

“Those who know every crack in the pavement

but are blithely unaware of the stars.”

Excerpt from *Heads Up* by Bruce McRae



Route 7 Review: Issue 8

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Route 7 Review: Issue 8

Dr. Pilkington, Director

Rachel McBride • Mary McFadden • James Jared Ford • Jacob Kitchen •

Yasel Avalos Sanchez • Brooke Carpenter

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CURRENT EVENTS

COVID

Sulman Shuruk



A Place of Perfect Peace

Ingrid Wilson

Worldwide pandemic. Lockdown. Quarantine. Political upheavals. Climate crisis. If you suffer from anxiety, you'd be forgiven for feeling worse than usual right now. Many people are raging at the world in 2020 and wondering, Why now? Why us? What next?

I think now, more than ever, it is time to count our blessings and use these difficulties as an opportunity for spiritual growth. We all need a place of peace within, where we can go to receive respite from all of the troubles which clamour around us. In a state of panic, we can neither help ourselves nor anyone else.

My personal situation looks like this: I am locked down in one of the most beautiful places on earth (the Julian Alps of Slovenia). I am locked down with my family. I have food, shelter, and reasonably good health. Plenty to be grateful for there. At first, I felt restricted in not being able to go outside my borough, until I took the opportunity to explore it. And I found a place of perfect peace.

This is the Sava Bohinjka Valley between Ribno and Selo, close to the famous Lake Bled. Unlike the lake itself, this is a quiet place, where the sounds, sights, and smells of nature are untouched by tourism and commercialism. Here you can listen to birdsong and the flow of the river and smell the pine-scented forest. The occasional tang of manure in the air does not detract from this but takes me back to my childhood in Cumbria, England.

Spending an hour in this place on a day of perfect weather and crystal clear light enhanced the feeling of inner peace, which I'd been cultivating since the COVID-19 crisis began.



Image Courtesy of Ingrid Wilson

But what of the dark days, when the rain never ceases, and the sun doesn't shine? On days like these, we can practice mental grounding and search for peace within. Take whatever time you have; even ten minutes will be beneficial. Find a quiet place. Close the door and turn off the lights. Listen to a guided meditation or repeat a mantra that calms you. Observe your thoughts with detachment: you are the outsider looking in; into yourself. So often, we neglect to look within, and we are so distracted by outside stimuli and the desire for external gratification that we forget what we have. We have the breath of life within us. We have eternal power. And we have light. I am only just discovering the light within, or rather, reconnecting with it. I think that children recognize it and accept it for what it is. As adults and even adolescents, the stresses and strains of the external world crowd our minds and block out that light. Now is the chance to turn the light back on.

Whenever your thoughts start to wander towards the negative, think of a place where you have found peace in the past. Travel there in your mind. Hear the river flow or the waves crash to shore: whatever it takes to invoke a sense of calm. Don't dwell on past regrets or yearn for future outcomes. Enjoy the moment. With practice, you will begin to see the inner light again. You will find your place of perfect peace.

This peace will begin to filter down into your dealings with the external world. You will feel less anxious, take the actions of others less personally, and yearn less for the things you want but cannot have. You have everything you need, and peace is yours for the taking.

This is the most valuable lesson I have learned in lockdown. Spiritual growth comes incrementally with a little practice every day, just as physical strength and endurance grow with regular exercise. Do not practice one at the expense of the other. Strive for balance.

Find your place of perfect peace. Enjoy the moment. Grow into a brighter life.

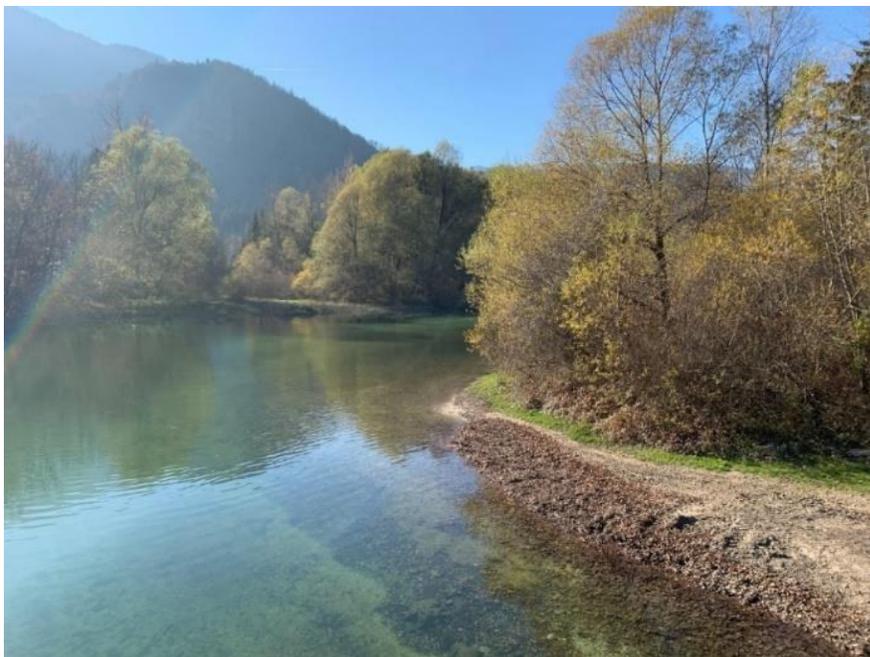


Image Courtesy of Ingrid Wilson

COVID Monologue 2: The Act of Smiling in a Mask

Paul David Adkins

It's lovely to wear a mask, in that, who orders me:

C'mon, baby! Smile

with your eyes!

Who claims

this baby-blue cotton lid adds to

what they think

is my beauty?

The elastic bands go

great with those earrings!

My glasses are fogged with nothing

but the heat of my breathing.

All those smiles I've stored –

wipes in the pantry,

bleach under the sink,

toilet paper, toilet paper,

white and white and tight like fists.

Doing Yoga in Quarantine

Mary Spadoni

we breathe
a breath
together yet
apart in
fractured pixels
a collective
bend sustained
in stretch
we reach
beyond walls
to flow
past today
grasp tomorrow
and breathe
a breath
together yet
apart.

Hidden Smile in the Coronavirus Era 1

Sulman Shuruk



In the Wind

Don Thompson

Thistle tumbles in the road
as if crossing a border—
refugees uprooted
from a place that means nothing to us.

Some leap the fence
and disappear into the scrub.

Others that snag on the barbwire
and stay there, indefinitely,
can neither go on nor go back.

Orange Alert

Jeanine Pfeiffer

I suppose it was inevitable, this descent into color-blocked madness.

In the Afterworld of a pandemic epitomized by six-word memoirs along the lines of, “hoarded toilet paper, should’ve stockpiled vodka,” I spilled boiling hot coffee down my front and leapt out of bed, cursing and yanking off my white tee while running to fetch bleach and aloe vera. This, after reading headline upon headline declaring an official death toll of 200,000, a figure we scientists recognized as a sorry figment of undercounting.

That morning I clicked “complete purchase” for a pair of screaming orange, Dali-esque, patent leather, zippered ankle boots. Foot adornments worthy of a Pedro Almodovar film on rewind and repeat; the hue of traffic cones and prisoner firefighter coveralls. Of color-coded digital maps recording extreme temperatures, conflagrations, and cases per capita.

These shoes emblazon textbook predictions once taught to students, now transmuted to lived realities denied by beloveds I choose not to unfriend on Facebook. Embedded in a shared, impotent isolation populated by words muffled behind masks, my eyes – evergreen and unprotected – smolder, sending out smoke signals. Ever restless, they dance above my shiny new boots marching the streets of Oakland. My gaze meets and greets fellow heartbroken souls: each recognizing the other’s unflinching interrogation of the *Why*, the *How*, the *What* we will yet become.



Image Courtesy of Jeanine Pfeiffer

Masking the Virus

Phyllis Koppel

In her novel, *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood writes, “[A] *Sewing Machine* would relieve as much human suffering as a hundred Lunatic Asylums... possibly a good deal more.” When the Covid-19 Pandemic erupted, I had the strange urge to make face masks. To remain sane, I said to myself. I didn’t own a sewing machine and the last time I had sewed a button had been years ago, for I still owned a sample set of cotton thread purchased over a decade ago.

“Just like Rosie the Riveter,” I said to my partner, holding needle and thread in the air, ready to sew my way through the protective personal requirements of those in need. My partner, who is a rational man and had never seen me this way, regarded me with caution, with one finger on the virtual panic button to Atwood’s asylum.

“This is nuts,” he shook his head. “Why are you doing this?”

He knew sewing was not my calling. In my 1970s high school home economics class, I sewed a stylish A-frame skirt, but the result was futuristic as it looked like a bunched-up tube skirt from the 90s. Often, the clothes a woman sewed on a shoestring budget were the only things she left behind—even her children took the husband’s name—yet, creating something out of a length of cloth was a joy lost on me. Childless, I wondered what I’d leave behind.

As with everything in life, Google guided me. Surprised by the number of mask-making tutorials online a week into shutdown, I learned the recommended dimensions for a pleated adult mask, 20x20cm, which meant nothing if I couldn’t sew the square into a pleated rectangle with ear loops.

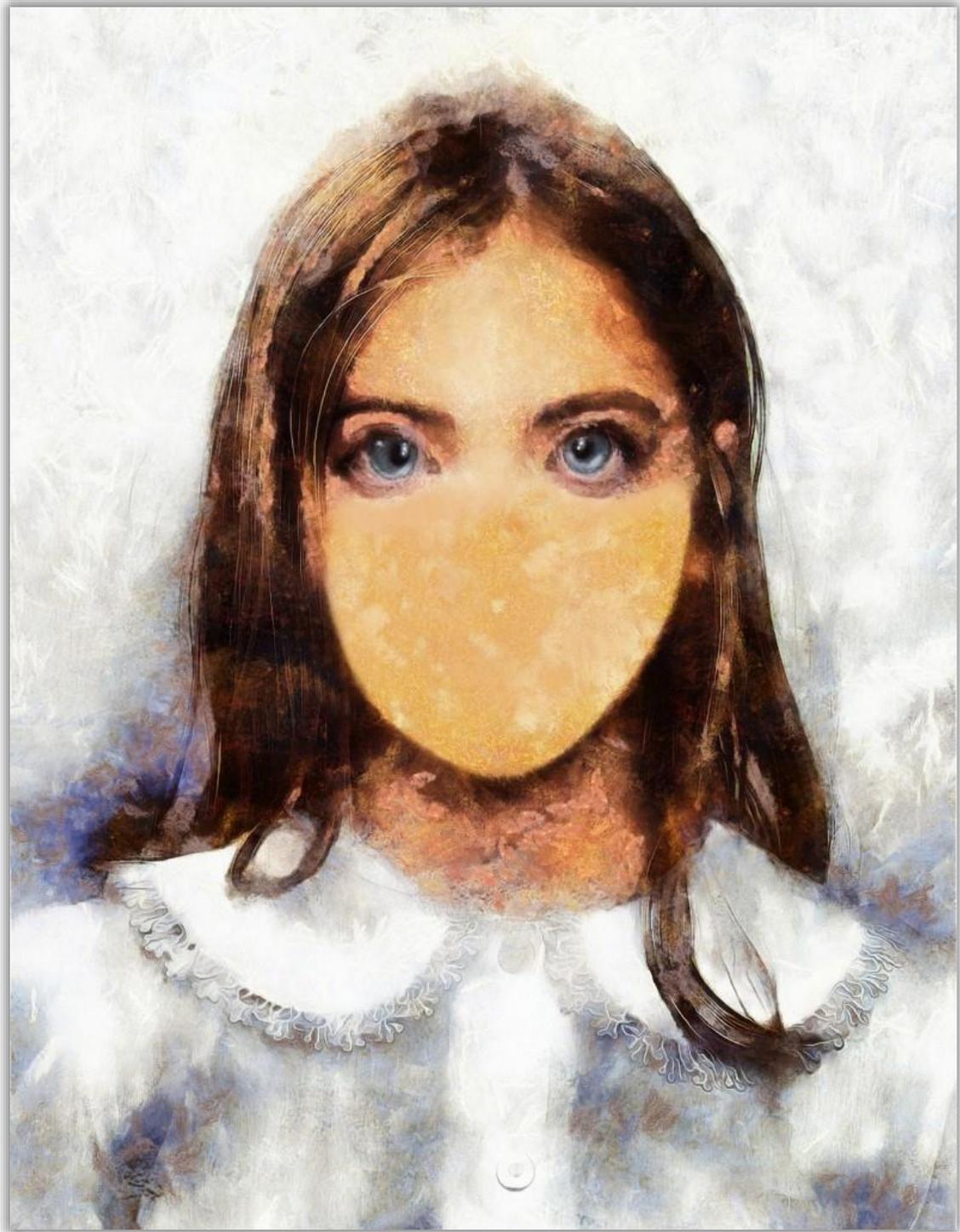
Thinking this virus wouldn’t stick around long, I set to create quick, throwaway masks. I scoured through no-sew mask videos where young nymphs teased, tweaked, and cajoled cotton T-shirts into unimaginable shapes, which ended as tangled balls of ripped T-shirt when I had a go. Deflated, I resigned myself to threading a needle, an activity my aging eyes complained about for days, and hand-sewed the rectangular pleated cloth. Bored by the second side of sloppy straight stitching, by the third side, my patience waned, and the fourth side made my body tense with agonizing anxiety. I was so bored the ear loops took two more days to sew on.

Determined and thinking outside the box, I took a dinner-sized paper napkin, folded it in half, and each half folded it in half again to create the pleats. To keep them in place, I taped the ends with scotch tape, folded them over a rubber band for ear loops. I stapled the edges to secure the bands in place and, in less than five minutes, I had a disposable mask.

The yearning to sew my way through the pandemic nearly sent me to the other side, but when I don my paper mask, I know I’m saving lives, and the environment, on a shoestring budget.

Hidden Smile in the Coronavirus Era 2

Sulman Shuruk



Queen California Karma

Ken Kakareka

We've pissed off Mother Nature
and she's decided to retaliate
by taking a flamethrower
to the state of California.
She's saying,
If you can't appreciate my gifts
and you must be insistent upon
making a mockery
of the natural wonders
I have provided you –
I will not stand by
to let you blacken my skies
with your burning coal, gas, and oil.
You will not tear down
my immaculate, majestic redwoods
to replace with buildings.
I will not let you spoil my clean air
with soot and carbon pollution.
No.
You will not destroy me.
I have long warned you
of your irresponsible behavior,

your lack of care for
what should be
so willingly easy
to care for.

No longer will I warn you.

If anyone is going
to destroy me,
it's going to be me
and in the process
I will do to you
like you have done
to me.

This Blood Soup

Travis Stephens

Virus

is just another way of saying

I am with you. We share

the salt of tears, the copper

and iron of our being. This

will never go away.

Without meaning to, I have

made antibodies and cells

to match yours, to absorb your

entreaties and make us one.

We live behind closed doors.

Blame the strangers.

Because they lived with cattle,

because they dined on sheep and bristly pigs,

they had resistance. They came.

Our people lay in the embrace of

the only land they knew.

A few survived, scarred and scared;

even their language withered, tasted

of copper and the dust of weeping.

The strangers live among us now, numerous.

Plant a flag, cast the seed.

Let them be killed

by bacon or heart disease,

violence or another self-inflicted error

whatever

lurks in the dirt of their past.

The stranger

that new tiny one

number Nineteen.

In My Sufferings

Imo Jumbo



Peacock Mandala

Ramisa Nawar



Trying to Meditate, and Failing

Ben Sloan

Against the far-off white noise of a pandemic
and gone-sour presidential election,

barely noticeable but always there
like the sound of a distant interstate highway

washing up on the near edge
of a late afternoon, is this bird

just outside my window
playing over and over again on its piano

the same incongruous, maddening,
oddly beautiful three notes.

FICTION

Arrival at Nowhereland Station

Jean-Louis "Miroux" Brassière



Late August

Templeton Moss

Dear August,

Or, should that be *My Dear August*? Or, what about *Dearest August*? *My Dearest August*? I'm beginning to see why people don't write love letters anymore. The only reason I'm even attempting to do so is because I thought it would please you. I remember that Christmas when Paul gave you that book of famous love letters and you went on and on about it over New Year's, so I thought you'd like to receive a love letter yourself. A *real* one. In a proper envelope, with a stamp and everything.

(That bit was quite difficult, actually; Do you know how long it's been since I've needed a stamp?)

Now, from what I've read, these letters normally go on for pages about how beautiful the recipient is. For all I know, that was fine in the fourteenth century or whenever, but it's not exactly "PC" these days, is it? I'm not supposed to reduce a woman to her physical attractiveness, as though that's the only thing that gives her value. Because it's not, of course. You have value far beyond your beauty.

Not that you *aren't* beautiful, because you are. I just don't know if I'm supposed to write nine paragraphs about your eyes or your hair or your smile or whatever. I could, of course. It would be easy. I could write a graduate thesis about how beautiful you are, but I wouldn't because you are more than just the single most gorgeous human I have ever met, seen or imagined. Though, as I say, you are that as well.

I don't feel like I'm off to a very good start here.

Anyway, apart from being beautiful you're also clever. Much cleverer than me, which I think is brilliant, by the way. All my life, I've felt like I was the cleverest person in the room. Which is deeply troubling because, when you get right down to it, I'm actually a bit thick. I mean, not the kind of thick where I would, I don't know, eat a shoe by mistake or open all the cages at the zoo or vote conservative. No, just the sort of thick where I don't really know all the things that a chap is supposed to know when he's thirty-four. I can tell you about the works of Dickens or the last time we won the World Cup or which of the Marx Brothers never talked, but ask me something that matters? Like, about government or money or cars? I'd be at a loss.

What do you Americans call it? "Adulging?"

Not like you. You're brilliant. Not only do you know about government and money and cars, but you also know about books and films and music and what you call that little monkey thing from Madagascar with the stripy tail.

It's either a lemur or a lemming; I can never remember which.

And yet you never looked down your nose at me for being so thick. If there was something I didn't know, you told me, and that was it. You're always teaching me new things, but you never judged me for not knowing them. In fact, in all the years I've known you, I've never once heard you utter a harsh or judgmental word to anyone. Even when they deserved it.

Even when *I* deserved it.

Do you remember the first time we met? We were at that terrible pub, and you spilled a pint of lager all down my shirt. At the time, I remember thinking that it was most fitting as I'd been having the worst day ever. The sort of day where a hundred little things go wrong. No big things, like receiving a large tax bill or getting hit by a bus. Just little things like stepping in a puddle or being late for work. In real terms, you're no worse off at the end of the day than you were at the start. But all those little things add up, and I was feeling so down that I did something I hardly ever do and went down the pub for a pint.

Then, out of nowhere, a strange, American woman spilled her drink all over me. I thought it was another dark cloud. But it turned out to be the silver lining. Or, rather, *you* were the silver lining. And just like that, the worst day of my life became the best.

You were kind to me. Kinder than I ever would have expected from a stranger in a pub. You were there with a group of work friends, but you left them to take care of me. You bought me a new shirt. You promised to take my old shirt home and wash it for me. We ended up at a different pub where we spent all night talking. You told me about your life and your job. Why you left Minnesota and how happy you were now that you were a television producer.

You kept saying "sorry," like you thought you were boring me, but you weren't. I was entranced, hearing you talk about the minutia of television production. I didn't understand most of what you were saying, but you were so passionate about it, I couldn't help but hang on your every word. And, even though it's far too late to mean anything, I'd like to tell you what I wanted to tell you that night:

August, you are a strong, intelligent, extraordinary woman.

That's what I mean when I say you're beautiful.

When people say that beauty is only skin deep, they mean well, but they're not quite right. I think of you as being a bit like one of those paper lanterns people hang up in their back gardens. Sure, the paper is painted a pretty color and has a nice pattern on it. But it's the light inside, shining so brightly, that not only makes the lantern glow, but bathes everything around it in a kind of magical, colored light.

Pretty is only skin deep. Beauty can only come from within.

I could go on writing about all the wonderful things you are for another year at least, but I think I'd better wrap this up. I've only got about half an hour till the service is set to begin and I don't want to be late.

Looking back over what I've written, I realize that this love letter is severely lacking in one important respect: I still haven't told you that I love you. Not in those words, exactly. I like to think I've been saying it to you all along, in my own way. Like that chap in that film who just said "As you wish" all the time, but what he *meant* was "I love you." Every word I've ever spoken to you has been a kind of an "I love you."

Why didn't I say it? Properly, I mean. Why did I never tell you what it's meant to me just to have you in my life? Why did I never say how much joy you bring me just by being yourself? Why did I wait until now to write you this letter? Why didn't I tell you all this when it might have mattered?

Extraordinary. Even after you're gone, I'm still learning from you. Learning not to take things for granted. Not to put things off. To say what needs to be said to the people you care about today. Because there's no guarantee any of us will see tomorrow.

After I've finished writing this, I'll take it with me to your funeral. I'm sure no one will object if I slip it into the casket. I don't know if I believe in a life after this one, but if there is such a place as Heaven, then perhaps you're there right now, reading this pathetic attempt at a love letter. Are you smiling? Are you crying? Are you wishing I'd said something sooner? Or glad that I never spoiled our friendship? I don't suppose I'll ever know for sure. Not until I find my way to wherever you are now.

Until then, know that you are loved. Have always been loved. Will always be loved. And that's got to be a good thing.

Even coming from someone too thick to know the difference between a lemur and a lemming.

Too thick to tell you all this before it was too late, August.

With all the love I have to give,

Clive Ferris

PS—I'm now about 80% certain the monkey thing is a lemur...65 or 70 at least.

Hollows

Scott Beard

The snow blew from the north, shattered glass bit into cheeks, and the acid sting scoured Luke's blue eyes and he lowered the camera resting on the sling across his neck. He lifted a frosty glove to wipe the snow that powdered his face, but as he focused on the snow in his eyes, he lost sight of the fox. Eventually, he looked up. Gone. Luke sighed and scanned the powdered sugar grassland that stretched out across the hollow. The curled brown fallen locks from the elms and maples peppered the undulating hills and he followed the misty horizon until the snow dipped along the creek at the far end of the hollow. The fog had writhed its way across the snowy rolling hills. It was hard to tell where the vapor rising from the creek ended and the fog and froth from the misanthropic snow and ice began. Further across the horizon, the slow groan of cars and trucks echoed from the highway a few miles away. It was still daytime, and the snow soaked up the brightness across the rolling hollow, but he could not find the fox. He turned his face into the snow blowing at his back, but in the heavy haze, he could not see his truck parked along the gravel road that wandered along the north side of the hollow. Snow pelted his cap, sifted under his collar. He sat in silence, listened to the droning whir of the trucks grinding along on eighteen wheels in low gear on the slick and snowy lanes of U.S. 54. He waited.

He thought about going back to the truck, but he wanted to get a picture for his daughter, Sara. She loved foxes. She loved the stony gaze of amber eyes alert, watchful. She loved watching them curled lazily in the small beds dug out from dry dirt at the zoo, on the nature documentaries; their auburn fur, bounding along on the miles and miles of snow, their alien bark accompanying them in dark of night, sounding the frigid dawn, the sharp shrill piercing the cold air and rattled frozen limbs of the tall elms.

The fog floated in and white flakes fell and played plastic bubble wrap snaps as the powder landed on the leaves. It continued to cover the tossed salad grass—the burgundies and ochres of sage and bluegrass fading to a blanket of white along the undulating hills of the hollow. He clutched the camera, gave the strap a light tug, and walked toward the creek. The flakes tapped along the outside of his hood and he lowered his head, lifting his eyes only to search for the fox. His boots pressed through powder; the snow crunched and melted on the black rubber soles. Through the heavy fog, he found a hollowed oak deadfall that lay along the creek. Luke noticed the writhing arm of the oak had split off and fallen perpendicular making a natural bridge to the other side. That's when he finally found the fox.

It raised its orange cone ears from behind the large deadfall. Its auburn face blended with a blanket of snow across its chest. The fox leered, leaning its long snout into the cold breeze; amber eyes glowered across the rolling powder.

Luke tapped the camera, its plastic casing sweating snow into droplets along the short lens. The fog and snow made a filmy haze across the hollow and at this range, the fox was nothing more than a fuzzy ball of fur. It still stared at Luke, its head and neck undulating up and down, darting behind mounds of powder piling up along the blustery hills. He lowered the camera and sighed.

Luke sat against the base of a large elm. He waited. He had been waiting for six months now, ever since he had lost his construction job at the concrete factory. The company had lost a few contracts and Luke was one of hundreds they had to let go. He had planned to pay for Sara's first semester of college—a manageable sum of in-state tuition and textbooks. He pictured her walking the concrete sidewalks, flanked by tulip beds and rolling patches of fresh fescue that awoke from its winter slumber just before spring break. He saw her in a new pair of jeans, and some baseball tee, walking briskly from hall to hall, her gingerbread smile warming faces, opening glass doors, and praying some would open for her. He pictured the move out of the two-bedroom apartment, its flat green carpeted hallways, the pool-hall haze of cigarette smoke that hung in the alcoves of the building, waiting for the wind from an open window to take it all away. But now, with the unemployment checks at seventy percent and bills pressing into his pockets, she might have to wait, like she waited on all those lonely nights for a tired truck driver along U.S. 54 west of Wichita. A dull-bearded face, gray haired, the web of lines like roads on a map, endless cups of coffee and plates of flapjacks and sausage, rolling down the highway making interminable tracks on the cold gray asphalt. The tired whirring of wheels that never seemed to take her father anywhere, but never seemed to stop.

The fox started up from behind the log. Long charcoal legs perched on the rotting trunk, orange cone ears erect. It stood, listening to the low growls of cars and trucks still jostling along on U.S. 54. Luke gripped the camera again, rose, and leaned against the trunk of the elm. He lifted the lens and rested his index finger on the shutter release. The fox bolted. It trotted along the rotting pine that lay across the creek, white powder rising in clouds of cold dust. Luke sighed. He slung the camera across his neck again and walked toward the creek. He stopped a few yards from the deadfall. It was a narrow maple that had already begun to bend under the ice and snow. He looked out across the hollow on the opposite side of the creek. The fox stood along the undulating drifts of snow. Its long black legs steady in the snow. Luke reached for the camera. But the fox didn't wait. It darted across the soft snow into the foggy folds of rolling powder, leaving fine footprints in the interminable white of snow. He thought of his daughter, walking steady down streets and sidewalks of a bustling college town, her blue business suit pressed, purse slung across shoulder and chest, into the horizon until her blue suit blurred with the gray backdrop of office buildings and the smog rising from cold gray storm drains along the busy street.

Luke scanned the horizon again, the writhing gray fog had moved across the creek now, following the fox further into the cold and tired trees and fields of fallen leaves on the other side. The cold crawl of the creek rushed from under the deadfall. The snow reflected the gray glow of a cloudy winter night enveloping the hollow. He would go home, and wait for the phone to ring. Wait for the next time he would drive to work, clock in; wait for another day to see the smile on her face, for her final walk across the college campus—fresh flowers along gray sidewalks. He listened to the tired ticks of the snow pelt the back of his hood. He stared into the distance, listened to the low rumble of truck tires whirring along on the wet asphalt. He turned to face the blowing snow, and began another trek back across the hollow to his truck parked along the gravel road.

Where We Belong

Ruby Michelle Riego



The Immortal

Morgan MacVaugh

Peanut Butter Fluff lost its earthly name and assumed the title: The Immortal. This is after living approximately four years over the maximum guinea pig life expectancy—a feat that Mom never fails to remind us about every time It utters a squeak. And It squeaks constantly; with every month that passes, Its call gets shriller. More nasally. Further away from death. Why God created a creature that communicates by screaming, Mom says she'll never know.

My brother and I, though—we don't think it matters much. The point is that It's still here. Still breathing. Still squeaking years after It should have been gone. Each time It squeaks, Mom raps on the bars of Its cage.

We tell Mom to quit it. We'd be screaming too if we ever got that old in people years.

She says she's screaming on the inside raising us.

Each morning, Mom opens our bedroom door and pulls back our blinds to wake us. When we stir, she throws her head towards the far dresser and calls out, *are You dead yet?* She is answered with the shrieking, squealing complaints of The Immortal. So she gets us out the door for school, or on weekends, just out of the house. What all else she does, we don't think we'll ever know—but a chunk of every day is spent cleaning Its ribbed cage, replacing the Holy Water, refilling Its wafer dish. All the while, The Immortal hobbles around socked feet in a plastic purple ball. Sometimes, if Mom's lucky, she's thanked by a fresh pile of turds the minute those small, scabbly feet hit new bedding.

At dinner, Mom tells us if a fire or flood ever flooded the house, The Immortal would survive and come home just to spite her, an olive branch clenched between Its teeth. Her face is red and wild and funny to us. Our dad, especially. He laughs and motions with his thumb towards the backyard. Says, *we could use more wood for the brush pile.*

Mom says that the Immortal likes testing our faith. Every now and then, we come in from playing all dirty and scrappy and find the Immortal laying on Its side against the wall of Its cage. We stop dead in our tracks. Call out. But there's nothing but silence. So we run to the top of the steps and whisper-scream for Dad, who follows with his eyebrows upturned and sharp.

He blinks at the Immortal, laying still in our room. Calls out to It, *hey!* And when there's no response this crazy giggle bubbles up out of his throat. *Mary!* He laughs, running to the top of the steps, us bounding like dogs at his heels. *Mary!* Until she's at the bottom at the steps staring up at us with that *go play in traffic* kind of look. *Mary, It's dead! Only took nine freaking years!*

Her eyes widen and she climbs the staircase faster than we've ever seen. Then she's past us and we're following her back to our room where the Immortal waits. Only the moment Mom steps into our bedroom, the Immortal must hear the soft scuffle of her slipper socks—must smell that Vanilla bean perfume clinging to her like ghosts—because by then, It's sitting upright.

Mom stops dead and the Immortal squeaks Its scolding.

Sometimes we let The Immortal out just to see what Mom'll do. By now there's this lump growing between Its shoulder blades and Its eyes are all bugged and milky. We try not to touch either feature as It freezes between our fingers. Dad sees as we lift It into the ball and stares. *That thing on Its back... Did it calcify?* We shrug. *'S hard.*

Then we cap the ball and roll it down to where Mom's making pigs in a blanket for her Bible study tonight after our dinner. It scuttles towards her feet, and when she sees it, her eyes roll straight back in her skull. The Immortal doesn't move within. It just squeaks at her from Its newfound throne on the floor. She rubs her temple; we're surprised she can't hear us giggling from the hallway. Then there's a carrot in her hand, and the ball plus Immortal going up the stairs.

There's no squeaking throughout dinner, but Mom still opens prayer saying, Lord, I don't pretend to know your methods. But it seems that that Pig is planning to outlive us all.

It's November when we come home to find The Immortal laying in Its cage one night. And not in that pretend kind of way that It had gotten good at doing, either. No, this time it looks cold and stiff, harder than the lump in Its back or the three-inch claws. Gnats circle still eyes.

We don't quite know what to do but look at each other. Then we race down the stairs, nervously giddy and panting into the TV room. Mom's the first one out of her chair. We follow Dad follow Mom up the steps and find her with a hand against the cage, reaching in. The room is too silent.

It's almost eleven and Dad has a shovel. He's chipping away, chipping away at the frozen Earth one chunk at a time. Mom stands on the back porch with her slippers and a nightgown on, the two of us beside her, quiet for once. The Immortal's shoebox is a coffin in her hand; the *Sketchers* logo seems too bright for the occasion.

It's by then we almost believe that there's a guinea pig in there, once, distantly, named Peanut Butter Fluff. But once it's all done and buried in the ground, and Mom has made us all cocoa around the dinner table, she pulls out a stone from her pocket and writes "Immortal" on it with black Sharpie. It will make a decent tombstone. Then she caps it, and sighs, *Amen*.

Place of the World: Character Concept

Kishore Ghosh



As It's Supposed to Be

Kiera Zager

Meredith wandered through the empty subway tunnel, looking for a sign. She had taken the subway at night before, and she had gone the same way she always had: take a left after the turnstile, go down a flight of stairs. And yet there was no familiar orange circle, adorned with the white letter *B*. She couldn't have gone the wrong way, and yet there was no sign for the B train or even the A or the Q train to indicate that she had made a wrong turn. The tunnel was dark and empty, with no sound but the clicking of Meredith's own heels.

She must've done something wrong: gone on autopilot, accidentally gone down a second flight of stairs or turned right instead of left. She tried to retrace her steps, but she couldn't remember anything. It had been too routine for her to take note. Regardless of whether she understood why or not, she was clearly in the wrong place. With a sigh, Meredith turned around and started to walk back towards the stairs.

She immediately noticed the man on the bench—he hadn't been there earlier. When had he come down? Meredith certainly hadn't heard any footsteps, though she figured she must've been too lost in her own thoughts to notice. If he was sitting on the bench, he must be waiting for a train, too. Meredith began walking faster, her strides lengthening with purpose. "Excuse me," she said. The man turned around. He was old—maybe seventy or so, dressed in a dark suit. He had pale blue eyes that Meredith immediately averted her gaze from. They were too light, too empty. If eyes were the windows to the soul, then this man had none. "Excuse me, sir, are you waiting for the B train?"

The man looked away from her, fixing his gaze on the wall directly in front of him. "Your train will be here soon," he said.

Meredith walked around the bench and stood next to it. "The B train? It's coming then?"

"Your train will be here soon."

Meredith shrugged, not seeing the point in interrogating the man any further. Maybe he did mean the B train, or maybe he just didn't understand what to tell her—he looked old enough for senility to be creeping in. She sighed and sat down at the other end of the bench. Bored, she started tapping out the rhythm of a song with her fingernails on the side of the bench.

"There's no need to be nervous."

Meredith jumped at the sound of his voice; she had forgotten the old man was there. "I'm not nervous."

“You don’t have to pretend. I see people like you all the time. They’re usually either scared or confused. Everyone wants to believe that they’ll be brave, but no one ever really is.”

Meredith nodded, though she didn’t understand what he was talking about at all. She was starting to feel very uncomfortable: lost in a dark subway tunnel, sitting next to a strange old man who didn’t seem to have a solid grasp on reality. She decided she had better go back like she had been planning to earlier. She would return to the turnstile, and this time she would make sure she went the right way. She stood up and started walking towards the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

She had only gone a few steps when the man called out to her, stopping her old in her tracks. She turned around slowly; he still wasn’t looking at her, but was staring straight ahead at the wall. “I— I think I’m in the wrong place,” she said.

“Your train will be here soon.”

“No—no, I don’t think it will. I think I made a wrong turn somewhere.”

“You didn’t make a wrong turn. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be. Just wait. Your train will be here soon.”

With small, quiet steps, Meredith started walking back towards the bench. “What kind of train is it, exactly, that I’m waiting for?”

“It’s a train that will take you where you need to be. It will take you somewhere far away, and it’s not going to bring you back. But there’s no need to be nervous. The train ride is fast, smooth, and painless. Waiting for it to come is the hardest part.”

“You’re sure? This is the hardest part?”

“I’m sure. I’ve watched millions of people board this train. They always get scared right before it comes, but afterwards it all works out just fine. Exactly the way it’s supposed to.”

“Is it true? What they say, about it being like falling asleep. I’ve heard that the sound of the train going down the tracks is soothing, and the train rocks gently like a cradle. You fall into a sleep so deep that there’s nothing else—no dreams, no waking. Just closed eyes and a calm, quiet train.”

“You’re right,” the man said. “That’s exactly what it’s like.”

Meredith nodded. She, too, was staring straight ahead at the wall; there wasn’t anywhere else to look. She didn’t have a choice. All that was left was to sit and wait. The tunnel was silent; Meredith didn’t much mind the silence. She could get used to the silence.

But the silence didn't last forever; it was broken by a vibration that shook that floor, a low, grumbling sound that filled the air around her. This wasn't quiet or calming. Lights flashed through the tunnel, so blinding and bright that no one could ever hope to fall asleep as long as they were on. She turned on the old man, indignant. "You told me it was quiet. You said it was soothing, and you could sleep, and—and you lied!"

"I didn't lie. I told you this was the worst part. It gets better once you board the train. The train will be here soon, and then all will be as it's supposed to be."

"No. No! I'm not getting on that train. I won't get on that train!" She stood up and started sprinting down the tunnel.

"You can't get away," the old man said. She could only hear him faintly; he wasn't struggling to yell over the growl of the approaching train. She didn't care. He was just a senile old man. He didn't know what he was talking about.

The grumbling grew louder and louder, and the brightness that filled the tunnel became increasingly more intense. Still, Meredith ran towards the staircase. She was close; she could make it. She glanced behind her to see if the old man was following her; he wasn't. He was still sitting on the bench, staring straight ahead, as if completely indifferent to her struggle. But she had dared to glance back, to take her eyes off of the path in front of her, and her shoe landed in a shallow puddle of water. She lost her footing and came crashing down to the floor of the tunnel, hitting the side of her head upon impact. She started to roll to the side; filled with pain and unable to think, she didn't struggle. The walkway between the rails was wide—at least, it should've been. It wasn't until she rolled over the side, until gravity started dragging her down onto the tracks, that she realized she had made a fatal mistake, the same mistake she had been making all along: the thought that this was a normal subway tunnel, one on which people could come and go as they pleased, one on which choice, not fate, decided where a person would go.

The old man could barely hear Meredith's scream over the sound of the train as it barreled into the station. He could just hear the faint sound of her bones cracking over that of the train slamming on its brake and grinding to a halt. He didn't need to hear the sounds to know what had happened; he had known what was going to happen the second he had sat down on that bench. "I told you, he said. He got up and started to walk towards the stairs, shaking his head. "I tried to tell you. All will be as it's supposed to be." He never understood why people always tried to fight it, why they panicked in their last seconds and tried to outrun the train. It never made any sense, and it made his job more difficult. With a sigh, he climbed the stairs and entered another subway tunnel. There was a middle-aged man wandering near the end of the tunnel, looking for a sign.

Deep Into Space

Sam Willis



Would Anyone Notice the Stars Screaming

Rachel Racette

Deep within the void of the universe, a Goddess settles back against nearby barren planets and a massive asteroid belt to watch a war unfold several galaxies away. She wonders how long this one will take. A year? A month? An hour? Five minutes?

She chuckles, raising her chaos-spun goblet to sip the swirling cosmos of dying planets and stars she's decided to swallow this age. Her nails -- claws really -- clink against the glass, the noise reverberating through the void. She watches with a hum of vague amusement as asteroids and shooting stars are obliterated into dust by the soundwaves. As the nearby systems shift, planet surfaces rolling under the devastation.

But she is not paying attention to the needless, easily preventable, destruction. No. Her attention is on one particular point of space, lightyears from her physical position, yet still well within her reach.

Fleets of ships clash in a deadly dance above a planet of ice and jagged towering mountains. Millions of eyes are set upon this world, upon this 'grand war' for the fate of a planet that will be forgotten in less than a millennia. But no gaze is felt more clearly than hers.

Not that the two warring species are even aware of whose eyes are set upon them so intently. She is so above them, so beyond their limited sight, that they strain to even comprehend her existence. The weakest of them insist she does not exist. Swear over and over that their meager works of science will yield all the answers of the universe if given the chance. "*There is no such thing as Gods.*" They hiss, even as they sweat nervously.

"No high governing power pulls the strings." They shout.

And yet, they dart their gaze skyward, hoping and dreading that one day they will see her. This force their science cannot explain, this species they cannot hope to contain or categorize without religious words. All the while she hovers over their heads, so far away and yet too close for comfort.

She finds those disbelievers the most amusing. Mortals praying that if they repeat something long enough, insist it true and write it down as so, that it will become truth. She enjoys watching those souls fade the most. For they all return to her in the end, and they tremble so deliciously in her palm.

As Goddess of the Universe, the Maker and Unmaker of the Cosmos -- there is very little outside her control. The stars and planets yield to her guiding hand, and all those mortals, even if they live for centuries, will one day collapse just like every star and planet. Their skin and bones returning to the flesh of their worlds, to become again one day the stardust she manipulates.

But back to the current events holding her attention. The armies seem to have come to a stalemate. Their death counts have long past the thousands, yet they continue to fight, to reject peace. The Goddess huffs, bubbles of oxygen and hydrogen rising from her lips, floating off into the cosmos.

She picks up an asteroid from the nearby belt and crunches it between her sparkling teeth. And she waits. She waits for those straining last handfuls of mortals to make their last moves.

And for an immortal being such as herself, the wait is not long. Five more years, and the final act comes. Her attention, vast as the void she dwells within, split between her vigilant watch of the entire universe. There are plenty of little moments to watch as she waits out the boring bits. There are always other battles going on. Other planet-shattering events that could be just as, if not more, interesting to watch, but her main focus remains on this one space battlefield. On the decaying planet of ice and mountains.

She watches, crunching more asteroids, as the members of that planet of ice make their last stand. She leans forward, blackhole eyes widening, as the last General stands alone within the bow of a scorched battleship. As he approaches the enemy, a message of surrender blaring, she reaches out with one clawed hand, and with a wave of her fingers, commands the universe to sing.

Under the comforting weight of the hymns of the cosmos, terrible and beautiful songs only she can hear, the Goddess grins. The declaration of surrender is a lie. The Goddess can feel the swirling chemicals and shuddering elements of hundreds of bombs filling the General's ship. The chance for peace was lost long ago, and all that is left, is suicidal genocide.

The Goddess shifts more of her attention towards this lone ship, licking her star-dusted lips, and deep within her body, her eternal cosmic soul cheers for the whispered promise of destruction.

And oh, what glorious destruction does this mortal General deliver. Fiery waves of green, red, and bright blue burst out from within the General's ship, washing over and leveling all that it comes in contact with. The monumental explosion takes out all the remaining enemy ships and then it collides and takes out a chunk of that planet of ice and mountains. And all the life that had remained on the planet, perishes.

Metal shards fly through the void, super-heated specks of what had once been massive ships. And the Goddess cries out in joy. She swoons as the waves of destruction rush unimpeded through space. Unleashing serious harm upon the rest of that planets system.

Their sun, that essential star, ripples with heat and the atomic remains of those powerful and unstable chemicals. It shudders, and she sees, with her impossible vision, that the star will go out and wipe out the remaining system within a month.

And this Goddess serves as the only witness to the inescapable horror. She sees the future chaos of destruction and rebirth as if it were written down. And she loves it. She screams and cackles, the trembling swirling cosmos within her glass nearly slipping from her grasp. She downs the rest of that dying system and then shatters the glass, sending its broken components back into the void.

As the fading embers of the explosion finally sputter out, she shifts her attention. The show is over, at least for that pocket of space. Oh well. The Goddess grins. The universe is such a big place, after all. There will always be new entertainments, and all this Goddess need do, is open her eyes and reach out.

Rockefeller

PJ Rosa

He wasn't the tyrant I expected him to be. In fact, quite the opposite. Not nurturing or caring, but stoic. Like a living statue. Sitting, watching, and puffing on his pipe. Even in conversations with others he considered his peers, he would spend most of the social interaction observing them talking with one another. Making small grumbles when they looked over to him for acknowledgment, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling as if reading what he was saying from cue cards plastered over the stucco. He would allow himself to pontificate, but in his own way. Short sentences and small gestures paired with side-glances and adjusting in his chair. As if he was a man of insecurity. Funny to think such wealth and power could be capable of flawed behavioral quirks.

He was often gentle and soft-spoken, more concerned with what other's had to say. Like a grandfather watching his family bicker over Thanksgiving dinner, only adding to the conversation when spoken to directly. A little shy even. Almost certainly never been in a physical altercation. The thought of him muddied and bruised up after some bar brawl that spilled out through the swinging doors of whatever wild west saloon he'd find himself in, amused me to no end. His black-dot eyes fluttering with disorientation at the new and revitalizing sensation of being punched in the chin. Sometimes when I was on duty, standing over him hour after hour, arms crossed behind my back, I would entertain myself by imagining how he might react if I suddenly jumped up and hollered to startle him. I half-expected him to not react at all. Simply look over his shoulder at me in anticipation for what I'd say next. He was always sizing people up, like being watched by something that wasn't human, only studying human behavior. It gave other staff the heebie-jeebies, but he came across as a child to me. Still learning, but never quite understanding why anyone does anything.

A long combed moustache hung down like a brush over his lips and his smoking pipe, his trusted accessory. Wild brows stuck out in all directions above brooding eyes, sometimes cold, other times fascinated by what they took in. Always observing his surroundings, always calculating. He was usually seen lounging in slippers and a smoking jacket, chewing on the ivory pipe stem while tickling at the scruff of his chin. Often we'd watch the world together from the balcony of his summer home and marvel at the sky bursting outward and going on forever. One day, still in my first year of service and very naive, I couldn't help myself but ask him a question during one of our afternoon sits. It was a time when I was still brash and very curious about my new employer.

"I hope I'm not crossing any boundaries sir," My voice split through the silence and the easy air like a whip and got carried off with the breeze. He didn't react. He just kept staring off at the rolling trees, transfixed by their magnitude. As was I. "I've been wondering," Still he made no notion to my speaking as I continued. To stop then would admit some sort of cowardice and knowing fault that I'd done something wrong. Taken some sort of misstep. If confronted for speaking out of turn, I could have played dumb, hopefully allowing my interruption of his mulling to slide under the rug.

"If you had to distill your success into one attribute which you possess, what would that be?" I felt as though we were practically friends towards the end of my inquiry. Gaining more comfort as each word passed through my lips. I may as well have been one of his wealthy colleagues to share a drink and talk business with. Surely, I'd already spent more personal time with him in the short length I'd been employed and I barely knew him. I'd earned one question.

He was quiet for a long time. So long I thought maybe he didn't hear me, or maybe he just didn't feel obligated to answer. Perhaps he was trying to give me the out as to not let my supervisor discover that I'd been attempting to make idle chit-chat on the job. Finally, he cleared his throat and lowered the pipe from his lips.

"Intuition, most likely," Smoke drizzled from the corners of his cracked lips over his squinting eyes studying the answer in the tree tops.

"Ever since I can recall, I enjoyed watching people. Even as a boy, I'd sit and watch other children at school and try to guess what they'd do next. Like a little child's game in my head perhaps."

He shifted in his chair, crossing one leg over the other.

"Well anyway... as I got older I got better and better at guessing people's next move and I realized that most everybody works in patterns," He made a circle with the end of the pipe and looked over his shoulder at me to make sure that I understood. I bowed my head and smiled, still considering his reply. He turned back around and was gone again to return his attention to the trees.

I thanked him and freshened his coffee, to which he made a slight nod as per usual. Out of the twenty-three years I would go on to serve in his estate, that was the single instance we ever spoke candidly to one another. As far I am aware, none of the other staff made habit of speaking to him either. It wasn't that he was a cruel man, it just wasn't done. There was no written rule saying we were forbidden to make casual conversation with the man, it just seemed peculiar or inappropriate. Like there was a barrier between us and we could never truly see from the same eyes. A grumble here and a murmur there. That's all. As the years went by he had less and less visitors and eventually he entered a state of solemn introversion. At his memorial service, a well to-do affair, I couldn't help but wonder what patterns he saw in me.

Daughter

Neal Tucker

When lights out is called, I have six hours until I'll be missed. I get out of bed and fill the sheets with themselves — an extra precaution at Myra's suggestion. Underneath the bed, I move the books and additional blanket I asked for in the direction of the door, then I lift the stone floor and set it on top of the blanket. To do all this without any noise takes several minutes.

The hole's too small, Myra says, but it can't be any bigger. She says the books must be placed just so. They should be returned to the library and new ones requested to keep up appearances, to make it look natural. She's been here. I trust her. And I read all the books anyway, so it doesn't matter.

Of course, it never actually feels natural, as if each time is the first: My hands and arms find the dirt wall, under the floor, under the bed. My head follows, chest and stomach. At last, my legs and feet can disappear into the ground, and I'm on my way.

I shouldn't write this down, but it's for her. For you. In case I don't get the chance to say it in person. It's for me. In case I forget what it's like.

It takes about forty-five minutes to reach the fence. This is the hardest part. It's circuitous. It's hard to breathe, always. From there, twenty minutes to the woods. I go another half hour underground to be safe before I'm back on my feet.

Running would be faster, but Myra says the only people running outside after midnight have done something wrong.

So, I walk. It takes me an hour to get home, get the key from the fake rock, go inside, walk upstairs, stop at our bedroom door. I give myself another sixty seconds: I open the door to see Stephen. He's asleep. He takes Ambien now to be sure. To be safe. More Myra advice, and we're thankful for it.

In the hall again, I go to her bedroom. A moment later, I'm holding her in the Winnie-the-Pooh chair. She has the Piglet outfit on. Stephen washes it every day and puts it on her every night. Then I'm nursing her. I think of the hiding, the digging, the crawling, the walking, but I'm nursing you.

It's only fifteen minutes, and my time is up. I give her back to the crib and kiss her forehead. I make my way downstairs. I lock the door and place the key back inside the fake rock. I walk back to my tunnel and crawl toward the woods, under the yard, up into the cell with Myra.

I replace the stone, reposition the books and extra blanket. I'm covered in sweet sweat as I lie down on the thin mattress and count again the contours in the ceiling. In twenty minutes, lights up will be called, and I will spend the next eighteen hours waiting to do it again.

NONFICTION

Lighthouse

Tracy Fawns



A Couch Potato Does a Burp...ee

Kathy Ha

I can't run. Literally, cannot run. It's like I was born with two left feet that are incapable of coordinating steps at high speeds. Not to mention arms that tend to flail around like a fledgling bird thrown out of its coop. I simply look awkward trying to run, so I don't. The powers above didn't grant me the ability to run like a gazelle, and that's fine with me, seeing how much I loathe sweating.

How anyone can tolerate sweating is beyond me! Sweating itches my face, pools around the pits, and causes chafing between the thighs. And don't even get me started on underboob sweat! The act of sweating offends my sensibilities.

So it comes as no surprise that the lack of exercise and sweat has resulted in some weight gain over the years. Oh, alright, maybe a helluva lot of weight, enough to warrant some concern if I'm honest with myself.

I dread the idea of spending hundreds going up a dress size and the subsequent feelings of shame for letting myself go to the point of no return. I don't want to feel uncomfortable in my own skin. A future of swinging from dieting to comfort eating is unhealthy for the body and mind. So I decided it was time to address the elephant in the room - pun not intended. It was time I made sweating and exercise my biatch.

I can't even remember the last time I stepped into a gym, but I can recall the feelings of self-consciousness, anticipation, and vulnerability. I never felt comfortable inside a gym, feeling overweight and awkward in tight-fitting clothing, pretending to know how to work the machines. I knew that returning to this setting for exercise would not work for me.

Instead, I booked my brother for fitness training. Ironically, he is the muscle-kissing, Insta-loving, gym junkie to my couch potato, trashy TV, chip eating self. The world needs balance, right? And being the lazy ass that I am and needing accountability, I dragged a couple of friends to join the sessions.

The morning of the fitness session, even with the familiarity of friends and family, I was a nervous Nelly. You know how humans have that evolutionary thing called the 'flight, fight or freeze' response? Well, let's say I was that anxious mammal alleviating a load or two for a lighter flight.

"Why are you so nervous?" asked my brother's fiancée, who had come for support. "You will be fine!"

Have I mentioned that my brother's fiancée is a young and fit woman? She couldn't understand my fears; how could she? She hasn't birthed two boulder-sized babies from her canal. She's in no danger of accidentally peeing herself because her pelvic floor muscles won't play ball. I bet her joints are springy and cushiony. Sigh, I'm so envious of people with pain-free springy joints. Ah, to be young again.

Anyway, I digress. After my brother's welcome speech, we laid out our yoga mats on the grass. We had met at a local reserve to do the group fitness training as lockdown restrictions meant we could only gather outdoors in small numbers.

"... burpees, then lunges... work with dumbbells... repetitions... 36 sets..." explained my brother to the group.

Have you done a burpee? It looks simple, doesn't it? Deceptive movements that work every muscle in the body. After the first two attempts at a burpee, I was basically face planting instead of planking. It felt like torture, especially with sweat dripping from every surface of my body.

"Come on! You can do it! Ten more seconds. Push through!" yelled my brother as he mirrored our actions.

Counting down ten seconds in my head, I gritted my teeth and pushed through the pain as I continued with brutal leg flutters.

"Ten more seconds," informed my brother.

Wait; what? "You said ten seconds before!" I chastised the liar. "Not funny!"

Huffing and puffing, each one of us committed to the fitness regime, giving it our best. Even my brother broke a sweat and admitted at the end that he was hurting. It gave me a sense of achievement that I had persisted, despite my discomfort. There might have been the benefit of a bit of endorphin release. We left the park, feeling good pain, and looking forward to the next session.

It's been two days since, and gosh, I am feeling the bad pain. I can barely walk. I shudder at the sight of stairs. I prefer not to go to the toilet because then I have to unceremoniously drop onto the seat. I roll out of bed; it's the only way off. The other ladies aren't faring any better.

Despite the muscle soreness, I'm looking forward to the next session. The hardest part was taking that first step, getting the motivation in turning a thought into action. That action means that I'm no longer hiding behind excuses of sweat and my inability to run. It means that I'm working towards taking charge of my own destiny for a healthier and happier me. Plus, sweating has its benefits, right? I'm basically getting a natural facial while losing weight. I call that a win-win.

Bus Ride from Paris to Lyon

Wilson Koewing

I left my rented flat in Paris before sunrise. Even at 6 am, the grind of Parisian life is evident. Swarms run frantic from train to train in packs, most resigned to the fate of a missed connection.

By seven, I was on a bus to Lyon.

In the idyllic French countryside, black and white cows graze under giant windmills. Lush farmland stretches out in patches of geometric greens and yellows. Thick trees dot the landscape. Green onions blow softly in the breeze. Above wildflowers of purple and red—which form gorgeous rashes on grassy hills—thin clouds hang close to the ground waiting to release gentle mist. Quiet French villages appear. One with a small community graveyard. Another, perched on a hill, slathered out under the facade of a castle.

On the road, we passed a pair of old Citroens. At a petrol station, a man with well-barbered hair and glasses filled up a convertible roadster. As we chugged away, a tan-colored mutt rolled in the trimmings of freshly cut grass, his owner screaming at him to return.

Halfway to Lyon, the elevation climbed, and our ears popped. Green mountains rose hazy in the distance. The land became tree-covered, but no truly mountainous region presented itself.

On the outskirts, power lines and transformers began to connect the more densely populated area. Industry Rose. Warehouses and familiar businesses with unfamiliar names. And then Lyon. Grand houses on steep hills. A bridge crossed the Rhône river which, along with the Saone, course through the city and provide much of its aesthetic charm.

Exiting the bus, a regional transit strike was in progress. I wandered away from the station Perrache into a park and sat in the grass. The sun was warm, and the grass was soft. An elderly woman with a miniature chow sat on a bench nearby eating a baguette. An elderly man, walking at a snail's pace, approached holding the leash of a Jack Russell terrier with a black streak across its face. They spoke in French as he neared. The woman coyly held out her hand. The man kissed it before reaching into his back pocket and presenting a single rose. She smelled the rose and let it rest across her lap. From a picnic basket she produced a baguette and handed it to the man. He nodded and strolled away taking a bite and humming softly to himself.

¿Are You Sure There Is No Hope for Me?

Phyllis Houseman

One of the highlights of my Peace Corps adventure was the free airplane ride I took on the monthly Brazilian mail flight from Ecuador to Rio de Janeiro.

My teaching partner Tricia and I got permission for the trip since we were on Summer break from our classroom duties in a small city in southern Ecuador.

After crossing the jagged snow-covered peaks of the Andes, our plane dipped down thousands of feet into the rainforest jungle. The craft stopped late in the afternoon at Manaus, on the banks of the Amazon River. The town boasted a history as the former center of Brazilian rubber production in the early 1900s.

Allowed to exit the plane for a brief two hours, we managed to see the famous Teatro Amazonas opera house and stroll the swirling patterns of colored brick that had been used in the construction of the sidewalks in the center of the city.

As we walked back across the airport tarmac to the plane, a cane toad as big as a cat croaked a goodbye.

After several intoxicating days in Rio de Janeiro, we plane hopped to Sao Paulo and then on to the Brazilian border with Uruguay

We crossed over the *frontera* between the countries. During the bus ride across tiny Uruguay, Tricia and I stopped speaking to each other—again. I don't remember the cause for our latest argument, but when passengers got off at the town of Melo, I snatched up my backpack and found a seat in the rear of the bus.

Watching new travelers board, my jaw dropped. A costumed *huaso*, the Uruguayan *gaucho*, locked eyes and then sat next to me.

Politeness stopped me from pulling my camera out of my travel bag to snap a shot. A rather handsome, middle-aged gentleman, he wore a trimmed, gray-streaked beard. His clothing was impeccably clean, with a wide *chupalla* hat, a colorful poncho on his shoulder, and gleaming knee-high leather boots.

As he dropped into the seat, a faint trace of rich tobacco tickled my nose.

My Spanish was fairly good by that point, and I understood most of what he said when he began talking about his family.

“My oldest son, Enrique, is a judge. Then there is Eduardo and Chocha. Eduardo is already a surgeon, and Rosa, we call her Chocha, will begin her studies at the Universidad de la Republica in Montevideo to be a pediatrician. My youngest, Felipe, is seventeen, and he doesn’t know how to tie his shoes yet.”

His evaluation of his children boasted of *orgullo* (pride) and love. The twinkle in his eye included the teenager in the assessment.

He then said with a sigh, “The rancho has many empty rooms now. The children are gone most of the year. The *estancia* needs a woman’s care. My wife died three years ago. I miss her. She was so beautiful, inside and out.”

“*Lo siento.*” I offered up my condolences for his loss.

Then looking me up and down in that classic male way, he asked if I had a *novio* — a boyfriend or intended.

I immediately invented a fiancé back in Detroit.

The entire bus must have been listening to our conversation. Waves of laughter went up and down the aisle when reaching his destination, he rose to leave. And with hat over heart, he bowed to me, asking:

“¿Estás seguro de que no hay esperanza para mí?”

¿Are you sure there is no hope for me?

When he exited the bus, I returned to the seat next to Tricia. As I settled down, she hissed, “Did you realize what he was saying!”

I just smiled.

I’ve often wondered what sort of life I would have led if I had gotten off the bus with him.

Ponte Market, Venice 1979

Gerald Olivas



Doctor's Office Hercules

Rex H. McBride

My eyes were beginning to blur while looking at a quarterly magazine in the waiting room. I was going to find out the results of all those tests I had been having since late August. Even before the surgery by Dr. Gray in September of this year, I knew already in my heart and head. It had come back. Or, never really left. But I had not had much trouble for almost 7 years.

So, when the post-surgery lab reports came back from Stanford recently, Dr. Yee, my primary care physician personally called me 6:40 PM on a Friday to say he was referring me to an oncologist 30 miles away. He said the oncologist's office would call me on Monday morning to set up an appointment. Dr. Yee soberly said, "You *have* to go."

So, here I was in the waiting room for the third time, tests all done, waiting to hear just where I stood. Each of my visits here had impressed on me that I was no longer in the minor leagues of ailments. There were some really sick people in this room. Many were wearing hats or wigs to hide hairless heads. Some were in wheelchairs, and no one seemed very energetic. Even the family members accompanying these cancer patients seemed tired — weighted down from the burden this disease places upon everyone close to it.

As tired as I was, I felt as if I didn't belong here. If this were a scene from a bad martial arts movie with a plot more warped than usual; I could single-handedly take on all 20 to 30 people in the room at once. Not like the carefully choreographed scenes where only one attacker approaches the good guy at a time. Heck, I was Hercules compared to anyone here.

When she walked in the front door to the waiting room at the oncology clinic, my first impression was of a very sick middle-aged woman. Quite attractive in her day, I thought. Wispy, thinning blondish-gray colored hair, barely covering the sides of her head. On top was a knitted cap, haphazardly placed as if she had been involved in a snowball fight at a family trip to the hills. The big coat, sweatpants and fuzzy booties added to the look of someone trying to keep warm in inclement weather. It was a sunny, warm, autumn day. Short sleeve shirts and sunglasses were more the norm but seemed completely lost to her. Darkness under her eyes and her fragile almost translucent facial skin reminded me of looking at a marble statue. She had a clear plastic tube near her nose hooked around her ears. She was pulling a green oxygen bottle behind her on wheels. There seemed to be a defiant courage in her struggle to pull the small tank over to a seat. She was going to do everything for herself as long as she could. She was followed by another woman in her late fifties and a handsome, slightly overweight but robust man in his mid-thirties wearing jeans and a golf shirt.

This trio's entrance caused me to lose interest in the magazine. The interaction between them as they sat kept my attention. The man was very kind and attentive. The 50ish woman got a paper cup of water for the ill woman who appeared to have an almost unquenchable thirst. Then, it hit me. The woman on oxygen wasn't middle-aged at all. More like, early- to mid-thirties. The man was her husband. The 50ish woman, was most likely there to help her own daughter who was, in my opinion, not long for this world. She still was beautiful, but the cancer was taking its toll.

I couldn't help it, but as I sat watching this loving couple chat, my eyes watered up. A lump grew in my throat. I was looking at a married couple on a journey where they soon would part and go separate ways. One would journey into the unknown; the other would be left behind pondering life and its meaning. Perhaps soon, he would have to explain to little curly haired, big eyed children that Mommy still loves them even though she's no longer there. My observation of the scene was one of those moments when you ask *why* and consider the eternities.

My name was called, and I got up and went through the door—following the nurse who three weeks earlier during a painful procedure called a bone marrow biopsy. That day, she was looking for something in all the cabinets of the room I was in. She said, "This may be your lucky day. I can't find the needles." The doctor told me it would be an unpleasant experience. For 3 weeks I considered showing up all 'liquored up' but what good would that do? The nurse said, "Oh, here they are." She plunked down a big plastic package on the tray. I stared at the hardware she had just exposed. I asked her, "When do they stop calling them needles and start calling them *pipe*?" I had daintier looking tools in my carpenter's toolbox. He was right about it being unpleasant.

Dr. Medhi came in. He sat down and said it was confirmed that I had lymphoma. Fortunately, a low grade or slow growing type. Most likely could be kept under control with radiation and occasional surgery. He said if I had to get cancer, this was the type to have. We both smiled. I knew that many prayers were answered.

I left the clinic that day greatly relieved that although my future health concerns may not always be pleasant, most likely my condition will not shift gears into something faster. I drove back to Modesto and pulled into a KFC for a big Pepsi and a bucket of chicken to celebrate. I didn't have someone to immediately share my good news with, in person but I also didn't have to face what that young couple was staring in the face either. I just hope they were able to smile with Dr. Medhi that day too. I sense that somehow their courage made them smile.

A Rocky Place, a Place Where Water Runs

Mollie Hosmer-Dillard



Every February Thirteenth: Memoir of a 9-1-1 Dispatcher

Rachel McBride

I'm usually happy to chat about my eleven years on the job when someone shows interest. I have dozens of stories to tell. But, the question I've been asked most often is: "What's the worst call you ever took?" *Sigh*. Why do you ask *that* question? To those of you who have asked over the years, I reluctantly recount the worst 14-minute conversation I ever had as a 9-1-1 dispatcher.

And then the phone rang. I knew this was a cell phone call by the line it came in on. Technology and GPS weren't as exact in 2005, so I was only anticipating a phone number—and that's all I got when I pushed the button to answer.

Me: **9-1-1, what is the address of your emergency?**

Call: (muffled screaming, crying, yelling, commotion)

My brain raced with possibilities. As I struggled to make sense of what I heard, I thought to myself, *Big call coming in! No address and no GPS? Dang!*

Me: **9-1-1! WHAT IS THE ADDRESS?!**

Just by my volume, tone, and repetition, the other dispatchers knew to perk up and listen to me. When on duty, hyperaware dispatchers functioned virtually as one.

Call: **My mom is dead. He shot my mom!**

Me: *Big call! Kid caller. Sounds really young.*

Your mom is shot at what address?

No GPS. Please know your address, kid.

My firm voice urgently inquired. By restating "your mom is shot," I hinted that my call needed law enforcement and medical assistance—but with only a phone number, dispatchers didn't know where to send help. This call could be anywhere in our 9-1-1 call radius—over 2,300 square miles.

Call: **I don't know the address.**

(continued commotion, muffled screaming)

Me: **Okay. What city are you in?**

Call: **In Laverkin!**

Me: Where in Laverkin? On what street?

Call: By the church.

Me: Do you know what street the church is on?

There are a few churches. But that narrows it down.

Good landmark, kid!

Call: No! She's dead! My mom is dead. He shot her.

Me: Okay. Everyone is coming to help you. What's your name?

Call: Taylor.

I didn't hear the gunshots. Other calls I took, the gunshots rang out clearly. End of life. Eerie peace. This call had too much commotion to hear the recognizable blasts. I could barely understand Taylor over the crying and muffled background noise.

Me: Okay, Taylor. How old are you?

Taylor: I'm nine.

Me: Nine? Did I hear that right? Who shot your mom?

Taylor: Her boyfriend.

Me: What's his name?

Taylor: Cory. He shot her in the head.

Me: She saw that at NINE. Where is Cory?

In the house with a gun? Would he hurt you? Maybe he left.

Taylor: I don't know.

(children screaming and crying)

Me: Okay. Who else is there with you?

Who is crying?

Taylor: My little (muffled).

Me: Okay. Siblings, I'm guessing.

Three minutes into my call seemed like twenty. *Why does this always seem to happen in slow motion?* Other calls flooded in from neighbors that helped piece the story together. Man with a gun. Crying woman. Kids in the yard. Shots fired. He probably left. But we finally had the address.

Me: **Okay. Get everybody into the bedroom and close the door.**

Go into the bedroom and lock the door so I know you're safe!

Protect the children in case Cory was still there.

Taylor: **She said to go in the bedroom! Come on!**

(commotion, background noise)

Me: **Good job! Get everybody in the bedroom. I'll stay on the phone with you.**

Everybody in the bedroom. Go, go, go!

Taylor had nobody except me; she was mine now.

Is Mom really dead?

Five other dispatchers were overwhelmed with citizen calls and police radio traffic trying to get officers and paramedics on scene.

Me: **Is everybody in the bedroom?**

Taylor: **Yes.**

(soft crying and sniffing continued)

Me: **Good. Okay, are you guys all okay?**

Taylor: **Yes, we're okay. But my mom is dead!**

(sobbing)

Me: **We don't know that, but I have an ambulance and police officers coming as fast as they can to help, okay? Are you guys hurt?**

Taylor: **We're okay. What do we do?**

Me: **Just talk to me. Okay?**

First officer arrived. Second officer pulled up. They verified the suspect left. Medical rushed in. Mom wasn't going to make it. That didn't stop them from trying.

Me: **Tell me about Cory.**

So sorry, but I've gotta ask. We don't know anything about him.

Taylor: Okay. I'll try.

Me: How old is Cory? 20? 30? 40?

Taylor: I don't know.

Me: Okay. What's his last name?

Taylor: Um. I don't know.

Me: That's okay. *She's nine. What kid would know this?*

Think! What would a nine-year-old know?

Um, how old is your mom?

Taylor: She's 26.

Me: *Wow. Mom's young.* Okay. And what's your mom's name?

Taylor: Brea Kirchoff.

Me: You're doing great. Just stay with me, okay?

Taylor: Okay.

Me: Is Cory younger or older than your mom?

Taylor: Uh, I don't know. Older?

Me: *She's not sure. She wouldn't know. I know you're trying, honey.*

You're doing great. Is he a white guy? Black guy? Hispanic guy?

Taylor: Um, white?

Me: *She's questioning.* Okay. What color is his hair?

Taylor: Um. I don't know.

Me: *She's in shock. Who wouldn't be?* Okay. Just stay in the bedroom.

I'm right here with you, okay?

A dozen officers were on scene. Nobody knew the boyfriend's name. My coworkers researched previous calls involving Brea or Taylor. Any calls from that address in the last few years involving an adult male named Cory? Corey? Kory? Dispatchers dug into each possibility. Digging took time. Confirmed information was faster. We had nothing but a first name and an address; they didn't match. He didn't live there.

Taylor: **Um. My little sister has to go potty.**

Me: *Of course! Kinda cute though. These poor kids. No mother.*

They're my kids now. Protect them. Is it safe to let my kids out of the bedroom?

Where is this bastard?

What if he's really in the house? Should she just pee in the corner?

No. Too humiliating. They've been through enough.

Safe. Keep them all safe.

Okay. Here's what I want you to do. I know you're safe in the bedroom, so I want all of you kids to go TOGETHER to the bathroom, shut the door and lock it! Okay?

Taylor: **Okay. She said all of us go together and lock the door.**

Come on! No, all of us!

(muffled sounds of movement)

Me: **Okay, is everybody in the bathroom?**

Taylor: **Yes.**

Me: **Close the door and lock the door!**

Taylor: **It's locked.**

Me: **Okay.**

How long have I been on this call? An hour?

Wow. Only ten minutes so far.

What else does a nine-year-old know that will help officers? Think!

Taylor: **Flush the toilet.**

I want my mom! But she's dead.

(renewal of panicked crying)

Me: *Keep her talking about other things. School!*

I know, honey. She's in the ambulance, and they are taking good care of her, okay? Just stay on the phone with me.

What grade are you in at school?

Taylor: **I made my mom a valentine at school on Friday, and**

I didn't give it to her because it wasn't Valentine's Day yet.

I was going to give it to her tomorrow.

And now she's dead.

My mom did everything for me. I loved her so much.

And now I'll never be able to give her

the valentine I made because she's dead.

Me: *What the hell do I say to that? What can I say?*

Taylor and I spoke for 14 minutes. She cried to me; I cried later. The call haunts me. Every February 13th, it's worse.

Everyone has an invisible scar. So, next time you're talking to a police officer, paramedic, or military veteran, would you really ask *them* about the worst situation they ever encountered? Maybe it's hard to talk about. Maybe you have something you don't want to talk about either.

In memory of the woman I never met



Brea Kirchoff

1978 – 2005

Book Review: *The Future is Trying to Tell Us Something* by Joy Ladin

Jennifer Adair

The Future is Trying to Tell Us Something

Poetry

Joy Ladin

Syracuse University Press

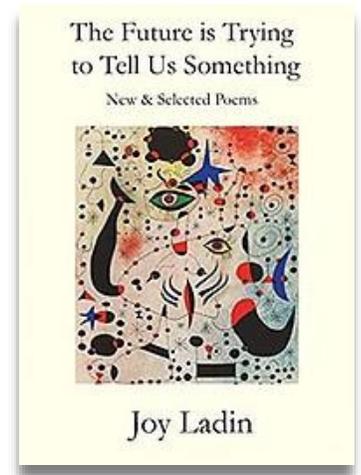
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Joy Ladin is a transgender, Jewish woman whose literary career stretches into the last century. She is a widely published essayist, poet, literary scholar, and a recognized speaker on transgender issues. She has published nine books of poetry spanning 15 years. Her poetry is mostly free form, though she deftly handles rhyme, meter, and even difficult forms like the villanelle. In her most recent book, *The Future is Trying to Tell Us Something* (Shepp Meadow Press, 2017), she writes on a variety of topics, but they are generally grand ideas brought to a personal level. In "A Modest Proposal," she writes of world peace as a series of mundane activities like making mashed potato animals and searching library stacks. In "Speaking of Whiteness..." she addresses race and the history of America, but also the personal confusion of seeing or not seeing privilege. She even writes about writing, such as "The Poem and Me," which discusses the oddness of re-reading old work to which the connection has been lost. Neither time nor geography significantly impacts the majority of the poems, since a sense of grandness is maintained, an awareness of the large-scale issues being tackled, such as God, gender, and death. In this collection, Ladin showcases her mastery of the English language, with speakers ranging from biblical verse to Cosmo Girl catchphrases, to everyday speech. Through craft and construction, all these voices are made art. Juxtaposing all these voices reinforces the conjoined universality and individuality that Ladin strives to instill in her readers

Found

Emma Rhyne

I found out about Kayla Gomez's fate in a cold and dark parking lot. I was with the band. Competition complete, we'd swarmed back to the charter buses in pairs, threes, some of us clutching patches to sew onto letterman jackets when we got home. Band jackets were red with blue sleeves, opposite the sports option. We liked to stand out, but that night, we were just tired. I can still feel how happy I was — tired, happy, looking forward to frozen toes, and sharing a friend's blanket on the charter bus.

That happiness had something to do with the stickiness of sweat against my skin, chilled by the November evening, and the rasping vibrancy of breaths smuggled between the swirling blue night and the white-yellow stadium haze as we gathered like children who have nowhere else to go around the band director, a key figure in the Bullard community who had just checked the news.

More likely, he'd been informed of the news. Mr. Jordan didn't have a positive track record with technology. Once, in class, he couldn't get his Apple Watch to stop playing Disney music. His turtle-like old face had wrinkled in frustration as he batted at his wrist with his other hand, right there on the podium, where we could all laugh.

"They found her," Mr. Jordan said.

It was *they*, not I.

I found out about Kayla Gomez in a cold and dark parking lot, where I was warm and surrounded by light.

How beautiful the night was then. I'd been praying they'd find her, when I had time to remember, in between conversations with my friends on the two-hour bus ride to the game.

Then he told us how.

She was ten. She was all smiles in the pictures the media released during the city-wide search. Full of faith, everyone around me prayed and prayed and smiled at the empty posters, and the dark woods where the blind led the blind, and everyone thought they would find her.

She'd last been seen at a parking lot of a church during prayer service. What a place to be her last! What a place to mourn her, and to hope for her, and to pray for her safe return, because maybe she just walked off, or maybe if we're lucky it wasn't someone in *our* town who took her, and he'd realize his crime, he'd look at her fragile life still waiting for her, and he'd drop her off at the vigils, hand her back to her faithful mother, and the town could have peace.

It wasn't just anyone; it was her uncle. He raped her, murdered her, and dumped her in his well.

I'd known they'd find her. Confidence — I remember the confidence of ignorance, the belief in humanity's *goodness* — led me to trust they'd find her. So maybe I didn't pray my hardest. I went to a band competition instead of joining the town search, where neighbors walked side by side under the ever-living pines, and the needles provided a cushion when someone, everyone, anyone fell to knees, not bent often enough in supplication: was it something we did?

He got life last year — no chance of parole.

In a small East Texas town where everyone bought candles for the night mourning services, pity has to do with guilt. Pity has to do with stealing second chances or squandering them. Pity has to do with the wrong in the world that takes the air out of the Texas humidity and shakes your soul until you're clasping friends you don't talk to anymore over someone you never knew, but they found her, and you don't know why it hurts you so much. Maybe it's self-pity, because now when you're driving home from dinner with the boy you think is the love of your life when really you have no idea what love is, you can't smile at him. You can't run your fingers against the curls that are so easy to hold because your hand is clenched on his. Your nails can't stop from digging into his skin because you can see her fear when everything changed, and who can you trust? Certainly not this man you found next to you because everyone is a monster, really. They found her body, and there's a quote from her mother, who the world failed, the uncle pleaded guilty. The death penalty is off the table because an exam the State instituted in 2002 found him "intellectually disabled," but what does that have to do with anything? That does not forgive him. That does not excuse him. That does not make her alive, safe, happy, or saved. The boy who never tells you he loves you too asks you to let go. You're hurting him.

Game of COAL

Carol Alfred

While Christmas shopping one December almost twenty years ago, I chanced upon a cute tin with a beaming Santa and one word, COAL, on its cover. Curious, I opened the tin, and there, nestled inside, was a single, honest-to-goodness lump of coal. I did not hesitate. I threw that tin into my basket and headed for the register. Then I spent far too much time in the days before that Christmas pondering and calculating: Who was the most deserving recipient of the COAL that year? You see, the COAL tradition in our family was new to us that year, but it follows the old coal-in-the-stocking tradition that most of us have heard of, if not been threatened with it. It will likely surprise no one that the year I bought the COAL, two of my three children were teenagers. (The third was double-digit, though pre-teen.)

My firstborn, Kevin, received the COAL that inaugural Christmas morning. Ironically, he would not receive it again for almost a decade. Instead, his sister and my middle child, Glynne, became the serial recipient of the COAL. For years she made my decision easy as she was a virtual COAL slam dunk. Glynne actually came to regard the COAL as a badge of honor – until, that is, the year my youngest, Colin, found the COAL at the bottom of his stocking. How his sister crowed with glee!

Since that fateful Christmas morning, the COAL tradition has expanded, resembling a competition and, at times, a game of intrigue. The three kids and their father lobby about the others' "COAL-worthiness." They are merciless in their attempts to throw each other under the bus for any action or statement that strikes them as more naughty than nice. Throughout the year, any one of them will break into the chant "COAL! COAL! COAL!" if someone else's behaviour warrants. They also ponder and calculate likely recipients, vigorously jockeying to put someone (anyone!) else in COAL position.

My response to their involvement has been to triple my supply of COAL, in part because the family has grown. Glynne's boyfriend, Nate, and their Standard Poodle, Layla, now share Christmas with us; therefore, they are in the running for the COAL. Neither wasted any time earning it: Nate for scoffing at the COAL tradition, and Layla for knocking me down.

Every Christmas morning, after the inevitable protests by the COAL recipient or recipients (some years multiple COAL is awarded) and smug laughter by everyone else, I quickly collect the COAL and carefully hide it away. This guarantees that I will retain my solo status as Awarder of the COAL and, consequently, non-receiver of the COAL, especially as the “COAL! COAL! COAL!” chant is actually aimed at me at times. And my name more and more frequently is in the “COAL-worthy” conversations. But traditions need to be cherished, respected, and preserved. That is why I intend to keep the COAL tradition pure by maintaining full control.

Eventually, our family expanded. Kevin married Caroline; they got a dog, DIPA. Colin became engaged to Steph; they rescued a dog, Honig. The result is almost double the pool for COAL recipients, not to mention almost double the intrigue and scheming. It reminds me of *Game of Thrones*, minus the body count, sex, and dragons.

Despite the increased competition, the 2018 decision was easy. Caroline was the hands-down winner of the COAL, although most thought DIPA was a shoo-in. Poor DIPA had suffered the misfortune of sharting on Caroline and the couch during my visit in November. Yet, the all-important scales of COAL justice tipped towards Caroline, the shartee, not DIPA, the sharter.

How is that possible? Caroline was sharted on, an innocent victim! Well, au contraire. You see, Caroline had lured DIPA onto the couch, despite an agreement with Kevin that the dog would not be allowed on the furniture. First, she allowed DIPA on a futon, then a recliner, next the couch. True, the dog is a prolific sharter; however, he would be sharting on the floor, not on Caroline/furniture, had the couple’s pre-dog agreement been honored. Case closed! COAL 2018 justly awarded.

COAL 2019 was not as obvious. The COAL pool was too murky, transgressions too evenly matched. I was stumped and close to not awarding it. However, while rummaging through my cache of Christmas “stuff,” I ran across a small canvas bag with a cute print of an RV camper. Serendipity.

I would give the COAL to Nate, my daughter’s husband, for following up on an ad for a \$169 “fully equipped” camper from China, receiving only a \$2 beaded bracelet for his money. To be fair, Nate pursued the ad more out of curiosity and a desire to please my husband, the finder of the ad, than out of naiveté. And he was a good sport about it. Plus, you could say my husband was more worthy of the COAL in this case. But that cute little bag sealed Nate’s fate. I tucked the tin in the bag, then deep-down into his stocking, and Nate became a repeat COAL winner. The crowd – and Nate – were shocked.

No one saw it coming because they knew what I didn't: Nate had logged hours researching and shopping for my Christmas present from the kids, a laptop. It replaced the wonky tablet I had been suffering with for years. He would spend hours more on Christmas day helping set me up on the laptop, transferring documents from the tablet. (A similar scenario to what he had done the previous Christmas when he shopped for and set up a giant flat-screen TV for us.)

Oops.

As you might suspect, I felt some guilt about my choice for COAL 2019. I scrambled for a way to make amends and, within a week, Nate received the first-ever Get Out of COAL Free Card. It guarantees COAL immunity – until December 26, 2020.

Book Review: *Lighting the Shadow* by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

Katie Strubel

Lighting the Shadow

Poetry

Rachel Eliza Griffiths

Four Way Books

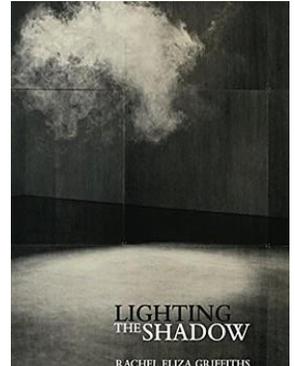
2015

978-1935536574

Paperback

136 pp

\$15.95



Lighting the Shadow by Rachel Eliza Griffiths is an emotional, honest, and intimate look into the aftermath of loss, grief, and the ways they can completely envelop our lives in one form or another. Griffiths wears her wounds with unwavering acceptance, and in this collection, those wounds take the shape of little moments loss leaves behind. In fact, the aftermath of loss and steps towards healing appear multiple times in this collection, first introduced in the opening poem, "The Dead Will Lead You:"

Mercy is the pulse of lupin
in a yellow field. My mother's
eyes are forgotten vases of irises.
Lighting the shadow, a woman
crawls out beneath her own war.

Moments like this underscore a key source of vulnerability in the collection's work. The poems are interested in showcasing the balance between the internal and external battle loss and grief have on the mind, how the concept of healing is not a one-way street of permanence, not congruent with the continuous waves of unexpected mourning. In "Elegy," the speaker seems to grieve the person she used to be when noticing the difference of how she used to view the world compared to now. Using the visuals of changing landscapes, she attempts to memorialize the ways these places accepted and contributed to her growth. The poem turns introspective, reflecting on what ways she abandoned parts of herself that were once so cared for:

My secrets have chapped lips. Once I gave them honey,
blood, & language. I never inquired of their subtle pain.
Why should I want their torment? Why do I believe in fools?

Griffiths' poetry acknowledges the unavoidable pain of life. The poems in *Lighting the Shadow* move through the shadows of loss, giving off their own light. Without sacrificing a poignant eye for imagery and emotion, they commemorate the grittiness of hurt and its contribution to human emotion and evolution. Griffiths writes, "brightness in the dark // please believe something," and reminds us to breathe through the mess of life.

The Mouse that Became a Man

Paul Burnham

We're trapped here. The two of us. I hear the sigh of faraway water rushing down the canyon, echoing off these sheer sandstone walls. There are no handholds, no purchase, no way up. But no one will drown today. With the initial flood comes entire cottonwood trees, pitch-poling down the narrow corridor, and boulders the size of French cars. No time to drown; the river will simply crush us in an act of mercy.

We gambled when we started up this canyon—hours ago. Clear blue skies showed us the odds, and we took the bet. We've almost made it to a series of ledges—only a quarter-mile ahead. These would allow us to climb above the approaching barrage of debris. With another five minutes, we could be spectators to the devastation, not participants.

I have sometimes guessed at my response to a mortal threat. Fight or flight? But the canyon only gives us the classic Hobson's choice: flight or nothing at all.

We can't outrun the flood. Not downriver. Maybe we can close the gap—the same way a ship's captain races toward a torpedo that is not yet armed. We'll run headlong toward the flood, beat it to the ledges.

We sprint—packs bouncing on hips—and only slow to traverse a trough of thick and putrid mud. The mud sucks at our knees and ankles and threatens to steal our shoes.

A column of sunlight reaches the canyon floor on the other side. We stand here for a moment, scrapping ten pounds of mud from each leg. The flood has not arrived. A hot wind comes down the canyon. Wind. We listen again for the flood. Wind. We see the ledges a hundred feet ahead. There is no flood yet. Only wind.

We scramble onto one ledge and then another, working our way up a kind of natural staircase. Others have passed here. Coyote, mule deer, rattlesnakes, mice. The canyon wall lays back, and the upper ledges are wide enough for a tent. In the evening—on a nearby ledge—we build a small fire with pieces of greasewood and sage that have fallen from the open country. The hot wind has turned to a cold breeze now. We sit closer to the fire. No flood today—only the wind, tricking our brains. We are safe tonight, above the canyon floor, out of the way of floods.

A kangaroo rat comes up from below, batting his nose at the fire. He sits back on his haunches and stares at us with giant obsidian eyes, as though considering his company and hoping for friendship. We chase him away, out of instinct.

But he returns, only seeking what we seek: refuge from floods, from cold, from isolation. We don't chase him away this time. I consider the diversity of our fellowship, our tolerance and acceptance of each other, and our shared resources. I recognize three members of the same tribe, and I hold hope for the human family.

Portrait of a Veiled Woman

Jean-Louis "Miroux" Brassière



Sexism Overseas

Micaela Edelson

I knew sexism was a part of the American fabric. I grew up in it, I've adapted to it, I was totally accepting of that fact that I would carry car keys between knuckles at night and avoid lone ventures for the rest of my life.

However, upon traveling through Eastern Europe and Central Asia, countries in which gender equality still has some ceilings to shatter, I noticed my willingness to accept sexism in all its extremes out of concern I was throwing shades of neo-colonial, foreign judgment.

As I traversed new territory over the course of six months, I maintained the mindset that criticism of a country was a criticism of another culture, which was not my place as a welcomed visitor. I would accept my lower social status as a female, tolerate sexual harassment, respectively try to assert myself, and in the end, go home.

My shadowed feminism and complacency were quite difficult to sustain. I've had my butt glazed over in a crowded market then immediately bore witness to the assailant full-on cupping my friend's cheek in front of me; I've been harassed on my way to the airport at 5 am by a kid on a bike who wouldn't leave me alone until I told him my age; I've been cat-called and whistled at in languages I couldn't even identify; I've had my hair grabbed by a drunk bystander; I've been verbally assaulted for ignoring another drunk man's request to touch my hair; and I've been groped on a plane by my seat neighbor.

At the end of the day, I was returning to America. I could leave.

My run-ins with sexual harassment paled in comparison to the forms of gender oppression that local women can receive: complete lack of participation in workforces making them completely financially dependent on males; arranged marriages by their parents (not uncommonly to much older men); little to no access to birth control, or even basic sanitary products like pads or tampons in some places; increased incidences and general acceptance of domestic violence. I am extremely privileged to be able to return to freedom from such oppression that many of my sisters endure.

Upon returning to the States, I was grateful for an extra thick layer to my security jackets—although I still shiver at night. But then I visited family in the Midwest and was bombarded with body manipulation commercial after body mutilation commercial. Liposuction, extreme dieting fads, weight loss pills—everything that expresses: (females) bodies can't just be accepted. I then went to Los Angeles for a month and was introduced to the gender discrepancy and forms of sexism ubiquitous in the film industry. I saw the credits scroll by dozens of men's names before the first female name is listed in the credits. I scroll through Netflix dodging male protagonist after male protagonist (there are even fewer women of color or members of the queer community that threaten to disrupt the sea of peen).

Yes, it has been getting better over the years. But to stumble across a movie on Netflix in which Seth Rogan, the protagonist, rapes his drunk colleague, Emma Stone, during the movie, and I'm guessing suffers no repercussions as he pursues his dream of becoming a cop (couldn't finish the movie so now I'm assuming) illustrates that rape culture is still being promoted by the film and media industry. Yes, the movie is old, but it shouldn't be improperly educating young men on how to treat drunk women.

I returned from extreme gender oppression in America to find sexism pouring into the top of our funnel of culture while we graciously swallow its message.

Two notions remain fixed in my mind: 1) I am (and likely others are) willing to accept forms of gender oppression because it's foreign, and 2) as long as sexism exists someplace, it will exist every place.

I might not be suffering the atrocities that a significant portion of women face around the world, but I shouldn't be complacent with ingrained gender standards and gender oppression either.

Book Review: Wade in the Water by Tracy K. Smith

Spencer Soule

Wade in the Water

Poetry

Tracy K. Smith

Greywolf Press

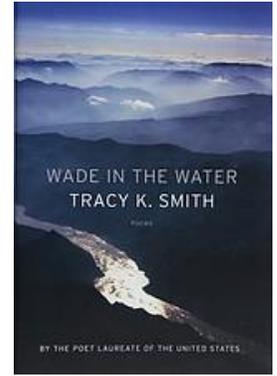
2018

978-1-55597-836-5

Paperback

83 pp

\$16.00



Turning the final page of *Wade in the Water* (Greywolf Press, 2018), the latest book by two-term Poet Laureate of the United States Tracy K. Smith, it is easy to see how she earned such honors. Smith's previous collections of poetry, *The Body's Question*, and *Duende* received high praise for their poignant and technically impressive discussions of race and identity in America, and her collection *Life on Mars* earned the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2011. It speaks to Smith's incredible versatility that she should follow *Life on Mars* — a collection of poems examining humanity through the lens of futurism — with *Wade in the Water*, an empathetic and often heartbreaking examination of America's racially divided past. Indeed, time plays a significant role in *Wade in the Water* as Smith explores the lives of African American's and the injustices incurred against them by an apathetic and reluctant white government during the civil war and reconstruction periods. Using letters and statements of African American's living through this most turbulent chapter of American history, Smith crafts erasure poems that speak as ghosts out of the past: "for instant look & see/that we never was freed yet/Run Right out of Slavery/In to Soldiery & we/hadent nothing atall..." Smith's meticulously crafted erasures give life to voices too long left unheard by the passage of time and by our own misguided desire to forget.

In "Declaration," an erasure poem assembled from selections of the Declaration of Independence, Smith awakens readers with a sharp list of grievances and appeals for redress: "We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. —taken Captive on the high Seas to bear—" These examinations of America's past only grow in urgency as Smith transitions to poems based around America's current woes, coupled with her sense of belonging as a modern African American woman. In "The United States Welcomes You," Smith adopts an interrogative persona that seems to embody everything wrong with America's current approach to immigration: "Why and by whose power were you sent? / What do you see that you may wish to steal?" But Smith is not pessimistic. Amid such grand themes, *Wade in the Water* offers plenty of simple, beautiful images connecting American life to the universal human experience. Later in the collection, Smith provides a potential cure to isolationist nationalism with elegant imagery: "Until I can understand why you / Fled ... let me imagine / you are my mother in Montgomery / Alabama, walking to campus —"

Wade in the Water is Tracy K. Smith's invitation for us to plumb the depths of our American consciousness, the ugly and beautiful, to see if we can't find those universal qualities that tie humanity together.

Borne of Pandemic #38

Paul Koskinen



Walk it Off

David Grubb

Weeks after my oldest son died, still in a daze, I swiped through the stats on my iPhone's pedometer. On Saturday, May 23, 2020, the app logged 17,144 steps: a little less than seven miles. It took a few seconds for the number to register because I averaged four or five miles when I'm at home trying to stay healthy, and everything is normal.

Nothing was normal when he was in a coma, his six-foot two-inch body ravaged from hardcore alcohol abuse. His acute liver failure shocked everyone, yet for a young twenty-eight-year-old caucasian, it also impressed us. The collection of empty vodka bottles in his room totaled five-hundred gallons, a stupefying amount for a closet drinker with three roommates (two adults and one child). His startling fate revealed mental health problems that were far greater than I ever imagined, and depression so dark and abysmal it must've had no bottom. He fooled everyone close to him with his quick wit, an ever-present endearing smile, and endless joviality.

Part of my grief manifested in five o'clock wake ups with no chance of more sleep. I'd sneak out of the hotel and take long walks, often spurred by updates from specialists stating "no real changes" or glimpses of hope with no promises. Newport, RI, during the Covid pandemic, was void of the summer touristy throng and apocalyptic in the early morning hours. The empty streets glistened with dew, and my protective face mask—handmade by my mother-in-law—remained damp from the fog and hot with fetid breath.

On that morning, I hustled along Cliff Walk in the frigid wind, passing few people. The sea was active, and the waves pounded the shore, breaking the eerie silence. I gained most of those steps during this outing, yet it was like I floated during the entire walk. My legs bi-pedaling without ever touching the earth.

After breakfast, I took my time getting to Kent County hospital, hoping it would give hospice more time to set up his transfer out of the ICU. The sky was gray with overcast, and the rain came heavy. I sat next to him in a plastic chair in utter disbelief. My firstborn son was going to die before me. Parents shouldn't outlive their kids, but I've had more close calls than most—and lived loose for many years—so it stung even more. I held his hand and stroked his hair: the kinky mop was more than a trademark.

The hospital's rigid Covid regulations had prevented me from being by his side for hours on end while the doctors sought answers. Taking him off the vent, called changing his code, provided far more liberal visitation hours. I made that awful decision on the previous day and hung out with him

for a long time, but slept in a comfy hotel bed with my wife and younger kids—the half brother and sister who loved him more than imaginable.

At some point, a hospice nurse came in to coordinate his transfer. As she was clarifying a few things, his breathing changed. She remarked as much, and we waited for him to take the much-anticipated last breath. I wanted him to go as fast as possible because it'd been weeks of tests and waiting for the results followed by more tests and more waiting: his body bloated, jaundiced, and riddled with marks from needles, IVs, dialysis port. He needed the release from life. His body heaved from exhaustion, and all the fight had drained away. An anoxic brain injury from coding for fifteen minutes had left a shell, and the boy I loved was long gone.

All those days of hoping he could recover from the lengthy trip into the realm of death was for naught. I yearned for a positive outcome, but I struggled to believe he would get the second chance I desperately wanted him to have. The nightly Zoom calls before we made the trip down from Maine did little to sway my increasing negativity. Those few times his eyes opened, his gaze drifted and did not focus on anyone or anything. I've little experience in the medical field, yet I knew it was a bad sign.

The doctors did everything they could and would've given up on him a lot sooner if it weren't for his age. It's not unheard of for someone in their late twenties to go into withdrawals and have seizures from that level of alcoholism, but the outcome often trends much better. We'll never know what went wrong during detox as I went to bed on May 9th with little duress because the nurse's report was placating: he's trending well, his scores are decreasing, he wasn't needing extra Ativan doses.

At about 5:30 in the morning, things went south—something to do with complications from an extra dose of Ativan. Inadvertently, I had silenced my iPhone, so I woke up at 7:30 am to a voice mail from a nurse who sounded panicked and shaken. I still hold a great deal of guilt from sleeping through my son's traumatic morning, even though there was nothing I could've done except hear the news two hours earlier. The same guilt punched me in the gut when it registered I'd walked seven miles the day he died.

He took his last steps when he exited his roommate's car to enter the hospital. Perhaps he made many trips to the bathroom and even paced in his room. How could I go on long walkabouts when his last hours of life were seeping out of him? Shouldn't I have been in that plastic bedside chair trying to stretch those last hours and minutes into a lifetime? Before the code change, I had an excuse. Afterward, my selfishness made the calls.

Months later, his remains are still in a USPS box with big orange stickers labeled Cremated Remains. Sometimes my pedometer logs six or seven miles, but certain things can't be walked off.

POETRY

Ideas and Depths

Ahmed Alozade



Train

William Blackburn

The train rolled by
Too industrious busy to notice my deep-darkening sky
I, on the platform, fresh ticket in hand
To ride that steel stallion in meadows green, hoped I
Another, fairer life beckoning from afar
Once seated safely within those rail cars

The train rolled along
Steam-puffing it's melodious, commodious, disquieting song
Foot-to-foot shifting, nervous awaiting
More swimmer than gardener, pits and palms sweating
Dry mouth indiscrete, daring a moment to speak
That moment slipped past in a flash and a squeak

The train rolled on
Through the length of callow night, out into burnished dawn
Caboose light dangled, passing just out of sight
Shame behind fear hidden, shrink in my seat, rear pew
Watch with loss dread as vows before all are made
Lives joined together, another set adrift by a maid

The train rolled away
I, standing still-life, as memories fade from yesterday

The Widow's Window

Steve Gerson

The evening light, more gray than dusk yellow,
filtering through cracked windowpanes as dust,
cast shadows on her threadbare dress like faded
bones. She rested one hand on the chilled sill,
the other on her brow bowed low. Outside,
her farm's fallow fields dimmed in the November
nightfall, the air breathless as a shuttered cellar,
canned goods lined cobwebbed like tombstones.
The route from 46, Bandera to Blanco,
passed without a glance, she a postscript, a postcard
never delivered. A mongrel cur, one ear clipped
like a bus ticket collected, trudged down the weed-strewn
road wending toward her home and wandered off like
a memory. Looking up, she saw the night's last light fade.

Deceased

Priya Tamang

T'was a cemetery cocooning
countable coffins, and the
eerie air smelled of acid,
the caustic kind that reminds
of tart soup with no salt.

Satin lily blades shaded
my embossed name
in springtime gravestone.
Shapes of chiseled initials
contour with
downhearted dead weight
of the love that killed me –
a cold corrosion etched obituary.

Once Worldly Autodidact's Drill Ditty

Gerard Sarnat

Jack 'n Jill downhill

zilch left in kitty

self-learned skill

how to be ill

accept your limits

energy, ability

now conserve, chill

with nil free will.

In the Wind

Don Thompson

Thistle tumbles in the road
as if crossing a border—
refugees uprooted
from a place that means nothing to us.

Some leap the fence
and disappear into the scrub.

Others that snag on the barbwire
and stay there, indefinitely,
can neither go on nor go back.

The Great Egret

Sandra Johnson



Vista

Brandon Marlon

Waterfalls pour into pools
slaking lush garden purlieus;
a gurgling spring
bubbles from the depths
as unlidded sunlight
surmounts the horizon.

Tenting amid intermontane
canyons piques curiosity
concerning the porosity
of columnar basalt and limestone.

Eyes and feet attest to the rigors
and splendors of sparse pastures,
rangelands and croplands,
sylvan hills where trees foliate,
orchards that fructify,
salted deserts for remedy and refuge,
a variegated region by turns
blessedly rainy, accursedly dry,
where there is no such thing
as trackless wilderness.

Latish days subdued by darkness
close with sensuous delights recollected
in the minds of those for whom
wondering engenders wandering.

excerpt 8

Cameron Morse

In actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent.

Acorns click
to the driveway
like LEGO's
dropping from my
neighbor's pin
oak tree.

No
trespassing
I hiss when Theo strays
into the adjacent lot.

When walking I discriminate
for him the city from
the citizen, the right side
from the left. Yet he's always
getting his shoes on
backwards, always tossing
footsteps to the private inside
of the sidewalk and these
rampant squirrels don't mind

who pays the mortgage
so long as they reap
with their sickle incisors
a harvest of nuts.

Talent and Hope

James B. Nicola

The sadness of a soul with no true talent
is not so great as one devoid of hope.

Hope, then, if not for one thing, for another
and then another if that doesn't work.

The talent is the hope; the valueless
becomes most valuable with point of view

and flexibility. With no capacity
to hope, nor flexibility of focus,

nor talent, and aware you've none of these,

you might dream. Let those dreams, though, be your own,

not those of others handed down to you
like dogma or commodities, but let

them be *of* others, those in need whom you
might help. And if you know of none, start

looking: You will see how many live
with no hope, talent, flexibility,

or dream of their own, but follow blindly
the loud and brilliant. You at least have me,

and now, awareness, which is the first drop
of any talent worth a dram of hope.

Place of the World: Area Concept

Kishore Ghosh



Deceptive expectation

Alexis Pearson

The muses nine
know ten still
and eleven when needed.
But there is not always as much
as one would think
or even

hope

and when I learned
that

hope

was the only

evil

to not escape Pandora's box
I vowed to never forget
That

hope is an evil

even though I think

I already knew that.

Royal Flush

Mary McFadden

Five in a flush.

A ten of hearts starved of bling;
it makes my heart rush.

My mind's turned to mush.

To this hand, Jack of hearts I bring.

Five in a flush

I will my cheeks not to blush,

"A beautiful red queen!" I want to sing.

It makes my heart rush.

Ignore the hush.

His heart steals mine, oh mighty king.

Five in a flush.

Deep breaths; try not to gush;

hold back a smile; hands, don't wring.

It makes my heart rush.

With an ace, I will crush.

I won! Ka ching!

Five hearts in my flush.

Oh, how it makes my heart rush.

Skeeter

Kenneth Pobo

It's rainy and I'm out of Ovaltine. Today
will probably be a lost watch. Music
might save it, so with a random hand

I pull out *Skeeter Sings Dolly*, 1972
when I graduated high school. Skeeter
gained fame singing "End of the World."
We may be at the end of
the world now. Democracy thought
it swallowed Ensure but learned it was rat poison.
The sky turned orange and lakes bled. Here

she's singing Dolly songs from when
Dolly hawked boxes of Breeze
with Porter Wagoner on his TV show.
Porter sang of a "blurry vision of doom"
in "The Rubber Room." Skeeter didn't
join him there. Instead she sat on

a lion's back—the beast took her to where
Dolly's songs hatched and took to the skies.

Owl on the Wire

John Grey

The wing, caught in a wire fence,
dangles from a blood-stained shoulder.
Its beak is hooked on a barb.
Neck bones jag.
Feathers flutter like the lingering pulse
of a dying bird.

Already, the sky, the treetops,
mourn the last raptor hereabouts.
To the field-mice,
its absence is a boon.
When a child, raised on the
troubling hoots of midnight,
may feel well rid of the woodland ghost.

No more stalking,
no more far-seeing,
no more silent plunge
of swooping talons,
no more flight
from one dream to the next.

God, at His most ruthless,
is trapped by man at his.
Hours pass without mercy.
Savage life is now metallic
to the core.

Once, with darkness,
the owl would have risen.
Now, even as the sun dips down,
it is only ever dawn.

Globalized

Anthony Salandy

My heart flutters

As contestations grow

To be more than mere words

On a flimsy placard

Or a woeful sound on a microphone

Far off in the distance of weary crowds,

No my body shakes to the tremor

Of global discourse

Where meaning is no longer contrived-

But rather emboldened

By the passion that exists

Deep in the souls of men and women

Whose words echo through

The ethereal connections

That reside somewhere beyond this world,

With connections my mind grows

To believe in new found hope

For a future where natural death

May be the only form of ending

Beyond the bloodshed of a world

Once isolated by differences-

Now slowly lost to an inclusive globalization.

Ink
Vangelis Reyes



End Dream

Mike Horan

I lay in the grip of a dream,
I am walking
on the road that ran in front of the house I grew up in.
Not the way it looks today
paved and landscaped to within an inch of its life,
no.
The way it looked when I was a kid.
Brown and bumpy and gravelly,
treacherous in the winter
with its sharp, sudden turns and steep hills
and ice.
In the other seasons it was glorious
especially summer.
It's summer now and
I'm walking
shirtless and sweating.
It is hot, humid like it is, summer in
Tennessee. I'm kicking at the rocks sending up
puffs of dust into the air that
swirl, before finally coming to rest on my skin
spelling out in hieroglyphics
the name that only I call myself.

Honeysuckle bushes line both sides of the road.

A bat darts from them,

a wing brushing my face like spider web.

A veil is lifted and

I see as I crest the hill

me

by the big creek that cuts through our farm

like a wound

filled with crawdaddy's the size of small lobsters

and the temper of an Old Testament prophet.

I move among the blackberry bushes

deftly avoiding thorns long as a

sharks tooth glistening, I imagine,

with a poison that paralyzes and reveals

the bad that lies at the heart of us all.

I pluck berries, one by one,

two in the basket,

one in the mouth.

"I remember this day",

my road self thinks.

A minor memory, really,

over the course of a lifetime of memories.

I could feel the explosion

of each berry in my mouth

and thinking that I had never tasted something so good

and never would again.

My life

a whole series of miniscule memories that make up
me.

I wake up in the part that appears at the end of every dream I have
these days: I am walking away from my viewpoint.

Loaded down with all the detritus of my life,
a gross, overweight figure, my
insecurities disguised as angry, hissing cats,
confidences posing as rotten fruit.

With every step they peel away
flake away

like fall leaves are stripped from a tree in a sudden squall
until I am lean & tight

walking with that lethal step I had when I was young
and too stupid to know that this, too, ends.

Thinner, thinner with each step
until I am just a black line in the distance
before that too blinks out.

The Hot Soup in My Bowl

Jacqueline Jules

Rain is pelting the windows
and the thunder is so loud,
I can hardly hear the man
on the television reporting downed trees
flash floods, and power outages all over.

But my lights are still on. There is hot soup
in my bowl. And I can have ice cream
for dessert if I choose.

I should be grateful, not angry at a world
where lightning seems to strike
the righteous more often than the wicked.

What can I do right now? It's dark
and the roads are flooded.

Except forgive myself for snuggling under
a blanket, switching the channel to a sitcom,
and pausing my privileged guilt just long enough
to cherish the safety and shelter
I wish others had, too.

Heads Up

Bruce McRae

A dazzling array of somethingness.

Ambiguity awry. Abstruse obfuscations.

A dumb show of light and vagaries.

And the anonymous multitudes in passing,
who don't give two figs for noise and passion.
Who are either indifferent or difficult to impress,
becoming adept at sidestepping the constant barrage
loosed upon the life-weary.

Those who know every crack in the pavement
but are blithely unaware of the stars.
Completely unsuspecting
their end is about to arrive.

Nobody saw this coming.

Celia died

Michael Estabrook

Just like that – time flew
yanking us from youth
and high school to old age
and death in a flash!

Heard through the Facebook grapevine
that Celia died. Three months ago.

Why are we hearing
this terrible news just now?

10 o'clock at night
I step outside to get some air.

Metastatic lung cancer. Ironic. She never smoked. At our 50th High School Reunion 4 years ago her husband was very ill using a walker, weakened from the Agent Orange he encountered in Vietnam. I bet he would've given his life for hers in a heartbeat. He was that kind of guy: a stand-up guy an old-fashioned gentleman: selfless, caring, generous and brave.

Been cold and rainy for weeks.
So glad it's finally let up at least for an evening.

Even though
we were all of the EBHS class of 1966
I didn't really know them.
They circled in a higher realm
both of them smart, classy, popular
destined to go places.
And me, well not so much.

I never said one word to her. Not one single word. How could I?
She was one of the true beauties of our class, of any class, our
Homecoming Queen one of the very best of us. And yet I'm
terribly sad the world has lost her before her time was up. But I
can't cry. I'm married and my wife would not understand.

All I can do is stare up at the moon
full tonight, majestic, timeless, resplendent
lighting up the night
and be thankful knowing it will be up there
shining bright next month too
and the month after that.

Not a Goodbye

Sanjana Narasimha Murthy

Blood flowing in your veins.

Heart beating slow.

Lips parted forcefully,

Making space for the tube to go

Inside the frail entrapment

Of your body, breathing life

Into a cage of bones and skin

Linked to a monitor running rife.

Monotonic sounds of display;

Proof of the crevices in your vitals,

While faces appear in passing,

Practicing parts for the final recital.

Your limbs tied with gauze to ensure

You lay still with your bruises blue,

From needles, patterned across your torso;

Fingers twitching, with palms a yellow hue.

Eyes unfocused, trembling beneath lids;

Struggle to open, with a weakening will.

Barely yourself, imprisoned in dependence;

By your side, tears threaten to spill.

I look at you now as I will tomorrow.

But I will not, I will not cry.

You'll be heavier, a sleeping statue,

But crying will mean saying goodbye.

Crowd

Edward Lee

It's lonely here,
among the crowds gathered
to hear words
they don't understand,
yet still nod agreement to,
liking how those words sound
coming out of the clown
they carried on their shoulders
to the glass soapbox
that hasn't be cleaned
in years, its stains like bruises
upon delicate skin.

Eye & Bomb

Jeffrey MacLachlan

Soviet safety poster, 1980s

The rest of dress and skin redacted into darkness
Georgian oil hot splash only a frightened eye
below taiga brow
train whistle blizzard fury ragged yellow asterisk
detonates
exclamation mark
high-beams moth smoke Cyrillic signals
do not leave explosive materials unattended kulak
dense sentences unregulated kindling
just one morning fire razes soon nothing
but light

Coos Bay Tug

Tracy Fawns



Murkiness

Su Ertekin-Taner

Murkiness, as in polluted water,
Will not silence us
We sift through oil and deceased schools of
Fish
To find the buried elegance of the reef
We are the spores and crevices
That gives conchs and corals
Their dignity
We are the emergence among extinction
We are the voices of birds
A radio far too loud
To turn down

3:04 AM

Heidi Speth

Sometimes when it thunders loud enough my car alarm goes off

One second I am slumbering like a new parent who's never seen sleep

The next, I am pulled from my dreamless sleep by the jolting sound of distress

The boom of the thunder, the bellow of the car alarm

I don't know which I relate to more,

The monstrous thunder, rattling off of the windows, or the lonely car, frozen in place

But I definitely relate to one

There is almost a thrill in it

Pulling myself out of my warm cocoon, my feet hitting the cold wooden floor

Running down the carpeted stairs in nothing by my softer than a baby's butt flannel pants and
a

tank top

Finding my way into the kitchen, the wind and thunder bawling outside

Only to dig through the bowl of keys, like piranhas, to not find the right one

The sharp alarm is still shrieking, just a few yards and couple concrete walls away from me

And that's when I wonder, shivering in the kitchen,

What it must be like to be the lonely car, big and bulky and metal

Screaming into the dark night with no one to listen

I realize in that moment, it is not the lonely car I feel empathy for

But myself

Now I am the one screaming into the dark night with no one to listen

Deer Mandala

Ramisa Nawar



Little Soul

Fabrice Poussin

White like so many it hovers
pondering its next journey
a last glance upon the carcass
the little soul.

It may be time for final adieux
to those eternal memories
days so close they still feel warm
little soul.

Inert the body bleeds
rusty rivers in the grooves of an old hide
young dreams quickly fainting
little soul.

Almost transparent with gentle stars
it hesitates to break the last anchor
to an earthly home it once adored
little soul.

Child again you will find your comfort
traveling upon the energy of the eternal

resting as you so often hoped you might
and sleep little soul.

Psalm (Omnipresence)

Joshua McKinney

If we ascend, you are still there.

If we descend, still you remain.

If we take wings, or oily fins,

where shall we flee from your presence?

O Plastic, enduring surrogate god,

you are with us to the world's end.

Circuit Boards

Gerry Fabian

The free will we so relish
is a philosophical myth.
While there can be
no argument with the logic
and the thought patterns,
we are little more
than societal computers.
Our greatest flaw
in designing society
is to program ourselves
to respond to our own codes.
Our guilt centers
are so highly developed
that we punish
the slightest infraction
with callous labels
in order to prove
that we are worthy
of our self-imposed programming.
We designed an efficient model
and programmed it
to punish the variable of evil

and expect the variable of good.

And that model is us.

Eastsound

Jason Thornberry

Parents snoring, I close the door and we
Navigate the dark in the direction of the
Village, avoiding the pavement. In the silent
Pitch, the stuttering lights of passing cars
Illuminates the bumpy road. Beyond it,
Like a whispering wall, the clustered notches of
Trees flicker from green to black. A foot above the
Trees hangs the sky and the stars.

Later, we share dessert in a restaurant about
To close, enjoying the feeling of being alone.
Paying the bill, we wait for a car to pass
Before we walk down to the grass that lay beside
The silent water—to look at something we
Never see in the city. Key to the cabin
Door against my thigh, we pass a group in lawn chairs,
Pointing, looking up at the sky.

Hunch

Rebecca Forbes

Worked on a hunch,
shoulders round
From a being let down
Pigeon chest deflated
Head sagging like an old vegetable.
Hunched, slumped
Floppy with age
Past ripe from birth
Head sagging down
In prayer to fill the emptiness
Left by defeat
Hunched for years
A dowager's hump
A peasant born
And a peasant made
Cried out
Dried out
Out of juice
Time to throw it out,
It can't be saved
Unwanted, unbraced
There's no bravado

In giving up
admitting defeat.
Withered and old
No youthful injection here
Cover with a white sheet
And turn off the light
It's easy to blow it out
it never burned bright
It's out of time,
Forgotten for too long
All chances used up.

In the Cemetery

Benjamin Goluboff

This is right against the wall
where they bury the singletons and poor people.
They're low, flat, stones
so the mowers go right over them,
and leave the cut grass to collect,
and dry out, and cover up the names.

So today I saw a couple
coming down the rows of graves
nondescript white people, older,
husband and wife, I guess,
and she's following him as,
with a little back-and-forth of the foot,
he clears away the grass from each name.

Wake

Michelle Brooks

I feel the weight of my life
collapse upon me, the crushing
beauty of ordinary days, all
those moments lost to time.
I run past tombstones in neighborhood
lawns, gone when I look back.
I can only assume they belong
to me, these ghosts who share
my past. Try as I might, I can't
outrun the abandoned buildings,
windows knocked out like teeth,
the dead end streets, the broken
men who live in the park among
the trees. I tell myself to keep going,
don't look back, and I wouldn't
if I didn't feel like we are already
dead and just don't know it yet.

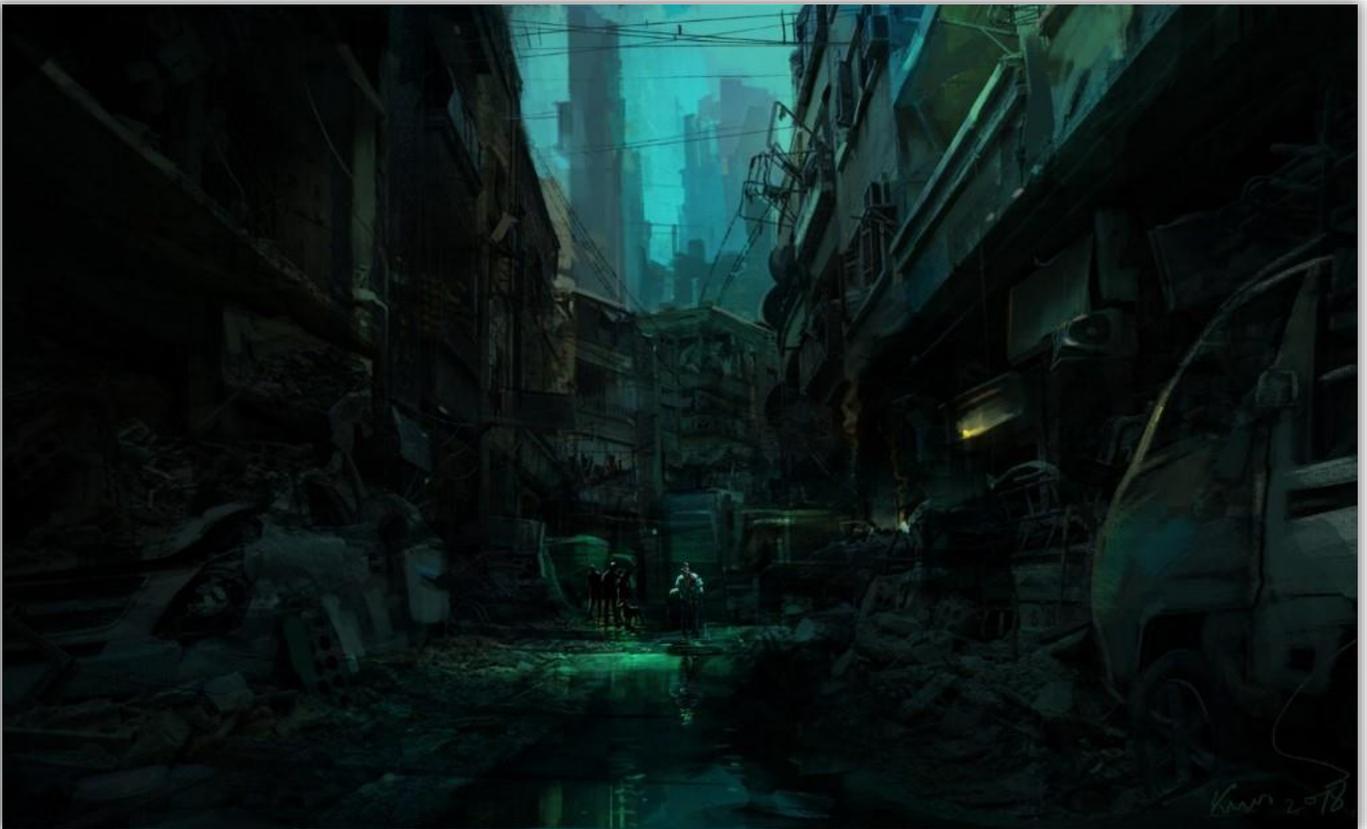
The Halved

Radoslav Rochallyi

$\overline{\text{torn/mind}} \left(\sum_{\text{to the mind}}^{\text{Silence}} \text{goes} \mid \prod_{\text{subsides}}^{\text{until the}} \text{unrest} \mid \cap_{\text{lie} \rightarrow}^{\text{It's}} \text{a cowardly} \right)$

Place of the World: Creepy Concept

Kishore Ghosh



Flower

Joe Bisicchia

A pull from within, from the seed.

A pull from above, at the head.

A pull from below, at the feet.

Powered to be as designed to be.

And the world goes bloom, and see,

we gloriously give in, as if gentle.

Yet powerful.

We are each this way beautiful.

Heart Pains

Ibtisam Abujad

Grated haloomi cheese topped with dense sweet kunafa

Cracked wheat grains baked and spread thick

Macerated orange powdered mixed with thick ghee smells of

Ground spices and nutmeg

Paddled onto the long oven tray upside down

Pressed into the bottom to hold its shape as it is

Fired in the oven on a high heat and

Flipped into a larger pan of aluminum, its edges

Drenched in sticky rose water syrup, and

Drowned in a layer of pistachios and nuts...

Cooked are the moments that pass, in kilns that

harden the years and the tears, memories imprinted on bodies

Cracks in their façade, just when you thought they had faded, the

beating of the heart mirrors the beating of eggs,

Tastes, bitter, awaken from their slumber and

wafts of floral waters soften the senses

Sights, frozen, melt in between blinks and distressed

calls ring under silences, heard from beyond sound,

Mouth tastes and heart pains feel the same

when the senses wither but the past remains

To My Unborn Child

Marianne Lyon

What I want to tell you
is that you are enough
you do not have to
do anything to be loved
you do not have to perform
or achieve
or earn a merit badge
this needs to be repeated
over and over
be who you are
love what is before you

What I want to tell you
is be courageous
be your own hero
embrace friendships
release fear unworthiness
continue to laugh
even when you can't
remember why

What I want to tell you

is be a doggie hell raiser
wiggling sniffing
inquisitive wordless
passionate for a rub
a treat a ball-catch
not worried
about next spring

What I want to tell you
is be awake a trailblazer
scoff illusions
that keep us believing
what we see
in the world is gospel
that keep us from recognizing
the truth that lies
underneath

The Reach and the Slap

Joe Inabinette

She lay motionless, my mother...
Lost forever in the corridors of her clouded mind;
She walked there—unsure, afraid and alone inside...
And reached out to me with hands that had forgotten.
Dementia came to her as a shroud of emptiness
And a thief of life's lived moments.

I sat there with her, when I could...
I was busy, you see—
Busying myself trying to keep my crazed blur of a life
In motion; walking my own twisted corridors..
Trying to open doors inside that would forever be locked.
Trying to start a new life after leaving an older, hateful one.

I was busy, you see...trying to keep her care in place;
Working so many hours to help pay for her to walk those halls inside her mind...
Going weeks without seeing her and, when I did,
She didn't know I was her son---just a stranger in her corridor.
An intruder in her mind's chamber.....
...And she slapped back in her fear.

I stayed busy, you see...because I couldn't deal with that slap;

It was more than I could understand in my own selfish way...
Until the day the nurse called and said her feet were mottled;
And that she would soon be on her way—out of the corridor.
...so I stopped being busy.

For that moment.

I sat beside her;
Watching an anger and a fear in her face...
She didn't know me, and worse, didn't want me there
And told me so with her silent contempt—
...then slowly, and deliberately she reached out to empty air;
Reached a hand that had not moved before,
With meaning and with purpose
Towards the ceiling and something unseen....
The end of the corridor for her.

Then...her hand went down. I reached to touch her;
...and she slapped me away. Her final blow in this life.

That was when I finally found that
She blamed me for that day—
She felt that I had left her
Beside the road along the way;
But I had to work so she would always be safe
...at least that's what my heart tried to say.

I'll never go a time

Nor live another day

Without the feeling of that slap

And the price she had to pay...

She raised me as her own, although I wasn't, she picked me

And how I wished I'd come more to stay...but now she can be free.

But I stayed busy, you see.

The View from 5,000 Feet Up

Sophia Vesely

The mountains befoul,
gut skies with their harsh ridges,
the fog's stitching bleeds
unbound, yet this savagery
still takes the breath from my lungs.

Sfera Ebbasta

Mario Loprete



Make Way for the Young

Billy Alsbrooks

The small boxes they use to put us in
The petty labels they use to define us
The ignorant ways they attempt to frame us
How much should the small, petty, and ignorant really bother us?

We need not ask for permission, to be that which we are
We need not seek approval, to dream the dream we've been given
We need not beg for validation to breathe the air that excites us
Would getting their permission, their approval, their validation gives us the high that we so desperately seek?

I've never seen fire asking for permission to burn
I've never heard the sun seeking the sky's approval to rise
I've never known LOVE to beg for validation to fall
What if like fire, we just burned?
What if like the sun, we just rise?
What if like LOVE, we just fell without any concern over the small minds that might reject us?

What if we got it all wrong?
What if instead, we sought to be misunderstood?
What if we aggressively sought rejection?
What if we intentionally sought the disapproval of those who have never achieved anything?

How much better would this world be?

How much more alive would this planet be?

How much better off would mankind be, if we danced to the music inside of us, instead of the harmony of their contempt?

What if it wasn't water and oxygen that made life possible, but rather the boldness to shun conformity?

What if the reason the moon seems so lifeless is that its ancestors succumb to the fear of public ridicule?

What if instead of saying we are thirsty for change, we started drinking from the cup that actually produced it?

Make way for the young....

Aubade

Brett Thompson

A mile away, in a ditch
a murder of crows
strip another carcass.

Rosettes of frost bloom
across my rear window.
We have forgotten.
We are human.

Mushroom Morning

P. C. Scheponik

The morning after the rain, in July's heat,
the mushrooms rise like the dead—
fully-formed Athenas sprung from Zeus's head.
They look like newly baked loaves of bread
fresh from earth's clay-oven heart.
They are scattered among a sea of oak shade,
a fungi archipelago, skillfully made
of mycelium's womb, the secret fruits
of soft nymph roots silently produced
from earth's labors of heat and rain.
Their umami flesh presses up through
the lawn's dew-covered blades
and lies full cycle in a pool that proclaims
victory of life over death.

The Great Banners

Margarita Serafimova

The hanging oaks of August were saluting me.

We were all going through life and through death
into eternity.

A breeze was passing.

Southern Interruption

Daniel Edward Moore

Why the spectacular included me,
a peach sky peeling my eyes back slow
down to the pit's rigid core, is harder to
shake than a hangman's tree,
harder than a Georgia license plate
with letters spelling his name.

The spectacular knows
why the fruit must fall
said *beauty is not why you're here.*

Woman Swimming in Autumn Leaves

Jean-Louis "Miroux" Brassière



This Way to Zion

Mark Antony Rossi

My color
Is an issue
For those
Who forgot King
But remember Karl
And use the Constitution
As a Starbucks coaster
Fervently scribbling
Another way of life
That strangely resembles
The shores of Cuba
And shame of Venezuela.

Never Too Old for Nursery Rhymes

Samantha Terrell

Our eleven year-old son –
Wearing my flowered kitchen apron
(He's boiling us pasta for dinner) –
Has gone out to the front yard
Where he's playing with his brother, petting our cat.

The apron pocket is wider than his chest and the
Strings had to be wrapped all the way
Around him, tied in front.
We'll need to wash the apron, of course.
Or, risk cat hair in the spaghetti.

But I don't mind. I cherish
These fleeting unselfconscious moments –
Comfortable. We're comfortable
In our own skin, in our roles, in our home.
It's a good thing, too.

We've entered lockdown again, to
Slow the locally-spiking Covid numbers.
It's a cycle, and we're going around and around
Hoping for a cure.

I keep believing it's only a matter of time.

“Ring around the rosie...”

An apron pocket full of

Pieces of a life collected, and

Tucked away –

Until a safer time.

Horse Mandala

Ramisa Nawar



Color of the Soul

Robert René Galván

What color is the soul,
ineffable waft
sealed into flesh
by a dervish
of sand?

Is it truly
the white
milk of God's
grace,
progressing
to black
with each
transgression,
or rather,
like the radiance
of the symbiont
orchid,
its tendrils
clasping
the body
for passage,

or is it an aura
that turns
with each moment,
the nebula
hosted by the
wary chameleon,
or perhaps
it is invisible,
like the residue
of a plucked
string,
a migrant tone
in the darkness?

#268: last remaining hiQ

R. Wilder

dried up scarlet leaf
delicately clinging to
last remaining branch.

I love my dog more than my dad

Mark Niedzwiedz

I love my dog more than my dad
By a distance, not a tad
There I've said it, the cardinal sin
Preference for a canine to my next of kin
His big floppy ears, doughy eyes, cold wet nose
Means more to me than my father's bones
That lay in a grave, I hope at peace
My accidental parent, who came from the East
And whilst my dog showers me with kisses
I remember the drink, the rows, the Christmases
He was never there, never told us he cared
But still I loved this boy soldier, unrecovered man
Though not as much as I love my dog
Sorry dad, I hope you understand

Second Picking

Kevin LeMaster

Why do rotting things
turn sweet just before their

darkness grows too deep
into the fruit's ruin?

While we pick them,
my grandson points out the

black ringed holes of the ones
that we must leave unsaved.

Their sugary spoils spread throughout,
making it like a slow molasses silence;

its dark center devours everything
it touches until it becomes

like death, leaving nothing behind
but an empty husk.

Face Rock

Tracy Fawns



Take Me Home Guys

Lynn Magill

oh
please
take me
back home, guys
this isn't a place for me.
I don't think I belong. all
of these people, look at you but
only see their own reflection, only
want to see their own reflection, not you
planet narcissism vacant, shallow, waiting
to be heard but never hearing, talking to a
mirror. can we go? i'm going to lose myself in
their void. what happens when you can only
see yourself, and nobody else? do you find or
lose yourself if echoes are all you hear? so
much talking, and no listening. how do you
learn through an open mouth? let's go. i'm
not sure that I want to see myself through
their eyes, or even through my own eyes.
how? do you see where you are going
when you can't see past yourself? and
what do you dream of, if your dreams
aren't bigger than you are, where are
you really going? I just think that
narcissus was an astronaut who
fell in love with herself, planting
the flag on that isolated planet
and hoping it was intelligent
life out there. Because
Houston, we have
a problem and I
don't think it's
me. yet. i

BIOGRAPHIES

Ibtisam M. Abujad

Heart Pains

Poetry

Ibtisam M. Abujad is a doctoral student and instructor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI. He is also a poet, with works published in a number of journals, including *Cream City Review*, *The Nasiona*, *Rigorous*, *Pointed Circle*, *Blue Minaret Literary Journal*, and forthcoming in *Femme Literati: Mixtape No. 2*.

Jennifer Adair

Book Review: The Future

Nonfiction

Jennifer was born and raised in Northern Utah. She wrote her first poem at five years old and has been hooked on words ever since. She recently graduated from Dixie State University with her bachelors of arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing.

Sanjana Aiyar

Not a Goodbye

Poetry

Sanjana Aiyar is a recent literature graduate from Bangalore. She finds passion in poetry through the memory of loved ones.

Carol Alfred

Game of COAL

Nonfiction

Carol Alfred lives in beautiful Vermont where she teaches Spanish and mentors new teachers.

Ahmed Alozade

Ideas and Depths

Visual Art

After a long career (42 years) in scientific research and university teaching, and with a huge effort of self-training and experiences, Ahmed Alozade has achieved beautiful artistic creations, which he produced with the latest digital painting technique. His creations are accepted by several platforms of the art trade (artmajeur, artpal, legaleriste, Dreamstime, expositionpeinture); they are—with his name—recognizable with all the search engines on the internet. He received the Artmajeur Prize (Gold category), and he has accumulated thousands of fans, comments, likes and messages of encouragement online.

Billy Alsbrooks

Make Way for The Young

Poetry

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks is an award-winning poet, motivational speaker, and author of the top selling book *Blessed and Unstoppable: Your Blueprint for Success*. A former Billboard charting music artist, producer, hit song writer, and on-air personality, Dr. Alsbrooks has spent the last 4 years inspiring people to become the best version of themselves. He's one of the top motivational speakers in the world. In 2019, he was awarded an honorary doctorate for his tremendous impact around the globe.

Paul David Atkins

COVID Monologue 2: The Act of Smiling in a Mask

Poetry

Paul David Adkins earned an MFA from Washington University, and Lit Riot published his collection *Dispatches from the FOB*. Journal publications include *Pleiades*, *River Styx*, *Diode*, *Baltimore Review*, and *Whiskey River*. He has received one Best of the Net and six Pushcart nominations and the 2019 Central NY Book Award.

Scott Beard

Hollows

Fiction

Scott has both a B.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction from Wichita State University. His writing has appeared in *The Report*, *LEVITATE* magazine, *Dime Show Review*, *Please See Me*, *Military Experience and the Arts*, *The Showbear Family Circus*, and in *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*. His literary criticism has been published in the October 2019 edition of *Coffin Bell Journal*. He enjoys fishing, hiking, reading, writing, traveling, and ice hockey.

Joe Bisicchia

Flower

Poetry

Joe Bisicchia writes of our shared dynamic. An Honorable Mention recipient for the Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry, his works have appeared in numerous publications. His website is www.JoeBisicchia.com.

William Blackburn

Train

Poetry

Currently based in Ohio (USA), William T Blackburn struggles still to find his car keys. He holds a BA in English:Writing/Teaching and Music Composition from Westminster College. His work has been selected by *Castabout Anthology*, and *Ricochet Review: 8*. He contributed to Adirondack Center for Writing: PoemVillage-2019 and 2020 and Response II, as well as Riza Press/Pen and & Pendulum: Giving.

Jean-Louis "Miroux" Brassière

Arrival at Nowhereland Station ; Portrait of a Veiled Woman; Woman Swimming in Autumn Leaves

Visual Art

Jean-Louis Brassière is also known as Miroux (literally “half red-headed”) in memory of his hair color when he was still wearing cropped pants. He doesn't have a degree in fine arts, but at least he has a degree in marine technology. With poor perspective knowledge and limited theory of colors, this lets Jean-Louis be guided by intuition. The sea became Miroux's home for more than three decades, but art secretly remained his garden. As the years went by, travel stirred up unconsciously the need to seize the most common and serious things that could reflect our world. And so, he started photography. Since 2017, Jean-Louis has experienced strong affinities with digital painting discovered after duplicating photos based on seascapes and characters. Miroux appreciates that medium in the field of fine arts and illustrations due to its versatility and flexibility. <https://www.mi-roux.com>

Michelle Brooks

Wake

Poetry

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

Paul Burnham

The Mouse that Became a Man

Nonfiction

Paul Burnham lives and works in the mountain west. He is a civil engineer by day and a river rat or powder hound by night. His essays and short stories have appeared in various publications, and his first book, *Finding Santa*, is available on Amazon.

Micaela Edelson

Sexism Overseas

Nonfiction

Micaela Edelson is a passionate writer of prose and poetry, specifically surrounding humanity's constructed relationship with the natural world. Although she is a novice writer, her work has been published in *Humana Obscura Literary Magazine* and *Red Flag International Magazine*.

Michael Estabrook

Celia died

Poetry

Michael Estabrook has been publishing his poetry in the small press since the 1980s. He has published over 20 collections, a recent one being *The Poet's Curse, A Miscellany* (The Poetry Box, 2019).

R. Gerry Fabian

Circuit Boards

Poetry

R. Gerry Fabian is a retired English instructor who lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. As a poet and novelist, he has been publishing his writing since 1972 in various literary magazines. His web page is <https://rgerryfabian.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @GerryFabian2. He has published three books of his published poems, *Parallels*, *Coming Out Of The Atlantic* and *Electronic Forecasts*. In addition, he has published three novels: *They are Getting Lucky (The Story)*, *Memphis Masquerade*, and *Seventh Sense*. All these books are available both as ebooks and paperbacks at all publishers including Amazon, Apple Books and Barnes & Noble.

Tracy Fawns

Coos Bay Tug; Lighthouse; Face Rock

Visual Art

Dr. Tracy Fawns works as a nursing professor at Dixie State University and has enjoyed photography for the last 15 years. Having grown up on the Oregon Coast, much of Dr. Fawns' work features special locations to her centered around the southern Oregon Coast.

Rebecca River Forbes

Hunch

Poetry

Rebecca River Forbes lives in Basel, Switzerland and Lancaster, England. Fuelled by tea (she has a whole tea library), she writes and performs stand-up comedy and is currently writing rude lines for Odette Hella'Grand's Live Drag Roast Show. She recently finished her novel *Shut Mouth*. Say hi to her on Twitter @bohobo101.

Robert René Galván

Color of the Soul

Poetry

Robert René Galván, born in San Antonio, resides in New York City where he works as a professional musician and poet. His last collection of poems is entitled, *Meteors*, published by Lux Nova Press. He is a Shortlist Winner Nominee in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Award for Best Poem. Recently, his poems are featured in *Puro ChicanX Writers of the 21st Century* and in *Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous Literature, Art and Thought*. His forthcoming books of poetry are *Undesirable: Race and Remembrance*, Somos en Escrito Foundation Press, and *The Shadow of Time*, Adelaide Books.

Steve Gerson

The Widow's Window

Poetry

Steve Gerson, an emeritus English professor from a Midwestern community college, writes poetry and flash about life's dissonance and dynamism. He's proud to have published in *Panoplyzine* (winning an Editor's Choice award), *The Hungry Chimera*, *Toe Good*, *The Write Launch*, *Route 7*, *Duck Lake*, *Coffin Bell*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Crack the Spine*, *Riza Press*, *White Wall Review*, *Variant*, *Abstract*, *Montana Mouthful*, *the Decadent Review*, *Indolent*, *Rainbow Poems*, *Snapdragon*, *The Underwood Press*, and *In Parenthesis*.

Kishore Ghosh

Place of the World: Character Concept; Place of the World: Creepy Concept; Place of the World: Area Concept

Visual Art

Kishor Ghosh is an Experienced Senior Concept Artist with a demonstrated history of working in the information technology and services industry. Skilled in Digital Painting, Sketching, Drawing, Concept Development, and Digital Art. Strong arts and design professional with a B.F.A painting focused in drawing painting from indira kala sangeet Vishwavidyalaya.

Benjamin Goluboff

In the Cemetery

Poetry

Benjamin Goluboff teaches at Lake Forest College. He is the author of *Ho Chi Minh: A Speculative Life in Verse* and *Biking Englewood: An Essay on the White Gaze*, both from Urban Farmhouse Press. Some of his work can be read at <https://www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/goluboff/>

John Grey

Owl on the Wire

Poetry

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. His latest book, *Leaves on Pages* is available through Amazon.

David Grubb

Walk It Off

Nonfiction

David Grubb is a retired Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer. He's been a creative writer his entire life, yet never focused on it because of career and family. He's changing that part of his life one day at a time and loving every minute of it. He also immensely enjoys being a stay at home dad, more or less. You can find more of his work at <https://www.agrubbylife.com/>.

Kathy Ha

A Couch Potato Does a Burp...ee

Nonfiction

Kathy Ha is a creative writer and storytelling enthusiast, sharing snippets of her journey through life and parenting on her blog, KNJ Tales and Snippets. She aims to inspire, empower, and ignite laughter, with every word that she writes.

Mike Horan

End Dream

Poetry

Mike Horan was born in North Carolina, raised in Tennessee but now lives with his family in the desert outside Palm Springs, California. He teaches elementary school during the day, writes and does dad stuff in the evenings, and practices kung fu in the spaces between. His work has appeared in *Mad Swirl*, *Snapdragon*, *Route 7 Review*, and *Riza Press*.

Mollie Hosmer-Dillard

A Rocky Place, a Place Where Water Runs

Visual Art

Mollie Hosmer-Dillard is currently a Visiting Instructor of Art at Dixie State University. She holds a BA from Oberlin College and an MFA from Indiana University. After college Mollie lived in Berlin, Germany for four years, where she painted and was an active collaborator in the city's interdisciplinary arts scene. Upon returning to the United States, Mollie lived in New York City, working as an artist and a translator of German to English. She is the recipient of an Oberlin College Alumni Fellowship, and artist grants from the Berlin Office of Cultural Affairs and the Queens Council on the Arts.

Phyllis Houseman

¿Are You Sure There Is No Hope for Me?

Nonfiction

Phyllis Houseman was born in Detroit and received degrees from the University of Michigan and Wayne State University. She served in the Peace Corps, Ecuador, and then taught Biology and Physical Science in Detroit and California schools. In a step into another career, Phyllis has published award winning novels and short stories.

Joe Inabinette

The Reach and the Slap

Poetry

Joe Inabinette is a teacher of students with severe Special Needs. He lives in McKinney, Texas with his wife, two sons, and two ridiculous excuses for dogs. He is an ardent fan of the 1967 television show, "The Prisoner" from which he draws much of the inspiration for his life. He enjoys writing Horror fiction and is currently preparing an anthology of short stories.

Sandra Johnson

The Great Egret

Visual Art

Sandra Johnson is a Nature and Wildlife Photographer. She travels throughout the United States photographing landscapes from Waterfalls of Michigan to capturing beautiful reflections on lakes. Through photography, she has been given her voice to share with others.

Jacqueline Jules

The Hot Soup in My Bowl

Poetry

Jacqueline Jules is the author of three chapbooks, *Field Trip to the Museum* (Finishing Line Press), *Stronger Than Cleopatra* (ELJ Publications), and *Itzhak Perlman's Broken String*, winner of the 2016 Helen Kay Chapbook Prize from Evening Street Press. Her poetry has appeared in over 100 publications including *The Broome Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Hospital Drive*, and *Imitation Fruit*. Visit her online <https://metaphoricaltruths.blogspot.com/>

Imo Jumbo

In My Sufferings

Visual Art

Imo Jumbo is a talented artist living in Uyo Itam, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria. Imo appreciates the visual beauty life has to offer and previously studied at Caritas University in Enugu, Nigeria. All he needs is a piece of paper and a ball point pen or regular pencil and a masterpiece begins. More of his works can be seen on Instagram @imo.jumbo and Facebook @ Jumbo artz.

Ken Kakareka

Queen California Karma

Poetry

Ken is a writer and teacher who enjoys train rides, typewriters and Blues music. He has a BA from Saint Joe's University in Philly. His novel *Late to Bed, Late to Rise* was published with Black Rose Writing. Ken's work has appeared in *Lost Lake Folk Opera Magazine, Ink & Voices, Conceit Magazine, Spontaneous Spirits Magazine, DoveTales Journal, Amulet Magazine, HASH Journal* and is forthcoming in *Gargoyle Magazine* and *The Vital Sparks Journal*. He lives in California with his wife-to-be.

Wilson Koewing

Bus Ride from Paris to Lyon

Nonfiction

Wilson Koewing is a writer from South Carolina. His work has recently appeared in *Pembroke Magazine, Ghost Parachute, New World Writing, Maudlin House, Trampset* and *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*.

Phyllis Koppel

Masking the Virus

Nonfiction

Phyllis C. Koppel's short stories have appeared in juried competitions and journals in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Austria, and her self-published novel, *The Story of Two Suitcases*, made it to the quarterfinals of Amazon's Breakthrough Novel of the Year competition. She's studied writing with Wayson Choy and Alice Walker. She identifies as visible minority, Latina woman living in Toronto, Canada.

Paul Koskinen

Borne of Pandemic #38

Visual Art

Initially inspired as a young teen by the works of Dali and Picasso, Toronto-based painter Paul Koskinen began his art training at home in front of an easel experimenting with oils. Over the years, he has been exhibiting his works in and around the Toronto area. With recent success through international exhibits and appearances in publications, his work has caught the imagination of many. Largely a self-taught, those early influences and many others started a journey towards the field of abstract art which continues to this day.

Edward Lee

Crowd

Poetry

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. His debut poetry collection "Playing Poohesticks On Ha'Penny Bridge" was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>.

Kevin LeMaster

Second Picking

Poetry

Kevin lives in South Shore Kentucky. His poems have been found at *The Lakes*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Praxis magazine*, *Rockvale Review*, *Inkwell*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Constellations*, *Plainsongs*, and *Coe Review*. He has had recent work published in *SheilaNaGig* online and *Heartwood Literary Review* and work forthcoming in *The Bookends Review*, *The Wax Paper*, *Slipstream* and *Triggerfish Critical Review*. Kevin is also working on a chapbook that should be ready to find a home by January 2021. His work in "Rubicon: Words and art inspired by Oscar Wildes De Profundis" was nominated for a Pushcart prize.

Mario Loprete

Sfera Ebbasta

Visual Art

Mario Loprete, an Italian artist from Catanzaro recognized as a promising talent of the international emerging artistic scene, intends to relaunch his interest for contemporary art through an investigation that connects the Urban style with the hip hop world. He has obtained notoriety in the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the United States of America through public institutional exhibitions.

Marianne Lyon

To My Unborn Child

Poetry

Marianne Lyon has been a music teacher for 43 years. After teaching in Hong Kong, she returned to the Napa Valley and has been published in various literary magazines and reviews including *Ravens Perch*, *TWJM Magazine*, *Earth Daughters* and *Indiana Voice Journal*. She was nominated for the Pushcart prize in 2017. She is a member of the California Writers Club and an Adjunct Professor at Touro University in California

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

Eye & Bomb

Poetry

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan also has recent work in *New Ohio Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, among others. He is a Senior Lecturer of literature at Georgia College & State University.

Morgan MacVaugh

The Immortal

Fiction

Morgan MacVaugh is a home-grown writer from Lancaster, PA. She lives for card games, oil paints, and her chonky black cat. You can find some of her other work in *CrabFat Magazine*, *F(r)iction's Dually Noted Series*, *Gingerbread House*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*.

Lynn Magill

Take Me Home Guys

Poetry

Lynn Magill lives in Western Washington with deep Iowa roots that influence many aspects of her work. She writes poetry and nonfiction and is also a painter and visual artist. She is scheduled to graduate from Central Washington University in 2021 with a master's degree in Professional and Creative Writing. Lynn has been a career legal/contracts professional advising Fortune 15 organizations and a national subject matter expert on Government and Tribal negotiations. She is currently enjoying a career in academia supporting the people who change the world. Lynn loves to travel and spend time with her husband on their Texas ranch herding goats and finding any excuse to avoid being within range of cell phone reception.

Brandon Marlon

Vista

Poetry

Brandon Marlon is a writer from Ottawa, Canada. He received his B.A. in Drama & English from the University of Toronto and his M.A. in English from the University of Victoria. His poetry was awarded the Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry (Fall 2015), and his writing has been published in 300+ publications in 32 countries. www.brandonmarlon.com

Rachel McBride

Every February Thirteenth: Memoir of a 9-1-1 Dispatcher

Nonfiction

After over a decade of riding the 9-1-1 dispatcher roller coaster, Rachel McBride decided to go back to college to see what that experience could offer. Nearly another decade as a non-traditional student (life and raising twins get in the way of schooling), she's nearly done with a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in technical writing. Her dispatch days prepared her well to be a mom of moody teenagers. She looks forward to what else life has to offer.

Rex H McBride

Doctor's Office Hercules

Nonfiction

Rex H. McBride was a native of the foothills of Sonora, California. After serving a two-year mission for his church in Hawaii, he became a finish carpenter and honed that skill for decades. His off-the-wall perspective and humorous musings were shared with his friends and family via lengthy text messages and random late-night email. Rex was proud of his daughters ("my three princesses") and two grandchildren. He died of mantle-cell lymphoma in 2009. His memory is still alive and well. His family celebrates his birthday and his friends speak of him often. More of his writings can be found at MemoriesOfRex.blogspot.com.

Mary McFadden

Royal Flush

Poetry

Mary McFadden is an English major with a creative writing emphasis. She enjoys reading, writing, and playing board games. She has been published in a previous issue of *Route 7 Review*, and in *The Southern Quill*. She is a voracious reader with a love for the beauty of well-arranged words.

Joshua McKinney

Psalm (Omnipresence)

Poetry

Joshua McKinney's most recent collection of poetry, *Small Sillion* (Parlor Press 2019). He is the recipient of the University of Georgia Press Poetry Series Open Competition, the Dorothy Brunsman Poetry Prize, the Dickinson Poetry Prize, and a Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative American Poetry. His work has appeared in such journals as *American Letters & Commentary*, *Boulevard*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review*, *New American Writing*, and many others. He teaches poetry writing and literature at California State University, Sacramento. A long-time student of Japanese swords arts, he is a member of Senkakukan Dojo of Sacramento.

Bruce McRae

Heads Up

Poetry

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,600 poems published internationally in magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle and the North American Review*. His books are *The So-Called Sonnets* (Silenced Press); *An Unbecoming Fit of Frenzy*; (Cawing Crow Press); *Like As If* (Pski's Porch); *Hearsay* (The Poet's Haven).

Daniel Edward Moore

Southern Interruptions

Poetry

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems are forthcoming in *Nebo Literary Journal*, *Main Street Rag Magazine*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Verdad Magazine*, *Lullwater Review*, *Flint Hills Review*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Emrys Journal*, *El Portal the Meadow* and *West Trade Review*. He is the author of the chapbook, "Boys" (Duck Lake Books) and a full-length collection *Waxing the Dents* (Brick Road Poetry Press).

Cameron Morse

excerpt 8

Poetry

Cameron Morse lives with his wife Lili and two children in Independence, Missouri. His poems have been published in numerous magazines, including *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, *Portland Review* and *South Dakota Review*. His first collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award. His latest is *Baldy* (Spartan Press, 2020). He holds an MFA from the University of Kansas City—Missouri and serves as Senior Reviews editor at *Harbor Review* and Poetry editor at *Harbor Editions*. For more information, check out his Facebook page or website.

Templeton Moss

Late August

Fiction

Templeton Moss was born and raised in Southern California, currently lives and (when he has to) works in Louisville, Kentucky, but he still considers Disneyland to be his hometown. He started writing in high school in a pathetically misguided attempt to get girls to like him and has kept at it out of sheer pig-headedness. In the meantime, he has written plays, novels, short stories, poems, children's books and angry Facebook rants. His poems have appeared in an Irish children's magazine called *The Caterpillar*, and his short stories have been featured in numerous anthologies. Outside of writing, his hobbies include naps, cartoons and pizza, and his turnoffs include manual labor and basically everything that's happened this year.

Ramisa Nawar

Peacock Mandala; Horse Mandala; Deer Mandala

Visual Art

Ramisa is just a high school student who draws for a hobby. They like experimenting with colors and patterns. However, they mostly draw original characters in anime style. Besides drawing, they love candies.

James B. Nicola

Talent and Hope

Poetry

James B. Nicola is the author of five collections of poetry: *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018), and *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond* (2019). His decades of working in the theater as a stage director, composer, lyricist, playwright, and acting teacher culminated in the nonfiction book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Guide to Live Performance*, which won a Choice award. A Yale grad, he hosts the Hell's Kitchen International Writers' Roundtable at his library branch in Manhattan: walk-ins welcome.

Mark Niedzwiedz

I love my dog more than my dad

Poetry

From the UK, Mark Niedzwiedz is a professional composer and lyricist. So far, Mark's poems have appeared in poetry journals such as *Grey Sparrow*, *Oddville Press*, *Scritura*, *Wink*, *Rat's Arse Review*, *Sac*, *Literary Heist*, *Harbinger Asylum*, and elsewhere.

George Olivas

Ponte Market, Venice 1979

Visual Art

Sharing stories and photos with others is George's passion. They are meant to entertain, excite, inspire others to be curious and motivate others to share their lives experiences. Enjoy!

Alexis Pearson

Deceptive expectation

Poetry

Alexis Pearson tries to create an experience that is nearly tangible, something that is understood in the bones before the brain. She lives in Minnesota where it's cold most of the year - perfect writing weather. She enjoys a good cup of coffee and will read just about anything but has an affinity for writing that feels like jumping into the deep end. She has been published in *Upper Mississippi Harvest* and *Sonder Midwest*, among others.

Jeanine Pfeiffer

Orange Alert

Nonfiction

Dr. Pfeiffer's life is devoted to the celebration and conservation of biocultural diversity: the intrinsic connections between nature and culture. Chapters from her book-in-progress have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize (five times), anthologized (three times), and published in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Camas*, *The Citron Review*, *The Portland Review*, *Flyway*, *The Guardian*, *Hippocampus*, *High Country News*, *Inverted Syntax*, *Between the Lines*, *Langscape*, *Medium*, *Ruminate*, *Silver Needle Press*, *Sky Island Journal*, *The Lowestoft Chronicles*, *Nowhere*, and elsewhere. Her spoken-word poetry has been featured on Dan Robert's Rhythm Running River, Mendocino County Public Broadcasing KZYX&Z. More at jeaninepfeiffer.com

Kenneth Pobo

Skeeter

Poetry

Kenneth Pobo won the 2019 chapbook contest from the Alabama State Poetry Society for “Your Place or Mine.” They published it this summer. His work has appeared in: *Hawaii Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Queer South Anthology*, and elsewhere.

Fabrice Poussin

Little Soul

Poetry

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review* as well as other publications.

Rachel Racette

Would Anyone Notice the Stars Screaming

Fiction

Rachel Racette was born in Balcarres, Saskatchewan, Canada. She has found a love in writing characters and creating new worlds. Rachel has always loved books of fantasy and science fiction as well as comics. She has been published in *The Spelunkers: A Chipper Press Anthology*. Find more works at racheldotsdot.wordpress.com

Emma Rhyne

Found

Nonfiction

Emma Rhyne's fiction and poetry work has been published in Stephen F. Austin State University's literary journal HUMID, Tyler Junior College's literary journal The Bell Tower, the Nacogdoches horror chapbook *The Piney Dark*, and in a multimedia format through Manawaker Studios. Her personal essay and travel works have been published in Country Magazine. She is currently pursuing her BFA in Creative Writing at Stephen F. Austin State University. When she's not writing, she's editing student essays for her job with SFASU's Academic Assistance and Resource Center or trying to plan her rapidly approaching wedding.

Ruby Michelle Riego

Where We Belong

Visual Art

Ruby is an illustrator and designer from Elk Grove, CA. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art from California State University of Sacramento with a concentration in drawing and painting and a background in fashion illustration and design from American River College. She is the founder of Nature Tales Creative Studio, where she teaches art lessons and runs a stationary, apparel and accessory shop featuring her illustrations. Ruby's works have been exhibited throughout California and her goal is to continue to learn and grow as an artist so that she can continue to display her works throughout other parts of the United States as well as Internationally.

Radoslav Rochallyi

The Halved

Poetry

Radoslav Rochallyi (born 1980, Bardejov, Czechoslovakia) is a slovenský philosopher, writer, and poet. The author finished his studies in Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts of the UNIPO and completed postgraduate Ph.D. studies. Rochallyi is the author of eleven books. He writes in Slovak, English, and German. In the DNA-Canvases of Poetry collection, he uses mathematical Equations to express his poetry. In Golden Divine, he reaches its peak of experimenting with forms of verses and poetry as a whole. In this collection, he tried to link poetry with φ and Hence the number 1,618034 in non-graphical form and with a golden section in its graphic form.

Peter Rosa

Rockefeller

Fiction

Peter Rosa is a Richmond transplant, currently residing in Bend, Oregon. They have been called the least outdoorsy human being to ever enjoy hiking despite their great grandfather being part sasquatch.

Mark Antony Rossi

This Way to Zion

Poetry

Mark Antony Rossi is a poet, playwright and host of the literary podcast "Strength To Be Human" <https://strengthtobehuman.podbean.com> His most recent is forthcoming in Ariel Chart, Big Window Review, BlogNostics and Indian Periodical.

Anthony Salandy

Globalized

Poetry

Anthony is a mixed-race poet & writer whose work tends to focus on social inequality throughout late-modern society. Anthony travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK & America. Anthony's work has been published 65 times in *Kuwait Times* ('Half Kuwaiti?' ARS), *The Kuwait Poets Society's Ink & Oil Zine* (June 2019), *The Showbear Family Circus*, *Dream Noir Literary Journal*, *Straylight literary magazine*, *Kreaxxion Review*, *Perhappened Literary Magazine*, *The Honey Mag*, *The Mark Literary Review*, *Doghhouse Press*, *FullyLit Magazine*, *Idle Ink*, *Versification*, *The Wild Lit Mag*, *The Daily Drunk*, *LuckyPierreZine*, *Milly Magazine*, *Analogies & Allegories Lit Mag*, *Neuro Logical Literary Magazine*, *Clay Literary*, *Sock Drawer Lit Mag*, *Unique Poetry and News in Poetry*, *Gutter Voices*, *Burnt Breakfast Magazine*, unpublished zine, etc. Anthony has 1 published chapbook titled *The Great Northern Journey*. Anthony is currently pursuing a BSc in Sociology.

Gerard Sarnat

Once Worldly Autodidact's Drill Ditty

Poetry

Gerard Sarnat won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfults of recent Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published including in *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *The New York Times* as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago and Columbia presses. Gerry is a physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to future granddaughters.

P.C. Scheponik

Mushroom Morning

Poetry

Most recently P.C. Scheponik has been published in *Adelaide*, *All the Sins*, *Big Windows Review*, *Smoky Blue Magazine*, *The Black Lion Journal*, *The Phoenix*, *The Wire's Dream*, and *Streetlight Press*. I have been nominated for the 2019 Pushcart Prize by the editor of WINK. He was a finalist and winner in Adelaide Literary Magazine Awards Anthology 2017 and 2018. He will be published in 2020 in *Badlands* and *Assisi Journal Online*. The editor of the magazine has invited him to be a regular submitter to the journal. His latest collection, *Seeing, Believing, and Other Things*, is scheduled for publication by Adelaide Book Publishers in spring of 2021.

Margarita Serafimova

The Great Banners

Poetry

Margarita Serafimova is the winner of the 2020 Tony Quagliano/ Hawai'i Council for the Humanities International Poetry Award, a 2020 Pushcart nominee and a finalist in nine other U.S. and international poetry contests. She has four collections in Bulgarian and a chapbook, *A Surgery of a Star* (Staring Problem Press, CA: <https://bit.ly/3jDU793>). Her digital chapbook, *En-tīm* (Wilderness), is forthcoming by the San Francisco University Poetry Center Chapbook Exchange in 2021. A full-length collection, *A White Boat and Foam*, is to be published by Interstellar Flight Press in 2022. Her work appears widely, including at *Nashville Review*, *Obra/Artifact*, *Origins*, and more. Visit: shorturl.at/dgpczC.

Sulman Shuruk

Covid; Hidden Smile in the Coronavirus Era 1; Hidden Smile in the Coronavirus Era 2

Visual Art

Shuruk Sulman is from Baghdad, Iraq, they live in Bucharest, Romania, they are lucky to live in two countries with different cultures, they love visual arts so they studied masters in multimedia, their studies helped them a lot in understanding and using programs related to drawing. They are also interested in photography and they practice it daily in their work.

Ben Sloan

Trying to Meditate, and Failing

Poetry

Ben Sloan teaches at Piedmont Virginia Community College, the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, and Buckingham Correctional Center. Work of his has recently appeared in *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Chestnut Review*, *2River View*, and *Third Wednesday Magazine*. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Spencer Soule

Book Review: Wade in the Water by Tracy K. Smith

Nonfiction

Spencer Soule can usually be found in his favourite reclining chair, buried in a short story collection with an ice-cold kombucha in hand. He is currently studying English with an emphasis in creative writing at Dixie State University.

Mary Spadoni

Doing Yoga in Quarantine

Poetry

Mary Spadoni is a theater-maker, event coordinator, and fiber artist whose writing has appeared in *Fearsome Critters*, *Ponder Review*, and *Newtown Literary*. She lives in Astoria, NY, and loves sharing a bowl of popcorn with her husband and dog.

Heidi Speth

3:04 AM

Poetry

Heidi Speth is a student at Truman State University. She has been writing, specifically poetry, since she was in high school. She is studying English and hopes to one day pursue a career in teaching high school. While she has never been published, she is an avid writer and plans to spend the rest of her life doing so with a mug full of coffee and her dog at her side.

Travis Stephens

This Blood Soup

Poetry

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who resides with his family in California. A graduate of University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, recent credits include: *2River*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *GRIFFEL*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*.

Katie Strubel

Book Review: Lighting the Shadow by Rachel Eliza Griffiths

Nonfiction

Katie Strubel is currently in her senior year of undergrad for Creative Writing at Dixie State University in Saint George, Utah. Her poetry and fiction have both appeared in *The Southern Quill*. In May 2020, her short story, "Black and Blue," won first place under the Naythan M. Bell Fiction Award. She resides in both Idaho and Utah.

Priya Tamang

Deceased

Poetry

Priya Dolma Tamang is a medical graduate from the north-east Indian state of Sikkim. With her tribal Nepali roots and deeply seated Buddhist beliefs, culture and mindfulness have both been active themes in her writing. Her debut book, *Ivory Gleam*, was published by Leadstart Publishers, India, in 2018. Priya's poetry has found home, among other places, in *International Times*, *Urban Magazine*, *Artoilla*, *Headline Poetry*, *Tales of Reverie* (Paragon Press, 2019), *Gravitas* (Pub House Books, 2020), *Acclamation Point*, *Just Milieu* and *Spillwords*.

Su Ertekin-Taner

Murkiness

Poetry

Su Ertekin-Taner is a junior, actress, writer, journalist, and singer at The Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida. She began poetry at the age of thirteen when she barely knew what the meaning of it was. Now, she is an aspiring writer and English teacher with awards for my writing. She received an award for her poem, "Soar," during the Jax Poetry Contest as well as receiving multiple awards from the collective Florida Times Union, Scholastic, and the Florida Scholastic Press Association for her poetry, prose, and journalism.

Samantha Terrill

Never Too Old for Nursery Rhymes

Poetry

Brett Thompson

Aubade

Poetry

Brett Thompson has been writing poetry since his graduate days at the University of New Hampshire where he earned a M.A. in English Writing with a concentration in poetry. He has been published in various journals, including *Plainsongs*, *Tilde*, *District Lit*, *The Literary Nest*, and the *Cobalt Review*. He teaches and lives in New Hampshire with his wife and two young daughters.

Don Thompson

In the Wind

Poetry

Don Thompson has been writing about the San Joaquin Valley for over fifty years, including a dozen or so books and chapbooks. For more info and links to publishers, visit his website at www.don-e-thompson.com.

Jason M. Thornberry

Eastsound

Poetry

Survivor of a traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic epilepsy, Seattle writer Jason M. Thornberry's work appears in *The Stranger*, *Praxis*, *Dissident Voice*, *Entropy*, *Adirondack Review*, and elsewhere. His work examines disability, family, and social justice. Jason taught literature and creative writing at Seattle Pacific University. He reads poetry for TAB.

Neal Tucker

Daughter

Fiction

Neal Tucker is a writer living in Los Angeles. Their work has been published, or will appear, in *Coffin Bell Journal*, *Writ in Dust*, *42 Stories Anthology*, *Poet's Choice*, and others.

Sophia Vesely

The View from 5,000 Feet Up

Poetry

Sophia Vesely is 18 years old and a class of 2020 high school graduate from St. Petersburg, Florida. She is currently taking a gap year before her matriculation to Swarthmore College in the fall of 2021. She has work published in *W-Poesis*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and *The Fiction Week Literary Review* as well as a published poetry collection on Amazon.com entitled *The Road to Amour de Soi* that aims to empower young women through the notion of self-love.

Rob Lane Wilder

#268: *last remaining hiQ*

Poetry

Rob Lane Wilder's re-structuring of modernism is quirky, unique and different. This is an instantly recognizable, unmistakable style. Wilder cleaves to whimsical, dreamy literature. This author explores philosophy, psychology, and spiritual transformation. Merging what's inexplicable with the surreal, Wilder cuts new pathways into formerly unknown, unnamed realms. Some publishing credits include *Poetry New Zealand*, *Feathertale Review*, *Pacific Review*, *Chronogram*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Boston Literary Review*, *Cordite Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*. A year before his passing, noteworthy author and Harvard-based historian Howard Zinn termed Wilder's poetry, "Outrageously delightful." Rob is also a classically trained musician and voice actor. He has performed before diverse audiences coast-to-coast.

Sam Willis

Deep into Space

Visual Art

Sam Willis is a photographer based out of Logan, Utah. He currently attends Utah State University, majoring in Marketing. When he's not studying, you will most likely find him outside being as active as possible or hanging out with his friends.

Ingrid Wilson

A Place of Perfect Peace

Nonfiction

Ingrid Wilson is an editor and owner of the website <https://experimentsinfiction.com> where she writes poetry, short fiction, and journals. She also features and celebrates the work of other writers. She holds regular poetry competitions exploring different forms of poetry and encouraging participation in the enjoyment of poetry. As she is blessed to live in a beautiful part of the world, she sends out 'Postcards from Slovenia' to her readers, combinations of text and image from some of her favourite places in this land.

Kiera Zager

As It's Supposed to Be

Fiction

Kiera Zager is a writer from Livonia, Michigan. Her short story, "Watching," can be found in *Phaeton Literary Magazine*.