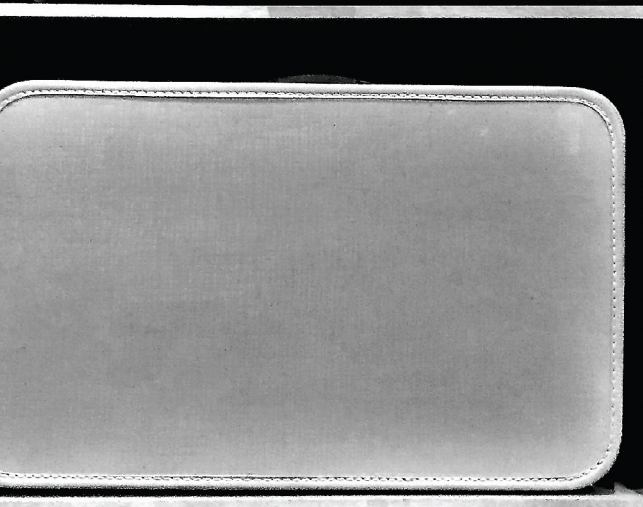
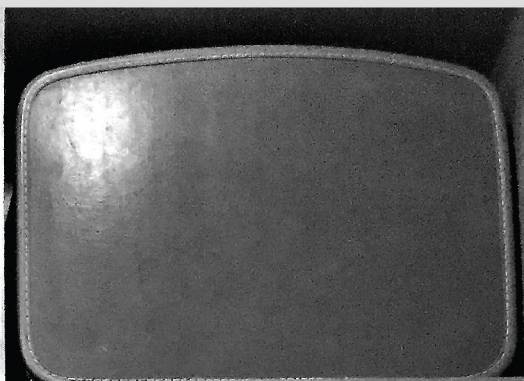
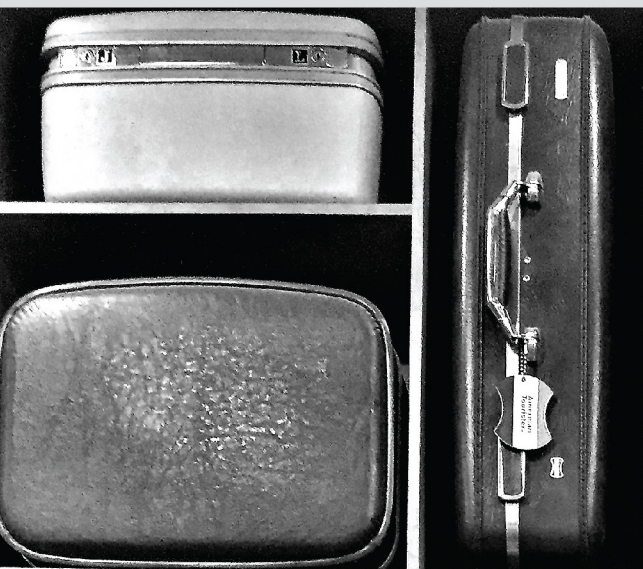


THAT



THAT

LITERARY REVIEW

Number Five



Journeys can include pauses between their beginnings and ends. THAT's journey so far has been a delicious riot of words and images that illuminated new worlds and unique perspectives. As of this issue, THAT will be hanging up its walking stick for now, pausing to look back and savor the road traveled, one that has provided many wonderful meetings. We're grateful to have found new eyes along the way.

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THAT

LITERARY REVIEW

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2020

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Karisma J. Tobin

Those nights when we were lightning bugs

When the outside streamed under doors,
Around windows,
Whistled through glass-bored remnant-holes
Of Uncle Jerry's BB days;

When lightning neared enough to make the cold
House flinch,

You climbed my shoulders,
Pulled down the ladder where mom marked our heights,
Where grandma marked *her* heights and Jerry's.

Facefirst into leak-drip, dust-shroud chill.
Pulled the ladder up after us.
Stopped the light.
Danced to the rattle of the shingles,
To the pale soprano wind.

When we'd swallowed thunder enough,
We ionized.
Exhaled our electrons and fell.
Your hair caught in my hair.

Do you remember when
We volted in the dark?



Matthew J. Spireng

Red Pepper Flakes

(for Rich)

At the end of the meal, my friend
didn't want to see the red pepper flakes
the waiter had brought in a tiny

condiment dish go to waste, so he
searched for something to put them in.
A used foil butter wrapper served

for some of the flakes, and a small
prescription vial from the dentist
was large enough to hold the rest.

Now he's driving home on a Friday night
through a college town where police are
ever-vigilant, and all I can think of is that he

will be pulled over for some minor infraction
and be checked for drugs. *What's that
folded in the foil and in the plastic container?*

Red pepper flakes. Red pepper flakes? Sure.
Maybe he'll suggest the officer taste one,
but no police officer in his right mind

is going to taste something he suspects
is drugs. So my friend will be hauled in
on suspicion of drug possession and booked,

and the evidence sent off to the state police
drug lab where tests will show
red pepper flakes and butter in the foil wrap,

and red pepper flakes and a trace
of a prescription gum desensitizer
in the vial from the dentist. My friend

will spend a night in jail for his
gingivitis and frugality. The red pepper
flakes and butter will go to waste.

Cameron Morse

Garage Sale in the Rain

Beyond the door on tracks above us, rain falls
like white rice, graining dark trunks
across the cul-de-sac. Nevertheless, they come.

Bargain shoppers and bored retirees follow
the signs to our dimly lit cement
enclosure of folding tables. Sequins of rain drape

strings over the broken back of the driveway
they pilgrim—the cracked, keeling blocks
of pavement accepting payment

for the sky's transgressions.
An old navy man presses his hand
between the chill blades of the oil-filled radiator,

waiting for warmth, for the promised heat
to sear him. It doesn't,
not fast enough anyway, but in the next interval

of stillness, breezes shake loose a patter
of raindrops from the pin oak, and a large woman
with Botoxed lips leaves with it wrapped in a blanket.



Laura C. Wendorff

Passage

There are those
who embrace change,
and those who see

the skull beneath
thin skin: the breath
pressed, flattened,
and shoved
through the

black hole.

Something hurts
when I look at you:

memory,

the skin of your cheek
as my lips touch it,

or your wit quick,
now tired,

or maybe

it's yesterday —
paper-thin
and
brittle



Laura C. Wendorff

A Parting

I pull it all from my desk:
dried bits of rubber band,
plastic forks for lunches not eaten,
a poem from a colleague long retired.

My Dean is making me move—
a good thing really.
Who but the mentally ill
hoard the detritus of their lives,
refusing to give up the bent paper-clips
and mottled memories?

A student walks in,
asks about summer plans.

He doesn't seem to notice:
the chaos of boxes and papers,
the empty shelves where books once sat,
the echo of our voices on the concrete-block walls.

He has a summer internship,
he tells me. His face has that
soft glow of desire, like the
gray of the wrens nesting in my wren house
or the clouds magenta-colored just before dawn.

I nudge photos and files into boxes;
squeeze in a digital clock.

I'm so excited about starting my life, he tells me.
Very exciting! I reply.

My new office is three stories up and
overlooks a vast expanse of green.
Later in the day I go and visit.

I think of my student's youth, and his plans,
and his excitement.

And I think of growing older, and loss,
and disruption.

As I look out my new window
a sparrow lands on the sill.

Perhaps I will put out some breadcrumbs, I think,
as I walk back to my old office.



Victoria Shippen

Deer Don't Wear Lip Gloss

don't put foundation on their nose,
it's too wet, I assume, and hooves making it difficult,
to pat down the beige and tan tones:
the unseemly white freckles keep slipping out.

Perhaps it isn't the hooves, perhaps they're not left
behind for a blemish on their side, for flabby legs
caused by overgrazing, or a too-quick startle response.

Perhaps they know their fur-skin covers them
beautifully, leaves them no wish to alter it in any way.
At a distance, in the field, I appear like a young deer,
but not up close. My breasts, flat, stretched in some

cockeyed dream from the house to the backyard fence. Dry
rivers of skin crisscross once fertile terrain. Hair has left places
it intimately belonged and shown up where it shouldn't be.

My stomach lolls—a loop of loosened flesh; no amount of good clothes,
or makeup, tricks me (or anyone else) into believing I am anywhere
near young. Time took me while I was busy following
the trail of myself. I am so mad; I can't cry.

Should I smile as my teeth drop, as my nether regions dam,
say "Thank you" as the gift certificate expires?

Jan Wiezorek

With Holding

I am outside, in the air.
Thoughts crack here

like sticks—five breaks
or four, sometimes

only three or two.
I laugh because I

was afraid, and I
couldn't face his

stick-face, thin,
his body: small.

I didn't say hello,
grabbing, holding

them in two hands.
The lengths I go

and never
find the fit.

And every bit
withheld breaks

where I
snap them

into lengths
just small

enough
to burn.



D. S. Maolalai

Specific.

my friend
tells me
what he likes about my poems;
“you’re specific. you’re not scared
of using
real names.”

I explain
it’s because
the names comes first,
then the poem. he
is a scientist—a real one,
with papers.
he discovered
a new kind of fish. he doesn’t
read poetry
but he reads mine
because we’re friends.

I mention
that the editor
for the book I’m doing
told me
to take out one; “Humber River Hospital”
because what it mentioned
was an institution
and the press could then
be sued. he tells me
the documentary
won’t use him now, but since they still
have his research
he’ll be credited.

he’s a strange man; Irish as whiskey
but looking Slavic, so much so
that in Hungary
I kept recognizing him. his name
is Aodhain, and he’s the cleverest person
I probably know.



D. S. Maolalai

Ironically Church Street.

so I woke up
in Cora's house
and she was
still on her period,
which I guess
is what happens,
because it never ends
it seems
during the night.

it was the day after the Canada Day fireworks
and the second time she'd blown me to completion
and when I found out she was on her period still
I kind of just wanted
to get out of there
(but how do you say that?)
so instead we watched the rest of the movie we'd been watching
when she had started kissing my neck
and then went and got some breakfast,
which was a bagel for me
and a coffee,
and sandwich for her
which had tomatoes
so I didn't try any
but she still expected a bite of my bagel.

and we went to the pride festival
at (ironically) Church Street
to see what we could get for free
and we got little tubes of toothpaste,
condoms, pepsi, lube,
candyfloss,
and small bottles of perfume (3),
which I gave to her,
and she took pictures of drag queens
but refused to let me take a picture of her
with them.
and we saw the furry tent

next to the Gays for Christ tent,
out in the ghetto
away at the very edge of the whole thing
which seemed mean
(but not that mean I guess)
and then later on we went to a food festival
and I was still trying to get rid of her
and she wouldn't take a hint
so I had to buy her some juice
made from real fruit



Carl Boon

Hometown Homicide

A homicide in my hometown means
Cheryl and Jim are pointing fingers
and Larry and LeeAnne are
grinding keys under starlight.
The dark will make us look
at each other differently—
the dark where the songbirds
hide when Julie and Scott go down
on each other with left eyes toward
the window. Love goes terribly awry
sometimes, love, that avenue of bite-
marks the police can't see,
love everywhere brittle
and alert to other thunders.

They say a mattress burned; they say
a nearby body was a woman's, but
they never say what happens after,
what happens when Mike and Lucy
lock the Chevrolet and say
we were born here, we kissed
at Homecoming and scattered candy
at the Labor Day Parade. We fed
the swans and watched their necks
glimmer in the sun. We took the dog
around the block and never thought
of death on Van Buren, the bright
becoming blue, the blue becoming
she who wailed, and we who couldn't hear.

Timothy B. Dodd

Her & Birds

I vowed not to eat them,
legs, thighs
no matter how beautifully they are
prepared—fried or drenched in hot sauce

they have camped a generation now in cages
clipped somehow
from earth.
In their walk, they have lost

their way, no knowledge
for finding kernels in the soil,
no patience to peck
at the ground around a homestead.

I tell myself, again and again not to eat them.
Have some mercy
or just stay away for your own sake, yet
So much is unnatural today

and I am without wing as well.
Yes, I have accrued sentiments,
sentimentality, but
in mess as increase in millions:

hormone-sprouted, rapid growth
a longed-for breast swell
holding little bulbs some call onions
by their little green strands rising
from my thoughts in dirt, ash.



Aurin Shaila Nusrat Sheyck

The Brown Sofa

You sit on the leather sofa
In evenings,
As I come home with grocery—
28-lb backpack on me,
Two more dangling from my left and right fists;
You are on it
In afternoons, when I am cooking
And the heat from electric coil seems to cook me instead,
And in mornings,
As I pack lunch for both of us.
With the chocolate-brown shirt on, you could pass for the upholstery.

See,
The sun is also moving.

Well, maybe because it does not have a wife.

I love my brown sofa in oakwood.
They say the creases give it a vintage look;
Creases on my fingers are growing too
Due to rigorous everyday use.
Actually, the creases and burn scars do give the fingers
An antique look.
Less antique, though, than the belief
That women's consent is like clay:
Give it any shape you want.

Somedays the sofa smells like woodfire
And somedays, like charcoal or dust,
Somedays, very old lipsticks;
I wish I could pick it up from sitting on it,
But I never;

I, most of the time, smell of ginger and garlic.

Beth Brown Preston

Red Earth

My voice speaks to you in Spanish,
An entire conversation, all the words in that language I know.
It is a sin not to remember deaths.
These poets are now dead: Gabriela Mistral, Silvina Ocampo,
Winett de Rokha, Yolanda Bedregal de Conitzer,
Claudia Lars, Carmen Alicia Cadilla.
Sisters whose eyes have closed with impatience, delirium.
These poets were taken from you and me,
Sent down into black tunnels of despair,
Became insomniac angels hovering over others' dreams,
Over cloisters, over fields where cows wander.
It was impossible to carry enough light into their rooms,
The illumination of their ache and wonder.
I loved their faces, women poets,
Reeling with knowledge of sensuality,
Their medusa hair, ends of verse dangling, dangling.
What is this light that speaks from the terror of the past?
I am pulled backward, as a half-sunken fishing boat,
Moored with my rope to the sagging wooden dock.
A young boy swims beside me in the lake on fire with sunset.
The earth is red and good.
The red earth cradles him in its womb of yearning and blood.
The boy is rescued by sense and sound. Perhaps, the end
Is in this line of angels defining manhood and womanhood.
All I now know is defensive, horrible.



Simon Perchik

*

You lean into this tree as if its roots
struck something made from wood
no longer moves, became an island

with mountains laid out in rows
and though they have no arms
they open them when someone

is left close by—under such a weight
their hands break apart the Earth
from feeling their way around it

grave after grave, blinded by moonlight
as the chunks you never saved
form this nearly empty night

with nothing but the bright green hole
this dying tree drains, keeps dry
between what you wanted and the shine.

Candice Kelsey

Ubering Ayn Rand

She assumes I have a good reason
for taking 23rd rather than the freeway,
but still she demands to know my purpose
for dragging her on this absolute *ledokhod*.*
I turn right at the light and right again.

As our eyes meet in the rearview mirror,
she mumbles something about bleak reality
objectively sucking the joy out of her day.
She reminds me that this life is all she has.

I turn up the music as an act of self-interest
only to realize that she is what she is and
not the quiet passenger I would like her to be.

She applies my pursuit through traffic
as analogy for the pursuit of happiness
at which point, lowering the radio's volume
and pulling into the Starbucks' drive-thru,
I more than happily acquiesce. The most
rational end I can pursue now is this Capitalist
carnival of caffeine, sugar, and foam.

And before she can rant about her misspelled
name, I get back on Lincoln Boulevard
to the quiescent sounds of sipping and sighing,
talk of man's potential paused momentarily
and the evils of altruism dissolved in a cup.

*Russian for debacle



Candice Kelsey

One for the Money *for Thomas Balish*

After the money comes the show,
then I get ready to go.
Is sleep another childhood?
I wonder.
Can we play in the midst of a war?

I am playing with you, Father; here
on this swinging stage, this
show-time dream. Whistle-lipped—
these hands let me go
even though I am not ready.

*

The blockage begins small, a coin
stuck in the slot. It is alone. It goes fetal
until more failures drop in,
money falling from hungry hands. And
here my purpose is formed.
Determined, as a wall of kudzu, hands clenched,
moon-face show through the curtain,
a tiny girl ready
to go deep into the beating machine,
my father's fleshy djembe.

*

My mother cooks dry pork chops
and green beans, all she can muster up. I
tear large sheets of foil; she compliments my work.
We stretch and tear the cellophane
membrane of each pink rectangular organ,
marveling at the white layer
icing of pig fat. "Help me make 'em sizzle,"
she says with a giggle. I can't look
away from the boiling potatoes.

*

I drive my father's car to his pre-op appointment—
forty-five minutes of highway trimmed
by corn and sycamore. The green
seems a playground, endless room to run or skip,
with couch cushion clouds of blue. Sky
and grass merge like *haibun*, and
I want to write calligraphy with my car. I
am ready for this show.

*

His body opens. The machine breathes for him—
one breath becomes two,
then three. At four the doctor goes.
The bloody organ offers
its plastic wrapping like a calf to the gods,
and I imagine it all. But
here in the darkness of the waiting room
I linger, I remain. Fluid.

The clock ticks like
an overbearing coach who expects too much,
and my hands tap my belly
remembering
how he gripped my ankle and wrist
swinging me out and back over my bed each night
like a heartbeat.
He stopped. I am called inside from the swings.
Two go.



John Sweet

widow afternoon

these uncertain shades of light that
spill from our open hearts

blue sky and then silver and
the air grown heavy and shadowless

the windows and the
silences they reflect

man next to you with his abundance
of grievances
with his abundance of gods

with his sepia-toned memories
of happier times

opens his mouth to speak and
whatever falls out never
has anything to do with the truth

Thaddeus Rutkowski

“It’s Here!”

I heard the sound of faraway thunder, but the sound could have been from something falling, something hitting the floor. I tried to ignore the sound, but it was persistent.

When the sky claps came closer, my father set up chairs on the front porch of our house so we could watch the storm. I sat next to him, and we watched and listened as lightning preceded thunder at shorter and shorter intervals.

“Is it the end of the world?” my father asked. “I don’t mean the climate or the violent weather. I mean the collapse of everything.”

I couldn’t see much. All I saw was a dark-gray wall of rain; I couldn’t see the hill that bordered the valley. Large drops blew in under the porch roof and onto my face.

My father picked up a beer and said, “The Republicans are grasping pieces of flotsam in the flood. The Democrats are underwater. They’re holding their noses and sending up air bubbles.”

I watched the rain bouncing off the blacktop of the street. I didn’t move from my seat as the storm went on.

“Who will stop it?” my father asked. “No one.”

Inside, I picked up a record album and looked at the back cover. There was a puzzle on the square ground—a kind of maze. The idea was to trace a path through the labyrinth and arrive at the central space. The words “*IT’S HERE*” appeared in psychedelic lettering in the middle. Using a fingertip, I entered the doorway and wound my way through the passages. Presently, I hit a roadblock. There was no way around it. The artist had designed the labyrinth so it could not be traveled. It resembled an ancient structure outside a king’s palace where no one could find safety before being eaten by the Minotaur.

When my father saw me sitting, he said, “Get up! When I was in the Army we woke at sunrise and marched all day. We covered fifty miles with our gear on our backs. We didn’t stop until we were about to die.”

I stood and went out to the front porch. In front of me was the old route, now a street, clear of cars. I heard a knocking and looked over the railing. My brother and sister were pounding on something below. I stepped down to join them.

“I won’t walk on the porch,” my sister said. “There’s something under there. I can’t see it, but I know it’s there.”

She and my brother were tearing at the lattice between the porch floor and the ground. They were using their hands to pull slats apart. I looked at the space they had opened but saw nothing beyond bare dirt.

“When this screen is gone,” my sister said, “it will have nothing to hide behind.”



I walked past my father's studio, an unheated room in the back of the house, and when he noticed me, he called me in.

"I'm making silk-screened prints of butterflies," he said and held up a sample.

He had drawn a perfect swallowtail, rendered to scale and in life colors, on a piece of gray paper.

"Butterflies are disappearing," he added. "We used to see clouds of butterflies in the fields. Now, you might see one or two."

I remembered those yellow and white butterflies, called sulfurs, swarming over puddles of water.

"I'm going to make a lot of these prints and sell them cheaply," my father said. "Anyone can have a work of art for five dollars."

My father took my siblings and me to an art fair in the neighboring college town. He had rented a table on the side of a downtown street.

"I'm going to give a silk-screening presentation," he said. "Make prints and sell them."

My brother and sister and I walked to the end of the street, to where a stage had been set up. A band called Beowulf and the Geats was playing. The songs were loud and, in my opinion, quite good. My siblings and I listened in awe to an entire set.

When we got back to my father's table, we saw prints of butterflies hanging on a clothesline. The paper sheets were attached with wooden pins. "These prints are drying," my father said. "You don't have to be a collector to buy one. If you have five dollars, you can own a work of art."

In a record store, I looked for albums by Beowulf and the Geats but couldn't find any, so I asked a clerk about the band.

"Do you mean Beowulf and the Goths?" he asked.

"No, the Geats. You know, from Sweden."

"The Visigoths?"

"The Geats."

"Never heard of them," he said.

In the evening, I watched a TV show with my brother and sister. At one point, I looked through the living-room window and saw a soldier on the porch. He was marching in one direction, then the other, lifting his elbows and his knees high. The figure could have been a reflection of a man on the TV screen, the result of a convergence of light rays that formed a hologram. But there was no such figure on the TV screen.

I pointed so that all of us could see.

"He came from under the porch," my sister said. "We opened the way."

Later, I picked up the album cover with the maze on the back and picked up a sharp knife. With the blade, I scratched out the line that blocked me from getting to the center. With the line gone, I easily traced a path to the words "IT'S HERE!" ●

Kali Paszkiewicz

Knitting

In the space between our virtues, I've turned
Around her words
Under my tongue, spit them back
Over her head, and
Tightened the seam on my mouth.

In bouts of memory
Around a sunflower fence, I once
Underestimated her ability to
Over-indulge in ignorance. I'll
Tighten the knots on those thoughts.

In her mind,
Around all her misconceptions,
Under God's righteous hand, she's tried to convert me
Over and over again. But I cannot
Tighten and shrivel back into her womb.



Jessica Goodfellow

Sonata Cento

Don't ask questions anymore. Don't hear
the voice the night makes—
the piano at the top of the Alps,
a white piano no one could play,
drone in a 3 a.m. silence.

Pines bleed into flat light. Sea stirs
a song, a world, a containment
I don't know this morning, with its glissandos
of trees, the river valley, the music of light
slam-dancing on the roof of my cabin.

It's just ordinary light, going about
in the direction of the deserving.
If such light made a sound,
I wouldn't have waited all this time
to learn that the line I called the horizon

leaves no memory. Or else memory
wouldn't be enough,
would leave you inconsolable all day.

Sources (by line):

1. Larissa Szporluk, "Trapeze"
2. Amy Orazio, "Unhinge"
3. Zbigniew Herbert (trans. by Bogdana and John Carpenter),
"Mr. Cogito and the Imagination"
4. Clint Margrave, "White"
5. Veronica Patterson, "Perseids, Later"
6. Ann Howells, "Two Years Ceased"
7. Robert Pinsky, "Rhyme"
8. Sarah Green, "Pastels"
9. Kwame Dawes, "Bones in the Soil"
10. George Drew, "What Mountains Do"
11. Patty Paine, "What Light Does"
12. T J Jarrett, "The Trouble with Lightning"
13. Dabney Stuart, "Traveling Light"

14. Iman Mersal (trans. by Khaled Mattawa), "I Scandalize Myself"
15. Lisel Mueller, "Monet Refuses the Operation"
16. Lawrence Raab, "The Major Subjects"
17. Jean Valentine, "Bury your money"
18. Jon Anderson, "The Secret of Poetry"



Laura Lannan

The Time My Brother Told Everyone I Was Dead

There was this kid called David in my brother's kindergarten class. He told the other kids he'd seen the tornado that killed his mother, and everyone thought that this was very cool. They were six, and death wasn't permanent to them.

So my brother, to one-up David, told them the story of his sister, the ghost. "She got murdered right in our backyard! With a chainsaw!"

I don't know why it had to be a chainsaw. I imagined my little body ripped open, spilling red silk scarves. Raw slices through skin and bone, perfectly straight, like a loaf of salami. Maybe without a head. My family kicking the pieces into a shallow grave, covering me with dirt, maybe putting the pieces in a pillowcase first, like we'd done with my late hamster.

"Yeah, she was all chopped up, and we buried her under the cherry tree."

The thing is, we didn't even have a cherry tree. It was just a normal tree that flowered white in the spring and maybe sometimes *looked* like a cherry tree.

"We still see her ghost," my brother told those kids. "She wanders around the house wailing and crying all night long, and messing with mom's knickknacks."

First of all, I only wandered the house at night that one time, and second of all, I never wail without purpose.

Here is how we found out that my little brother was telling his kindergarten class that his sister was dead.

I was in my kitchen one day, making a PB&J, when one of my brother's friends walked in. He screamed at the sight of me. I dropped my sandwich. My brother's friend went sprinting out of our house and down the street, yelling, "It's the chainsaw ghost! The chainsaw ghost!"

And I was left to wonder: if I had, in fact, been killed with a chainsaw and chopped into little pieces, then why would this kid expect my ghost to be in one piece? He would have been better off imagining a floating head. Hands in the walls. Toes sprouting from the dirt like dandelions.●



Nellie Vinograd

A Dinosaur Develops Ennui

We become the bones.
We become the plastic.
And maybe in another hundred million years
some bipedal creatures will harvest our melted
bodies and turn us into something exquisite—

like a lawn chair.

Or a hairbrush.

I know nothing of lawns,
I know nothing of hair.
I am the oily mass
sitting in your cupped hands
begging to be made into something
that will last.

Michelle Brooks

We Deliver to the World

It's nearing the shortest day
of the year, the light the color
of amber, and my life feels like
an adult dragging me along as I
struggle to keep up, worse for wear.
Images flicker around me, promising
things will be different this time.
I hesitate before the window in this
cold ICU room, stare at the flower
shop across the street and notice
clouds forming in the distance. A man
down the hall screams, *Is it my time?*
Are you going to take me now, Jesus?
while Tom Cruise saves the world
on the small screen, noise intended
to mask the beeping of machines.
The flower shop sign says, We Deliver
to the World! which I assume contains
this room where I wait for nothing good
to happen because that's all there's left to do.



Paul Lojeski

Progress

Instead of nature, I watch
TV, mesmerized like it's

Li Po's Yangtze, transfixed
by that loud, flowing mystery.

Paul Lojeski

Friendship

Frank called to say George was going soon. That he'd refused more treatments: they were useless, nothing would cure him now or even make him more comfortable. So he'd taken to bed at home, seeking dignity and moments of serenity. Visitors streamed in, taking turns holding his hand, small talking it towards the end. Frank told me this on the way over to say good-bye, to take George's warm hand in his: skin-to-skin, blood-to-blood, death-to-death.



Gwen Namainga Jones

Dusty Organza

"I hear there is a very special letter for us at the general store," I announce. "They say the envelope is the color of breast milk with ribbons the texture of Inshwa's wings wrapped around it."

My husband, Tenda, makes sounds as he sips from his cup of hot, milky tea. "Puma, we are not a family that receives letters."

"Everyone at the store was talking about it. . . . I will go to the store to collect it tomorrow to find out what it is all about."

Tenda nods his approval.

Later in the afternoon, I walk to the neighboring compound. The sun follows me down the narrow, dusty path; the air is filling with aromatic odors carried in the tendrils of smoke that rise to the sky as far as the eye can see. . . . All our neighbors are preparing their evening meal.

The acrid scent of dried fish lures me as I near Dora's hut, and I picture the gnarled fish frying, popping and sizzling in the cooking oil.

As I approach, I see the door is ajar, and I walk inside. "*Odi, odi.*" Knock, knock.

Dora crouches over, concentrating on that popping fish, which twists in the hot oil, almost as if it is caught a second time, and must writhe to die.

I can see Dora's white teeth flash in a smile as I enter the darkened room.

"Puma, I will accompany you with pleasure, and I can be ready to leave at dawn so that we are back home before noon."

We set off at seven o'clock while the morning dew still clung to the grass alongside the path and wet our feet as we passed. We walked the three miles alongside schoolchildren who walked to the only primary school in the region.

They carried their shoes in one little hand for fear of scuffing them on the road, leaving their little feet bare and dusty with white sand, hard-callused from walking this road each day. In the other hand, they tightly clutched their notebooks and pencils, tools of learning, signs of hope, signs of an education.

"How will we read the contents of the letter?" Dora asked. "Perhaps we can ask the storekeeper to read the letter to us?"

"No, we cannot open it. Tenda has instructed me to take it home so that he can open it himself."

"But Tenda himself cannot read," Dora pointed out.

Dense clusters of palm trees marked the outskirts of Mwila Central, and we removed our *chitenges* and used them to dust the white sand clinging to our feet.

We donned our good shoes to complete our attire, and felt more

presentable to receive this much-anticipated, illustrious letter.

Our heels clicked on the concrete steps as we walked up the veranda of the store; all eyes were on us. I could hear whispers behind cupped hands.

We walked on. Click, click, click. The onlookers' eyes bored into us as we crossed the concrete floor inside.

The shop was filled with farmers and housewives, all busy with their purchases. All commerce and transactions stopped as we approached the counter.

"Please wait; the shopkeeper himself would like to give it to you personally." My heart raced and my mouth opened, waiting.

"Here, Puma. This is the letter," said the shopkeeper.

We stood for a while just staring at it in wonder and awe. What could it be?

I surveyed the top of the envelope. All I could see were marks that looked like little black ants with fattened bottoms marching across the envelope. Peering closely, I made out a couple of *a*'s and *b*'s—this recognition a throwback from my third-grade education—but nothing else made sense. I could not decipher the strange squiggles and symbols I knew were words and sentences. But I had to know what the letter said; it was so important-looking, so beautiful and alluring.

I raised my face up, away from the incomprehensible paper; I realized the crowd, as well as the shopkeeper and his assistant, were all waiting for my response.

"My husband will be the one to open the letter, so I will return to him immediately." I smiled to myself. Tenda could not read either—at least we were on the same level—and I relished the anticipation of watching him surrender to helplessness, too.

Safely out of view, we relinquished our hauteur and turned to one another, squealing in delight. We had collected the letter! It was in my hands. Victory! We clapped and laughed at the sheer rush of exhilaration and excitement. We were one step closer to solving the puzzle of its contents.

Then, disaster: we caught our breath and gagged on our laughter. I had dropped the delicate cream-colored envelope.

Dismayed, we watched as it fell to the ground in slow motion.

Dust particles rose around it, coating the silken ribbon.

My heart skipped a few beats. I picked up the envelope, and using the edge of my skirt with care, I tried to wipe the dust from it. My eyes met Dora's in trepidation as the dust sifted to the ground. The envelope appeared almost entirely clean. We had almost soiled this beautiful letter.

Sobering up, we resumed our brisk walk, stopping only out of courtesy to chat with passersby who asked the same questions about the letter. It seemed that overnight, we had gone from hardly being noticed to becoming the village celebrities.

We arrived back at our family compound in time for the main meal of the day, prepared by Ikwe, wife number two.

"Mother of Aubulu, I am ready to see you now," I heard Tenda call out to me. Aubulu was our oldest son.

I struggled up off the mat, tidied my *chitenge* around my waist, and called out, "I'll be right there."



Our husband occupied this fine house alone. When he wished to see one of the wives, he would visit her; we each had our own hut. We never stayed overnight at his house; it was purely for his purposes and official duties of the family. Thus, this visit was akin to entering a royal palace. I sat down on the floor at his side and handed him the letter with both hands.

Tenda stared at the creamy envelope for a while. "It is even more beautiful than we have heard. Look at the fabric crossing over the paper, and all these small cloths," he wondered aloud.

"*Mah weh!*" he exclaimed. "Truly, this is important." He squinted at the black lettering. I peered at him out of the corner my eye, and for the first time, I saw him as helpless as I was.

If only I could read. . . .

He stared at it for a long time and then gave it back to me. "Can you understand what it says?" A silly question.

The letter had stirred up more than dust in our village; it brought with it a realization of the power of transferring one's thoughts on paper.

"Send for Bona," Tenda ordered. "Perhaps he will be able to read it."

"Well, what does it say, Bona?"

Silence. Study. Bona was embarrassed.

"I am afraid I do not understand the writing," Bona confessed. "I don't know . . . perhaps we should take it to the Chief's court tomorrow and someone there should be able to interpret what it says."

Tenda agreed. "Very well, that is a good idea. We will go to visit the Chief and get this letter translated."

That night, to my utmost delight, Tenda spent the night in my hut instead of the hut of wife number four. This was a very special occasion; I could not remember the last time he shared my hut.

Having received approval for the meeting before the Chief, we set off early in the morning. We arrived twenty minutes later at the Chief's residence, which was already a hive of activity. We watched, awaiting our hearing.

Tenda began: "We received this elaborate letter but have failed to read it and have come seeking assistance for someone to interpret the contents."

"Let me see it," instructed the Chief.

A respectful silence filled the air; we wondered if the Chief could read English. Even a small amount would help.

"Interpret the contents of this letter."

We all leaned forward to hear what the letter conveyed.

In the distance, a dog barked.

Silence. The sound of cattle mooing.

Silence. Children laughing at play. Silence.

"The honor of your presence is requested at the marriage," began Jameson. He frowned on the next line.

"*El honor de su presencia se pide en la union de. . . .*"

His dark eyes seemed to dart up and down the page, lightening up as he

recognized a few words: “Thomas Moodie.” The son of Mukale’s daughter Jinni, who lived in America. He cleared his throat and continued.

He read, “Saturday the tenth of August, two thousand and eleven,” faltering again on the strange words: “*sábado el ventiocho de agosto.*” His hands shook as he held the paper.

“*Dos mil y once.*” Jameson looked up, meeting all eyes on him. “*Cinco de la tarde.*”

“It is. . . .” He stopped and squinted at the paper again. More silence. “It is a. . . .” Everyone leaned closer.

His face was now shiny with sweat, scrunched in concentration, the struggle to decipher the words visible across his long, angular face. He sighed loudly.

“It’s a wedding invitation,” he declared finally, although he still seemed troubled by the contents.

“A wedding,” chorused two or three voices.

“Yes, a wedding.” He smiled. His shoulders relaxed; he seemed to gain confidence as he proceeded. “It is for a wedding of the eldest son of Jinni Thomas, Mukale’s child.”

“And?” Tenda prompted him. “A wedding of Thomas, go on.” We had heard that Thomas was marrying a woman from Mexico.

Sitting up straight, Jameson’s features became brighter as he declared, “The wedding will take place on the tenth of August this year in Mutonga.”

He repeated himself. “Yes, it is the wedding of the eldest son of Jinni, the one called Thomas Moodie, and the wedding to his Mexican bride, Karen. It will take place in Mutonga on the tenth of August this year.” He finished with a big, broad, hyena-like smile, showing all his brilliant white teeth.

That was it; he surveyed the entire room now as he laughed out loud, big eyes popping in excitement.

“Yes, people, a wedding, a very important wedding, will take place on the tenth of August this year.”

Thanking the Chief and the magistrate, we excused ourselves from the court and walked back to our vehicle.

I could hardly contain my excitement and scurried to keep up with the men ahead of me, almost tripping on my loosened *chitenge*.

“Mother of Aubulu, you will accompany me to the wedding in Mutonga,” declared Tenda. “Bona, you will go with me as well. We shall stop at the general store before going home; we will need to begin our preparations for the wedding.”

Turning to me, he said with a softer tone, “Mother of Aubulu, you may choose a dress for yourself for the wedding.” Then, in his normal voice, “Of utmost importance, as the head of the family, I will have to donate two head of cattle to the wedding to feed the guests.”

“How will you take the cattle to Mutonga?” asked Bona.

“The cattle will be herded by foot. Once selected, they will need to leave seven days before us, as it will take three days to get there. On arrival, they will need to be watered and fed to be ready for the wedding feast.”

Stopping at the general store, we climbed out of the vehicle. Tenda reached



into his pocket, peeled off a few hundred *kwachas*, and handed them over to me.

"Here, buy yourself a good dress, new shoes, and whatever else you need for the wedding."

Walking into the general store, I noticed two of my friends, Eneres and Prisca, standing at the entrance.

"A wedding?" the shopkeeper inquired. "And whose wedding would that be? And where? Are you attending or sending your regrets?"

Regrets? What did he mean? Of course we were attending.

"I need a dress for the wedding."

At this point, the shop assistant came forward. She had already begun presenting various dresses on the counter; they were spread out in front of me in a profusion of color: navy blue, peach, red, brown, and pink. I stared.

The shopkeeper took over, sensing my confusion.

Eneres had followed me in. She did not want to miss out on this part of the story.

Dress after dress I tried; none felt quite right. It was such a big decision. I needed the right dress.

Then, a new bunch came through with the assistant, and I spotted it!

Underneath, peeping out of the new bundle, was a burnt orange, shiny fabric, and I knew that this dress would be the one.

"May I try this one first?" I asked, while Eneres kept sentry at the door, looking over her shoulder.

"Yes, this is the one. This is the one I will wear to the wedding. It is perfect. I don't need to try it on. I will take it with me. . . ."

My heart stopped. Perhaps, just perhaps, as I looked so grand in this dress, Tenda would notice me again—notice me as a woman, his woman. Not as his old, first wife, but in the way he had looked at me those years before.

"I need a pair of shoes to match the dress."

Soon, a pair of shoes in my size appeared at the door. I slipped them on. We returned home with my ensemble.

The next morning, Tenda held a meeting with all the wives and the family to give them the news. We gathered at the big house where he played chief and addressed us all as he sat on his chair, throne-like.

Wife number two, Ikwe, was the old Chief's daughter. Ikwe was all right; we got along best, and our relationship had improved with the acquisition of wife number three. Similarly, wife number three had trimmed her feathers too, once wife number four had arrived.

Holding up the luxurious envelope for all to see, he began:

"Thomas, the grandson of my sister Mukale, is getting married in Mutonga. I will be attending the wedding on the tenth of August with wife number one, Ba Puma, together with my old friend Bona," he informed us.

"We have sent word to Aubulu to return home from college in Namwala to accompany us to the wedding, as he speaks English and will help us communicate."

Meanwhile, preparations were in full swing. The two fattest cows,

thick-girthed and ripe for slaughter, were selected early the next morning. Milo, the herdsman, was ready to proceed with the herding of the cattle all the way to Mutonga. He was all puffed up like a fattened bream in winter, as he assumed he, too, would be going to the wedding.

The days wore on without any sign of Aubulu. By Wednesday, the air was thick with worry. What would we do if he did not arrive in time?

The loud shrieks from my eight-year-old, Talia, woke us from our somber state. "He's here! Aubulu is here. Look, Mama, look!" She was staring toward the gate.

Talia broke out in a run, followed by a dozen of her bare-breasted and barefoot siblings; they almost knocked Aubulu over in their excitement.

"What took you so long? Mom and Dad have been waiting." Each one of the children chimed in to say something.

Tenda roused himself and emerged from the big house. "You have finally arrived, Aubulu. We have been waiting for you."

Aubulu undid the fragile organza ribbons and opened the envelope, retrieving the matching invitation inside, and began to read.

The children giggled even though they did not understand the words; the austere presentation of what was being read tickled them. The women smiled at each other.

Tenda stared at Aubulu. "Go on."

"There is a line underneath I do not understand." Aubulu concentrated on the invitation. "Wait . . . it says, '*El honor de su presencia se pide en la union de . . .*'" he frowned. "I am not sure what this means; it seems to be written in another language. There are two languages on the letter."

The invitation was bilingual, English and Spanish, for the benefit of Thomas's wife's family who lived in Mexico.

Undeterred, Tenda said, "Well, go on, go on, and finish reading."

Aubulu's brows knit together. "I can't go on," he said. "I can't read this. . . ."

Tenda and the crowd detected something was not quite right with Aubulu's silence and the look of consternation on his face.

"What is it, Aubulu? Continue with the reading," urged Tenda.

"Yes, Father, I apologize. I will do a better job at reading the letter."

The rows deepened as he continued to read. "The marriage ceremony will take place at the San Jose Mission in San Antonio." He then stopped short at the next sentence.

"What is it, Aubulu?" Now, Tenda could sense there was something wrong.

Aubulu's eyes widened, catching the reflection of the pretty ribbon in his pupils; he looked up to his father.

"Ta . . . Tata." He started, using his childhood name for Father now.

The children's voices rose as they continued playing with each other, cajoling and rolling around.

"Stop it! Quiet!" shouted Tenda. He was exasperated. The noise and clatter that earlier had added to the charm of the occasion now disturbed him. "Children, away from here. Go and play somewhere else."



“Tata.” Aubulu attempted to speak.

“What is it? What is wrong, Aubulu?” Aubulu looked up into his father’s eyes; he seemed to search for a sign, perhaps some form of encouragement to deliver what he had read on the paper.

Finally he blurted out, “*Muchato tali ku ku ku . . . Mutonga*,” stuttering in Ila. “The wedding is not in Mutonga.”

“*Ma Weh!*” Oh dear, everyone gasped.

Ma Weh! was a beautiful expression, and when said in unison, it had even more significance.

“*Ma Weh!*” the family chorused in unison.

“*Muchato, ili kwi?*” Where is the wedding? Tenda demanded.

“*Sa, iliku Lusaka?*” shouted wife number three.

“*Eh, muchato sa taili ku Lusaka?*” I piped in, making sure to mark my territory. Was the wedding being held in Lusaka?

“Pepe.” No, no, said Aubulu.

“*Ili Kwi Aubulu. Muchato Ili Kwi*,” shouted Tenda. “Where is the wedding, Aubulu? Where is it? *Sa taili ku Lusaka?*” Is it not in Lusaka?

“Pe.” No, protested Aubulu.

“Hold back,” I shouted to them. “Can’t you see he is trying to tell us?”

Tenda stood, holding his hands up. “Calm down! Order, family.”

“*Sa Muchato ili kwi, Aubulu, na ku Harare. Ambweni, Ba ushi Thomas watola muchato ku Zimbabwe.*” Perhaps Thomas’s father is taking the wedding to host it in Zimbabwe? Tenda surmised.

“*Pe pe, Pe.*” No, no it isn’t. Aubulu said in a more controlled voice.

Seemingly, he had gathered the courage to speak up now.

“*Muchato taili ku Zimbabwe*,” he said calmly, looking up at his father.

“*Muchato ilaba ku America, kulale, koku ku San Antonio, ku Texas.*” The wedding is not in Zimbabwe. The wedding is being held in America, far away from here at that place called San Antonio, in Texas.”

Silence followed this statement.

Tenda’s shoulders drooped down. He stared at his son.

He heaved a big sigh and muttered under his breath. “I wonder how far Milo is with the cattle.”

That night, Tenda did not join me in my hut. I walked there alone and remained alone. But before lying down, I donned the satin orange dress, and slid into the beautiful brown shoes. I stood tall. I needed no mirror to reflect how I looked.

I drew myself up and made a vow. I would never be at such a loss again. I would learn English. Tomorrow, I would find a way to learn to read if it was the last thing I did.

I would never be helpless or unknowing again. I would never depend on anyone, ever again. I smoothed down the silken dress and drew myself up to my full height. I whispered to the empty room my answer to this fancy but useless invitation: “I send my regrets.” ●

Martina Reisz Newberry

Sadie's Scare

*No wonder I am afraid, she said.
Have you seen the way the leaves shudder
against the reflected light off the
garden wall, then sway and appear to
dust that wall, attempt to wipe away
any memory of the cool, moist
mornings, then become frantic, wicked,*

*blowing around and above the wall,
that wall having become all shadows?
No wonder I am afraid, she said.
That rustling turns to a roar, surrounds
the house. Even though I sit drawn up
in my chair, red blanket on my lap,
that gusting threatens to come in, tells*

*me it knows how, says it wants me, wants
to be inside me. That empty sound—
this way at the window—that way be-
neath the hallway's closed door—that pattern:
flutter, rustle, wreathe and wrinkle, roar
and roar again. Naturally night comes
and branches fall down and trash can lids*

*are lifted and carried away. No
wonder I am afraid, she said, when
it is always the same. Dark descends,
the curtains show their eyes, the walls breathe
as though it were their last breaths. No peace
in windstorms, she said, and peace is God's
lie—the lie that loves me best of all.*



Jonel Abellanosa

The Light

Might require what the sun left,
meaning in the many, the moon,
its shade an EKG line on the lake's
unsteady surface, black. Knowing

the tree behind me, all of a sudden
knowing it's not among the many,
reflection not the sun's, not the
moon's. Hearing leaves vibrate,

I look up to the west, seeking pitch
echoes, winging diagonal to my
learning line. Sight a branch of
inking, where all seekers alight.

If they're bats, they're hearing
the larger in the dark, listening for
asymmetry, homing in trace pulse,
fire from the sun no longer fire.

Amy Soricelli

You are Here

The Bronx hangs in the trees with its dirty fingers
tied in sailor-knots.
Its tongue flaps directions from every corner
offering routes and sudden stops;
they're all that's left of who you were.
The junkies gather on the corner bobbing their heads
you'd think it was political unless you were close enough.
It's just anger left over in a McDonald's cup.
Once in the bad sun in August during jury duty
this guy stood up and started yelling.
Then he sat down and no one said a word.
I watched him on our lunch break.
He broke his sandwich into pieces for the birds.
It was a flat lonely day on a bench.
I never wanted to grow up here
but the bus stopped and we got off.



Sandra Kolankiewicz

Something I Learned When

The meal cost twenty times my hourly pay,
described by words I could not pronounce, yet
appeared white sauce and peas on noodles,
crystal of his wrist watch catching the light,
reminding me the time was already
too late. For what could I say when the plates
were emptied except I no longer lie
on my back anymore, prefer my left
side, something I learned when I was pregnant
would allow my blood to flow more freely
and feed what was growing inside. He might
push me back while I watch the ceiling, wrap
his fingers around my throat, his dark eyes
closed in ecstasy as if he's in a
silent movie with a muted soundtrack,
foreign captions describing the action.



Russell Rowland

Goldfinch in Goldenrod

Goldenrod bows to a wind that blows anywhere
it will, and fixes the trajectory for flighty finch—
which, wherever it alights, shall find sustenance.

Quickened spark seeks tinder of complementary
color, that will rekindle incandescence in accord
with a Word that gilded and pronounced it good.

I seek such gold forever—but cataracts develop
on lenses that have avariciously looked for gain.
The flower turns monochrome, the feather grey,

grass withers, songbirds wing away. That bow
of many colors in the sky goes black and white.
The forecaster will make no guarantees tonight.

Midas, Midas, chance gave you a golden touch.
But grapes turned into nuggets when you ate.
Your harem became statues. You learned late.

Russell Rowland

Testing the Limits

Trombone-voiced counselors regiment
their troops for the descent. One boy,
discovering a hideout among the ledges,
drops out of sight. Tan arms, bare legs,

towhead, do not answer to their muster.
What if he stays. How many miles until
they notice—one sheep short of a flock.
He observes his stasis with detachment.

Flickering in his mind, the candle flame
attracts a slow finger again. The needle
from Mother's sewing box slides easily
underneath his skin: such is experience.

Last August he stood on railroad tracks
that converged to a shimmer, watching
the brilliant eye grow brighter, bigger—
only to see how long he could face it,

how much a life in North Newington
Junction was worth to him, what sort
of option death was, whether parents
should be listened to in such matters.

Oh, he did break and run. The freight
roared past him unheeding. But today,
on the summit, he hears young voices
fade, imagines his face on the posters.



Andrew Peters

The Sinking of the Alpha

She writes letters in her head, in the quiet afternoons at the Alpha Café, when all you hear is the pots banging in the kitchen and Mrs. Carmichael whispering to herself as she goes through the lunch receipts. Out of boredom, she writes her head letters. As she wipes down the tables, sweeps the linoleum, empties the glass ashtrays, washes the ashtrays in the little sink behind the counter. One or two a day, she writes. Sends them to persons near and far. Known and unknown. Once—Oh God, the boredom!—she dispatched a message in a bottle. It read:

Dear Delicious Don Carlo. It has been days and days since I last espied you from the deck of this doomed vessel. Where have you gone? Should you find this bottle, know that we will surely sink and perish, our foundering is inevitable. Rescue me if at all poss., please. Yours for eternity, Nicola Jane O'Malley-Smith.

She dropped it over the side and waited.

He is the best of them, but can even he?

She has never spoken to him. Only seen him through the warped glass of the Alpha's windows. Watched him light his cigarette. On the corner of Wicklow Street, the shoppers drifting around him. Tall and dark and all the rest. The way he cups his Zippo with his strong sailor's hand and kissy-mouths his cigarette, tightly puckers. And the quick hot snatch of ignition, the mouth-grabbed smoke and the head tossed, the muscle-twitch of the neck, the first drag gulped.

He could save her, certainly, if he cared to.

It is a late summer of doldrums weather. A crouch of cloud over the city, deadening the streets. You can lose all hope in the heavy airs, dull fuzzing summer, and all its lively colors pressed to the sides, squashed flat. She longs for rain, for the clouds to rip and spill. And the street to fill, for the Alpha to upend and sink, if that is to be their fate.

Gracie comes in on her sticks-for-legs. Gracie says, Those windows will be polished to death, my girl. There's a gentleman left in the parlor will want his pudding and jam by now.

Old Gracie talks lacy like the blouses she wears. If you are a temporary waitress, a summer hire, you must call her Grace. Say Gracie, and you get a look. She comes in late for the teas and suppers. Moves like a wisp of smoke around the tables. Marshalls you with her looks, sends you into the smoky cram of the back parlor where the stares of the old geezers trickle over you, watery. Your front, your rear, the furtive points of weight, pupil-sized, you feel them. The old gentlemen of the Alpha Café, their ancient dribbling hunger.

A full summer, nearly, she's been there. Her father saw the ad in the *Herald* and read it out to her: "Waitress required. Afternoons only. Timely, Friendly, Reputable."

She found the place at the back of Switzers. Up a narrow staircase and into a tight passage of wood-panelled walls. Under your feet the carmine linoleum, worn pink in its central track. And Mrs. Carmichael waiting, the proprietress, expecting her.

And how old, did you say?

Sixteen, going on seventeen.

Oh! Like the song, how lovely.

I guess.

And experience?

None, yet.

Well, no matter. We can show you the ropes.

She took Nicky's hand and showed her the small parlor. And then back along the dark passage to the larger dining room. The big windows that must be polished daily. The dinky old-time cash register and the cutlery drawer and the condiment table and how you wipe around the nozzles of the squeezey ketchup and mustard.

Mrs. Carmichael has a kind face, full of fruit bowl shine and roundness. The patches of supple skin on the summit of the cheeks, the back of her neck, show that she was young once. She has an old limp, worn to a roll, and a seaswell in her walk as she makes her way back to the register behind the counter. This is how you see her most times, her head and shoulders behind the counter and a happy tremor in the chemical float of her hair as she plays the register, two-fingered, her white pointed hands falling to the keys in efficient piston motion and her singing out the items, eggs and sausage and toast, tea, pancakes, the extra of black pudding, and the kerchunking shakes of the till as it scrolls and totals, and Mrs. Carmichael blinking mildly, a polite-edged nunnish smile, in anticipation of the money in her hand.

Oh, so boring. You enter the dining room with your hands full of plates and in the big windows there are the cliffs of the buildings, close pressed. Wicklow Street, Clarendon Street. From the window ledges sidewise looks from the resting gulls. Hard, high brick, the fishy sweat of the slate. Every evening Gracie sniffs the air with the stud of her nose and says it will rain. And every day it doesn't.

And the sounds of the gentlemen eating. Fillet of cod or shepherd's pie, or mutton chops and fried potatoes, mushrooms on toast, Eve's pudding, milk pudding with jam. You go around the tables with a notepad, taking orders. So old, the gentlemen! Long-coated, humid newspapers wedged under their arms, they scrape up the stairs on worn soles. Where there is hair, it is white and grey, storm-tossed, stretched over scored scalps. The buckled panels of their faces, they turn them on you, and you have to look away. They bend to their newspapers as they take in their food. The way an old man says jam, very sad indeed. It comes straight from their stinky centers, the hungry guts: With jam, please, and the watery eyes wide at you, the tongue flying over the lips and the coral hands shivering the menus.

Then the ticklish weights of their eyes felt all over, front and back.

How was lunch, says Gracie when she comes in.

Grand, says Mrs. Carmichael.

Nicola is setting for the suppers, I see.



And her sticky looks as she goes around the room to straighten the knives and forks, twist the little sails of the napkins. Every day the same.

. . . Oh, I can't go on. These old people don't know what's coming. They have me trapped, Don Carlo, and won't let me out . . .

When you polish the windows, you see the real people. Standing on a chair, your knees smarted by the brass fins of the radiator. Down below, the kids skirting the yelling busker and disappearing into Tower Records. The clickety-click of the fashionable women slipping into Switzers' back door. The tea-break waiters and kitchen porters, wall leaning, puffing, watching the exotic flash of bike couriers unzipping the street.

And Don Carlo, sometimes, in his tight T-shirts. The way he moves, the slow assurance of it, as if standing squarely on his inheritance. Couples part for him as he stands and smokes.

Mrs. Carmichael follows her gaze one time and tut-tuts when she sees him there.

What does he do? says Nicky.

A hoodlum, sighs Mrs. Carmichael. They're all over the city.

A pirate, then. The graceful unchallenged movement, the neck stretches, the yawning, and the glancing over the street with the power of life and death. Mrs. Carmichael cannot understand. When Nicky watches him there she feels a spinning behind her ribs, a swooping rush to her very depths.

The gray day ages, thickens, the reflections in the glass grow stronger. Mr. Hourican, who always kisses your hand, in for his tea, at his usual table, the bowed heads of the other old gentlemen, the shed skins of their coats hanging from the backs of their chairs.

This egg is delectable, Grace.

Thank you, Mr. Hourican. I'll tell the cook you liked it. Nicola dear, them windows is polished to death. Would you ever run down for more tea?

Lacy Gracie has imaginary buckles on her shoes. She says, I do be liking a little syrup on me pancake meself, but it is terrible repetitious. When you bend to buckle your shoe it does be repeating something terrible.

So old, all of them.

How will it end?

Mrs. Carmichael gripping the till as the black water swirls her waist, the old men clawing at the foam, dragged down by sodden overcoats, their brine-filled pockets?

Yes, teacups spinning in the whorl, the heavy dining room goes under first and the prow of the parlor rising, and then the lapping at the parlor benches, the green leather benches and the soft impressions of the gentlemen's rears puddled and washed over.

Sometimes a passing truck shakes the windows, and you look across the tufted heads and feel that this must be the moment, the beginning of the fatal list.

When Mr. Hourican comes up the stairs meet him at the top or he'll kiss your hand in front of everyone.

And the blushes, then.

As he kisses your hand and you get his tea-sweet breath and he lays his old eyes on you, weak blue eyes rolling in milk.

Oh, the blushes.

He runs his finger down the menu and says every time, The Special Evening Tea, please, Gracie.

And Grace calls out in her splintering voice, Special Evening for Mr. Hourican.

Grace wears stockings and old-fashioned garters. That time she opened the door on her, the corridor toilet, and saw the silky helter-skelter of the stockings and the rigging of the garters and the wasted legs withdrawing, flinching. Sorry, sorry, through the wood door, but only silence and then the running of the tap. That brown door painted so many times it looks like melted chocolate. And Mr. Hourican observing from the dining room, his old man's desperate curiosity, and the rouge of excitement in his cheeks.

Doomed, all of them.

There are three weeks left of summer, Don Carlo. Forty-six weeks until the next summer. Mrs. Carmichael only smiles. When she talks to the customers she places her hands on the table to take the weight off her bad leg and she laughs and laughs until her hair shakes. She has her hair set once a week, and dyes it nutmeg brown. Oh, rescue me!

When the rain comes it surprises her, tapping at the windows. At last the rain, tapping politely at first, and then falling in slings, ribbons, the windows quickly roped.

And Don Carlo on the street corner, cursing. The lunches are over and she is polishing the windows and through the cords of rain she watches him pull up his collar and snarl at the sky.

He sees her there. In the window. Her cloth arm raised. A quiet Monday. Only herself and Mrs. Carmichael, behind the till.

His look stays on her.

Mrs. Carmichael is busy with the lunch receipts. Cannot see.

She drops the cloth, and her hand is on the cold glass.

He looks at her.

Some old song, Mrs. Carmichael is humming. She cannot see. And the rackety till, kerchung kerchung, the spinning insides.

Her insides spinning, he looks at her.

Her fingers flex, a wave.

He flashes a grin. Checks the street up and down. Looks at her.

Oh, the blushes.

He saunters over the road, and the rain is so hard it is impossible to hear his foot on the stair until the last few steps, thudding. And then he is in the doorway, and Mrs. Carmichael's white hands settle on the till keys as she feels the change in the air, his subtle pressure.



He is everything she expected. Dark hair slicked back, otterish under the strip lights. He stands at the threshold of the dining room and says, Jesus, what kind of place is this?

Mrs. Carmichael seaswells quickly to the end of the counter. We are a restaurant, she says. Can I help you, sir?

Don Carlo looks at her. Mrs. Carmichael goes flat around the mouth, chin up. She will ruin everything.

I meant the food, missus. What kind of food do you have?

There is a bright nick taken out of his eyebrow. Quite fetching. Mrs. Carmichael wants him out for sure. She will ruin. . . .

I'm afraid lunch is finished, says Mrs. Carmichael.

On her stiff leg she wheels and rises an inch. Don Carlo looks at her. His face is smooth, broad, the thick-rooted nose flinching, insulted. Mrs. Carmichael is ruining. . . .

. . . if you persist in frustrating can I remind you that this man has traveled considerable . . . to receive such an inhospitable

It's teas, now, Nicky shouts.

To keep him there. To stop Mrs. Carmichael sending him away. She pulls a chair from under one of the tables. Smiles brightly.

Then I'll have my tea, says the Don.

He sits down on the chair. A window table. Mr Hourican's usual place.

A stupendous improvement, oh golly.

She passes him a menu. It is small in his hands. He looks at her, and she sees the livid fringe of the look, but also the feathery thickness of his lashes that droopily soften it.

Handsome, most definitely a pirate.

We have Barry's tea, she says. It comes with a half sandwich. Ham or egg.

I don't want a half sandwich, he says.

Or a pancake. With syrup, says Nicky. Or two potato cakes.

I'll take the pancake.

And there's sponge cake.

I'll take that too.

And bread and butter, and jam if you want it.

He lays a hand on the table. The thundery sunsets of his knuckles, arcs of purple and ochre. And a sovereign ring on his pinkie, glinting.

Loot, or an earnest, it glints gold as his fingers drum the table top.

And I'll take the bread and butter, then. And plenty of jam, he says.

He says jam like a young man, cleanly.

I'll just check with the kitchen that we are still doing tea, says Mrs. Carmichael.

Don Carlo turns to her. Of course you're still doing tea, he says. It's tea o'clock, isn't it, missus?

All the same, I'll just go and. . . .

Go all the way to the kitchen for me? Ah no, I wouldn't want to bother you. Send Brigitte Bardot here. Save your leg.

Mrs. Carmichael should smile and wobble away. Just smile and out you go. Tra lala lala.

But she does not smile. She backs up, sways behind the counter. Watching. A hand on the old till.

Don Carlo turns to Nicky, says, Now why don't you go and tell Cook about the tea, and come straight back. Don't leave us lonely, like.

Of course, she says.

Along the wooden corridor, past the small parlor, empty, past the melting toilet door, to the kitchen, her insides spinning.

Ignore the old lady, I beg you! What little she knows of. . . . Do not leave without me Forgive my frequent writing If Gracie was here she would try to tell you that maple syrup is repetitious, when really it is she who Do you mind me writing so much? Mark Twain and Mrs. Mark Twain used to write lovingly to one another every day, and she was only downstairs or whatever, wasn't she? . . . You must bring me with you, otherwise I shall

When she returns to the dining room, Mrs. Carmichael is still at the till. Don Carlo is tilted back in his chair, his eyes closed.

Hearing her step, he sits up. Don't mind me, he says, I like to have a kip in the afternoon.

I only work afternoons, and a bit of the evening shift, she says. Feels the blood rushing into her cheeks.

Is that so? And how long have you been doing that?

Nearly four weeks.

Summer job?

Yes.

Still at school?

Yes.

How long left?

Just a year.

How old?

Nearly seventeen.

Sweet sixteen! Well, what about that! Get 'em young, eh, missus? Teach them the ropes before they pick up the bad habits?

He is looking at Mrs. Carmichael.

Mrs. Carmichael's face is flat, colorless in the clamp of afternoon light. She watches him steadily but makes no reply.

Were you like that, at her age, missus? I bet you were. Going about with your teas and cakes. And jam for everyone, eh? Bit of jam? Everyone likes their jam. I'm mad for it, so I am.

Is there anything else you would like, besides your tea? says Mrs. Carmichael. Only Jane will be leaving soon, and the evening waiters will be coming in.



The evening waiters, is it?

That's right.

A gang of them, eh? Big men all? Rippling with muscle and the like? A whole shift of them punching their time cards, like they do the Ritz?

They'll be coming in shortly.

And there'll be a waiters' briefing no doubt. Don't forget to push the caviar. Chef says it is nearly gorn orf. And Lady Muck will take her usual table this evening, so be sure there is no draft from the foyer. Oh, I wouldn't want to be here for all that.

Jane will be leaving, and the waiters will be coming in for the evening, says Mrs. Carmichael.

Not just another old lady, then? With a shite perm?

Mrs. Carmichael blinks, once, twice. She says, I don't believe you want your tea at all. Only. . . .

Only what, missus. What do I want?

Nonsense. Only nonsense is what you want, says Mrs. Carmichael. There is a tremor in her thick brown hair.

The rain has come fully, curtains of rain on the windows, the cliffs of brick sliding, toppling, looming close.

Now! Don Carlo slaps the table, turns to Nicky. Now, how about that? What a thing to say to a customer.

We have plenty of good customers here, says Mrs. Carmichael.

And all I want is Janey here to serve me up a couple of pancakes. With syrup. How do you like your syrup, Jane? The lady here likes her jam, but you look to me like a syrup girl. Am I right?

I quite like syrup, says Nicky

Enough, or a lot? Do you want it covered in syrup, like? All over? Or just a little dab of it on the side?

Not too much, I guess.

And every day? Do you like it every day? Or is it only when you can get it?

Mrs. Carmichael steps out from behind the counter.

Jane, she says, Mr. Hourican will be in shortly. You better get his table ready.

So old, Mr. Hourican! When he takes your hand you feel the silk of a moth's wing, the cool fluttering pulse. Courtly old gentlemen, he bows to the ladies, kisses their fingers, *You are a diamond in the rough, Grace, amidst us barbarous men*, his pale eyes leaking and the spice of his breath, gingery clouds of it when he throws his head back, shows you his sinking teeth.

Don Carlo sighs, glances at his watch. He turns to Nicky, runs his droopy gaze down and up. He says, Why don't you go down to Cookie and see what's taking so long?

Of course, says Nicky.

She runs along the corridor. The cook is nearly finished with the pancakes, jabbing the pan above the flame, flipping. She does not tell her about Don Carlo, or the way Mrs. Carmichael has stiffened behind the counter, her painted stare, a battered figurehead at the till. Mr. Hourican might come in at any moment. And

Gracie too, for the supper shift. Grace, soft on old Mr. Hourican, looking for someone to die with, her powdery airs and the the ancient light of her eyes, the gas lamp sparkles, the winter glow of high fanlights. Oh please rescue me.

When she steps back into the corridor, Don Carlo is waiting for her. She lets the kitchen door bump shut on her rear.

She has a covered plate in each hand.

Pancakes? he says.

Two stacks, straight from the pan, she says. She tries a smile.

Well, aren't you going to deliver them?

He is blocking the corridor, her pirate. She takes a few steps forward and stops. He steps to meet her.

What did you say your name was?

He stands against her, curls his head down towards hers.

Chewing gum, the fresh cut of aftershave, and something warmer and deeper, tackily human.

I didn't, she whispers. Another smile, she tries.

The old lady called you Jane.

She did.

That your real name?

No, I guess.

Didn't think so. She's no Plain Jane, I says. So what is it, then?

Nicky, she says.

Nicky, he says. Nicky, Nicky, Nick-ee.

His chest is very close, through his open coat she sees the impeccable fit of his T-shirt, its smooth descent to his belt. You could put a hand to it easy enough. But her hands are under the pancake plates.

He steps into her and she flinches to the wall, her back against the old wood. He steps close to her there.

I think I'll call you Tricky Nicky.

Why?

Because you have a tricky look about you.

Do I?

Yes.

Is that a good thing?

Yes.

I see you out the window, sometimes.

Yes.

And what's your name?

Don't have one, he says. And in a supple movement he gets his fingers under the waistband of her leggings, pulls them a little from her hip.

She is wearing plain blue briefs with cracked plastic lettering: Thursday. Her second least favorite pair. His knuckles against her skin, the pink skin grooves left by the elastic of her leggings, snug against the inner channel of her hip. Minty hard breathing.

That's enough! shouts Mrs. Carmichael.



Mrs. Carmichael stands in the entrance of the dining room. She holds a large carving knife. A mean blade twitching her thigh, a handle of wound string. She keeps it in a cupboard under the till for such occasions.

What's this, missus? says Don Carlo, stepping back.

Out, says Mrs. Carmichael.

Ah, c'mon, I'm only messing.

He has a medium smile, not so hot. There's a tooth missing at the side, you only see it when the curtain of his lip is pulled. And there is discoloration, soupy shades running to the back, and a mealy yellow run along the gums. The chewing gum is crushed, bubbling, between his molars. He grins at Mrs. Carmichael.

All right, I'll have me tea and be gone, he says.

Out! shouts Mrs. Carmichael. From her side the knife flashes upwards and she makes a lame scurry forwards, halves the distance. Crazy enough for anything.

Don Carlo shifts his weight. He frowns, his fist goes to his forehead, raps twice. What kind of place is this? he says.

I swear to God, says Mrs. Carmichael, if you don't go now. . . .

She takes a jerky step, the knife still raised.

He goes down the stairs slowly. Creaking steps, the old wood giving way. They wait until he can no longer be heard. Mrs. Carmichael standing in the corridor, the knife held up. Nicky against the wall, pancakes raised. Neither of them speak. The water is filing the gutters, running over the gunnels, rising against the foot of the stairs as if all the seas of the world are tumbling around them, the rain having come at last, breaking over the city, its ancient surfaces, the brick and stone and warping glass, and the grime of the long summer shifting, free floated, and the stripped city beneath looking something like new.●

Jeffrey Alfier

Reply to a Letter Requesting My Return to Gila River Valley

I remember what home was: scrubland
soaked by storms, tired horses,
tired childhood in the sun's taxing grace.

Perhaps I'd come back to learn again
what emptiness scoured by dust
and the wind's long arrival means.

Days my voice found its echo
down mines I'd labored, only to find
they'd exhausted to a dead stop.

You've long known I'd drifted off into another life.
Rode freight trains with drifters trolling
through days uncertain to arrive.

If I come back now, all you'd get would be wounded,
scarred, the far off murmur of wind.
And yes, I once held out to you a fistful of flowers.



Tobi Alfier

Annual Gathering at the Cayucos Cemetery

This is our fourteen-year summer reunion.
Ten families, we meet up here, up the coast,
settle from Morro Bay to Cambria, the little ones
now driving, the older ones driving only as far
as each other's kitchen tables for drinks,
gossip, '80's music and sunsets.

We are the middle ones, in our twenties.
At least once or twice we beg off to be with
each other, meet at the cemetery across the highway
at Ocean Avenue. One of us brings wine,
one brings cups, one brings a sketchbook
to rub the new graves—they are like old friends,
they need to be remembered.

I fell in love with Steven here. He went on to marry
Jan, proposed to her at the Walker headstone,
where we all used to relax, leaning against it
to watch the sun kiss us good day as we learned
how to smoke pot, then raced across the highway
during a break in traffic, heading for anyone's house
that was closest. Those were the early days,
the "truth or dare" days. Too cold to get naked,
we were all pretty innocent, even once we weren't.

We make a toast to George at the Pierce marker—
his family moved to Connecticut. Except for a note
here and there, he's lost to us. He's in the Navy,
dating a sweet girl named Annie, like the only wine
we could get when all this started. George used
to hang out at the store, ask everyone to buy us a bottle.
We didn't want to steal from our parents,
didn't have a corkscrew anyway, and sure as hell
didn't want to explain.

No one's died yet. No one's in prison.
We don't have to drive by Atascadero
and raise glasses. Ten nice families,
who got tired of "family camp," decided
to make their own. Today we'd be
a laughingstock. Back then—
really even now we don't care.
Only takes one sight of the sun
as it drops over the horizon,
the timeless glimmer
on the water, with our arms
around one another,
a full glass and a full sketchbook,
to know it's time to calendar it again.



Matthew Babcock

I Will Never

be one of those guys
who wears a T-shirt in the pool.
Mistakes should stay
as naked as an unfrosted cake.
When my body bloats
like The Blob's wet dream,
have the nearest crane operator
dump me in the deep end
as bare as the day
I spoke my first syllables of pain.
I will never say, "Well, I never!"
Never go undercover
or wave banners for lies.
Never carouse. Never arrive.
From bleachers I'll never badmouth
someone's fifth-grade girl
on the basketball court.
Never vacation in Mexico
the way my brother does,
sending photos of my nephew
swimming with dolphins
under a sky blue enough to blind
the sun while I drive my used car
around this northwestern town,
the gray snow and grainy light
a guarantee for six months,
the constant sky a carbon slate,
the storefronts a kingdom of shadows.
Never will I favor despair,
breed retrievers, or savor a stare
like the one I receive
from a shivering coffee-eyed girl
on Christmas Eve, her wet ponytail
a squiggle of ink, her dream
to splash for a steamy hour
with her bashful dad and five sisters
in this roadside motel.

Each stout brunette girl
has stepped out of her mother
like the Matryoshka of the Month,
to the ear the endless echo
of a giggle, to the eye
the evolutionary stages of the soul.
The mother reclines
on an aquamarine deck chair,
the baby wedged between
her thighs like the young goddess
carved on the prow of a ship.
Her quick needles knit
an afghan of fuzzy blue yarn—
something I could never do—
as if to say, *Whatever happens*
I will never let my hands leave this miracle.



Laurie Kolp

Chew on This

Stuffing trail mix in my mouth bit by bit:
raisins, M&Ms, almonds—
minus the cashews, which I amass for my son—
I wonder why I gave up gum for Lent.
And when it's not trail mix,
it's any kind of chocolate I can get my hands on
or Werther's soft-centered Originals,
even sucking on shitty-aftertaste cough drops
appeases my fetish for mastication.

I'll share a little secret with you.
I once tried cud, stuck some chewing
tobacco behind my bottom lip
like the guys I thought studs
at the baseball field.
I could drink them under the table
so undoubtedly, I could dip, too.
For a second, and then I spit it out
in disgust, the taste worse than
Brussels sprouts. Plus, my mother
was coming to pick me up.

These past few weeks without gum
I must have gained five pounds.
I fell asleep during the church mission,
I almost swallowed a coffee straw
at my daughter's dance competition.
But my kids haven't run out of the gum
I love. The gum Mom loved, too,
and chewed onto her deathbed
one year ago today.



Laurie Kolp

Sky Lantern

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Cycling over
the Rainbow Bridge
seemed reasonable at the time,
I'd pump my thighs right into shape
and tape a ribbon on my wall. Plus, if you
survived the 15-story climb, your fear of heights
just might subside and I might win; but 10 minutes in,
my heart jumped out and knocked me flat so fast a firecracker
flashed before my eyes then SMACK an 18-wheeler crashed my bike
and I splattered like a plum. What if I told you I made a wish on starry ribs
as they shattered from the compact? What if I said your hands upon my chest
compressed my breath as much as this? I kited upwards nonchalantly, a Chinese
lantern. I watched drivers stop quickly, mush traffic into jam. Never before had this
much ado spun around you, the other me I see amid a sanguinary hue. Now I'm free
to sail above the clouds intrepidly. I'm finally free to move away from you to me.

Federico Federici

[it] indicates that

[it] indicates that
the observer's hat
ticks slower than
massless particles
but faster than his
inert relatives' clock
in their framed kitchen
where they eat static
ground based atomic
beans in a diluted soup

short pulses of light
as well as long ones are
unaffected passengers
of time, the rate of which
reaches zero at the proper
speed; time dilation
recalibrates the span
of death, stars collapse
in a teaspoon



Duane Anderson

Just Desserts

My wife is craving dessert.
She asks me what we have and
I tell her orange pie,
flaming babaloo,
and cherries jubilee.

She says, no we don't,
and she is right.
We don't have anything
but a package of cookies
purchased at the store today.
Have a cookie.

Sometimes the desserts
in life are just a
plain ol' cookie.
Enjoy one before I eat the rest.

Brett D. Armes

The State of Delaware

It was three o'clock in the morning, and I was on the edge of my bed hugging a ball of bedsheets and a coarse comforter. A woman was fighting with two men outside my motel room near Red Cloud, Nebraska. They were slamming doors, shouting, calling each other rat-bastard and redneck motherfucker. The motel was one of those single-story deals where people park in front of their rooms. When I peeked through the blinds, I saw a saggy-skinned woman and a barrel-chested man in front of my window. They were wearing blue football jerseys and cowboy boots. That's it. Nothing else. A small man was running away from the couple. He sprang into an old pickup truck, backed up in a rage, spun around, and pointed his headlights toward the half-dressed couple. When he gunned the engine, the truck jostled from side to side. I should move, I thought. I could die if he crumbles the wall. But I didn't. I wanted to see how things played. The woman was wielding an ear of corn, shaking it in the air and cursing at the man in the truck. What is she doing with an ear of corn at this hour, I wondered.

"You sick fuck, God knows where you live," the woman screamed. "You hear me? He's gonna *geet* your sorry ass."

The truck spun its tires at the woman's words, a move I saw coming. The man was about to speed toward us all. These types of situations always escalate rather than de-escalate. It was possible that the man would calm down and slowly drive away. Possible, but not probable. If I've learned one thing in my thirty-five years, it's that the world is full of predictable sad sacks. What I didn't know was whether the truck would swerve at the last second or plow into us all. I was also unsure if the couple would scatter or stand their ground, if I would retreat or take the truck head on.

The truck was finally in motion, and I kept waiting for the woman to say *geet* again. I badly wanted her to say it. The word ignited a rush of warmth across my belly. But not just the word, the force with which she belted it out, the pronunciation she achieved from a clenched jaw. *Geet. Geet. Geet.* I thought I might tear up at the word. Since I was a boy, sounds have been like drugs, or magic spells, or parasites that clung to my brain. Some sounds tasted like raw radish. Others like blue cheese. A sound might invade my thoughts like a blast of cold freesia or cut grass. Some sounds floated calmly across my mind like dandelion seeds on air. Others raced in frantic loops like electric balls of yarn. Some were two-dimensional. Others three. They built themselves into small or grotesquely large geometric shapes like living crystals. But the woman's *geet* was unique. It started as a tiny kernel of metallic light beneath my sternum, which bloomed into the ends of my body, a brilliant silver fractal of selfsame petals tickling me into an angelic state.



The truck's high-beams pierced my eyes, so I focused on the backs of the couple's jerseys. They were staring down the oncoming truck. They weren't budging, and neither was I. From where I stood, the corner of the truck's bumper seemed to graze the woman's hip, but in reality, he probably missed her by a few feet. After he swerved, the guy started doing donuts in the parking lot, and it occurred to me that I didn't care if I died or not, that the saggy woman and the enormous man didn't care if they died or not. I supposed the world was filled with such apathetic people, people who'd stare at death and sigh in a non-suicidal way, "Let's get this shit over with."

The truck finally straightened out, cut across the two-lane highway, and disappeared into the darkness of an open field, bouncing and bucking over the Kansas plain like a cartoon bull. The enormous man loomed over the woman's left side. He tried to squeeze her shoulder—a gesture I found rather tender—but she chopped away his hand and pointed the corn at his chest like a dagger.

"Don't you touch me, you dumb son of a bitch. Don't you fucking touch me."

She jabbed each syllable into his breast with the end of her corn. The man just stood there with a puppy-dog face, and I got the feeling he was one of those gentle giants, maybe a little slow. The woman probably loved him but wished he would show a little backbone once in a while, kick some ass when some ass needed kicking. Maybe the man in the truck was her former lover, and the giant man had tried reasoning with an ex who couldn't be reasoned with.

These were the moments that made life worth living, I thought—these moments of realness and uncertainty. They were like sandpaper to the soul. I felt crisp, clear, and alert, ready for anything. My lungs opened up, every breath full and deep. My eyes were hyperfocused. The lights outside lit up the room enough to see my brother Owen in the bed next to mine. He was unfazed by the commotion and sleeping the sleep of the dead, even if he was grinding his teeth. He'd forgotten his special mouthpiece at home, which sucked because home was about eight hours behind us in Casper, Wyoming. He'd have to buy an athletic mouthguard from Walmart. He hated those. They were too bulky. The sound of my brother's teeth drove me mad. Like metal hooks scraping porcelain. He looked naive lying there. But don't we all when we're asleep. Still, something about him reminded me of the gentle giant outside, and I wanted to shake him awake and tell him to stop, just stop grinding your goddamned teeth.

I say Owen, but since his return last year, he started using his middle name, Marlon. I don't know why, at forty-five, he decided to change his name. Maybe it was his way of marking a new start. He'd fallen into a deep depression after the Air Force discharged him. Paranoid delusional disorder, they said. Another doctor said schizophrenia. Either way, something triggered a breakdown while he was stationed at Ramstein Air Base. He said he couldn't tell me what happened. Something about security. Or maybe he was just lying because he didn't want to talk about it.

I watch too many movies, so I pictured a younger, handsomer Owen in fatigues, pistol in hand, locked in a top-level room. There were file cabinets against the door. Red lights swirling overhead. The clang of Klaxon alarms swelled in my

brother's brain until he slid down the wall in an upright fetal position and cupped his ears, crying. When I shared my version of events with Owen, he told me to stick to computers.

"All I can say," Owen said, "is they told me I should never own a gun."

Jesus, I thought, what happened? Was he suicidal? Did he go too deep with his conspiracy theories? He'd always been something of a doomsday fanatic. He liked to read survival manuals and make bug-out bags for fun. Then again, doomsday was about as American as apple pie. Even I kept a hunting knife, crossbow, and hundreds of seed packets on hand. But after Ramstein, when I looked at Owen, I saw a man who was my brother and not my brother. Every time I visited his apartment, he was slouched over a dimly lit desk, staring into the glow of his computer, chatting online and posting to conspiracy theory forums. He always rested his chin in his palm as if his head were too heavy for his neck. And at the motel in Kansas, I definitely didn't recognize him. He lay there on the bed's comforter in American flag boxers, legs spread eagled, sweating through his undershirt. He was a lot heavier now. He said it was the meds. On the night table next to him were two different blood-pressure medications, an antipsychotic, an antidepressant, and a bottle of antianxiety pills, which I bought for him on the dark web. His sleep-apnea mask clung to his face like an alien parasite, its tube a weevil's long proboscis. I could see orange earplugs in his ears. His phone, propped up against his pillow, played ocean sounds on a loop. There was something cyborg-like about him. Good Christ, I thought, is this what it takes for him to sleep?

The scene depressed me, and the room smelled like feet, so I got dressed, gathered up my bedding, and headed for the car to sleep. Outside, I saw no sign of the corn woman or the giant. Even with a heavy coat, a blanket, and a comforter, I shivered violently. I started the engine, reclined the driver's seat, and watched my breath disappear. The November sky hung low in waves of waxy clouds the color of undeveloped film, and through them I could see subtle pulses of green luminescence sail through the sky. I first noticed the lights in Casper while packing for our trip. I stopped and just stood there in my driveway, in awe of the display.

The next morning, we stopped for gas before getting back on the road. We were headed to Delaware, but Owen wanted to visit the geographic center of the United States, outside Lebanon, Kansas. It was a gray morning, and I could see Owen inside the gas station buying the same thing he always bought—mini-muffins and coffee. I could also see him asking the cashier if he could take a gander at the quarters in her cash drawer. He always said that, "take a gander." He thought it was funny. He started collecting coins when his therapist told him he needed a hobby. Over the past few months, he'd gone from photography to creative writing to coin collecting. On the wall in his basement is a black-and-white photograph of a couple wrapped in an American flag, making love.

"Why did you make the picture black and white?" I asked. "You lost the red, white, and blue of the flag."

"Shit, I didn't think about that," he said.

Owen's first and only short story was about a scientist who invented a time



machine which took five years to travel one year into the past or one year into the future. The scientist was forty-five years old when she traveled one year into the past to the year 2017. There she was fifty, and she met her past self who was forty-four. Then, when she returned to 2018, she had aged to fifty-five years old. She became severely depressed when she realized, even if she lived to be ninety years old, she could only travel seven years into the future to 2025. In the end, she chose to destroy the time machine, which had taken her twenty-five years to build.

I tried using the story to psychoanalyze my brother, and I concluded that the time machine represented his midlife crisis. If he were younger, there would be more time to experience more of the world, but now that he was older, like the scientist, it was too late. Not much changed in his life, and every day was the same. Maybe he felt like he'd wasted his life on something that did him no good.

"If the scientist was smart enough to build a time machine," I asked, "why did it take her so long to realize she could only travel seven years into the future before aging so much? And what does a person do in a time machine alone for five years?"

"I see your point," he said. "I guess I could add a cryogenic sleep chamber to the inside of the time machine upon revision."

Owen also collected America the Beautiful Quarters and placed them into a book of felt slots. Only Ohio was still missing, and it drove him crazy.

"Just buy the damn thing online," I told him, but he refused.

"You don't understand," he said. "It's about the hunt. I'll only accept an Ohio found in the wild."

"The wild," I said. The *wild*?

Before we left on our trip to Delaware, I'd purchased an Ohio quarter online for \$2.25, and I planned to engineer a scenario in which the coin seemed to appear naturally. I was tired of him harassing strangers and cashiers because of the damn thing. It was embarrassing.

As he walked out of the gas station, an elderly man in overalls stopped and shook his hand, undoubtedly thanking him for his service. Everywhere he went, he wore an Air Force cap or T-shirt, and people constantly stopped him to shake his hand.

"Another member of the Owen fan club?" I asked.

"Don't worry, little brother, defragmenting hard drives at Best Buy is an important job, too."

"You know the true center of the United States is located near Belle Fourche, South Dakota," I told him. "It takes Alaska and Hawaii into account. We're going to the center of the forty-eight contiguous states."

"You mean forty-seven contiguous states," he said.

I expected this answer. He was subtracting Delaware. He was into geographic conspiracy theories about sinkholes and Google Maps anomalies. And he'd recently read that Australia did not exist. This inspired his own theory—Delaware doesn't exist.

"Think about it," he told me one day. "Nobody's from Delaware. Nobody talks about Delaware, not on TV, not in the news."

"Nobody talks about Wyoming, either," I said.

"Yeah, but we're *from* Wyoming, so we know it's real. Look, I'm not

saying Delaware was *never* a state, just that at some point in history, it ceased to be a state, and I intend to discover why and when. Right now, I'm investigating the idea that bankers paid the U. S. government to secretly secede Delaware so corporations and investors could use the land as an 'offshore' tax haven."

He put air quotes around 'offshore.'

"What about the millions of search results you'll get if you Google Delaware?"

"Anybody can post anything on the internet. It's the wild west of information," he said, oblivious to the hole this poked in his own argument, since every conspiracy theory he subscribed to he'd found online.

"You do realize you're posting your own theories online, that you believe Australia doesn't exist because somebody posted it online?"

"It's all about power and money," he said. "The websites I read are authored by average Joes, not some corporation or billionaire or government. Average Joes have no reason to mislead people. Powerful people do."

Back in Casper, every weekend, Owen put on dress shoes, khakis, and a collared shirt and tie. He surveyed people outside restaurants, strip-mall shops, and Walmarts.

"Have you ever been to Delaware?" he'd ask.

"Can you name any celebrities, politicians, or famous athletes from Delaware?"

"Can you name a professional sports team from Delaware?"

"What is the capital of Delaware?"

"Which states surround Delaware?"

"Is Delaware landlocked or on the coast?"

The responses were not surprising. People's ignorance of Delaware only helped fuel his theory. When one woman demonstrated her knowledge of Delaware, Owen suggested that she'd caught wind of the survey and studied in advance. "Maybe she was part of the whole conspiracy," he added. "You never know."

A few days before Thanksgiving, Owen photographed me sitting next to the geographic center of the United States, which was technically a symbolic landmark. The real center was nearby, on private property. To protect the landowner's privacy, the state moved the center to a nearby field by cementing a flagpole into a wonky pyramid of rocks. A green bench had been plopped down beside the monument, and there was no flag atop the pole. It was ten a.m., but the sky looked like early evening. The wind traveled in aggressive bursts across the plains. When I called the scene depressing, Owen told me to show some respect. The two of us stood awkwardly in the middle of the Great Plains, unsure what to do next. I looked up into the cloud cover for the green lights, and Owen pushed a stick around with his foot, wondering aloud where a stick could have come from when there were no trees in sight.

"It's a mystery for the ages," I told him.

He picked up the stick and placed it into his coat pocket.

I decided to ask him about the lights.



“Hey, have you noticed any meteorological anomalies during the past few days?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Weird green lights in the sky.”

“Then just say ‘green lights,’ for Christ’s sake. Don’t say ‘meteorological anomalies.’ You sound like an asshole.”

He peered into the sky for a while and rubbed his belly.

“Now that you mention it, I think I did notice a few blobs of green light the other night. Sometimes my meds mess with my memory, but I’m almost positive I saw them.”

I regretted saying anything. I got the feeling I had planted the idea in his head.

“Shit, I think I just saw a green light glide across the sky above the clouds.”

I couldn’t tell if he was fucking with me or not, which always irked me. I wrote a paper once arguing that excessive use of irony and sarcasm was America’s greatest mental health crisis, that our humor had become so steeped in ironic ruses, we had collectively lost touch with reality. I claimed such humor was sadistic, a form of schadenfreude, since it made people delight in another person’s confusion or discomfort. My Canadian friend agreed with my theory, claiming that Canadians were, on the whole, a much more ingenuous people.

There was a tiny white chapel near the geographic center’s monument, but it was only the size of a few outhouses. The inside was so tiny each pew only sat one person. I took a seat near an old woman, and she said, “Aren’t these tiny pews the most adorable thing you’ve ever seen?” Her grandson was darting from pew to pew, ducking and diving, pretending to shoot us all with a toy machine gun. When he pointed the gun at Owen, my brother’s face went pale, and I wondered if something similar had happened during his breakdown at Ramstein. Owen turned around and walked to the front of the chapel in a bit of a daze. He stood at the pulpit and thumbed through a gigantic Bible. After a while, he looked up and began reading Genesis 1:1 out loud, and as he read, his voice got louder and deeper and more zealous. After he stopped, the older woman removed her gloves, clapped, and said, “How quaint!” As if Owen were part of the installation.

“Thank you,” Owen said in an Elvis voice. “Thank you very much.”

Behind Owen was a wooden plaque on the wall. It was shaped like the United States and painted like an American flag. The stars covered Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and the rest of the plaque was all red and white stripes. Someone had nailed a Christian cross to the center of the plaque, marking the geographic center. This fucked with my head for a moment because that made the U. S. the cross on which Christianity was crucified. But it also looked like the country was in the crosshairs, as if Jesus had America in his sights. The plaque was meant to be inspirational and patriotic, but it also looked like America was the place where Christianity had gone to be martyred.

For the next leg of the trip, I pretended to be asleep while Owen drove, but that didn’t stop him from talking to me. “Did you know Delaware was named after Thomas West, Baron De La Warr,” Owen said, “which means something like ‘of the war.’ When we reach Pennsylvania, I say we set up camp near the border. We

can rent a canoe and take the Delaware River into the area of the former state of Delaware. . . . Hey, are you asleep?”

Even though the trip had been my idea, I was tired of hearing about Delaware. I was starting to lose faith in my own plan. If Owen could just spend some time in the actual state of Delaware, I’d thought, maybe he would realize how ridiculous his theory was. I wanted him to see a sign on the side of the highway that said, “Welcome to Delaware.” I wanted him to see our Hampton Inn receipt with a Delaware address printed on the front. I was even planning on getting a speeding ticket on purpose, so he would have an official state document to prove the existence of Delaware.

I continued to feign sleep. My head was propped against the window, so I had to endure the pain of the glass against my scalp. I breathed slow and steady and planned a natural-looking maneuver to reposition my head against the headrest. I hoped Owen was watching the road, but I worried that his eyes were on me. I imagined him studying my face and my breathing, searching for signs of faking. After a couple of minutes, I murmured a sleepy whimper, rolled my head off the glass, and exhaled softly to signal that I’d never actually woken up, just shifted positions. Owen must have bought the act because he started singing Bad Company and Iron Maiden songs, which eventually put me to sleep for real.

When I woke up, we’d just passed Columbia, Missouri. I took over driving outside a town called Kingdom City. It’s amazing, the number of places tucked quietly away in the United States. You could spend a lifetime studying them and never make a dent.

Back on the interstate, Owen and I decided to find a place to eat. As we were talking, I looked over and saw a driverless car in the lane next to us. A metallic sphere on a tripod was attached to the car’s top. In the passenger seat, a woman typed away on a laptop, and in the backseat, a man in a virtual reality mask and gloves enacted driving motions.

“Holy shit,” I said, pointing. “Look at that!”

Owen turned to his right and looked out the window.

“My God!” he said. “I’ve seen it all now! Take the next exit. We have to go there.”

“*Go there?*” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

“The Ark,” Owen pointed into the distance. “That’s the new Noah’s Ark Theme Park. The second one in the country. It cost 9 billion dollars and took four years to construct. Doubt it floats though.”

I looked up and saw an enormous rectangle perched on the horizon.

“I was talking about that driverless vehicle.”

I slowed down, so he could get a good look inside the car.

“I think that guy’s driving the car using virtual reality,” I said.

But Owen seemed unimpressed, which disappointed me. All he could think about was the Ark, and I knew that if we didn’t stop, I would never hear the end of it. “At this rate,” I said sarcastically, “Delaware really *will* be gone by the time we get there.” But then I remembered that my sarcasm was my brother’s reality, and I wished I hadn’t said it.



Inside the Ark, we found what one might expect. Some real animals, some fake animals, some animatronic dinosaurs. We stopped to eat at a Boston Market inside the Ark. To pass the time in line, I predicted my brother's order—meatloaf with green beans and corn. But I wasn't sure if he would take the cornbread or rolls. I went with rolls. I was correct on all counts. When the guy at the cash register handed Owen his change, I saw how I could sneak my Ohio quarter to my brother. I would pretend he'd dropped it, then simply hand it to him after we sat down.

We took our trays and sat near the entrance. Behind my brother, I could see the head of a baby pterodactyl peeking over its wooden stall. It moved back and forth mechanically, and its beak opened and closed every thirty seconds. I counted.

"You dropped this up at the cash register," I told Owen, handing him the Ohio quarter I'd bought, along with a dime and a penny thrown in to deflect suspicion.

"Oh, thanks," he said. He put the coins into his pocket.

Jesus, I thought, the guy molests the entire countryside looking for a quarter, and he doesn't even inspect his own change.

"I think there was a quarter in there," I said. "Aren't you going to check it?"

"Nah, I'll check it later," he said. "I'm famished."

I watched him as he used a plastic spork to scoop corn into his mouth. With nearly every bite, one or two kernels of corn missed his mouth. They fell onto his plate, disappeared into his lap. One rolled onto the floor. I'd never seen anybody unsuccessfully eat corn. He either hadn't noticed or didn't care. Both possibilities depressed me. My brother looked eighty years old. I imagined him in a nursing home with only me to care for him, only me to feed him lukewarm green beans and corn. I know I should have felt bad for my brother, but all I could think about was chaos theory. Maybe one kernel was on the floor because of the way the kernel hit my brother's t-shirt. Maybe another kernel was on the table because it hit his beard first. I took other variables into account. Was the corn buttered? What kind of material was my brother's t-shirt? How oily was his beard? I considered the atomic and subatomic levels, the particles and subatomic particles at play in a single hair from my brother's beard and how they interacted with the particles and subatomic particles in a piece of corn. All of these things affected the course of each kernel's path. This is how the world really works, I thought, entire fates determined by a chaotic orchestra of invisible electromagnetic forces. We think we're in control, but our lives are no different than those kernels of corn falling from a spork and onto a conspiracy theorist's beard or chubby belly. Some of us end up on the floor. Some of us get eaten. There are no lucky ones. We are, each one of us, planted, raised, harvested, and consumed by a maniacal universe.

Jesus, I thought, it's almost Thanksgiving, and I'm sitting in a replica Noah's Ark watching my brother fumble with a spork in front of a robotic dinosaur, philosophizing about corn. I wished the truck at that motel in Nebraska had ended me. I was annoyed at first, then angry. Owen should be able to eat a bite of goddamned corn. For fuck's sake, where's a cob when you need one, I thought. Then I noticed my brother's hand trembling, just barely, causing the corn to vibrate over the edge of his spork and onto his stomach and lap. It occurred to me that the trembling could be a side-effect of his medications, or maybe it was just his nerves, or maybe he had a health problem he didn't even know about, like diabetes or Parkinson's.

After dinner, we'd had enough of smelly animals and people in robes and fake beards. We walked across Noah's parking lot, which stretched across the land forever. The sulfur smell of new asphalt rose into the air and cut into my nose. Owen looked up into the darkness and asked if I saw the green lights. I did. But only one. It was surrounded by a body of clouds shaped like an ancient beast, and the light beat slowly in one place like the pulse of a dying leviathan. "There has to be a logical explanation," I said. But Owen wasn't having it. I could see the wheels spinning in his mind and he stared into the night sky with a smile. He was constructing a narrative, piecing together his own theory about the lights and what they might be, and I knew that even if I proved to him the existence of Delaware, there were at least ten other myths to dispel, and Christ knows how many more lurking around the bend.●




Andy Clinton

Villainelle

O purrrfect villain, sweet seductive Cat,
Anarchic temptress, heeding not men's laws.
Confounded feline, plague unto the Bat!

How lithe and agile, costumed acrobat,
With prowling skills to give the city paws,
O purrrfect villain, sweet seductive Cat.

Defrauding every puffed up plutocrat
Against whose avarice she stakes her cause,
Confounded feline, plague unto the Bat!

Who never takes a fall or goes 
Her grace in combat merits all applause.
O purrrfect villain, sweet seductive Cat.

The darkened tower roofs her habitat,
She knows her way around a hero's flaws.
Confounded feline, plague unto the Bat!

Her wiles ensnare the cowled aristocrat
The darkest knight is putty in her claws.
O purrrfect villain, sweet seductive Cat.
Confounded feline, plague unto the Bat!

Andy Clinton

Three High-ku

High-ku #1

Wow, man, my fingers
Contain a whole universe!
Where are the cheese puffs?

High-ku #2

What if we're the dream
Of some primordial god?
Or, like, that raccoon?

High-ku #3

There's, like, this color
That's sort of all the colors,
But also Saturn.



Robin Gow

Family

we all go to the hibachi place
because we're celebrating something.
there's balloons tied to our
wrists: all of us have a birthday,
all of us are getting married, all of us
are graduating, all of us are hungry.
my brother gets chicken as his meat
& my uncle gets steak & my father gets
steak & i get shrimp because they're pink.
my mother can't decide because
it's all so exotic, maybe just a salad.
we love the hibachi, catching broccoli
in our mouths, the chef feeds us
& speaks with the sounds of spatulas
on grill, the slick scraping of metal.
we watch him closely, the folds of
his wipe apron & red hat. he points
to me & i know he wants me to stand
on the grill. i listen to orders
as all children should, feet sizzling
in oil. my family claps—what a trick!
the chef then takes me in his hands &
molds me into an egg; white & clear.
i feel my yolk heavy inside me,
a mouth full of egg white—what a trick!
i spin for them on the hot surface,
tucked into myself & he cracks me open.
instantly i cook yellowing on in the heat.
he chops me into tiny pieces for the fried rice
& i'm scattered among the vegetables;
tiny gem-like peas & cubes of orange carrot.
my brother eats my shrimp & asks what we had
come to celebrate & no one can remember.
my mother still hasn't ordered so
she just eats the broccoli. all the balloons
pop at once from the tension. the chef
keeps making food to keep them there,
he doesn't want them to go.

when they eat me, the egg, i feel
happy though. i had never known my family
like that—like teeth on my body,
like the texture of their tongues
like the smoothness of their throats.
let's come back here sometime.



Robin Gow

flowers 1964

After Andy Warhol

the girl i loved's name was orange.
we ate flowers made of fuchsia.
biting the walls, they turned primrose.
our favorite planet was red.
the morning turned the house white.

the girl i loved's name was fuchsia.
we hated flowers, all of them primrose.
plucking them until our fingers were red.
the stems of the flowers died white.
in the kitchen we split an orange.

the girl i loved's name was primrose.
we dyed each other in rivers, came out red.
the inside of apples is white
& so is the under belly of an orange.
we ran away & called all the towns fuchsia.

the girl i loved's name was red.
she liked strawberries unripe & white.
we dipped our fingers in sun-yolk orange
& swallowed it; the sky tasted fuchsia.
she told me life's not a primrose.

the girl i loved's name was white.
why didn't she like the color orange?
she would paint canvases entirely fuchsia.
undressing me, she'd laugh you're so primrose.
we'd bite off the other's lips, kiss red.

Ted Guevara

The Stay in Move

It is evening, and I will pass again
your distress by the table and chair.
It is with the umbrella, my conscience,
spines bent in the middle, so it can't open.
My often-said promise is the grip of
the doorstep. We never had to prop
anything open.

It has always been in the foyer,
this unpacking of a bright day.
But it is with the night that I place you
deep within the house. In
the living room, I see furniture. You
see obstacles, unsettled in the plush.

Both of us must weigh in.
They're placed where they are,
not only to give notion. We must
give them covenant, their function,
that in the space they're in, we are

also in. I have no fear of leaving,
but I dread you being not in the room.
Outside the door, there is calm
and there is whirlwind.



ayaz daryl nielsen

someone I want to know

list of books checked out
by prior library patron
p20754599
left in a collection of
poems by Bukowski:
A timbered choir: the sabbath poems
No shortage of good days
Fly fishing the seasons in Colorado
Given: new poems
Tao te ching
Zen living
Betting on the Muse: poems
and stories by Bukowski



Tiffany Belieu

Voted Most Likely

You know, they're vaping now
at the rabbit hutch.

Placed their New Years on a rock
smashed them crystalline.

High as Ariana ponies.
Faces closer to babies

than babes, their youth an x
on the back of bar hands.

I saw them skipping class,
their goddess legs cloud-stroke

across the empty football field green
above all our thoughts of them.

A smear of bold reality.
We know about that one—

her boyfriend, the blood and the others
all vibrating bones of want.

Was it foolish to fall
for makeup tutorial lighting?

The glamor glitized our eyes
so they appeared

hard edged, all angles
too sharp to get close to.

Our heads so heavy with
the thought of them we bend

into bows in praise of girls
who walk in power.

Girls that draw our heart
lines down our palms and know

how long life gives. Pretty
as we watch their light dance

in awe of their fire burning
out so quickly.



Chuka Susan Chesney

Last night after text message

your Grandma died
we freewayed to the home she was zippered in a bag

later at the bar you manholed a margarita
it was my night to drink
you had promised me an Uber
I plastic strawed Mojito then hammocked to floor

Strum me through a spoke on your umbrellaed heart wilt me in a snack
of stand alone nuts
fragmented in yawns your mouth yoyos words
I'm beaten on a counter of lethargy

We're extracurricular lovers serrated in two
Home alone on evenings I flapjack on divan clothes stacked in sloth
you omitted
to add soap

I dread teaching class watch you PhD

My hair dyed copper I'm an unspent coin

Breakfast time at diner you soft boil our break-up I finger Bloody Mary
it's my morning to
imbibe you outline your menu to desert me for a younger

I flambé my ambition to poison your love drawer



Anastasia Jill

She threw me on like an old thing

Cyber Monday is a funeral;
Flights cancelled, doors open at six a.m.
Someone is trampled to death, virtually.

She finds me in this mob, a world of wide and web.
She had just given thanks for manifest destiny;
Now she gets to practice on me.

I become the silver and green coat in her closet,
The one she wears to parties where she drinks tequila
And hooks up with men while I stay in the closet.

She doesn't know that the closet is a coffin
And I am three feet of cement.
At the end of the night, I shrug over her shoulders.
She walks heavier with my corpse across her back.

Anastasia Jill

Even gurus sing the blues

Her voice fills my eyes, the sapphire pulpits
Raise their arms and their lives
Like a gospel.

She is made of the wiser things,
Bones rich enough to fill themselves with thought,
And the uneaten bits of knowledge become my fuel.

I ask her many questions, and she takes my virtue
On fun trips between her sheets.
It is a privilege; after all, she created me.

She peppers the bridge of my nose with Aristotle's ink
And repeats to me that happiness is action.
She's drawn me without arms, though.
I don't know how I'm supposed to move.

She binds me with hair, and scrubs away my mouth.
In the end,
I have failed the test of her.



Olivia Stowell

Warp Threads

folded like vestments in
my dresser—nine pairs of jeans

waist sizes:
twenty-six
twenty-seven
twenty-eight
twenty-nine

cannot throw away
pants two sizes too

big

watch the mirror
bend my body
suck
my stomach
in

hold the twenty-nines
to my chest

keep them to remember
when i was more

keep the twenty-sixes
the way they only-just-zip

keep them to believe
in a future where i am less

where i can become twice-zero
at last

and hold my breath when
my professor asks:

why would any woman
want to become
nothing?

Olivia Stowell

Trevi Fountain

people are always sharing spit
in front of monuments. a woman
in a bubblegum bodycon dress
asks me to take her photo. she
and her husband step back, and pose
two statues, kissing. a few feet
to the right, a couple press their
foreheads together, and snap
a selfie. i am trying to say something
about love, but i think i am thinking
about time. the water in the air is
boiling. an old man with a nose
like a slice of watermelon hawks
rosaries, one euro each. on all edges
of the fountain, we are holding on
to each other. why do we like to tell
ancient things that we are still loving?
i toss one euro over my shoulder.
i waste my wish on hoping
my coin will kiss the water.



Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri

Weekend with Mama

We take Mama out, my sister Penelope and I. We owe this to her, children who once demanded. We take her from the morgue, prop her up.

She smiles.

First, the movies. *Kramer vs. Kramer*. She loved depressing. We leave when people complain about her smell.

Pungent sweetness.

She loved movies, people watching. Dissecting souls, pretenders. She'd call that usher a cocksucker.

We take her to the tracks. She loved the whirl of trains, passing worlds. Respite from routine.

Her life comes together. Illuminating, constrained. We carry her into the night, feel weight on our souls.

We hope she's happy. 🍓

Robert Conklin

Paging Dr. Möbius

Paging Dr. Möbius:

It was the patient in 2-D again. She had called out in her sleep, which she did repeatedly, as though on a treadmill, her voice coming distantly, as though through an intercom, perhaps.

Dr. Möbius looked in on her. She was asleep again, and he bunched the sheets above her shoulders. He looked at her clipboard and scribbled a fast and illegible note. He would look in again on her in the morning and the morning after that. And the morning after that. And again, if all went well, the morning after that.

He called for a nurse.

“Make sure no one disturbs her tonight,” he said.

He went out into the hall with its white linoleum squares, and settling one sole in front of the other, he continued his walk down the hallway, past rooms, some with doors open, patients watching a television hanging in brackets from the wall, and some empty, being prepared with new sheets for new patients, who might never arrive.

It was otherwise a quiet night, and Dr. Möbius decided to exit down the stairwell for a breath of night air, and a cigarette.

Outside, he viewed a collection of visitors smoking as though in a huddle, and he declined joining them. When he went back inside, he came up again at the beginning of the hall, and he began his tour of the ward all over again, as though he had never left it. The ward looked the same, except this time, a fluorescent light was malfunctioning, flickering with uncertainty, a piquant randomness that Dr. Möbius, being accustomed to certain patterns, found unsettling.

Paging Dr. Möbius:

It was the patient in 2-D. She was awake, clutching her sheet and twirling it above her head as though she were a banshee. It took all of Dr. Möbius’s persuasive power to calm her and make her believe it was in her best interest to return to her bed. She was an attractive woman, Dr. Möbius thought. Her hair seemed auburn this time, a distinct under-tracing of red running beneath the brown velvet sheen of her hair. He wondered if she had allowed a nurse to wash it lately. Making sure the patient was settled, Dr. Möbius looked at the clipboard attached to the bed frame. He initialed his previous set of comments, then decided to write the letter *J* for no ostensible reason.

He called for an orderly.

“Please look in on her hourly,” he advised.

And he went out into the hall with its white-and-black checkered squares. He planted his soft-soled shoes, lined inside with a pad to assist his arch, down



the hallway, all of its doors on either side open except one, which he found strange. None of the opened doors showed anyone inside. Had the patients all been discharged? Or had they congregated inside one of the rooms? Was there a party on the ward—a party of which he was unaware?

Indeed, he heard a loud din from one of the rooms—the one with the closed door. It sounded like the simultaneous banging together of a number of pots and lids, as though a pretend marching band were rehearsing a number.

Dr. Möbius descended the stairwell. It was still midwinter but warm for the month of January. He lit a cigarette and smoked it alone in the night beneath a streetlight. Another man joined him, and together, they silently smoked, watching the fumes of their burning cigarettes rise into the night, to evaporate slowly among the lower reaches of the atmosphere, never even reaching the clouds.

“Nice evening,” the stranger remarked, and Dr. Möbius nodded his head.

Back inside the hospital lobby, he decided on the elevator instead of the stairs. When he reemerged on the ward, he was again at the opposite end of the hall. It looked the same as he had left it, except the night nurse had changed shifts at the station. He wasn’t sure he recognized this nurse—a young man with a ponytail—but he smiled anyway.

Paging Dr. Möbius:

He needed to look in on the patient in 2-D. She was awake, as he had expected her to be. However, this time, she was fully dressed, and her suitcase was apparently packed and ready to be carried out of the hospital.

“I’m feeling better,” she said calmly. There was something of the schoolmarm in her expression, and Dr. Möbius remembered the stern face of his second-grade teacher, as she had taken from him a love note he had clutched in his fist and been prevented from passing to a girl sitting at a desk next to his. His patient was dressed in a long-sleeved cotton blouse buttoned all the way to her throat, to the very top buttonhole.

“That is to be expected,” Dr. Möbius replied. He studied her chart. He searched for the letter *J* he had scrawled on his previous visit. He turned the pages in succession, looking. It was a very long chart. Eventually, he reached the end of it—or really the beginning. He looked up at his patient above the top edge of his clipboard. “However, we must run more tests. It is imperative, given your condition, that you allow us to run additional tests.”

“But just what is my condition?” she demanded to know. “And what kind of tests? And how much longer do you intend to keep me locked in this cell?”

“I assure you, madam, this is far from being a cell. You have all of the comforts of home in a single room.”

“The mattress is lumpy,” the patient complained.

“We can make arrangements to exchange beds.”

“My breakfast this morning was cold.”

“I will talk with the kitchen staff. I will make sure it does not happen again.”

“Ah—ha!” the woman exclaimed. “So, you intend to keep me another day. Another morning. And another day and morning after that. And after that.”

Dr. Möbius quietly pressed the call button for a nurse.

"Prepare an injection," he whispered as an aside when one appeared in the doorway.

Outside in the hallway, Dr. Möbius studied the tips of his shoes as he walked along the corridor. They were caked with dried mud. He wondered how the mud had gotten onto the tips of his shoes. The interlocking tile of the corridor formed a grid, a pattern that resembled the circuits of a computer. He tried to decipher some hidden message or code in the pattern of tiles. The doors of the ward were all closed tonight.

Except for the clicking of his heels, he heard no sound whatsoever. Only the very last room of the ward was open to view. He paused to look inside. An older man who bore a resemblance to his father tilted his head in his direction from his bed. An IV tube dangled from a bottle beside the man's bed. A book lay on his lap, and Dr. Möbius craned his neck to learn the title. However, he had no apparent reason to enter the man's room. He smiled at the man, hoping to contradict the man's expression of sadness and despair with an air of confidence.

As he descended the stairwell, he felt his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. He must have left the pack in his office, he thought. However, the idea of climbing the flights of stairs for a pack of cigarettes seemed daunting. He stepped out into the night. Buds were forming on branches beneath the yellow light of streetlamps. The cherry trees were in bloom.

He looked around in all directions for someone smoking in the darkness. He wished to ask for a cigarette. He felt a desire to smoke. This night, there appeared to be no one taking advantage of the night air. As he turned to reenter the hospital, he found himself face-to-face with a woman in evening dress. She was smoking a long, thin cigarette within a silver holder, which she held between forefinger and thumb, in reverse, so that her palm was exposed to view. Was this the patient from 2-D, escaped at last? Dr. Möbius found himself staring into her palm, tracing her lifeline. It seemed important to reach the end of it before he returned to his duties on the ward. ●



Holly Day

A Sequence of Letters

I don't remember his name, and I'm not going to look it up
but there was this Chinese writer who once wrote his poems
directly on the surface of the river, with the hope that his words
would be carried all the way downstream and into the ocean.
You can look it up yourself because it's a true thing that I didn't make up
there's a passage about him in one of the books in my office.

I don't know what his poetry was about, but I imagine
it had to be something that would be equally appreciated
by people and fish, ducks and cormorants, maybe even the water itself
since it was expected to carry the burden of all of those words.
Once, so many years ago it might be a lie

I got so angry at my typewriter
I threw it into a puddle in the back yard, kicked the hell out of it
only came back out to rescue it when I realized I would have to hand-write
all of my poetry submissions from that point on. By then, the ribbon had
gotten all wet
turned most of the puddle black, I can only imagine the selection of words
that sank into the ground from that strip of damp ribbon,
and the way the worms must have interpreted those disconnected phrases.

John Tustin

In Search Of Truffles

Poetry grows in a wet darkness
Much like fungus

And, much like fungus,

Almost none of it
Is edible.



Brendan Pranievicz

Ode to Future Playgrounds

We spun round on rust-orange merry-go-rounds
hung upside down on monkey bars
howling like orangutans.
Back and forth on swings
we spread our arms like jet planes.
Gathered in our bathing suits
we did not build sandcastles
we carved sand empires.
Who would've thought
this world wasn't meant for us?

Now, instead of sand castles
we build credit card debt.
Make ends meet like nine-to-five contortionists.
Struggle feeding hungry kids
while our own stomachs grumble.
What happened to marmalade sandwiches,
afternoon recesses, angel-shaped nightlights?
We no longer have our mother's simple answers,
but we keep asking child-like questions.
Who would've thought?

Bobby, Ricky, and I used to play war
with plastic pistols, water balloons,
camouflage walkie-talkies.
Now they're in a bigger sandbox—
Baghdad, another tour
where car bombs rock cradles
where children—gunned down for democracy
where Bobby gazes across a rust-orange desert
his finger on the trigger.
In his pocket, his other fingers, crossed.
Who would've thought?

Childhood promises, ephemeral rainbows
Our pot of gold, empty.
Our rust-orange sandbox, abandoned.
Bobby says it's like the world gave up on us.
So we detached from the world.
We sped down a silk highway of books—
Siddhartha, Lao Tzu, wu wei, Ta Mo.
Next life, we'll come back as Zen masters,
hang upside down on monkey bars,
like yogamarishis, balance
on teeter-totters like wushu warriors,
or we'll plant ourselves under a Bodhi tree
and just breathe.



C. L. Bledsoe

Spoons

A fuzzy-headed daisy, shocking the humus
of my little life, the eye is drawn and can't
help but delight in your color.

I set down the corpse of my long-dead world,
to better see you tumble across the living
room. Your wrists are thinner

than my hopes. I hope you never understand
any of this. Just know that when you wake,
it's enough, and, when you sleep,

the quiet holds its breath so as not to disturb.
You say, "I don't want to learn right now!"
When I try to tell you stories

of the dead, though living. Later, you settle
into the back seat and say, "Tell me a story
about the time Aunt Cookie

dug a pool in the yard with spoons." I dodge
potholes, interjecting plot points with curses
and tell a story about the woods

I used to cry in. You deserve more than the dying
world I've given you. But it's all we have.
Let's make a new one.

Erin Mizrahi

Birth of a Writer

when I was young
 I let my hair down for Rilke
 his hot breath through my loosened braid
I parted my lips
 for Ginsberg
 room enough for the slightest tongue
I hiked up my skirt
 for Kerouac
 so that he might see my slender thighs
I showed my bare back
 to Neruda,
 more vulnerable
 than strong
my bare chest
 to Corso
my bare ass
 to Kundera
 he wouldn't have it any other way
but my hands
 my touch
 my release
 I gave to Whitman long ago
I gave
 myself
piece
 by
 piece
no one to say
 my child
 that's not what your body is
 for
 don't give yourself
 so willingly
 to language



Bios

Jonel Abellanosa lives in Cebu City, the Philippines. His poetry has appeared in *Rattle*, *New Verse News*, *McNeese Review*, *Mojave River Review*, and others, and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Dwarf Stars award. Clare Songbirds Publishing House published “Songs from My Mind’s Tree” (2018) and will publish his full-length *Multiverse*. “Pan’s Saxophone” (speculative poetry) is forthcoming (Weasel Press). Cyberwit published “50 Acrostic Poems” (2019).

Jeffrey Alfier’s recent books include *Fugue for a Desert Mountain*, *Anthem for Pacific Avenue*, *The Red Stag at Carrbridge: Scotland Poems*, and *Gone This Long: Southern Poems* (2019). His publication credits include *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Kestrel*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *The Stinging Fly*. He is founder and co-editor of Blue Horse Press and San Pedro River Review.

Tobi Alfier is a multiple Pushcart nominee and multiple Best of the Net nominee. Her full-length collection *Somewhere, Anywhere, Doesn’t Matter Where* was published by Kelsay Books. *Slices of Alice & Other Character Studies* was published by Cholla Needles Press. She is co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* (www.bluehorsepress.com).

Duane Anderson currently lives in La Vista, Nebraska, and volunteers with the American Red Cross as a Donor Ambassador on their blood drives. He

has had poems published in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Fine Lines*, *The Sea Letter*, *Cholla Needles*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and several other publications.

Originally from Indiana, **Brett D. Armes** is currently working on a PhD in English at the University of North Texas. His writing has appeared in *Fourth Genre* and *Atticus Review*.

Karyna Aslanova is a Kyiv-born Ukrainian multimedia artist, director, and photographer. Karyna studied Theatre Directing at The National Academy of Government Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine. Although photography is her principle medium, she also uses video, painting and illustration, and poetry to further her exploration of a multitude of subjects. Karyna describes her photography as atmospheric, moody, emotional, explorative, and conceptual.

Matthew Babcock: Idahoan. Writer. Failed breakdancer. Books: *Points of Reference* (Folded Word), *Strange Terrain* (Mad Hat), *Heterodoxologies* (Educe Press), *Four Tales of Troubled Love* (Harvard Square Editions), and *Future Perfect* (forthcoming, Ferry Street Books).

Tiffany Belieu is working hard on her dream of writing. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Okay Donkey*, *Collective Unrest*, *Rabid Oak*, and *The Mantle*, among others. She loves tea and cats and can be found @tiffobot on Twitter.

For twenty-two years, **Guilherme Bergamini**, a UNI–BH graduate in journalism, has worked with photography, a passion since his childhood. A curious enthusiast of its contemporary possibilities, he expresses his experiences, worldview, and anxieties through this art. Recognized in national competitions and festivals, he has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions across the world. He publishes parts of his photographic journey on his website (www.guilhermebergamini.com).

C. L. Bledsoe’s latest poetry collection is *Trashcans in Love*. His latest short story collection is *The Shower Fixture Played the Blues*. His latest novel is *The Funny Thing About . . .* Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his daughter and blogs with Michael Gushue at <https://medium.com/@howtoeven>.

Carl Boon lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American literature at 9 Eylül University. His poems appear in dozens of magazines, including *The Maine Review* and *Posit*. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, Boon is currently editing a volume on food in American literature.

Michelle Brooks has published two collections of poetry, *Make Yourself Small* (Backwaters Press) and *Pretty in A Hard Way* (Finishing Line Press, 2019), and a novella, *Dead Girl, Live Boy* (Storylandia Press). A native Texan, she has spent much of her adult life in Detroit.

Roger Camp lives in Seal Beach, California, where he gardens, walks the pier, plays blues piano, and spends

afternoons with his pal Harry over drinks at Nick’s on 2nd. When he’s not at home, he’s traveling in the Old World. His work has appeared in *Poetry East*, *Pank*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Nimrod*.

John Chavers enjoys working as a writer, artist, photographer, and general creator and is fascinated with the diminutive, works of art on paper, and the desert. His writing and artwork have been accepted at the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library’s *So It Goes* (2016), *3Elements Review*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Ascent*, *The Roaring Muse*, *Birch Gang Review*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, *Ground Fresh Thursday*, *The Ogham Stone*, *Verity La*, and others.

Los Angeles-area native resident **Chuka Susan Chesney** is an artist, a sculptor, and a published poet. Her work is represented by Aarnun Gallery in Pasadena. Her paintings and drawings are heavily influenced by Latin culture. She kept her love of writing poetry, especially in the middle of the night, a secret, sharing only with her family. A few years ago, she started submitting, and a few poems have been published.

Andy Clinton teaches high school English at Saint James School in Montgomery, Alabama, maintains a blog of rhyming poetry for kids at andyspoemplanet.blogspot.com, and works as a freelance puppeteer. His sneakers are tastefully mismatched. Andy has degrees from a few different places. He is a neat guy.

Robert Conklin’s short fiction has appeared in *Unlikely Stories*, *Unbroken*, *Speculative 66*, and *Blue Moon Literary & Art Review*. He has



also co-authored a college composition textbook to help emerging writers connect with their world. A native Ohioan armed with an advanced degree in American Drama, he currently edits international training publications for engineering safety inspectors.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *The Tampa Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing).

James Dobbins is a staff editor at the *New York Times* and currently working on a novel when not taking photographs, reading, drawing, or painting.

Timothy B. Dodd is from Mink Shoals, West Virginia. His poetry has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *The Roanoke Review*, *Broad River Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently in the MFA program at the University of Texas, El Paso.

Physicist, translator, and writer **Federico Federici** received the 2017 Lorenzo Montano Prize for prose and the 2019 Nassau Review Writer Award for poetry. He lives between Berlin and the Ligurian Apennines. In addition to the collection *On a Certain Practical Uncertainty* (2018), his works have appeared in *3:AM Magazine*, *Jahrbuch Der Lyrik* 2019, *Raum*, *Sand*, *Magma*, and others.

A resident of Japan, **Jessica Goodfellow's** books are *Whiteout* (University of Alaska Press, 2017), *Mendeleev's Mandala* (2015) and *The Insomniac's Weather Report* (2014). Writer-in-residence at Denali National Park and Preserve and awarded the Chad Walsh Poetry Prize from *Beloit Poetry Journal*, she has been published in *Verse Daily*, *Motionpoems*, and *The Writer's Almanac* with recent poems appearing in *Threepenny Review*, *The Awl*, *The Southern Review*, and *Best American Poetry 2018*.

Robin Gow's poetry has been published in *POETRY*, *Furrow*, *carte blanche*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, and *Corbel Stone Press*. *Oyster River Pages* Social Media Coordinator and Porkbelly Press intern, Robin is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Adelphi University. An out and proud bisexual, transgender man passionate about LGBT issues, he loves poetry that tilts in and out of reality, and his queerness is also the central axis of his work.

Ted Guevara is a freelance writer from Speedway, Indiana. Although he delves into an array of themes—always looking for the unusual—he tends to adhere to the plight of the disabled, the helpless, their “profound richness,” as he mentions in one poem. His poems have been published in *Suisun Valley Review*, *Elbow Lane*, *Anaphora Literary Press*, *Vending Machine Press*, and *The Pangolin Review*.

Anastasia Jill is a lesbian writer living in the South. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Small Fiction Anthology and has been featured with Poets.org, *Lunch Ticket*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, *apt*, *Anomaly Literary*

Journal, 2River, Gertrude Press, Minola Review, and more.

Born in Zambia, **Gwen Namainga Jones** received an English education and spent time in her mother's hut. Her first novel, *Three Miles Too Far*, tells the story of her parents' divorce and her shuttling between their disparate ways of life. Living in Arizona, she returns often to Zambia to aid impoverished and ill native women. Her work is forthcoming in *Evening Street Review* and *Mount Hope Magazine*.

Candice Kelsey's poems have appeared in such journals as *Poet Lore, The Cortland Review, Sibling Rivalry Press, North Dakota Quarterly, Burningword, and Wilderness House*. Recently, her nonfiction was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She's also the author of a successful trade paperback parenting guide. An educator of twenty years' standing with her Master's degree in literature from LMU, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband and three children.

Sandra Kolankiewicz's poems have appeared widely, most recently in *Adelaide, London Magazine, New World Writing, and Appalachian Heritage*. *Turning Inside Out* was published by Black Lawrence. Finishing Line has released *The Way You Will Go* and *Lost in Transition*.

Laurie Kolp is the author of the complete poetry collection *Upon the Blue Couch* and chapbook *Hello, It's Your Mother*. She has been published in *Southern Poetry Anthology VIII: Texas, Stirring, Rust + Moth, Whale Road Review, Front Porch Journal*, and more. Laurie lives in Southeast Texas

with her husband, three children, and two dogs.

Laura Lannan is a librarian with the DC Public Library and is currently in charge of the teen collection at the Chevy Chase branch.

A senior at Auburn University at Montgomery, **Megan Lofgren** studies graphic design with minors in art history and music; she hopes to work in graphic design and photography. Her work has appeared in the *Filibuster* and the *Historical Review*. Lofgren has a penchant for fixing up old houses and is happiest when spending time with her husband and her dogs.

Born and raised in Lakewood, Ohio, **Paul Lojeski** attended Oberlin College. His poetry has appeared online and in print. He lives in Port Jefferson, New York.

D. S. Maolalai recently returned to Ireland after four years away and now spends his days working maintenance dispatch for a bank and his nights looking out the window and wishing he had a view. His first collection, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden*, was published in 2016 by the Encircle Press. He has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

New York-based poet and educator **Erin Mizrahi** currently teaches English at CUNY Hunter College and hosts Cobra Milk, a monthly reading and music series for emerging and established voices.

Cameron Morse lives with his wife, Lili, and son Theodore in Blue Springs, Missouri. Diagnosed with a glioblastoma in 2014 and given a 14.6-month life expectancy, he entered



University of Missouri–Kansas City’s Creative Writing program and graduated with an MFA in 2018. With poems published in over 100 magazines, he has two collections: *Fall Risk* (Glass Lyre Press’s 2018 Best Book Award winner) and *Father Me Again* (Spartan Press).

Keith Moul is a poet of place, a photographer of the distinction of place. His poems and photos are published widely. His grayscale photos are digital, often striving for a charcoal drawing look and mood. <http://poemsphotosmoul.blogspot.com/>

Published in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, **Martina Reisz Newberry** is the author of *Where It Goes, Never Completely Awake*, *Learning by Rote*, and *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* (Deerbrook Editions), *Take the Long Way Home* (Unsolicited Press), and *Running Like a Woman With Her Hair on Fire: Collected Poems* (Red Hen Press). She was included in The Halcyone’s “The Sixty Four: Best Poets of 2018.”

Born in Valentine, Nebraska, **ayaz daryl nielsen** attended Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Monterrey, Mexico, schools; lived in Bonn, Germany; and now lives in Longmont, Colorado, with beloved wife Judith. A veteran, former hospice nurse, and ex-roughneck (oil rigs), he has been the *bear creek haiku*’s print editor for over thirty years and 150 issues. His poetry, published worldwide, includes senryu chosen as Irish Haiku Association’s Best of Year (2010 and 2012).

With a BA in English Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Asheville, **Kali Paszkiewicz** is working towards her Master’s in Library and

Information Science at North Carolina Central University. She is striving to make writing her full-time career. On her blog, “The Garrulous Gecko,” she writes reviews, prompts, and advice. Poetry is how she copes with stress, mental illness, and the devastating ennui that comes with working retail.

Simon Perchik’s poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere.

An Egypt-based financial writer, **Andrew Peters** recently started to publish fiction. His short fiction has appeared in print anthologies in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Hong Kong, and the United States. His short story, “Felix Culpa” received an honorable mention in the Glimmer Train 2017 Short Story Award for New Writers and appeared in the Earlyworks Press 2018 anthology (United Kingdom), having been chosen in competition.

Nicoletta Pougias is a twenty-five-year-old aspiring photographer from Germany with an affinity for portraiture and in-camera double exposures.

Brendan Praniewicz earned his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State in 2007 and has subsequently taught creative writing at San Diego colleges. He has had short stories and poems published in *Races Y Mas*, *Watershed Review*, *Driftwood Press*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, and *Gold Man Review*.

Beth Brown Preston is a two-time recipient of the William Carlos Williams Prize of the Academy of American Poets and has published two poetry collections, *Lightyears: 1973–1976*

(Broadside Lotus Press, 1982) and *Satin Tunnels* (Broadside Lotus Press, 1989), and self-published a chapbook, *Blue Cyclone* (1982). Her work appears in the *African American Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Callaloo*, and other journals. She is currently completing her third poetry collection, *Oxygen*.

Seven-time Pushcart Prize nominee **Russell Rowland** has two chapbooks with Finishing Line Press. A full-length collection, *We're All Home Now*, is available from Beech River Books. He writes from New Hampshire's Lakes Region and has judged high school Poetry Out Loud competitions.

Author of six books, **Thaddeus Rutkowski** most recently published *Border Crossings*, a poetry collection. His novel *Haywire* won the Asian American Writers Workshop's members' choice award, and his book *Guess and Check* won the Electronic Literature bronze award for multicultural fiction. He received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State's MFA program in fiction. The recipient of two Honorable Mentions from Glimmer Train, he has also had work nominated for The Best Small Fictions. His work has been published or is forthcoming in journals such as *Virtual Zine Mag*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *The Write City Magazine*, and *Escaped Ink*.

Aurin Shaila Nusrat Sheyck has completed her Master's in finance, but her passion is both numbers and words. She is currently living in Ottawa, Ontario, and working as a finance

manager. She loves trekking and has trekked to Annapurna Base Camp in Nepal and through several beautiful mountains. She believes traveling to remote places frees one's soul and makes one humbler.

Victoria Shippen lives in the Boston area and works as a child, adult, and family psychotherapist. She has studied poetry with Tom Lux, Denise Duhamel, Chard diNord, and Joan Houlihan. Victoria's poetry is forthcoming or has appeared in *Silkworm*, *Heartwood*, *Main Street Rag*, *Canary*, and *Constellations*.

A lifelong Bronx resident, **Amy Soricelli** has been in the field of career education and staffing for over thirty years. She has been published in *Grub Street*, *Camel Saloon*, *Versewrights*, several anthologies, and a chapbook *Sail Me Away* (Dancing Girl Press, 2019). A Grace A. Croff Memorial Award for Poetry recipient, she was nominated for Sundress Publications Best of the Net award and the 2019 Emerging Writer's Fellowship by Billy Collins.

Eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee **Matthew J. Spireng** won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award for *Out of Body* (Bluestem Press, 2006), The MacGuffin's 23rd Annual Poet Hunt Contest, and the Common Ground Review poetry contest (2015). His chapbooks include *Clear Cut*, *Inspiration Point* (Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition winner, 2000), and *Just This*. His poems appear in *North American Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poet Lore*.

Olivia Stowell is a graduate student at Villanova University pursuing her



Master's in English. Her recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Albion Review*, *Madcap Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Merrimack Review*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, and *Glass Mountain*.

Born 1968 and still numbered among the living, **John Sweet** believes in writing as catharsis and is opposed to all organized religion and political parties. His latest collections include *Heathen Tongue* (Kendra Steiner Editions, 2018), *A Bastard Child in the Kingdom of Nil* (Analog Submission Press, 2018), and *A Flag on Fire Is a Song of Hope* (Scars Publication, 2019). All pertinent facts about his life are buried somewhere in his writing.

Michael Thompson is an artist living in Chicago who makes decorative kites for a living; he also pursues interests in printmaking, assemblage, sculpture, and fake postage stamps.

An MFA candidate at Sam Houston State University, **Karisma J. Tobin** has work appearing in *Beacon* and *Leonardo*.

John Tustin is currently suffering in exile on the island of Elba but hopes to return to you soon; fritzware.com/johntustinpoe includes links to his poetry online.

Based in the DC area, **Nellie Vinograd** writes free verse poetry about change, loss, memory, and desire. She seeks to satisfy a fascination with the banal and those daily, repetitive actions that can become something sacred. She is an alum of Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she received her BA in English and Sociology. She currently works as an art museum guide when she is not writing.

Professor of English, Ethnic Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville, **Laura C. Wendorff** has been published in *After the Pause*, *Bluestem*, *Door Is A Jar*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Hektoen International*, *Minetta Review*, *The Opiate*, *Poydras Review*, and many others. Her essay "Worth the Risk: Writing Poetry About Children with Special Needs" was nominated for a Best of the Net Award and the Pushcart Prize.

Russell Whaley's favorite forms of literary expression are poetry and creative, unconventional prose. A retired Marine intelligence analyst, he is a freelance writer and artist, experienced in technical writing and journalism. After retirement, he interned with *Onslow Times* while attending Coastal Carolina Community College. Russell currently homeschools his children while writing poetry and working on graphic design projects. His major influences include Walt Whitman, Hunter S. Thompson, and Ralph Steadman.

Jan Wiezorek writes from Barron Lake in Michigan. He has taught writing at St. Augustine College, Chicago, and writes for *The Paper* in Buchanan, Michigan. His poetry has appeared in *The London Magazine*, *Cabildo Quarterly*, *Yes Poetry*, *L'Éphémère Review*, *Leaping Clear*, and other print and online journals. Author of *Awesome Art Projects That Spark Super Writing* (Scholastic, 2011), he holds a Master's degree in English Composition/Writing from Northeastern Illinois University.



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