifted gears from writing to advertising and marketing, she never stopped writing or attending workshops, eventually earning an MFA from Manhattanville College. Her poem, “Not in the Wonder Box” has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She has been published in numerous literary journals for her poetry.

Michael Ansara’s work appears in *Arrowsmith*, *Cognoscenti*, *Ellipsis*, *Courtsip of Winds*, *Euphony Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Mid-American Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *MuddyRiver Poetry Review*, *Pine Hills Review*, *Ponder Review*, *Salamander*, *Web del Sol*, and elsewhere. His first book, *What Remains*, was published in 2022 by Kelsay Books. He spent many years as an organizer and activist, having served as a regional organizer for Students for a Democratic Society and an executive director of Massachusetts Fair Share. He is the cofounder of MassPoetry (www.masspoetry.org) and serves on the board of Tupelo Press. He lives in Carlisle, MA, with his wife.

Amy Arutt has been published or is forthcoming in *Green Silk Journal* and *Voices de la Luna*. She teaches and is a student at The Writers Studio in New York. She has taken writing workshops with Joyce Maynard, Phillip Lopate, Vivian Gornick, and Melissa Febos. Amy was a reporter for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram before a career in corporate public relations. She has played viola and cello with the Symphonic Pops of Long Island. She depends upon her faithful cats for company while writing.

John Attanas is a sixty year old grade student at the City College of New York. He is also a published young adult novelist and biographer. He thanks you for reading his poems.

Ace Boggess is the author of six books of poetry, including *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and *The Prisoners*. His writing appears in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

Paul Bluestein is a physician (done practicing) and a blues musician (still practicing). He lives in Connecticut near a beach where he finds quiet time to think about the past and wonder about the future. His poems and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of online and print publications, and he has published two books of poetry - *TIME PASSAGES* in 2020 and *FADE TO BLACK* in 2021

Dr. Patricia Brawley's work has been published in *Magnolia Quarterly*, *Junto*, and *Page & Spine*, and she won first place in the Pike County Literary Contest for short story and poetry. A psychotherapist and university professor, Patricia has presented her research on the use of poetry in therapy at conferences in Perugia, Italy, and Tokyo, Japan. She has attended the San Francisco Writers Conference and the Mississippi Book Festival. Patricia holds a PhD in psychology and has maintained a private counseling practice for over 30 years. She writes using the pen name Patricia East Spring.

Gaylord Brewer is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he founded and for 20+ years edited the journal *Poems & Plays*. The most recent of his 16 books of poetry, fiction, criticism, and cookery are two collections of poems, *The Feral Condition* (Negative Capability, 2018) and *Worship the Pig* (Red Hen, 2020). A book of flash nonfiction, *Before the Storm Takes It Away*, is forthcoming from Red Hen in spring 2024.

David M. Briggs is a writer from Wisconsin, now exiled to Illinois. His poetry and prose have appeared yearly since 2005 in publications like *The Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, *Steam Ticket*, *Straylight*, *The Catalyst*, and *Red Cedar*. His chapbooks can be found at bit.ly/briggsbooks and you are invited to follow him just about anywhere @halberdbooks.

Corey Bryan is a fourth year student at Georgia State University majoring in Rhetoric and Composition. He is currently writing daily poetry prompts, along with some original poems, with a friend of his at poetryispretentious.com. He has 2 poems forthcoming in *Sage Cigarettes Magazine* and *The Bluebird Word*.

Stephen Campiglio recently co-edited *Noh Place Poetry Anthology* (Lost Valley Press, Hardwick, MA: 2022). His poetry and translations have appeared of late in *Aji Magazine*, *Chiron Review*, *Circumference*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *Glimpse*, *Gradiva*, *Italian Americana*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *The Octotillo Review*, *Pensive*, *Pinyon Review*, *Sangam Literary Review*, *Stand*, *VLA*:

Voices in Italian Americana, Wild Roof Journal, and The Woven Tale Press Magazine. Winner of the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize for his version of a poem by Giuseppe Bonaviri, he has now completed a manuscript of selected Bonaviri translations, entitled *The Ringing Bones*. His current project, with co-translator Elena Borelli, will result in the first full translation into English of Giovanni Pascoli's volume of poetry, *Canti di Castelvecchio*. Twice-nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Campiglio was a quarterfinalist in the 2018 Codhill Press poetry book contest and has published two chapbooks, *Cross-Fluence* and *Verbal Clouds* through Various Magritte Skies.

Stephen Cavitt teaches English and creative writing at Florida Gulf Coast University. He likes mountains, hound dogs, and listening to The Killers on repeat. He's still waiting for the next season of Firefly. You can reach him at stephencavittwrites@gmail.com.

Rose Davey lives and writes in Wisconsin's driftless region.

Rebecca Dietrich is a writer from New Jersey. Her debut chapbook *Scholar of the Arts and Inhumanities* (Finishing Line Press, 2023) will be published November of 2023. Rebecca's poetry has been featured in publications by Plumwood Mountain Journal, Making Waves: A West Michigan Review, and Central Dissent: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality. She holds a B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Holocaust & Genocide Studies from Stockton University. Rebecca is currently studying for her M.A. in Genocide Prevention at Keene State College.

Panika M. C. Dillon's work has appeared in Heavy Feather Review, Poets&Artists, Copper Nickel, The Diagram and others. She received her MFA in creative-writing poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and works as a legislative reporter at the Texas Capitol.

Timothy Dodd is from Mink Shoals, West Virginia. He is the author of short story collections *Fissures and Other Stories* (Bottom Dog Press), *Men in Midnight Bloom* (Cowboy Jamboree Press), and *Mortality Birds* (with Steve Lambert, Southernmost Books) as well as poetry collections *Modern Ancient* (The High Window Press) and *Vital Decay* (forthcoming, Cajun Mutt Press). Also a visual artist who exhibits his oil paintings primarily in the Philippines, his artwork can be sampled on Instagram [@timothydoddartwork](https://www.instagram.com/timothydoddartwork). His website is timothybodd.wordpress.com.

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places, but now calls North Carolina home. A Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda* (Main Street Rag) and three chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions* (Birch Brook Press), *That Echo* (Longleaf Press), and *Bogbound* (Orchard Street Press). Some of her poems have recently appeared (or will soon appear) in *Cloudbank*, *Comstock Review*, *Kakalak*, *Iconoclast*, *Ravensperch*, *Slant*, *The Stand*, and in audio format on *The Writer's Almanac*. She shares a home with her husband, four housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Hollie Dugas lives in New Mexico. Her work appears in *Barrow Street*, *Reed Magazine*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Qu*, *Redivider*, *Porter House Review*, *Pembroke*, *Salamander*, *Poet Lore*, *Watershed Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Penn Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *CALYX*. Hollie has been nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize and for inclusion in Best New Poets 2021. She has been a finalist twice for the Peseroff Prize at Breakwater Review, Greg Grummer Poetry Prize at Phoebe, Fugue's Annual Contest. "A Woman's Confession #5,162" was selected as the winner of Western Humanities Review Mountain West Writers' Contest (2017). Most recently, her poem was selected as winner of the 22nd Annual Lois Cranston Memorial Poetry Prize at CALYX, in addition to, the 2022 Heartwood Poetry Prize. She was also a finalist in the Atlanta Review's 2022 International Poetry Contest. She is on the editorial board for *Off the Coast*.

Bart Edelman's poetry collections include *Crossing the Hackensack* (Prometheus Press), *Under Damaris' Dress* (Lightning Publications), *The Alphabet of Love* (Red Hen Press), *The Gentle Man* (Red Hen Press), *The Last Mojito* (Red Hen Press), *The Geographer's Wife* (Red Hen Press), and *Whistling to Trick the Wind* (Meadowlark Press). He has taught at Glendale College, where he edited *Eclipse*, a literary journal, and, most recently, in the MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. His work has been widely anthologized in textbooks published by City Lights Books, Etruscan Press, Fountainhead Press, Harcourt Brace, Longman, McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall, Simon & Schuster, Thomson/Heinle, the University of Iowa Press, Wadsworth, and others. He lives in Pasadena, California.

Zack Fox Loehle is a student in the Kennesaw State University MA in Professional Writing program. His writing has appeared in *Mental Floss*,

SaportaReport, and other newspapers, and his fiction has appeared in Armstrong Literary.

Bill Garten recently had three poems picked by Billy Collins to be finalists in the *Fish Anthology 2022*, and his poem “I Lost” was a semi-finalist in the 2022 James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition from the *North Carolina Literary Review*. Bill’s book, *Asphalt Heart* (Main Street Rag) was published in 2018; its chapbook version was a finalist in *The Comstock Review’s* 2017 Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Contest. *We Have to Stop Here*, Bill’s most recent book, was a semi-finalist in the 2020 Willow Run Poetry Book Award; its chapbook version will be published in 2023 by Finishing Line Press. Bill is the winner of the 2017 Broken Ribbon Poetry Contest; a Finalist in the 2018 and 2022 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards for Poetry; a Finalist in the 44th New Millennium 2017 Awards; and a Finalist in the Writers @Work 2018 Contest for a group of poems from *Asphalt Heart*. Bill won The Antioch Writers’ Workshop Judson Jerome Scholarship and was a finalist in The Beverly Prize in the United Kingdom. He has published in *Rattle*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Portland Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal* and others. He has been anthologized in *Wild Sweet Notes*; *And Now the Magpie* and *What the Mountains Yield*. He has a B.A. in English from Marietta College and graduated from Ashland University’s MFA Program in Creative Writing with an emphasis in poetry. He won The Emerson Prize for Poetry and The Margaret Ward Martin Prize for Creative Writing.

Kevin Grauke has published work in such places as *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Fiction*, and *Quarterly West*. He is also the author of *Shadows of Men* (Queen's Ferry), winner of the Steven Turner Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. He’s a Contributing Editor at Story, and he teaches at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stand*, *Washington Square Review* and *Floyd County Moonshine*. Latest books, “Covert” “Memory Outside The Head” and “Guest Of Myself” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *McNeese Review*, *Rathalla Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

Grey Held is a recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing and the winner of the 2019 Future Cycle Poetry Book Prize. Three books of his poetry have been published: *Two-Star General* (BrickRoad Poetry Press, 2012), *Spilled Milk* (WordPress, 2013), and *WORKaDAY* (FutureCycle Press, 2019). He offers a weekly online poetry workshop for professional poets. He is also a literary activist, who through civic involvement connects contemporary poets with wider audiences. He holds a BS in art and design from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an MFA in drawing and painting from Tyler School of Art. www.greyheld.com

Jennifer Hernandez teaches immigrant youth and writes poetry, flash, and creative non-fiction. She's a member of the League of Minnesota Poets and loves the energy of performing poetry both live and online. Recent publications include *Visual Verse*, *Talking Stick*, *Spring Thaw*, and *Heron Tree*. Her poems can also be found at poetry walks in Richfield and Mankato (MN).

Susan Johnson is a poetry writer. *The Meadow*, *Dash*, and *The Comstock Review* have recently published her work.

Heather Kenealy holds a minor in English composition from the University of Arizona and studies creative writing at The Writers Studio and Stanford Continuing Studies. Her work has been published in *Evening Street Review* and *The Phoenix*. She enjoys traveling, hiking, creating sculptures and jewelry, and baking crowd-pleasing pizzas in her pizza oven.

Robert S. King lives in Athens, GA, where he serves on the board of FutureCycle Press. His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines, including *Atlanta Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Chariton Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *Kenyon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Negative Capability*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. He has published eight poetry collections, most recently *Developing a Photograph of God* (Glass Lyre Press, 2014) and *Messages from Multiverses* (Duck Lake Books, 2020). His personal website is www.robertsking.info.

Marty Krasney's poetry and short stories have been published in *Areté*, *Innisfree*, *Evening Street Review*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *MacGuffin*, *Marlboro Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Mudlark*, *Tricycle*, and *Witness*, and he has completed a novel, *The Bees of the Invisible*. He has studied writing with Richard Bausch, Patrick Donnelly, Lynn Freed, George

Garrett, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Edmund Keeley, and Tom Mallon. His long and varied career as an organizational executive culminated with ten years as the founding executive director of Dalai Lama Fellows, a global network of contemplative, young social-justice activist leaders, administered since 2018 by the University of Virginia. Previously, Marty was the program director of the National Humanities Series, the first director of the Aspen Institute Executive Seminars, and the founding president of American Leadership Forum. He has served on more than twenty-five boards, primarily in the arts, education, the environment, health, and human rights.

Olaf Kroneman graduated from the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine with an MD. He interned at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, then attended the University of Virginia to complete a residency in internal medicine. Upon completion of his residency, he participated in a fellowship in nephrology at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. He entered private practice in 1983. His interaction with patients and other healthcare professionals prompted him to write. Inspired as well as horrified by the things he has witnessed, his writing is influenced by actual situations but is fictionalized to protect people's identities.

Rick Kuening translates lifelong writing and teaching experience into poems informed by a quick and innovative sensibility. His work reflects a keen interest in nature, art, culture, and religious studies. It also draws on a long career in international relations and national policy. He writes with depth and variety; cultural criticism and political censure are leavened with whimsical reflection and lyrical meditations on the natural world. He is stirred by rich language; words formed into beautiful phrases allow us to see in new ways and better understand ourselves. His poems seek to provoke and inspire! His poems are forthcoming in *El Portal*, *I-70 Review*, *Medicine and Meaning*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *The Phoenix*, *Slab*, and *Variant*.

Lisa Romano Licht's poetry and other work has appeared in *The Westchester Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Capsule Stories*, *Mom Egg Review* and other journals, and was selected for Vita Brevis Press' *Nothing Divine Dies* and *The Year's Best Dog Stories 2021*, both anthologies. Find her on Twitter: @LRLwrites

George Longenecker's poems, stories and book reviews have been published in *Comstock Review*, *Cooweescoowee*, *Evening Street Review*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The Mountain Troubadour*, *Rain Tax*,

Steam Ticket and the anthology 2021 Best Short Stories from the Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest. His book *Star Route* was published by Main Street Rag. He lives in Vermont.

Mark MacAllister grew up in northern Illinois, spent a great deal of time on his grandparents' dairy farm in southwest Wisconsin's Driftless region and learned to write at Oberlin College. Mark now lives in Pittsboro, North Carolina but travels often to the Wisconsin Northwoods and to Michigan's Upper Peninsula to hike and bike. His poems appear in various journals, including "Quiet Diamonds," "The Journal of Undiscovered Poets," "Deep Wild: Writing From the Backcountry," "Abandoned Mine" and "Passenger Journal." Mark's chapbook, "Quiet Men And Their Coyotes," won the 2022 Concrete Wolf Chapbook Contest, and he is also the winner of the 2022 Heart Poetry Award from Nostalgia Press.

Katharyn Machan, an enthusiastic professor in the Department of Writing at Ithaca College, has served as coordinator of the Ithaca Community Poets and director of the Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, Inc. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, textbooks, and collections (most recently *Dark Side of the Spoon* from the Moonstone Press in 2022 and *A Slow Bottle of Wine*, winner of the Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Competition, from Comstock Writers, Inc. in 2020), and she has edited three thematic works, including *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* with Split Oak Press. For body and spirit, she belly dances.

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan also has recent work in *Stonecoast Review*, *Miracle Monocle*, *The Round*, among others. He is a Senior Lecturer of literature at Georgia College & State University.

DS Maolalai has received eleven nominations for Best of the Net and eight for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022)

Bray McDonald retired as Senior Educator at the Tennessee Aquarium and spends the majority of his time focused on writing. In 2000 Mr. McDonald earned a B.S. in Environmental Issues from the University of South Alabama where he studied poetry under Sue Brannan Walker and Walt Darring. Mr. McDonald has been published in many journals, including 'Blue Collar Review', 'California Quarterly', 'The Cape Rock', 'I-70 Review', 'Rockhurst Review', 'Third Wednesday', 'Storyteller Magazine',

‘Chiron Review’, ‘Adelaide Literary Magazine’, ‘Nod’ (Can.); and “Between These Shores Anthology”, “Gold Dust” in the UK and The Transnational (Ger.). He also has poetry forthcoming in ‘Plainsongs’, ‘Colere’ and ‘New Reader Magazine’.

Judith McKenzie has traveled much of the world but is always drawn to the Rocky Mountains as one place that feeds her soul. She loves change - new places, new people, new challenges, but writing is her home. Her poems have been published in Pine Row Press, Halcyone Literary Review, Plainsongs Magazine, Closed Eye Open, Scribblerus, Cathexis Northwest Press, Meat for Tea Valley Review, and several others. She is a wee bit of an Irish curmudgeon, but her friends seem to like that about her.

Stephen McQuiggan was the original author of the bible; he vowed never to write again after the publishers removed the dinosaurs and the spectacular alien abduction ending from the final edit. His other, lesser known, novels are *A Pig’s View of Heaven* and *Trip a Dwarf*.

Vicki Nyman is a reading tutor at an elementary school in the Minneapolis area. She studied Creative Writing as a graduate student at Hamline University and independently with poet Jim Moore. Her work has appeared in El Portal, Evening Street Review, Green Hills Literary Lantern, The Remington Review, and Steam Ticket. Originally from Chicago, Vicki now lives on four acres in semi-rural Minnesota with her XXL puppy. She enjoys listening to classical music and Chapo Trap House.

Thomas O’Connell is a librarian living by the banks of the Connecticut River in Springfield, Massachusetts. His poetry and short fiction has appeared in Jellyfish Review, Blink-ink, Live Nude Poems, Hobart, and The Los Angeles Review, as well as other print and online journals

Lauren Oertel is a community organizer covering Texas and New Mexico for a nationwide nonprofit that works on voting rights, policy advocacy, elections, and antiracism. Her work has been published in The Ravens Perch, Evening Street Review, and The Sun Magazine. She won first prize in the 2021 MONO.Fiction poetry competition and was a winner of the 2022 Writer’s Digest short story contest, as well as the 2022 Mendocino Coast Writers’ Conference poetry contest. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her partner Orlando and their tuxedo cat Apollonia.

Robert L. Penick's prose and poetry appears in over 100 literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Oxford Magazine*. His latest chapbook is *Exit, Stage Left*, by Slipstream Press, and more of his work can be found at theartofmercy.net

Ann Pedone is the author of *The Medea Notebooks* (spring, 2023 Etruscan Press), and *The Italian Professor's Wife* (2022, Press 53), as well as the chapbooks *The Bird Happened*, perhaps there is a sky we don't know: a re-imagining of sappho, *Everywhere You Put Your Mouth, Sea* [break], and *DREAM/WORK*. Her work has recently appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Barrow Street*, and *New York Quarterly*. She has been nominated for Best of the Net, and has appeared as Best American Poetry's "Pick of the Week".

Christina E. Petrides teaches English on Jeju Island, South Korea. Her poems have appeared in periodicals worldwide. Her verse collection is *On Unfirm Terrain* (Kelsay Books, 2022). She is the author of three children's books, all published in South Korea. www.christinaepetrides.com

Niles Reddick is the author of a novel, three collections, and a novella. His work has been featured in over 500 publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *PIF*, *New Reader*, *Forth*, *Citron Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Nunum*, and *Vestal Review*. He is a three time Pushcart, a two time Best Micro nominee, and a two time Best of the Net nominee. His newest flash collection *If Not for You* has recently been released by Big Table Publishing.

Brad Rose was born and raised in Los Angeles, and lives in Boston. He is the author of five collections of poetry and flash fiction: *Pink X-Ray*, *de/tonations*, *Momentary Turbulence*, *No. Wait. I Can Explain*, and the forthcoming, *WordinEdgeWise*. Seven times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and three times nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology, Brad's poetry and fiction have appeared in, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Steam Ticket*, *New York Quarterly*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Clockhouse*, *Folio*, *Cloudbank*, *Baltimore Review*, *45th Parallel*, *Best Microfiction 2019*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Sequestrum*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Cultural Daily*, and elsewhere. Brad is also the author of seven poetry chapbooks, among them, *Democracy of Secrets*, *Collateral*, *An Evil Twin is Always in Good Company*, and *Funny You Should Ask*. www.bradrosepoetry.com

Jocelyn Rose received her master of arts in educational theater from New York University. Her script “Maze” reached the Quarter Finals of the Academy Nicholl Fellowship for Screenwriting in 2007. She was an actor and theater teacher for 20 years in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Charlotte, and San Francisco. Jocelyn’s love for cats and dogs led her to create Boo Boo’s Best, a successful treat company that she sold in 2022. Jocelyn bakes a mean sourdough bread and will never say no to a good mac and cheese.

Noel Sloboda earned his Ph.D. from Washington University in St. Louis. His dissertation about Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein became a book. He sat on the board of directors for the Gamut Theatre Group for a decade, while serving as dramaturg for its nationally recognized Shakespeare company. Sloboda has published two poetry collections, seven chapbooks, as well as hundreds of poems in journals and magazines. He is an Associate Professor at Penn State York, where he coordinates the English program.

Dana Stamps, II. is a poet and essayist who has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Cal State University of San Bernardino, and has worked as a fast-food server, a postal clerk, a security guard, and a group home worker with troubled boys. A Pushcart nominee, poetry chapbooks “For Those Who Will Burn” and “Drape This Chapbook in Blue” were published by Partisan Press, and “Sandbox Blues” by Evening Street Press.

Alan Swope’s poetry has been published in Evening Street Review, Fort Da, Front Range Review, Medicine & Meaning, Mixed Mag, Perceptions Magazine, Poetic Sun, and Roanoke Rambler. He is a practicing psychotherapist and an emeritus professor with the California School of Professional Psychology. Alan enjoys singing, acting, travel, cinema, and gardening.

Cole Thompson is uniquely unqualified as a photographer. He says, "I've never taken a photography class or a workshop. I don't have a degree in art. I've never worked as a photographer. I don't have gallery representation. I'm not a Canon Explorer of Light. And I only have three lenses and none of them are primes. Do I have any qualifications? Just one...my images. Nothing else matters."

William Waters is an associate professor, in the Department of English at the University of Houston Downtown. Along with Sonja Foss, he is coauthor of Destination Dissertation: A Traveler’s Guide to a Done

Dissertation. His research and teaching interests are in writing theory and modern grammar.

Charles Harper Webb's latest collection of poems, *Sidebend World*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Red Hen Press published his novel *Ursula Lake in Spring*, 2022. Recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.

Mike Wilson's work has appeared in magazines including *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Mud Season Review*, *The London Reader*, *The Coachella Review*, and in Mike's book, *Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic*, (Rabbit House Press, 2020), political poetry for a post-truth world. Mike is a past winner of Kentucky State Poetry Society's Chaffin/Kash Prize. He resides in Lexington, Kentucky, and can be found at mikewilsonwriter.com

Kenton K. Yee recently placed poetry in *Constellations*, *Plume Poetry*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Rattle*, *South Dakota Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Valley Voices*, *LIGELA Magazine*, and *Pembroke Magazine*, among others. He writes from northern California.

Michael O. Zahn, a former newspaper reporter in Milwaukee, lives in Poinciana in Central Florida. Born in 1947, he mostly writes poems inspired by swimming or water, often in a spiritual context.