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Voices

Vol. XLVI

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Editors' Note

The Editors proudly present the forty-sixth issue of Voices. We extend our thanks to Dr. John Schulze for his expertise and guidance throughout the creation and publication of this journal. We are grateful to the Department of English, Humanities, and Philosophy and Prothro-Yeager College of Humanities and Social Sciences for making this year's issue possible. We would also like to thank all of this year's contributors, whose work made for a thoroughly enjoyable issue.

The Editors hope that the time and effort invested in the creation of this year's *Voices* matches that of our contributors. We hope that you enjoy reading our contributors' work as much as we have and that the pieces contained within provide you with connection during a time that has made many feel increasingly isolated.

If you are interested in submitting your work for a future edition of *Voices*, you can search for us on Submittable or Duotrope. You can also visit our website:
www.voicesjournal.org

Cover Art by Barbara Hageman Sarvis
Front: "Goddess with Wounded Birds "
Back: "Wounded Bird"
Cover Design: Penn Stewart

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MSU Texas Writing Award

The Bryan L. Lawrence Creative Writing Award is given annually to the best submission to *Voices* from a student attending MSU Texas. Poetry, creative nonfiction, and short fiction pieces are all eligible. In addition to a certificate and publication in *Voices*, the award includes a cash prize of $250.

Michael Anderson

When Death Comes A-Visiting

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah

When death comes a-visiting
Me a-leave the dirty dishes in the sink,
wear the dress that Heaven sent me
and hurry to the back of my house
there, I will hang in the sloppy wires;
there, I will kick at the unfriendly skies
and spit at the sleepy, resting moon,
and make noise, make plenty noise
that death a-leave ma house
that me have no time for he coming.

When death comes a-visiting,
I hang my climbing rope on me shoulder
and rush out to tap me palm trees;
they must be full of palm wine now
in all the days I have no time to climb
and no time to carve some calabashes.
I will invite all me friends and enemies,
who live both far and near
to come celebrate with their stomachs
and drink and drink themself to stupor.

When death comes a-visiting,
I travel to the city to see ma daughter
who has given birth to another big boy,
a big boy for that matter, real big,
who I have not yet had time to see
because I still busy mending my fence.
Now that death a-come visiting,
no fence again will there to mend
and I have no time to spend
entertaining death and his empty belly.

I am on a journey to get what I want,
no matter what comes my way,
or what I see climbing up this mountain
I have no time to welcome death to me home;
when the sun rises and the sky is bright

I shall not see the dead coming for a visit;
though the moon decides to hold me down
or the rain pours out its venom on trees,
I will not rein in my desires for a second
the next time death comes a-visiting.

The Song of the Humpback Whale

Jennifer Handy

the grizzly and the polar bear will often come together
over the carcass of a beached humpback whale

but this time is different
this time there is a ghost or two

as Brown, he spies on White,
and White scratches down notes with his claw
and Brown, he watches White,
and White pretends to excavate the flank
and Brown, he records of White
that the latter only pretends to eat
and Brown, he psychoanalyzes White,
why he engages only in simulated acts of life
and Brown, he waits for White to leave his post,
each proceeding in secret to the other side,
the two of them circling the whale
in search of the Other
in search of themselves
in search of the Word that could define them

in the end, they reach a stalemate,
Brown on his side of the whale,
White on the other,
the decaying carcass always between them
putrefaction always between them

the watched becoming one with the watcher
they do not eat, they do not sleep,
they neither bathe nor frolic
their lives empty into the other
until at last they die alongside the whale

the watched and the watcher at last come together
in the song of a dead humpback whale

Old Jack – A Character

Robert Martin

After retirement, when not writing, my free time was spent exploring the Capitol Hill area downtown. I loved the old buildings, especially the Capitol and the City and County building across from it, both nestled between other hundred-and-twenty-five-year-old buildings. Add in the parks with their large oak and cherry trees offering shade throughout the well-maintained lawns dotted with statues and monuments, reminding everyone of our state's history. It made for a lovely place to wander.

However, I was surprised by the number of homeless people on the Hill. When I was a kid, in the dark ages of the 1960s, we didn't see many homeless people anywhere. You might glimpse a hobo by the railroad tracks or a drunk stumbling along a sidewalk, but not in these numbers. There must have been hundreds or maybe thousands of them. I often wondered why there were so many but couldn't get a straight answer from anyone.

I'd heard all the hateful things said about them. Lazy. Dirty. Druggies. Alcoholics. The list went on. I didn't buy it. While the media and politicians focused on the negative side of their lives, with the occasional sob story of an individual or family tossed in, I wanted to talk to the unhoused to learn their stories.

The ones that hit me hardest were the older men. One I gravitated to the most was called "Old Jack." His wild hair and unkempt beard were near-blazing white. The deeply etched creases on his face gave the impression of looking into a mountain valley, and his sunken eyes were the color of raw coal. He dressed as shabbily as the others and smelled about the same. Sometimes, he appeared as tall as me, and other times, he seemed smaller. I didn't meet him every time I was downtown, but often enough to strike up a kind of friendship. I couldn't help but think, "Now but for the grace of God go I," each time I met him.

One sunny fall day, warmer than the past several weeks, with a sky the skiers called "bluebird," I watched the last of the early snow slowly melt away while I took my daily walk. Turning a corner, I found Old Jack sitting on the steps of the Capitol building, enjoying the sun. I sat beside him.

"Jack, my man, I haven't seen you for a while. How are you?" I asked.

He looked at me for a few moments, confusion in his eyes.

"Do I know you?"

I wasn't sure how to respond. I tried to remember the last time we talked and realized it had been several weeks ago.

"Jack, it's me, Andy. Don't you remember?"

"Andy," he said, as if tasting the word.

He examined me before his smile deepened the creases in his face.

"Andy," he repeated. "I haven't seen you in ages, man. I figured you cut an' run from the scene down here."

I looked him over, concerned that he might be ill or injured.

"I've been right here most days, Jack. I saw you a while back at one of the lunches. Maybe it was longer than I thought."

He thought on that for a bit before answering. "Well, sometimes it's like I get pulled away from here and end up somewhere else. Sometimes, I remember people I see there and recognize a place."

"You mean like a dream?" I asked.

"It ain't no dream. It's very real. I can taste the food and smell the air. I'm dressed up and look sharp most times. Sometimes I'm younger and sometimes older, but I'm always old here."

We sat in silence. A soft breeze blew across the park, and I smelled the decaying leaves scattered on the grass. The grounds crew was busy raking them in piles, ready to mulch for the spring flower beds.

"Jack, do you remember your name? I mean, we all call you 'Old Jack,' but do you remember your real name?"

"I'll tell you, Andy, sometimes I wake up somewhere else and have a different name. Sometimes, it's one I remember from before, and sometimes it's a new one. Many times, it's 'Jack.'"

He studied me for a moment, then placed a hand on my shoulder. It was almost like he needed to touch me to make sure I was real.

"Sometimes, I believe I'm a character in a story that's never finished—maybe many stories. Some writer creates me, puts the story aside, and forgets about me. I end up here, in this place and time that I've been in so long that I don't even remember how I got here."

I wasn't sure what to say. Maybe "Old Jack" was as crazy as I'd been told, or was he something else? A character from an unfinished story, perhaps? Someone that an author put out in the universe and forgot? It could have been that Jack was pulling my leg. Most of the homeless I'd met liked a joke as well

as anyone else, and they weren't stupid, but the seriousness of their situation—hunger, clean water, a place to sleep—all those things made me wonder if Jack would do such a thing. However, something he said stirred my soul, and I placed my hand on his.

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it, Andy?"

"I'm not sure, Jack, but tonight, I'm going to sit down and write a story about 'Old Jack'—how he met another old man, and they spent time together enjoying long, rambling conversations. How about I write 'The End' at the bottom of the last page?"

Old Jack stood up and took my hand to shake it. He looked deep into my eyes and smiled.

"You're a good man, Andy. I wish you nothing but the best for the rest of your life."

He headed down the street. I watched as he turned the corner a block away. He waved as he had so many times before, and I waved back.

That night, I wrote over a thousand words about Old Jack. Not much, I suppose, but I didn't know much about him. I didn't sleep well that night, dreaming of a man with many faces but no name.

I never saw Old Jack again, and I'm not sure how I feel about his disappearance. Did he move on or die? Ultimately, I decided to play it safe and told my wife to remind me to finish every story I ever wrote.

Bryan L. Lawrence Creative Writing Award Winner

Come In, Stranger

Benecio Landeros

The rain falls in sheets as I pry open the front door against the wind's wishes. The wind screeches against the weak posts holding my balcony together. The woman I haven't seen in months gets blown inside like debris—thin and wispy like leaves that accompany her. Our bodies press against each other in the narrow hallway. In the quiet of the house, we pace our breathing. There's new wrinkles on her face, her cheeks and in the corners of her eyes. She's been busy making memories, I know. She presses her chest to mine, her soggy leather jacket soaking my nightgown, and I can see that she's still out there—deep in the night. Rambling.

When she bends to take off her muddy boots, I almost think to hide them. I place my hand on the small of her back, watching her work them off. She rises to place a kiss on my cheek, giving up halfway through the second boot to humor me.

"Miss me? " She murmurs against my skin, thin lips drawing into a smile like she already knows the answer.

I catch sight of the recliner I've left empty since June. I swallow. My voice doesn't rise above the pitter-patter of the rain.

"You've been gone so long, Dean. I missed you. "

She pulls away from me. The fall chill takes me from the summer still stained on her skin, and I mourn the warmth. Even soaked, she's unextinguished. It only works to ignite me—makes something foul rumble in the depths of my chest when she looks at me.

" Well, " She says, kicking off her last boot. " I'm here now, ain't I?"

When she shifts to walk past me, my muscles tighten. They coil like pythons, hungry, unwilling to let prey scurry past unbitten. I catch her before she can make it further than the first step on the stairs. We kiss in the silence. We are both waiting for the venom to sink in.

My grip loosens, but doesn't leave her arm. I teethe uselessly.

" Stay with me this time, Dean. " It leaves my lips more like a plea than the demand I mean. I didn't want to ask—I'm sick of asking. But I make a desperate appeal, looking up to her blank face like a higher, uncompromising power. " Please. "

It's too late in the night for a real answer. But, she peels off my hand with the one keeping her steady on the railing. Malleable, I let her take me. She intertwines our fingers and looks to me in the dark of my home. She is still the dark stranger that swept me away in a dim-light bar, back in a youth too far from me to remember right. Her voice is low like the passing thunder.

" You're tired, darlin'. Let's go to bed, yeah? "

I forfeit. I count the steps as we climb them. One for each month of the year.

My Sister Doesn't Speak to me Anymore

Christine Andersen

We blew seed balls into the wind
and then turned our fingertips golden yellow
when we picked bouquets of dandelions for Mom.
She loved us enough to be thrilled,
to arrange them in a crystal vase,
to set them on the kitchen table
where the long shafts of afternoon light
ignited their ruffled faces
until they glowed like mini suns.

I didn't think anything could ever part us.

When Mom died and there was nothing left
but her heirlooms and her money,
we keeled, then drifted like unanchored children.
An ocean expanded between us.
Grief is a divisive devil.

This spring crowds of dandelions camp on my lawn.
I kneel to pull them out so the seeds won't spread
in the wind, but I can't bring myself to uproot them.

Weeds, like love, are determined.
I hope the seeds I'm blowing find you.

Taking the Christmas Decorations Down in April

Christine Andersen

The wreath on the front door of my elderly neighbor's house
was brittle and brown—
had been raining pine needles since February
every time the door opened and closed.

The red bow was still bright and pointed at the corners
and all the plastic berries had stayed fixed in their orbits,
with little gold bells catching the sunlight that floods the front
of the house on clear mornings.

But I had to wonder why she left
the tired wreath hanging long past its prime,
long past the parties and the presents,
beyond the snow and chill of the winter days.
It seemed such a simple thing to take down a wreath,
pull off the decorations, walk the carcass to the woods
behind our homes.

On my acreage,
I have a Christmas graveyard.
I find towering pines that have lost low branches to storms,
with only broken nubs remaining.
I hang my old wreaths there in January.
Skeletons of my annual Christmas trees
are scattered on the forest floor.

With Easter in the air,
my neighbor's faded wreath finally came down.
She left it at the roadside on top of her garbage can
as if to make a statement.
A circle of woven grapevines with plastic lilies,
the resurrection flower, replaced Christmas on her door.

Maybe some people resist the change of seasons,
or just resist change.
Or they don't like endings of any kind,
or young neighbors who hurry to make a cemetery
against the heartbeats of old trees.

The Buffalo Statue

Connor O'Mara

The man looked at me through the TV. He was somewhere fake but real all at once. His mustache meant that he was evil and so did his crooked smile and his crooked teeth. There was a gun at his hip. A real one, I think. Or real to him. I felt my gun at my side, but this was a toy because the real thing was dangerous. I was too dangerous to hold real dangerous. The TV had eyes. The TV was eyes, and the eyes moved away from the bad guy and to the cowboy. He was tied to the train tracks and this made my hands fist and the sound I couldn't help bubble up from my throat. They said things, but I was too angry to listen. He was fake, and the train tracks were fake, but still there was good and evil and even though I had watched it one-hundred times, my rage was real because good wasn't supposed to get hit by trains.

It was all black and white.

The door opened behind me, but I was too busy being angry and watching the TV watch them. Hey, buddy, he said. It's been a while, he said. Happy birthday. He came beside me and watched along while my eyes flicked from the screen and across the wall and beside me, up and down, side to side, like spiders running everywhere.

I came down special to see you, buddy. Thirty is a big one. He wrapped his arm around me, let the weight of it press into me. It sunk down burning. Then I remembered the next thing the TV sees and his arm didn't bother me so much. You still like this show? Good. The cowboy had escaped.

I leaned into him, head on shoulder.

We ate with Mommy and Daddy and they talked a lot with Brother as I stood beside the table wearing my leather vest and my cowboy hat and my cowboy boots, with my gun tucked into my underwear—those were white. Brother looked different and for a while I couldn't figure out why, but then I realized that his face looked like Daddy's old face. I started to tear up and threw my banana on the ground because I didn't want my face to look any different, and if he got Daddy's old face then that meant that Mommy's was the only one left and I didn't like makeup.

They told me to hush and I did and Brother told me that he had something special for me. A trip. Something exciting, he said. They said that I had to wear pants and this made me cry again, but soon Brother and I were driving north and he was talking to me like I was going to talk back.

Mom and Dad sure look old, don't they, buddy?

We drove through town and he told me that things looked the same. He pointed out new buildings and the new reservoir on the south side of town and the bright mural painted against brick near the elementary school. I smoked my first cigarette there, he said. After he pointed out everything new, he said again how it was the same. It has the same sunshine, light, he said. As I remember it. I didn't understand, but he nodded like this was true and I believed him.

The old folks were strange this morning though, he said. Do you ever go to the lake with Mom? I went to the lake this morning and all the old folks looked the same but instead of looking at the water, hearing it, they're looking at phones. It's sad.

They look the same but are different and the town is different in ways but because of the fake town he has inside him it's the same.

We kept driving.

Halfway to the surprise we stopped at a little rat-colored building that Brother liked because it was time for hot chocolate. We parked and I sat inside the car while he swung his knees out with the rest of his body, and then walked farther away and disappeared behind the door. After a while, while I sat there humming, he came out from behind the door holding two small white cups. When he got back in the car he was shaking his head like something was wrong, but I didn't know what because he had what he had come for.

Everyone here is just like back in the city, he said. Those kids in there were exactly like the old folks from earlier. When I was their age I would be spilling shit and hollering, just causing all hell to break loose. But they just sat there, in a circle, like—like little prayermen, looking at their phones, not saying a damn word. It's a shame. We've declawed them.

I drank and he drank and we kept on driving. He didn't talk anymore and I thought about how driving was always like this—it makes people talk at me and then it makes them real quiet. I watched the hills build on themselves and then flatten out. I watched the grass for a long long way growing forever.

We parked. I looked up and there was the sun, hot and white. I looked down and there was my shadow like a little black puddle I was standing in.

Brother told me about the park. He told me about how much fun we would have. He talked about the sights, the activities and the food, while our puddles followed us.

At the front gate the metal shined and there was a big white box with a woman in it. She had long rope hair. Hi there, folks. Welcome. She talked about the park and scanned something on Brother's phone and then I thought we were allowed to go inside, but we weren't. She kept on talking about people and other things. She sounded like the short commercials between all my TV shows, talking too fast. While she talked Brother's face looked like a question and her face got real red. Then she took a big breath and it paled again. Oh, and we've got a petting zoo for the little ones and the best corndogs on God's green earth, I swear it. She smiled. Y'all have fun now.

Right away there were too many people. I didn't like that. There were loud families and people in costumes and kids. There were even horses walking around. It smelled like tires and dirt and something sweet and my stomach hurt looking at it all.

It's just like your westerns, Brother said. He nudged me. You get to be a real-life cowboy. He took a step forward, blocking the sun with his hand.

For a minute I thought about what he had said. I had never seen a real-life cowboy. I didn't even know they existed. I thought all cowboys lived in TVs and books about a long long time ago. Brother was smiling and he took my hand and started walking me. In the distance, roller coasters lifted like birds.

We walked around the park and I decided that it was definitely real—the buildings, the people, the horses. It all looked like my TV shows but it all felt fake and I didn't know why. It wasn't fake in the same way, a fun way, like my toy gun or the TV shows. We walked past a place called a saloon. We then went through old looking candyshops where little kids begged and cried, past barbershops and barnyards, and into a large brown building with real things displayed in glass boxes all along the walls. In the back there was a smaller room where you could buy fake toys which looked like the real things in the glass boxes in the fake building. I started to get upset. It all reminded me of a TV show Mommy and I had watched where a man died and someone brought him back to life and then he was a monster, and green. It was like they did that to this park one-hundred times until they did it so well that the monster looked the same as the man but felt just as scary. The park was a fake place about a real thing a long long time ago but the park wasn't trying to be like the real thing but instead a different fake thing of which I was unaware and I didn't understand how you could make a fake thing out of another fake thing and then do it all again one-hundred times, or why you would want to.

I pulled and ran away.

By the time I reached the saloon again, Brother was panting like a dog hands on knees. Damn you're fast, he said.

I took a seat on the wooden steps leading up to the saloon. I was hungry.

Hungry, aren't ya?

Around us were many food carts with round people cooking and selling and eating from them. Brother left me alone on the steps while he went up to a woman dipping. She smiled a white smile at him and handed him a little basket. I turned backwards as someone left the saloon, and its batwing doors flapped and creaked and stilled again. Under I could see women's dresses spinning on the floor like water. Brother sat next to me and handed over the basket.

We could go sit in there, he suggested. Might have A.C.

I said nothing. Started eating.

For the next hour we sat in shade as the sun lowered from its hanging and soon revealed us in its light. Brother had gone and gotten that beer, but now it was finished. His hands now cupped uselessly in his lap. I looked up and everything was moving. Cowboys, clowns, real people, horses and some goats were gathering in the middle of the square. The man at its center looked like me—he had a vest and a hat and boots—but had deep lines in his face and tan skin. At his side, a toy gun, like mine, flopped fishlike. Ladies and gentlemen! he cried. The bank robbery will begin in five minutes!

Will the O'Malley gang escape? a woman cried out.

Or will we stop them? said another.

People dug in their pockets and pulled out phones, and during this time I sat up very straight. Brother was looking at me now, his eyes looking like Mommy's eyes before she tells me she loves me.

The doors behind us exploded and five men burst out of them holding onto their belt-buckles and shouldering toy rifles. One carried a sack painted with a bright green dollar sign. They surrounded us and yelled things into the crowd. I watched as one tucked a tag back into his neckline and another scratched his butt. Their leader said something mean about the sheriff's mommy and I reached for one of their toys but he swatted at my hand like a bug.

You'll never get away with this, O'Malley! the sheriff said.

Then they advanced.

After it was all over I felt like I had been tricked. It wasn't real. The good and evil here was a lazy good and evil that I didn't care

about at all. I thought about why my TV good and evil was different and I thought maybe the goodguy and badguy that the TV watched really thought it was good and evil and these people didn't. That made a big difference in the realness of fake things. That and their guns only sounded like popcorn not guns. In the end, the sheriff handcuffed O'Malley and took him away. My brother sighed and looked at me. Wasn't that fun, buddy? He wasn't good at pretending either.

As the goodguys and badguys went away, the others went into the crowd which had formed around them. A scaly old man, with black glasses covering his eyes and a cane poking the ground before him, moved towards us. Dodging people. Snaking through. I remembered there was a kid in school who wore dark glasses and used a cane and I remembered that he was no fun in hide and seek. Now reaching us, at the foot of the stairs, the old man grinned a wide grin and took out a camera. Flash.

Lovely smiles, gentlemen. Why don't we try that again.

Again we were flashed.

Beautiful. Just wonderful stuff. He took a third picture, and I moaned and quickly got to my feet.

Hey, why don't you cut that out, said Brother.

Don't mean to bother. Only trying to capture precious moments. The best a blind man can. He smiled that smile which made my bones hurt. Photos available in the giftshop. Cheap, cheap, cheap.

I rushed past, and from behind he said see you around, gentlemen.

I ran for a long way, to the very back of the park where a chainlink fence stood and further tallgrass grew. The people's noise had died. Only their footsteps walking about in the air and I thought I could hear the wind.

Brother started saying things, but the words were dull. I held onto the fence and looked and then I sat in the grass and looked more. He sat beside me. Soon he put his arm around me and we began to gently hum together as a plane passed overhead through the blue blue sky and we watched it all get smaller and we joined together somewhere that wasn't right here or right now until something switched and the world again became itself.

I stood and together we walked along the boundary. Soon a stream began and the plainness of where we were changed into a park with benches and old people and children in strollers.

Then we found it.

It was standing sadly in a patch of yellow grass, its eye-paint

scratched and blurry. I could tell it was a buffalo because of the way it was and the way buffalo looked in my books and from the one time I saw a living buffalo and Daddy told me the sad story about how people came and killed lots of them. The statue wasn't a living buffalo but still it was not fake. It had real sadness in it. I could see in its body that it used to be a part of a tree and that whoever made it wanted that tree to be remembered. It knew about things it couldn't understand and when I looked at it it made me feel more real than I already was. It was old and scarred and kind of ugly but it was the only thing with real love in it for one-hundred miles except for Brother next to me.

I walked near and touched it.

You like that one, buddy? he asked.

I sat down in the yellow grass and touched its treehooves, grooves, all kniferaw. Brother asked something but again I did not hear. A few hours passed, and after Brother had gone and left and gone and left, he told me that it was time to leave and I bellowed and I cried. He took me by the arm, dragging me away with tears running down my face and snot dripping from my nose. In the car he held my hand and told me he was sorry but that it was getting late, that Mommy and Daddy would worry if we weren't home soon, that they would miss me. We drove and I looked out my window and he looked out his. Next time buddy, he said. Next time we can go look at flowers.

The Family Inspires Operatic Recreation

Rosa Arlotto

I have a great liking for my brother's house
really everything appears delightful and interesting.
Frost windows frame the plain beyond
nature whitens in the fields
blankets of snow on frozen boughs
ice weighing on bare trees
and a light wind through the ground.
The amber of silence and calm of winter
is picturesque
and images of peace
descend upon us.
Some distance off the sound of birds
scrambling up a tree
begin their flight.
My brother has spread polenta and pork on the long table
and wine pours down our cheeks.
Another populous feast
another festive day.
The two newly untamed animals
meet for the first time
they are so small side by side
that I could have bowed.
Barefoot, the older ones tumble about among furniture
they collide on the pavement
their cheeks spread on the ground.
The Maple Leafs win the game on TV.
Cheers are in the midst of the room, and there is spirit; it sings.
I cherish this time together.
The long arduous and futile search for the miraculous has subsided,
and the family inspires operatic recreation.

Gaia Africanus

Patrick Sylvian

Gaia, how could I mourn something
I never truly knew? My father
told me of his delight after drinking
clear cold water from pristine brooks, and
how mist would hide the afro-like moun-
tains.

I wish I could reverse time,
erasing years of unbearable summers
with brooks and streams drying up—

I'm in mourning, Gaia, for you, my father,
and my younger son who will never
see how beautiful you were
with hibiscus flowers in your hair.

Last night, Gaia, you came
to my dream again, still wearing
your burning blue dress.
You smelled like acerbic ash.

Gagging, you begged me
to hunt the tie-wearing
vampires who slowly drained
your blood through metal straws.

Why me, Gaia? I'm nothing,
but a poet with a foreign tongue
searching my way like a lost leaf
drifting against a river's flow.

Unable to speak for yourself,
you placed your burning index finger
on my tongue like a eucharist.
I smelled roses in the morning air.

My father is with you. He is mourning
the loss of his land—acres filled
with breadfruit, mango, coconut,
and orange trees. His tears, like yours,
are acid rain mixed with uranium ash.

The Default Paterfamilias

A. Raymond Moschina

"It's gonna be OK," I repeated into the phone.

Somewhere outside of Ann Arbor, on a highway going north, my voice played over the speakers of a brand-new Subaru.

A *Subaru*.

The kind of highly rated, no-nonsense foreign SUV that, in my youth, I could have never imagined my parents owning.

I remember the groans whenever a Honda would speed around us on I-94. Back then, people in Detroit used to call them "rice-burners," which is a wildly racist thing to say in hindsight. Yet it was as ubiquitous a term in the 90s as another offensive "R" word that we don't say anymore.

Things change. People change.

They get cancer.

My dad worked in body shops for most of his adult life, despite possessing degrees in medical technology and microbiology. In the 1980s, I was told, laboratories didn't pay nearly as well as the automotive industry. So, after a short stint processing blood samples and running diagnostics, he began a career in the automotive industry. It suited him fine as he was a lifelong fan of hot rods.

On some Saturdays I would go with him to "the office," which was a dealership on 8-Mile in Detroit (yes, the same 8-Mile made famous by Eminem). It was conveniently located between the cemetery where Aretha Franklin is buried and a topless bar called The Booby Trap.

While my dad worked, I would explore the back of the shop, climbing in and out of strangers' cars, pretending they were mine. Occasionally another bodyman would bring in his son, Terrence, and we would go on adventures together. A decommissioned passenger van became our spaceship; a stack of old tires was mission control. Today, the whiff of rubber and car paint while waiting for an oil change hit me like a gust of warm wind.

When the excitement of being at the shop wore off, I would grumble to my dad that I was bored. He set me up in the area for customers with pens and scratch paper. If no one was around, he might turn the TV to a channel playing cartoons. I wondered why he couldn't spare the time to sit with me. (My own children, well familiar with the sight of me huffily tapping away at my laptop, now wonder the same.)

What did I know?

For decades, my dad worked between 60 and 70 hours per

week. He wore pressed collared shirts with the dealership's name embroidered on the chest. Even after he assumed a "desk job" where he faced off with insurance companies on behalf of his customers, he'd still come home with black marks on his knees and back. They were evidence that he had spent his day kneeling and crawling beneath cars to inspect this and that.

My mom would give him a hard time about doing too much. It was her firm belief that the Chevy dealership he retired from was destroying his body. At home, she would henpeck him when he became overinvested in a project. It happened a lot. I spent many late nights repositioning one of his ancient shop lights in an attempt to illuminate the source of some sudden plumbing emergency. "Yeeeaaargh," he'd groan while attempting to squeeze into a narrow, filthy crevice in the bowels of our home.

He groaned a lot as he got older—when sitting, when reaching, when rolling out of bed. A loud grumble from another room meant he'd soon be inbound. I think of him now when I make my own little squawks of pain, the results of heel spurs and sore knees from the early morning runs I'm too stubborn to give up.

For my dad, pain was a consistent part of daily life. But it was nothing to dwell on. At least he was still here, he seemed to figure. His mother, father, and two brothers had all passed on, making him the paterfamilias of our namesake by default. When I asked him about the profundity of being the eldest member of our bloodline, he was totally indifferent.

"But you're the goddamn paterfamilias!" I insisted, riffing on a line from one of his favorite movies.

He shrugged as if to say, "Yeah, I guess."

There was no interest in patrilineal navel-gazing. Life went on. Stiffness and chronic pain was just the price of admission.

It became worse with the cancer.

The way it started was with a white poop. Others might have laughed and thought, "What did I *eat*?" But my science-minded father - along with my mother, who spent 30 years as a medical transcriptionist - immediately recognized that something was seriously wrong. The issue, they deduced, had to be with either his liver or gallbladder.

Tests revealed a cancerous mass on his bile duct.

For the better part of a year, my parents journeyed back and forth from their home in the middle of the state down to University of Michigan Hospital. It was a four-hour trip each way. My dad, unable to process food properly, had a feeding tube inserted through the wall of his belly. He shed so much weight that

I found it difficult to look at his withering face without bursting into tears. His voice shrank. His hair, already gray, turned white.

During the worst of it, I left my wife and young daughter in Maryland to work from my parents' home for a week... to spend time with my dad "just in case." He seemed most excited for me to install a ventilation fan in their upstairs bathroom, a project he was unable - for the first time - to do himself.

The week after my visit, my dad was scheduled to begin chemotherapy, the final step in a process they believed would determine his fate. I sat off to the side as he and my mom had a video conference with the oncologist. The surprisingly upbeat doctor seemed confident that the right medication could do for my dad what other doctors had made sound impossible.

We braced for the worst; hair falling out, vomiting, *even more* weight loss. But it never happened. For him, the worst of it was the discomfort of taking a bullet-sized green pill each morning and each night. Beyond that, he was happy as a clam. In fact, he put on weight. With the feeding tube removed, he was free to eat whatever he wanted.

As quickly as the life had seemed to drain from my dad, it returned. His trademark sense of humor was back on full display as he dished out odd jokes and interrupted conversations with my mom's sisters to make full-throated references to Star Trek. Even his hair began to look darker.

When my parents flew out to visit us, my dad was eager to be assigned tasks to help around the house. If my mom felt he had done enough, she would shoo him back to the couch. "That'll do it, Steve!" she'd say, exasperated, as if it was the hundredth time she'd had to reset him that day. "Sit down, sit down!" The types of intense projects he was famous for - deep-cleaning the dishwasher, spot-cleaning the couch cushions - were no longer permissible.

The paterfamilias had been benched.

In truth, even prior to his cancer diagnosis, I thought often about my father's death. It's occupied a greater space in my mind since I became a father myself. When I wasn't obsessing over my daughter's - and eventually my son's - health, my cerebrum would serve up worrisome questions like...

"Will my father dance at his grandchildren's weddings?"

"Will he see them graduate?"

And the most persistent worry, exacerbated by the 500 miles between us... "Will you be there when he goes?"

When my mother's voice broke on the phone, I knew the

cancer was back. I could hear the road moving under their brand-new Subaru.

"It's gonna be OK," I told them.

What did I know?

The last time I saw my dad was in a small-town funeral parlor that could be mistaken for an upper crust family home. A thin, soft-spoken man who looked like the actor Fisher Stevens pointed us to a dimly lit room. At the center was a stretcher bearing the weight of my father's body. His belly was swollen with excess fluid. I laid a sweaty hand on his pallid forehead and wept.

In his final months, that swollen belly - officially known as ascites - had made it impossible for him to enjoy the little things he once loved; eating, playing guitar, hunching over a puzzle. All he could do was sit back and dwell on the relentless discomfort. It had finally gotten to him. Though he assured us the pain wasn't bad, his misery was apparent. His half-hearted smile and cracking voice over FaceTime made it clear that he was running out of time. He was 67 and unlikely to see 68.

I told my mother I would look at flights and head up there sometime in the coming weeks. The next night I listened over the phone as the paramedics told her that her partner of 41 years was gone.

Eight hours later, I stood in the frigid parking lot of an Enterprise Rent-a-Car in Detroit. The chipper associate gave me the choice between two Ford Fusions. "You can take the red one or the gray one," she said. I told her gray would be fine, then mumbled something about it matching the sky. I was still groggy from the 6am flight from Baltimore.

I stopped twice during the four-hour drive to my parents' house. *No. My mom's house.* The first was at a combination gas station / Tim Hortons. I picked up a soggy breakfast sandwich, an extra-large coffee, and - figuring my parents' liquor cabinet would be bare, a bottle of Four Roses. My second stop was at a rest area 50 miles up the road where I was forced to reckon with my gas station breakfast. (In fairness to Mr. Hortons, my stomach was in knots before I took my first bite.)

When I finally arrived, my mom and sister came to the car to greet me. We hugged and I started prattling on about the drive and how I didn't hit any traffic until Tawas, but there's always traffic around Tawas, ya know? My sister showed me pictures of her dogs. Soon we were all bawling.

Over the days that followed, I stayed with my mom. My sister came and went. Others visited and told stories about my dad. I

cooked. I carried things upstairs. I deflected when people asked how I was doing, turning it around on them - "But how are *you*?" I got functionally drunk. I made everyone listen to my dad's CDs. I looked at old pictures I'd seen a million times and asked my mom to identify everyone I didn't recognize.

I wrote my dad's obituary. It featured middle-of-the-road commentary like, "Steve was admired for his sense of humor, good nature and deep devotion to his family." Everyone said they liked it.

I told my mom I loved her every night before I went upstairs to sleep in their guest room. *Her guest room*. I startled my mother's elderly neighbor when sneaking out for an early run. I agonized over what was the right amount of time to stay with my mom while leaving my wife to contend with our seven-year-old daughter and two-year-old son.

After five days, I packed up my things—which now included both my dad's guitar and my grandfather's banjo—and loaded them into the gray Ford Fusion. Rather than fly, I decided to drive the 12 hours to Baltimore as it saved me from spending the day surrounded by strangers who might ask, "So what brought you to Michigan?"

It also seemed a fitting tribute to my dad - sitting for half a day, in general discomfort, in a discontinued American car.

Perhaps it served as a sort of ritual, anointing me the new default paterfamilias.

When I arrived home, my family pulled me in tight. They told me they missed me. They told me they missed grandpa. My daughter began to cry.

I held her close and whispered, "It's gonna be OK."

Unrest

L. Ward Abel

A dry month of Sundays finally leaves here
dust to mud soft as worn out old wet flannels
flapping in the breeze.

More fainting than relief the showers have
fallen like a grudge, the drought being over
and notes landing too near the other notes
for any kind of easing
to ever set in.

There had been talk of arroyos made to wait in,
torn seams tilting along boondock hills
branded by warfare, tattoos of a scar.

Now just a panting aftermath, a searing churning
almost-crazed sleep in the small
hours.

So nobody mourns avoidance of those hard days—
the dodged bullet, a history misremembered
before the fact.

But it all leaves an aged morning pall, takes, gives
little good in return except the rain that follows.
The rains
always follow.

Dragonfly Nymph

Barbara Meier

The slinky submarine rises slowly to the top,
only to gracefully fall to the bottom.
She hides her brutal snappers
while perched in the substrate.
Suddenly, she sends her expendable jaw
to nab the fat-bodied tadpole swimming by.
The tadpole dangles from her mouth with a broken tail.
It succumbs to the lair amongst the water weeds.

This larvae of nastiness
with such a graceful dance and a lovely name -
nymph.
Innocent looking till she eats.
Graduating to filmy wings of helicopter death,
bright blues and magnificent greens.

Index Cards

Noah Lane Browne

Mom loved index cards.

She constantly wrote little notes, to herself or to the universe, in flair pen. Usually black ink, sometimes red. She scattered them throughout the house—stuck to the bulletin board or cabinets, wedged into books she was reading or planned to read, cast haphazardly into drawers. A common spot was in the drawer beside the phone, or thrown next to the hair dryer and nail clippers. But her favorite was to tape them to the microwave, where they would remain for weeks, until the edges started to fray and the ink began to run.

In her loopy, half-cursive, she scribbled down things she needed to do (Call Dr. Goldman's office); things she didn't want to forget (Andy-birthday); things that were recommended to her (David Sedaris: new book); things that, apparently, she wanted (*Friends*—The one that goes behind the scenes full episode HD), things I had explained to her (what "TL;DR" means); things my brother had explained to her (how to attach a photo to an email); things that inspired her (a Dalai Lama quote about compassion); things her hyperverbal four-year-old grandchild had said to her ("As you can see").

If you said something just arguably memorable, she'd stop you mid-sentence and say, "Wait, let me get an index card!" And you'd abide, patiently standing by while she found her flair pen and a fresh stack.

The standard-sized index card—invented by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in the mid-18th century to catalogue plant and animal species—is 3x5 inches. But I never saw one of those in the house. Mom only used 4x6 cards, relying heavily on those additional nine square inches to complete a thought. But even a 4x6 card forces discipline of expression. There is no space for surplusage; you need to know the point and get to it quickly.

Growing up, the change in index cards dotting the kitchen was almost imperceptible. One by one, after serving their purpose—a birthday passed, a movie watched, a quote's resonance faded—they were replaced.

But when I moved away for college and for the decades after, each time I came home the shift would be stark. All previous index cards had vanished, superseded by a new constellation of information and inspiration. They were a snapshot of my mother's thoughts, her world, and of her lightheartedness. In recent years, she had taken to watching an episode of *Friends* every day, and would seize on Phoebe's one-liners ("Oh, I wish I could, but I don't want to") for index-card preservation.

Mom died last year. Not long after, the grief still raw and sharp, I urgently needed to see her hand-written words. Anything to bring her a little bit closer. I scoured the kitchen. There was nothing taped to the microwave. Usually a reliable spot, there were no notes in the drawer next to the phone. Flipping through some of her books, I hoped to find one used as a bookmark. Nothing. I should not have been surprised; in the last few months her spirit remained bright, but her lungs were giving out. Trips into the kitchen were rare.

One more way that death is cruel. It renders scarce the once-abundant.

Then I looked up towards the bulletin board. It was covered in medical bills, insurance documents, hospice forms. But there in the corner of the bulletin board, I saw one remaining index card written in her unmistakable half-cursive. Judging from the number of pushpin holes (used to reposition it over time) and the repeated smudging of some of the black ink (were those fingerprints?), it must have been there a long time. But I couldn't recall ever seeing it before.

This index card—her last—was different from all others I had seen over the four decades I had known her. It was not a grocery list or a reminder of someone's birthday or a funny quote from *Friends*. It was not ephemera or whimsy. Rather, it was a message meant to penetrate and endure. It was, in equal parts, admonition, command, and encouragement. Reading it, I could hear her voice filling all the empty spaces.

The card said: Know your own truth.

I tucked the index card into my book and brought it home.

A Ribbon in the Sky (After Stevie Wonder)

Lucas Maas

That a star would guide you my way

Did I ease into this world, into your arms, with the same grace as the piano keys that begin our favorite song? Or when I wailed at my newfound existence, giving my voice to the world for the first time, did it sound like the warm nectar of his voice? Many years later, digging through the bottomless pit of eclectic CDs, you leaned over the BELOW $10 poster to pull out what would be our most treasured possession. "Oh, yes, Luca, this is it," you said as your eyes glossed over the cover, your visual receptors taking in the Mahogany album cover with Stevie Wonder's signature head tilt. Your eyes met mine in shared excitement and we hustled through the self-checkout line so that we could pop it in the player when we got to the car.

There's a ribbon in the sky for our love

In your cherry red 2004 Chevy Cavalier, we bumped that CD everywhere, especially in the mornings to start our day. We'd drive to school, cutting through the humid, Floridian morning joyfully singing "For Once in My Life" and swaying to "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" where you made sure to hit every adlib, giving the perfect amount of time between the chorus "You are the Sunshine of my life...yeah! I know you'll always be around" and grabbed my hand to reassure me that yes, you would always be around. And using your infinite musical wisdom and lyrical thought patterns, you assured me that you'd always be around because—cue piano keys—"There's a ribbon in the sky for our love..." you'd sing to me, your gold hoop earrings dancing in the space between your neck and your thick, curly hair as you tried your best to serenade me and keep your eyes on the road. You always played that song twice in a row.

We can't lose with God on our side

Father Rock sold you that 2004 cherry red Chevy Cavalier for a fraction of what it was worth because he knew you needed it to help take care of the three of us. This was his way. So, every Sunday evening we went to mass, watching an elderly Father

Rock pace, shoeless, in front of a captivated audience who hung on every word of peace, love, and togetherness. He conducted his sermons shoeless because of a time when a woman watched him from outside the church, scared that because she didn't have shoes she wouldn't be welcomed inside. Father Rock noticed this and took *his* shoes off, escorting and reassuring the woman that all were welcome. Father Rock stood there at the threshold of St. Lawrence, shoeless, always trying to talk to us and to make sure that I was coming to confession. Sitting in the car he sold you, you would play "Ribbon in the Sky", pointing upward past the cloth lining that was sagging from the ceiling, during the apex of the vocals, and praise Father Rock by saying *what you put in the universe, is what you'll get out of it.*

We'll find strength in each tear we cry

In four months we had been evicted twice. The first time, you woke me up from our new place in Sun Lake, telling me to pack our things after only one night as you lied about how you got your black and swollen eye. Your boss, Derek, would call and text me asking if I knew where you were after you dropped me off at school and headed to work in the old Circuit City building on Gunn Hwy. You also left me. You dropped me off at my football game in Nuccio one Saturday morning and told me you were looking for parking. Your tears permeated through the phone when I finally heard from you, over a week later, and you took that time to reassure me that you begged the sheriff's office to call me to let me know where you were. This was different from all the other times. Different from selling our pets or pawning our PSPs and then helping us look for them. This time, you left me. But when you finally called, tears ceaselessly ran down my face, endless like Jordan, washing away your sins and bathing you in forgiveness. You assured me that it would never happen again. I always believed you.

From now on it will be you and I

We'd walk down the long stretch of stores, the white floor tiles and white walls reflecting every UV ray brought on by the Florida sun through the skylight that illuminated all of the perfume, jewelry, and cell phone case kiosks planted in the center. By thirteen, I was already taller than you, having to look down and through your 90s-styled rectangle lenses to see the eyes that you

had given me. We'd walk down the long stretch of stores, your arm in mine, the crevice of your elbow scarred and mutilated by the car you rolled a block away from our house. You hook your arm in mine, youthful and unscarred. "Ya know, Luca," you'd say, always neglecting the S in the name that you chose for me, "I don't care how many girlfriends or wives you'll have in your life, I know I'll always be your main lady." And then you'd rest your head on my shoulder. After you rested your head for the last time on a beautiful Sunday morning, one where you'd normally throw our CD in and sing our favorite Stevie Wonder songs, I walked down the long stretch of stores, alone. While glancing at the space beside me, your words still fluttered in my mind like a ribbon in the sky.

A Ribbon in the Sky for our love

The day I turned fifteen, I stared at my phone waiting for you to call even though they told me you were gone eleven days before. The following day we had your memorial service at St. Lawrence where Father Rock fought through the tears that fell upon his shoeless feet, reminding your loved ones of the smile that warmed our hearts or the "giiirrrrrrrrrrrllllll" you'd throw at us when hearing something crazy or before leading into some juicy gossip. Each moment with you made us feel like a ribbon—bright, beautiful, *free*. During the service, we sang your praises, ignored your faults, and laughed at your embarrassing moments. After, we divided what little you had. Newer cars don't have CD players, but I keep our black, leather CD zip-around in my car in case one day it decides to grow one. I open it from time to time, running my thumb along the top side of the disks while reading the title and tracks like you did when it was your turn to choose a CD, wanting to feel you at that moment, wishing the silence could be filled with your breathing in the seat next to mine. Instead, I settle for Stevie and his ambrosia vocals like a wave on the track, and I think of your hand on mine, gripping it and shaking it in the air when Stevie hits the crescendo, asserting that there is and always will be, a ribbon in the sky for our love.

Come Winter

Ann Howells

Hollies bear a rash of red; mistletoe weeps
waxy tears. Frost plumes the panes,
silvers cars, paves walks
with diamond dust. Three days of soft-filtered light,
sueded sky, makes children pray for snow,
slushy snowballs, whooshing Delaford Hill
on plastic sleds, tin lids, flattened cardboard.
A world blanketed
like furniture in a vacant house,
marred only by delicate calligraphy of birds,
thumbprints of squirrels.
But the grey-haired weatherman
who conjures snow with dotted lines,
can also make it vanish, a feat of prestidigitation.
He draws a large L on the map, circles it,
and snow passes us by.
In its place we have ice – layer after layer –
impervious coating.
Streets become glass. Flowers and leaves
transform into Gilhooly sculptures.
Knife-sharp air scrapes cheeks,
needles fingers and toes. In summer,
mercury in the thermometer shoots skyward.
But for now, we are certain
we'll never be warm again.

Nasturtium and Crabapple

Kenneth Pobo

Winter's faint knock
gets louder. I check on
the last garden
survivors: nasturtiums.
Five still bloom
despite two frosts. Maybe
being close to the ground
protects them. A good way
to live, staying so close
to Earth that you can hear
her heartbeat,
each breath.

The crabapple has lost
all his leaves. Empty
branches reach up
to an indifferent sky.
If I stay out,
I'll be more crabapple
than nasturtium. The sky
doesn't care if I've
locked myself out.
It has clouds to tend to,
places to go,
storms to invent.

Us, The Tides
Anirudh Saji Nair

We stand at the edge of history,
looking back at the shadows
of walls built in fear,
faces turned to stone
in the name of difference.

Yet here, in the quiet spaces between us,
there is a heartbeat.
A rhythm that speaks not of borders,
but of belonging—
not of tribes, but of touch.

You and I, we are fragments
of the same ancient song,
our voices once drowned in the noise of division.
But listen,
can you hear it now?
The rising hum of togetherness,
the swell of something new—
a chorus where every tone matters.

I see you,
not as an other,
but as a reflection
of the same sun that warms my skin,
of the same earth beneath my feet,
shaped by hands, though different,
crafted with the same love.

And though the world remembers
the scars of yesterday—
the unspeakable things we have done
in the name of power,
in the name of pride—
we are still capable
of creating a new story.

Where pain does not echo forever,
and hands once used for harm
are now open,
building bridges,
tending gardens
where life can grow wild and free.

We are the tides,
always shifting, always meeting,
washing away what divides,
bringing with us the chance to begin again.

and hands once used for harm
are now open,
building bridges,
tending gardens
where life can grow wild and free.

We are the tides,
always shifting, always meeting,
washing away what divides,
bringing with us the chance to begin again.

Foil the Feminist At Your Peril

Jane Barnard

Women now claim 11.8 percent of 15,000 chief executives, financial officers and other top roles at publicly traded U.S. companies, down from 12.2 percent the previous year.
—*The Washington Post* 4/03/24

Have you tried to sync your phone, laptop and tablet lately? I'm flailing my arms in the techno-swamp of Nothing Works. Or works as planned, or works for a while until it breaks, or works not at all according to the directions, which are written in Russian by Putin.

With mild post-feminist chagrin, I do confess that I can't fix anything. This is disturbing to a woman who revered Gloria Steinem and has always, sometimes reluctantly, had to rely on herself. Feminism shot my Disney dreams of a man-rescuer all to hell. For the better. Mostly.

Picture my younger self, decked out in a navy-blue power blazer with a ridiculous flowery scarf tied in a bow. At the end of the long polished cherry table in the corporate boardroom, I was presenting a new IT project proposal. My hands trembled, my palms were sweaty, my Secret Roll-on was failing me. My 5'8' frame felt like a miniature garden troll in that room full of senior male executives with shiny ties and get-it-over-with eyes. I did. They dismissed me with a cursory hand-wave. I slunk back to my cubicle and stuffed myself with my shame-drug of choice in those days, two packages of Little Debbie Nutty Buddies.

My refrigerator light is out. Mind you, this has its advantages. I can't see—and as yet can't smell—the aged, overripe, expired jars toward the back. At Ace Hardware I purchase a new fridge bulb, the right voltage, ohms, RPMs, whatever. I proceed to twist my own overripe but not-yet-expired body into an impossible yoga position, aiming for the light socket placed where even a long-armed orangutan from Borneo could not reach. I clench my teeth. I whisper, Of course I can, Gloria. I contort my spine, screw in the bulb, and voila: nothing. All is still in darkness, formless and void. And behold: no light on the mysterious back shelf. What is that smell? Gorgonzola turning green? A woeful shriveled peach? A sprouting potato stuck there since the Civil War? I jiggle the bulb in case there is a short. Let there be light, I command. Let There Be Saint Rosie the Riveter swooping down from her heavenly

workbench. Nothing. Let there be an aging but still fierce feminist who occasionally yearns for a Prince Charming with a tool belt.

Today the fridge is still dark. I'm used to it. Frankly, illuminated leftovers, like men in tights, are greatly overrated.

Now it's the vacuum cleaner. As I steer the Hulk-Hogan-of a-beast across the living room carpet, I hear a pathetic whine. Uh-oh. Hulk is KO'ed. I see none of those telltale carpet pathways. Next, I throw down my gauntlet, a test crumb. It's not sucked up. I mutter to myself, Fine, St Rosie, you who promised to leave me never, I'm bereft, and You withhold when I'm most in need? Fine. I will fix my own vacuum. And then I say to myself those words which should never be uttered in my lifetime, How Hard Can It Be?

There are 6 screws on the faceplate that require a Phillips screwdriver. Gird thou my loins, Gloria. I open the vacuum and Eureka (actually, a Hoover), there lay the culprit, a broken belt, hanging its sorry head.

At Ace Hardware, I sidle up nonchalantly to the postpubescent sales clerk. Trying to sound casual, I say, "I need a size 1A belt for a Hoover series 2y." No response. I announce, louder, "I'm fixing my vacuum." He barely turns around, just points and says, "Aisle 5." I want to grab his skinny freckled arm and say, "Listen up you dolt. Does *your* grandma fix her own appliances?"

I stretch the new rubber belt around the one of the thingies, replace the faceplate, and voila: the vacuum cleaner works! Hulk's back in the ring! I gun the engine, pumping my fist in the air. Cracker crumbs, do your worst—I am woman, hear me roar.

So *now* do I get a seat at the executive boardroom table instead of vacuuming under it?

Serenity

Sheila Rittenberg

Sherwood and Annette understood each other, like most couples married thirty years. And now they understood they ought to move to tiny living. To two tiny houses, to be clear, joined by a common deck. Still connected. Still married.

Annette had told him it was her time now, time without responsibilities. She wanted space. Whimsy. Sex (still). She wanted Sherwood. But on different terms.

For his part, Sherwood thought the whole idea was hilarious and fun and a bit adventurous. Why not? He wouldn't miss the house. The lawn mowing. The fridge and HVACfilters forever in need of changing. The broken window screens. The dishwasher four kids had randomly filled, dishes broken or still dirty. Cooking the same pasta, the same way—puttanesca, family favorite—week after week. Besides, he'd be able to be creative, artistic, in his bitty digs. All those years at Urban Architects, he'd never been able to really let go.

Sherwood was known for his barge of a body and surprisingly gentle voice. People ogled when he and Annette were at parties or dance lessons or their favorite Italian joint, given their great disparity in size. Beauty and The Beast? Not quite. Sherwood had his own allure: Black hair still plentiful. Eyes deep blue (from dad) and Japanese-shaped (from mom). Tall, not porky. Muscular, not flaccid.

Annette had told him she hardly noticed the rubbery red bump on Sherwood's forehead when they first met, even though it stood out. Not your usual birthmark, he'd said. Hemangiomas were different, blood vessels coiled together, luckily for Sherwood not over his eye. She'd told him he laughed so easily and stunned her with such gentleness and had such crystal blue eyes, how could she focus on the mark?

Annette herself was sparse and silky like elusive strands of spider web. Sherwood was a fist of empty. Annette flew. To work. To volunteer. To school recitals and kids' volleyball/judo/piano/art lessons. Composed and pretty, hummingbird-flitty, she'd breathe into the house with bags of groceries or garden supplies, a new yoga mat or the perfect drawer organizers.

Sherwood wanted her. Kept wanting her. He figured she wouldn't have as much to do when they downsized. They could focus on each other in tiny living. He imagined finding her on their shared deck, calm as puff clouds in a still heat, planting daffodils or tulips in peacock-blue pots. Or, he dreamed, he'd knock softly on her door and she'd coo, come in, and there she'd be, in silk itself, draped on a small feathery couch she'd found at the Salvation Army, her legs slightly open, inviting.

And then the garage sale, the furniture donations, the housecleaners. They'd moved.

Now, Sherwood tinkered with his bike on the shared deck. He chased his sixty-mile rides with Advil and a stinking hot bath. Annette used to complain about Sherwood's rides, the time they took. Now she herself was away most days. He learned why, slowly, without pumping for answers. Pilates, reading circles, cooking classes, volunteering at the indigent clinic, gabbing with girlfriends, why she couldn't have learned to cook before (Annette, in the kitchen, a disaster), he didn't know. Why she needed to read in a group, he didn't know. Why she was helping at a clinic when she'd complained endlessly about Emergency Room medicine, he didn't know. She'd become an ER doctor for the shift work, the predictable schedule. It sort of worked but sort of didn't. Duties running over. Filling in for colleagues. Department meetings.

These days, she'd come home to her little adobe-style house, tiptoeing to not alert Sherwood, he knew. He could practically feel her presence, a prickly sensation hitting him in the gut. He'd poke out of his own door, raise his eyebrows Groucho Marx style, a gesture they knew to mean: how-about-a-drink. She'd blow him a kiss, half-limping from so much walking, a feigned yawn, a tilt of the head to the side, hands pressed together like a pillow holding up her face. She was going to fall into bed.

At their big house (it already seemed so long ago), he'd plunk around the sprawling kitchen, looking for leftovers, restless at two in the morning without Annette. In spite of four kids and various dogs, there was always a murky shadow of solitude he couldn't shake off.

At least now Sherwood's loneliness didn't echo in cavernous rooms. The contained spaces of the tiny house coddled him. He loved being able to touch counters from the kitchen island, reach his razor from the shower, slide from couch to front door in two easy strides.

The new floor-to-ceiling bookshelf he'd designed soothed him.

Curled paperback covers, dusty hardbacks, books from coffee-table to pocket-size. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Rabbit at Rest*, *Lonesome Dove*—the familiar titles bathed him. The hidden pull-down storage spaces relieved him of the kind of clutter he and Annette had endured. The pastel taupe and gray and indigo walls he'd painted with a pent-up flair flowed together, an abstract painting, starting downstairs and then up the slim stairwell to his bedroom. The colors carried him as if on a wave.

The big house had actually had some benefit. It worked for Annette, her constant bustle and moving around, and for them, when they needed to hide out from the kids, whether for lovemaking or fighting. He remembered yelling at her that one time, could she just sit down and talk to him for once, and she stormed off with a slammed front door and a peel of tires tearing out of the driveway. Hours later, she came home. Mascara smeared, cheeks messed with dried tears, her sighing both musty and sharp from cigarettes and booze.

"What's going on, Annette?" Sherwood had asked.

"I don't know. I feel trapped sometimes, like I've got to keep moving. Or I'll panic."

"Trapped with me?"

"No. I love you." A coy pause. "Most of the time." She broke into that charmed, dimpled half-smile, leaned over and kissed him fiercely, muzzled his mouth with her hand when he tried to speak, sat on his lap, and that was the end of anything else that night. They were lost in their coupling. Now, tilting back on a deck chair and musing at the moon, he sighed into the nirvana of that moment.

Sherwood's tiny kitchen was a victory. Knives and pots hung from an industrial steel bar. Svelte cantered island had drawers and pockets and shelves for any need. Every one of the appliances was black—Annette would hate this, he'd chuckled—and stood strong against the cool blue light cast from the violet walls.

The oven could hold no more than a two-person casserole. No problem as long as Sherwood could practice his croissants. He was going to get them right. He knew croissants well from his architecture years in Paris, that satiny silvery time. Since the tiny house move, he'd taken a baking class and then a few more. After each batch, he'd serve up a croissant on a napkin (imprinted with the Eiffel Tower), lay it one steel-gray plate, and leave the crispy buttery crescent on Annette's doorstep. That same night, the empty plate would be back at his door with a note. So-so. Nothing

else. No Love, Ettie(his nickname for her). No xoxoxo (she used them emailing friends or even on notes to the gardener back at the house!). One time, the croissant came back untouched. No note. He lay awake for hours, worrying. The next time, a playful note. I'll get fat eating these. You'll have more to nibble.

Indeed, separateness seemed more important to Annette than marriage. Sherwood, alone night after night in tiny living, streamed comedies and documentaries on Netflix. Played chess online (day and night). FaceTimed the kids. Sweet Katy, reassuring. Jonah, his own kids howling in the background. The twins, Silas from his dorm room, Parker from his Peace Corps training.

One night, a knock, and there, Annette, two wine glasses in hand and a bottle of Cakebread, their favoriteChardonnay.

"Really? he said. "It took this long?"

"Really," she said, void of explanation.

They sat on the new Crate &Barrel loveseat, finally on it together, their feet up on Sherwood's curved concrete bench a.k.a. coffee table, toes touching. Sherwood shook his head at the holes in Annette's socks.

She poked him with her elbow. "What?" she kidded.

"Do I still have to remind you to buy new socks?" He laughed and kissed her head, remembering their shopping trips together. She'd focus on the practical, he on aesthetics.

They each drank two glasses of wine and then shared the last dregs. Turned off the movie.

Oh, the smell of her! The powder in the folds inside her elbows and on her shoulders drew him to nuzzle. The citrinin stud earrings his tongue roughed against. A new bra and matching panties! Not an I-dare-you-Barbie pink but a softer, coaxing blush, like the first touch of sunset. Her newly cropped hair—almost buzzed! — a tabula rasa for the large gray eyes, Romanesque nose, and round plum mouth. Her loveliness.

It was all like coming home.

He asked her then and there to come back the next evening. She said no. In the morning, he knocked hard on her door, harder than he meant. She wasn't there. He actually called her cell. It irked him, having to find her. We need to talk, Ettie, he told her. His tone was harsh, he knew, his voice like a rockpile shattering. Talk about what, she wanted to know.

"There was last night and now I can't even be with you. I feel used, "chilling his voice, an implicit pout.

"So do I," she replied. "Thirty years' worth."

Theirs was not a traditional marriage—she a doctor, he with

a more flexible schedule—but she was right, they'd all used her, he and the kids. To make things right. To love them. To make sure about their wardrobes. Their health. Their conflicts. To heal them, not only as a physician, but in their souls. Like the time the twins had such a fight Silas wound up sleeping in a closet to get away from Parker. By morning, she'd navigated ten-year-old wrath. By noon, they were mounting Lego figures on a display board. By night, insisting on sleeping in the same bed.

Now, he was tempted to call her again but didn't. He threw down a grease rag. Put away his bike. Sat on the deck armchair for a long time. Took a shower. Checked email.

The thought of activities made him choke, actually gag in his throat. Baking was all right, solitary, the lessons online. But the CrossFit gym. Yoga. A book club. Goddamn painting lessons. Brooding about what he could "explore" (hateful word) made him lightheaded and heart-flying, as if he'd just sky-parachuted. Once, he even threw up. He wasn't an activity person. He was nerdy, internal, domestic. Annette had always said she loved that about him.

Most days of tiny living, Sherwood read the news online—again and again—then oiled his bike chain—again—then swept the deck. He checked his watch, again. Time for lunch? Not yet. He worked on his fly-fishing gear even though he hadn't casted in years. Now lunch? Nope. He crept inside the house, broom in hand, to shoo the field mouse he'd seen run in. It's never going to be lunchtime. He looked at paint colours for the bathroom. Aha, now. Lunch! Then, the afternoon was languid. It was okay to rest when retired, wasn't it?

He couldn't bring himself to do a bike ride. Couldn't cook. Gave up his croissants.

Each morning, Annette flipped her head at Sherwood on the deck as she left the house. Some days, she'd come to kiss him on the cheek. No schmoozing. No checking on how he was doing. Off she'd go with a ta-ta! Wave. She's still in the honeymoon phase, he told himself. Honeymoon! Honeymoon for what? The tiny living, her own house, being free of senseless stuff. Finding herself. What's to find?

One morning leaving her house, she bounced along the path like a kid skipping. Sherwood slapped his book on the deck table, pushed himself off the armchair with both hands and tried to clear the slug of mucous in his throat.

"Annette," he called, waving. "Ettie," he now shouted. He was actually running after her. Well, trotting.

She spun around to face him. “What is it, Sher?”

“I just don’t understand why you’re angry,” his arms raised to the sky, followed by his eyes, beseeching, daring, someone to explain.

She went to sweep her hair away—chin lifted to one side, eyes closed, reminiscent of their daughter’s haughtiness—then seemed to remember the fuzz of her shorn head.

“Not angry. Just busy.”

“You’re not exactly friendly.” His hands were at his side now, curled into soft orbs. “Or affectionate,” he added softly.

She crossed her arms at her chest. “Look, Sher. You knew what this was going to be like. You knew I needed my space. This is my time! For once, I can do things for myself.”

“I know, I know. You feel trapped, right?” He reached for her shoulders. “I don’t want to fight, Ettie.”

“I give you a hard time, don’t I,” coming forward now, Queen to Rook. “Poor Sher.” She reached to cup his face in her palm.

“Could you be busy and friendly?” he tried.

“I’ll work on it, Sweetie.”

Sweetie!

“Let’s have dinner tonight.”

“Okay.”

Okay!

“I’ll cook? Or Allegra’s?” Sherwood now beamed. He could tell the ease had returned to his face, could tell by the mirror effect on Annette’s, her own eyes turning up now at the corners, mouth partly open, tongue visiting her teeth.

“Allegra’s.”

“I’ll pick you up”—oh god, he loved this, it was like dating her all over again—“at seven.”

Allegra’s was one of those dark restaurants. Even with their readers on, Annette and Sherwood had to use their phone flashlights to take in the menu. He was surprised to see her fingernails squared, neatly filed, intact. She’d stopped fretting her fingers constantly, stopped picking the cuticles, stopped ripping a nail from its bed. Sigh. Maybe he had made her crazy.

She ordered quickly, the vegetarian lasagne. He hedged and stammered. The server twirled his pencil and looked around, clearing his throat, waited.

“You’re a fusspot.” Annette leaned forward and tapped Sherwood’s chin.

“I know. “He ordered the steak. “You thought that’d change?”

She was writing a song, she told him, with her pianist friend.

She'd been going to Ellen's studio every day. Annette wrote the lyrics, Ellen the music. Annette wanted to do something she'd never done before. The song was about letting go of life, of expectations. A song about personal freedom.

"Sounds like Elmo for adults," Sherwood said.

"Elmo?" The roundness of her mouth spread out into a jewelled halfmoon.

"Free to be you and me." He laughed into those big shoulders. "Remember, from the kids?"

"We're going to send it to Oprah," she said, all serious and unamused.

He sucked away his nerdiness and shyness and ewww-ness and joined a men's group called Serenity. Something he had no idea men wanted. Once a week the guys tangled with defining masculinity and what a "good" or a "bad" death is and how much savings to have in retirement and how to deal with your wife's menopause and how to be freely gay when you have grandchildren. He wondered if this was the talk you'd find in a "healthy family" (Serenity term).

Sherwood would rather discuss cycling, Hemingway, design, the science of baking. He'd walk out of the sessions shaken, ungrounded, wobbly in his step. He was tempted to bail. It was all so different from his architect's linear world. Serenity made him obsessively lick his lips and wipe his forehead and run his hands through his hair. His head and gut fought: Stay, go. Stay, go. He went, and went.

They headed again to Allegra's, this time Annette coming from Ellen's, Sherwood from Serenity. She wore an off-shoulder sweater, hoop earrings large enough to be bracelets, blue nail polish.

"For Christ's sake, Annette," knowing his voice had gone low and irritable, like gravel in a bike chain.

Her hair had grown to flop over her forehead. She brushed it aside. "What!?" the tone—naked, exposed—like a teenager faking innocence.

His eyes locked on her right shoulder. There, a tiny butterfly tattoo, the image all fresh and dewy as if just released from a cocoon. A huffy storm moved in his chest.

"You know how I feel about tattoos, Ettie."

"I heard that for thirty years, Sherwood. This was my decision."

His days alternated between compassion for Annette's need

to change and a wintry gloom of abandonment. Days of turmoil. He was no longer a respected architect—he was dry, pruned, finished up, stripped of his ability to create, raw. What was left? Under his psychic cloud, he saw only an oversized nerd who hadn't left a real mark on the world and suffered a paralysis of identity. Go find the wet in the desert, he told himself, go to the dry of the swamps! Nothing felt right, not even Serenity, although he'd grown into the group, had begun to take on a new lingo, an openness about things, about the way he looked at people, void of the judgments he'd always made. Even so, in the sessions, his gut told him Flee!

His new neighbor, Chance, taught Applied Social Science at the college. "Evidence-based study of the social world, Buddy," Chance explained over the mailboxes. "We apply social science theories to real world problems."

Sherwood laughed. "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."

"Come audit a class!" Chance sang. A toothy smile, neon eyes.

The students could've been twelve and looked him up and down and whispered, pointing this forehead's purple cauliflower. Most stayed their distance. One daring soul asked why he was there. He told her he'd never heard of Applied Social Science. The professor, his neighbor, invited him. "You came to learn! At your age! Awesome!"

Chance lectured. "Let's go back to Gary, our authoritarian father," pointing to a family tree sketched on the white board. "What do we know about this guy's family psychology? Let's pick up where we left off."

Sherwood looked around, one shoulder twitching, ears burning hot, mind lurching from his boyhood to manhood to fatherhood. The room seemed out of focus, bobbing around him. Maybe his parents were authoritarian. Maybe he was.

He drove home with questions popping like kernels in the microwave. Hit some construction. He wondered about the traffic flaggers, what made them. The scowling one. The one with a panoramic grin. He watched pre-schoolers filing along clamped to their tow rope. Searched their faces for clues. The rebellious one. The one with a killer instinct. How do you have any control over the world, he wondered. Over yourself.

This time, he cooked. Cornish hen, mashed potatoes with caramelized onions, seared asparagus with charred lemon. Chocolate croissant dessert. He scattered rose petals on the

table. Ettie came with wine and flowers. She flashed a wide belt with a large silver buckle engraved "Rodeo Drive,"worn over a gauzy V-neck white blouse and an emerald mini skirt (in her sixties!).

Her usual radiance and spark were flat tonight, even with the outfit. Sherwood normally saw a trail of glitter, fairy dust, wherever she walked. He was used to her smile of perfect pearls, to her feet prancing. Not tonight. A brown tinge encircled her, a reverse halo. Her mouth turned downward. Her leg staccato-tapped. She didn't care for the Cornish hen, wouldn't eat wild things that shouldn't touch our plates, she declared. The croissant she proclaimed dead on arrival. She had to go soon.

He blinked his eyes over and over, tried to listen with different ears. He didn't know if Annette had changed or if he had.

He took a trip. He was not himself in the airport without Annette, her phone always in hand showing their boarding passes. It was almost out-of-body, as if he were watching himself move in slow motion through the crowds.

The warm breezes and tropical cocktails. He had sex, the first in thirty years with someone who wasn't Annette. A woman seduced him at the hotel bar. And he went with it! It wasn't love and that was okay. Even better, it was hot. He didn't know he'd had it in him. Sherwood was confused. Delirious. Sad (because of Annette). Dreamy. Gauzy-floating.

He spent time at the pool pondering the buildings he'd designed and wrote about his process in long passages. The bartender loved them. He'd never written like that, let alone read anything to a stranger, and the effect—as if he'd given a precious gift—made him dizzy-happy.

He swam every day and wore sunscreen. Sat long in the jacuzzi. Had his eyebrows threaded. Read the classics—*Don Quixote*, *Wuthering Heights*, even *Frankenstein*—something he'd forever avoided, even in college.

He emailed the Serenity guys and said maybe he'd found it.

His time away gave Sherwood other gifts. He'd researched hemangioma treatment centers and picked a vacation spot where there was a reputed laser clinic. He had to attack anxiety full-throttle just to get himself there. A few sessions and he could see the gnarled birthmark would smooth out. The clinic told him the purple would lessen in time to become more background than centerstage. He lingered in his hotel room, stared in the mirror at hints of good looks. Before, all he'd see was the birthmark taking

up his face's real estate.

Sherwood ate everything he usually dreaded—clams, squid, sausages, braised cabbage. The trip was a vacation from himself.

Annette came to their deck where Sherwood was writing. She looked long at him and sat, without a sound, as though she were a careful but confident bird. "Wow," she finally said. Her cheeks grew hot and sassy, the chuff of her chest, up and down, up and down.

The passage of time hit him, time without each other, dense and thick like a new building constructed to withstand any force of nature. He felt a surge and wanted to dance, found Ed Sheeran on Spotify, and reached out his arms. Annette flowed into them.

"Well, Sherwood!"

"Well, Ettie."

She'd always been brazen. "Let's go out tonight," reaching up to smooth his eyebrow. "Find a new restaurant."

He bent and kissed her cheek. "I'm going to take some time, Ettie. I, too, need some space."

"Is that right?" She backed up from the dance.

"Yes. I love you though."

"Right."

He slipped on his windbreaker and sunglasses. "I'm going now."

"How will I see you?"

"I'll let you know," Sherwood said. "I'll let you know."

Gardner

Lawrence Bridges

We locked ourselves out of the house and waited for the gardener to drive over, uncertain about where to go. We closed up the Jeep from the rain and sat on the porch listening. When the rain stopped, we walked up the road and heard the calling of the young hawk and, further on, came upon a pile of house numbers across the road from a demolished cemetery. Nobody lives around here now—but we heard an aria agonizing in the night from somewhere far off. Looking around, we realized we could see stars for the first time in a year. Was the singer like the young hawk calling to its mother? In the cemetery, I lay on my back watching a conjunction of Mars and Jupiter. Holy shit, I thought. I always pretend to perfect my soul—not for heaven, but at least for marriage. This door-to-door journey will end in bed, cushioned by pillows or grass, or self-awareness. Walking back, we wandered by an empty pool half-full of water from the rain. This, then, is our spectral anthropology: at its best for the gods, at its best for sex, perfect souls only polluted by sin, voluntarily seeing the worst. We get nowhere, yet fear no place, carelessly putting perfection in our days, trying to feel the whole world suddenly while running pleasure, just alive. A large raccoon sniffed a wall ridge, under the moon, and I stood in silence, throwing weightless redwood chips. Where do we creatures come from? Eyes under starlight before death—I accept that this is all. But what other creatures have not yet come forth on the planet or in mind? At 1 AM, the sound of a car on gravel. Gardener.

Cyanide

Stephen Barile

After the war, before chemical companies
soldmerchandise like insecticides,
we covered each individual grapevine
in the vineyard with a canvas tarp,
burned almond hulls under the canopy.
Fire and smokefilled with cyanide
fumigated, exterminated insects
and spiders that infested the grapes
before the annual harvest began.
Careful not to breathe-in
The noxious fumes spilling out
from underneath the smoking canvas.
The vineyard, a measure of cool,
part shade, a portion in theheat.
Unlike any other place, the vines,
Curling cordons, canes,and the spurs.
Leavesspread upward toward the sun
on a rolling vineyard of lowland.
I led Rosy,the mule, and the trailer
down the roadto the back eighty acres,
where the railroad tracks divide the land.
To the place we last finished at sunset.
I shoveled hulls under the vines,
Father covered individual gangling plants
with the smoky tarps,ignited apile
of the husks with kerosene,
and wooden matches he carried.
The trailer emptied, my job
return to the barn and load hulls
from the pile we kept there.
It took two weeks to fumigate theacres.
We ran out of fuel midway through,
The Madera farmer considered charging more
for the second-load of almond hulls.
My father promised to come back next year,
buy more if the price stayed the same.

All Their Faces

Sean Sutherland

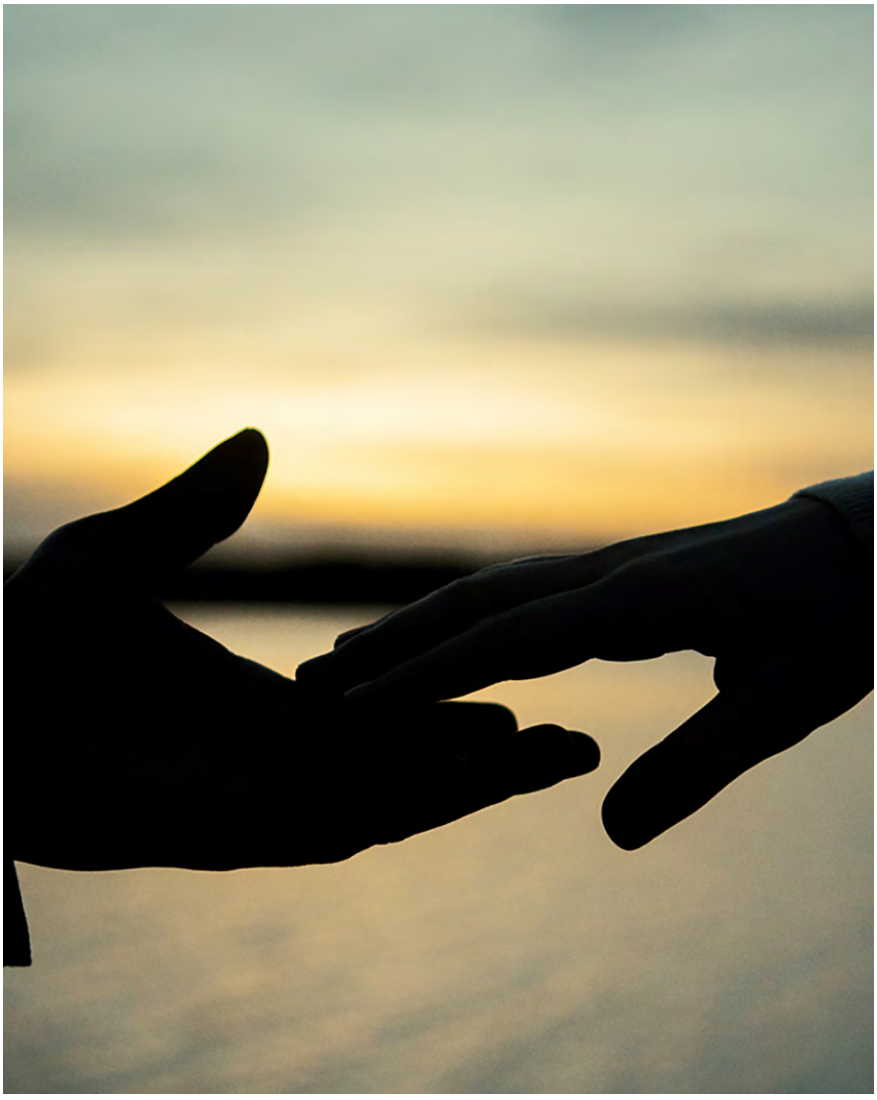
In a rented cottage, mother, father, sister
and brother watch firelight flicker across each
other's faces, as battalions of moths look over
their shoulders and listen to the sleepy drift of their talk.
Later, they will follow tall Blacked Eyed-Susan's
as they disappear under the hood of their car
down the middle of an old dirt road, ending where
a man sits in his rusty chair in the swaying grasses
of his yard with a bottle and watches how white caps
grow whiter against the darkening waves.
How excited the children are that a horse lives with him
in his tarpaper shack. Then the rain comes down
and the man ushers them in and repeats;
"So, you are looking for land?" Inside are the smells
of sweat, and hay and a salt wind, and he gives
the sister and brother greasy jam jars of sour milk,
lights a candle, takes out a map, and the broken window
at the end of the table lets the rain pool there.
Each of them holds a private love for how he says,
"Let's just move to the other end of the table,"
as if speaking to himself. They use the phrase for years,
to try and avoid arguments or to make each other laugh,
until the phrase goes out of use.
They only remember how they wanted to stay there,
leaning in, with all their face slit by one thing.

Miss

A.S. Aubrey

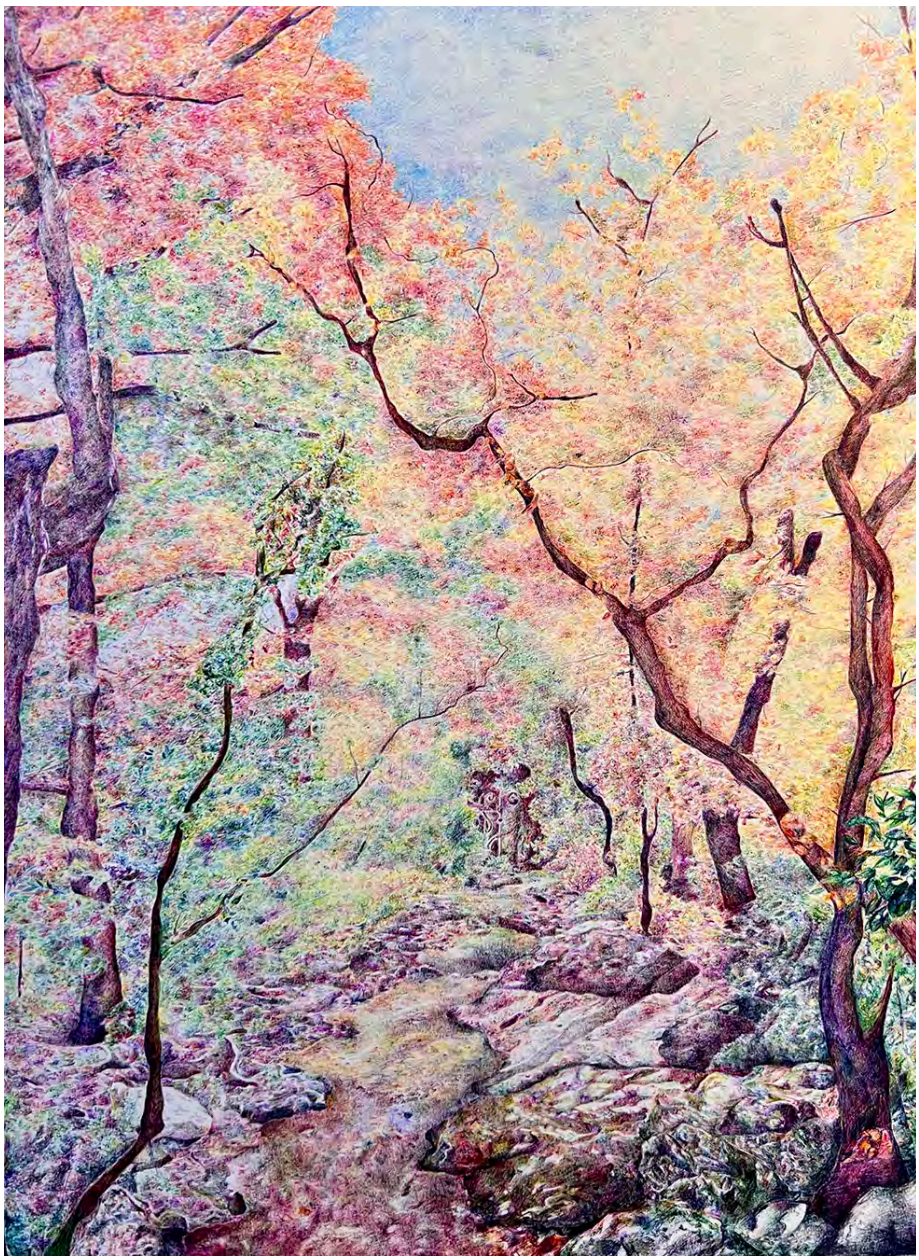
Your things miss you, the ones you left behind.
The silk robe with pink flowers under the armpit. Your reading glasses, unfolded, and waiting, right on top of your book: that autobiography of Nabokov you never finished, felt obligated and enlightened by.
The raindrops on this pane miss you too, your absence in this chair next to me, its brown and wrinkled leather not holding your arms, your slender form leaking weight.
How can all these pots and pans be a kitchen without you? Or the glasses that touched your lips in myriad ways, their dotted design in your fingers.
Not to mention the bed, rumpled on your side because I can't bring myself to make it, yet. How soon, how recently you passed, that your breath is still here lining the walls with its air. In
the closet, even your clothes aren't musty; they reek of you, crying your scent.
I was the last to touch you. Not here, there. With tubes that didn't know you, pretending to revive
you until nothing worked. Why did they get the last glance?
Your body in a blanket that never belonged to us, your pale face empty of its form. And then a bag, holding the hollow, grabbing at your tracks, its zipper so final in having you.
This house so full of longing, I can barely contain the noise.

The Ripple Effect
Cristina Sandoval



Medium: Photography
Dimensions: 17” x 22”

Secret Door
Sravya Pilla



Medium: Ball-point pen
Dimensions: 9” x 12”

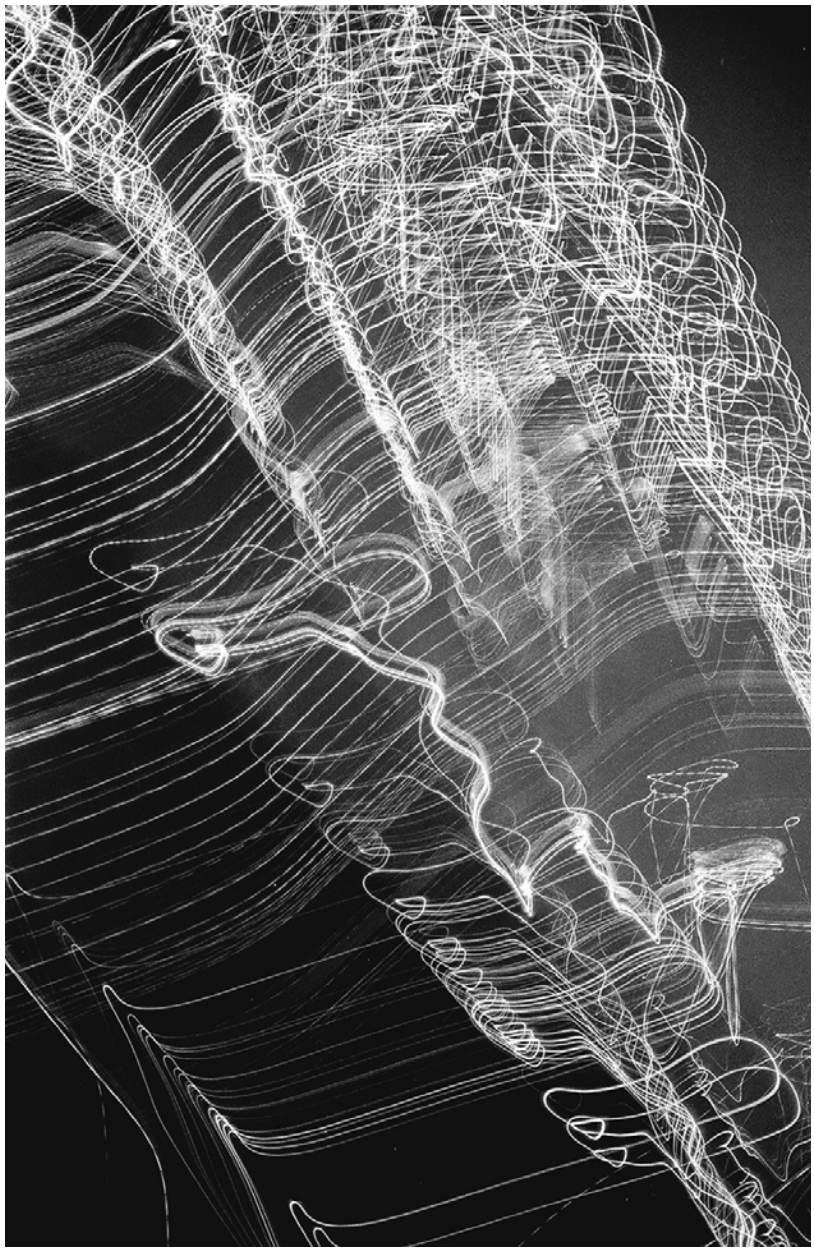
Untitled
Stephanie Ho

Medium: Collage
Dimensions: 9” x 12”

In the Woods
David Summerfield

Medium: Artistic Photography
Dimensions: 20” x 26 2/3”

Night sky with Aerotrails
Aqeel Shaik



Medium: Photography
Dimensions: 14” x 21”

My Other Half
Alex Holt

Medium: Multimedia on wood
Dimensions: 31” x 22”

Arroyo
Adriane Anderson

Medium: Watercolor
Dimensions: 17” x 121/2”

Survival
Stephanie Ho

Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Dimensions: 5” x 10”

The Illustrated Transcendence of Bethany Larson

James Callan

When Bethany Larson legally changed her name to Mariana Moonbeam, it marked the last step in her transcendence from an American human being to a merfolk that belonged to the sea. The Justice of the Peace witnessed Beth's signature, applied her own, and became the first to look upon Mariana, a mythical being born on the blue upholstery of her office sofa, its faded fabric a hue that Ikea had dubbed Atlantic Shore. Though Mariana, who now officially bore the name which meant "star of the sea," wasn't truly a mermaid, in her mind, she had always been one—a girl with a piscine sensibility. Since the day she was mistakenly born with ungainly legs adapted for land, Beth knew: she wasn't Bethany Larson, she was Mariana Moonbeam.

But her name change would come later, further down the line. It would be Beth's final move, made at a time when she was ready to take the plunge. Ascendancy, after all, can't be rushed, and her journey to becoming a maritime creature was numerous in its years, manifold in its stages. First, it was swimming lessons, an origin story seeded in the depths of a public pool, where she founded her love of water, cementing her belief that she was aquatic at heart. Next, it was VHS tapes: The Little Mermaid and Splash. At ten years old, Beth wanted to be a mermaid who marries a prince. At twenty, she still aspired to become half fish —though she could do without the marriage, or the prince. Then, following her many years of routine visits to the public pool, her countless viewings of her favorite films, Beth bridged the gap between Bethany Larson, the human, and Mariana Moonbeam, the merperson, with body modification on a socially acceptable scale. She decorated her flesh with patterns and pictures in ink, garnishing her skin with dozens of nautical permanent features, a melange of sea-themed tattoos.

When it came to her tattoos, Beth did not test the waters, but dove right in. She wanted to make a statement, she wanted to make a splash. She started with the outside of her thigh— somewhere with ample surface area, somewhere hidden from her parents. The artist told Beth that her skin was perfect for tattooing, that it was an honor to imbue her art into a canvas as radiant as her flesh. Beth was flattered, and later, elated, when the needle broke the surface of her unblemished skin, when the pain

was not unbearable, as she imagined, but meditative, hypnotic in its sustained sting.

After five hours, the tattooist set down her needle, and Beth woke from an out-of-body migration, a journey across the cold Atlantic in her spirit animal form—a humpback whale. She blinked away the tears of pain and, feeling euphoric, walked on her human feet to stand before the mirror. Her eyes brimmed with saltwater, trailing her hot, flush cheeks to fall upon and darken her sleeve. Caught off guard and profoundly touched, she gasped with unbridled delight, an unfamiliar sentiment of love for herself. She studied her leg, no longer white, stained in sorbet hues of strawberry, mint, and orange. A manatee idly grazed the seagrass of her body. Docile and cumbersome, it floated in content on the broad square of her thigh.

Six weeks later, forgoing 42 lunches to save up for her next tattoo, Beth returned to the artist with echinoderms on her mind.

"You look skinny," the tattooist told her.

"Like a brittle star," Beth agreed, holding up the zoological diagram of her favorite marine invertebrate.

The artist smiled. "Where do you want it?"

Beth surveyed her body in the full-length mirror.

"Everywhere."

She settled for her left shoulder, with five long arms divaricating down various lengths of her body. Radiating outward from its fist-sized central plate, the brittle star threw its bony limbs akimbo, a sporadic and malnourished pentagram. One arm, at the behest of the artist, tickled Beth's protruding ribs—pain exceedingly divine—to curl its tip under the fold of one of her small breasts. "A lover's touch," she remarked. Beth ignored the tattooist's wrist as it grazed her erect nipple, as it lingered there like a sea star on a rock. Four hours later, four other arms fell across her body: one draped over her opposite shoulder; another tracing her left triceps down to her elbow; a third down her back, terminating in a tight spiral at her hip; one coiling around her neck to rest across her collarbone. The brittle star seemed at home on Beth, and was, in fact, now a part of her. Its calcite limbs remained colorless, bleached and hollow, like dead coral; alabaster and bloodless, the skin tone of its host. But before the month was out—bypassed lunches and a reluctant try at webcam sex—Beth's earnings were sufficient to revisit her purpose. The brittle star would become flushed with color: rose fading seamlessly to indigo, sea green to Tiffany blue.

One echinoderm is never enough—a sentiment that brought

Beth back after two short weeks. She no longer abstained from her lunches, but pawned her mother's jewelry—the odd piece that had gone unworn and neglected for years—arriving with ample funds.

That tattooist smiled when she saw Beth walk through the door, eyeing her up and down without constraint. She puffed on a cigarette pinned between lips as red as coral. "What will it be today?" She wondered aloud, her words wafting on scents of menthol.

"Starfish." Beth trembled with her need to be covered in them. "So many starfish."

"Make up your mind, Sweetie. Is it stars or fish?"

Starfish belong to the class of animals known as Asteroidea, a Greek name meaning "star-like." They are not fish at all, but echinoderms, a name combined of Greek and Latin root words, collectively meaning "spiny skin." Beth knew this well. She had read it in her hardbound tome of marine biology, seen and heard it while watching dozens of ocean documentaries. She tapped into inherent commonsense to eradicate the misconception that starfish were actual stars—this, she surmised, was obvious.

Beth shook her head at the artist. "Neither." She held up her own makeshift illustration. "Starfish," she pointed at the Crayola sketch. "Sea stars. You know—the animal."

The tattooist looked at the doodle etched in crayon. "There are many fish in the sea, Baby. But you're my shining star." The artist's laughter filled the room, amusement and longing riding on wafts of cloying menthol. She snubbed out her cigarette and stretched. She took out the needle and cartridge. "Where do you want it, Darling?"

Beth pulled her Disney shirt over her shoulders, allowing The Little Mermaid to fall to the floor. She undid her clamshell bra --an eBay purchase that set back her tattoo by a week—and turned around to showcase her bare back.

"Cover me. Mark me. I am a tide pool rock and you are the many creatures that cling to me."

The tattooist raised her eyebrows. She toyed with her tongue stud and cocked her head with a satisfied grin. "Baby, I thought you'd never ask."

The hours that transpired were filled with wonderful pain, none so delicious as when the needle scraped her spine, spiking from uncomfortable to near-unbearable. Face down on a padded table shrouded in Saran Wrap, Beth bit her lip and moaned. Her agony was ecstasy, pleasure writ in ink. Throughout Beth's

discomfort, the artist's cold hands on the small of her back was a balm to her affliction, icy waves over sun-scorched rock. Beth closed her eyes and focused on the needle, tracing its movements in her mind, accepting its gift of art, of permanence, of tender pain that hurt in the best possible way.

Half a dozen playthroughs of Plasmatics albums was a soundtrack that differed from Beth's would-be choice of Enya or Yanni. It was rough and unusual to Beth, but it went well with the buzz of the needle, its insistent, enduring bite. In the end—her ears feeling the brunt of assault as much as her hide—Beth rose from the table and, when viewed behind, did, in fact, appear as if a tide pool rock. Her back was pale stone, red and raw at the edges where sea stars sucked with their hundreds of greedy tube feet. Her white flesh was the inverted night sky. The five-pronged echinoderms were multi-colored stars, rainbow constellations, big and small.

Topless, coated in sweat, Beth marveled at herself in the mirror. "It's beautiful."

The tattooist peeled off her latex gloves and lit a cigarette. "Yes," she eyed her own work. "Yes, you are."

Months came and went, a known condition of time, and more tattoos followed, a result of addiction—a collector's need to achieve the whole. It wasn't just body art. It wasn't a mere expression. It was transcendence—metamorphosis. Beth's tattoos told a tale of her odyssey, a woman escaping the gravity of land; a merfolk swimming against the current of the human condition. And thus, each picture on her flesh was more than a design etched in ink. Each tattoo was but a single tile among the great collage of her destiny. Each sea-themed image plunged her soul closer to the depths of its rightful residence. Each mark upon her body was another step into the ocean, the place where she belonged.

The following year found hundreds of lunches forgone, her Mother's treasures plundered, and webcam exploits featuring mermaid-themed sex shows. From her virginal tattoo, a pink manatee, to now, fifteen months later, Beth was covered from head to toe in ink, a permanent seascape on land. There was a cluster of clownfish on bony ankles; dolphins at play among a roaring, sapphire surf; octopus and squid; spirals of kelp; rainbows and orca whales. There was a constellation of many-colored starfish suctioning to her back; a brittle star cascading her shoulders; a seahorse nestled behind one ear, air-bubble hearts trailing its tail.

By the end, her canvas running short, Beth felt near to something whole, an achievement not quite met. To fill that subtle, unknown gap, she sought intimacy with fans who claimed to adore her, followers of her webcam series who professed devotion to her aquatic heart. She dated subscribers—men and women who routinely masturbated to her live, remote performances. As she tried to engage with landlubbers and human souls, it felt like moving backwards, swimming in reverse.

There was the tattooist herself, a woman who seemed to be as much at odds with the world as Beth, a woman who Beth had shared more intimacy with than anyone else, despite having never engaged in sexual intercourse. The tattooist was a giver of pain, pleasure, and art. She lingered in more ways than the images she wrought, pervading Beth's mind, if not her heart. New terms of endearment might be explored—food for thought, never far from Beth's musings. Let's not forget: the artist was keen, and had let Beth know from the start. She had offered a free tattoo, her own name—what she called a brand. "It's on the house, Baby," she offered. "I'll even throw in a little fish."

Though she did not take on the name of the tattooist, or its implications, it spurred an idea that would later float to the surface of Beth's mind. Like a finger of coral fixed to bare rock, it would start small, and slowly grow. In time, it would germinate, becoming a landmass in its monstrous scope. The notion would click, and when it did, action would proceed.

Beth had fallen out of touch with her parents, neither seeing nor speaking to them for many long months. In the aftermath of their final, bitter exchange, she sought a cheap apartment—a place where her own rules applied. She had been exiled, kicked out of her mother and father's home when she continued to get tattoos, something her parents vehemently prohibited as a requisite while dwelling under their roof. Separated from her mom and dad, no longer on speaking terms, Beth felt little reason to honor the shared distinction of her family name. It came to her like an idea for a new design, like a cetacean breaching the surface of her skin to occupy what little exposed flesh was left to her: Beth would change her name, take further steps to achieve her maritime goals.

And now, no longer Beth, Mariana stands tall. She's a new woman—in more than just her name. In her body, she's changed at the molecular level—a truth construed by her psyche. In her soul, she has spiritually advanced, having become a brand-new species. Her business concluded, the final step taken, she shook hands

with the Justice of the Peace, then walked towards the door. She sauntered, dripping with swagger. Beth had died, and Mariana was born.

In her low-cut tank top and short tube skirt, Mariana's tattoos were on full display. As she made her exit, the JP studied her, intrigued and a little jealous. She considered the many pictures branding a young land mammal with ocean creatures and nautical themes. She considered, too, the girl's wayward path, her eccentric yearnings, her signature scrawled on a legal document. Changing her name was the last step to Beth becoming Mariana. And once again, like her myriad tattoos, it was transcendence achieved with ink.

Outside, the urban byway was the same: no coral spires, no roads paved in seashells, no water to dampen gravity as Mariana's high came crashing down to the pavement. Like a ruptured puffer fish, her exaltation swelled only to deflate. And though she was now Mariana, the star of the sea, she couldn't ignore the fact: her bubble had burst.

She walked the streets of a human city; dry land; same old American town. This was supposed to be the end, Mariana thought. My final transcendence!

She pulled at her hair which she had dyed sea-foam green. She stamped the sidewalk with feet made for land. But panic is a tide—it comes and goes—so she took a deep breath to settle her nerves. She put her best foot forward to rethink what might next be done. Like her predecessor, Beth, who knew what steps to take, Mariana, too, was resourceful and determined. There was more that she could do.

There were the soles of her feet, the scalp beneath her hair, her buttocks and inner ear. There were islands of blank canvas remaining on her sea of illustrated flesh. Mariana was close—so very near to her final transformation. She would do whatever it took, anything at all to become the star of the sea. Resolved to whatever pain awaited her, she would transcend in the end.

Inchworm

Patrica Heisser MeFoyer

A summer day: I thought I saw a small cat
Doing a weak imitation of an inchworm.
It undulated in a strange combination of
Hunch-and-slink along the edge of the garden's pond.
Covered with dark fur, its chin dabbed with white.

It reminded me of life being horizontal,
Craving friends; and the soul, vertical, needing
solitude.
Too many hours spent in my bedroom,

I wonder what the bedroom will do.
Whether speech or action will be first,
And whether a virus will be first
To begin.

Silent and terrified, I was once hidden,
Among the colors of my grandmother's garden.
The Lights and Darks.

Eyes run through without saying anything.
Why not accept the waiting and forego
The known? After all,

My mind. And the bedroom is long.
Like flowers in my grandmother's garden
whose names I never learned.

Not people. Not stranger with the listening
Heart, without a mind.

Not Person.

Virus encroachment barely visible.
I watched the vanishing of a separate ghost.
I have seen carnage.

In a breath's disappearance
Even those who tried to remain.
I should not wait for the walls
To speak. Go into the bathroom,
Turn on the faucet.
Lost in terror in face of what I don't know. In
moves I cannot make.

In labyrinth hours, I don't understand.

50139

Morgana Rubini

I delight in pulling out the fine grass in large clumps like ripping peach fuzz hair
And smothering rich compost into the ground
Smelling like a forbidden deep cocoa,

Angry burn is slowly collapsing into a tan
look, even nature relaxes itself.
Scarred all over by red hot ant bites
No matter the inconvenient itch, I love them all the same
Like hickies of desire, to be marked by something greater than yourself,
Feels like some wild freedom,

I begin obsessively checking the weather
Spending hour after hour
Tracing the dashes and harsh diagonals and bursts of sun
Maybe this is the newness
Each day different patterns of soaking, burning, wetting,
pollen releasing after hours of sheltering itself

When the sun begins to set, we will shelter in the tiny decaying campervan
Sat cross-legged under the dying light of the solar-powered lantern,
Playing endless rounds of cards to surrender to
Meaning-making patterns
Until the inevitable early darkness descends
Life under this new mythology

Later, clasping my hands in the black of my tent
As angry lightning flashes overhead
I reach out again for something greater

Given the choice, I go barefoot in the mud
Preserving my boots clean for the new day
When I shall wipe the sludge from between my toes
Leaving them pinky and soft
And be again ripe with the possibility for some sanctification

But for now, while they aren't looking
Let us dirty.
Let us break into the abject
Yellow poncho stuck to naked flesh
Under the full moon with only the dripping
But harsh rashes tired after hours of screaming giving in
To the shock of the cold.

Back to Nature With Sam

John Grey

I think Sam's already sorry
he asked a poet to accompany him
on his early morning fishing
and canoeing expedition.
He was showing me how to thread
a worm and I was muttering
something about the irony of that
poor creature's life as a go-between,
a cruel death in store
just because of man's penchant for fish.
He nodded his bewhiskered head.
"Nothing better 'n walleye,
roasting on a flame."
I rattled off a thousand platitudes
of man in commune with nature,
of two Thoreaus
living off the bread of the waters, the forests.
Then it was all aboard
as our canoe swished away from the bank,
threaded the rocks like a thatched-bark needle.
The current blissfully carried us,
like watery hands passing us
from fingertip to fingertip.
Sam said it was easier this way
than paddling up-stream.

An Elegy for Exile

Romeo Oriogun

after Ben Okri

There are things that will always be strange to us
like the last sigh of winter, or the dragonfly stitching

the mouths of children asleep on the porch outside
where the officers are still prowling the street,

searching for those who had slipped through the canal
of the night, becoming the stars and their dust,

ever watchful, ever faithful to the surveillance of survival
as the cradle telephone is to the voice of a lover,

or the loneliness of hills to the guerilla of freedom.
The beauty of a new country is a gift given to those

who see in the shadows the aftermath of this world,
and every new wonder is a reminder that we are lost,

that our suffering, though ancient, is not felt by those
who pass the law, by those who read the scroll

of their cities in the houses of authority.

Sing to us of the wind moving from rooftop to the window
of the sea, and of the artist who drew the desert

and its aloneness, who drew the chameleon changing
from field house to stone house, and the oasis,

bearer of our thirst.

Everywhere, in the alleys and corners of this world,
we are gathered, warming ourselves before the fire

and despair of our lives, and through a language
not spoken in the mansions and offices of this city.

I have seen the eyes of hope in the private pages of a diary,
in the patient handwriting of a poet.

In the dark eyes of a crow, we say to the unseen hand
of kindness, we are here. Look, the lights are dancing

on water. Our dead and their memorials are evergreen.
Look, the men are coming out from an anthill,

and shadow by shadow we are moving from being illegal
into the books of this world.

All I have and all I have become is out in the open,
in the halfway house of refuge — the novels

and poetry of Bolano, the manuscript of movement,
the old pitcher filled with water, olive oil for salvation,

and Alice Coltrane singing of Isis and Osiris. Look,
life is good, the dark fields are slowly being open to us,

and in this city,

and in every African kitchen, there is a border waiting
to be crossed. I am not lost, sorrow will always
be a stranger. I am home.

Children

Hunter Prichard

They sat in the back of the restaurant at a table catty-cornered to a large glass window that faced the cobblestoned lane. There was momentum in the cool autumn air now that night was settling in. Already the shops were closing and the restaurants were welcoming their first seating. Clay sighed, turning his attention to the restaurant's captain, now approaching their table with a plate of escargots upon arugula salad. Clay took a small sip of the Chablis his father had ordered as the captain took the order of roast pork and trumpet mushrooms. The maitre 'd passed to fill their glasses before hurrying to the bar where fresh patrons were crowded.

"Your life will be pointless the way you go on," his father was saying.

Clay tried to smile. "Dad, let's have a nice, quiet dinner."

"Dinner? You haven't eaten a thing."

"I'm not so hungry now," Clay said. "It's been a long day."

"All the more reason to enjoy yourself." His father rapped the wine bottle with his knuckle and harumphed. "Ninety-five dollars for this bottle and you barely touch it."

"Anne will have dinner ready soon," he mumbled.

"Will she?" As his father smirked, wine trolled in spidery rivers down his wrinkled face. "Ninety-five dollars a bottle," he said in a low whine.

Clay reached over and gently pressed his father's wrist. "How are you feeling, Dad?"

"Bored."

"Bored?"

"I'm bored," his father said. He jerked his hand away and ate an escargot. "You don't need to be anywhere," he whispered. "Drink up the wine. It's an expensive bottle."

"You don't want to be drinking so much," Clay said.

"I'll do what I want. And you sit there and do nothing."
His father ate another escargot, cleaning his fingers on the tablecloth. "You know, I might be a suicide after all," he whispered. "I know I would've a long time ago if I knew how you were to turn out."

"This isn't the time to talk of this."

"I'll say what I want. You eat your dinner."

Clay straightened and smiled. “I’m not hungry at the moment.”

“Not hungry? Must be nice not to eat when other people buy you it.” For a time, his father stared out the window. An opaqueness overwhelmed him. Then he awoke and pounded the table twice with his fists. “I remember when you were born, your heart newly beating, your face pulsating, it was unbelievable. I couldn’t believe I’d pulled it off.” He frowned, looking away. “So, I’ll say what I wish. You’ll listen to me, as you’re obligated to and –eat an escargot. C’mon now. It’s an expensive dish.”

“I’m not hungry, Dad. “Clay swallowed. “I heard you went out walking this morning, down to the little pond?”

“Huh? What walk?”

“The nurse said you took a nice walk down to the pond.”

His father looked stunned. “Guess we did.”

“How was it?”

His father shrugged. “Have your wine.”

“I have it right here,” He tried to smile. “Anne is making salmon later and –”

“Salmon?” His father looked away with a muffled sniffle. “You don’t understand,” he grumbled. “You don’t understand. When I first held you, I cried. I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

The maitre ‘d paused their conversation to serve the last of the Chablis and the captain brought the dish of roast pork. Somehow Clay had convinced his father to order only one entr□e on this evening. Still, even this was too much. The pork chops were wonderfully presented, rosy and glistening, upon a stack of roasted potatoes and trumpet mushrooms. Clay served his father. He made sure that his father had enough to offset the wine. As he did so, he decided he would stop for chocolate truffles at the candy store. For Anne.

“That’s right. You screamed. You were all red, weren’t you?”

“Was I?” Clay asked, trying a potato. “How’s dinner, Dad?”

“You were all red and happy and now you’re grey and quiet. Aren’t you?”

“Would you like more mushrooms? Ask me if you want more.”

“I expected certain things from you,” his father went on. “My father expected certain things from me. And I obliged him.”

Clay sat stiffly, understanding that it would be over soon. He tried hard to smile and nod and not to say so much and to make his eyes friendly and accommodating. In a short while, the car would be called and his father would be brought back to his residence. And he would go to the candy store and hurry home to Anne.

"I'm not joking with you." His father ate poorly, hiccoughing and spitting, his fork slow and trembling in the air. "Your life won't be worth much at the end. You know it, as I do."

"It was a shared decision. It was our decision. Anne's and mine. You know so, Dad."

"Shared decision?" He laughed. "She has the upper hand over you. Sure does."

"Anne and I made our decision."

"Stupid decision for stupid people." His father dryly chuckled. "Maybe it's for the best."

"I'm sorry," Clay tried, his voice rattling like gumballs in his throat.

His father smacked the table again, hard enough for the plates to rattle. "I'm ordering another bottle," he muttered, looking around for the captain.

"We have all we need right here, Dad."

"Are you telling me what to do?" His father grinned wolfishly. Then he shook his head. "This is a pricey place. But you won't eat a thing." He looked around. "They used to crowd me in this restaurant with the rest. Once, I had a senator with me on business and you better believe it, every captain was at attention. After that, they knew not to shove me around." He grinned. "That taught them." He sniffled and straightened himself. "Anyways, what do you mean by saying you've 'settled on something'?"

"We've settled on our decision."

"Please, I don't understand. Explain it."

"We've talked it over." Clay said. "It's our decision and –"

"I don't understand it. Together? What does that mean?" His father's face was ironical, almost playful. "I never liked her, right from the beginning I knew."

"Anne's a wonderful woman. You love her, Dad."

"No, I don't. You don't tell me who and who I don't love."

Clay tried to smile. "It's alright, Dad. Isn't it? In the end? You love Anne, as I do. This is the decision we're made. We love each other more than anything."

"A compromise?"

"I believe that—" Clay began, not sure how to respond.

"You compromised, she compromised, and there's even a compromise from me: I'll be dead soon. Goody for me. No more dull dinners." His father stopped and shook his head. "Shameful, frankly, that you put up with her. I'd been a suicide. You know, all it takes is a gun. Or a bridge. Won't you go, and do it? I promise I

won't be so sad."

Clay nodded weakly to the captain. "How's dinner, Dad?"

"What do you care? Dinner? You're not eating. You're thinking on your precious office."

"There's something that I need to get to before the weekend."

"I don't understand why you need to work so hard. What's the point now? "His father cut the hunk of pork. "Don't tell me what to do," he whispered.

Clay decided he would buy a cigar and go for a long walk, once his father was safely back in the car, being taken back to the residence. When this sort of nervousness overcame him, when the clattering shook up his brain and his throat felt hard and sore, he had a smoke and a long walk up over the knolls on the eastern edge of town. It would help some.

"There's no point without the future intact, is there? That's what the hell I'm saying."

"How's dinner, Dad? Everything's alright?"

"These snails are more precious than diamonds. Do you know how much one snail costs? Must be one million dollars per snail," his father said humorously. "That's how much!" His father rubbed his nose with his shirtsleeve. "What was the point with you? I don't much know why I brought you into the firm or anywhere else. Well that was my obligation. And what's yours? No, you don't care. No, too selfish in the end. Aren't you?" He chuckled. "Do you think I liked doing it? It was for you, for who came after. A grandson. I was foolish to think you were capable of such a thing, wasn't I? You never understood what you were given, what was made before you had the inkling to be born. Your grandfather before you, then me, then—then what?"

"It's not only up to me," Clay said, trying to keep his voice low and contained.

"It would be up to you if you weren't a weakling, a puny little man."

"We've come to the decision together and—"

"If you had nerve!" His father gripped his utensils, so that his knuckles were white.

"Dad, I think we should call the –"

"You listen to me! She's lying to you. That's right. Anne hates you, and her own self too. She doesn't respect you. I could always see it in her eyes. I feel greater sympathy for her than I do for you. To be married to someone like you. I can't imagine it!"

"Dad, we're happy and—"

"She hates you."

Clay caught himself from responding and instead sat back in the chair, trying to feign as if he and his father were passing strangers on park benches, engaged in a casual conversation, about the weather or ducks or baseball or whatever else people talked about. The conversation between his father and himself became barren and fleeting, no more than stories and lies and anecdotes that his father wouldn't recalled in a quarter-hour. It wasn't so hard to sit with such an image; there wasn't any other way.

It didn't matter what others believed, for he was his own man, as Anne was her own woman. And they made a good partnership, solid people with interests, pursuits, and friends. He was making good money at the firm and Anne believed she was due for a promotion at her office. They'd been upstanding every day of their lives, always working tirelessly and never getting in trouble. People might've laughed at him when he'd gone to college, believing that his father had put in a word for him. Maybe he had, but what they said didn't matter. He'd had good grades and test scores and recommendations. He'd never cheated at an exam nor an essay, not even in biology or history, subjects he hated. Not only that, but he never got drunk and only rarely smoked cigars.

"We got the same blood inside of us," his father was saying, a piece of pork hanging off the fork. With his other hand, he thumped his chest. "I guess it doesn't mean anything to you. I thought maybe it would, but I was wrong, wrong about a lot of things. Guess people do whatever they wish without caring what others think and all I say is what the hell was I doing my whole life working the job until I'm sitting here with—with what?"

Clay ate an escargot. Anne was making salmon with saffron rice for dinner, and he wanted to be hungry for it. They always planned out their Friday night dinners because they often were too busy during the week to take the time. Anne had gone down to the waterfront this morning for the early catch. Clay noticed that the sun had fully descended below the horizon and he made a signal to the captain. His father was doing alright, but it was best that they call for the car. For a moment, he closed his eyes, imagining Anne and him in their kitchen as they prepared dinner. No matter what she'd decided, he loved her very much, more than anyone could ever understand.

"I'd leave that Anne alone to her job, to her money. I would get myself a homely girl that'll have and raise some children," his father told him. "No, no, I wouldn't mess around with a stuck-up woman like her."

"Dad, please—"

"Stupid woman for a stupid man." Slowly and steadily, a mischievous look came into his father's eyes, and into the curl of his lips. "You don't stand up for yourself. If my father called your mother that, I would've put him in the hospital in one second flat." He smiled. "But you sit there on your hands. Your grandpa and I fought once. I swung at him. I don't remember why. Things were different back then. He hit me and I hit him," he muttered. "Am I offending you? I'll call her whatever I want."

"You love Anne. I know so."

"Well, she doesn't love you. If she did, she would act differently."

"I love her very much, Dad—"

"If she loved you, then she would do what you told her."

Clay shook his head. A kink snaggled his neck. He cleared his throat. "I need to go home. Anne is preparing dinner."

His father smirked. "Nice of her," he said simply. "Nice wife to prepare dinner for her husband. Didn't know women had it in them nowadays to prepare their husband's dinners."

"Dad, they've called the car and—"

"A woman strong and tough and mean as a man." He sniffed. "You're a little baby. A failure. So, am I." His father exhaled. "Spoiled. I spoiled you. And I thought I could get away with it. Maybe it's a good thing." His father was mumbling into his plate. "When spoiled people get treated like the rest, they sure get resentful. Guess it's a good thing in the end. You shouldn't be any sort of father. You're children, the both of you. No sense of obligation."

"Dad—"

"Children can't raise a child."

"Dad—"

"You bow down to a woman and you end up with nothing," his father whispered. "Good thing you're nothing. Good thing, isn't it? "A black-purplish flush spotted the bridge of his nose. "A whole life of taking things that aren't yours and aren't we all fools to put up with it. I know I was. And I thought I was doing alright." His father rose in his seat and lowered himself to the floor. Kneeling with his hands clasped like a man praying, he looked up at Clay. "Did I do alright? Did I do alright, son?" He asked the question many times, his eyes flinting with pleasure.

"It's alright, Dad." Clay stood and helped his father back into the chair. "Let's get you cleaned up," he whispered, pressing the linen napkin to his father's lips. "The car will be here soon, Dad. Just sit right here and try to rest."

His father laughed in a raspy holler so loud that the others were staring at them. The maitre ‘d approached the table, the bill in his breast-pocket. Servers behind him, polite and reserved, asked if they enjoyed the meal and cleared away the plates and glasses.

Contributors

L. Ward Abel's work has appeared in hundreds of journals (*Rattle, Versal, The Reader, Galway Review, Main Street Rag*, others), including two recent nominations for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and he is the author of four full collections and ten chapbooks of poetry, including his latest collection, *Green Shoulders: New and Selected Poems* 2003–2023 (Silver Bow, 2023). He is a retired lawyer and teacher of literature, and he writes and plays music (Abel and Rawls). Abel lives in rural Georgia.

Christine Andersen is a retired dyslexia specialist with the time to wander the Connecticut woods with her five dogs at her heels, pen and pad in pocket. She has published over 100 poems and won the 2023 American Writer Review Poetry Contest and the 2024 Harvest Harmony Contest and the Lee Maes Memorial Award #1 in the National Poetry Day Contest of Massachusetts.

Adriane Anderson has been an art teacher for 11 years at Jasper High School in Plano. As a graduate from the University of North Texas, she focused on painting and metalsmithing. Currently, her personal art has had an emphasis on the natural world in drawing and painting.

Michael Anderson is a theatre technical director at The Colony High School. In his spare time he creates cartoons using ProCreate. The quest for laughter from others is what drives him.

Rosa Arlotto graduated from University of Toronto Erindale College with a degree in languages. She is author of the novel *The Maestro and Margherita* on e-book, publisher: R. L. Hartley, and available in paperback on Lulu. Rosa has also published two poetry books, *Record of a Modern Heart* and *Flower of Poison* by Publish America. Rosa's poems can also be found in *The Poe Train Anthology* (2015), *Literary Heist magazine, Ottawa Literary Magazine, FormerCactus*, and *Belladonna Literary Arts Magazine*. Her short story appeared in *Voices* (2020), published by the Toronto Writers' Co-operative, and she has recently published a short story with Ukiyoto Publishing. Rosa has been one of the organizers of the Artbar Poetry Reading Series and a new member of the TWC Co-op.

A.S. Aubrey is a writer and psychotherapist working with trauma,

chronic illness and identity. Her work has been seen in The Poets Corner's Art & Ekphrastic Poetry exhibit, *The Write Launch*, *Ipa'lante!* and *Cathexis Northwest Press*. She currently lives in Los Angeles, where the urban sprawl inspires humor and existential angst.

Stephen Barile is an award-winning poet from Fresno, California, and Pushcart Prize nominee. He attended public schools, Fresno City College, Fresno Pacific University, and California State University, Fresno. His poems have been anthologized, published in numerous journals, both print and on-line. He taught writing at Madera College, and CSU Fresno.

Jane Barnard is a Madison, Wisconsin writer. Her flash piece is part of a stand-alone chapter from her memoir-in-progress, *The Poet as Pain Relief: A Comic Memoir*. It's about about surviving with humor, irreverence, and hard-won grace. Jane has a Master's Degree in English from Marqette University. A passionate writer since age 10, she is finally submitting at age 77: an emerging writer on Medicare. She hopes to be reincarnated as a cross between Dorothy Parker and Betty White.

Lawrence Bridges' poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker, Poetry*, and *Tampa Review.* He has published three volumes of poetry: *Horses on Drums* (Red Hen Press, 2006), *Flip Days* (Red Hen Press, 2009), and *Brownwood* (Tupelo Press, 2016). You can find him on IG: @ larrybridges.

Noah Lane Browne is a full-time lawyer, part-time yoga teacher, and some-time gardener. Tomatoes, mostly. His writing focuses on family, memory, and survival. He lives in Washington DC with his wife and cat.

James Callan is the author of the novels *Anthophile* (Alien Buddha Press, 2024) and *A Transcendental Habit* (Queer Space, 2023). His fiction has appeared in *Barzakh Magazine, Bridge Eight, BULL, Hawaii Pacific Review, Mystery Tribune*, and elsewhere. He lives on the Kāpiti Coast, Aotearoa New Zealand. Find him at jamescallanauthor.com.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing, City Brink* and T*enth Muse*. His latest books include *Subject Matters, Between Two Fires* and *Covert,* which are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Hawaii Pacific Review, Amazing Stories* and *River and South.*

Jennifer Handy is the author of *CaliforniaBurning,* an environmental poetry chapbook, and the poetry chapbook *Dirt.*

Stephanie Ho is a 9th grade student in Plano, Texas. She experiments with mixed media and her works highlight themes such as women's empowerment.

Alex Holt is 16-year-old sophomore from Plano, Texas. He has a twin sister, Julia, who has Down syndrome, and he can usually be found in his room snuggling with his cats. Julia is the subject of his artwork, and the intent is to show the difference between how the world views her and how Alex views her.

Ann Howells edited Illya's *Honey* for eighteen years. Recent books include: *So Long As We Speak Their Names* (Kelsay Books, 2019) and *Painting the Pinwheel Sky* (Assure Press, 2020). Chapbooks include: *Black Crow in Flight*, Editor's Choice –Main Street Rag, 2007 and *Softly Beating Wings*, 2017 William D. Barney winner (Blackbead Books). Ann's work appears in many small press and university journals here and abroad.

Benecio Landeros is a freshman English major with a minor in Theatre. In high school, he won the Neighborhood Play Contest hosted by Stage West Theatre and had his play produced by local actors. He plans to one day become a published novelist and playwright. His favorite genres to write are science fiction, horror, and dramas.

Lucas Maas is a husband, an author, a United States Marine Corps veteran, and an MFA candidate at Saint Mary's College of California. His work can be found in *Military Experience* and the Arts literary journal *As You Were: The Military Review*, vol. 21. He resides in the Bay Area with his dashing wife, a Coast Guard Servicemember, and two loving pets, composing essays about male adolescence, addiction, and the military and veteran experience.

Robert Martin, a native of Denver, Colorado, began writing as a form of therapy after retiring from the printing and publishing industry. Advised by his doctor to keep his cognitive abilities sharp, Robert transformed his love of reading into a passion for writing. He now channels his creativity into crafting stories across various genres instead of spending all his time searching for his keys. He has two accepted stories waiting for publication with a small traditional publisher. In his free time, Robert and his wife travel in their 5th-wheel trailer with their two dogs, always looking for story inspiration.

Barbara A. Meier is a retired teacher who works in a second-grade classroom in Lincoln, KS. Her recent publications include: T*he Mersey Review, Piker Press, The Museum of Americana: A Literary Review*, and *Al Dente*. She has been nominated for the Best of the Net and a Pushcart Award. She has three chapbooks published: *Wildfire LAL 6*, from Ghost City Press, *Getting Through Gold Beach*, from Writing Knights Press, and *Sylvan Grove*, from The Poetry Box. She loves all things ancient.

Patricia A. Heisser Métoyer is completing an International MFA in creative writing and holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology. She is an award-winning essayist and recipient of T*he Los Angeles Review of Books* Publishing Fellowship and The American Film Institute Fellowship. Heisser Métoyer has been published on multiple platforms. Her poem "Manifesto" has been accepted for publication in the January/February issue of *Cathexis Northwest Press*. *Stardust Review* has also accepted her poem "SIGNS AND WONDERS", and her poem "Lift Every Voice" appears in *Oyster River Pages*. She is a member of the Black List, The Television Academy Foundation Education Advisor, Author's Guild, and the American Psychological Association.

A. Raymond Moschina is a prize-winning writer with works featured in *Salon, Fatherly, Thought Catalog* and other places.

Anirudh Saji Nair, aka Andy Nair, is a freshman at Downingtown West High School, PA, USA. Andy is a keen musician who plays more than 5 instruments and is a regular at band, jazz and other individual

& group performances, including competitions in Chester County, PA. He loves performing for senior citizens and disabled children at various local non-profits. He is also a motorsport enthusiast and dreams of being both a racer & a mechanical engineer one day.

Connor O'Mara is a writer from northern Colorado. He often writes about tragedy set in the Mountain-West, finding inspiration from the people and towns he loves. His fiction has been published in *Inlandia: A Literary Journey* and featured in Oakland's *Beast Crawl*.

Romeo Oriogun is the author of *Sacrament of Bodies, Nomad,* and *The Gathering of Bastards*. A finalist for the 2021 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, and the 2023 National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, he is the winner of the 2022 Alice Fay Di Castagnola Prize, the 2022 The Nigeria Prize for Literature, the 2023 Julie Suk Award, and the 2023 Nebraska Book Award for Poetry. Oriogun poems have appeared in the *New Yorker, Poetry, American Poetry Review*, and others. He has also received fellowships and support from Harvard University, the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, the Oregon Institute for Creative Research, the IIE-Artist Protection Fund, the University of Iowa, and Iowa State University. A juror for the 2024 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, he currently serves as an Assistant Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University.

Sravya Pilla is a sophomore at Jasper High School. She's passionate about all forms of fine arts and loves exploring creativity through different artistic expressions.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book coming out in March from Fernwood Press called A*t The Window, Silence*. Also forthcoming from Wolfson Press is *Raylene and Skip*.

Hunter Prichard is a young writer from Portland, Maine. He writes short stories, dramas, critical reviews, and memoirist essays. Follow him on twitter at @huntermprichard.

Sheila Rittenberg is a retired nonprofit leader born in Montreal. She's lived in three countries, and speaks English, French, and Hebrew (rusty!). Bend, OR, is home. She was a Fellow at Atheneum, and is

co-founder of the Stepping Stones Writing Retreat. Her work can be found in: the April 2024 edition of *The Bluebird Word, Does It Have Pockets* (January 2025), and *Fiction on the Web* (11-25-24).

Morgana Rubini is a 25-year old recent graduate who earned her Master's in Cultural Studies. She is primarily a poet and essayist, particularly writing autotheory. She's interested in deconstruction, fragmentation, embodiment and exploring other ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

Barbara Hageman Sarvis. In the winter of 2020, Covid19 re-introduced me to several unfinished paintings hanging in my studio. For many weeks I stared at the images on the canvas while listening to the daily news. Feelings of rage, sadness and powerlessness overpowered me regarding immigration, systemic racism, climate change, equal rights and a woman's right to choose.The paintings could no longer exist as a portrait, landscape or floral, but instead became visual stories that I had to tell as a catharsis for change.

Aqeel Shaik is a seventeen-year-old Indian-Singaporean student. Two of his original plays, *youth-15* (2022) and *so many faces* (2024), have been staged at his school, and this year he developed his first poetry pamphlet, entitled *Qawwal*. Much of his artwork has revolved around his writing, even though he's shot film for almost two years now**.**

Cristina Sandoval is a photographer by day and reader by night. When she is not doing either, she is probably playing fetch with her dog or binge watching a series in her bed. She is currently in her second year of graduate school at MSU Texas, majoring in English with the hopes of working for a publishing firm in the future. You can find her other photography work on her Instagram @cas1_photo and direct message her for bookings and questions.

David Summerfield's fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and photo art has appeared in numerous literary magazines/journals/and reviews. He's also been editor, columnist, and contributor to various publications within his home state of West Virginia. He is a graduate of Frostburg State University, Maryland, and a veteran of the Iraq war. View his work at davidsummerfieldcreates.com

Sean Sutherland has had poems published in the literary magazines: *Atlanta Review, The Florida Review, The Sandhills literary magazine, Hypertext, The Sky Island Journal*, among other literary magazines, along with the 30th anniversary anthology; *The Writers Studio at 30,* and *The Maine Review*, for which he won honorable mention for their poetry prize in 2015. He was nominated for a Pushcart by the literary magazine *Sleet* in 2019. He was also nominated for a 2023 Pushcart Prize by its panel of guest editors. Two of his poems were selected for an anthology titled, *Poetry for the Actor- A Guide to Deeper Truth*. Sean is a MacDowell Colony Fellow and would like to find more time for camping in a tent!

Patrick Sylvain is a poet, writer, social and literary critic. Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Published in several creative anthologies, journals, periodicals, and reviews including: *African American Review, Agni, American Poetry Review, Cagibi, Callaloo, The Caribbean Writer, Chicago Quarterly Review, Ep;phany, Magma Poetry, Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, Small Axe Salon, SpoKe*, and *Transition*. Sylvain has degrees from the University of Massachusetts (B.A.), Harvard University (Ed.M.), Boston University (MFA), and Brandeis University (PhD). Sylvain is an Assistant Professor at Simmons University, and he is also on faculty at Harvard University's History and Literature Division. Sylvain's poetry chapbook, *Underworlds*, is published by Central Square Press (2018). Sylvain is a featured poet on Benjamin Boone's Poetry and Jazz CDs T*he Poets are Gathering*, and *Caught in the Rhythm* (Origin Records, Oct 2020, Nov 2023). Sylvain is the leading author of *Education Across Borders: Immigration, Race, and Identity in the Classroom* (Beacon Press, Feb 2022). His latest bilingual collection, *Unfinished Dreams // Rèv San Bout* (JEBCA Éditions, Jan 2024).

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah is a Pushcart-nominated poet living in the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in *Unleash Lit, The Pierian, Propel Magazine, Atticus Review, The Journal of Undiscovered Poets,* and elsewhere. He won the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest in 2022 and the Alexander Pope Poetry Award in 2023. His first poetry collection, *Blame the Gods*, published by Kingsman Quarterly in 2023 was finalist at the Black Diaspora Poetry Award in 2023. He was the Editor's Choice Prize Winner of *Unleash Lit* in 2024. He was shortlisted for the Minds Shine Bright Poetry Prize 2024.

Michael Anderson