

Steam Ticket

A Third Coast Review

Volume 28

Spring 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

Our *Steam Ticket* staff would like to thank all those involved in the creation of Volume 28, including:

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

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

A Letter from the Editor

Vol. 28 was an experience like no other. I was last year's prose editor, and I loved helping create this journal, which is why I wanted more than anything to be this year's editor. However, nothing could've prepared me for the commitment, time, and mental stamina that I would need to create something I would be proud of in a limited time frame.

This year's staff was truly wonderful, and they loved so many of the pieces we received, but it seems as more editions are published, the more submissions we receive. We were definitely in for a strenuous semester. I wanted my editors, Ryan Rogalsky and George Robords, to take charge of their individual submissions and I did not want them to feel too much pressure to accept any pieces right away. I wanted them to be sure that every single piece they accepted was something they would die for. At least, that's the wording I used. Each time there was a conflict in decisions I would ask, "Would you go to war for this? Would you hypothetically die for this to be accepted into *Steam Ticket*?" This may seem kind of excessive, but we are all Gen Z College students, so of course it helped the decision process. This thought process forced this year's staff to pause and think about whether they really loved the pieces enough to include in a journal that they are helping create.

I was so proud of everyone's communication and ability to come together and help others on our staff when it was needed. I knew I could always count on my editors to get everything done when I needed it, and they were always willing to go above and beyond. I spent many nights crafting this journal, but I know I could not have made this happen without my two editors.

This whole staff has become like a family. I have witnessed several friendships form from creating this journal, and I just wanted to thank you, all the writers, for making this possible. Without you, I would not have met these people, and I would not have been able to produce something that I am genuinely proud of. The hard work everyone has put into the journal is clear, and I hope you love it as much as we do.

Alannys Cruz Lambert
Editor

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A Vector of Love

Laine Derr

Though written with
a fine line pen, she finds
my lust distasteful,
spoiled by sugary want.
Ink tasting of nectar
is not enough, she says.
Give me blood thickening in
the sun, whispering for breath.
So, I did.
As blood is mortal, a tired,
clotted urbanity, her heart
fancies itself an *Aedes aegypti*
carrying the world anew.
A mosquito devouring delusions
of love, feasts of doing and undoing.
Together, it scorns, we are alone,
saliva beginning to numb – diseased.

When the Podium Shelf Breaks

Ben Hyland

Let it fall, scholar.
No one was paying
attention anyway.
When your notes fan
over yellow plaid carpet,
know in your soul
you leaned too hard.
One crisp snap,
and your students
clap for the class-
ending crash,
your lesson plan
floor bound,
quiet as autumn.
You're naked,
left to pick up
each researched page
as though this were not
the best lesson
ever taught.

Stoop

John Grey

This is a tenement stoop
on which a kid was shot.
He was killed for his sneakers.
Now most would give up
a whole leg
just to keep on hobbling through life
if the accommodations
were swell enough
and the company
was loving and encouraging.
But the kid was proud of his sneakers,
proud of himself
for wearing them.
So, he fought back,
took a bullet for his troubles.
Cops got a tip,
some kid bragging
about this new pair of shoes
he couldn't possibly afford.
They were blood-stained.
and a size too small.
There is no tenement stoop
where a two-legged man
became a one-legged man
because being crippled
was still something to live for.
There's just the one where
one life was ended,
another incarcerated,
and a pair of sneakers ended up
bagged and boxed
and stored in some evidence vault.
That's the stoop I'm sitting on.
Two legs
and scruffy shoes,
I'm not the one you're gunning for.

Long Walk

Sean Whalen

Such a trek, indeed, I lose my way.
Using cutbacks, double turns, blind corners,
scent diluted in muddy streams, I'm successful
in throwing myself off my trail.
To make a place to spend the night I cut a hole
in my abdomen, carve out a cave, build a fire
of bones in the overhanging shelter of diaphragm.
I wrap in a comforter of intestines and fat.
My heart sings me to sleep. Smoke whisps
from my nostrils. The morning sun slants
through the slats of my ribs. There is a familiar hue
to the unfamiliar land. For breakfast I eat my compass.
Today, further. My legs are canes, my hands
shoes, my eyes perfect and faulty gyroscopes.



Platonic is a loaded gat; it stays cocked in my pocket
as nothing in the way she dances to her dad's rock n roll
makes me Bogart in a trench coat, quick-drawn
and quick-quipped, waiting on her line of fate
to help me unfold the dog-ears iron creased into
all corners of my overly revised Noir script mind.
"Always is an acne scar I'd wear," she could have ad-libbed,
reading a thin wrinkle of character off my face, but
a silhouette in the bedroom she is the silent new moon,
unaware of what's hidden, unwilling to shine golden hour
and spotlight the sacred, like how I used to chain smoke pretzel sticks
as a kid, acting in close-up while I dealt a deck of face-card friends
from my sleeve, each blow of the tangy salt smoke preserving
my self-worth, for vulnerability is a movie one can taste.
Just an edge of insolence could have gone a long way,
if anything, she'd see that's she's the superior hero
because a man top-billed alone has no chance
solving his own cold missing person case. Instead, I'll keep pressing
play, keep smoking until I learn how to be tough without a gun.

Ghostings

Michael Kfoury

Twenty-three, but if I needed someone to purge
this juvenile worm of apathy, it would be you
for the way you let your brushstrokes breathe
like a Summer of Love album cover
carved between my peeling bedroom paint.

You know if I could sing, you'd never hear me talk,
but I can't say I want to take it slow when I'm just
sitting on my wallet, like toothpaste crusted on a mirror
(too far from the drain), forgetting the things
that made you human until I'm content with tasting
the spicy mint of silence and figuring out how to kill time
without injuring eternity behind my locked door.

"Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough."

- George Washington Carver

I abandon chattering thoughts, become more silent than the world. I see the outline of an old man on the wharf silhouetted by the full moon. This old man steps into the shadow of a stack of inflatable rescue boats. He hunches over, flexes his shoulders. He wears a heavy ebony coat. His head bends toward the decking. The angle of his face and the brim of his hat hide his eyes from mine but the way he carries his body reminds me of myself. I wonder whether he hides to prey or to avoid being preyed upon.

"Why are you in the shadows?" I ask. I point to lights atop lampposts along the wharf behind us, to footlights dotting this pier that extends into the sea. "If you come into the light, I can see you better and we can talk."

As my words escape from my mouth, I feel their wings stop beating, hear their wasted quality, the empty, bumpkin rudeness of them, and watch them evaporate in the dark night air. I stick out like a sore thumb, an oddity in a scene permeated with awareness of me but to which I'm not privy. The old man softly clears his throat.

"Want to hear a story?"

"Is it *your* story?" I ask. *It will be tragic*, I think, *and will conclude with a request for money*. The old man smiles, white teeth shining like a Cheshire cat in the dark. I feel something in my hand. I hold it up to the light from the lamppost. A hundred-dollar bill.

"Money comes and goes," he says. "It's worthless as horse snot. Never mind about the story. It doesn't have a price. You won't be able to hear it, anyway." He turns his back to me and sinks, the way a turtle withdraws into his shell. The shadow of him trembles. I sense he's about to vanish and leave me with the weight of his judgment if I don't intervene.

"Wait! Please! I want to hear your story."

The old man remains hunkered. I realized he's waiting for something, too. I raise my hand and release the hundred-dollar bill. I watch it flit and tumble through the air. A night breeze catches it and wafts it up toward the sky, where it disappears in darkness, a bet placed on mystery. The old man straightens up. He turns to face me, but I don't dare look in his eyes. Suddenly, all my senses vanished except one I didn't even know I had.

...

I find myself captaining a small ship, alone, at night, in tempestuous seas of an unmapped archipelago. I don't know where I'm headed, but I'm too preoccupied with avoiding rocky shoals to care.

The wheel is surprisingly responsive to my touch, and though waves unexpectedly toss me toward danger, just as often they rescue me from dangers that had escaped my notice. It's as if the ocean is playing with me the way a dog might play with a chew toy.

I drift into a calm lagoon. The full moon's reflection on the water is a stripe of white paint from the boat to the shore in front of me. Instinctively, I reach within my heart for some clue as to my mission. I sense I have been dispatched to find someone like me, someone who is looking at the same moon I'm looking at.

I drop anchor. I lower a rowboat into the water, climb down the ladder, and get in. The lagoon is dark soup through which the boat glides easily with light strokes of my oars. When I feel the bottom scrape, I step into the water with a splash. I slob to the front of the boat and pull the nose toward shore, until the rowboat is completely out of the water.

The shoreline is illumined by the moon. I feel compelled to head north. After walking a piece, my path is blocked by a boulder bigger than a house. I wade into the ocean, holding onto the rock, and emerge from the water at a new beach where golden sand glistens like phosphorus. I am enamored with this beach and strut back and forth excitedly. The luminosity of the beach is alive, a creature with whom I cavort. Suddenly something hard strikes the crown of my head. A rock.

Atop the boulder sits a black, brassy crow. Crows can't throw rocks, but that crow threw this one. I concentrate on the crow, search for its agency, for evidence of its guilt. Suddenly, I'm perched where the crow was. I see that everything is illumined from within. I can see the outline of a leaf miles away, or the crystalline structure of a grain of sand, simply by intending it. I can feel the mood of a breeze, hear the thoughts of a stream. Everything is alive and touching everything else. I lift my wings, push off from the boulder, and rise into the air.

...

The old man's back is to me, and he's hunkered down. I have the impression he never moved at all, that perhaps he never even spoke. Suddenly I'm overcome with fear and embarrassment. Am I in a fugue state pestering some poor homeless person? I look again. Now, the old man is small and far away, an inchoate inky spot on the pier that extends from the wharf, a shadow disappearing.

I realize that I'm not actually on the pier. I'm standing on the shore beside the wharf, my car keys in my hand. The moon is full and rests comfortably above the ocean. I feel fully alive. Everything around me tingles. The trees behind me sway in the night breeze. I feel them as if they are part of my body. My eyes are drawn to the pier, where a crow is taking off, flying in the direction of the moon. I concentrate on the crow, feel the beat of my wings against the air and see over the ocean with an eye that knows no limit.

I'm startled when I land on my backside in the sand. Suddenly, I remembered – I'm supposed to pick up Linda, my granddaughter, from basketball practice. I don't recall how I came to be at the wharf. Perhaps I was early, came here to kill time. Did I fall asleep? What a strange dream. I stand, brush sand off my pants, and look at my watch. I'm not late. There's even time to stop at Starbucks for caffeine to keep me awake. What is awake, anyway? I say to myself, then wonder why I say it – that question doesn't sound like me at all. I notice my right rear pants pocket seems light. I reach back, feel. My wallet's not there. I frantically walk back and forth across the sand. No wallet. This means cancelling

credit cards and no Cinnamon Latte. I head for the parking lot. I don't remember where I parked, so I walk between cars pressing my key fob, waiting for a beep.

Beep. As I walk to the welcoming noise, a piece of paper on the ground catches my attention. I reach down, pick it up. A hundred-dollar bill. I look around, but don't see anyone. I stick the bill in my pocket. Finders, keepers.

I slide into the driver's seat. When I insert the key in the ignition, I feel like I can drive this car to any place I can imagine, and it will carry me there. I feel an urge to imagine someplace far bigger than Starbucks. Then I catch myself.

Basketball practice.

I pull out of the lot and struggle to remember where the gym is. By the time I remember, I realize I've been driving the correct route for several minutes. My brain is just now catching up with my body. And there, approaching to my right, is Starbucks. I park, turn off the ignition. The glow from the parking lot lights strikes the passenger seat. I see my wallet – right where I left it. I pick it up, open the car door. When my foot hits the cement, I struggle to keep my balance. The other foot hits, I sink my weight like a Sumo wrestler to ground myself, shut the door, press lock on the key fob and lift my eyes to the sky. I look at the moon.

...

When I arrive at the gym, basketball practice is still going on. Linda's team, wearing yellow jerseys, is scrimmaging against a team wearing red jerseys. I notice the parents of Linda's teammates in the left-side bleachers. I scramble up, sit behind them. One of them half-turns to me.

"They're doing pretty well." I see what he means. The red jerseys are taller and bigger than the yellows, but the scoreboard shows a one-point game. I search the floor and locate Linda stepping up to the foul line. The ref hands her the ball. Even though she's thirteen, I'm struck by how small the tan Wilson basketball is in her thin white hands. She backspins it, pivoting the ball between her thumbs, something she's copied from seeing someone else do it, and pushes a two-handed shot. The ball drops through the hoop without touching the rim.

"Atta-way Linda!" I take a sip of my Cinnamon Latte, glance at the scoreboard. Thirty seconds left, and it's a tie game. The red team brings the ball down the court and Linda's team sets up in defense. A tall girl on the red team, big as a college player, breaks to the top of the circle to receive the ball. The other red jerseys back away, clearing space for their star to go one-on-one. "Do it Macey!" one of them shouts. Macey dribbles between her legs and sizes up the yellow jersey guarding her. *Linda.*

I hold my breath. I will Linda to step this way and that, to cut off paths to the basket that Macey could take. Macey towers above me. *I can smell Macey's sweat, see the wet under her armpits. I am sensitive as a violin string and see Macey's mind flip back and forth like a pancake as she tries to decide what move to make. She's careless about protecting the ball. Bounce, bounce, my hand darts and the ball caroms to Macey's right, my feet already moving, and I have control of the ball, pushing it ahead of me toward the basket.*

Suddenly all I see are the backs of team parents standing and cheering. Did I have another fugue experience? I stand and tap the shoulder of the fellow in front of me.

“What happened?” He turns with a big grin, still clapping.

“Didn’t you see? Linda stole the ball and scored! We won!”

...

“Linda won the game,” I tell Valerie when I get home. “It was tied with thirty seconds left. She stole the ball and drove down the court for a layup,”

Technically, this is not dishonest – it’s what the people in the bleachers saw.

“You have sand on your shoes,” she says. She looks worried. Valerie is intuitive. After so many years of marriage, she can smell when I’m not telling her something.

“I do, how about that. Uh, I went down by the pier before I went to pick up Linda.”

“Down by the pier? Why?”

“I don’t know.” Technically, this also is true. “It was a beautiful night, full moon. There’s a little beach near the pier, not far from the parking lot.”

“You went there in the dark? That’s risky, David. Who knows what kind of people might be down there at night, shooting up drugs or looking to rob someone.”

“It was fine. No one was on the beach.” I don’t mention I might have spoken to an old man on the wharf, I might have turned into a crow, or that it might have all have been a dream. I feel guilty keeping things from her, but I know what her response would be: *You need to be evaluated, David. Dementia runs in your family.* I reply in my imagination: *It may not be normal, Valerie, but it’s not dementia.*

I see the half-drunk bottle of Sauvignon Blanc in the fridge, but I’m in the mood for red.

“There’s pinot noir in the cabinet,” Valerie says, reading my mind. I find it, pour myself a glass and join her on the couch. She’s scrolling up and down the guide on the television screen.

“Nothing’s on.” By this, she means no shows she likes. She scrolls to the sports channels, clicks on the NFL game. Our standing joke (and also a fact) is, when Valerie wants to take a nap, she turns on football and will be fast asleep in two minutes, but she knows I like football, so she’s begun cultivating an interest in it as something to share with me.

I watch a few minutes of the game. It’s clear that by the end of the first quarter, Tom Brady and the Buccaneers will trounce the Philadelphia Eagles. My attention wanders back to Valerie, and I ponder what a lucky husband I am. She’s listening to the CBS commentators as intently as a Yeshiva student listens to a lecture, and because her gaze is fixed on the screen, she does not notice me gazing at her. I can feel the tenderness in her heart. She lifts her wine glass to her lips. *I taste the cool not-too-sweet Sauvignon Blanc, mentally tell myself only one more glass and then it’s off to bed. I sense that the orange team is better than the green team. David says it’s because of*

Brady, that Brady's a bit of a jerk, but he's probably the best quarterback of all time, that the Eagles will not be able to stop Brady. Brady is why the orange team is beating the green team. I'm starting to get football.

I jerk in my chair as the TV blares "Call now – it's free!" Something about saving money on Medicare benefits. Money comes and goes. Without thinking, I touch the crown of my head. It's sore. I look at Valerie.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you, too." We look away, as if our separate identities might disappear if we look too long in each other's eyes. We are rescued by the voice of Troy Aikman explaining how Tom Brady so easily eats up the Eagles' secondary by creating space over the middle. But I'm not thinking about that. I'm thinking that I almost understand something. That identity is not just the physical body we clutch tightly like a miser's purse. It's more flexible, more fungible than we realize. That empathy isn't just imagination. I feel Linda's eye on me.

"Do you want another glass of wine?"

I, or whatever is identifying with this physical body at the moment, watches me tip the glass, drain the dregs.

"Yes."

...

"Have sweet dreams," Valerie says.

"Sweet dreams." I turn out the light, roll on my side, and pull the covers over my shoulder. I'm exhausted and amped up at the same time. Our bedroom is dark, but seems to breathe, like me. I don't want to be awake; I want to sleep – I need to sleep – but Morpheus is not cooperating. I will my muscles to relax. I purpose my intent to surrender to sleep. I try to ignore my thoughts and make myself thoughtless.

I feel my grip on David ease....

I'm captaining a small ship through tempestuous seas in a familiar archipelago. The wheel is responsive to my touch, and I sail past wave-tossed shoals to a calm lagoon illumined by a full moon. I look at the moon, wondering how many others are looking at the same moon.

I see an island and instinctively steer north, around a large boulder, to a phosphorus shore. When the bottom of the boat scrapes, I suddenly find myself on top of the boulder in the form of a crow. Although it is night, there is no darkness. Everything is illumined from within. I can see the outline of a leaf miles away, or the crystalline structure of a grain of sand, simply by intending it. I can feel the mood of a breeze, hear the thoughts of a stream. Everything is alive and touching everything else. I turn to the ocean, lift my wings, push off from the boulder, and rise into the air.

I fly south, guided by some navigational device hard-wired into the night itself, and land on a pier, beside a stack of inflatable rescue boats. I shake my wings, which now are arms. I'm no longer a crow, but a man wearing a dark coat and a bat pulled low on my brow. I gather myself, become more silent than the world, and wait for the next thing that will happen. I see an old man approach. He reminds me of myself, but he has an invisible rock on the crown of his head, a detail I file away for future reference.

"Why are you in the shadows?" the man asks, uncertain whether I'm predator or prey. His right hand clutches a hundred-dollar bill. He points to lights atop lampposts along the wharf behind him, to footlights along this pier that extends into the sea. "If you come into the light, I can see you better and we can talk," he says, but as soon as the words escape his mouth, their wings stop beating. I smell his dismay when his words fall dead on the decking. But he needn't be dismayed — he created an opening that I'm destined to fill. I glance to my left at the moon's reflection on the sea, a white stripe that leads to a phosphorus shore. I, or whatever is occupying this body, softly coughs.

"Want to hear a story?" I say.

"Is it your story?"

I smile.

(Untitled)

Irina Tall



How To Make a Sandwich

Chris Cottom

Taste-test everything from rustic cobs to sophisticated sourdoughs. Spend your gap-year in Baden Baden beneath a dense, dark pumpernickel. Try a Tuscan summer atop a sage-flecked focaccia. Don't dismiss a been-around-the-block multigrain.

Marry your soft white to his worthy whole meal, coating both with well-whipped butter. Argue colourways of Leicester red or Jarlsberg yellow. Lay a lettuce bed for baby toms or pretty marigolds.

Allow shooting stalks and sprouting beans to spill unchecked. Don't be tempted by French dressing or salt 'n' pepper strangers. When crusts curl and surfaces coarsen, slice through the centre, discard your other half, and start again.

The One Whose Car Has an Aluminum Engine

C.I. Marshall

You tell me to set the odometer back
to zero. How a small chrome rod turns
above the left speaker. How I won't have
to subtract every time, I stop to get gasoline.
You say keep tire pressure at or about
thirty pounds like it says on the glove box
door, but these numbers are low. You say,
you will need one or two tires. I think
I can find you good used ones for free.
By no means, don't let this little car run
low on oil or water, but especially oil.
Check it every single time you fill up.
You say take it easy, do not ask
this motor to work hard below
about three thousand revolutions.
You can putt around on the level
at a constant speed or downhill at
two thousand revolutions. You must
Armor All the dash or sun will crack
it like a desert riverbed, like mine is.
You get literary and tell me, Take heed,
my child, I know where of I speak:
Get enough sleep
Eat a balanced diet
Be nice to small animals
On your business card, you scribbled
all this. At one in the morning, slipped
it under my door. In tiny print you wrote,
On cold evenings when your Alfa is hard
to start, keep the brass key revolving
in the ignition and you might recall
that I love you.

Skittering

Richard Dinges

A mouse gnaws something
dry and hard above
ceiling tiles, at the edge
of my thoughts, silent
when I look up
only to return when I
look away, an idea
I cannot grasp,
lost some time when
youth descended into
this basement room,
cool and dry, surrounded
by tiny toothed skittering
that reminds me to open
my eyes once in a while
and look up to where
I have yet to go.



I

Inside the frat house, someone lifted the top off the cake, and the bot raised itself into the light.

The college men whooped, shouted, and raised beer bottles. Lance Davis, however, neither whooped, nor shouted, nor held a bottle; he did not care for alcohol. Had he flinched at the moment of the surprise bot-reveal? It wasn't even his bachelor party, but he noticed a few eyes on him, not on the wonder-tech guest. Someone snickered. He'd flinched, hadn't he? He flinched at the drop of a hat, sometimes not even realizing it until he heard the inevitable snicker.

Chris, beside him, gave him a nudge. "Lance, buddy, it ain't just Tim's night! We want it to be your night, too."

The sexbot--officially a Loveassist First Generation Gynoid--stood in its pink cardboard cake scrolled with white icing, its hair black and cut into bangs, modeling black fishnet negligee. It could *almost* be mistaken for a mannequin. Almost.

Lance shook his head. "Guys. It's a machine."

"Well." Lanky Tim, blond hair already thinning, got straight to the point as always. "If this is what it takes to get you laid, then--"

Chris, a defensive lineman massive as a bull, leaned in. His voice, however, never matched his bulk; he had spoken above a murmur twice in the year Lance had known him. "It's not for the rest of your life, buddy. This is to help start you off on the right foot. You've gotta start somewhere."

Chris meant well. It was his father's corporation, after all, that had introduced these Loveassists. The bots were going to be Chris' whole career after he graduated, so of course he would talk them up.

Lance closed his mouth again, returned his eyes to his intended date for the evening. Well, his and Tim's.

Then he perked up. For once, he thought of the perfect comeback. He raised a finger: "There's no substitute for the real thing!"

"So said every guy who ever used porn," someone snorted.

The gynoid stirred.

Everyone watched, suddenly quiet. The bot's processor must have whirled to the conclusion that it was time to join the party. Hidden servo motors bent its left leg, raised it up and over the cake. Its right foot joined its left on the table.

The two closest men hurried to help it down, each holding a thermoplastic hand. Once on the floor it struck a pose, knees together and slightly bent, hands on hips, mouth slightly upturned, face hinting at invitation. Everyone crowded in to examine it. Lance hung back.

The engineers who built this, Lance thought, did they bring their kids in to see their works in progress? How the children's mouths must have opened, their

little eyes gazing in wonder. Every party animal and football player in the room looked that way now; for a moment, they were boys again.

The Loveassists provided more than one sort of entertainment, however. Unseen hinges opened the dainty mouth, and the bot proceeded to entertain the men with word-for-word reenactments from movies like *Fratboy Paradise* and *Surfer Girl Massacre*, leering like the killer, shrieking like the victims in its almost but not quite real voice. It stepped and gestured with ballerina grace; its designers must have studied ballet. The men bawled their approval and downed beers. When the bot finished its performance and reverted to its pose, every male eye returned to Lance. *Well?*

“Well,” he said. And shuffled his feet. “Sure, it can do tricks, but it's still a *machine*.”

Lance caught one man rolling his eyes. Chris came up and placed a heavy hand on Lance's shoulder. “Buddy, look. You want the real thing?”

He said nothing. He didn't need to. The real thing meant having to approach the real thing, and *if* the stars were aligned, and *if* you didn't put your foot in your nervous mouth, and *if* you managed to keep the wrong look off your face, didn't hem or haw or let your awkwardness show, if you got everything just right and *if* it happened to be the luckiest day of your whole life, then *maybe*—

That sophomore—her name was Autumn? She seemed so eager at first, in the cafeteria. Before long, though, she would walk by and then speed up, as if she didn't want to catch a disease. At least she said hello. Then there was Mary, okay, a little weighty but no need to hold that against anyone, she was willing—two dates, some nice smooching in her car— then playing Monopoly with two girls from her sorority, and she remarked right out loud that “you have to kiss some frogs before you find your prince,” while winking at Lance. That was when he found out she had struck sparks, as the saying went, with a stout junior who was outgoing and partied with the boys—in other words, everything he wasn't. Right? So, it went. And went. And went. Lance removed Chris' hand from his shoulder. “I'm all right.”

Tim, who'd had more than a few, was running his mouth non-stop from across the room. He tottered beside the bot, motioning to it with his beer bottle, braying like a carnival barker. “Come on, Lance, it's just a toy is all, hell, man, haven't you ever heard a dildos? You oughta—” he cut himself off with a massive belch— “go for it, man!”

“Shut up, Tim.”

Lance froze at his own words. He never spoke like that.

At least it had done the trick. Tim only gazed now, face befuddled, mouth mercifully sealed. And Lance, of course, had everyone's attention again. Unwanted attention found him as easily as the wanted kind eluded him. Even the bot held still, as if analyzing its next move.

Chris reached out again. “Hey, Lance, take it easy.”

Lance waved him off, an awkward, stilted wave like every move he ever made around other males, fraternity brothers or no. Damn it, would everyone stop *staring at him?*

"I'm gonna get some air." He fled out the door and into the dusk and autumn chill across campus. Thank God for the dark and solitude. Solitude was a no-judgment zone.

II

How, Lance Davis thought, did I end up working here of all places?

Descending the spiral staircase, his hand gliding over the aluminum rail, he recalled his job history since college. His bachelor's degree hung framed on his apartment wall, yes, but it was in Liberal Arts, and jobs had been hard to come by except for call centers, title company word processing, and now, Chris' domain. Yes, *that* place. Chris' father still reigned as CEO, and the son was up and coming.

Lance, wearing the itchy gray suit his job required, headed down the grand staircase toward the glass main entrance—the doors always gleamed, even on cloudy days. He had never seen so many glass doors in one place in his thirty-three years of life. They stretched block to block, like all the mirrors in a maze lined up in one rank. And the company had just opened a new building. Passing the reception desk, he caught sight of one of the brochures stacked neatly upon it: *You've seen our work and don't know it.*

Well. One would certainly expect to see their work in their own halls. He knew Stacy the receptionist, red-haired with freckles, and he waved to her now. She was real, not like the Fantastic Four's robot receptionist. The times reminded him anew of the comic books, paperbacks he read as a kid. And Lydia in the mail room with the black curls, *she* was real. He would bet on that.

Lance worked on the first floor, though, and the bots were constructed on the sixth floor behind all kinds of security. Of course they wouldn't be wandering all over the building.

He did see one on the first floor once, but it was a giveaway. It walked slowly, raising and lowering its feet with care. Whirring sounds rose and fell with each step. Two men, who must have been scientists because they wore white lab coats, walked with it, each holding an arm. The bot wore blue scrubs with short sleeves, and Lance could see its artificial elbow joints from all the way down the corridor. He did his best to ignore how real its face appeared.

One curious employee after another approached the bot. All got waved away by the men in white coats: "No, please, stay clear," as if the thing might explode.

The ads didn't help, either. Sharp and professional, they showed a middle-aged man embracing a pretty young thing who cared not at all about his age, or his thinning hair, or his bulging waistline, while a syrupy female voiceover intoned: "There is now no reason whatsoever for anyone to live without love. It is the birthright of every human to love and be loved."

But they're. Not. REAL!

This thought, however, came with less volume, less vehemence, than in past years. And the only way to avoid those damned ads was to stop using the Net altogether, scrap his computer, go back to doing everything offline, go to the

library to look things up, do all his banking at the actual bank. No more Google, no more nothing. Sure.

Not only that. Rumor had it there was such a thing as roaming gynoids, bots on the hunt for sad-sack types like himself. Once bedded, the men's heads swimming with the memory of that ecstatic encounter, the bot, maybe while buttoning its blouse back up, revealed that their night of love had been his free trial. If he wanted to keep his partner, it would cost him either so much per encounter or per month; that detail varied. Otherwise, he could go back to longing (and lusting) for pretty young things from afar.

Worse yet, curiosity had led Lance to company forums populated with usernames like WORLDSNEWESTLUVERBOY, VRGN-NO-MORE, and EX-INCEL. Their posts abounded with words like "paradise," "glorious," "magical," "totally rad," and one man asserted "I never knew anything could feel so good!!!"

He noticed Stacy; she was giving him a concerned look. The delivery? Waving again, he ran for the nearest of the glass doors.

...

Lance worked in the mail room every day except Tuesdays, when the delivery job fell to him. He got to drive a BMW at least, and the cars smelled new. Sinking into the driver's seat and operating its high-end controls, he could feel like a rich man. First, however, he had to wait for the Loveassist to meet him in the company parking lot beside the building, where the fleet of black BMW's stood ready around the clock.

Lance fidgeted beside the car with hands in pockets. Sometimes the bots met their drivers in the building, or out front, or in the lot. He noted every female he saw, passersby on the sidewalk. One laughed at some joke as she walked with a companion. Which one?

You've seen our work, and don't know it...

"Hello Lance."

He jolted, cursed, and spun around.

The slender gynoid stood nearly as tall as himself, raven hair shoulder-length and parted to the left, face soft as a supermodel's, eyes brown. Sky-blue dress, black pumps, glittering necklace. Studio 54 would have parted the ropes to let it in, back in the day. It waited with the infinite patience of a machine that had no conception of time, its expression more serene than mechanical.

Lance blew out a breath, straightened his suit, gave the bot the required once-over inspection. "Name?"

"Luna."

"Serial number?"

"Helen Keller."

Well and good. The answer changed each day, beamed by encrypted wi-fi into every official electronic brain. Other companies were building these too, both female and male. Most were cheaper knockoffs you could spot with ease.

Lance opened the back door like a limo driver, and the bot climbed in.

Settled in its seat, Luna said: "You seem not to like me very much." Its serene look never changed, and there was something creepy about that.

"Huh?" He climbed in behind the wheel. "I didn't say anything--"

He caught himself. It happened all the time: if you weren't on your toes, you could catch yourself getting defensive, just as you might with a human.

He started the engine. "Don't worry about it. I'm not the client."

"No one has to be, who doesn't want to be."

Or who didn't want to pay for it. An old country-western song came to mind that Lance's grandfather used to play on his quadrophonic stereo, "Love Ain't Worth a Dime Unless it's Free." Lance barely remembered how the song went now, but he had always remembered the title. He eased the car past the security gate and into traffic.

The lipstick-painted artificial mouth opened again. "Have you heard of the online groups, and services and—"

"And the scams."

"True. Those can be a problem."

The Loveassists were also designed to be agreeable. He drove on.

"Maybe..." He hesitated. Should he? Why not? This bot wasn't going to tell anyone. "I've waited a long time, and I didn't wait this long to settle for less than the real thing."

"I understand."

"Whoever I'm with has to mean something to me—you see? Not just be someone I'm using. She has to mean so much to me that I'll vow to spend the rest of my life with her. And hey, once you've got it, you've always got it. You're set."

Even as he said this, however--that last part--he envisioned Chris and other men rolling their eyes: *Man, oh man, are you clueless!*

"Perhaps, though," Luna said, "we could tide you over in the meantime?"

Sheesh. Lance already had the inevitable problem with porn, and that since high school. "No," he said. "I still wouldn't really be able to, ah, love. Or be loved." Why did he have such a hard time even saying that word? Like pronouncing something in Greek or Chinese. "No matter how fancy you get, you're never going to have more than two dimensions. I already see women as if they were pictures in ads and magazines, pretty much. So much magazine-gazing and website-gazing, and you bots, you wouldn't help with that. If a man spends all his time with you, he's gonna see all females that way. And when he does meet a real woman, he'll see her the way he sees the bot."

"I understand."

He frowned. That got a little annoying--it brought to mind the old movie *THX-1138*, the hero baring his woes to a fatherly A.I. like in a confessional. Whatever the hero said, the A.I. always chimed "Yes, I understand." But how could it understand? And how could it laugh?

When did he first see a real-life robot, anyway? Age sixteen, visiting a friend in the hospital, he saw in the hallway a box on wheels like a small refrigerator, moving and turning a corner by itself. A sign taped to it said DO NOT

TOUCH ROBOT. It rolled up to an elevator and, as Lance watched, extended a metal rod to the row of buttons. The nurses' station was only a few steps away. He wanted to call out to them, "There's a machine moving around by itself!" It unsettled him, but that was a good thing. It meant he was reacting normally to something so unusual. Something he read once returned to him; about how some early automobiles wore fake horses' heads on their hoods so as not to alarm horses.

Now, however, progress was mastering the illusion of reality: skin, hair, eyes, speech, body language.

Only--Lance again reminded himself--it was still an illusion. Inside, they would always be boxes on wheels.

"We are not without advantages, though," Luna said. "We are always in the mood when you are. We are always physically ready--you know what I mean--when you want us to be. And we are hyper-tuned to detect moods, read faces and mannerisms."

Sheesh! Were they programmed to be walking ads, too? Of course they were.

A minute later, they arrived. Like two-thirds of Lance's deliveries, the address lay on the affluent east side, in this case a gated apartment building with a uniformed doorman and trees flanking the entrance. One delivery, however, had been to a Bronx tenement, and the sleek BMW stood out in that neighborhood, Lance locking himself inside to wait out the hour. For overnight rentals, the next day's driver came in the morning. Perhaps some men saved up for months for a turn at one of these. Or maybe a group of men pitched in for a gangbang. As long as the company got its property back in good condition, nobody asked questions.

Lance got out of the car, opened the door for the bot, and escorted it to the gate. He was about to ring the bell when a man in slacks and a sport jacket ran up and threw the gate open with a clang. He sported aluminum hair and the build of someone who went to the gym regularly.

"Mr. Cousins?" Lance stood between him and the company's million-dollar technology, as per procedure.

"Yes." The client peered over Lance's shoulder. "This is it? Wow. She'—"

So real, yes. "I just need to see your confirmation."

The man pulled out a silver phone longer and wider than his hand, fiddled with it, held it up. What Lance called a squiggle-code showed black on its white screen. Lance raised a small device and held it next to the squiggle until the device beeped.

Cousins pocketed his phone. "She's for my brother, you understand--my kid brother--he's in college, never even gone out on a date--"

"College?"

"We were born twenty years apart. Believe that? Same parents and everything. This will get him up to speed." Beaming in triumph, he turned back to his cybernetic guest. "Isn't that right, babe?"

"Her name's Luna," Lance said before he could catch himself.

Another man walked up, towering to seven feet with a mess of red hair, his face shifting from one confused look to another. Lance would not have taken the two for relatives.

Luna leaned in close to Lance. "This is your kind of fellow."

The older man pounced on the newcomer. "Dave! Hey!" He motioned to Luna. "This is the co-worker I told you about. Luna, this is my brother Dave."

The brother took no notice. He went up to his date and bent to examine, way down to get his eyes close, hunching his back. It made him resemble a stretched version of Quasimodo, Lance thought. Luna waited with the same unflappable patience as before.

Dave straightened, turned toward his brother. His confused look had given way to distaste.

"Very funny."

"What do you mean?"

"She's fake!" Dave shook a finger at the gynoid. It did not react. "Look, the information's out there. Articles. Videos on how to spot them. Yeah. If you look close, you can see the plastic rims around the eyes. And it's not breathing, no rising and falling of the chest."

Lance kept his face level. *And a real girl would have reacted, not stood there peaceful as a flower child.*

Dave straightened back up, addressed Lance from on high, acknowledging his presence for the first time. "Sir? I'm really sorry your time got wasted. Larry," he returned to Cousins. "Look. I can wait for a real girl, all right?"

"But you've been 'waiting' for years. You have to do something. You just need a little help--"

But Dave had already reached the building. He closed the door behind him, leaving his flustered brother to deal with the visitors.

Lance watched. He was not alone. *Hang in there, brother*, he sent his thoughts after Dave. *The real thing is worth waiting for, however long it takes!* And he needed to look up those videos. How did he not know about those? He was so out of touch.

Back in the car, Luna stowed again in the rear seat, he pulled away.

"Luna?"

"Yes, Lance?"

"You said Dave was my kind of fellow? What did you mean by that?"

"He shares your attitude toward Loveassists, as you saw. It showed in his tension, his eyes, the way he had his mouth set."

The eyes of the gynoids were marvels, said to match human eyes cell for cell. The designer won a Nobel Prize. Lance himself hadn't noticed anything except that Dave seemed jumpy and on edge.

"And that woman across the street," Lance said.

"Where?"

There she was, on the right side, thirtyish, brown slacks, white blouse, hurrying along. The slacks were torn at one knee.

"She's frustrated about something," Luna said.

"Trying to get away from someone?"

"Perhaps."

"How can you tell? Maybe she's just in a hurry. Is it because her blouse is untucked?" It was the only thing Lance could think of, but he thought he should at least guess.

He pulled over to the curb and turned off the ignition. "We've got a few minutes. Let's check this out."

Luna did not quarrel--Loveassists were not made for that. Jumping out, the two fell into step half a block behind the woman.

The woman jerked to a halt.

Lance leaned over to Luna, "What is she seeing?"

Even as he asked, however, he could tell. Among the usual swarms of passersby, a man came out of the crowd, marching perfectly as a soldier, arms swinging at his sides. Not a "him," actually, for it was one of the cheaper androids, conspicuous as a mannequin at Macy's. Its eyes maintained their stare, not flickering from emotion to emotion like natural eyes.

It stopped in front of the woman with the untucked blouse.

Lance watched. Androids were still a minority, one for every six gynoids, but they were catching up. His own company was readying a line of them for the lonely ladies of society.

The android seized the woman's arm. Then her other arm.

Lance watched. The woman struggled, kicked, but the bot held tight. Bots were not supposed to do that. One of the synthetic hands moved from her arm to her throat.

Lance ran toward them. "Hey, hey!"

Luna kept an effortless pace at his side. One of the passersby reached the bot first, a bearded man in sunglasses and a beret, clawing at the android that paid him no notice. The woman jabbed her fingers in the bot's eyes, but it made no difference. Another man and a woman joined the fray. Lance's arrival made four, but although he and the others beat the android's head or tried to pry its fingers loose, it did not stop. The woman's eyes bulged; her tongue protruded.

Lance turned to his own bot. "Luna. What's its safe word? Do you know?"

It was federal law: all artificial humans had a fail-safe mechanism, a single word that would shut it down. This, too, changed each day, at least for the ones at Lance's company.

"I can try syncing with it." Luna's face reverted to its serene look, all reassuring calm, keying on everyone's expressions and adjusting to suit the occasion.

The woman's face was turning sunburn-red. Others were pounding their fists to the android's choking hand, to no avail.

"Luna?"

A new light sparked in the gynoid's eyes. Luna stepped forward. "Funnybone," it called out in a louder voice than Lance had ever heard from a gynoid.

The android slumped. Its hand loosened. The bearded man ripped the hand from the woman's throat. She gasped, holding her freed neck, as the female passersby brought out a phone and mentioned calling the police.

"Luna! Good job!" And Lance did something he never thought he would: hug an artificial human. "You're a heroine."

For some reason it kept its arms at its sides, not returning the embrace. Maybe they only did that for paying customers, but it did say, "Thank you, Lance."

A crowd had gathered now, a man helping the woman to her feet. She held her throat, breathing steadily now, the sunburn fading from her face. The android remained still, bent over at the waist, arms hanging free.

"Aren't there laws for this?" someone asked. "Like, three laws?"

For the second time that afternoon, Lance stepped back to inspect this technological wonder. He wished he could see into its electronic brain and ferret its secrets. "Luna. On the level. That woman--and Dave, too--how could you tell?"

"I can't explain. It's like how someone with an eidetic memory can't explain how they can recall everything. They just can."

A squad car pulled up, officers climbed out. The crowd parted around the still-inert android.

"Luna? I think we're done here. Better get back, we're still on the clock."

Lance took it by the arm and retreated up the street to the BMW. He did not want to be a hero, but if he was honest, he didn't want the bot to be a hero, to gain more publicity for artificial companionship. Even if the safe word was his idea.

Luna went along without complaint. Give bots credit, at least, for having no egos.

III

That afternoon Lance called Chris with a request. He wanted to rent Luna himself, on Saturday, for the entire day.

"Why, you devil." Chris chuckled. "You're finally coming around? And hey, it's no disgrace. You know how many men are doing it?"

The cheap android, it turned out, had been rented by the woman's husband. She could not be trusted. She had to be watched and monitored. The android did not try to keep out of sight, however, for they were not made to be spies. Something went wrong with it, set off apparently by harsh words from the woman. A lawsuit was in the works, and of course the papers were having a field day.

Lance took Luna to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They could also stroll around Central Park, if need be. Here, meetings were face-to-face, and no one hid behind a username and fake photo. And luck was with him: in the museum Luna detected not only one, but three women around Lance's age who did not believe in the idea of artificial humans as companionship. One of these wore a gold ring, but Luna assured him he could approach the other two.

And if things went well--then what?

Maybe *if* the stars were aligned, and *if* he didn't put his foot in his nervous mouth, and *if* he managed to keep the wrong look off his face—no. No need to blow it up all huge. He was meeting someone, that was all.

“How do I look?” he asked Luna.

She looked him up and down, then gave him a thumbs-up. “Go get'em.”

He had to laugh.

IV

Chris stopped by the mailroom. “Lance, hey! I hear you're going out with someone.”

“Yeah.”

Chris drew in closer, though the only other employee was on the other side of the room, sorting mail. “Can I give you some friendly advice? It's like all or nothing with you, you want a committed relationship right away. Right?”

Lance listened. He needed all the help he could get.

“Just enjoy her company and let her enjoy yours. Okay?”

He nodded. “It's just a friend kind of thing right now. Her name's Jenna. Luna helped out.” He explained how.

An expression clouded Chris' face that Lance had never seen before. “She told you—”

“*It*,” Chris.”

“Yes, okay, it told you it knew how people thought? Their attitudes toward things?”

“Yes, and spot on. Jenna actually told me; we natural humans need to stick together. It gave us something important in common.”

Chris spoke slowly. “Lance, I know these things inside and out. How their brains are designed. I'm here to tell you, they don't have any way of detecting anything like that.”

Lance examined Chris' face now, as he had inspected the gynoid. “You're sure of this?”

“I'm sure.”

The two stood silently for a minute. Then Chris said, “Why don't we go back to my office, for a drink.”

Missing A Sister

Paul Ilichko

I never had a sister but if I had
she would have been called Katherine
which was my mother's favorite name
I did have two brothers both younger
but only one of them is still alive
and I sometime wonder if
that inexplicable early death has something
to do with the way in which the remaining two
of us have struggled to stay connected

I think I told you once that my lines
tend towards the disguised iambic
but that does not imply that meaning is
subordinate to structure
there are vibrations in the underlying
architecture color and mass
are fluid things that flow through
my fingers

like the memories I should
still be keeping of my brother's funeral
but am unable to bring to mind
all that remains is the horror of
knowing that I can no longer recover
the time when I saw his dead face

and of course my sister was not there
when I need her most I'm working
hard on withholding blame
as a northern light washes through
the open window on this overcast day
where I sit in front of my computer
trying to find the words to express
too many decades of pain.

Gods Look So Small

T.N. Turner

Seen close,
gods look so small—
wear colorful, loose-fitting,
pin-stripe suits—
leather doublets, linen shirts,
silver links, diamond pins,
scarlet ties—
allowed means
to buy immortal lives—
hide treasure
far
from lawful eyes—
leave long, black cars
with darkened windows—
glance furtively side-to-side.

Ode To Angelo Badalamenti's *Laura Palmer's Theme*

Alex Carrigan

Every key you press on the piano
dissipates the fog a little more.
Black key, white key, black key, white key.
Two lodges appear in the forest before you.
Will you pick the one atop
the cliffside lighthouse,
or the one hidden deep in the sycamore trees?
You know you're getting closer
to her the more you play.
The girl who always seems to wander
into the woods if no one is looking at her
is waiting for you with a warm coffee in her hands.
You don't know if she's ready to leave the woods,
but as you approach the crescendo—
black key, white key, black key, white key—
you start to see the rays of light
breaking through the pine nettles.
She's there. You see her. She's waiting
with eyes bright as angels.
You want to reach out, take her hand,
and pull her away before the light goes out,
but the song is ending, and you realize
she's still unable to leave the woods just yet.
Maybe you'll succeed if you start the song
from the beginning.
Your hands are over the keys, but fear spills
out of you like creamed corn on a counter.
What if it's not the same girl you find
when you go back into the woods?
You press the keys again.
Black key, white key, black key, white key.
The lodges reappear, and you make your choice.

AGORAPHOBIA, ROBERT DISCOVERS, is a condition where one becomes emotionally or physically affected by: open spaces, closed-in spaces, being outside of your home.

Check. Check. And check.

It also runs in the family.

No getting around that one. Check.

It can be treated with cognitive therapy but most often with drugs. No surprise there. Who are we kidding? This is America. Seventy-five milligrams should do it. Diarrhea, dizziness, insomnia, anorexia, tremors and erratic moods swings may occur. Not to mention decreased libido. Repeat every ten to twelve hours.

The drugs don't change anything, of course, they simply numb and suppress. The issues don't go away, they just get stoned. And the prescribers don't offer an exit strategy. The pills keep coming. Why wouldn't they? It's big business. Just another way to profit off those not comfortable living in their own skin.

Robert understands he's a lot of things but one thing he's not is agoraphobic. It's not really a revelation, more an affirmation. Because according to the journal he read, for those who suffer from it, there's ultimately no real danger. It's nothing more than an illusion. However, Robert is under no illusions. In his case, there is danger and it's very real. And no drug will take that away. He also knows that the many others just like him have it so much worse.

He closes his laptop.

After a quick cup of coffee and some toast, Robert grabs the blue plastic milk crate, stuffed with his alter ego, and lodges it awkwardly under his arm. His hand hovers over the smooth, flat enamel doorknob. His ear presses to the metal front door of his apartment. He listens to the commotion echo in the stairwell. His pulse throbs in his neck. He tries to breathe slowly but his heart won't let him.

Robert steps into the hallway and stands still at the top of the stairs. On the floor below, through the spindles, he sees a man, a woman and a little girl who's maybe four or five years old. Their luggage lays scattered on the checkered linoleum floor. Clarence, the building's super, stands in front of the white painted door of 3C, arms crossed. He says their apartment won't be ready until tomorrow afternoon. After no response, Clarence repeats himself slowly as if speed's the problem, emphasizing each syllable like a separate thought the way people do when they want to patronize someone utilizing their second language.

"Come. Back. To. Mor. Row."

The confused man helplessly looks at the woman. Her brow furrows. The man turns back to Clarence.

"No, no," the man says. "Your email say come fifteenth. Today, fifteenth."

“Yeah, you said that. I got it. What’ya want me to say?” Clarence says.
“Shit happens. Welcome to America.”

The woman speaks Portuguese rapid-fire to the man. He is being told things he already knows. He nods patiently, then turns to Clarence.

“We have nowhere go. We tired, hungry. Trip long,” the man says.

Clarence closes his eyes, slowly shakes his head, exhales long and shallow as if the man is an insolent child.

“Today, fifteenth--”

“Listen, just stop. Okay? Listen,” Clarence says.

“You say--”

“Can you listen?”

The man nods, crosses his arms over his chest.

“Go get yourselves a hotel for the night.”

The man steps back, looks down, rubs the back of his neck, mutters to himself. Clarence looks to the woman, hoping for a more receptive audience. She looks away.

“Listen. Get yourselves some dinner. Sleep. Then come back tomorrow, your apartment will be ready at two. Okay?”

Clarence adjusts his stance, pulls a wadded paper towel from his pants pocket and blows his nose. He flips the paper towel, raises it to his nose, pauses, and speaks from behind the damp curtain. “Better yet, make it five. Okay? Five.”

The man continues to shake his head as the super loudly blows his nose. He stuffs the wad back into his pocket.

“It’s. On-ly. One. Night.”

Clarence steps over and around their luggage. Mid-stride he sees Robert peering down from the top of the stairs. He yells up; the little girl covers her ears.

“Stayin’ or goin’? Either way, just let me know. Ya got till Monday or I’m rentin’ it out.”

Clarence takes the stairs two at a time and disappears.

Robert watches the man lean over and kiss the little girl on her forehead. The man slides their belongings against the wall, motions to the woman and girl to sit. They huddle together, try to get comfortable. The woman reaches in one of the bags and pulls out three sandwiches in plastic baggies and hands them out. Robert walks past. A ghost amongst ghosts.

The rush of voices and music and horns and clatter hit him along with a cool spring breeze. The neighborhood is buzzing. So is his phone.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” she says. “You walking?”

“Yeah, going to work for a few hours.”

“Okay. See you later?”

The sun is still below the buildings. He walks in the cold shadow blanketing the sidewalk. His breathing beats a rhythm into the phone. She waits.

“Yeah?” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Something wrong?”
“I got another email from Stanford.”
“What’re you going to do?”
“I don’t know.”
“They won’t wait forever.”
“That’s basically what the email said. It’s such a good position. But, you know.”

“I know.”
“Yeah, you know. Just not sure it’s worth the risk.”
“They can’t just--”
“It’s just a matter of time.”
“What happened to people?”
“Maybe nothing. Everybody’s got a finger to point. Anyway, I’m stuck.”
“I’ll come over, cook us something nice tonight.”

He stops, waits, then crosses Malcom X Boulevard at the corner of one-hundred and thirtieth.

In that moment kids yell playing ball, two Con Ed workers laugh next to their truck, a distant siren fades, a silence lingers on the phone.

“Something else?” she says.
“Not really.”
“What?”
“It’s just that there’s a new family moving into the building. Their place isn’t ready and Clarence, the super, is--”

“An asshole.”
“Yeah. So they’re just camped out.”
“Where?”
“In the hallway. Husband, wife, little girl. All their shit.”
“Oh, babe.”
“Yeah. They came from Brazil, I think. Don’t know they can afford a hotel, but I’m only guessing.”

“How long?”
“He said tomorrow.”
“Well, maybe let them stay at your place?”
“I don’t even know them.”
“What more do you need to know?”
“What? I mean--”
“Go back.”

“I’m already at the station.”
“You know what it’s like.”
He stops at the top of the stairs to the subway and thinks about what it was like. A wide river of humanity moves around him like an endless current around a displaced stone.

“Hope? You there? Hope?”

He looks at his phone. He lost her. He gets bumped once, twice. He follows the crowd. The number four screeches to a stop and lets out a gasp of compressed air. He squeezes inside.

WHEN ROBERT FIRST came to New York, his parents brought him to Times Square. Back then someone called it the sleaziest block in America. Standing there now, on his spot at forty-fourth and Broadway, he knows nothing's really changed. Sure, you can rebrand things, places, even people but deep down they're the same. So no matter how much the politicians scrub it, refurbish it, or gentrify it, Times Square will always be what it's always been: a home to thieves and con artists. Although now instead of names like Slim Willie, Goldie and D-lo; they have names like Starbucks, Hard Rock and Disney.

He puts down his blue plastic milk crate and gets ready to become something he's not.

At first, Robert would change in the Bubba Gump bathroom. That changed with new management and new security. They wouldn't honor the previous arrangement. He was not-so-kindly asked to leave and never come back. Which meant he had no choice but to disappear in plain sight.

It happens quick. Robert hides under the large verdigris robe. Then, while beneath the silk green canopy, he stretches the tight-fitting matching gloves to his elbows, pulls the latex face and crown over his head and slides on a pair of Ray Bans.

From the outside it looks like the Wicked Witch of the West scene played in reverse. Robert rises from a crouch, his head and arms emerge from the expanding stola and palla. He steps onto the plastic crate concealed under his long flowing garment, drapes a US flag over his left forearm and raises the iconic torch with his right. It takes only a few seconds for Robert to become Lady Liberty.

The day he bought the costume, he invited Hope over. When she walked in, he was posed, in the middle of his apartment, in full costume. She squealed and clapped.

"I always wanted a powerful woman for a boyfriend," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Like a Nineteenth Century cross-dresser." He lifted the mask. "Think I'll do okay? I need to make some money."

"You're going to crush Batman and Spiderman and Sponge Bob and..."

"Elmo. Elmo apparently rakes it in."

"Elmo's not seeing another dollar while you're around."

She walked to him, took the rubber mask, pulled it back down over his face and stepped back. "Yeah," she said, smiling. "You're all about this. Very sexy." And then she kissed him long and hard on his rubber Statue of Liberty mouth. And he thought, God, what would I do without her?

Most people are respectful. At times, even grateful. They pose, they take pictures, they leave a few bucks--enough to supplement his college grant and help

pay for food and rent. Sometimes they leave other things: photographs, letters, religious medals, personal items.

A few months ago, a man named Zvi left a letter written in Hebrew. Robert had it translated by one of the professors at Columbia. Zvi wrote of war, of suffering, of losing everyone he knew and loved. He said one day, as he was thinking of suicide, he saw a ship docked in Gdansk. He didn't know where it was headed, but he had lost hope, so he didn't care. He snuck aboard and hid in the boiler room. He hardly ate or slept for eighteen days, give or take a day or two. He said he lost track of time. He didn't move. He remained still, stuck in that place for fear of being found out. Then, one day, what he thought was nothing more than a ship's whisper was in fact a distant yelling and cheering. The joy he heard drew him to the surface. He said his legs were so weak he could barely walk. But when he finally made it to the deck, crawling on his hands and knees like a child, he looked up and there she was. He became overwhelmed and instantly fell in love. It made no difference she was one-hundred and fifty feet tall and made of iron and copper. In the sixty years since that moment, Zvi wrote, he had many, many blessings in his life but that none of them would have been possible without her. And then it ended with the only words in English: Thank you for taking me in and giving me my life. God Bless you.

What do you do with something like that? Robert has no idea. For now, Hope stores everything in five shoeboxes in Robert's closet. But anytime he feels down or discouraged, he reads Zvi's letter.

Another time, during fleet week, four sailors, most likely members of the Sea Chanters, stood before him and sang, "You are so beautiful." It wasn't ironic or in jest. The harmonies not only unified them, but nearly everyone in earshot. By the time they finished serenading there must've been two-hundred people gathered; all cheering wildly. The men saluted the costume Robert was in and went on their way.

And yet for every moment like that, there's also some drunk asshole or sober asshole who pose like they're grabbing ass or breasts or performing any number of sex acts. Robert doesn't move or react. It's better to stand still, he thinks, like a statue and let them show their true nature. Better that than to have pictures in the Post of Lady Liberty beating the hell out of some variety of asshole wearing a Ted Nugent t-shirt. The last thing Robert needs is any kind of attention or publicity. That would be the end of everything he's worked for.

Still, it's not always easy. Because there is one indisputable fact about standing like a statue in Times Square: You see everything.

Couples screaming at each other, sobbing kids being yanked through the crowd like luggage, words of hate and rage thrown at one another like sharp knives, cruelty, intolerance, indifference. Sometimes, Robert feels his whole body tremble at what he can't look away from.

Still, he stands there like a statue. He doesn't move. He tells himself he has to stay in character. His job is to be a symbol, not a cop, social worker, priest or rabbi.

But today, as he silently sweats inside the long silk cloak and latex mask, he sees the tall, thin man and everything changes.

It's a day like every other. An unrelenting sea of people push in endless waves around him. So naturally, there are sharks amongst them. Prowling, looking for easy prey. It's only a matter of time until one strikes. To see it unfold is always shocking. Still, no matter how much Robert wants to look away, he can't.

He watches the tall, thin man and understands the threat immediately. Not by his appearance, but by his cunning. The way his head sways side-to-side. Robert watches him hunt. The tall, thin man is no different than any other animal. He stalks his prey looking for the weak, the vulnerable, the cash heavy. The tall, thin man is a pro. Everyone is oblivious. Even the two cops twenty-five feet away. He casually sizes people up in fractions of seconds. Until he locks in like a guided missile.

Robert sees the tall, thin man's target. An older woman, silver hair tied back in a bun, wearing a yellow spring jacket.

She reaches into her purse and removes a thick fold of cash. She peels off a couple of large bills. Her teenage granddaughters scream thank-you's and rush off. She absently puts the money back into her purse and continues to marvel as a naked cowboy sings, a woman on stilts juggles, street dancers contort, a bank of billboards flash in synchronicity.

The tall, thin man moves closer.

The frenzy of the street dancers ramps to a finale. The crowd gathers tight. The music booms. The dancers fly, spin and land in unison. The crowd erupts.

The tall, thin man strikes.

The older woman stumbles forward, but she does not fall. Instincts take over. Her arm locks across her chest. She is pulled forward. The strap of her purse stretches to the fist of the tall, thin man who stops, turns and gives her a menacing look of inevitability. She twists her body away from him. She's unrelenting.

By now, people see what's unfolding beside them--yet, no one moves. As if it's part of the street entertainment. But that illusion disappears as the tall, thin man steps forward and backhands the older woman across the face. Her head flies back. Her eyeglasses take flight. Her arms open wide. Her silver bun unravels. She falls helpless onto the sidewalk. The tall, thin man tucks the purse like a football and runs.

The crowd separates as if made of oil and water. The tall, thin man runs through the chasm towards the static and unmoving statue.

Robert watches the tall, thin man approach in full-gallop. A car horn screams somewhere close. Beyond the man, Robert can see the older woman roll onto her side and prop herself up on her forearm. Her spotted hand trembles to her bloody mouth.

Still, no one moves. Robert knows many things can paralyze a person: fear, shock, uncertainty, immigration police.

The tall, thin man is getting closer. His posture strengthens. He looks back quickly to see no that no one is chasing him. His eyes seem to smile, he's home free.

The fiberglass torch shatters into three pieces. The impact on the tall, thin man's face sounds like Aaron Judge cracking one to left-center. It knocks the feet out from under him. The tall, thin man doesn't know what hit him. He looks around trying to figure out why he's on his back and breathing out of the wrong side of his face.

People stop and turn. The tall, thin man is back on his feet, charging, full of rage straight at Lady Liberty.

Robert drops what's left of the torch. His right foot slides back and plants on his toes. His right fist slams into the tall, thin man's long, narrow jaw. Once again, the tall, thin man hits the pavement. Gasps. A crowd forms. A New York cop pushes through.

She points at Lady Liberty. "You. Back up."

Robert steps back, fist still clenched. The tall, thin man slowly gets to his feet working his jaw. Blood flows from his mouth and displaced nose.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" The cop's head swings between the two.

"He hit her," Robert points to the older woman just now being helped up by her granddaughters. "Stole her purse," he points to the older woman's purse lying a few feet from the tall, thin man. "And I stopped him."

"Remove the mask, sir."

He takes off both the sunglasses and mask. He is sweating hard, breathing fast. His eyes adjust to the bright sunlight.

"A fucking Mexican?" the tall, thin man says.

"That's enough," the female cop warns.

"You gonna believe a fucking Mexican?"

"Not another word," she warns again.

"That fucker assaulted me."

"I stopped him. Citizen's arrest," Robert says.

"Trust me, he ain't no citizen."

"I've had enough of you," the female cop says to the tall, thin man.

"Well, I've had enough of these people rapin' and murderin' and assalutin'. You gonna call immigration, or what?"

The cop picks up the purse, hands it to a second cop that just arrived. "Interview the woman in the yellow coat. See if this is hers and if that one--" she points to the tall, thin man, "or anyone mugged or assaulted her."

"And call ICE," the tall, thin man yells out.

The female cop puts her finger in his face. "You shut-up."

"He's violent. Fucker tried to kill me. He's an illegal. Gangbanger. MS-13. Look at him."

The cop pauses, a thread of uncertainty crosses somewhere behind her eyes. Which might be the reason she doesn't rebuke the tall, thin man again. He

becomes more emboldened. Turns, plays to the crowd. Just another show on Broadway.

“I’m an American citizen. I have rights. Call ICE!”

The cop looks at Robert. He stands still, a statue without a head. She points at the milk crate. “Take a seat.”

“But I--”

“Take a seat.”

Robert sits, watches the cop take the tall, thin man a few feet away to question him. She takes a more conciliatory tone. The tall, thin man pleads his case, palms up, shakes his head, points in Robert’s direction. It’s quite a performance, Robert thinks.

Robert waits, silent, his head in his hands, hears the tall, thin man say he was pushed into the lady and his arm got caught in her handbag, it was a complete accident, he says, because

all he was doing was running to get a cab when the crazy, fuckin’ Mexican attacked him for no apparent reason. Look what he did to my face, he repeats.

The cop looks at Robert sitting on his milk crate. The tall, thin man asks why she’s wasting time on a U.S. citizen when she should really be worried what kind of violence that gangbanging illegal Mexican will do next.

The crowd grows. No one stands up for Robert. Instead, they start to feel like a wall surrounding him.

Through arms and torsos, he sees the second cop come back.

“She doesn’t want to press charges.”

The first cop looks at Robert, considers something unspoken, and then leans her head to a shoulder walkie. “Yeah, I need an immigration and customs officer at forty-fourth and Broadway.”

Robert’s body tightens. His pulse throbs in his neck. He tries to breathe slowly but his heart won’t let him: fear of open spaces, fear of closed-in spaces, fear of being outside of your home.

Check. Check. And check.

It also runs in the family.

No getting around that one. Check.

She sets her hand over handcuffs on her utility belt and moves toward Robert.

The tall, thin man leans against one of the oversized concrete planters, lights a cigarette and smiles like he just won a prize at the county fair.

She pushes through the crowd. She stops, her jaw tightens, her hand slides to her holster.

The milk crate is empty. Robert is nowhere in sight. Her head swivels in every direction. It lands on a steel mesh trash can. A flaccid Statue of Liberty costume lays on top. The face of Lady Liberty hangs over the edge; warped, without form, the vacated eyes reveal nothing.

ROBERT SITS on a painted green folding chair by the granite fountain in Bryant Park. Contrails scar an otherwise perfect blue sky like stretch marks on a promise yet to be born. He looks at the immaculately manicured green lawn chained off from anyone using it. He attempts to make sense of senseless things. Which does nothing more than twist him into knots. The threads of which are so tangled he can't separate one from another.

Something buried surfaces. Prickly heat rises to Robert's face. His mind races like a car without brakes. His lips move silently. What's the point? Why care? He doesn't belong. He's not wanted, not valued. So why care? Screw it. Bigotry, envy, greed, racism, judgement, lies; they seem to be the accepted and not the exception. He tried. Hadn't he? Done everything he could? Still, no one gives a shit. This is America, thank you. But you're not welcome. So what's he supposed to do when it's other people who aren't comfortable with him living in his own skin? What then? Maybe they should take a pill.

He wants to throw a chair at the fountain, onto the manicured lawn, into the scarred sky. He wants to go back and punch the satisfied smirk off that tall, thin man's face. And, while he's at it, everyone else like him.

His phone buzzes. He's not in the mood.

He looks anyway.

A voicemail, from Hope. He's not in the mood.

He listens anyway.

"Hey. So listen, I'm at your place and I made way too much food. I mean *way* too much. So instead of letting it all go to waste, I invited that new family in your building to come for dinner. So, they'll be here when you get home. They are so nice and so appreciative. We're just hanging out. I made some tea. The little girl is sound asleep in your bed. She's so adorable.

Her name is Esperanca. She calls me sister. I mean seriously, how awesome is that? The thing is, they didn't want to just leave all their stuff in the hall, so we brought it up to your apartment. Anyway, can't wait to see you. So get your ass home. You are missed."

Robert walks to Fifth Avenue. One side of the street is bathed in reflected warm light, the other is in a cold shadow.

"Okay," he says out loud, making a decision. "Okay."

Terrarium

Whitney Cooper

We take Goldenrod Trail surrounding the lake,
and, despite the lack of yellow blooms, we find ourselves
seeking respite as the afternoon sky sheds
its gilded fire onto our faces.
Forest cradles the lake, cupped hands
clutching a bowl. Ducks sew
V-shaped ripples along the blue-black surface.
Cicadas scream for sex out of sight.
Lily pads amble under the water's skin,
green veins reaching into its blind depths.
We point at every scale and shell
before it retreats into darkness,
but the creatures are felt before seen.
They grant permission for us to be with them.
Each breath according to the sheen of the striped
mullet in the water. Each touch according to the mud
sluicing beneath their gills.
You mention wanting a terrarium someday,
eyes glowing as you imagine nurturing
moss and stone in a glass bubble on your shelf,
but I already have my own—
I will hold this place in my palm.
I will let roots lace and rivers run over my fingers.
I will take this afternoon and press it to my chest.
I will always feel you humming at my core.

The Lost Art

Keith Morris

We'd leave them under wipers—
Messages only as long as the scraps
of paper would allow.
(Receipts. Paper sacks. Half pages of notebook paper.)
Brief. Precise. Beautiful.
Long letters were too long.
Too much imagining how the words would be received rather than the message.
Too many lines to read between.
Too much care to mix the mundane with emotion.
Now,
text messages only corrupt—
reducing the promise of "Yes"
to "k."
[Too quick for thought
or no thought too quickly.]
What was so special about a piece of paper
holding on for its life?
(Wind trying to pry it from its security,
its author praying for no rain.)
Was the author saying, "Think of me
before you leave?"
Or,
was it
author and reader
both knowing the words would be
seen, interpreted, stored away with gloves and ice scrapers
to be read and remembered on a cold day?

Leaks and All

Craig Evenson

A given flower wilts in a glass,
a salesman knocks on the door.
She releases a breath, pushes an eyelash
off her glasses, which lie on top of a
book on how to fix a faucet—
hers for over a year now—
takes a drink to bleed thoughts into emptiness
of too much love, too much heat
for worlds held together by tubes and wires and scripts.
The salesman goes away and a hummingbird
comes to feed from the morning glories
which are swallowing the house
leaks and all.

Someday

Sushma A. Singh

A poem lies as
an unopened
 bud
inside the immaculate
hush of a prayer -
a sculpted candle
 manifesting
a bead

 of glow;
caught in a spell,
leaf of lassitude
a fall
 away
from the splendor
of cosmic spin.

Someday, somewhere
 one caress
of a reader's sun-
flaked breath,
shall spawn
murmuration

on this sky,
veining red
the paper heart.

I Began to Wear Red

M.D. Berkman

I began to wear red
To bars at midnight,
Warning off men
Who could not tell
If I were interested or not.

Warning off those
Who did not want
To see me in red,
Like my first lover who threw
My red clothes out the window.

Like my first lover
Who might have thrown me
Out when I came home
If I had not put on a smile
Then snuck back into the night.

Snuck back into the night
To a blue, blue world,
An innocent who
Only knew at the time
Ways of love from one man.

A man who could not see
My wearing red rags
Was not to camouflage or enrage
But a plea to engage me
To wear white.

Half-Seen Beautiful Things

Patrick Vala-Haynes

Behind the tree
a child
Her bobcat sneer
The drift of hair catching
on the bark
The tease of an eye
as she sees you
seeing her.
How hard she works
to stay hidden
Too young to know
the betrayal of limbs
The smile you withhold
to give her the stage
To let her go.

Like Lost Dogs

Alexander Etheridge

Walking at dusk again,
and stray lines tap
on my mind's window,
looking for a poem.
I've seen her
dancing on waves
of an orchard breeze
I've seen
a rainbow born of
a black hole
My steps are crooked,
my thoughts are jagged.
If your country is
exile
in a way are you
always home
I've worn a trail into
grass, walking under
these towering trees.
Each night I track the moon
charging slowly
through shreds of cloud.
You may see me here,
talking out loud
to no one.
In the thin air of a dream
God's eyes
are the colors of rust
You may see me,
a stray word looking
for a language.

Melancholy of Beauty

Alan Altany

A sublime painting
signed by the artist
just before his suicide
on a summer's day,
black & white photo
of an innocent boy
staring at the camera
lay crumpled in trash,
a young mother
nurses her newborn
for the first
& last time,
an old man
kneeling in church
praying silently
for loneliness to end,
homeless man
smelling of urine
sleeps on a sidewalk
dreaming of his wedding,
flowering weed
grows in a gutter
unseen
before withering away,
beauty & melancholy
hidden & obvious
Everywhere.



I Miss the Sun

Arvilla Fee

Papa was a brooding man,
a perpetual crease
between his dark eyebrows;
he wore worry like some
wear pants, wrinkled,
slightly frayed from overuse,
but when he smiled, Lord
have mercy, it was like clouds
parting in an overcast sky,
and the sun beaming down
in all its golden glory!
We kids lived for that smile
and would pull any shenanigan
to see the flash of white teeth
across his work-tanned face.
We were like a king's jesters,
I suppose, telling jokes, hiding
frogs under Mama's skillet lids
(not something she appreciated)
standing on our heads, wearing
socks on our hands at dinner,
performing impromptu puppet
shows. All of us were long grown
and gone when Papa passed, but
it still hurt like hell, and I sobbed
as if I were ten, my mind flashing
through memories like one of those
old slide projectors. Papa had been
the paragon of fathers, a ray of light
no matter how gray the day. I would
pick up the phone many times
in the coming weeks, wanting to tell
Papa something funny, only to slip
the phone back into my pocket
and stare at the pouring rain.

Craving. Starving. Insatiable. A hunger that echoes throughout the body and mind. All-consuming in every perceivable way. You can't think straight and your skin tingles, prickly nerve endings overreact, and goosebumps mar your skin. It's gnawing, never satisfied, no matter how much you eat. Like an itch you can't scratch. You devour whatever's in front of you, but everything tastes bland. You watch satisfaction overtake others after a fulfilling meal and pangs of jealousy join the ever-present ones of hunger. Your meals sit at the bottom of your stomach, heavy and dissatisfying. You've reserved yourself to a life of wanting and never getting.

Then you meet her. The subway is crowded, people shove their way past and mumble noncommittal apologies, conversations are held on speakerphones, and the smell is unpleasant at the very least. The car lurches as it approaches the next stop, and people struggle to keep their balance. You grasp the handrail and let your body sway with the movement. From the corner of your eye, a flash of sweat slick skin catches your attention. A woman, stretched peculiarly across two seats. Her braids are haphazardly strewn over her shoulders, cascading wherever they please.

She moves to adjust her hair, pulling it away from her neck, and you watch her tendon strain as she does. You make note of the waft of vanilla perfume, and it makes her all the more appealing. Taking advantage of the stopped car, you move to her side and tap her shoulder. She tenses but relaxes when you flash her a kind smile. One question later, you're sitting in the seat beside her making light conversation. Before you get off at your stop, you ask for her number. She's happy to oblige.

Texting is your least favorite part; you know she's there, but she isn't really. Where vocal cords would vibrate, bubbles of text pop up with a single, disappointing ding. Warm, blemished skin is replaced with the cold, smooth metal of your phone. And her scent is nowhere to be found. You don't want to obsess over her. Don't want to care where she goes, who she's with, what she's doing. But you can't help it. You stalk her social media, watch for who liked her most recent picture, click on random profiles wondering who they are to her. Are they still in her life? How important are they? Do they love her like you do? You wander into places you know she frequents, hoping for a coincidental meet up. It never happens but you're okay with that. You sit in comfort at her favorite coffee shop, sip your drink, and almost taste something more. You begin to feel like maybe you could experience that satisfaction you always see in others. It's even better when you set up dates.

When you're together, it's everything. Your entire being vibrates with anticipation at her mere presence. It's like nobody else exists, all you can do is stare into her eyes. Someone could hit you with their car and you feel like you could brush it off to track her down for one more touch, one more glance at the skin on

her fragile collar bones that you'd so love to feel between your teeth, one more moment breathing the air she breathes. And the best part is, she reciprocates this feeling. You've worked so hard to build this bond you share, and she wants it to pay off just as badly as you do. There's a spark between you that's undeniable, and you both dance around it.

One day, you finally give in. Your stomach clenches, your mouth waters. You can't resist. You grab her waist and lean into her body; the intense smell of the vanilla perfume she's worn every day you've seen each other clouding your senses. She smells the same as she did on the subway, only clearer from the lack of intruding scents. It's delectable. She leans in. Her lips meet yours and you melt into them. They're smooth and plump. You swipe your tongue against her lips; the sticky residue of her lip gloss tastes sweet and manufactured. The kiss deepens; you both want it to. You break away to trail kisses down her face and neck and nip at her jawline. You trace lines up and down her body as she squirms under the touch. Soft, golden skin gives way beneath the pressure of your fingertips, catching under your fingernails. She sucks in air through her teeth.

Then, your canines sink into the side of her neck and meet the metallic tang of her blood, the sweetest thing you've ever tasted. It's pleasurable, delicious, fulfilling. And you want more. You need to have more. Increments of her flesh melt into your tastebuds as you rip away at her body and greedily shove them into your mouth, warmth spills from the corners and a slick, red drool slides down your face and drips from your chin. Thick globs plop against your skin and the ground. You're sure you'll get them later. You can't imagine wanting any of this moment to go to waste. You don't hear her screams, but you feel them vibrate through her body. You can't focus on anything apart from the buzzing in your head and the ecstasy coursing through yours.

And finally, you feel satisfied, for just a moment.

But when you're done, the itching, gnawing feeling returns.

Henry's Shed

Phyllis Price

now stands on someone else's land—shelter for a smokehouse,
workshop, coal, feed, and tack. A row of nails clamped between his lips,
he squared fragrant cedar boards milled from chosen trees—
hammer-saw-hammer-saw—until the shape emerged.

Autumn evenings after school I sat on steps exposed to evening light.

I lean into finger etchings in the grain where poison ivy clung,
search for scents of him on air and wood, stalk his ghost
in shadows where he stood, the creaking door he left ajar,
a splinter he removed with pocketknife when I was four
and he was learning, still, how to be a father.

Just As Well, Reece

Dan Sicoli

when i think about the moon
grease smearing your fingers
after you reached to tempt stars
but instead reeled in a whiskey
bottle hidden in the ceiling tiles
when i think about the brake dust
ingrained in roads of your hands
and lungs and your black heart love
turning grip to gripe shuffling
blame upon a lunar phase
when i think about your user
years adrift in the abandoned river
where every promise turned decoy
buoying in mud and silt
baiting eye to another lure
when i think about how i
envied your skill and precision
and how you neglected to
cast it out into the flow
when you had strength to hold steady
when i think about how that
single shot must yet echo through
your wounded psyche and
bittered whatever remained
of your devil-may-care
what a corpse of a dead moon
cannot conceal in its own darkness
is portrayed as distilled failure

Melon Seller

Zita Muranyi

you were so careful not to move
like a summer melon vendor by the side of the highway
except in the evenings
when your reading-glass was lost
and you couldn't recognize the letters
you will be reborn in a matter of years and
you'll have to learn to walk again
You think God is blind
you're tired of being
just the two of us staring into space
it doesn't display the verity
from under the covers my head
other times you're the one who's pulled the blanket over you
or you have chosen snoring as a noisy partition
I've heard it turned against the wall
as in my dream spring sprang
and the buds broke their reflection on your lost reading glasses.

Homestead Rhythm

Jeffrey R. Richardson

We are salt and sod,
We are old songs and new songs,
callouses and silk,
a smudge on the cheek
and sweat on the brow.

We are the harvest of honey and hope,
roots of rutabagas digging in the loam,
ripening bulge of oat grains
atop their swaying stalks,
the splitting of wood and kindling of fire,
we are the kiss of wine and sunlight,
we are cistern, river and mist.

We are salt and sod,
we are old songs and new songs,
abbess, abbot and angelus bells,
a smudge on the cheek
and sweat on the brow.

We are stories of parting and pain,
of homecoming shyness
and passion's gradual, grinning return,
the shifting, rising waves of warmth
in easy flannel caress,
in darkness and moonlight;
we are the storm and the aftermath.

We are salt and sod,
we are old songs and new songs,
compost and cocoon,
a smudge on the cheek
and sweat on the brow.

We are sculptors of love and solitude,
stretching out time with bold flirtations,
with muscle and decision and declining inhibitions
we are stone and the blink of surprise,
we are innocence loosed in meadow flowers,
midwives of courage and slayers of fear,
the dance of all seasons, of laughter and tears.

We are salt and sod,
we are old songs and new songs,
placenta and pulse,
a smudge on the cheek
and sweat on the brow.

Sensibility

Anders Ross

Rain makes the road a river,
With the tops of plane trees as its milestones,
How like a faint backdrop that shivers,
To the slowly opening winter rose,
Whose petals are pursed like a lover's kiss,
A little touch of nature, so overgrown with bliss;
That is received at the station platform, despite the sheer chill
On the lips of a soldier returned: how life can be so tranquil.

But what remains as the engine steams its parting hiss,
Is the war widow who stands by the painted bench, alone
Without refreshment of life, of a love she had once known.

In letters,
He wrote of the wildflowers that rose through the trenches,
The violets pressed dry in his officer's diary,
'What pretty songbirds they have here, they remind me of home'
And lo, he continued to say:
How she was his better, his summer and winter,
That in the autumn he'd bought her a golden ring,
Though the very thought of her made him misty-eyed . . .

They ended about here, so his commanding officer could tell,
For it was only half of a diary they ever found,
In the torn meadow where he fell.

Amelia

Michael Theroux

A name in the mist, Amelia
From ages past, from arbors
of vine-covered lattice
Jasmine scented, heavy, sweet
a call on Southern Aires, with cicadas

This love I've known, of such grace
from ages past, at a distance
More of time than miles
and I, with roses, waiting
calling one sweet name, so softly

When from the mist, Amelia
from blue dappled moonlight
Sweet-scented Southern night
drifts into my dreams, into my arms
bringing kisses of jasmine, of roses

Yes, without question, yes
into my life, from such a distance
of lives ago, into my heart
comes Amelia, from Southern mists
comes Amelia, cicada singing
Comes Amelia.



Brittle Leaves

David Ward

rattle on a tarmac path
as breath catches breath
with words worn away
by a wind as cold as death
where hilltop views the city
and the city spews the sea
and the alleys fill with echoes
of voices which have crawled
from oceans into kitchens
and along the backyard walls;
tom cat, tip-tap, a blind stick
staccato, clattering at bin-lids
spilling yellow fever flowers
till dusk wraps heavy blankets
and grey sleep swallows all.

Last Night

Daniel P. Stokes

You didn't know. I'd kept it secret.
But now – I felt it in my waters -
it was time to tell.
I whispered in your ear
(the room was crowded)
“I’ve a surprise.”
You turned and tinkled
wide-eyed, “A surprise?” I nodded
and bustled past composite faces
up a flight of half-familiar stairs.
I took it from a shoebox
stuffed with shredding
and hurried down.
You sat apart, unfrazzled
by the hubbub, grinning
at me lumbering before you,
hand wedged behind my back.
But when I held it out
and touched your empty pillow,
I faced once more in cold light
and in silence
the insignificance
of all we’ll never share.

The Meeting Place

C.V. Blaisdell

*"All real living is meeting."
—Martin Buber*

The tide trickles through
a gathering of rocks,
moss & slime & shipwrecked
seaweed—the wavering edge
of unknowable ocean
skimming wet sand, heavy
with our footprints
& sanderling scratchings

How do we name this in-between,
this fluid enterprise, this coming together,
this mess of beautiful things—

a universe at the center of us

“Howdy, Howdy”

Kevin Brown

I said, as my co-worker Kim
walked past, stopped to call my
repetition into question:
Why did you say that twice?
Quick-witted, I replied,
because I'm twice as proud
to be from the South,
a lie if ever there was one.
In moving to the Midwest,
I had wanted to leave holler
and yaller behind, ashamed
of the way we were portrayed—
television shows that tried to make us
into Jethro, Gomer, and Roscoe P.
Coltrane.
Kim's Why? echoed
down the hallway,
her contempt echoed
into empty class
rooms.
I didn't have an answer, then,
as I had to travel all the way to Washington
State—three coffee shops
per block, like churches
in every Southern town,
each worshipping what gets them
through another day—to find a love
for the land I left behind, to learn
what stereotypes should have told me
about the ones who laid out such lines,
the ones who believe the South
is a monolith of a monoculture,
and all Southerners sound like they come
from the same small town in Alabama.
I know the problems, but there are also
people like Jack Higgs, a Pulitzer-nominated
professor with an accent as thick as summer
humidity and the gnats that come with it,
who once said he spent his career proving
he was wiser than people's perceptions,
or Wayne—my best friend for the few years
of high school and our valedictorian—

rhymed yellow with tallow when describing
the tobacco he hung in his grandfather's rafters
where he understood the physics of force
and gravity better than any textbook,
or Jimmy Carter, Memphis drag queens, and
country music about the poverty and pride
conservatives have tried to ignore, overturn,
or legislate out of existence—
the progressives here are tougher
than Palmetto bugs and hate
because they have to be.
So now I hold my pen with
a grudge and write the answer
I couldn't come up with years ago.

petra and francisco were mexican. As you might have been able to tell. they grew up in large places and small ones. Places where Dads hit their kids and cheated on their wives. Places where a Parent could call you a Dog, treat you like one too! And, well, everybody just went along with it.

I suppose it was just leftovers.

Some Priests' habits they couldn't seem to shake. The smell of colonizers wet fur still lingering. Then, there was America, all Marilyn'd Monroed as they (the mexicans that is) tried their best just to peep what she hid under that skirt. America, with its hands on its hips, a superhero's body with a great S on the chest. The S stood for safety.

It also stood for Sam.

So off they went, petra and francisco, that great migration. that march north into the Kingdom of Equal Opportunity. that great palace up above, a Holy Paradise where god, (that biggest of brothers,) Superhero Sam that is. Said this. a psalm written in the country's cultural scripture:

Sam: *If you have a dream, the only thing that's stopping you is your work ethic*

There they were, Petra and Francisco. and believe me, many came. Some joined the great superhero army, (poor brown sidekicks, robins.), others drifted at sea on rafts and boats (fresh off of them), and if you can believe it, some even swam! All Wet in the Back. full Michael Phelpsing their way into sleepy onion fields and fresh spring picking Slavery. Oh, Uncle Sam, those stars in your eyes sing sweet lullabies. My American Dream.

But petra and francisco didn't fall asleep, lazy into their work, they took pride in it! It was the American way! Who needs a handout when I got hands to get it myself! They said this always. Had the words framed above their doorway and touched it every time they left their home at 4am out to the fields of handpicked elysium.

Feeling sleepy yet?

WELL, THEY DEFINITELY DIDN'T! Shaking trees and peeling nuts for Ol Stahmann the Shaman the Almighty Pecan Boy who hugged and loved all of his brown children. the joaquin's and maria's, ricky's and richie's, even, petra's and francisco's. "You all were born for this!" He might say, as he watched arthritic hands and feet curl into claws, Raking away. human metamorphosing into tool. Clinging to Super Sam's promises. Marilyn's Sweet Undercarriage.

What makes a good slave? Hmm?

I'll tell you.

A slave that is paid. Just enough to yawn and believe they are not.

So petra had some kids, what's a good American family without em?

But they were poor. Like REALLY poor. If a fetus could work petra and francisco might have let it. Have you seen a 6-year-old hustle? A 10-year-old sort onions at 2 in the morning? All for free. It's quite a sight. Almost as if they were born for it.

So, what's next in the plan? In this row of cotton and avocados. Years of sleepy Slave work, and the deep and slow mummification of a dream? The very try hard remembrance ritual of a promise? Superheroes and beautiful women seem to always get away with things, don't they? Sams and Marilyns. francisco and petra had left mexico to no longer be referred to as animals. Yet after years, decades in the Paradise, in the Kingdom of equal opportunity, They were treated like dogs.

And what does a kid, a puppy, learn from their parents?
From everybody, from the world and how it treats them?

well,

to be a dog of course.

Commencement

Margaret D. Stetz

planting themselves
in classrooms
anonymous rows
in autumn
that you must care for
and about
tended all winter
they wait underground
curled into themselves
you will see no results
only frost
over earth
but there's always
the beauty of promise
of what may reach high
in the spring
as brilliantly frilled
they will start to unfurl
into petals
and then
into irises
glorious, fresh
waving their colors
like art nouveau glass
sparkling but fragile
complex
some cascade easily
spreading toward sunlight
while some open
painfully
knotted in figures
twisted like volvuli
empurpled with pain and
distressed
every June
you will
celebrate blossoms
that you helped to nurture
and will never forget
while always regretting
and mourning
the one left

unreached and unrescued

this poem is his
(Al was his name)
who died on a bridge
suspended
arching over a park
all abloom

Short-Timer Syndrome

Alan Swope

My old neighbors told me
they were buying only plants
that would bloom in one season.

Seeing another Spring
was once as certain as the next breath.
Now, hedging their bets.

They're enjoying their eight-year-old
granddaughter at she is now,
content with imagining what
she will become in the future.

Former delights are now relished
only in memory—
people watching on the Piazza Navona,
witnessing a total lunar eclipse in Sedona,
hearing the joyous trilling of Sandhill Cranes
as they splash into the California delta.

Faded hopes for my old neighbors.
Perhaps, like the swan, onrushing death
will grant them a voice to sing
more beautifully than ever before.

Inheritance

James Scruton

As if for the proverbial other shoe, you wait these days
for your bloodwork's unlucky numbers,
an x-ray's ghostly hex, for some -scan or -graph
to draw an ominous horizon across your future.
Next year you'll be the age your father was
when his bones began to fail in a cancerous hurry,
ducking chemo, outrunning radiation.
You gave him his next-to-last shave,
rinsing the razor as he scorned to the end
your generation's clothes and music, your politics
and reading habits. You towed his cheeks dry
as he warned again, you'd never feed a family
by talking about the books, you loved.
You had little in common but weak eyes
and a time bomb of a heart. Yet you don't rule out
some other late, unlooked-for inheritance,
his bad marrow, perhaps, bequeathed after all
this time to you, your father's son to the brittle bone.

The Word Became a Stone

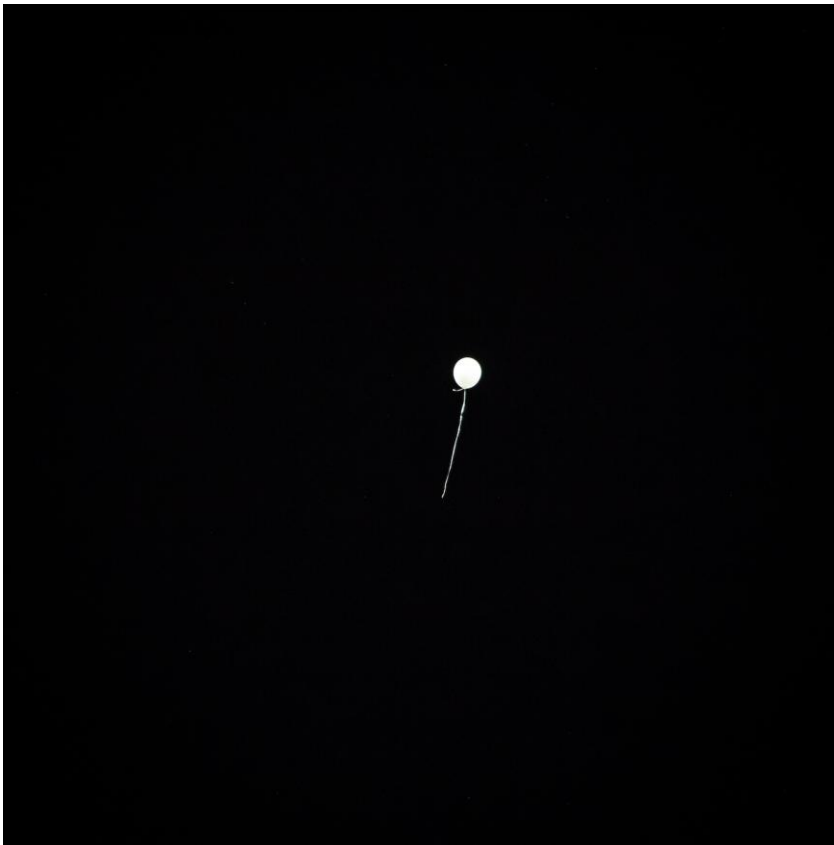
Richard Weaver

Rolling down mountainside, intent on revealing itself to the valley below. Alone, it suffered. Troubled, it broke its chains and accepted gravity's heavy helping hand. The word now stone, recalled a previous life, a dream-like journey in darkness, flowing into time from the solitude of absoluteness. Once anchored on earth it slept, undiscovered. Unheard. Un-uttered. Until it became airborne, lifted by light. Wafted in air. Drifting moonward. Floating now, weightless. Unchained from matter and meaning, adrift with other words and phrases. Whole sentences and clouds of paragraph. Drifting and shifting. Gathering. Recombinant. The clay of words spinning round and round, offers its exterior to uncalled hands, the fluency of memory, casting light against darkness, and sound upon silence.

Shooting Stars

Julia H. Fonte

Her mind closes
like shutters on the night
to things dark, cold.
There is only so much a mind can hold,
only so much a heart can endure
before tucking each echo
into concealed closets and drawers
within the psyche's mansion.
Safe now, stark room, staff nearby,
she's familiar with this temporary setback
as she learns to resist the need
to score surface of soft tissue,
to feel wall against head.
Learning to feel without the physical.
At the window
she searches the cloud-cloaked night
like an astronomer wishing
for the wink of a newly found star.
And after she finally pillows into sleep,
the atmosphere having blown away
its charcoal billows,
I, in my sky-blue scrubs,
camera in hand, find myself
mesmerized by a meteor's magic,
its burst of brilliance carrying the hope
she seeks
every single night.



Learning How to Speak My Father's Native Tongue

Sarah Liu

Darling, I know you saw your father as a mountain.
Stern and quiet.
To you who defined love through Hollywood stories,
he was a man of lessons, of hard work, of sacrifice.
His affection, a shadow you chased but never caught.

But look closely.
At the way he waits for you in the parking lot when you finish your classes,
At the box of persimmons that appear in the fridge after your mention of liking
them,
At the words that come as second nature:
“Did you eat yet?”
“Do you have another jacket?”
“When are you coming home?”

Do you hear it?
How loud the love is?
How it thrums like a heartbeat,
repeating your name
over and over again.

The Tigermoth

Angelina Carrera

This train's gonna take me so far that
when it stops, I don't know if I will.
Seek comfort in a rucksack,
the smell of lemons,
the clothes off my poor back.
At dawn a tigermoth clung to the windowpane,
thinking she could ride the wave of horsepower
all the way to wherever.
Nature brushed her off within the hour.
Caught again—
that desire to arrive somewhere so bad
you forget who you are.

Not-Mother's Day

Jane Desmond

If, when the condom broke
I hadn't been about to move
to New York
If you didn't already have
one child
If I could have imagined making it to dance class
with a toddler in tow
If you had committed
long before
or
If I had ever wanted
marriage
If I hadn't made the decision
without you
If the clinic had been closed that day
so that after, my best friend didn't drive me home,
kindly ignoring the small ruby-colored stain
blooming on her car's seat
would I now have
a daughter
sending me flowers,
bringing two grandchildren
to visit this morning,
instead of sitting in this silent house
watching the car pull up at the neighbors
doors slamming, toddlers surging
up the walk, their sprung bouquets
of scarlet blossoms thrust upward toward
the opening door?

Everyone Wants to Know Joy

Robert S. King

I try to cheat the weather of this land
with forecasts and dreams of sunflowers
to warm the winter shivers of worry,
to sift away the powder of snow,
to give birth to a new sun
that casts its bright eye on the future.

But like so many bathed in tears,
I've drowned in the poison, fallen
with the flocks of fluttering leaves,
my brittle colors turned to ash.

Never innocent, but now I feel like
the worst of both the living and the dead,
a gray mix of dark and light shadows
whose name could never be Joy,
whose arms never hugged warm enough
to melt the long, cold winter of the heart.

Among the considerable number of paintings at the Galerie de L'Esprit Dévoué, it was the smallest in the collection that had mystified Maurice Monteil for the better part of a year.

He stood before it now, all one hundred forty-four square inches of it. A golden field of wheat stretched into the distance beneath a dark blue night sky, the striking contrast of colors itself a mystery. How could the wheat glow so vividly in the absence of sunlight?

The painting posed more questions than it answered, which intrigued Maurice. Yet whenever he glanced around the gallery, curious if others felt the same, he found himself alone.

He continued his ritual inspection of the painting. In the foreground, two wingback chairs sat angled toward each other, upholstered in golden velvet, with intricately carved mahogany frames.

A young girl, about ten years old, sat in the leftmost chair. She wore a deep blue dress studded with white, resembling a star-filled sky. Her reddish-brown hair was parted down the middle and tied behind her neck. She rested one elbow on the chair arm beside her; her hands folded together patiently in her lap.

In all the time he'd spent studying her, he could never see beyond her doleful expression. The eyes were blank and staring—almost glazed—yet the pucker at her brow belied her worry, tinged with a hint of grief. Her mouth was solemn, set neither in a smile nor a frown, more a state of grim repose.

Whoever she was, she was resolved to wait, as the painting was entitled: *Waiting*.

Yet for whom, or what, was she waiting?

The second chair was empty, the cushion slightly askew, as if the chair had been recently occupied, then left abandoned.

At a squeak in the floorboards behind him, Maurice glanced over his shoulder. A woman in a pale blue coat had entered the gallery, her attention fixed on the paintings along the far wall.

A tickle crept up his spine. He could not remember a time when anyone had passed through the gallery before. Positioned at the rear of the museum, this room housed the less showy pieces, compared to the ornate galleries at the front.

It was a promising sign she had made it this far back. The empty chair was the meaning behind the entire painting, and he wanted to satisfy himself that it needed others the way it needed him.

"Hello," he said, nodding at her as she approached.

She seemed young, mid-twenties, with immaculately pressed curls underneath a stylish felt hat.

The woman's gaze jumped from the painting to him. Her eyes were doe-like, but with less of a curious spark than he would have hoped. "Oh, hello." Her painted red lips twitched into a smile.

She barely considered the painting. She was, in fact, about to skirt around him and move further along the gallery.

“What do you make of the empty chair in this painting?” he asked.

Maurice locked his gaze on the chair in question. He could sense the woman glancing at him before she took a step closer to give the painting further study.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “I think the girl is more interesting. She seems very sad.” The woman shivered. “But I don’t generally like dark paintings. They depress me.”

Dark?

Maurice struggled to formulate a reply. To disagree with her risked making him seem argumentative, which was not his intent. He wanted to explore the possibilities, to share his curiosity and discover, perhaps delightfully, that it resonated with another’s.

“It’s interesting you think of it as dark,” he said quietly, with a note of contemplation. “The golden field draws my attention to the chairs. The dark blue sky is merely a backdrop, and not the focus of the piece.”

“I suppose,” the woman said.

She sounded uncertain. Maurice loathed the idea of being placated for his opinion or brushed off in the interest of remaining polite. How could she overlook the painting’s unmistakable aura of mystery, and the intriguing presence of the empty chair?

It disquieted him to realize the woman felt no compulsion driving her to discover the truth.

The deeper truth.

The floor creaked beneath her shoes as she angled to slip past him.

“Well, goodbye, then,” he said, sensing her desire to leave.

The woman’s footsteps rang out across the wooden floor behind him, then stopped. She drew in her breath, then said, “My driver won’t be here for another twenty minutes. I’ll be moving out of the country tomorrow, and I wanted one last look at the Botticelli before I go. But I do agree with you. The empty chair is a mystery.”

It was a concession, Maurice realized; her sympathy was aimed not at the girl in the painting, or whomever was meant to occupy the abandoned chair beside her, but at him, standing alone with his thoughts in the empty gallery.

The stark awareness of his situation startled him.

So wholly captivated by the painting as he was, he hardly thought of himself as distinct from its contents. The longer he considered the painting, day after day, the easier it was to imagine the golden wheat crunching under his feet, the gaze of the girl in the blue dress settling on him as he approached the empty chair.

He *even* imagined he could detect a faint smile playing about the child’s lips as he did so.

Was she waiting for him, as the title of the painting seemed to suggest?

Maurice grunted softly.

Perhaps the artist intended to make anyone standing before the painting understand that the empty chair was meant solely for them, regardless of their state of mind.

The concept intrigued him. Was he, Maurice Monteil, in a state of existential crisis?

He hadn't entertained the notion, until now. He was happy enough as a typist, recording notes for the Bureau of Labor at departmental meetings. It was simple work without fuss or variation and was well-suited to his perfectionistic tendencies. It paid the bills for his one-bedroom flat and kept him reasonably well-fed, as well as allowing him time on the weekends to read and keep to his well-worn paths through the museum.

He hadn't expected more out of life, not really, except for this one question that had nagged at him for the past year.

"What's with the empty chair?"

The sound of his own voice startled him; the question had slipped out unbidden.

He heard a creak behind him. Maurice glanced up. The woman in the blue coat lingered by the archway.

So.

She hadn't left after all.

"Why does it bother you so much?" she asked, nodding toward the painting.

"I thought I lost you to the Botticelli," he said, surprised.

The woman glanced off to the side and smiled, as if he'd said something ironic. Now that he seemed to have more of her attention, Maurice felt nervous. He hesitated to share his full thoughts; he'd already misjudged her interest in the painting once.

"Do you come here often?" she asked, stepping up beside him.

Maurice lowered his gaze, then lifted it toward the canvas. He sighed through his nose, then turned to face her. "Yes."

"I've loved living in Paris for that reason," the woman said. "The museums, the art, the culture. The cuisine," she finished with another smile that quickly turned sad. "I hate to leave."

"Surely there will be museums where you're moving," Maurice said, sizing up the fine light blue wool of her coat. It was expensive, both in material and design.

"I'm afraid not," she said.

He waited for her to explain, but she didn't.

Her gaze flickered to the painting and despite the layer of rouge on her cheeks, she paled. "It's unsettlingly realistic, eerie even. There's something about it—I can't quite explain. It's more than the juxtaposition of light and dark. The artist is asking us a question, and it's not one I feel compelled to answer. It makes me want to run away, to hide from the girl."

Maurice considered her words, as well as his response. The driving need to connect with one other mind on the subject material of the painting propelled him forward, perhaps recklessly.

(There was nothing safe about the empty chair.)

“Do you believe it’s real, on some level?” he asked.

The words were out there, hanging between them, before he could claw them back.

“Real?” Her brows furrowed. “Why, none of this is real. It’s a museum full of precious art, yes. But none of the art is real in any deeper sense.”

Warmth crept up his neck. He had blurted out the question without any preamble. It had been unfair of him to pounce on her like that, and yet—*and yet!*—how he wished she had simply understood and taken his words at face value.

He felt ashamed, and annoyed that one simple question had caused him to feel so. “I do.” His voice was husky, the way it always got when he was nervous, as if he were about to choke on his own words. “I believe it’s real.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. She flicked her gaze between him and the painting. “How so?” she asked. She looked as if she might bolt, her stance primed for flight.

“In the sense that it has become my truth,” he said, fudging his response a little, to make it more palatable to her. “The meaning of the empty chair haunts me. It lives inside me, whether I am at work, at home, or here, standing in contemplation of it.”

“I suppose that’s what the artist wants,” the woman said, her tension easing. “Expression is ultimately a two-way street, at least ideally.”

“But that’s just it,” Maurice said, lowering his voice. “The child’s expression surpasses the ideal. She is upset that the chair is empty. She is challenging us to find out why she feels so.”

That’s when he lost her. It was as if a sudden chill had overtaken her, the kind that comes from touching something too real, too raw. The woman in the pale blue coat uttered a frail excuse about needing to check on the driver, and Maurice stood alone in front of the painting.

There would have been a time when he’d have been just as skeptical of someone preaching about the transcendent nature of Art, but not in the last year. The question had hung before him long enough.

It was high time he laid it to rest.

The chair...the chair...the empty chair...the words rang like a refrain in his mind. He reached toward it and stumbled. He regained his balance, then stretched out his hand farther still, until his fingers caressed the canvas.

The fallen heads of wheat crunched under his feet, precisely as he’d imagined they would. The air was neither cool nor hot, though he did feel surrounded by a pleasant sort of warmth.

A few steps away, the girl sat in the wingback chair, observing him. His gaze flicked to the empty chair and his heart stuttered.

All this time, he'd been right, but right about what? The painting *was* real. He had been able to step inside it.

Yet it was more than that.

The empty chair was *his*.

Certainty dwelt in him, akin to the feeling of stepping into one's own flat after many long hours. This place is *mine*. An immutable truth.

Maurice sank into the soft embrace of the empty chair.

The girl watched him.

"May I sit here?" he asked, though the question felt superfluous.

"I suppose that's the wrong question," he said. "What is the right one?"

The child's eyes narrowed briefly.

"Am I meant to be here?" he tried next.

"None of these are the right questions," the girl said, "and all of them are."

Enigmatic, Maurice thought.

"Oh, look," the girl said, "she's back." Her doll-like gaze was turned outward, toward the vast expanse of the wheat field, and ultimately, to the museum gallery which lay just out of sight, like a murky reflection on the other side of a fogged mirror.

Maurice glanced in the same direction.

The face of the woman in the pale blue coat loomed large on the distant horizon, but indistinctly, as if composed of smoke and shadow. She appeared confused, searching to make sense of what she was seeing, as if in a dream.

"Be still!" the child cautioned.

Maurice felt neither fear nor regret. He was not wistful for the city that lay beyond the horizon, nor did he feel compelled to hide from the girl or turn back and run the way he'd come.

He simply *was*, and that was enough.

"Who are you?" he asked the child, all the while keeping his eye on the far-off face of the woman in the pale blue coat.

"I'm Waiting," the girl said.

Maurice was perplexed. "That is your name?"

"It's what I do, and it's who I am, so yes. I suppose you could say my name is Waiting."

Maurice felt he had stumbled upon a truth even more profound than the mystery surrounding the empty chair.

He heard a distant gasp and glanced up at the horizon. The face of the woman in the blue coat was pale as milk. She clapped a hand over her mouth and disappeared.

He turned to the girl, delighted in the absence of worry lines on her face. Her eyes sparkled like the stars reflected in her deep blue dress, while a contented smile played around her lips.

"Waiting..." he murmured. "I like that. Where shall we begin?"

Making It

Esha Khimji

Sharp suit and sharper words,
panting with that Wall Street thirst.
You'd play hard and drink me
like the driest martini,
letting me bite the olive off
your toothpick.
I listened to whatever your city mouth would say, and you'd pour my time away
like flat champagne.
Half-drunk the morning after your latest 'networking' thing.
Blunts in the sick.
If you hate it so much, find a fucking cul de sac, you said.
Tempting, I thought, as men I never trusted washed up under the sink.
You keep them afloat, buoyant with uppers so they don't notice
what a downer you've become.
They've never known the 'you' I knew.
When you weren't so sharp but wanted to be. So badly.
It's embarrassing to want something so much, you once told me,
your eyes bright and tired.
Neon lighted you blue, shadowing your uneven stubble, your worn sneakers
at the edge of the puddle.
I kept that moment when you shoved it away.
I kept hoping you would find it again, maybe in a drawer you forgot about.
You could have brought it out to show, like an old photo.
Maybe we could have looked at it together.
Basked in that nostalgia glow.
I kept hoping.

Leftovers

Kerry Trautman

I reheat veggie lo mien. I can't eat it cold like folks
on tv—hungover one morning, poking their chopsticks

into flaps of a white carton by light of the open fridge.
I need it warmer than my body, and mine's in

a bowl because our place doesn't use those cute,
white cartons, and today's isn't takeout anyway but

homemade. All this to say I am not the same as other
people. My father used to cook pots of unrecognizable

Things which the rest of us tried a bit of, and he'd
putting the pot in the fridge, pick at it the next three

days. Cold wind whips the kitchen window. A golden
acorn squash glows in a blue glass bowl of oranges.

I'm not sure what I'll do with it, but I had to
have it. Bigger than the biggest grapefruit I ever held.

Surprisingly heavy—like a newborn baby whose weight
was removed from me, but I feel no lighter, rather

heavy with the responsibility of its life exposed to
air, rapidly cooling. My reheated lo mien rapidly cools

My father read cookbooks like romance novels.
Listen to this he'd say and read aloud of bone marrow

and clarified butter, and I'd blush, recognizing desire
behind his grin, even if it was only desire for sugars

and animal fat. I hope my newborns weren't too
disappointed with the world I birthed them into—

all fluorescent and drafty. I'll peel and chop the acorn
squash, roast it with olive oil, sage, and a little

parmesan. My family will dutifully try bites.
I will reheat the rest for tomorrow's lunch.

Things We Can't Fix

Kerry Trautman

I trust that every empty room is holding its breath, waiting to allow the next warm person inside.

Have a seat. Stay.

My interior is displayed like a jeweler's case—locked and twinkling, blocked from close inspection, artificial light.

Stars puncture dark night in hopeful slivers with nothing to reflect off.

Broken mechanisms won't always interlock, after all. Their gears end up in a rusted coffee can on a workbench, or in a scrap heap—recycled, crunched.

Time clicks itself inside my skull, unknowing its tick-tick-ticks are mis-calibrated.

Manhattan hotel rooms are lonely between check-out and check-in. But those in small towns expect emptiness for days on end. It's all about how to absorb vacancies.

By the time we see a star's light, it has likely been dead for years.

There are no keys jangling on a handyman's hip. No keys at all.

Nature Is For Sages

Joy Nevin Axelson

Terrace lights are fireflies.
Twinkling jets are stars.
Sidewalks, woodchip hiking paths,
and pigeons are nightjars.

Spotlights shine like harvest moons;
streetlights are the sun.
Skyscrapers, sequoias,
and dams are salmon runs.

Buildings, rock formations,
light pollution, dawn,
smog, the falling evening,
pit bulls, spotted fawns.

Fact'ries, photosynthesis,
and bus lines, spiders' webs,
subway tracks are riverbanks,
and rush hour, tidal ebb.

Junkyards, sprawling, speckled hills,
overpasses, arches,
gutters, tiny rivulets,
and bike racks, cattail marshes.

Razor wire is climbing vines,
and railroad ties, old logs.
Concrete cracks are salt flats;
exhaust fumes are light fog.

Chain link fences, shrubbery,
black asphalt, clear, dark pools.
Nature is for sages,
and cities are for fools.

Homeowner's Blues

Rick Rohdenburg

Mismeasured. Misassembled. Misrepaired.
If I could work with my hands
I'd have made something of myself.
Instead, every project is rickety and paint-smeared
from an agony of haste, or,
if God is merciful, abandoned altogether.

O how my wife has yearned
for a handy husband.
O how I have prayed
that Paradise require no maintenance.
The houses there, foursquare and sturdy.
The sky painted neatly, ineffably blue.

Mom painted my bedroom Benjamin Moore 0300 Luminous Days, on my twelfth birthday. I hadn't thought about changing my soft pink walls until Shannon Marie Falcone slept over. The new bumblebee-yellow walls demanded a level of optimism that left me feeling a little uncomfortable.

Our moms met organizing PTA fundraisers. When Mrs. Falcone needed somewhere for Shannon to stay overnight because her grandma was sick, mom offered the floor in my pretty pink room without even asking. Shannon had scanned my belongings, declared my aura to be golden, then proclaimed we were destined to be best friends.

She was a popular girl, with the sleek blonde hair and clear skin of my dreams. I was shy, muted by classmates. She laid on an air mattress beside my bed, and asked, into the darkness, if I'd ever kissed a boy (I lied about making out with an older guy from Canada during summer holidays). Shannon had already kissed seven boys but hadn't liked any of them. She said kissing is gross until you find your soulmate, so we needed to try out lots of boys.

I heard soft sobs long after I thought she'd fallen asleep. I whispered that I hoped her grandma would be ok. Shannon said that her mom lied because she'd found out Shannon's dad had a girlfriend in the city, so she went to drag him home by his balls.

Shannon and I painted my room Benjamin Moore 2023 Downpour Blue, on my fifteenth birthday. I'd picked out a pretty periwinkle shade, but Shannon said dark blue was more emo and edgy. We scream-sang to My Chemical Romance and Paramore, the room closing in on us with each indigo stroke. My dad brought us pizza and Cokes and let us eat in my room. Shannon leapt off the bed to hug him. He peeled her off, joking that her parents must not remember what she looks like because she's always at our house. Later she told me that she'd felt him get hard when she squeezed him. I told her to shut the fuck up.

I asked Shannon if she and Charlie had done it yet. For months she'd been talking about letting him go all the way. Shannon's boyfriend was an eighteen-year-old stoner with a mustache, and a rusty Toyota Camry. He always looks bored, but Shannon said kissing him was amazing. Through a mouthful of cheese and dough, Shannon blurted out that she was pregnant. She only cried when I asked her if Charlie knew. I wrapped my arms around her, and we sobbed together on the floor, surrounded by paint cans and greasy napkins. We went to Planned Parenthood the next day; I promised to hold her hand and keep the secret forever.

Todd and I painted our guest room Benjamin Moore 0023 Heirloom, on my twenty-third birthday. I wanted to wait until we knew for sure, but my glass half-full husband promised we could paint over it any time we wanted. I carefully cut in around the sill, wondering where Shannon was and if she had a window to look out. I hadn't heard from her in the year since my wedding. She stayed sober

long enough to hold my bouquet and sign the license, but not long enough to give a coherent toast. Todd had quietly put her in a cab before the cake was cut.

I worked on the final coat of soft peach and Todd assembled the crib. I'd been more numb than surprised when the call came from Child Protection Services. Shannon's baby girl had been in the NICU for three days when my best friend disappeared again, leaving behind a note with my phone number. Every day I cradled the fragile girl, watching her detox from Shannon's demons. I whispered her momma's stories into tiny velvet ears and made promises to her that I will never break.

Marie and I painted her old nursery Benjamin Moore 0850 Reflections, the day after Shannon's funeral. We sang Taylor Swift while applying the cheerful green shade Marie had picked out.

Yesterday my girl sat stoically in the front pew, between me and Todd, accepting condolences from grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who were strangers. At eight, Marie was smarter and more perceptive than I'd ever been, one of her many gifts from Shannon. She saved her tears until we got home. They arrived fast, hot, and angry, with nowhere to land but on my shoulder.

Tonight, when she is tucked in bed, under her new sunshine-hued comforter, she'll ask me to tell the story of her mom. And, as always, I'll paint a picture of our Shannon, layered, textured, and brimming with color.



The Skeleton

Jennifer Harrison

I play the ivory keys the black Cs
of your vertebrae spine of old books
atlas of calcium your loveliness
weighing gravity down

so that nothing floats away—
lean into my foramina
otolith my little ear of vertigo
my pelvis scribbled with fat veins—

you are the gothic scarecrow
of the unharvested field
who will step through my skin
into the light but until then

your empty sockets
are nests for crows the laser eyes of angels
each time you walk I walk each time you sit I sit
each time you kneel still I cannot pray

Lunar Love Poem

Michael Salzman

Our shy moon disappears
A month at a time
For a few days

Eats at itself
Like a pie
Or scimitar of light

Love halts its dark face
Turns away
Embarrassed by the sun

Between red and yellow
The moon equips the sky
With mystery

Looks for stars behind
The scattered dust
Of dark energy

You turn your lips to me
Not waiting a minute more
For the moon's return.

I'd laughed.

That little guy on the train, his glasses foggy with tears, we'd gotten off at the same stop, wound up at the same bar. I'd bought him a beer, told him some jokes, described the girl I'd just laid—how she rode me cowgirl, whinnied when she slapped my ass, used her knees like spurs in my ribs—and now I had a craving for oats. I got half a chuckle out of him, so on the topic of horses, I asked why the long face?

It was his brother, gone, recently, young. I'd asked how, and he'd gulped some beer, stared at the Michelob coaster shredded between his fingertips, murmured “a piano fell on him.”

I'd laughed, asked if the Road Runner had zipped by going “Meep meep,” offered to buy another round. He'd left.

And that was that, never saw him again, never even thought about him again, not til a couple years later.

It was a Sunday, I'd been running three days no sleep, man on a mission, hit this club where a guy knew a guy who shot dice with a dude who knew a gal who did deliveries for a meat shop where the butcher side-hustled as Frank Freddy's muscle, 300 pounds of tattoos who mostly just enforced payment plans unless someone fell too far behind and—even then—not too much more unless they started running their mouth about it.

I'd tracked this Butcherman to a Jewish deli, six in the morning, gold chains, tight shirt, reeking rum, big beefy guy waiting on a big beefy sandwich. I'd told him who I was, asked about Jamie—Jamie, whose last lucky day was in the eighth grade when his dad woke up on Christmas too sick to kick his ass so he came over to my house to eat ham, play poker, sharpen his tongue on Richard Pryor records.

“Your boy didn't bet with us,” Butcherman had smirked.

“No,” I'd said, “but he played the ponies with Pablo down the street and Pablo isn't talking. Look, I know you all subscribe to the ‘Deadbeats Digest.’ Just tell me something, okay? The kid's mom is tearing her hair out.”

Deli-guy had called a number, dropped a sandwich on the counter, and lured Butcherman over. Looping the sandwich bag around a wrist, Butcherman chuckled, shrugged, and decided to throw me a crumb. He put his palms together, pointed his fingertips at me, and wiggled them side to side.

“The fuck is that?” I'd snapped, my eyeballs exploding with Adderall.

“The secret handshake?”

“No,” he'd said, his hands still making waves. “That's your friend swimming with the fishes.”

And he'd laughed, dropped a twenty on the counter, and slapped the bell above the door on his way out like a cat batting a toy.

That was what—October? Jamie's memorial service was in November.

I remember the rain, moldy clumps of foliage dive-bombing off the trees onto an empty casket, the red leaves like bloody Kleenex, preacher saying Jamie had been called home, Jamie's mom shrieking "not *my* home," letting out a wail long as the winter.

Anyway, it's spring now, which helps—the butterflies and whatnot. I'm seeing a girl who won't let me shake her loose, three months counting. She's funny, funnier than me, tells jokes, in clubs, she's good, gets paid.

But she plays this one joint, "Mr. Giggles," I don't go see her there anymore. No matter how sharp her shit is that night, no matter how many drinks I suck down, I can't crack a smile.

They stash a piano in the corner for the music comic. My girl's hot as hell, normally can't take my eyes off her, but I end up staring at that fucking Steinway all night.

Thank You for the Cookies

After Lisa Bellamy

Elizabeth Hill

I called from Florida to say
I miss the City.
I meant I miss you, but I never say that.
And you sent me the cookies --- the ones
from my favorite Italian bakery. You've always
been so thoughtful, though I don't deserve it.
I was the older, the lauded boy.
I'm sorry I hit you so much they sent me
to a child psychologist.
He asked Vy do you hit your sister?
I didn't know. I'm sorry I reveled in being the
preferred child. I'm sorry I did not stop them
when they went on about my IQ scores.
I'm sorry I interrupted you whenever you talked
about yourself. I needed that attention too.
I'm sorry I told them you
hid the vegetables in your napkin.
Thank you for being my crew at the races.
I'm sorry I let Ned pick on you.
I worried he would pick on me.
The cookies arrived in the white cardboard box
with the red and white string, so tantalizing.
I'm sorry I told you you weren't cool
until you believed it. Thank you
for letting me make your boyfriend my friend.
Thank you for not telling our parents about the pot.
You even sent the chocolate tricolor ones
I especially love, also the vanilla with apricot centers,
and the black and white checkered!
I'm sorry my speech was already slurred
when you arrived at the bar.
I'm sorry I always took my wife's side.
You remembered the lacy molasses ones.
Thank you for all the pictures you took of my kids.
Thank you for loving them.
I'm sorry I cut you off.
Mom said you had gone crazy
when you fired your therapist.
I'm sorry I believed her.
You are fine without those meds.
Thank you for marrying the guy who

eases our disagreements.

Thank you for always laughing at my jokes, my friend.

At the Crossroads

David Romanda

Finally, the Devil shows up.
“Would you rather be lucky
at cards or lucky in love?” he asks me.
He’s dressed like a kind of
hobo drifter, all tatted up.
He’s sunburned red, but doesn’t
have horns or anything.
The Devil says, “Choose.”
“If it’s not too much trouble,” I say,
“I’d like both luck in love and cards.”
The Devil just turns and starts
walking down the road.
“Greedy fucking prick,” he says, shaking his head.

Got It Under Control

Cathy Porter

If we count backwards, we'll end up
right where time left us in the dirt –
but we don't count on anything these
days. We drift and dodge, sleep when
exhaustion overcomes, or we pass out
from go hard or go home -- no diamonds
on this windshield – just dimple chips
and scattered lines of cracked glass;
our version of abstract art for the delusional.
Friends have ghosted; even the best have
limits. Tonight is cold; temps dropping to
the low teens, snow on the way. We shouldn't
be out in this weather -- but we've never
backed down from a challenge. It doesn't
count if you can still function, right?

If Bombs Were Flowers

Donna Pucciani

roadsides would explode
with blossom. Pick your favorites—
crimson poppies, the white fronds
of hydrangeas, day lilies orange,
blushing coral.
Bees would zoom, nectaring
in the cups of four-o'clocks
which, having lost track of time,
would burst forth at midnight
or whenever they couldn't
help themselves, overcome
with long-forgotten joy.
Booms of butterflies
would wing across continents,
fluttering like drunken seraphim
over the cracked earth
of drought-ridden gardens
and the rubble of leftover cities,
where children with empty eyes
and hungry bellies play among stones.
In the shards of buildings,
violets bloom.



The Play's The Thing

Bruce McRae

Of one who loved not wisely but too well,
said Shakespeare's Othello,
talking about me, about you,
all those starring in love's staged comedy,
tragedy waiting patiently in the wings,
its mask slipping, a tear falling
for what seems like centuries.

Boys pretending to be men.
Women disputing womanhood.
Love's infection spreading mouth to mouth,
theatres shut in a time of plague,
princes in love and losing their heads,
their beloved wasting away in towers,
in dungeons, banished to an island
for daring to love beneath their station,
their names never spoken again.

Love's courtly melodrama,
starring you and you and you.
Studying our lines and then forgetting them,
ad libbing wildly, chewing on the scenery,
Love's brief spark then the theatre's in flames,
all of us merrily burning.

The Hills, Right Now

Don Pomerantz

I say to the fox, scamper through the underbrush
just as the tales say you are meant to—

but no, she just stands there a bit farther
away than you are from me now.

She's unthreatened, blasé, I am too big to be food and
inexplicably do not appear to be predator—

must be the fluffy hat I wear, she seems to stare at me
from a time-interrupted space

as I stare back, saying fox, this is the part where you run
through the underbrush, as previously stated,

to your well-known lair of invisibility before I realize
it is I who have been invisible all along

and she is looking right through me at something sublime
and no doubt beyond imagination delicious—

sweeter than all those bird calls kissing the palette of her ears.

The Commuter

Sonia Nanescu

The sky is made of wind and soot and smoke,
fingertips touch the smell of gasoline
and there is talk of girlfriends and summer
as I partake in the enthusiasm of a stranger
I know only whispers about.
The bus goes by rusty buildings,
vibrating with all its hinges
until even my teeth clatter,
and bursting with noisy passengers
perfect for this nosy wanderer.
As I sit in this place of waiting
the chatterer tingles my mind and eardrum
with something to cling on
until my stop arrives to give a target
to tremulous steps, as if uncertain
if the floor is made of soap or stone.

Beautiful and Forgetful Father

Sonia Nanesca

The first to show me laughter, pickaback on shoulders of a giant,
or whirling through the air like deluge on never failing arms to land,
I thought I had the world,
my joyful father.

The first to break my heart, my hero,
with green eyes that borrowed warmth from sunshine
And blended it with blue from ocean's bottom,
my beautiful father.

The first to see me when even for my mother I was a riddle,
You knew there was nothing I couldn't forgive,
even when mother you betrayed for another,
my unchaste father.

The first to teach my loss, did you know that I lost a piece of my mother too?
Was it that the other had green eyes, like you? Was she kinder or brighter?
Or was it her daughter, your daughter, that came later?
My absent father.

The first to show me the jagged shape of promise broken,
I craved nothing more than your embrace, yet deep in sleep's hallucinations,
my nightmares were of loneliness, without you. I was forgotten,
my forgetful father.

Dad called it prime time, when the sun went orange and mosquitoes swarmed in buzzing clouds about me, when a lake's surface was so populated by the ripples of fish kissing bugs from the surface that it looked like rain. When northern pike prowled weed beds, stole those ripples from the lake's surface by snatching bluegill in their teeth. This was always when my bobber sank and line screamed from my reel, when the bar-goers at Fay Lake Resort looked out the window and saw me, twelve, and the silhouette of my fishing rod, bent like a sickle by the pressure of life.

Mom had found a job. It was a summer gig, bartending for Fay Lake Resort, just a couple miles from Long Lake. This was a resplendent time, one where Mom seemed put-together, where Dad found room to smile, and where I got to fish on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night, on the resort's common pier, which floated on two huge barrels, and sat between five cabins on either side, which each hung over Fay Lake. From my pier, I could cast beneath cabins five and six, in the shadows under the cross beams. I could cast out deep on my left-hand side, where I knew from old boat trips with Dad that there was a pondweed forest rife with little perch and home to larvae clinging to the soft green branches swaying just three feet beneath the surface. Or I could cast right, where the silt and weeds dropped deep into a cool expanse of overgrown rock, where there'd be white crappie skimming the surface, pike snaking their way through that undergrowth, bass snacking on the little bluegill that are snacking on the bugs stuck to the lily pads down the shore. I dreamt of all this water in my casting range, the miniature lake within the lake. On the "Great Catch!" tack-board in the resort's bar, pictures of me with plate-sized crappie and big pike with their spots like splotchy stars against their green dusky skin crowded out those of the old timers and vacationers, and I took great pride in that.

That evening was a prime time like any other. Mom was tending the bar alongside Katie, the resort owner, who had high cheekbones and couldn't escape her Floridian accent. She carried herself like she hadn't quite acclimated to the glacial pace of life in Wisconsin's deep north, but like she wanted to. She was loved by me and by everyone – I loved the free sodas she'd hand me and the pats on my back when I came running into the bar with my hands spread wide, saying I caught a fish "This!" big. Townsfolk loved that she revived Fay Lake Resort, provided a few jobs, refilled its pools, propped the cabins and piers from sinking into the lake, at least for now. Dad was in the bar, where he chatted with the loggers and truck drivers and mechanics like him, a collection of sore hands wrapped around cool drinks, sun-chapped lips telling stories of backbreaking days.

And I was out on the pier, and somewhere between the clink of glasses and somewhere amidst the chatter, my bobber twitched. My whole body tensed; I knelt down to place a soft hand on the rod. Beneath that bobber was a half foot of braided line, moss green, and a size 3 blood red hook tipped with a four-inch redbait river minnow, caught from the outlet of Fay Lake itself just a day ago, and

saved in our basement for just this occasion. Dad swore by this set-up, used it when we fished together out on his boat, which happened much less now. In this way though I revived the feeling of our fishing together, and when my bobber glided across the surface, dragged beneath the weight of something big, then sank, I set the hook just like him.

The pike slashed through the water, all the way left from cabin 5 to cabin 6, a water whipping arc that sent my drag screaming. I knew what it was from how it felt; I was an old hand wrangling at Fay Lake pike by now. I pulled hard, strained the tendons in my wrists, wrenched the fish around tall stalks of pondweed until it crested the surface. With my net I scooped it up and laid it out on the pier. I stretched one of Dad's old tape measures out and got my figure: 30 inches. The biggest I'd ever caught. My heart pounded alongside the beating of its gills. I scooped a handful of water from the lake and dropped it over those gills, and as I dug into my tacklebox for my stringer, I looked into its eyes, the eclipses of its pupils against a simmering orange halo, a dark sclera like the night sky encroaching.

I ran inside to the bar. 'Garth Brooks' "Low Places" was playing, as ever, and I scanned to see my dad there on the corner stool, chatting with an orange-capped trucker, probably about the upcoming deer season. I ran over to him and Katie called from behind the bar, "Catching anything bud?"

And I stood there in the bar, excited, and told her so loudly as to tell the whole bar, who stopped chatting and turned and looked at me, about the 30-inch pike, the saga of my bobber sinking, the fight, the way it wasn't just long but also fat, and that it just on the stringer outside, if anyone wanted to see.

There was a general cheery murmuring, a "How about that?" energy that took its turn through the room.

"Sounds like they're biting, you better get back out there!" Katie said. And that realization struck me hard, that there could be more out there, so hard that the realization that some strangers probably didn't want to leave their cozy stools to see some fish was parried away and never occurred to me. With a wave to Mom and Dad, I ran across the crumbling road and back to the pier.

The pike, strung through the nostril and swimming lazy circles, was still there. I fished another minnow from my bucket and cast again, deep on my left-hand side. The evening burned on, and I watched every twitch and nod of my bobber and fantasized about what could be on the end of my line – perhaps a bass this time, or a rare Fay Lake walleye – though some part of me, a part of me that would feel at home with the old-timers in the bar, perhaps, always knew it was only my minnow swimming in circles on my hook. I knew that when something big struck, there would be no mistake.

There was a paddle boat tied to the pier. It was there for the kids on busier weekends, a commodity. Somewhere between watching the bobber twitch and swatting mosquitoes from my humidity-dewed skin, it moved. Silently, it floated five feet aside. I blinked. The lake was utterly still, as it usually is at prime time. I peeked at the pike on the stringer. It sat there, just staring forward and

breathing. I shrugged. My bobber twitched, the chatter in the bar drifted through the open windows, frogs sang in the lilies. I was in my usual trance.

Then there was an incredible splash by my side, and the stringer holding the pike was drawn pull-cord tight, and the paddle boat, which had drifted back to its original spot, was pushed aside again. I scrambled to my feet and looked over the edge of the pier, and there he was.

A snapper turtle, wide as a truck tire, tore into the pike. Plumes of blood billowed into the water, and the pike flailed, the kind of movement only panic beckons, but it could not escape the jaws of the snapper, its grasping paws bigger than my dad's hands.

I felt dizzy. I could only watch as the turtle took strips of the pike's muscle in its mouth and ripped it from the fish's frame as it thrashed. The paddle boat tried to float back to the pier, but the turtle pushed it aside again, redoubled its tearing. I stared into its ravenous, simple eyes, and it did not look back at me. A forest of algae swayed on its back. Fat leeches bore into its underarms. It must have been older than me.

A crunch of gravel. Dad approached me. Maybe he saw me staring, arms limp at my sides, or maybe he just wanted to see my fish. He joined me on the wobbling pier. I could only point at the macabre scene.

"Jesus Christ," he said, quietly. He tugged back at the stringer, some protective instinct I wasn't strong enough to muster, but it did nothing against the turtle, its hooked jaw.

"I'll be right back," he said, and he patted me on the shoulder and ran back to the bar.

He came back out with a half-dozen locals, all a little drunk.

"Now that's gotta be the biggest fucker I've ever seen," someone said. And they all murmured in agreement, their decades in the Northwoods and all their exaggerated stories of wilderness escapades still no match for this beast that swam beneath them. We all just wobbled on the pier and watched blood fill the water.

Finally, one of the loggers acted on a thought that started to fill us all: that we must capture the turtle. He ran down to Cabin #3 and grabbed a muskie net from a boat docked there. He ran back, huffing, and soon, he and my Dad and I had hands on the net, and everyone else made way, and we slipped the net beneath the turtle, who was too indulged in his gluttony to notice what was happening, and we heaved him out of the water. We all huffed with exertion, strained arms and widened our stances to hold the turtle's weight. It hovered there in the air, hissing like a hot coal, bending the net's aluminum handle. For a moment, it hovered there, its size made known to the world above, until it thrashed, kicked its massive paws, and burst open the net, sending itself plummeting, still hissing, back into the water.

We all sputtered, swiped lake water from our lips.

"Wait one sec!" We heard behind us, and we all turned to see Katie, jostling keys, turning around and running back to a garage I'd never seen opened. From where I stood, I thought I saw fishing poles, huge ones, the kind you stick on

downriggers on oceangoing boats. There seemed to be lifejackets and lures all hung up on a tackboard. An entire life, an entire type of fisherman I'd never seen.

And there she was, Katie running toward us with a steel tuna net held like a war banner. She ran onto the wobbly pier, and we all took the handle now, the net half the length of the pier itself, and we dipped blindly into the muddy, bloody water, where we knew the turtle must still be, and we heaved.

I don't know why we did it. Maybe at the end of everybody, there's a thirst for the extraordinary. I used to think it was just us, just small-town folks looking for something to do. But I kept thinking about Katie, who'd lived a whole life by the ocean, running with that net toward us, a banner of her passion for that moment. Then there she was and there we were; we stood there on the shore of Fay Lake in a semicircle, and we stared at the turtle, which dug its claws into the grass, and blinked slowly. Prime time's orange light faded to ordinary darkness, and after much chatter, stories of these old timers' days in canoes and among the lakes, of turtle's past, the crowd started to dissipate. Soon, it was just my dad and Katie and me and the turtle. We stared in contemplation at the turtle for some time. It stared back, a jagged boulder with a grimace. Then, Katie slapped her hands on her pockets, picked up her net, and said,

"What a day!"

And she walked away. Then, as if it sensed the social shift, the turtle, too, turned around in its slow way. Its spiked tail dragged in the grass; its great belly flattened the reeds as it slunk back toward the lake. It felt natural that it would somehow turn its head to say goodbye, but of course it didn't. It slid noiselessly into the water, and Dad and I just sat in its absence for a while. Voices from the bar began to fill the night again, and Dad and I knew we had one thing left to do before we could join them.

I hated to see that the pike was still alive. It swayed in the water, directed now by the motion of Fay Lake instead of its own strength. Its muscles were shredded to the spine on both halves of its body, twists of clotted blood floated out from deep within its body. Its fierce eyes seemed sad. I felt Dad glance at me, my arms pasted to my sides, my chin drawn down to the Earth.

Then, a shape appeared on the lake's surface, illuminated by the half-moon that had made itself known. The turtle's head, huge, was bobbing on the surface, turned back to us. Without a word, Dad knelt down and removed the stringer from the pike. With a careful hand, he let the pike slip forward in the water. In the dark, the turtle took the fish in its jaws with surprising gentleness and disappeared beneath the surface. Inevitable, how things sink. I'll never forget it.

Linnie

Cole Thompson



If You Want to Take the Suspense Out of Death

Walter Beineman

and what can happen next
have them
put the worms in your coffin before you are buried.

settling the question.

Mount Up With Wings Like Eagles

Ana M. Fores Tamayo

Mount up with wings like eagles, tilting at those windmills,
do not despair to dying days or fighting foes—
valiantly bathe our world with *besos*, never borders.

Lesser souls succumb to simulated secrets.
They will bicker, and in vain, feud painted enemies.
Mount up with wings like eagles, tilting at those windmills

with our fearless front, intrepid warriors.
Fight on against misdeeds, transgressions, sin.
Valiantly bathe our world with *besos*, never borders.

Those folk who spread tall tales and faulty fictions,
who misinform and fear the other, the unknown... you must
mount up with wings like eagles, tilting at those windmills.

Passion ought to counter hate, to break those barriers.
Love needs to win the day throughout this plunging planet—
valiantly bathe our world with *besos*, never borders.

Champion, crusade, apostle for what's true—
never concede the struggle to save our world, our worth.
Mount up with wings like eagles, tilting at those windmills,
valiantly bathe our world with *besos*, never borders.

Walking By Water

George Amabile

Under palm fronds, flecks and spots of sun
fade, and hard shadows
edge from definition into the soft dusk.

This time of day often invites me
to think philosophical thoughts
but tonight, there is only a memory:

*we've been on the beach all afternoon;
she's telling a story; her eyes glow
and glow as day ends, her eyes,
their light, and nothing else in the world.*

Contributors

Alan Altany has BA & MA degrees in Catholic theology, and a Ph. D. in religious studies (University of Pittsburgh). After an academic career, he is a semi-retired, septuagenarian professor of Comparative Religions at a small college in Florida. He was the founder & editor of a small magazine of poetry (*The Beggar's Bowl*), a high school teacher & university professor, factory and lawn maintenance worker, hotel clerk, novelist, delivery truck driver. He has published three books of poetry for a series, "Christian Poetry of the Sacred": *A Beautiful Absurdity* (2022), *The Greatest Longing* (2023), and *Intimations* (2024). His poetry has appeared in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Valley Voices*, *Sand Hill Literary Magazine*, *The Hong Kong Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Montreal Review*, and others. He writes with the steadfast support of his golden retriever, Zeke. Website: www.alanaltany.com.

George Amabile has published twelve books, won many prizes and awards and had work in over a hundred publications including *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *American Poetry Review*, *Botteghe Oscure*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, *Saturday Night*, *Poetry Australia*, *Sur* (Buenos Aires), *Poetry Canada Review*, and *Canadian Literature*.

Lis Anna-Langston, "Hailed as "an author with a genuine flair for originality" by *Midwest Book Review* and "a loveable, engaging, original voice..." by *Publishers Weekly*, Lis Anna-Langston is the author of *Skinny Dipping in a Dirty Pond*, *Gobbledy*, *Tupelo Honey*, *Maya Loop* and the story collection *Tolstoy & the Checkout Girl*. Raised along the winding current of the Mississippi River on a steady diet of dog-eared books, she attended a Creative and Performing Arts School from middle school until graduation and studied Literature at Webster University. Her novels have won dozens of awards including the NYC Big Book Award and her films have been screened around the world. A three-time Pushcart award nominee her work has appeared in dozens of literary journals including *The Literary Review*, *Emerson Review*, *Hobart*, *Barely South Review*, and *Emrys Journal*."

M. D. Berkman writes poetry, fiction, and reimagined fairy tales, and blogs on UN issues, including climate and women's rights, for the Women's National Book Association. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Comstock Review*, *Caesura*, *Aji Magazine*, *Earth's Daughters*, *Stone Canoe*, *Glassworks*, *The Waiting Room*, *Seems*, and *Muse*, among other places.

C.V. Blaisdell is a New England writer & poet whose work has appeared in *Third Wednesday*, *Star82 Review*, *Portrait of New England*, multiple anthologies, and even a community cookbook.

Kevin Brown (he/him) teaches high school English in Nashville. He has published three books of poetry: *Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and

Exit Lines (Plain View Press). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again*, and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*. Find out more about him and his work on social media sites at @kevinbrownwrites or at kevinbrownwrites.weebly.com.

Bill Bruce began in advertising before moving to longer-format stories and directing. He and his wife, Tracy, formed a multi-media entertainment and marketing partnership creating work in various mediums while also publishing short stories in *Lunate*, *Mud Season Review*, *Oyster River Pages*, amongst others. Bill just completed his first novel.

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch* (Querencia Press, 2023) and *May All Our Pain Be Champagne* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). He has appeared in *The Broadkill Review*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *Barrellhouse*, *fifth wheel press*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, and more. Visit carriganak.wordpress.com or follow him on X @carriganak for more info.

Angelina Carrera, 22, is a neurodivergent poet studying Philosophy and Creative Writing at UC Berkeley. She is the winner of First Matter Press' 2024 Ekphrastic Poem Contest. Her work appears and is forthcoming in *After Happy Hour*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *F(r)iction*, *The Bookends Review*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, and more.

Clarissa Cervantes is a researcher photographer. Clarissa's photo gallery includes images from all over the world, where she finds inspiration to share her photographs with others through her creative lens, inviting the viewer to question the present, look closer, explore more the array of emotions, and follow the sunlight towards a brighter future.

Chris Cottom lives near Macclesfield, UK. He has work published or forthcoming in *100 Word Story*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Flash 500*, *Flash Frontier*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *Leon Literary Review*, *NFFD NZ*, *NFFD UK*, *Oxford Flash Fiction*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Raw Lit*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Streetcake*, *The Lascaux Review*, *The Phare* and others. In the early 1970s he lived next door to JRR Tolkien.

Whitney Cooper holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University, where they served as editor-in-chief of *Jelly Bucket*, the graduate literary journal run by the university. Their poetry appears in *Glassworks Magazine*, *Stillpoint Literary Magazine*, *Calliope*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *SHARK REEF*.

Laine Derr has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, Ted Kooser, and Robert Pinsky. Work has appeared or is forthcoming from *The Wells Street Journal*, *ROPES*, *Full Bleed + The Phillips Collection*, *The Amistad*, *ZZZZYVA*, *Portland Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Chapter House*, and elsewhere.

Jane Desmond: is from Champaign, Illinois; her work appears in *Persimmon Tree*, *Words for the Wild* (U.K.), *The Shrew Literary Magazine* and in other collections. She is currently working on my first chapbook.

Richard Dinges, Jr. works on his homestead beside a pond, surrounded by trees and grassland, with his wife, two dogs, two cats, and eighteen chickens. His recent work appears in *Wilderness House*, *WINK*, *Alembic*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

Alexander Etheridge has been developing his poems and translations since 1998. His poems have been featured in *The Potomac Review*, *Museum of Americana*, *Ink Sac*, *Welter Journal*, *The Cafe Review*, *The Madrigal*, *Abridged Magazine*, *Susurrus Magazine*, *The Journal*, *Roi Faineant Press*, and many others. He was the winner of the Struck Match Poetry Prize in 1999, and a finalist for the *Kingdoms in the Wild* Poetry Prize in 2022. He is the author of, *God Said Fire*, and *Snowfire and Home*.

Craig Evenson lives in Minnesota with a cat, a woman, two dogs, and three parrots. The woman does not always enjoy his poems. The rest have no opinion. His first collection, *Meltwater*, is coming in 2025 (Clare Songbirds Publishing).

Arvilla Fee lives in Dayton, Ohio, teaches English for Clark State College, and is the managing editor for the *San Antonio Review*. She has published poetry, photography, and short stories in *Calliope*, *North of Oxford*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Mudlark*, *Remington Review*, and elsewhere. Her poetry books, *The Human Side* and *This is Life*, are available on Amazon. Her third book, *Mosaic: A Million Little Pieces* is due this December. Arvilla loves writing, photography and traveling and never leaves home without a snack and water (just in case of an apocalypse). Arvilla's favorite quote in the whole word is: "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." ~ Henry David Thoreau. Her website: soulpoetry7.com/

Julia H. Fonte is a retired psychiatric and Hospice nurse living with her husband on old Vermont farmland. Her work appears in *The Mountain Troubadour*, *Touchstone*, *The Braided Way*, and *Northern New England Review*.

Ana M. Fores Tamayo: Being an academic not paid enough for my trouble, I wanted instead to do something that mattered: work with asylum seekers. I advocate for marginalized refugee families from Mexico, Central America, and most recently, many other countries from which people flee. Working with asylum seekers is heart wrenching, yet satisfying. It is also quite humbling. My labor has eased my own sense of displacement, being a child refugee, always trying to find home. In parallel, poetry and photography are my escape: I have published in *Acentos Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Shenandoah*, and many other anthologies and journals, both in the US and internationally, online and in-print. My poetry in translation and accompanying photography have been featured in art fairs and galleries as well. Ediciones Valparaíso in Spain published my book of poems, *PEREGRINA*, in June 2022.

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

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *New English Review* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books, "Subject Matters," "Between Two Fires" and "Covert" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Haight-Asbury Literary Journal*, *Amazing Stories* and *River and South*.

Brandon Hansen is from a village in northern Wisconsin. He studied writing along Lake Superior, and then trekked out to the mountains, where he earned his MFA as a Truman Capote scholar at the University of Montana. His work has been Pushcart nominated, and can be found in *The Baltimore Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Puerto Del Sol*, and elsewhere. Find him on X: @BatBrandon_

Jennifer Harrison has written eight books of poetry, most recently *Anywhly* (Black Pepper, 2018, Australia). Three new collections *Sideshow History*, *Fowler's Phrenology* and *Finals* are forthcoming in 2025/2026. Recent awards include the 2024 Heroines Poetry Award.

Christy Hartman pens short fiction from her home between the ocean and mountains of Vancouver Island Canada. She writes about the chasm between love and loss and picking out the morsels of magic in life's quiet moments. Christy has been shortlisted for Bath and Bridport Flash Fiction prizes and is a New York City Midnight winner. She has been published by *Elegant Literature*, *Sci-Fi Shorts*, *Fairfield Scribes*, and others.

Walter Heineman's interests include history, art, literature, music, dreams, myths, fairytales, ritual, symbolism, depth psychology, science, guitar, architecture, electronics, geology, chess, perception and consciousness. Extensive travel nationally and internationally. He lives in Houston, Texas.v

Elizabeth Hill: I was a Finalist in the 2022 *Rattle* Poetry Contest. I was nominated for the 2023 *Pushcart Prize* by *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*. My poetry has been published in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Boomerlit*, *SAND*, and *Catamaran*, among other journals. I am currently a candidate for an MFA at VCFA and I am a retired Administrative Law Judge who was responsible for suits between learning disabled children and the school system. I live in Harlem, NYC with my husband and two irascible cats.

Ben Hyland's poetry is collected in four chapbooks – most recently, *Shelter in Place* (Moonstone Press, 2022) – and has been featured in multiple publications, including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hawai'i-Pacific Review*, and *Delta Poetry Review*. Readers can connect with him and follow his work at www.benhylandlives.com.

Paul Ilechko is a British American poet and occasional songwriter who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work appears in many journals, including *The Bennington Review*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Atlanta Review*, *Permafrost*, and *Pirene's Fountain*. His first book is scheduled for 2025 publication by Gnashing Teeth publishing.

Michael Kfoury is a graduate of Suffolk University whose poems have appeared in *Ink In Thirds*, *Blue Lake Review*, and *October Hill*. An old soul, Michael loves classic rock, classic literature, and classic films. Often, his attention is divided between being engrossed with the night's Humphrey Bogart screening and revising his writing. As a New Deal Nerd, Michael chronically studies the socio-economic and environmental reforms of 1930s America. Follow on Instagram at [kfourymichael](https://www.instagram.com/kfourymichael).

Esha Khimji is a new writer living in Scotland. She works a 9 to 5 and writes to stay sane. Her writing often touches on themes of self-preservation in the face of inequality and its interplay with desires that stretch past 'one's lot in life'. Her first published piece recently appeared in *Short Beasts*.

Robert S. King lives in Athens, GA. He is a co-founder of FutureCycle Press. Since the 1970s 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 nine poetry collections, most recently *Developing a Photograph of God* (2014), *Messages from Multiverses* (2020), and *Selected Poems* (2023). His personal website is www.leftypoet.online.

Douglas Kolacki began writing while stationed with the Navy in Naples, Italy. Since then he has placed fiction in *Amazing Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Liquid Imagination Online* and *The Fifth Dimension*. He currently haunts Providence, Rhode Island.

Sarah Liu is a writer, product manager, and daydreamer based in New York. Poetry has been a source of healing, learning, and discovery throughout her life but it is only in recent years that she has found the courage to write and share her own poems. As she grapples with her own identity and the world around her, she has found comfort and joy in expressing herself through poetry and she hopes that her words can help others feel seen and heard as well. You can find out more about her creative journey on her budding Instagram account [@sare.writes](https://www.instagram.com/sare.writes)

C. I. Marshall writes from the Mogollon Highlands in Arizona. Credits include *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Poems In The Waiting Room* and others. Marshall holds an

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Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle and the North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his poems have also been broadcast and performed globally.

Keith Morris earned his BA in English and Psychology from the U. of Mississippi and earned his MA in English from Mississippi State U. His works appear in *The Brussels Review*, *The Opiate*, *Louisville Review*, *Willows Wept*, *Defunkt Magazine*, *Macrame Literary Journal*, and others. He teaches English at Itawamba Community College in Fulton, MS, and lives in Tupelo, MS, with his wife and two sons.

Zita Muranyi is a Hungarian writer and poet. She graduated from the University of Szeged with a degree in communication. Her first novel is *Mirrorpalace* (Tükörpalota 2003). She received the Sandor Bródy Prize in 2004, awarded to the best debut authors. She has four books of poems, and three novels published in Hungarian. On Mr. Darcy's sofa is her first English novel. A collection of her poems was published in the anthology "They'll Be Good for Seed" by Wine Pine Press; one of her poems was featured in the October issue of *La Stanza Poetry Journal*. One short story is featured in *Blin-Ink* magazine's March issue. Recently, *Cholla Needles* magazine published her English poems (issue 95, 98).

Sonia Nanescu grew up dreaming of being a ballerina but found out she is more of a bulldog instead. She became a dentist with shaking hands, so she had to reinvent herself. This led her to explore being a researcher, and while doing so, gained two PhDs in Biology and she is now a science administrator. While she aspired for a while to become a motivational speaker, she realized written words can touch hearts just as spoken words do, and she pursues this in her spare time.

Joy Nevin Axelson is the author of several published poems and works of nonfiction. She holds a BA and an MA in French (from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana and from the University of California, Santa Barbara respectively). She also attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and North Park University. In addition to being an author, she is the translation coordinator for GlobalFingerprints, the EFCA's child sponsorship branch. Her translations of training materials are used at 12 international sites. She enjoys traveling with her husband and two older children. www.joynevinaxelson.weebly.com.

Cristian Nunez Esparza is an undergraduate creative writing major at New Mexico State University who loves to engage and learn about the world through writing, music and various other things. She also really loves plants.

Seth Polfus: Taking photos has been a passion of mine since receiving a disposable camera for Christmas when I was ten years old. Even today, the photographs I took back then tell a story and the timeless value of photos is what has propelled me to take up photography. An appreciation for nature and a love for adventure was implanted in me while growing up in the wilderness paradise otherwise known as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. My work is reflective of my passion for photography, love for variety, and longing for adventure.

Don Pomerantz is originally from Western Massachusetts, after stints in software and education, now lives and writes in New York City and the Hudson Valley. His poems appear in *NY Quarterly*, *Washington Square*, *Consequence*, *Tar River*, *Eclectica*, *Conium Review*, *Kestrel*, *SAND*, *Adirondack Review* as well as many other American and international journals. More information at donpomerantz.com.

Cathy Porter's poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs*, *Homestead Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Hubbub*, *Cottonwood*, and various other journals. She has several chapbooks available from Finishing Line Press, Dancing Girl Press, and Maverick Duck Press. *Bodies Of One Breath* (2024) is her latest collection from Dancing Girl Press. Cathy has been nominated for several Pushcart Prizes. She lives in Omaha, NE.

Tana Prater has been writing all her life and loves watching cats make biscuits, getting warts from toads, and listening to bird calls.

Henry Presente's tall tales have been published with *Orca*, *Barren Magazine*, *Harpur Palate*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and others. His story collection is *Personal Earthquakes* (Czykmate Productions, 2018). He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, helped save enough energy to power 1 million homes for 1 year, and once led a spontaneously formed conga line—fearlessly and with no regard for tomorrow. Find him online at HenryPresente.com and [@HenryPresente](https://twitter.com/HenryPresente) on X.

Virginia author **Phyllis Price** writes from a small farm in the Appalachian Mountains. Published work includes a chapbook, *Quarry Song*, as well as published or upcoming work in journals: *Rattle*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, *POEM*, *Clinch Mountain Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, and others. Price's poem "Five Ways to Go" was the 2019 first place poetry winner in the Tennessee Mountain Writers annual contest.

Donna Pucciani, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *ParisLitUp*, *Meniscus* and other journals. Her latest book of poetry is *Edges*.

Jeffrey R. Richardson is a poet, author and retired journalist. Born and raised in southern California, he spent 35 years in Alaska where he worked extensively with First Nations communities throughout the state. He also worked as a wildland

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Rick Rohdenburg's work has appeared in numerous print and digital publications, including the *I70 Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Chestnut Review*, and *Kestrel*. Now retired, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

David Romanda's work has appeared in places such as *Columbia Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His book is *Why Does She Always Talk About Her Husband?* (Blue Cedar Press, 2022). Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. Check him out online: www.romandapoetry.com

Anders Ross lives in Heidelberg, Australia and believes in the merits of tinned fruit, marmalade and tea propulsion engines (also known as authors). Inspired by his childhood spent on farms in Victoria and Tanzania, his writing often reflects much of his experiences and those stories told to him by his elders. But not always. His work has been published in Australia and the United Kingdom.

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

James Scruton is the author of two full-length collections and five chapbooks of poetry. He has received the Frederick Bock Prize from *Poetry*, the Finishing Line Press Poetry Award, the Grayson Books Chapbook Prize, and other honors.

Dan Sicoli lives between two Great Lakes in New York State where he co-edits *Slipstream*. He will have a new poetry collection out from *Ethel* in 2026. Recently he's had poems included in *Abandoned Mine*, *blazeVOX*, *Evening Street Review*, *Hellbender*, *Hobo Camp*, *Home Planet News*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Ranger*, *Rye Whiskey Review*, and *San Pedro River Review*, among numerous others. On weekends he beats on an old Gibson in a local garage rock band. pw.org/directory/writers/dan_sicoli

Sushma A. Singh is an orthodontist from India who published her debut book of short stories (*Shuffling seasons*, Telling ties on amazon, in 2014.) whereafter she focused on poetry writing. Her work has been published in *swifts & slow's journal*, *Tint journal*, *Twelve Mile Review*, *Brushfire literature and Arts journal*, *Stonecoast review*, *Dash literary journal*, *Library love letter*, *Dime Show*, *Better than Starbucks* and numerous *haiku*

journals including a haiku in *Red moon anthology* which was also shortlisted for the *Touchstones award 2018*.

Margaret D. Stetz is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Delaware, as well as a widely published poet. She is also Poetry Editor of the *Steinbeck Review*, a journal published by Pennsylvania State University Press.

Daniel P. Stokes has published poetry widely in literary magazines in Ireland, Britain, the U.S.A, Canada and Asia, and has won several poetry prizes. He has written three stage plays which have been professionally produced in Dublin, London and at the Edinburgh Festival.

Alan Swope's poetry has been published in *Cider Press Review*, *Front Range Review*, *Steam Ticket*, *Perceptions*, *Evening Street Press*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, and *Sky Island Journal*. He is a retired psychoanalytic psychotherapist and an emeritus professor with the California School of Professional Psychology. Alan enjoys family get-togethers, singing, traveling, cinema, cooking, and gardening.

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work appears in: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories," and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The wonders of winter."

Michael Theroux: I write from Northern California; my career has spanned field botanist, environmental health specialist, green energy developer and resource recovery web site editor. Now in my seventh decade, I am shifting from the scientific and technical environmental field to placing my cache of creative writing. Many pieces may be found or will soon be seen, in *Down in the Dirt and their semi-annual collection*, *'Cast Off'*, *Ariel Chart*, *50WS*, *CafeLit*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Last Leaves*, *Backwards Trajectory*, *Small Wonders*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Preservation Foundation / Storyhouse*, *Cerasus*, *The Acedian Review*, *the Lothlorien Poetry Journal & its Anthologies #2 and #4*, *City Key*, *Wild Word*, *Fixator Press*, and elsewhere.

Cole Thompson (back cover) is a black and white, personally expressive photographer. www.colethompsonphotography.com

Kerry Trautman is a lifelong Ohioan whose work has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals. Her books are *Things That Come in Boxes* (King Craft Press 2012,) *To Have Hoped* (Finishing Line Press 2015,) *Artifacts* (NightBallet Press 2017), *To be Nonchalantly Alive* (Kelsay Books 2020,) *Marilyn: Self-Portrait, Oil on Canvas* (Gutter Snob Books 2022,) *Unknowable Things* (Roadside Press 2022,) and *Irregulars* (Stanchion Books 2023.)

T.N. Turner lived his 1st half-life in Wisconsin; 2nd half-life in Minnesota; living final half-life in China. Over 35 years, Mr. Turner says he developed a unique, deceptively simple, direct, non-synthetic, non-boring, thought-provoking, entertaining, home-grown style of poetry he calls “Organic Naturalism.”

Patrick Vala-Haynes is a Sundance Screenwriting Fellow, fiction writer, essayist and poet, who knows more about well-drilling, cannons, swords and alfalfa than any man should. As a freelance Fight Director, he has choreographed sword fights and hand-to-hand combat for more than a hundred stage productions in the Northwest. His work appears in *Dulcet Literary Magazine*, *Sand*, *Split Rock Review*, *Slate* and elsewhere. He lives within running distance of the Oregon Coast Range.

Lisa Voorhees, a Jersey girl to the core, when Lisa's not writing short stories or novellas, she's either listening to hard rock or out at target practice. She writes dark fantasy with a hopeful edge but dabbles in sci-fi and the occasional literary piece. Read her published material at <https://lisa.voorhees.com> and stay tuned to <http://facebook.com/lisavoorheesauthor> for info about upcoming publications. Interested in becoming a patron? Find out more about how to support her creative work and receive bonus material at www.patreon.com/lisavoorhees.

David Ward was born in Northampton. He is co-founder of The Windows Project, running creative writing workshops in community venues on Merseyside since 1976; and editor of *Smoke* magazine. He has toured to Singapore, Hong Kong, Harbin (Northern China) and Barcelona. Broadcast on BBC TV and radio. Poems in over 200 magazines and anthologies, including *Poetry Review*, *Abridged*, *Ambit* and *Poetry Wales*. His collections include: *Tracts* (Headland) *On the Edge of Rain* (Headland) *Jambo* (Riot Stories Ltd and Impact), *Inside Pale Eyes* (Hawkwood), *Leechcraft* (Hawkwood) Visiting Writer-in-Residence Nanyang University, Singapore. Honorary Fellow in Creative Writing, Liverpool Hope University. Writing as David Greygoose, *Trilogy of folkloric tales* Brunt Boggart (Hawkwood 2015; Pushkin 2018; Penguin Random House Canada 2020), *Mandrake Petals and Scattered Feathers* (Hawkwood 2021), *Crow Dark Dawn* (Hawkwood 2023).

Until recently, **Richard Weaver** has been the writer-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub in Baltimore. He has flipped coastlines. Some of his other pubs Include: *OffCourse*, *Misfit Mag*, *Granfalloon*, *Burningword LJ*, *Slippery Elm*, *Loch Raven review*, *Spank the carp*, and *Magnolia Review*. He's the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende

Press, 1992), and wrote the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars* (2005). He was one of the founders of the *Black Warrior Review* and its Poetry Editor for the first four years. He's pleased the BWR is now 50 years old. Recently, his 220th prose poem was accepted. Headshot by request.

Sean Whalen, retired, lives near Pilot Mound, Iowa. He received his M.A. in Creative Writing from Iowa State. Recent poems have appeared in *Last Leaves*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *Unbroken*, *New Feathers*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, and *Thimble*, and are forthcoming in *The Avenue Journal*, *Assignment Magazine* and *The Chiron Review*.

Mike Wilson's work has appeared in magazines including *The Petigru Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Mud Season Review*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Still: The Journal*, *Barely South Review*, *Steam Ticket*, and *Anthology of Appalachian Writers Vol. X*. He's author of *Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic* (Rabbit House Press, 2020), and resides in Lexington, Kentucky

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

