



2023

A note from the editor...

Dearest contributors, readers, and friends:

Before you dive into these pages of wordsmithing and artistic brilliance, I wanted to share with you a few exciting updates.

Beginning with our next issue, *isotrope* will be rebranded as *Bare Hill Review*. The new name and logo are an homage to one of the most well-known legends of the Seneca Nation of Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples of our beautiful Finger Lakes region in Western New York. Nestled next to South Hill in Middlesex, stands the barren and treeless 865 ft. tall Genundowa, also known as Bare Hill. Growing up five miles from this unique natural wonder, I spent many a dusky evening with my father in his old Ford pickup, cascading over her magnificence while taking turns narrating the tale of her ill-fated encounter with a giant snake who robbed her of her foliage. (If you would like to continue along with my reminiscing, you can experience a more detailed account of the Bare Hill lore [here](#).)

As the journal transitions into exciting new territory, I will also be passing the torch to our new editor-in-chief, Albert Abonado. An accomplished writer and published poet, Al brings with him a wealth of talent, knowledge, and experience in the literary and publishing fields. I have no doubt his vision will breathe renewed life into this project that has been—and will continue to be—so near and dear to my heart.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude for your friendship and collaboration over these past seven years. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as editor-in-chief of *The Finger* and *isotrope*, and I will forever cherish the art and words I have been blessed to review and share. As I move on to my next adventure, I wish upon you all the best of the creative muses. Keep shining, keep creating, and keep in touch.

And now...without further ado, the final issue of *isotrope*...

Cheers,

Erin Brewer

Erin Brewer

Sequela

Kim Rossi

After half a morning on the computer
helping far-away children
say /r/ and stay on topic,
I put on my soft blindfold
to rest in the sofa indentation
left by yesterday's rest,
the silence not quite spotless
but smudged with house noises:
the jelly jar rattling in the refrigerator,
the apples vibrating on a plate,
a strange lullaby for a strange life.

When my family comes home, I'll appear able
to hold a conversation,
make dinner,
lock the chickens in their coop,
maybe go for a walk I'd have once considered short.
In between there's sitting,
invisibly calculating the algebra of exertion.

I have become like my nearly useless
paper shredder, working for a while,
then needing hours unplugged
before working again.
I don't even use it anymore,
I just take my papers to the garden
and burn them in the fire pit.

If there's some alternative to me,
something brighter, warmer,
more fun,
I hope they don't find it

so I can go on pretending what coats me isn't dust
but pollen for some future flowering,
but sugar for some still possible delight.

Stories with Legos

Lucas Selby

I started playing with Legos because my brother played with Legos, and I needed to be exactly like him. He would build the most marvelous structures beyond the scope of my imagination. A city longer than I was lying down, a spaceship bigger than my head, I would wonder at them whenever he played with me. Only, he didn't play with me. Occasionally, I would bother him enough to let me join in on the "fun", but when I moved his beautiful creations out of their rightful place, he yelled at me and I cried and our mother would separate us. I did it over and over. He yelled, I cried, she separated. I was never a smart child, so it took me a while to learn the pattern. I eventually took the hint and stopped playing with him.

My father bought me my first Lego set. We built it together because the pictures didn't really make sense to me. Again, I wasn't a very smart child. Plus, it was big. The set was an entire castle, and for a week I refused to touch it. The knights watched over the battlements motionless for days as I ogled at its majesty. Eventually I touched it and immediately became addicted. Only the knights moved at first as I created the stories of them guarding the walls from the evil knights who attacked relentlessly. At the end of every session of personal playtime, the knights would return to their exact right positions for the next battle. Ultimately, nothing changed. The stories were repetitive, and the characters never found lasting resolution.

When my brother noticed how much fun I was having, he invited me to play with him again. His Legos would join mine until I moved anything out of place. He yelled, I cried, my mother separated us. I played with my castle by myself again until I began to notice new stories. These stories needed new parts and pieces, so I borrowed from my brother and returned them as each story came to a close. That is, I borrowed from him until he noticed. That's when I learned about collaterals. When I borrowed from him, he kept something of mine that I cared about until I returned it. And when I returned it, he would hold on to that something that I cared about as interest for letting me borrow his precious Legos. When my castle became bare walls without decoration, I realized what he was doing. Again, I wasn't a very smart child. I stole everything back. If he noticed, he never said anything, because I would have told Mom and she would have kept him from charging interest ever again.

One day, in one of the epic battles against my kingdom, I broke the castle wall. With the instructions, and probably my dad, I would have been able to remake it, but now the story was better. Walls were never just fixed right away after battles. They took time to rebuild. I re-added a new piece every day wherever it seemed to fit and carried out my miniature sagas of castle knights versus attacking knights. At one point, the attacking knights took advantage of the broken wall and drove out the good guys. Now the castle knights had to attack their own castle to take it back, and of course they did because I decided who won and lost, and the good guys always win.

For years I received Lego sets for birthdays and Christmases. All I ever asked for was more Legos. I built every set just as it was and never traded pieces or shared adventures with my brother. He displayed his personal creations in his room while I created dialogue, intrigue, and worlds with my pre-made store sets. I never risked building my own. I always followed the

instructions. One thing I knew as a child was that I was stupid, so I couldn't risk the atrocities that would become of the works of my hands. Then my dad helped me build my first ever no-instructions creation. A battering ram, taller than the castle it was made for, all in solid black pieces, imposing in size and style. My stories became as big as the siege weapon itself. Every character earned a backstory to the point where it would break my heart if I took them apart. I began shutting my door when I played because I needed to speak their dialogue out loud in their voices. I built a bigger castle with bigger walls with more walls to protect those walls, then I tore apart other sets to have the pieces to build bigger siege weapons to attack those multitudes of walls, and my creations took up the floor of my room so that every night I would have to clear a path to my bed in order to sleep and dream about the stories still in progress. Conflicts never finished in one day like they used to. I had to place every character in a specific location before bed so I wouldn't forget to pick up right where I left off the night before.

I got home from school before my brother did, so I took the opportunities to sneak into his room and stare at his hand-made sets. Nothing had moved. Years of building and destroying and moving and recreating and just down the hall everything was the same. But I never tired of it. I never tired of sitting on his bed for the half hour before he came home, staring at the perfection that surrounded me. No wonder I was never allowed to move anything. No wonder he never rebuilt. I could only sit and soak it in before running back across the hall when the front door slammed. I hoped to find that same perfection in my stories the same way he found perfection in his buildings. But as I said, I was a stupid child. No wonder I was never satisfied.

Normally I spent my nights sitting with my parents or watching my brother play video games or doing my homework, but as my brother entered his independent phase, he began to fight more and more with my parents. I entered my independent phase early as I shut myself up in my bedroom and played alone. I heard the shouting through my conjoined wall with the kitchen, but I never listened to it. My characters had things to say, so they became my priority even after my brother stormed down the hall and slammed his bedroom door.

The Lego walls covered half my bedroom by the time my brother moved to college. I was entering my last year in middle school and thinking that I was getting too old to be playing with Legos. Bit by bit, the stories came to an end. Every character earned their happy ending because that was the best I could offer them--that was the best I could offer myself. The bedroom down the hall was packed into his closet as it became my dad's study, so I stopped sneaking in to admire dusty perfection frozen in time. But I could never bear to pack away my Legos. They remained spread across the floor for months as I could never bring myself to bring the story to a full close. So they sat there and my characters collected dust. After a year, I packed them up and stored them in my closet. They didn't fit into the storage boxes, so I broke them down into parts. My parents bought me a desk to fill the empty corner of the room that used to contain a castle with knights that fought for their kingdom because it was their duty. I started doing my homework on that desk and closed the door to my room out of habit. Not once during high school did I pull out those storage boxes. My imperfect creations, built by a stupid child with an overactive imagination, remained immobile as the first days of that castle. And there they are today.

When I was that stupid little child, I spent more time making stories for fictional characters than I spent living my own story. To this day I can name every character I ever made and tell you everything you'd ever need to know about them. They were my family when I didn't

have a family. They were my siblings when my own couldn't tolerate me. I went into my brother's room one last time before I moved to college and found one of my pieces on one of his buildings. We must have both forgotten about it, but, as I saw it, I knew every character who'd ever held it. I knew every story it helped shape. For once, I didn't steal my piece back from him. I left it attached to his building. In a way, it made it even more perfect.



Let Me Teach You
Serge Lecomte

Beasts of Our Own Legend

Benjamin J. Kirby

Beasts of our own legend fall into frame
dice roll -- snake eyes -- and they chuckle
Never really gone
only around the corner, sipping mimosas

Wicked timbers blow, cast ancient curses
Shadows fade to haze; light will be here soon
We confuse these things: God, the afterlife, love
We recognize these things: heartache, the mundane, conflict

Through, through with the mess
and over the slow madness
Then the old devils bend a finger
beckoning you down the familiar way

The dinner table stays so dirty now
we wipe and elbow-grease scrub at it anyway
You can feel those noxious hungry yellow eyes
waiting to feast on whatever's left of us



Typical American

Donald L. Patten

Harpo's Complaint (Says Tina)

John M. Bellinger

They are cranking up machinery in the neighborhood: block by tiny block, chewing up the last of the black top. No one ever knew how it is this came to pass, how the elderly just gave up— it was their turn—they had their daylight savings bank of moments and autumn had swung around again, with all new programs.

And maybe it wasn't worth it – after all, programs are programs and it's not like it once was – in the old neighborhood, everything that happened seemed significant, moments had both weight and mass, holes were deep but not black, and there were people on TV you could count on to turn nightmares into prose, temporarily giving you a pass to where shades stay furled. In time such muster won't pass. The man will suspend all your hand-outs and temporary programs and break you down, leave you at the shuffle-board without a turn, and there you are, lost as a leper in that very neighborhood you feared: Where the still dark will whisper and feather black with danger. You will reach

for the nightstand, a light, a moment that will carve fear out of the hard dark, one last moment, a shining obsidian thread where the worst of it will pass. I have been in that very place, where you cross with black all the eyes in the pictures - all the people in the program of your dreams. *You can't escape from this neighborhood,* you are thinking. *There will be no more weekends to turn back the clock. Night will come/soon, the world will turn early with day.* This is our now. Here. This bright moment where we can open the rusted screen door and face the neighborhood and the bare heat of the south-tending sun. *This will not pass* we will scream *all the algorithms belong to you, to the programs that were designed for you. Not even monochrome, black is the color you have imagined for every parachute, and black is the hole you fall into at night. We know whose turn it is now.* *We are the perpetually waiting. Get with the program.* The thing is that no one gets to sit down, no one gets a pass. The machines are oiled and ready to grind every moment into irreconcilable dust.

Welcome to the New Neighborhood. You have been here before.
Cut your eyes, neighbor, hood pulled tight.
We have cameras everywhere, so please pass softly
through the dust. Things here are rebuilt with every moment.

IN SEARCH OF YESTERDAY IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

John Grey

Stone walls mark the edges
of overgrown pastures.

So many remnants
of a civilization lost to all
but some memories.

Houses have been demolished,
or burnt, or overgrown,
but cellars holes hold out,
with their jigsaw fieldstones
and hardy blocks of granite.

I come across a rusty tractor
and a cameo wedged in dirt.
And is that a comb?
And, over there, a kettle?

Strangest of all
is an oak tree
that's grown up around
a stretch of barbed wire,
that's cut into its trunk
for a hundred years.

Such an awkward coming together
on man and nature.
Most aren't as obvious
but there are many more like this.

The Woman Who Told Stories**Mark Crimmins**

She wrote them in her head, mostly, and as far as she was concerned—which was pretty far—writing them in her head was the most important thing. Here, narrative essence was distilled from the dross of life. Here, the warp and woof of consciousness itself was represented in the very throes of the creative process. The steaming cauldron of the imagination, bubbling over with mixed metaphors, cooking the raw intellectual powers and throwing the switches of association into overdrive. The chaos of the creative force, captured, gently netted, rendered into narrative line.

A sequence of action. Plot.

Yes, she told these stories in her head all the time, and she sometimes wished that this imaginative life of hers could be objectified, concretized, rendered into language, so that the internal could be rendered external. Somehow, if this could happen, she reasoned, it would allow her to transcend time.

Or would it?

She refused to think of her thought-stories as merely things she was thinking. It was not true. They were not only not just thoughts—they were in fact stories. Not only were they not stories—they were in fact, in the truest and realest sense, the greatest and purest stories ever composed by the brain of woman! Stories, moreover, that were never written by the hand of man!

Sometimes, therefore, she thought up terms to describe herself as her own particular, unique, individualized, and completely original authorial self. An artist. She would endow herself—at least in the quiet confines of her mind—with various titles. She was *The Brainwriter*. *The Mental Author*. More mysteriously—after a sip or two of Laphroaig—she became *She whose tales must not be conveyed*.

But write them she did. They didn't pour out of her as much as whirl around inside of her, a tornado of tales. Finally, she arrived at the conclusion that to write any of them down, these mind-tales, would be to cheapen and downgrade them, to pollute them by rendering them into specific linguistic form.

And thus, she became reconciled never to recording any of the stories, the truest stories, the purest tales, the ones that existed only in her imagination, where they would ever revolve on the platform of a supranarratorial plane. Yes, she decided, she would curate, for herself alone, the library of tales rendered sacred by their confinement to the precincts of her own brain!

Defiantly, she chanted her favorite Dantean phrase: *Yo? So low?! Oh no!*

Then came the moment when she realized that even this decision was somehow a betrayal or her own inner compulsions, her own profoundest creative convulsions. This resolution never to relate a tale paradoxically followed a narrative line of its own.

Even this, she understood, was a story.



When I Touch You with My Eyes Closed
Brad Stumpf

Ars poetica

Joseph Byrd

Allow the
best to step away if you
can stand it. And
don't tip your hat to irony
even if your family's freaky
fedora begs for a
go at what's been
hoeing around
in its weird garden of
jokes and smoke shows.

Kill uncle bob before saying he always
lets grandma answer the rest home door naked. Laugh when
mom puppets the Thanksgiving turkey around the room.
No need to explain how daughter and mother have long
orbited each other in their three-ring circus of sex.

Pass on grandpa's lost letters to dad, their crippled cursive asking one
question: *Will you let me see my son?* And
remember: never say never, unless you're
saying what
took you so long to
understand that it's the
velocity of all these wonderful
weirdoes which fucked these words into
existence.

You are nothing less than the
zymurgy of your brood. But sometimes a
zucchini is just a
zucchini.

Leopards, Music, Wolves

Coen van der Wolf

Music is not political.

It captures nostalgia far better than any politician ever could,
However daft his pageantry –

Leopards break into the temple, emptying the chalices; this repeats itself again and again;
finally, it becomes predictable, and enters into the ceremony.¹

It could be our biggest boast, trotted out to substantiate
That we chafe at encasement
To systems of suns

American wolves howl differently from European ones:
Still, they know how to respond to them.

¹ Franz Kafka, The Zurau Aphorisms



Embraceable You
Matthew Fertel

In the Eye of the Beholder

Nathaniel Gutman

Two syllables in *coffee*,
but the way she pronounces it,
at least four: C-O-U-A-FF-EE.
You can't take it, the coffee,
into the gallery, she says.

Can you say it again, please,
I beg the charming attendant,
I love your accent, say it, please, one more time.
Oh, I'm so sorry, is it disrespectful?
If it is, I apologize and take it back right now.
Coffee, she says,
giving Audrey Hepburn in My Fair Lady
a run for her money.
Then, she puts the cup under the counter.
I'll safeguard it, the coffee, for you.
I'm in love. With her.
With New York. With MOMA.

I'm the only visitor in the large hall.
Centered, on the floor, a single exhibit:

Read the label:
Gabriel Orozco, 1993
Dimensions: 4-7/8" x 13" x 8-1/2"
Credit: Nina and Gordon Bunschaft Fund
Object number: 1048.2010
Department: Painting and Sculpture
Artist's Comment:
A combination between disappointment and amusement,
between surprise and skepticism.

A uniformed guard keeps a close watch.
I know, she says, catching my quizzical look,
I thought the same until I heard the artist's talk.
It's about context, see, space,
the fine line between everyday
objects and art, like Van Gogh's Old Shoes.
Makes sense, no?

Yes, I say, hoping my coffee is still hot,
heading out, I glance at the artwork again:

Empty Shoe Box

Monsoon (Barsaat – برسات)

Nadir Khan Feroz

As the clouds gather,
letting their backs tan
to an other-worldly hue,
unbeknownst to the mortal eye;

And the faint tap of the drizzle,
gradually turns into a *pitter-patter*
that we *desis* romanticize
as *rim-jhim*;

As millions of nameless rain-drops
sway south,
eloping with gravity,
to embrace an eternal anonymity;

And the trees and shrubs pose
for some invisible photographer,
unperturbed
by those anonymous caresses;

As the zephyr tickles through my form,
just as you would,
leaving a trail of goosebumps as it proceeds
to foxtrot with the leaves;

As the occasional roar
of the blackened skies,
echoes the excited cheers
of the young and wild;

And perched birds
intermittently chirp
an ode to us
and their interrupted wanderlust;

Intoxicated by the petrichor

emanating from all around me,
I look up,
yearning to catch your glimpse

and notice the Sun-kissed iridescent clouds,
forming anagrams of vibgyor
I can't pronounce;

I smile –

writing on to you
as each sight and sound
of the monsoon
nudges my quill further...

And I sip my caffeinated *doodh-patti*
taking another bite of the fried *pakora*;
I'm done inscribing
and you, reading:

Barsaat...

Memories of an Observation Deck
Robin Weeg, FLCC Student

I stand in the woods by a small college.
Wooden legs knee-deep in marsh water.
Benches cosmic-turtling on my back.

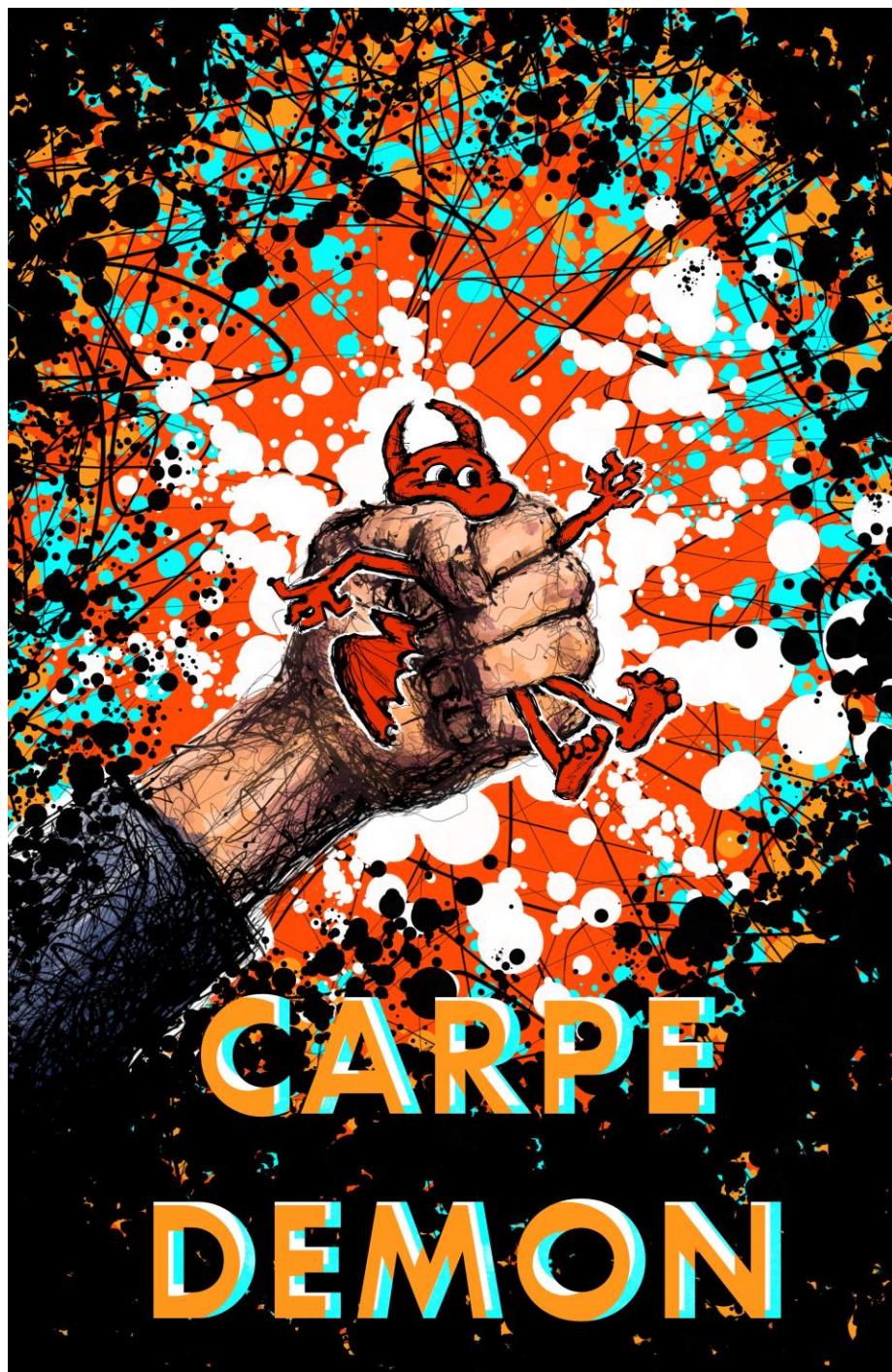
I'm a rest stop for tired twenty-somethings.
A secluse safe space for misplaced loners,
displaced stoners. Lovers. Losers. Poets.

Scratching and scrawling inscrutable scribbles —
“Love” “Peace ❤️” “Spoinkus” “Carpe Diem”
“ACAB” “Twigsnap” “Words Never Die”

A thousand ways to say — “I was here”
“I tried” “I cared” “I had unique thoughts”
Thoughts I will carry safely when you're gone.

Till I finally collapse — buried in muck.
Forgotten human wreckage too expensive to exhume.
I'll become a home for frogs.

My rotting walls unreadable Rosettas
For wide-eyed tadpoles to marvel at
And future frog scientists to study.



Carpe Demon
Robin Weeg, FLCC Student

All that's left

Emma Jarman

A bead of viscous red fluid had settled in the pit of a small, rain-filled pock beneath a steaming tree. Scarlett poked at it with her finger.

"Is that blood?"

"No, transmission fluid."

She pulled her finger back, pretending to believe it.

Hugging her knees in the misty cold, Scarlett scanned the wooded shoulder where just yesterday the boy she'd loved for twelve years – since they were fifteen years old – drove away from her into this oak tree.

"Come on, get up, we've gotta go."

Scarlett didn't get up; she wasn't quite done. She had to find his keys. She couldn't find his keys. Her eyes tore through the desiccated roadside as a cold panic washed over her.

"Where are his keys?"

She began to cry.

Scarlett went to the salvage yard next. His Jeep sat near the entrance like it was any old car, but none of the other cars had pieces of him melted to the driver's seat. Any old car didn't have all that was left – his hair, his skin, his blood – caught in the cracks of its shattered windshield.

Scarlett moved to the front end of the car and looked inside. She reached through the broken window and peeled a scrap of gray sweatshirt from the driver's seat, inspecting it. Bits of melted plastic and flesh clung to the fabric, soiling her hands. He smelled like his mother's house even after he'd left home for good – basil and fennel, lavender Tide, chewing tobacco – but this just smelled like fire and *nothing*. She rolled his scorched fleshy bits inside the sweatshirt and tucked it under her arm. Reaching back, Scarlett felt around the steering wheel to the ignition. One mangled key. No ring.

Pressing her back to the side of the wet car, Scarlett slid to the ground, hugging the sweatshirt to her chest. She began to cry again, and thought of summer twelve years ago when she was fifteen. Her friend had been driving, he was in the back. She didn't love him yet, but soon. They were going to Claire's in Solon, back when there was a Claire's in Solon, back when people went to Claire's. He'd thrown a raging fit in the parking lot for having been dragged there, refused to go in, sat in the back and waited with all the windows up in the summer heat. When they

returned, he was still there, completely naked, arms crossed, hair wild as an animal, sweat dripping down his legs to the floor. Scarlett erupted with laughter. Her friend rolled down the windows.

"Here, we got you this," Scarlett said. She tossed him a small, green and yellow, plush pineapple keychain.

"I hate it," he said, twisting it onto his keyring. His green eyes sparkled as he pulled her into the back seat laughing.

Scarlett soon grew to love him like she'd never love again: wholly, desperately, consumptively. And each time it fell apart, as it often tended to, they'd pick up the pieces and rebuild together, like kicked-over Legos or the Dresden Cathedral. She'd match the edges and he'd dot the glue until they were happy again, until the next time. Scarlett was enraptured by his savagery, engrossed by his madness, in awe of his tendency toward the outrageous and solely privy to the pilot light of pain inside of him. He was everything she was not – bold, loud, unafraid, – and she idolized him. And he loved her timid, quiet hesitancy just the same, if not slightly more.

Scarlett rose from the mud, not bothering to brush it from her dress. Circling the car, she peered through the rest of the broken, missing windows searching for anything salvageable. Mostly, it was in the mud at the tree.

She paused at the trunk and thought of the day three years ago, when she was twenty-four, that he'd come home to her for the first time. She'd smiled as he'd drawn her in for a bend-over-backwards hug and a tongue-filled kiss and tossed his keys on the counter – their counter.

"I can't believe you still have this," she'd said, picking up the time-worn pineapple. It was much browner and softer than all those years ago, but the key to his Jeep still hung on.

About once a week for a year after he drove into the tree, Scarlett drove past the burned-up trunk to tell him how much she still loved him, how much she always would. Then his father petitioned the township to cut it down. That week, she drove to the stump and stopped. There, she sat in her car and began to cry, then sob. Violent, shattered breaths wracked her body as she melted into the driver's seat.

For the next many years Scarlett will visit him in the age-worn shoe box at the back of her closet. She'll pull his favorite green t-shirt full of holes and white paint over her head and think of the day he gave it to her, when she was twenty-five and had to drive back to Ohio for a while.

"Take this and bring it back to me," he'd said.

She'll take out the pair of black cotton underwear and move the fabric through her hands, holding it to her cheek. She'll open his old flask shaped like an old Game Boy and bring it to her nose, conjuring the old smell of cheap cinnamon whiskey. She'll shake his twenty-year-old can

of wintergreen Skoal and listen for the tink of dehydrated leaves inside, remembering when they were teenagers and he taught her how to thwap it with one hand to pack the tobacco. She might read the letter he'd written and left in her car the morning after a particularly bad fight, telling her how much he'd loved her and always, always would. But if that's too hard she might open it just to look at his handwriting. She'll prod the sealed bag with the rolled-up sweatshirt and lay down among all she has left of him, close her eyes, and think of their bend-over hugs, their mouthful kisses and their little yellow pineapple.



I'm Not Lovin' It
Matthew Fertel

Big

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Ben liked loud trucks with loud mufflers. In fact, Ben liked all big and loud sounds, the bigger and louder the better he felt. He boomed his voice and was sure everybody heard him. How could they not?

He got loud and surly with a couple of cops. When they told him to quiet down, Ben said, "I am Ben. I am big and loud, big and loud." He screamed at the top of his lungs and ranted a bit. He ranted enough to be held for 48 hours for psych observation.

Hospital staff put Ben in the Quiet Room. His screams echoed off the walls, but became fainter and less frequent towards morning. When staff checked up on him, Ben was sitting on the floor, curled up into a ball. He whispered, "I am only six inches tall. Please don't step on me. Please don't step on me."

Confined

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Willie was asleep on his feet, half dreaming, half remembering the playpen made out of barbed wire his frugal and drunken father made for him when he was a toddler. Somehow, the pinpricks of yesterday never seemed to get totally lost in the stream of time.

Feeling he was falling, a reflex jerked him upright, awake but still groggy. He thought about the softball game, how after it he was so tired, he fell asleep in the car as his brother went into the roadside country store. The slamming car door had woken him up, and he had seen the sack of groceries his brother was carrying and the baseball bat with blood on it that his brother tossed in the back seat.

Will wrapped his hands around the iron bars in front of him. They were cold and hard, but at least they were smooth.

Leftovers

Maggie Bowyer

We would split a Skillet Queso and Cajun Chicken Pasta at Chilis / We gossiped over our latest dates and stayed out late, but she didn't let me touch the Cajun Chicken Pasta / "It's leftovers, baby," she would always say / Shove the table's hot sauce in her purse / Pour her Diet Coke in a water bottle before asking for a refill and the check / "Be sure you add the coupon for a free bean dip with an entree," she would call as the waiter walked away / I always left restaurants hungry, but I remember thinking at least she was feeding me / She would unload her treasures, tell my brother she had lunch for tomorrow, and she would go straight to bed / I would slide my hands underneath my mattress, snag the stash of snacks I hoarded there, and dine on leftover chips, an expired pack of Twizzlers, and a squished bag of gummies / Now my freezer is filled with homemade meals I cannot stomach (I have to wonder if it was her leftover genes or damage done in childhood that caused this disease)

Ode to body hair

Dwight James III

On the way to my grandfather's house,
the snow blows into the Jeep.
Curls scratch every edge of my clothes as
heat builds with every layer I put on.
Rubbing my hands, I grab the lotion.
Oil sheen to cracking skin,
like sweat running down my forehead
while fighting bullies after school.
My white meat knuckles sting with every rub.

For every hair that sheds,
there is a patch replacing it.
Bring me back to the naked days,
where nothing could cut my skin.
I cover up in order to cover the hair
that is still here. The rage is still here.
The windows feel like plains of ice,
I glide my fingers around to look at the street:

Kids play a pick-up game of Basketball,
defenders bump into the small carrier.
they reach and steal the ball till
he falls and chases after them.

How was school?

My grandfather's question breaks my daydream. The crown,
the weight of the world and a wonder known by all.
It is not how much of it we have but how much remains together
like split ends. How do you keep the hair from growing?
Is there a bare ness that only we can obtain?
Or is manscaping an escape, evasion of the body
and how it always wants to be a jungle?

Good, I tell him, good.
as I shove on my hoodie,
the bulk of my coat suffocating my chest
hair. Falling in threads as peach fuzz
breaks through my chin.

Ski Dream

Francine Rubin

Through ice crust and small rocks,
we carve in tandem until he speeds ahead,
bored by my moderate pace, his graceful arcs
deepening into a steep line, and then
I spot his body thrown into a snowbank,
skis off. When I reach him,
he is on hands and knees, light brown hair
wet with sweat and snow, concussed
but okay. Two slightly older boys wearing
the power of recent growth spurts –
new bone and muscle ejecting
them from childhood – steal his skis, laughing
when he objects. Older and slightly taller,
I raise my voice above theirs and use
all the young adult tones and postures I know.
In this dream, there are no articulated words:
just sounds that indicate threats –
ice, blades, thieves, voices – and breathing.
When the boys leave and it is just us,
he smiles at me with pale baby teeth,
his face translucent as porcelain.
We collect his skis, and I revel in this moment
of knowing we can ski down the mountain,
but that we don't have to. We can stand
in the pristine cold under trees and breathe
in fir and snow together as if we share
one set of lungs.

What I See When I Remove my Eyelashes

[Content Warning: Depression]

Sabrina Stuart Smith

Despondency stares me down
through the mirror and asks me to smile with it.
It's cold, sardonic and wants to end me
with an unnerving grimace
its eyes penetrate deep into my roots
where it nestles and spreads its web

I seek no defence.
I'm curious for Despondency
to reveal its plan

Gaiety rushes to my aid
but I shove her away,
tell her I'm good
that I've got this
no need for rescue; *I sought no defence*
I tell her
she's doubtful--*I see danger. Come, let's flee*
I overrule her. I detest being forced

she disintegrates into cobalt flakes
and I'm left alone with Despondency.
I relish a decent challenge--
Give me your worst!

Reason interjects, just briefly
but witty and convicted enough
to cause a slight pause in me

creating a wormhole
for that persistent, Gaiety
to wiggle in, undetected
and destroy my new web.

Now when I look in the mirror
I see nothing there
but Confusion.

The Baying Dogs of Night

Jim Ross

Being unokay and swimming in,
testing the limits, of core discord
isn't the way we're supposed to play.
We're to take three deep breaths,
shut it down, get back to work.

But if you find yourself in Hell
you have little choice
you've got to follow the baying dogs
because they're the only ones
who know the way out.

Sometimes it feels like
the baying dogs are eating
you alive, from the inside out.
All the more reason:
keep them well fed.

A tip: the baying dogs are blind
and go on scent alone. You're
the one, you've got to lead
the baying dogs to daylight.
All the more reason:
keep a flashlight lit.

Those dogs can raise all hell, stink
to high heaven, eat you out of house
and home, and don't dare look in their eyes.
Maybe get proactive: devour the hapless
guide dogs before they make lunch of you.

If one gets a jump and wraps
his maw around your thigh, digging deep,
slam the flashlight on his scabby nose
and seeing red run to the EXIT sign.

I hope, for your sake, our sake,
it's not a door to a deeper room
of Hell filled with apocalyptic cats,
drumming, blowing into warring shofars.
Could anything be worse than apocalyptic
cats playing jazz at a funeral?



Whose Bones Are These?
Ners Neonlumberjack

That Night

Devin Meireles

It was a cold winter night, nearing the end of what feels like the longest month of the year, February. Even though more daylight seemingly increases day by day, the darkness was still most of what I saw around my working hours. The street light adjacent to my front door was probably the closest thing I saw to sunshine. Walking under it cast a shadow that followed me in either direction but that evening would be the last time that it came home with me.

On that night, our tiny house was silent except for the grief that echoed between our plastered walls. When I got in, she was taking a bath. Reminiscing on what could have been but we knew what was coming. It wasn't what we hoped for.

The doctor called us with the latest results. A pulse was lost, ticking dissipated, and now we awaited their DOA. The doctor told us what to expect and gave some options to induce. She chose the natural route. No drugs. Bad news is hard enough to receive, let alone while hopped up on meds.

The doctor forewarned how painful it might be. That made her nervous yet she still wished to proceed without any help. She soaked in the tub like a duck in water. Paddling under the bubbles, working hard to keep it together, but all I saw was her calm demeanor and lamenting eyes. She was beautiful amidst tragedy, exuding so much strength. Stronger than I had seen her before. More than she ever knew.

After leaving the bathroom, she sat with me at the bedside. Those maternity books on the night table were irrelevant all of a sudden. Not how I remembered them the night before. All the joy and hopefulness from yesterday was gone, just like that. She cried while I held her in my arms, holding back my own tears to make her feel safe. That's the best I could do. It hurt so much.

Still, she was all the light I needed that day. More luminous than the street pole outside. In the darkness that engulfed us she cast a beacon that guided me to what mattered most. She was the lighthouse that guarded our tiny house. We would always have each other.

We carried on like any other night. Doing our best to feel normal. I think we had soup. Our sorrows sunk into our bowls. We downed mouthfuls of salt with our spoonfuls. That was our reality—accepting the hard truth. Some things cannot be changed and that's just how it goes sometimes.

Even still, there was something in the air that wasn't there last night. It only arrived after the doctor called. Maybe it followed me home. It was an energy that attached itself to the space around us. Nestling between the walls of our modest bungalow. Something joined us for what

was coming. We could feel their presence sitting among us. Like a silent dinner guest at the table.

She thought it was her Avó who passed on that month. It was in Palliative Care that she told her of the news, in confidence, before crossing over. Now, as quickly as things had changed, it was comforting to think that Avó was still looking out for her on the other side. Whatever it was, we weren't alone that evening. We went to sleep with them in our company.

That night was quiet until 3am. She tossed and turned by my side while I took no issue sleeping, a secret talent of mine. I can't remember what I dreamt about but I was suddenly awakened from my deep state when the smoke detector spasmodically sounded off. It was ominous. The dog and I hopped out of bed to find the danger but there was nothing. Prior to that happening, there was no indication that the smoke detector was faulty. It was hardwired with a battery backup. A false alarm never happened like that.

When I chalked it up as a weird glitch, I went back to bed. Again, I had no trouble falling asleep but this time as my eyes closed, it sounded off as if it caught me in the act. It was a signal. The dog was on high alert. Ambience in the bedroom thickened like a dense gloom. It felt like whatever that was was trying to warn us. Then she uttered the words, "I think it's coming".

The dog and I waited outside the bathroom, fanning the smoke under the ceiling. There was no danger but the detector knew as much as we did. Without a doubt the fire was in her womb when it came to pass. That's when it happened. It painlessly fell in the bowl like lamenting into our soup. That specimen sank to the bottom. It never had a chance to drift. Nothing was more ingenuous. Salt of the earth. That was our baby.

Part of us died with them. It felt grotesque to collect the sample to send for testing. Our flesh wrapped in plastic like some forensic evidence. We didn't get much sleep beyond that. Apart from another sound off, the detector stopped acting strange after it passed. The silence in the house was filled with despair. Whatever was in our company still hung around. We could feel their shadow watching us. Standing at guard. There was something about that night.

The morning after was another working day. I got ready, doing my best to feel normal, while a piece of myself was still in bed. It was hard for me, for us. The devastation of losing a piece of ourselves and all hope in that moment was the lowest we ever felt. I couldn't bear leaving her. She was distraught. She lay there until I returned from work. That day was so difficult.

It wasn't until I returned home when I realized that something was missing outside my front door. My shadow. Oddly enough, the street light burned out and died just the same. For all I know, it could have happened at the same time. I remember looking up at the darkness. I remember thinking that is more than just a coincidence. Perhaps a message. As a tear fell down my cheek, I thanked a higher power for such godly attention.

Grieving looks different for everyone. I tend to bury my sadness with distractions. At the very least, my curiosity seeks meaning in the most trivial of things. That helps me to cope. Even so, the pain of that night still stays with me.

Finding the silver lining in any circumstance is always best advised, and as painful as that was, I can't help but think about the strange events of that night. Something was there for her, for us. Something came to collect an angel. We were not alone. I can still feel them with us from time to time. That night will forever be a part of us.

Bullhead City

JC Alfier

Name it the hard-won art of not going home:
how sky umbers into failing light.
Into the scent of dust and memory,
of barren foothills brushstroked
in terra cotta and mirage.

Along Casino Drive I hear the dark elation
of someone buying dope in a shadowed doorway
and the laughter of a teen vaping
with the fervency of someone deprived of oxygen,
their lungs in search of restlessness.

Jaywalking tourists scuttle sideways over streets
and curbs, rushing to gamble under the gaining tide
of neon that apes the low red flame of roadside vigils —
the part of them that will leave no forwarding address,
streets meant to fall away behind them.

Others drift toward the musty aura
and muted corners of dive bars,
toward nightclubs that line Route 95,
the deadpan glamor of strippers
with names only fugitives would assume.

Like all mercy, those names beg to be used again
on men who wait for the torch singer
whose voice is ceaseless,
each soul leaning toward the same hunger,
the same light coming for our eyes.



COVID 19

Minta Samiei

Wildwood Nearing Winter

JC Alfier

The season's reduced to this: my clock dragging
like a bad marriage, a wayward tide,
the day arriving so pallid it's a paraphrase of itself.

Wind cuts in from the sea — brine hangs in a rumor of snow.
Pavilions shelter none but a few errant gulls.

A breakwater's chunks of stone shoulder seaward,
luring a far-gone memory of my father's hands crumbling bread
into soup, frost-burn on his knuckles from morning chores,
his table in the shadowplay of a low winter sun.

The boardwalk's an unsent invitation. It groans under me
in the tattered colors of shuttered concessions.
Just offshore, shipwrecks are perched atop sandbars, the only harbors
they'd gain. Do they see us out here as those
who'd farewelled them from foreign piers?

Turning inland toward my motel now, its lurid Vegas name,
streetlights stand in wait for dusk
their unlit amber anxious to announce a corner,
someone walking my way, somewhere light should live.

Spitting
Wilda Morris

The Mozambique spitting cobra . . . can spit from any position, including lying on the ground or raised up.

~ Fact-Retriever.com

I'd be more impressed by the abilities
of the Mozambique spitting cobra
if I hadn't had a son like Jeff.
When he joined our family at age two,
he didn't know how to expectorate,
as I learned when I took him to the dentist the first time.
I made the mistake of teaching him, which makes me wonder
if mother cobras have that task, too. Once Jeff learned,
I couldn't get him to stop. He spat on ants that crawled
on the sidewalk. He spat on the fire in the charcoal grill.
He spat into his bowl of chicken soup, his bathwater,
the swimming pool. A few years later,
he slipped out his upstairs bedroom window
onto the porch roof, spewed spittle on his sisters
and their girlfriends as they came in and out
of the house. Fortunately, unlike the cobra,
his spit was not toxic, would not blind
them if it hit their eyes. And I admit,
he did not have the Mozambique cobra's ability
to direct his spit eight-feet away at right angles
from his mouth. I rather hope that, at least once
when I wasn't looking, he lay in the grass,
spit into the air, and was startled when his saliva ran
down his own cheeks. It would have served him right.

The Dark

Robert L. Penick

There was never a monster
lurking in the abyss
of the closet.

Never an ogre pausing
beneath the bed before
saying hello.

That was the problem—
The lack of beasts put us
in a corner.

We had to fear something, right?
The church and the mothers
held we must fear.

So we became our own ghouls,
tracking ourselves through days
and nights of dread,

counting rosary, tossing salt,
praying deliverance from
our own damned selves.



COVID 19
Minta Samiei

Transfigured Mojave

JC Alfier

I'm out in Daggett, near the rail junction,
a flourish of sparrows in my attic. They murmur
like tides in the sun's bone-hollowing heat
that could burn you even in your dreams.

Wind through pinyon pines plays thin hosannas,
muffled sounds like voices in a room beyond a room.
All distance here is motionless —
a scene from a calendar that never dates itself.

Coyotes herd their hunger along cutbanks
and washouts where dust devils ruck fences
that line ghost rivers to say all art is departure.
Nights become the Union Pacific's labored drone,

headlamps gathering silhouettes
that contour broken foothills where feral rains
scrawl the unmapped zones of dust-addled air.
I watch evenings fall dark as henbane,

daydream my father at his coal shed, winters gone,
weathered slats breathing New Jersey winds.
How through snow drifts he'd scuttle the dark fuel
to his back door, lingering to stare at the moon.

Before long, I latch my screen door
and a gust pins a torn news page against it.
In all the quiet the desert can offer, the faded print
faces me like a voiceless messenger.



COVID 19

Minta Samiei

Engagement

DS Maolalai

it's evening. sun sets
like a broke-open egg yolk
and a hardening pan
of horizon. I am on the sofa.
chrys breaking eggs
for us both. I don't help –

we have worked out a system.
I'll clean up later
and she won't help
with that. and the dog
is with her in the kitchen –
she's cooking, I'm jealous,
the dog likes the smell
of our eggs. later, the dog

will be in with her also – when it's
after dinner, and she's
on the sofa, I in the kitchen,
but I'm only washing
up. there is a synchronicity;
we move, like the hand
and the egg aimed
with accuracy. I am propelled
and she is propelling.
she follows through, runs
from her target.

Notre Dame

DS Maolalai

the footage showed smoke
come in bunched dusty blooms
like a roadside of filthy-
topped flowerstems,
and sometimes in poetry
the simile must just be trite.

the news flamed all evening
and way past eight o'clock,
vanishing like ink off the pages
from a novel in a water-
logged bathroom. and I
saw it. watched on tv
and saw it. like 9/11
again, but in france: history, flat
as a television. and this
was real history, real fire
and nothing like a story
in a newspaper when you're ten – not like
when you're asked "do you
remember?" 800 years
suddenly breaking their kneecaps.

no more landmarks to skip over
in the tourist's usual search
for what's authentic in paris.
I walked to the bathroom
and pissed, hitting the seat
and piled books as I stared
at the news on my phone

Prohibition

Bethany O'Tremba

Flash and flare of the 1920's
Seems distant from the rounded table in Edward Hopper's Automat,
A table for two, but seats only her.
She stares at the half-empty cup in her hand
Which serves as a sorry distraction from her half-empty heart.

He has it—her right glove—
As a token of affection.
An old-fashioned tradition, like showing up for a date,
Not running off with flapper girls who
Bat their eyelashes and shake their fringe.
They're sirens who lure men away from their loves,
Contorting them into fools, drunk on their own lust.

The lights stretch beyond the window into the unknown,
He's not lonely without her.
He's cutting a rug without her, drinking rum without her,
Laughing without her, living without her.

This girl and I have a lot in common.
He never called me *doll*, never said I looked *swell*,
Just took my glove and my love as well.
When I looked at him, he looked at her,
The flirtatious flapper girl.
I'm alone like the girl in the automat,
Because he up and left us both.
We're all dressed up with no place to go, and I think we can agree
That prohibition isn't easy, but what choice is left for her and me?



My Hair on Her Hips
Brad Stumpf

Owl in the Library

Kim Rossi

There, in the fireplace
of the great old library,
a barred owl hovers above the flames
and for a moment it seems possible
that this is the kind of magic school you read about
and spent years wishing you could attend
before reality kicked.

And here you are at this mundane college
studying for your sociology test or dozing off
and suddenly there's an owl flying
up to the gothic rafters,
looking down at you like a grandmother,
watching you with ringed eyes,
comparing you to mice.

And here she is, more living than all
the books combined and you
know there is something real like magic here—
if you could just write it down—
when the librarian says everyone
must leave so you leave
but the words stay.

The owl stays for four days.
Falconers come with tasty pigeons
but she only hunts words—
yours and all the others in the library—
to swoop, to swallow, to digest
into poems for her life-mate,
stories for her nestlings,
songs of a solid sky,
a windless, treeless place,
a moon as bright as the sun.

A Private Play

Matt Gulley

Great design is self-evident
but the black box theatre
is no accident.

The actors know the lines
but they catch themselves repeating
little things said in private.

What's caught is undoubtedly held,
but possession creates
new objects in your hand -

and nine tenths of the law
leaves us a precious fraction
with which to claim

a final couplet, and chart
back lit shadows

with which we may step to
and receive overdue applause.

Never apologise; never explain

Coen van der Wolf

The man-child author reports on his driving lessons.
A hesitant pedestrian near a bedlam even crossing
Has his instructor cursing her skittish gender.
The author concurs, *and a male bond is forged.*

That other author. Half-Jewish, he flings his scrawny figure
Against a man whipping the dog that pulls his cart
Along the canals' opal promenade,
And is applauded by SS men.

The paradoxes of an occupation captured in two moments.

12, you hear your teacher halt with approval
By the preppy girl's comely star-spangled bottom.
"That's cardinal."
Today, he would fry for that.

10, you are babysitting a child half your age,
One 7. They have fallen asleep on the bed.
You have brought along your favourite book,
Cagey Du Guesclin and his young band.
You know it by heart. You watch them.

*offering to a childhood crush***Sophie Hall**

for Ralph Macchio
anything soft, with lemon.
this is how I say thank you
bring you into the home you built
(only a little, just barely, just
one or two bricks laid of hundreds,
thousands, but
Ralph, your bricks were the easy
wood of a guitar stem, spruce for a softer touch,
dollhouse walls to hold the slightest accents—
materials I want to rest
inside)
the lemon is my own thing.
when the flavor of a dish doesn't swim
so strongly to the surface, lemon
spits
over everything—it's my rose tint,
the flavor I like my cough drops,
the fancy ones, the subtle scent I dream of
in a goat's milk soap. Ralph, when I
loved you most, I didn't eat so much lemon.
I watched the 1986 Crossroads with my dad,
cobalt acoustics, stuffed buck heads and
candy electrics heavy on our walls,
his cigarette teeth
decapitating
bright boxes of lemonheads, his steel-toe boots sprawled
on the blanketed couch. you played the blues,
Lightning Boy,
and Dad reminded me, every time,
that the movie cut to another actor's fast hands
when you supposedly played your lemon-yellow
guitar, but I never cared at all,

you were just
so
sweet

Wendy's Sweet & Sour Sauce

Zach Spruce

Mother, I still remember
that overwhelming, salty sting
of soggy Wendy's French fries,
how we let the detritus thrive
in the backseat: crumpled
straw wrappers, greasy bags,
cracked plastic cutlery, mold-
speckled nuggets between
the Coca-Cola-stained seats
where no light could reach,
not unlike the aphotic depths
of cold ocean. Mother, I know
you tried as hard as you could.
But I still recall the disorder,
the fine blue powder swirling
into chunky cinnamon Motts.
I still think about the sweet
& sour sauce I was so fond of,
how it resembled the machines'
nourishing goo where Neo slumbered.



Joy
Abubakar Sadiq Mustapha

The Long Walk

Bruce Spang

Along the path by Bent Creek, early when the light
first leans between the firs and hickories, first shimmers
on the waters lulling by the bridge, we walk with our dogs.

They tug and stick their noses in the underbrush, lift
their legs, letting others know “We’ve been here,”
and we, too, attest to that need, to say
“We have walked here together,” the miles
side by side, two men, gripping the leashes.

In time, as the light lifts higher, the mist rises,
and coming at us, an elderly couple, one
with ski poles to keep his balance, and his wife,
close by, wary, halting often to gaze
at the water over rocks, the shish of sound.

We wave, merely say, “Good morning,”
as we pass, knowing that in years,
with my knees as they are and the sore hip,
we may be strolling as they are, not making
time, but walking, finding some solace
in the quiet, the taut leashes, and the love,
yes, love that comes from being with each other.



Joy
Abubakar Sadiq Mustapha



The Breath of a Wing

Bruce Spang

The zebra finch flutters by my face—
the air tactile, featherlike.

In the emptiness of day, I sit
in a brown leather La-Z-Boy.

A dove coos, *I'm here, I'm here.*
Who was it who said the world

was with God? Or was it the Word
is God? I'm not sure.

But Blake did say words have
their own divinity. They reach

yet fail to reach yet reach to
where I am here with my lover.

The purple lilacs leave
their scent like wings.

This day is like all the others,
as we, too, are like all others.

Our four dogs sleep on the carpet.
It's midday. Much of light

has spent its soft dominion
over the wall. The caged finches

sing one to another, *Watch me.*
They flit from perch to perch.

Dazzling, persistent in flight,
they aren't hurried, yet flick

off the lights at night, they settle
as the pulse under the skin

where no words exist. *Indwelling*
Heidegger called it, the way words

dwell in the here, the perch, the nest,
the window, the raucous sky. My lover once

touched my cheek like the breath of a wing
and whispered, *I love you* so near me

the words flamed like a tongue
in my mouth as if my heart

and the finch were one, caged
yet content in our durable love.

medical procedure

Zachary Hodges

the nurse asks you about college again, she's
trying to calm you down. you tell her you're
studying english, *education*, you add,
which should change, and for the second time
in a month she tells you about her english teacher
from high school, and how he hated her using the word *ain't*,
and how he's a patient here, yes, the very same, isn't that crazy?

and she leaves and you learn just what crazy
means— grippy socks poke the slope between the ball of your
le foot and the sole. sky blue paper dress, one you've
written about, now you wear, on a bed on a bed on the
english teacher's bed, on the english major's bed. *education* bed.

and you remember the last time— grippy socks, white walls,
now foul then fresh. blue paper dress,
the nurse asks you about college; she's
trying to calm you down. you tell her you're
studying english— fluorescent lighting— *education*, you add,
which might change, and the cinder block walls,
and she tells you about her english teacher
from high school, and how he hated her using the word *ain't*,
and how he's a patient here, yes, the very same, isn't that crazy?
isn't that crazy? isn't that crazy?

you're back, and she's back, and she tells you about how
she loves teachers, and *iiiiiiii* says your arm, and sorry, she says,
she's inserted the catheter, she's
trying to calm you down. the drug is going to start pumping,
the drug is starting to begin it's pumping, the drug is starting to be gin
it s puming, the druh istriting to pummpf, tuh druhh ss pum,
druhh pummm, druhhh pummmmm, druhhhhhhhhhhh

ahn thanurs aksu abuhhhh tacollesh agin, she ss
triing tcalm you dow. yteler yur
studeeign inglitch, *ejacashun*, yuuuuad,
wichah musst tchanje, aamd fur tuh turd tam
inah mont jetelse uu abuh owta hur inglitch teeshur
fruhmm hiiiee scoowel, andow hehay ted hur yusig de wherd *aaynt*,
andow hesa pachent heer, yehs, the veere saym, issnt tat crayzee?

bloo paypuhr drehsss gripee socks, wyt cinder blok wallss, wheel chaer. catheter hole.

isn't that crazy?

Empty Parts

Alex Rost

"I always thought I was meant to be a mother," said the barren woman.

"You would be a great mother," said the patronizer. The barren woman glared a sharp dismissal from the corner of her eye.

"Had a chance once. In high school, the end of it. Didn't even tell the father. Got myself all wrapped up in the supposed to bes. Supposed to go to college, start a career. Supposed to meet my husband there, supposed to marry him in my late 20s, supposed to plan a pregnancy, have my first baby at 30. Proper order, right? Wasn't supposed to get knocked up before 18, wasn't supposed to marry my high school sweetheart, get old in the town I was born." She sighed, picked at her skirt.

"What do you think?" The skeptical women in the back whispered to her neighbor.

"Coke. Definitely."

"Now I think about how my supposed to bes were all backwards," continued the barren woman. "I went on, did what I was supposed to, made my parents proud, I guess. Thing is, I loved him, my high school boyfriend. Never did find another man I wanted as much as I wanted him."

"You were young, how could you know?" said the patronizer.

"There isn't any use for excuses. Youth doesn't lie." She paused. Maybe she thought she'd said enough.

"What happened to him? Your boyfriend?"

"He got married, has a whole pile of kids. Seems happy. He still calls me on my birthday. Every year. Sometimes I wish he wouldn't. Has a way off making me smile that pulls me down. We talk about what was. Nostalgia." She shook her head, smiled ironically. "Doesn't matter, really. I daydream. He said one time that you can live a full life even with empty parts. Something like that. I turn 40 next week. He's gonna call me. More and more parts come up empty."

"I wish I was forty," said the patronizer. "You have a lot of life left ahead of you." The barren woman scoffed out a chuckle.

"My grandmother turned 97 a couple months ago," she said.

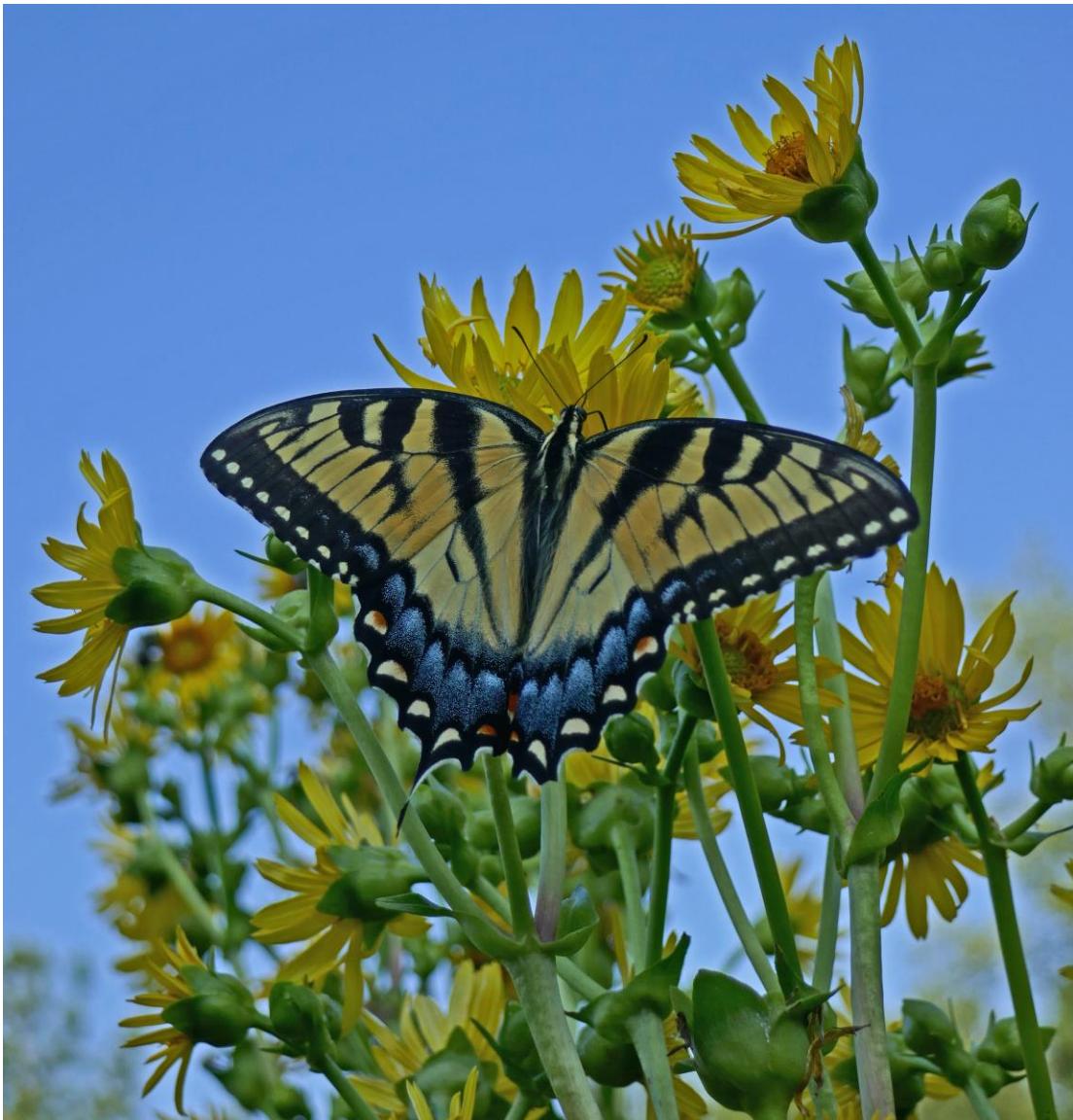
"See?" said the patronizer.

The barren woman looked down at her feet.

"I didn't make it to the party. But I do remember thinking about that age. Ninety-seven. Fifty-seven more years. I can barely imagine it. If one of you told me that I was going to live fifty-seven more years, I don't know if I could take it. I'm not sure if I could."

"She's not living to any ninety-seven," the skeptical woman in the back whispered to her neighbor.

"Seventy, tops."



Summer Treasure #44

Jim Ross

The Tea Shop

Maggie Pono

The ring of a bell, the creak of a door. A smoothed old wooden floor. The smell of smoke and spices greets you. High ceilings and frosted windows close off the outside. Sheets of canvas cling to the walls, water colored with strange red spirits. The figure of a woman leans on the counter. Her black baggy pants swirl like the smoke from her pipe and the look in her eyes tells you this isn't where you should be, but you're welcome to stay. It may be warm and comfortable but the smell of incense grabs at your arms and legs. The longer you stay still the tighter it wraps. You know you've been here before but you can't quite remember when or why. The woman smiles at you, pointed teeth and a glint in her yellow eyes, she takes a drawl from her long pipe.

There's new drawings on the counter by the door, recently inked pieces of paper that you feel that you should look through. But how did you know they were new? Did you even enter through the door in the first place? You cannot remember how you came in nor where you came from. They are handmade sheets covered in watery colors of red and grey. They hold drawings with significance to someone other than you but there's nothing more compelling than looking at things that are not yours... right?

The ring of a bell, the creak of a door. A smoothed old wooden floor. Some semblance of her husband enters. He wears a suit, he holds a typewriter, you cannot see his face. Engulfed by a dark fog that he pays no mind, he places new drawings in front of you. You've lost your current place in the stack. Words glide from the fog but you cannot hear them, the woman behind the counter answers. The both of them are close enough but their words bend around you as though they're physical letters you could grab. The stack of papers keeps growing, you've split it in half but there are still so many. A grey sheet of paper, a grey wolf, a red spirit. It feels familiar, you recognize it, perhaps from the haze of a dream? The woman leans over the counter, her skin glows copper in the dim orange light. Her eyes feel like scales weighing the importance of your decisions now and in the future. Smoke swirls from her pipe, she curls her fingers around the edge of the page and the drawing comes alive. The ceiling seems impossibly tall, every spirit on the wall looks down at you. There is nowhere to run but your feet are frozen in place anywhere. The drawing you picked up does not belong to you and you don't belong here. The smoke grows thicker, her husband has disappeared and so has the door. She motions for you to sit at the counter and as you step toward you realize you can't see your shoes. Were you wearing shoes in the first place? What kind were they and where'd they go? But here, here it doesn't matter. You sit on the stool; she pours you an amber liquid from a silver shining teapot glinting gold. You bring the glass cup to your lips, close your eyes and take a sip. When you open them again the color of your ceiling greets you, the grasp of incense still lingering on your limbs and the taste of spices on your tongue.

END

Sweet
Francine Rubin

Chewing slowly to muffle the sound,
I attempt to eat peppermint chip ice cream discretely.
Like a jack in the box, my baby pops up
to scrutinize me, milk dribbling
down his chin, his chocolatey eyes
ingesting the details of my face,
my mouth crunching while his is swallowing.
I brace for fussing, but his mouth
opens, and he laughs.



Premonition
Larissa Monique Hauck

Retrospective

Jaden Fong

If I could dedicate
my life to a craft
I would dedicate
it to you—you are
a poem I could
never write.

I am sorry
to have made
a muse out of
you yet again.

Somewhere, Everywhere

Jaden Fong

Somewhere, a bee
is swatted with
its legs halfway
into the anther.

Somewhere, a song
is held gently
on her tongue
and spat out like
red wine.

Somewhere, a truck
is dead in a green
field, slumped like
dog bones.

How sickening
it is to breathe
in such a lovely
spring.

The Probing**Carl Boon**

I see strangers probing my bedroom window. I see them in the morning while my father's in the bathroom shaving and my mother's downstairs in the kitchen making salami sandwiches for my lunch. They want to come in. They want to sit on my bed and talk about baseball and *The Bold and the Beautiful* and what it's like to be an American boy in the suburbs. I tell my aunt they're aliens and she laughs. She has other things to think about: her long and camel-colored Cadillac, my mother's hair to perm, Easter dinner. Easter's coming up.

I am not bold. I am not beautiful. I'm in the third-grade at Wooddale Elementary where I learn long division and the mystical nature of girls and how to stay small. After school my sister plays Madonna on the cassette player and I've never seen their faces. They hide away in her bedroom and dance all evening to "Material Girl." When Mother calls them down for casserole, it's teenage obscenities and the slamming of doors until the dancing begins again. Neither of them would understand about the probing. They think I'm weird because I do my homework with the cassette player off.

Maybe it's my quiet nature they seek, the probing ones. Maybe for them I'm an oasis against the din of suburban life—the bad music, the rattling of shovels and rakes, the Pontiacs that backfire, the motorcycles that hum up and down Maple Avenue. I try not to speak because I stutter; I try to move in silence and don't clutter my room with posters of half-naked POWs intent on ridding the world of communists. I carry my numbers carefully when I'm asked to add columns, but the long division's difficult. Why should we divide at all? I wonder. Why not keep things whole? On Maple Avenue and beyond it's land divided into blocks and homes divided into rooms and no one seems happy.

My mother swallows pink pills, Pepsi, and Pepto-Bismol, and believes she has an ulcer. My father rattles the newspaper and drinks glass after glass of whatever's in the green bottle. My sister's bedroom oozes with the smell of hairspray and acetone, so I'm not surprised they don't probe her, whoever they are, whatever they want. I think my sister is an alien, but when I tell my aunt, she scoffs, asks for coffee, more of those plastic curlers, more of that malodorous Ogilvie perm stuff. What's wrong with the hair God gave? What's wrong with being unbeautiful like me? I walk to St. Michael's alone on Sundays because I like to look at the stained-glass windows and the images of the real Madonna. On my way home I buy a bran muffin and a box of orange juice. Maybe Jesus will keep the probers at bay.

Father John says Jesus can do anything, but I'm not sure. He couldn't exactly save Himself, so why should He save me from the probing? Maybe He knows they're harmless or simply desire Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pies (my favorite) or Funyuns (my second favorite). Father says you have to trust Jesus, but obviously Our Savior has done little to ebb the growth of his nose hairs or curtail his breath of garlic and onions, yes, for even on Sunday morning it's pungent and distracts me from the children's sermons on whales and the acid results of touching one's penis in the dark. I do not touch my penis in the dark; I let it grow until I think of long division and then all my potential sins go away.

Everybody's unhappy, but I seem to be all right. After Easter when it's Spring Break we're going to Lake Williams for three days of what my father calls "getting away time." I hope the probers won't find me there, but I think they will. They'll easily climb the cabin walls—the wood planks make it easy—and be there in the morning. We'll be away from the suburbs, but most things won't change. The pink pills, the

green bottle, Madonna (or maybe George Michael) on the cassette player, and I'll sit on my sand-covered bed spread pondering them. I can't say they're unusual or weird; it seems they just want to know what's going on and I'm their conduit, their way in. My task, which I know is coming, is to cater to them, maybe unleash a secret or two about how we live in 1987. Maybe if I do so they'll leave me alone. Maybe if I tell them there's really nothing here they'll leave me alone. I'm a small and insignificant boy, but even I have hopes.



Alien Smooch
Janis Butler Holm

Sundown

Catherine Broadwall

Dreamt I sat in a stalled car out on a tundra,
canvas-white. The sun swam low, a gold fish
chasing two lovers, red and indigo clouds.

My mittenend hand held a phone, and a woman
spoke into my ear. She was selling me something
that had to do with the house we once shared.

Yes, I told her. I lived there once. Ice, by now,
was walking up the windows with clawed reptile
prints. The sky was a marble, fragile and

condensed. My heart was like this too as the
woman tried to sell me on insurance I no longer
need. The sun had gone to bed with the lavender

clouds. Darkness spread like a duvet. I stayed
on the phone. I had affection for the woman. I was
lonely and her voice seemed so persuasive. I liked

to hear her talk. I asked about the pros and cons,
the silver and platinum tiers. She chatted about
the coverage, promising this was the policy to end

all policies, the one with the best defense. I sat there,
a dot on the iceberg all night. And though I may not
have been loved, I was loveable. This much I know.

Untitled, 1976

Delilah Dennett

When you grow up as a child of genocide survivors, things are arranged in a certain way.

Your father, once a happy and carefree young boy, will age imminently into a barren husk of himself.

He will stalk the halls at night,

a spirit trapped in human clothing,

roaming the small apartment where you live until the sun peeps into your windows.

You will not realise this for many years, but he is trying to free himself, to flee from what binds him to flesh and bone. Even before his death, at the tender age of 52 - people die too young here - the secret glimmer in his eyes burnt out long ago.

You were lucky to witness it a few times, a fickle flame dancing in a circle of mud, but light does not shine out of his eyes now. Although you were close to him - you cried over his body at the funeral, stoically holding yourself together as tears dripped down your face - he has his demons, as every man does. He smokes daily, ingesting ashy fumes even as they coil knowingly away from him. He is a fervent drinker, leaving for musky Mongol-run bars in the late afternoon and returning noisily in the early morning,

his breath reeking of vodka.

You are embarrassed of your father, despite your deep love for him. The way his jagged breath cuts you in the dark when he berates you for not doing well enough in school, even though you are trying your best. The way he stumbles into the apartment, reaching for walls and corners to steady himself in his drunk fervour. How he hits your mother - over and over again, too often to call it a one-off incident. You forgive him for it, although it is not for you to forgive.

But he is your father. What else are you supposed to do.

You hear the careless rumours from everyone else in town - the inflected sneering in their voices when they remark on his sallow demeanour and thirst for spirits. The pointed assumptions about natives encoded in what they say. Too crude to repeat here.

Treating your father with contempt. Looking at him as if he were a savage outlier on Chinese land.

For all the faults of your father, he is careful not to pass his dangerous habits onto you. Although you will struggle to contain your miseries - to treat your many unnamed disorders - you never take up smoking or drinking.

You may have been unable to stem the porous spread, but you have too much self-discipline to become an alcoholic or habitual smoker.

That is one thing I can fully credit you for.

I suppose I am telling you all this because I need you to know, and that is almost enough.

You see, what I am trying to say is: you can grow up in a loving home environment where both your parents care deeply for you. You can have a fairly stable upbringing, even in a politically turbulent landscape. You can be a part of a marginalised ethnic group yet never experience unrest because you are surrounded by love from your own people. But all that is upended when you bring the gouging emptiness of genocide into the picture. Especially one which remains unacknowledged by the party that committed it.

The specific burdens of genocide entail a crisis of survivance in the people who were targeted. Yes I understand this but - how could you possibly know this, without the thing that chases you until

How could you have grown into any other kind of person, with all this.

Soft Feelings

Maggie Mauro

You made me feel soft inside, but not the pretty kind, moonlit cheeks and dreams steeped in taffeta. Instead, I was the softness of rotting fruit and you saw the decay in my eye sockets and pushed your fingers in, flesh crumbling beneath your touch, mold roped around lips, the carcass of all I could have said. You promised to slip me onto your tongue and push my psyche to the roof of your mouth, bruised pulp in the grooves of your teeth, syrup swollen in your throat. Distill me and marvel in my overripe taste and isn't that my job, spin sickly sweet nothings all for you, crammed into the cavities of my chest where your soft words pressed too hard.



Electrified
David A. Goodrum

Three Jazz Pieces

K Roberts

Noo Yawk

The hotel where he finds work is a faded Victorian dame, pompous, but wearing ragged petticoats. A coronet of brass numbers over her elevator doors. A corsage of carpet flowers worn to a sprinkled spray. Crystal chandeliers in the lobby are her smiling teeth, antique chairs in loose slipcovered sleeves are her welcoming arms.

The city spreads its banquet for him: a crazy quilt tablecloth, flat Melba toast billboards on Broadway, red chili lanterns in Chinatown. Brooklyn Bridge is a leftover tray of roast chicken devoured down to the backbone. Rain washes the deep bowl of the streets, the skyscraper spoons. He hurries crosstown, a kitchen apron folded under his arm, his free time sliced thin.

Blood Bargains

He waits for a decision seated on a bar stool next to the stage while his band leader speaks muted and flattering to a man who must be the club owner who wears an ugly plaid shirt. He's been told cocaine built this place but it looks to him like a candy box, every visible surface painted gold and red, a collection of mirrors on the walls framing a hundred bite-sized portraits of two men leaning forward in their seats to divide a table with their elbows.

Two whiskeys wait for them untouched, moisture condensing on the glasses. A waiter wrapped in an immaculate knee-length apron swivels at the shoulders and hips like a pepper grinder and wends a path between close-set chairs, balancing a tray held on the palm of one hand.

The two men stand finally. The owner is laughing. The band leader smiles and bares his teeth in that way he has when he's not amused, and says to the trumpet player, *Let's go*. At the door, summer's heat hits him like a sonic boom after the nightshade cool of the air-conditioned club, and it's still early afternoon.

The band leader shakes his head silently, only once, reaches into his own wallet, counts out his sideman's back pay.

As they walk to the car, the trumpet player loosens his tie and unbuttons his shirt cuffs, rolling them back from his wrists. He dabs a handkerchief at his neck, where trickles of sweat are running down the shaved nape, dampening his collar, and the glistening beads catch in the edges of his graying hairline. Now and then he rubs a scar on his upper lip, where it's blistered and swollen from playing his instrument.

Jacob's Ladder

All night, the saxophonist practices circular breathing, takes whole and half steps with his hands, walking up and down the cycle-of-fifths.

At midnight, the telephone interrupts. A friend's invitation curdles to frustration at each polite refusal. Sour-citrus rhetoric denounces his asceticism, mysticism, "this dead music from a dead age that is clouding your mind."

He tells his friend his vision's clear, he sees more every day, but never clouds, not in this city heat.

Outside the sealed window, arrhythmic horns are blaring twelve tones at once. Cars are fleeing, rejoining, lost and angry as glass bees. Pedestrians streaming onto the streets from theater lobbies and hotels are a scrambled flock of swans, an orchestra dressed in flap-tailed tuxedoes thrown overboard from a ship and treading water, unmoored from their future.

Airplane roars by. He plays faster, trying to catch it. The hour is very late.

Strange images tremble before his mind. Notes detach from the musical staff. Glowing circles surround him. He's suspended in a column of sound, floating. Long cords shimmer between earth and sky. They hum as they waver in the air, threading a musical braid around him.

This moment, this feeling, is what he's working toward. He doesn't dare stop playing, though his knees are giving way.

His fingers modulate down another key, almost home. Deep into the octave he stretches his back, offers everything. The horn he carries pulses in his arms like a second body, the worn lip of its warm bell announcing the faith of his fingers.

The UPS Guy

J.T. Homesley

My phone went off loudly around five thirty in the morning. There's no way for a phone to go off quietly that early. A gentle coffee warmed voice asked me if I was who I am, and asked if I was available to work that day. Foggy headed, half asleep, almost too tired to speak, I could not think of a good excuse. Yes ma'am, I said, and sealed my fate. I could expect a call from a driver within the next two hours. Shipping things for a living seems a precarious venture. It forces us to treat the mundane with a misplaced urgency.

You're handing someone an impossible job.

Demanding they do hard work gently.

The United Parcel Service, UPS, hires what they call driver helpers, for the month of December. If you get called in for the orientation, you begin to glimpse what you're in for etched in colorful posters advocating daily stretches. Stared into a television monitor watching all the wrong ways to lift heavy things. At least sixteen of us around the table. My manager told me maybe five worked a full day, and of those five, no one worked two. I was one of those. Not because of the work, but because of the structure. You would never know if you were needed until your phone rang sometime before six in the morning. It worked on a daily basis, you see, and so you did as well. There are particular rungs down at the base of the economic ladder where a day off is a sort of miniature death sentence. If I had an open Thursday to offer, I said yes. Even though I had no clue what I was saying yes to. Until my phone rang about an hour and a half later.

My driver was on route.

They had given us all a hat. A brown toboggan. But the driver would have the rest of my uniform. Because UPS delivery persons have special security clearances that let them enter airports, schools, and businesses. Each of their shirts and pants and issued hats has a long tracking number associated with it, and they use it. You're probably not going to find old UPS uniforms in Goodwill or any other consignment shop. Which also makes the dull brown a sort of symbolic color for the company. UPS has strong suggestions for how an employee should represent themselves when wearing this uniform. Like the military. There is no casual piece of company clothing. Branding control. Marketing cohesion. Which trickles down to guys like me, putting on my tremendously oversized milk chocolate colored coat and pants in an Exxon bathroom, where I was asked to leave my car parked for the entire day, a potentially twelve plus hour shift. I hopped up into the cab with a guy named Jeff, and we took off exchanging introductions. All my options and freedom of movement and control sitting locked and turned off totally abandoned in a cramped gas station parking lot.

It is also important to note, I'm working and living in an area that I am entirely unfamiliar with. Having only moved to Upstate New York that November, working now for UPS in December. The man actually gave me one of their GPS and shipping information handheld tracking devices, like I had any idea what to do with the fragmented five-digit house numbers and road names that

may as well have been in a different country. Jeff took it back when he saw me looking up addresses on my phone. He understood. Accordingly, he had quit this job just the week before. Jeff had come down with the flu, and was forced to call in sick to his active, high energetic and technically demanding job, and his supervisor told him no. So, he quit. 'Supe' called him back four days later, five days into December, and with no apology, simply offered him a shift. The one we were both part of at this very point in the story. He has three kids, loves to snowmobile, is good at his job, started like me as a driver helper, took that position to something basic in the warehouse, and in just a short time, they had him driving his own truck around his own hometown. He loved it. And several people on his route loved him.

Waves, conversations, playful jokes about someone's yappy dog, bigger more dangerous animal owners came out smiling and waving and clearly knowing. One young military wife came outside with a Christmas card after I had just dropped a package off on her front stoop, with ten dollars inside, for Jeff, or as he demanded, the both of us. And he gave me a five. I learned more about the area I had moved to in those high up violently shaken and crazy chaotic scannings of barcodes and staring down mailboxes than the entire month before. I learned more about reading addresses and following road signs instead of verbal commands and diagrams and actively oriented maps on my phone. I scanned the horizon for highway signs and little flat green strips hosting street names. House numbers, how they hop across the street, very rarely move along sensibly linearly.

Cat piss covered front porches and wide-open mudroom doors and setting down Amazon packages in front of houses I could not fathom anyone actually lived in. Though they did. Dogs tied up in rough outside conditions. Jeff throwing his hands one over the other sliding back and forth, dangerously smiling wildly and bouncing up from his seat, as we skated left and right across a mile long, frozen sheet of ice someone calls a driveway. UPS trucks are only two-wheel drive. At least most of the trucks were, Jeff attested. Made it all that much more fun to slip around in. I detested it, as I smiled politely, and gripped the base of my bucket seat, as a friend of mine would say, hard enough to pinch the vinyl.

I live for days like this, challenges like these, but that does not mean I do not get tired. Psychically, physically, empathically exhausted. I do. And that started around five thirty in the evening, twelve hours now from when my phone first started ringing. Glancing into the back of the truck, it still looked brimming with odd sized gift boxes and brown cubes and dented rectangles one big plastic eye wrapped around paperwork stared back at me. A monster in the middle, something flat and massive, a baby crib I guessed, but never said out loud. I made the rookie mistake of casually asking what we do with the packages still in the truck at the end of our shift.

Something happens to people when they work in ridiculously difficult conditions so long they get numb to them. When someone new comes through and experiences it, they can't help but feel a twinge of resentment. Of reminder, that oh yes, what I am doing is hard, in some ways, demeaning, and in one clear instance, humbling. They see it anew again in the eyes of the

trainee. And the trainee feels for the first time the fear and exhaustion this tried and tested worker put down and submitted to a long time ago.

Corporate, as Jeff called it, never communicated to a driver directly. Always through this supervisor, who was out to get him, to hear him tell it. He had for a long time suspected, but never knew to what level they truly tracked his time and movement on the job, until he was seated in his supervisor's office, three sheets of paper on the desk in front of him, all cataloging and detailing a five-minute pit stop he had taken. Not during his recorded lunch stop, which was entered into the device. He had pulled off the road at a gas station to grab a Mountain Dew. It was five minutes as the record showed. And he was told to not let it happen again, or he might be better suited to the warehouse.

Three kids. Loves to snowmobile. Appreciates he gets to raise them in his own hometown. Defending five minutes.

Needless to say, there is no option to end the shift until the truck is empty, he told me. He had it take him over fourteen hours in a single shift, in the past. So I asked, what if I needed to leave early, could I even be dropped off at my car, just asking out of curiosity, of course. We were over forty-five minutes from there. Jeff said he would gladly take me back, but I'd be setting him back just about two hours in recovery and driving time. I told him of course not. I did my breathing exercise. I also sometimes force myself to smile. I made a joke at my expense. Caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the dingy window. Hey, I see you. UPS guy.

Who else could do what you do?

Meet a stranger out in the world, change into a strange uniform in a bathroom, hop into a truck and head off into the never less known. I wasn't home until after ten that evening, making it a nice clean twelve-hour shift. I got a check for a hundred dollars, after taxes. And I got to be a UPS delivery guy for a day.

And on top of that. They let me keep the hat.

The Reversal

Carl Boon

Once the word was spoken, the floodgates opened up again and the creatures marched back to dry land, some on two legs, some on four, and some on eight or more. There'd been a glitch. Someone had pressed the wrong button. And we, who'd switched our umbrellas (spoke-showing, ancient things, even then) out for parasols were forced to begin focusing on The Procession. It was a sight to behold. Too bad we had no binoculars.

The consensus was that we should've packed picnic lunches. I had mackerel back home that would've been perfect for sandwiches. You had a fruit tray, and Jeremiah (not *that* Jeremiah) had popcorn and a sack of olives, all pitted. Yes, had we known how long—so utterly long—the procession was going to take, we would've been prepared. Had there been some announcement...even a simple handbill posted on the rabbi's cypress would've sufficed. But no, and it was HOT.

You know how the heat can be after a long stretch of rain. And the humidity, the humidity was the worst. It seemed to rise up and engulf us. It seemed unfair, all of us waiting there for the Great Send-Off, a ceremony maybe fifteen minutes tops, and now we were stuck and we had to applaud. Especially me, who's both keraphobic and equinophobic in the best of times. I was sure I'd faint, or at least grow nauseous.

Thank God there was wine, but so little of it. More wine would've made all the difference, especially when The Violent Men came from the village wielding their axes (and yes, I know you're aichmophobic). They were tasked with breaking up that beast of a boat, but there were only twelve of them and I knew—given the humidity—they'd tire after an hour. No prayers would help them, the poor bastards, and I'm sure those axes were heavy. In ceremonies such as these, even the unplanned ones, the so-called spurs of the moments, no expense is too much.

After an hour, just as The Violent Men were starting to fatigue and The Procession was dwindling down to common mules, house cats, squirrels, and pigeons, Jeremiah and I decided to go seek shade in Paul's (no, not *that* Paul) peach orchard. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and we both decided the rain was better than the bitch of a sun. "Noah's gonna be pissed," Jeremiah said, and I agreed. But he was gonna be more than pissed; he was gonna be possibly derobed and eventually relegated to night watchman or even worse, the Ant Guy. Nobody wanted to be Ant Guy—talk about a come-down after Big Cat Oversight and Elephant Manager. We felt sorry for old Noah, but it'd been him, after all, who'd insisted on and undertaken this fiasco. "We'd better get back," Jeremiah said, "we don't wanna miss the insects."

In any procession, especially one of this magnitude, the insects are the worst. And by God there were hundreds of pairs, maybe thousands: gnats and mosquitoes, fireflies and moths, nymphs,

and larvae you had to squint to even notice. Not to mention the locusts—we all had painful memories of them. The spiders crawled and the cicadas rubbed their legs together like horny old whores. I enjoyed the ladybugs, but I didn't enjoy it when a pair of cardinals swooped down on them for a late lunch/early supper. And do you have any idea how many varieties of ants there are? It would blow your mind. It would make you tremble.

We felt bad for old Noah. The guy had done yeoman's work to get this thing off the ground. By then it didn't matter if the forecasters had simply got it wrong or there was some Intervention. What mattered was that we were all very tired, tired of the large and the small, wildebeest and grasshopper alike. We were discouraged, too, for we knew this sudden change, this reversal, would somehow make our lives less sacred and interesting, and those of our descendants, as well.

To Lightning

Wilda Morris

On childhood summer evenings
we sat on the front porch,
watched you split and stitch
the sky beyond the railroad tracks
as we chatted in the dying light
and sang our favorite songs.

On more sultry evenings
when clouds spread a dark tarp
over the prairie, rain beat
its rhythm like a snare drum on the roof,
and a great bass drum thundered.
There was something haunting,
something appealing and mysterious
about the way you tore open the sky dome
all the way to the horizon
and how it healed itself.

I never feared you.
Instead I held you in my secret heart
until the day you betrayed me,
aiming your fiery hatchet
at the trunk of the apple tree I climbed,
the tree where I sat for hours reading
Little House books, and dreaming
I'd board a westbound train.

Now when I watch your great spectacles
of light, I think ego. I think exhibitionism.
I think jealous lover out to take a rival down.

Contributor Bios

JC Alfier's most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work.

John M Bellinger is the Chapbook Editor for *The Comstock Review* (37 years in print). His work has been most recently published before in *Blue Heron* and *Green Ink Poetry*.

Carl Boon is the author of the full-length collection *Places & Names: Poems* (The Nasiona Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Posit*, and *The Maine Review*. He received his Ph.D. in Twentieth-Century American Literature from Ohio University in 2007, and currently lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American literature at Dokuz Eylül University.

Maggie Bowyer (they/them/theirs) is a poet, cat parent, and the author of various poetry collections including *Allergies* (2023) and *When I Bleed* (2021). They are an essayist focusing on endometriosis, chronic pain, and trauma. They have been featured in *The Abbey Review*, *Chapter House Journal*, *The Elevation Review*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Wishbone Words*, and more. They were the Editor-in-Chief of *The Lariat Newspaper*, a quarter-finalist in Brave New Voices 2016, and a Marilyn Miller Poet Laureate. You can find their work on Instagram and TikTok @maggie.writes.

Joseph Byrd's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Punt Volat*, *Pedestal*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *DIAGRAM*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Many Nice Donkeys*, and *Novus Literary Arts*. He's a 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee, and was in the StoryBoard Chicago cohort with Kaveh Akbar. An Associate Artist in Poetry under Joy Harjo at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, he is on the Reading Board for *The Plentitudes*.

Mark Crimmins' flash fictions have been published in over fifty literary journals, including *Columbia Journal*, *Tampa Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Flash Frontier*, *Pure Slush*, *Dogzplot*, *TheNewerYork*, and *Flash: The International Short Short Story Magazine*. YouTube: Mark Crimmins Writer

Delilah Dennett is a writer and poet. Born in Beijing and raised in London to a Mongolian mother and an English father, Dennett uses her nomadic rootlessness to encourage words to seep out from her bark of soul like sap. She recently graduated with a degree in English literature from Cambridge University, where she studied Native American and Asian American life writing. Dennett has previously been published in *Rigorous Magazine*, *Yukkuri magazine*, *Varsity*, *The Cambridge Student*, *The Dial*, *Canvas Magazine*, *The Sandstorm Journal*, *Hive Literary Journal*, *The West Trade Review* as well as *Young Writer's Journal* based in the UK. She

has also won the Arrol Adam's Poetry Prize for her poem "Morecambe Shores." You can follow her on Instagram at @delilahdennett.

A stage-artist, multi-lingual poet and lyricist, **Nadir Khan Feroz** has been penning verses for over half a lifetime. His work has appeared in *PaperCuts Magazine*, *Basant - a Poetry Anthology*, *The Dewdrop*, *Literary Chowk Vol. 2*, *Rockvale Review* and is forthcoming elsewhere in print and online.

Matthew Fertel is a Sacramento-based photographer who has worked at Sierra College since 2004. Before that, he was a fine art auction house catalog photographer in San Francisco for over 10 years. Matthew's work seeks to expose the hidden beauty in the everyday objects that make up the landscape of our daily lives.

Jaden Fong is a writer with a sweet tooth and a soft spot for the whimsical and the peculiar. A two-time nominee for the Aliki Perroti & Seth Frank Most Promising Young Poet Award, you can find his work on the Academy of American Poets website at poets.org, *Flora Fiction*, and *The Santa Clara Review*, among other places. To see his work on tea-stained paper or to contact him, find him on Instagram at @jadenwriter.

David A. Goodrum, photographer/writer, lives in Corvallis, Oregon. His photography has graced the covers of several art and literature magazines, most recently *Cirque Journal*, *Willows Wept Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *The Moving Force Journal*, *Snapdragon Journal*, and has appeared in many others. His artistic vision has always been to create a visual field that momentarily transports you away from hectic daily events and into a place that delights in an intimate view of the world. See additional work, both photos and poems, at www.davidgoodrum.com.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Stand*, *Washington Square Review* and *Rathalla Review*. Latest books, *Covert*, *Memory Outside the Head*, and *Guest of Myself* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *McNeese Review*, *Santa Fe Literary Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

Matt Guley is 35 years old. He attended Wayne State University in Detroit and currently resides in Brooklyn with his partner Jenna. Recently published in *The Madrigal*, *Defunct Magazine*, *Blood Tree Literature*, *The London Reader*, and *Block Party Magazine*. X (Twitter): @selfawareroomba on X (Twitter)

Nathaniel Gutman, was born in Israel and lives in Los Angeles. He is a filmmaker and has produced, directed and/or written over 30 theatrical/TV movies and documentaries internationally, including award-winning *Children's Island* (BBC, Nickelodeon, Disney Channel), *Deadline* (with Christopher Walken), *Linda* (from the novella by John D. MacDonald; with Virginia Madsen). His poetry has appeared in *The New York Quarterly*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Pangyrus LitMag*, *Constellations*, *One Art: A Journal of Poetry*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*.

Sophie Hall writes about homes and fears, especially where the two overlap. Her poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Outpost19*, *Ruby Lit*, and *Jeopardy Magazine*, among others. Also a postcard collector, frog parent, and lover of orchids, these days, Sophie is most dedicated to her dream journal.

Larissa Monique Hauck is a queer visual artist who graduated from the Alberta University of the Arts in 2014, where she received a BFA with Distinction. Her artwork has been featured in multiple regional and national group exhibitions as well as a growing number of international exhibitions. She has been selected for inclusion in events such as Nextfest 2018 (Edmonton, AB), Nuit Rose 2016 (Toronto, ON), and the 9th Annual New York City Poetry Festival 2019 (New York, US). Her drawings and paintings have also been featured in publications such as *Creative Quarterly* (US), *Wotisart Magazine* (UK), *Minerva Rising* (US), and various others.

Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for Wide Angle, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

Zachary Hedges is a poet and author who lives in West Lafayette, Indiana. He is a sophomore at Purdue University and working towards two BFA's in Professional Writing and Creative Writing. You can follow his journey at @themorningmourner on Instagram, as well as his website at <https://zacharyhedgesbooks.wixsite.com/my-site>.

J.T. Homesley is an English teacher, writer, actor and farmer currently based in the Piedmont of North Carolina. Here, together with his wife and their 5-year-old son, he cares for a 150-acre tree farm, covered with a herd of dairy goats, a coop full of chickens and an impossible number of gardens. In the spring of 2020, he graduated with a Master of Arts in Writing from Lenoir-Rhyne University in Asheville. The following fall, he accepted a teaching position at a local high school, where he currently teaches British Literature, World Literature, Honors English and AP English, in addition to leading drama club. Most recently, J.T.'s work has appeared in *GreenPrints Magazine*, *Ghost City Review*, and the poetry anthology *Dreamstones of Summer*. Follow along with his journey at www.writeractorfarmer.com.

Dwight James III: I am the eldest of my mother's children. I am a director, writer, and poet currently residing in Atlanta, GA. I use poetry as a bridge into the worlds of cinema and photography. My work has been published in The Merrimack Review, Catfish Creek, and The Kudzu Review. Keep up with me by visiting www.dwightjamesiii.com

Emma Jarman is an emerging creative writer enjoying short fiction and memoir. She is an Ohio native and recovering journalist, currently working full time in special education at a small public school in Oklahoma. Her work is slated for publication in *The Ocotillo Review* and *The Downtime Review*. Instagram: @illwritealready

Benjamin J. Kirby is a writer living in St. Petersburg, Florida. Born in North Carolina and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, Benjamin lives in St. Petersburg, Florida with his wife and children. Previous work has included a top-ten selection in *Creative Loafing's* Fiction Contest, has appeared in *WordWrights Magazine*, a publication of the Argonne House Press, and was published in the George Mason University's literary magazine *Apathy*. His poems have been selected for publication by *Wingless Dreamer* and *Cathexis Northwest Press*.

Catherine Kyle is the author of *Fulgurite* (Cornerstone Press, forthcoming), *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She was the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award and a finalist for the 2021 *Mississippi Review* Prize in poetry. She is an assistant professor at DigiPen Institute of Technology, where she teaches creative writing and literature.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He came to the United States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H.S., he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a BA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He has worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, and as a bartender.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent." His work has been nominated eleven times for Best of the Net, eight for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Forward Prize, and has been released in three collections: *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

Maggie Mauro is a second-year undergraduate student at Susquehanna University. She is pursuing degrees in creative writing and publishing/editing. While she primarily writes fiction, she has recently discovered a penchant for poetry. Her writing process includes entirely too much caffeine and capitalizing on sporadic bursts of inspiration.

Devin Meireles: I am a healthcare worker from Toronto, Canada who moonlights as a freelance writer and self-published author. I wrote a story about the night my wife had a miscarriage in our home with some perceived strange company in our presence.

Wilda Morris, Workshop Co-Chair, Poets and Patrons of Chicago, and past President of the Illinois State Poetry Society, has published poems in numerous anthologies, webzines, and print publications. She has won awards for formal and free verse and haiku. Her book, *At Goat Hollow and Other Poems*, scheduled for publication late Spring, 2023, is mostly about the uncle who nurtured her love of nature. Previously she published *Pequod Poems: Gamming with Moby Dick* and *Szechwan Shrimp and Fortune Cookies: Poems from a Chinese Restaurant*. Wilda Morris's

Poetry Challenge at wildamorris.blogspot.com features a monthly poetry contest for other poets.

Abubakar Sadiq Mustapha is a storyteller, poet, and art curator. He believes in the power of photography and how it can be used for mental health. His work has appeared in the *Ebedi Review*, *The Song Is*, *The Nigeria Review*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Libretto Magazine*, *Literandra*, *Lolwe*, and elsewhere. He is a fellow of the Bada Murya Fellowship.

Ners Neonlumberjack was born in a tiny town in central Indiana in 1986. Having lived throughout the Midwest and Southern United States, the variety of landscapes in which they have lived informs a wealth of variety and interest in plants and animals in imagery as well as material choice. After graduating Herron School of Art and Design with degrees in Painting, Sculpture, and Art History in 2009 the longing for a sense of place and being conscious of the fragile nature of mortality has been a current within the works. Currently based in Zion National Park, their works maintain an environmentally conscious and sustainable working practice. Drawing inspiration from the natural beauty across the continent, works straddle the line between painting and sculpture showcasing vibrant colors in geometric patterns on raw natural materials such as sticks, stones, bones, feathers, and logs. The ever-present theme of mortality is contrasted with lively colors, and abstracted imagery of flora and fauna abound as they correlate alongside three-dimensional works.

Bethany O'Tremba is from Lovell, Wyoming and is currently a Freshman at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana studying English Education.

Donald Patten is an artist from Belfast, Maine. He is currently a senior in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Maine. As an artist, he produces oil paintings and graphic novels. Artworks of his have been exhibited in galleries across the Mid-Coast region of Maine.

The poetry and prose of **Robert L. Penick** have appeared in well over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Oxford Magazine*. His latest chapbook is *Exit, Stage Left*, by Slipstream Press. *The Art of Mercy: New and Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Hohm Press, and more of his work can be found at theartofmercy.net

Maggie Pono: I practice aerial silks in hopes that one day I can fly but I make sure to let my feet touch the ground, occasionally. I have spent a lot of my life growing up in the Caribbean, interacting with people of all walks of life and I too hope to be one of those people they remember. I've held many jobs frosting cakes, building cabins, packing orders and I look forward to my next as a writer.

K Roberts is a professional non-fiction writer, a published artist, and a first reader in fiction for the magazines *Nunum* and *After Dinner Conversation*. New work is forthcoming in 2023 from *Meniscus*, *Soundings East*, and *Panorama*.

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in eight years he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid, interviews, and plays in nearly 200 journals on five continents. Photo publications include *Barnstorm*, *Bombay Gin*, *Burningword*, *Camas*, *Feral*, *Phoebe*, *Saw Palm*, *Stoneboat*, *Stonecoast*, and *Whitefish*. Text-based photo-essays include *Barren*, *DASH*, *Kestrel*, *Ilanot Review*, *Litro*, *NWW*, *Sweet*, and *Typehouse*, with *Pilgrimage Magazine* forthcoming. He recently wrote/acted in a one-act play and appeared in a documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim and family split time between city and mountains.

Kim Rossi is a poet and speech language pathologist living in Decatur, Georgia. When she is not working and playing with language, she is wandering around streets and forests trails.

Alex Rost

Francine Rubin is the author of the poetry chapbooks *If You're Talking to Me: Commuter Poems* (dancing girl press), *City Songs* (Blue Lyra Press), and *Geometries* (Finishing Line Press). She is online at francinerubin.tumblr.com.

Minta Samiei: I started photography seriously two years ago, and my passion and style is documentary photography, photography of a generation that will not be repeated, and the reality gives them joy.

Lucas Selby has a Bachelor's in Creative Writing from Arizona State University. His work also appears in *The Scriblerus*.

Sabrina Stuart Smith is a Toronto-born, Toronto-based writer of Afro-Caribbean descent. She received her BA in English from York University, and studied Book Publishing at Toronto Metropolitan University. She previously resided in São Paulo, Brazil where she studied Portuguese, and taught English. Her work is published or is forthcoming in *Pink Panther Magazine* and *Shot Glass Journal*.

Bruce Spang, former Poet Laureate of Portland, is the author of two novels, *The Deception of the Thrush* and *Those Close Beside Me*. His most recent collection of poems, *All You'll Derive: A Caregiver's Journey*, was just published. He's also published four other books of poems, including *To the Promised Land Grocery and Boy at the Screen Door* (Moon Pie Press) along with several anthologies and several chapbooks. He is the poetry and fiction editor of the *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. His poems have been published in *Connecticut River Review*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Red Rover Magazine*, *Great Smokies Review*, *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, *Café Review* and other journals across the United States. He teaches courses in fiction and poetry at Great Smokies Writing Program at University of North Carolina in Asheville and lives in Candler, NC with his husband Myles Rightmire and their five dogs, five fish, and thirty birds.

Zach Spruce is a writer, musician, and resident of Rochester, New York. He holds a BA in English with a minor in film studies from SUNY College at Brockport. His work has been featured or is

forthcoming in publications including *Lucky Jefferson*, *Lilac Mag*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *ANGLES*, *Roadrunner Review*, and *The Finger*. In his spare time, he enjoys craft beer flights, getting lost in the woods, and collecting records.

Brad Stumpf (b.1991): I am a painter living in Chicago, Illinois. My paintings are acknowledgements of real and imaginary moments in my life that make me want to hold my breath. They are attempts to capture the purity and stillness of an idle moment spent alongside my wife. They explore the adoration and hope that accompanies a new marriage and new lifestyle. My paintings function like miniature stage sets. They are painted from observation and depict objects I make by hand, oftentimes organized atop my bedside table. The images are like an open door to a quiet room for which you can peek into, or a still photo of a play halfway through.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Coen van der Wolf (1982) has been published by *In Parentheses* and *The Raintown Review*, among others. He is training to become a History Teacher.

Robin Weeg is a Creative Writing student at FLCC, student staffer at the Charles J. Meder Library, and president of the Dead Poets Society. More of his art can be seen on his Instagram @RobinWeeg.