

The Magnolia Review  
Volume 6, Issue 1  
January 2020

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\*Note:

“Cassandra” was originally published in Scrittura Magazine.

“Non Dolet” was originally published in The Write Launch.

“Ode to Olivia” was originally published in The Ramingo’s Porch.

“Riding on the Bus” and “Sunny Day” were originally published in The RavensPerch.

Welcome to the eleventh issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, flash fiction, experimental work, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, and we accept submissions year-round. The issue will be available online on January 15 and July 15.

While The Magnolia Review will not have physical copies at this time, the editors may compile a print version if funds become available.

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# Lines of Me

Once, there were willowy sinuous lines of me.  
Lines with graceful sway, and selfish curve and lush ripe growth  
Fruitfully indolent as a creeping vine.  
In spring season  
Sweet sunlight danced across my cheekbones  
Dazzled my lashes  
Lowered my sated lids  
Until dusk gathered and I could not recognize the truth.  
Of those blurred and unfinished  
Lines of me.

Notice my brow, once furrowed over some notion of the feminine  
Which I did not fulfill  
Smoothed as I accept parts which find a place to belong  
of their own accord.  
Notice my ears, once bent to listen to hushed voices  
Keeping me taut with their judgment.  
And now my ears  
Listening only to the silence in my depth and breadth and width  
Measuring each word's usefulness  
Tasting the meat of it between my lips.  
Notice my eyes absorbing disappointments  
Lackluster refusals  
Dim opposition.  
Here, now my eyes  
Steely emeralds looking inward  
Envious of no one  
Lacking nothing  
Flinching never.

Now, I offer you the strong and lovely lines of me.  
The heavy hips and thick bones, covered in my too tight skin  
Which I've worn these many years until it creases just so  
And begins to loosen around the edges.  
Comfortable enough to fit me.

# Architectural Secrets

Overworked creatives  
toting bottles of green juice  
fondle smartphones buzzing with dizzying urgency  
and the relentless screams of swipeable screens,  
observed by a sea of silently crumbling  
stone façades that once witnessed raucous  
merchants hawking crunchy biscuits  
to scared lads flushed from yellow fever.  
History haunts obscure structures as  
long as the wrecking ball grants a reprieve.

# A Dictionary of Dreams

I was handling, in one moment, an urn,  
entirely broken, and in another  
holding firm. Ash and bits of bone.  
Someone I loved  
had died. If I could only  
keep it together, by strength of mind  
dream-logic explained, I could,  
not prevent that thing, never—  
but at least keep it unknown,  
to myself, who already knew.  
No one wants to hear  
about your dreams. A true dream  
makes no sense in the telling.

Dreams don't emanate  
from the two doorways,  
hewn ivory or polished horn,  
are not poured  
with sweet sleep upon the eyes,  
but jumble into half-sense,  
from a storm in the gut.  
Mind unmoored from its minder.  
Who watches the watcher, watching  
is how we imagine ourselves  
pilot of our own life. Take stock:  
the urn is already broken,  
the bones we know  
are our own, forthcoming.

The cat shifts on the wicker hamper  
and that has the dogs up  
and so am I, to make coffee, to feel  
the sun rising over the mountain,  
the dread of someone not  
really dead, is lifting. But the dream  
knows: what we do in holding  
two opposing ideas  
like the broken halves of an urn,  
to know and to forget,  
is to live.

# Ode to Olivia

Oh, Olivia, during  
what disingenuous dialogue,  
getting closer and closer,  
you told me  
in that bar by the seashore  
“pretty good-time girl  
comes once, comes often,”  
eyelashes shyly lowered,  
thick and lustrous,  
lowered time and again  
to hide the hard eyes  
I knew were there.

I was surprised by  
your interest;  
vital with intent,  
your lithe body  
tilted towards me,  
white teeth showing  
in a smile, breasts  
firm and unfettered  
in your summer blouse.

Delirious with your fancy magic  
I nearly fell off the bar stool,  
fell like a fairy-tale frog  
clear down to the bottom  
of the mossy well, my member  
swelling in your favor,  
transported to  
to your body’s joyful openings,  
anticipating  
hot and wet,  
those ports of entry,  
those sweet breasts,  
that sweet tongue  
flicking between your lips;  
promises of things to come.  
O ye spermy nights of the gods!

The rune on our canoe's tail  
says "enter here, ye of little haste"  
and willows brush our arms  
as we paddle down the river  
of ardor and fulfillment  
and coming together and  
whatever else  
we can muster up  
from a time of dreams,  
from the manna  
of this earthly paradise.

Olivia, you were brown as a nut  
from a summer of sun;  
a glamorous summer goddess  
there for the taking and still  
it came to nothing.  
A change of heart,  
a parting glance,  
and off you went.

Your naked this I never saw,  
your curly that I never pawed;  
alone in the majestic garden  
of self I sit stiff and cold  
as a block of ice;  
a lonesome soldier in a sentry box  
waiting for the gate to open;  
it never does.

Olivia, you left me  
as you found me  
and just as well  
for the both of us.  
There we were  
in that bar,  
and there we are forever,  
enshrined, inscribed  
like Keats' Grecian urn,  
graceful outlines,  
a frieze of some long past event,  
at rest in that luminous  
wasted moment forever;  
no future, no past,  
no time at all and  
what never happened,  
what is not there  
just as real  
as what is there.

# Whispers Enough

She wanted to love like  
    a whisper;  
        Him leaning  
in, breath on  
    cheek; listening.  
        Her lips curved  
upward reaching for  
    sky; his hands holding  
        hips to anchor  
them both, a kind of home.

Nests, cabins, caves --  
    homes as well. She considers  
        tapestry or making do.  
He speaks of "push me pull you"  
    wondering if tides  
        can cut  
ties to the moon;  
    as though she could shut up,  
        as though he'd be still.  
Not all homes have roofs and some leak.

He thinks it better to savor  
    the puddle than pine  
        for the ocean.  
She figures it matters little if  
    they're both mirages.  
        They rock  
into the night waiting on  
    the day there's a day after  
        the hangover.  
Some mornings they both whisper.

# Last Night at the Campground

After s'mores  
the boys discovered  
that grocery bags  
became jellyfish  
of the sky  
in the vertical plume  
of agitated air  
above the campfire.

Ebullient like little  
Mongolfier brothers  
they reveled in  
their discovery all night,  
repeatedly tossing the totes  
over the flames  
until one-by-one  
they each succumbed  
to a fault in canopy  
or shift in wind  
and plummeted into  
the hellfire which  
first gifted it flight.

I rescued the last bag  
to *sherpa* our dwindled supplies  
to the car in the morning,  
and their protests  
boasted prolonged yawns  
even they couldn't ignore.

That night  
in sleeping bag cocoons  
their dreams would metamorphose  
those boys into tremendous  
winged creatures  
that had all of the sky  
left to discover.

Their foreheads warm  
to the goodnight kiss,  
breath already regulated by sleep.

# The Thinker



"I think, therefore I am."

--Descartes

# On the Edge of 1969

He watched the street parade  
of traffic going where he wasn't,  
as if studying the rush and retreat  
of the tide from behind a dirty window.

She entered with bells---  
the one that signaled the door,  
and the three on her wrist---  
like some gypsy: long hair,  
tie-dyed skirt, fringed blouse,  
and leather sandals.

“Are there any hippies around town?”  
she asked, having just hitched in  
from the mud and sound at Woodstock.

“Maybe I’m one,” he replied.  
His hair was longer than it  
ever had been. But while he liked  
its touch against his neck  
in the wind, he dressed still  
in his straight-pants, plaid-shirt way.  
And she looked at him  
as if he were the freak today.

“There are a few,” he said,  
wishing he had slept in  
the cocoon tents rained  
to muddy floor in the farmer’s fields  
he’d seen on Huntley/Brinkley.

“It seems a pretty backward town  
to me,” and she looked through  
the albums on the rack by the counter.

And he wished he were not  
backward in a backward town,  
but had hitched from Woodstock  
with this “hippie chick,”

wished he had marched in teargas  
parades in Chicago,

wished he'd been bloodied  
by the honorable baton,

wished he'd lost his greenness  
between the legs of this young woman  
somewhere in the grass, mud and rain  
among the high-watt music  
in a farmer's field in New York.

Instead, he watched the traffic  
through the dirty plate-glass window,  
imagining each car filled  
with veterans of nightsticks  
and muddy concerts  
while he sold shadows of sound  
engraved in vinyl.

And he heard the exiting of bells.

# Black-ice Dawn

12.26.18

7.19 a.m.

22 degrees

Pink ranging over the distant hills and cinematic in the treetops,  
obeisance to the landscape which is the earth which is  
nightfall and daylight and every trace between,  
dominion of hoarfrost and black ice and a waning moon in the dawn sky.



# LOL

I cackled  
when you microwaved a lozenge  
of aluminum foil to mimic lightning bolts  
because you missed Midwestern thunderstorms in August,  
and you tee-heed  
as I nibbled beads of black caviar on a Dorito.  
I giggled  
when you mentioned Marie Antoinette  
whenever you “or-dered a-head,”  
and you howled  
after my Waterpik maneuvers had left a miniature  
of the Johnstown Flood on the bathroom floor.  
But when you snickered  
at my admission  
that my family had forsaken me for being “a freak,”  
the laughter was stifled for good.

# Death of a Mother

The air was thick. Faces serious. Then my grandmother called my cousin a bitch and everyone laughed. Except for my mom, who wouldn't have laughed at that even if she was alive, her body lying in state in the middle of the room. The Phillies game played on the television. My mother's grandfather died on this same island watching a Phillies game in the 1970's. Sitting in the armchair at the house on 17th street in North Wildwood with the kids playing by his feet thinking he was asleep. The air was thick. My 24 year old father's first words when he saw his body were, "oh shit." Forty years later, my mom rested on an at-home hospice gurney over-sized for her frail corpse. My father's first words when he saw her body were, "my best friend is gone." My grandmother's first words when she saw her body were, "my baby is gone." The air was thick. The room smelled like lavender and exhaustion. I sat beside her the entire night, talking her through death, telling her it was okay to let go, with doubt in my breath, but belief in my words, to say it out loud was to confirm desire, to stop fighting and be at peace. Born on July 17th, 1957. Died 1:47PM, April 27th, 2017. My father left to withdraw money from an ATM. His receipt read the same time as her last heartbeat. The air was thick. After her death I stepped outside and smelled cigarettes and dog. Winstons and pure-bred Boxer. My dead grandfather's favorite cigarette brand, and my family's favorite breed of dog: Sansom, Ashley, Gypsy, all dead. I expected to smell the Atlantic Ocean, but was met with mundane, supernatural scents. I never believed in ghosts until I could smell them. Their faces in the wind. The air was thick.

# On the Nature and Uses of Sabotage

The pale reeds  
the glass-like water wreaths  
a dozen splayed dresses  
tired dancers  
on the floor. The sky is milk.  
A chop saw buzzes-out somewhere  
periodically with the lonesome  
aspect of a horn. The world is weary.  
Veblen got it right: the proper attitude  
is scorn.

I have gotten so far out in this poem  
the land has left me  
like a tugboat in the mist.  
Nevertheless  
push on, push the long black barge  
on. On, twisted metal  
China won't buy anymore.  
You see, they have plenty  
of twisted metal  
of their own.

Other recycling we burn  
to soot. Now the low water  
exposes two centuries  
of moles  
and jetties. Pretend  
I can differentiate what might be  
the same thing.

Someone chose these rocks  
out, all of similar size.  
An engineer,  
and the price system (with an  
introduction by Daniel Bell).

What's the use of sabotage  
when we already  
do it to ourselves  
so well?

# Of Famine Roads

I have seen the scars  
of my people  
imbued onto the barren landscape  
of my ancestors.

I have heard the cries  
of my many starving mothers past  
intertwined with the notes  
of musicians' instruments.

I have smelled the peat  
of their smoldering dreams  
wafted through the pubs  
of my welcoming hosts.

I have tasted the water of life  
of barley's juice  
which works as a blessing and curse  
of generational inspiration and impairment.

I have touched the flower  
of uncertainty sprouted between bricks  
guided by hands setting paths tread by none after  
of stones long ago covered by weeds.

I have thoughts  
of famine roads  
prodded by desire to finish construction  
of projects that would save ancestral memories.

# Change Takes Energy

Thunderstorms rotate into hurricanes, rockets hit  
escape velocity over 25 thousand miles per hour, birthday cake  
bakes at 350 degrees to tender perfection.

No reason to expect any leftovers. Babies can't loan you  
thirty bucks and butterflies won't take out the trash upon emerging  
from the chrysalis, if ever. And she isn't the one with whom

you tied the knot, fumbling hands recalling torn-through  
mittens on the rope tow because the hill was just too  
steep and you never did learn to ski. Gloriously

happy with the band on your finger, all that hide and seek  
behind you. He wouldn't keep you safe or bring you  
soup, but still a kind of resting place. Buried beneath

pills and knives, scars and scarves, you'll never find  
him now. You fueled the escape and don't quite begrudge  
it, except in what is misunderstood as finite. All these

worries of loss overlook what science shows us -- renewable  
energy in wind, tides, sun, your heart and the smile  
you give your kids after taking out the trash.

# Beneath a Wave of Molasses

The blue light of 24-hour news  
is all that carries me past the transition  
of educational channels from history  
to one salesman or another. Then the news  
melts quickly to history in the insomniac fog.

Some said that it was anarchists. A bomb.  
Others thought the hot Spring made rivets pop  
from the full two million gallon vat that  
loomed large in the North End  
with the force and sound of howitzer rounds.

The molasses had warmed fast,  
expanded past the vat's cheap construction  
when fermentation added new gases to the mix.  
The molasses was bound for munitions,  
but wound up on a tour of Boston.

One sunny afternoon twenty-one people drowned in molasses.

The fifteen foot tsunami of sticky brown  
hurled a truck into Boston Harbor.  
Tipped a railway car. Washed over hundreds  
of Bostonians, candying them. Some stood,  
some struggled to stand. The firemen laid ladders  
across the muck to get people out.  
And later the bodies—glazed beyond recognition.

And again I'm thinking of quicksand,  
that non-Newtonian mess of nightmares.  
Mother of all wrong turns.  
The metaphor I can't shake.  
They say that I need to cheer up,  
and for a moment I watch in my mind  
Tony di Stasio ride the brown curl like a surfer  
before being tumbled by it  
and, like a surfer,  
coming up with a mouthful of wave.

But then I again think of Peggy Shumaker's  
"Moving Water, Tuscon": the teenage boy  
who rides the flash flood  
into the footbridge,  
where the immense force of water  
holds him in place.  
But at least he was expecting it.  
He hadn't been dodging calamity  
en masse the past few years  
and taken unawares. He was empowered  
by conscious choice and monsoon  
all the way to his final crash.

The Red Sox had just won the series  
only months before. However,  
flu had killed six percent of the world's population  
only months before. Plus, also just months gone  
was the Great War, fifteen million more dead.  
Good days were cast with such a different mask back then.  
Or, perhaps it's the other way around.

Sometimes I can't sleep.  
Nothing works. Other days  
everything outside of the bed  
is a cloying syrup to be pushed against.  
Fought through like quicksand.  
Some days, though,  
after cleanup and reboot,  
a long, long shower,  
quicksand seems more like oobleck  
in a kiddie pool. A test of speed  
against cornstarch and water.  
Some warm days the North End  
smells sweet, they say.  
Some days I like to believe them.

# Pool Escapades

I am five when it happens. Sitting on my inflatable chair, I've not a care in the world. The sun shines on my face, my legs dangle into the pool. I'm wearing multi-colored sunglasses and a Winnie the Pooh bathing suit. I couldn't be more serene. My mother snaps a photo, then goes back to her book.

The longer I sit the more I get antsy. I start to swing my legs. Slowly at first, but then with growing ferocity. My mother warns without looking up that I better not fidget too much, the chair might take on water. There's an ounce of teasing in her voice, I pay little mind.

By now the swinging has shifted into what I can only describe as an attempt to launch myself off the inflatable chair as though it were a miniature trampoline. But my actions are to no avail, as the chair refuses to send me airborne. The unmistakable sound of Lycra on PVC fills the pool area. I think nothing of the soft hissing noise until it is too late.

Somehow I'm under the chair. The moldable plastic oval weighed down by the water, trapping me underneath. I kick at it trying to get it to move away from the surface so I can swim upwards. It doesn't work. It's not that I can't swim, but I can't seem to find a way out from this hellish dome I'm in. I've become a tiny seal in the ocean and an orca whale has fallen on top of me.

My mother tells me I was only under the lounge for a second, but I don't believe her. In my mind, I've been in the depths for longer than anyone before me has. Longer than even an expert pearl diver could hope to be. I've overcome all odds and emerged victoriously... but I'll never sit on an inflatable chair again for as long as I shall live.

# Refueling

When I turn from the gas nozzle  
toward the pump,  
he appears, miffed, as if HE  
stood here first, as if when I pulled in  
I ignored him.

His t-shirt, taut,  
skin slick as Vaseline across biceps  
looking to exercise rights. My car door, ajar—  
my purse, within reach, keys,  
visible on the seat.

*Sloppy*, I think.  
Then, *Checkmate*.

His gaze, a razor  
etching more in shorthand than  
my trembling hand could.  
Implacable. He has all day.  
The rest of an impoverished lifetime.

Were those muscles  
developed in prison? A life I know  
from the other side, the worker / wife  
who paced out an interminable  
sentence of my own making.  
My release a matter of running out the clock,  
the calendar, the majority of my life.

Here we stand, head-locked.  
I hear in his speech bubbles rising as if  
from a drain pipe, no, that familiar gurgle when  
the tank swallows hard.  
I catch *food* then *bus*.

When he pauses, I lean forward,  
my smile almost neighborly,  
my upturned nose a bit too near his  
flat determination. Still he doesn't budge.  
*Need cash?* Like he's my son.

I press hard the open door  
that barely separates us. My bony grip  
too near his broad tattooed knuckles.  
He motions inside the car.  
I lean in to dig for a crinkled bill.  
Who has cash?

He and I think about how  
he could overpower me. *Get in*, he motions.  
My quaking hand holds the window  
framing my stooped position.  
I know—does he?—I will not  
will not go quietly.

# Beneath the Six-Sided Farmhouse

One afternoon, my grandfather wrapped my small  
hand in his thick calloused one, and led  
me down the unpainted creaking wooden steps  
into the cellar beneath his old farmhouse house.  
I'd never been there, never cracked the door  
to this musty darkness, full of coal  
and shelves of canned fruits and foods.  
He took me back into the dark corner  
underneath the dust beams of afternoon sunlight,  
and pointed to the floor beside some broken sacks.  
I blinked my eyes in the blindness of light  
and dark. Then the outline of a black shape.  
A large rat had found the rat-trap there.  
The rat-trap had welcomed the rat, crushing  
it, its rat-eyes beady bugging in death.  
I looked up at my grandfather for the meaning,  
the purpose, the lesson in this basement vision.  
He looked from the rat to me, raised a single  
finger to his lips, and made a silent hiss.  
Whether I should be quiet before death,  
or whether he knew only silence had a meaning,  
or whether he feared his tiny wife's scolding  
for bringing me down into the rat-dead basement,  
I did not know but kept my silence.

# Lost World

The view from the island is not yet memory.  
I stand on the shore, wind at my back.

In one hand I hold what remains  
of a once bright fish the sea has returned.

In the other a bleached shell, the lost  
house of a hermit crab who has packed

and moved on. I'm too late to do either any good,  
the sun having wandered away. The composition

of decomposition I joke to myself. Tomorrow  
there will be light or life, something more

than the whirling shadows of nightbirds.  
The moon may listen for once.

Or if changed, let it turn these shapes  
to pale stars and take refuge there.

A lighthouse for those few  
who have also seen this island of God.

# Promise

Father said  
You need to have the power to choose;  
But I let him down.  
Unconsciously, without even knowing,  
People played me hard, stole my strongest.  
Towards my heart  
All the way through my body  
Mercy have I not shown  
When transparency was bolder.

But right now  
Right in this instant  
Everything seems so sheer in the distance;  
Future, stars, air  
Are now easier to be breathed,  
Inhaling powerful words builds now my shield.

Promise You Father-  
choices will no longer frighten my soul.

Wait a second-  
are they not part of my whole?

Ounces of pain had enough control over me  
It is high time I lock them outside and let them be;  
The breeze, the cold will treat them worthy  
Promise You,  
I will rest my body.

# Dream Logic

You fall through a tangle of damp bed-sheets  
into arms of angels,  
guardians  
of your restless nights.  
Perhaps you are a wanderer, for in truth  
you feel alive  
here, vivid in patches of daylight  
reassembled  
to transcend meaning  
and set you  
free.

You don't question  
yoga class with strangers at an airport,  
the teacher's touch  
upon your hip  
so suddenly important, that dance performance  
about to start where you  
alone can't find shoes, your therapist  
in charge and harried,  
pointing you to  
new ones,  
nor even the many times  
you walk through office halls and strange  
people busy at  
work in search of yours,  
or your search for exits in dim-lit malls  
the stores all closed.

This makes sense, your life,  
and who you are,  
nowhere, really, quite yet,

but on the way  
to everywhere you've  
been.

# Non Dolet

The pleasures of philosophy;  
the smiling stars  
parade out of heaven,  
one by one,  
and more than one,  
bursting forth with a bloom  
more beautiful than youth;  
but not for the young,  
whose energies lie elsewhere.

The treasures of philosophy;  
flowers that grow on earth  
need simple sun and rain  
and not the sources of things,  
or the mishaps of ontology.  
Consolations of the spirit  
ebb and flow with time  
and the light-going years;  
unconsoled at last,  
we cope like prisoners,  
uncomfortable in the  
narrow chambers of Faust.

Green sleeves, green dresses  
echo the forest  
and lawns  
of far-off youth,  
when balance was  
a bouncing ball,  
up and down,  
up and down, restless,  
careless as love.  
Careful now as ballerinas,  
we wend our ambiguous ways  
to termination.

But listen;  
the fields are  
green as ever, if bare  
in winter, the winter sea  
glad-handed and  
brilliant as ice;  
the balls balance still,  
like sun and moon,  
rolling  
the miles away, the years.  
Like Captain Cook,  
whatever strikes us dead  
strikes at least  
in a different clime,  
beginning and ending  
among strangers,  
indifferent to see us  
gasp our last.

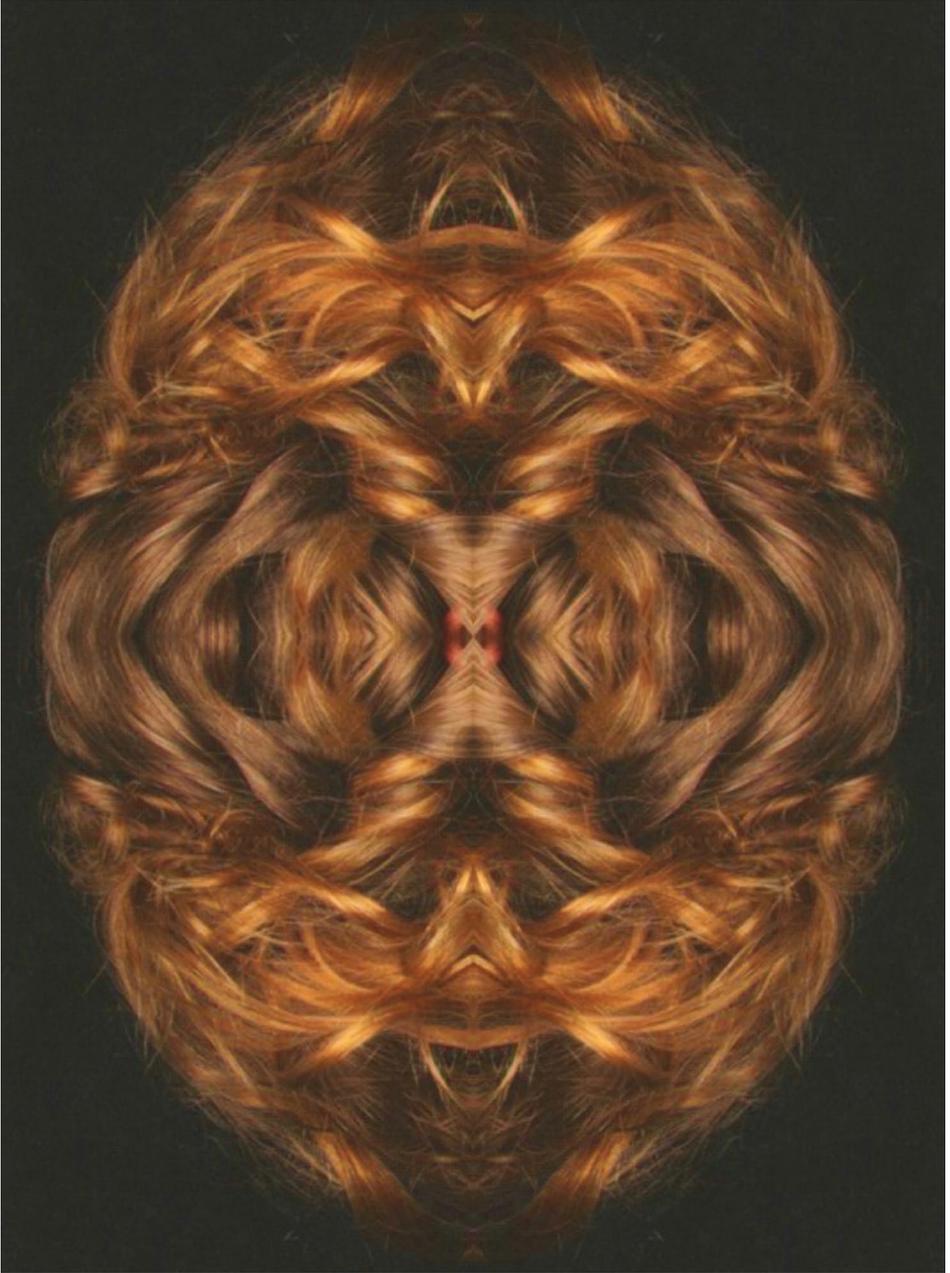
To the dump  
with the memory  
of the limber nervous body;  
Venus' corpse was always  
there, the skull  
as bare beneath the  
freckled nose and  
cheeks as Yorick's,  
the ribs  
stark scaffolds  
beneath the  
nourishing breasts.

So what if all  
goes under to the grave?  
Let's fare our way,  
and crazy or judicious  
in decay,  
servants of luck and time,  
let's live like masters  
in another's house;  
the good shepherd,  
the faithful steward,  
calm only the righteous,  
or those patient for eternity.  
The measure of philosophy;  
whirling all overhead like a  
mad king or a drunken dervish;  
sea to sea,  
beginning to end,  
come to rest  
we will.

# Omnious Snow Tunnels

Snow plows careened  
    across our street frequently—  
scraping slightly swerving lines  
    in the gravelly tar.  
The halfway point next door  
    provided the perfect dump  
for piles of powdery snow.  
    A perfect place to compact  
into a solid snow bank.  
    And what a repository of fun.  
I learned empirically  
    that kicking and scraping  
were the real form of tunneling.  
    Every so often, my complexes,  
my Viet Cong tunnels  
    which allowed sneak attacks  
in snowball fights,  
    would be re-compacted.  
A clean slate for new designs.  
    Even after being grounded  
to my room with no Nintendo,  
    I didn't see the logic  
in banning my most badass  
    snow fort structures.  
Older, leaving before sunrise  
    as snow falls quietly  
lit by orbs of parking lot lights  
    I saw peace in the plow  
picking its slow course  
    in the empty, smooth white field.  
Eventually I also learned to see  
    the snow compacting  
firsthand in nightmares.  
    The light emanating  
from the end of that familiar,  
    ominous tunnel  
extinguishing  
    always ends the dream.  
The crushing  
    is left to my waking mind.

# Light's Sudden Hesitation





Does it matter after all?  
Having someone to catch your fall?  
No one is really there  
I learned the hard way,  
I was blind all this time  
Nothing ever hold on me so tight.

I grabbed  
I was stabbed  
Grabbed this one  
And this one  
Until I was on the floor  
Bleeding  
Sobbing  
Holding holding hold-  
Stopped.  
Trembled  
Terrified  
Tried  
Tried tried tried thousand times  
Eyes are not shining  
Empty hands  
Hollow distant hearts  
Cannot beg for saviors, they are fraud!  
Fake false pretending something  
Giving hope to nothing

# Mid-life Mountain Time

She overshoots childhood  
and lands  
in the Age of Dinosaurs  
on tall grass between feet  
of Plant Eaters.  
Flies the size  
of Volkswagen Beetles  
buzz by but  
she's safe  
from sharp teeth.

Why couldn't she fall  
into Jurassic as  
a pterodactyl?  
With wide-stretched wings  
she'd soar over palm trees,  
volcanoes, orange  
canyons,  
—all this big life,  
scanning plains with beady red eyes  
that see everything,  
fear nothing.

She wouldn't spend time  
probing why she hates burnt carrots,  
shrinks from stern voices.  
She'd just swoop,  
swipe  
what she needs  
from land that yields it,  
then fly to the clouds  
without thinking.

With bones hollow like straws,  
strong as branches, she'd float  
on air without breaking.  
She would go  
where the wind took her  
—allow the earth  
to breathe her into a future  
that starts now.

# Teacher Training

It's summer.  
Or late spring,  
early fall, even  
mid-winter.  
Sun shines over  
parks, days long  
or short, snow  
balances on  
branches. Whatever  
the case, blinds  
are drawn. Windows  
closed, air thin.  
Arduous restraint  
to sit when each  
100 billion brain  
cells scream to get  
the hell outta Dodge.  
Restless leg,  
restless heart, mind,  
skin. Remember flight?  
Feet pound a  
path to playground,  
arms pump  
swing to the sky  
tracing birds' path,  
skim past clouds  
of hippos, silos,  
doves or a solid  
slate ready to be  
chalked with  
daydreams. Thus  
goes the daydream.

# According to its Lights

Immobile. But that's only what you think.  
The trunk grows slowly, imperceptibly,  
according to its lights.  
Same with the roots, always on the lookout  
for more soil to spread into,  
dropping its anchor, wider, deeper,  
while standing abundant or grim,  
fluttering noiselessly  
or ringing its limbs with brisk wind,  
according to the season.

All that buzzing sun,  
white blossoms,  
the puffs of green breath,  
its game of illuminations,  
that interior commotion,  
and then the stripping away,  
gaunt but not sorrowful,  
always within sap's whisper of its own lush heaven.

Backyard elm, for over a hundred years,  
from bud to full-blown leaf,  
all the colors of time,  
tallying everything from lives and deaths  
to the joggers, the traffic rumbling by.  
It's been so constant, so perceptive,  
it can remember all of some people.

# Myself

Was I ever?

Have I known?

Did I try?

Never have I ever handled the world

Like the sun knows His worth

Dreams dissipating-  
seems like they're fading.

People stole the identity of my past

Now I have to reclaim what's about to last.

Treachery build my core!

I will stand and sit tall.

# Path of Lightning

Floating in the ocean that leads  
to a cove fed by  
a lake in which you  
are. Drifting maybe not in water, but her  
upthrust beside my sea, a thousand  
kilometers south.

You reaching  
past having failed  
in laying down short term memory. I  
having failed  
to be memorable.

Young love incites, even at a distance,  
even when old.  
You reach for her.

But what of lightning?  
the way water conducts electricity, the  
way we conduct ourselves  
in goodbyes, the jolt  
enough to stop a heartbeat;  
the second strike that can restart.  
Dispersed in water electricity travels  
only six meters, they say.

But what of fish and birds?  
Migrating trout eating fried crayfish; scooped  
by swoops of ospreys,  
dropped in path of a hungry bass,  
traveling to near you.

Not much for swimming, but you do love  
bare feet. You feel  
the current. So you don't  
sleep with her.

Never mind that it's July.

We're all mystified -- ospreys and gulls, bass and trout,  
you and I.

Me, treading water, never one for touching  
the ocean floor; you walking  
away; me confusing seaspray with  
rains; you wildly shooping  
sandflies, looking like a dance.

The only element that matches  
the season is the wishing.

# Life in the Bulrushes

When my skiff swamped and delivered me  
short of the island, I withdrew silver, faceless  
cans, meals from home, from my supplies.

The first two I opened were spinach,  
a plague of greens the sea  
could swallow easier than me.

The next can I cast back into the east wind.  
Navy beans. An irony that went down  
into the depths like a stone.

No burning bushes today.  
No snakes dancing in this land  
of milkweed and honeysuckle.  
Moses-like I've repaired my boat  
with bitumen and pitch. Tomorrow,  
I'll be ready to feast in the wilderness.

# Cassandra

Mystic the moon-pools  
of your willful soul,  
those secret eyes buried  
in your skull,  
the skill to see,  
looking beyond  
the first light.

Dawn doth float  
above the uneasy sleep  
that God forgets;  
heeding the call,  
the littlest things,  
the very worms,  
like Cadmus creatures  
of another breed,  
wriggling out of the earth  
turn to dragons.  
You know it  
before it happens;  
nobody listens.

Alone we two  
fain would be;  
the forests of  
your fair eyebrows knit;  
you see it all.

Outside the drawn curtains  
the placid lawn takes a breath;  
stepping forward in the east  
the rosy, the hourless,  
the enormous sun  
starts up, showing  
the rim of its everlasting eye.

Midnight, my cry sounded  
up and down the bedroom,  
you were gone,  
gone your second sight;  
I lay wounded,  
terrified, despondent.

Impossible in this dawn,  
in this day arising,  
if you came to me  
there would be  
less delight  
in your sweet presence  
than knowing the future;  
forget, forget,  
at noon I work  
spider spinning,  
industrious.

Onward the sun on course,  
dropping down the heavens  
towards night;  
across this land comes  
twilight slowly, then  
dark and then the real  
lights of heaven come on,  
tiny and distinct,  
and here on earth  
the false ones.

You see it all,  
clear as the neon signs  
we see, the future  
speaks to you,  
impossible burden,  
and you tell us  
the tragic end  
of all our labors,  
our mighty strivings.

In your prophecies,  
your visions  
thrown to the winds,  
your truth for us  
just as clear  
and useless  
as broken glass.

# The Rotten Poets



# Rotten

The shark circles the island  
I follow the shark  
Storm clouds swirl above  
How did we end up here?  
I was all alone on this island  
until they joined me  
The smell of rotten fish  
echoes back to my rotten luck  
but it's rotting undead pirates  
crawling out of the ocean  
We're all turning undead  
Skin decomposing into  
gritty salt and  
  
crashing green waves  
Who's hunting who?

When we collaborated on this poem, one person started us off with the first line, then another person followed. After that, we stopped going in order and people started to contribute randomly. It was fun to build off other people's ideas. It bonded us as a group. It also made it easier to write, since we could bounce ideas off everybody. Since we weren't on our own, we didn't ever stay stuck. Each person contributed at least a line. As we built and revised the poem, everyone had a say. We all listened to one another and respected our differences of opinion. We disagreed on some points but were able to reach a consensus peacefully every time.

# Within

Within the silence  
You hear  
All of my thoughts  
I was trying to put into words  
But couldn't seem to say

Within the distance  
You catch  
All of my secrets  
I didn't realize  
That I was giving away.

Within my heart  
You see  
The fears that make me want to pull away  
But you change them to hope  
And I feel like I can stay

Within my soul  
You find  
All of the paths that I face  
And you lead me  
Just where I should go.  
You see me  
More than you will ever know.

You tell me we think too much with our heads,  
That logic can get in the way of what is truly real  
And that we must listen to our hearts  
For our hearts are never wrong about  
what we feel

Though some feelings can't be explained,  
I am sure that this cannot be wrong  
All I can think is  
You must have been within me  
All along.

# That Song Doesn't Hurt Now

Outside of a store  
Yesterday I had a thought;  
Youngsters passing by  
Played that song eerily alive.

In my memory those rhymes  
Found a scratch full of lies  
Shadows were overflowed with haunting laughters  
Afraid of visualizing the edges of their masters;

My new, genuine smile faded  
But only for a minute;  
Happiness is all around me now-  
it blocks the intruders out.

# An Ode to the Morning After

There he is,  
hung over a plate of eggs and bacon,  
eyes bleary,  
hair as unruly as a dove's nest,  
unshaven,  
with breath she can smell  
from as far away as the sizzling frypan.

This is what she saw enough in  
to invite back to her place,  
her comfortable bed,  
the expensive sheets  
she bought through a catalogue,  
the dresser table  
where her childhood doll sits,  
its china cherub cheeks  
squeezing the mouth  
into a wisp of smile.

And now her bed is bleary,  
the sheets unruly,  
the doll's breath  
stinks out the day  
and the night to come.

She slips eggs  
and two bacon rasher  
onto a plate,  
sits beside him  
in her own unkempt morning state.  
Better to ruin his recollections  
while she has a chance.

# “Notes on Some Lesser-Known Italian Films—and Film Artists”

**ABSTRACT:** This essay consists of notes on some lesser known (especially outside Italy in particular and Europe in general), but hardly unknown, Italian films and film artists. Some big names are represented here, like Antonioni and Visconti, but not by their big pictures. Other directorial names, such as Rosi, Lattuada, Monicelli, Bellocchio, and Zurlini, will ring a bell for educated moviegoers and observers of Italian culture, but probably not for anyone else. Guerra, D’Amico, and Zavattini themselves are screenwriters, and, though screenwriting lags behind every other aspect of filmmaking, these three are among the best ever to have composed movie scenarios. For this they deserve commemoration, as do their directorial counterparts—particularly those, like Rosi, Lattuada, and Zurlini, who have never commanded a wide audience.

**KEY WORDS:** Italian cinema; *Christ Stopped at Eboli*; Francesco Rosi; *The Lady without Camelias*; Michelangelo Antonioni; *The Leopard*; Luchino Visconti; *Mafioso*; Alberto Lattuada; *The Organizer*; Mario Monicelli; *Henry IV*; Marco Bellocchio; Tonino

Guerra; Suso Cecchi D’Amico; Cesare Zavattini; Valerio Zurlini.

What follows is well-described in my title: notes on some lesser known (especially outside Italy in particular and Europe in general), but hardly unknown, Italian films and film artists. To be sure, some big names are represented below, like Antonioni and Visconti, but not by their big pictures. Other directorial names, such as Rosi, Lattuada, Monicelli, Bellocchio, and Zurlini, will ring a bell for educated moviegoers and observers of Italian culture, but probably not for anyone else.

As for Guerra, D’Amico, and Zavattini, well, these are screenwriters, and screenwriting lags behind every other aspect of filmmaking. It has always lagged behind. Directing, acting, cinematography, design, and the other components of film have always been more dependably good than writing. Here is one inferable reason for the worldwide imbalance: writing for performance (this applies to the theater, too) is more difficult than any other element in performance. The good news is, this is perhaps less the case in Italian cinema than in that of any oth-

er nation; the bad news is, despite the fact that Guerra, D'Amico, and Zavattini are among the best writers ever to have composed screenplays, they live—with the possible exception of Zavattini on account of his long association with De Sica—in virtual anonymity.

This essay will not change these writers' state, nor will it elevate the status of such directors as Rosi, Lattuada, and Zurlini. My only hope, apart from sheer remembrance, is to call attention to the achievements, as well as missteps, of all the Italian film artists included here.

### ***Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Francesco Rosi, 1979**

By 1979 it was getting a bit late to worry about Francesco Rosi (1922-2015). He had been directing since 1958, and the balance in him of virtues and faults, too equal to keep him from first-class work, hadn't yet tipped favorably. If anything, the reverse.

That said, Rosi was a director of stunning ability and genuine seriousness, with strong (though not unique) interests: he explored actual events, through fictional re-creation, as social phenomena (like Costa-Gavras and others). Rosi was Neapolitan, "political," and marked his films with a humane, cursive gravity. He was concerned with the well-being of his countrymen, with the plots and complots that oppress them; his camera moved to disclose and unravel the conspiracies against justice, glided succinctly and discreetly, in such films as *The Mattei Affair* (about oil), from 1972, and *Lucky Luciano* (about the Mafia), from 1974.

*The Mattei Affair* is concerned with the forces *under* events: this time the story of Enrico Mattei, the Italian oil executive who died in a plane crash—probably murdered—in 1962. Mattei had prescience about what it's now modish to call the energy crisis, had a clear vision of the importance of oil in politics; and his activities in Italy and abroad ran counter to those of the big oil companies of the world. He was a rationalist, a nationalist, and an internationalist, unconcerned with exploitation. His death was a convenience for the exploiters.

It was a natural theme for Rosi and, sheerly in filmmaking terms, he handles it comfortably. But skillfully though it is composed and edited, intelligently though it proceeds, its affective power is weak. We *see* what Mattei is about, we understand his aims, we recognize his enemies; but the heat of his struggle never touches us. The film is deft (but mere) exposition of a problem.

His early and, I think, best film, *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), was a "ballad" about the Sicilian bandit as an emblem of protest, and many of its images are incised in memory—the massacre at the communist rally, the naked corpse of Giuliano packed in ice against the Sicilian summer. (And let's not forget that the cinematographer who perfected those images was Gianni Di Venanzo, who died in 1966 at the age of forty-six: an inadequately recognized force in the postwar Italian film rebirth.) But in that work and later ones (such as *The Moment of Truth* [1965], made in Spain, a cruel-compassionate study of what bull-fighting means as escape-hatch for poor boys), Rosi's structure is weak, his dra-

ma flabby. He relies on texture to do almost everything for him, and it doesn't. (It's odd, this failing, because he began as assistant to Luchino Visconti, whose dramatic sense leaned the other way, to the florid. Had Rosi been overreacting to Visconti all through his own career?)

In 1979 Rosi filmed a subject that, I'd guess, he had had in mind for a long time, but he didn't re-examine it in the light of lapsed time, with enough rigor. One of the most famous of postwar Italian books was Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945). Levi was a physician and painter, an anti-Fascist who in the 1930s had been exiled from Rome to Lucania in southern Italy along with other "politicals," and who wrote about the experience ten years later. The story is not of Levi's sufferings, for in any real sense he didn't suffer. When we think of political dissidents under Hitler and Stalin in those years, Levi and his fellow anti-Fascists seem just to be on faintly spartan holidays in an exquisite countryside.

However, not much claim is made about his suffering. Levi's real subject is the Lucanian peasantry, his countrymen whose lives were straitened in every regard. But they and their villages strike us differently today. When Gian Maria Volonté, as Levi, speaks on the soundtrack about the desolation, the misery, the abandonment of these people. I thought that he ought to be glad he never saw the South Bronx or many parts of Harlem. More: I saw *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979) for the first time just after a documentary on ABC-TV about Cambodia today.

Not that misery must be the most miserable in our experience in

order to be moving. The life of a Lucanian peasant even now, I'm sure, is harder than most of us will ever know (although the worst we actually see here are some superstitions about illness). Compare *Eboli* only with Ermanno Olmi's *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978). Rosi's film is the notebook of a tourist, compassionate but safe. Olmi's film fell sadly short of success, but we lived with the peasants, were surrounded by the hardness of their lives. Levi was a visitor, judging by the difference between Lucanian life and that in Rome. Olmi never patronized his people; Levi, as drawn by Rosi, can't quite escape the scent of tourism.

And the tour plods, episode after episode, an invertebrate travelogue. Rosi attempts to give it a semi-spine with a (non-sexual) relationship between Levi and his housekeeper. Irene Papas fills the part with her dark juices, but she simply appears for a while, then disappears. The episode is one more brick not cemented into place. Volonté, saturnine and strong, does what he can as Levi, but there's not enough for him to do.

Always Rosi wants to cut against conventional filmmaking, which is admirable, but all that he replaces conventional structure with is flaccidness. That was often true of him, and here it's worse because he didn't see what his material looked like in 1979. Levi's book is generally credited with being in the van of postwar Italian social realism. That—in the days when Liberation still hung in the air, the days when presumably Rosi first read and loved the book—was a while ago.

### ***The Lady without Camelias*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1953**

Not long ago I went to see *Attila* (1846), an early opera by one of my heroes in art, Giuseppe Verdi. I thought *Attila* very weak, with little hint in it of the Verdi to come, which was surprising because even earlier Verdi, *Nabucco* (1841) and *Ernani* (1844), seem stronger and more prophetic of the giant en route.

Not long ago I went to see *The Lady without Camelias*, an early film by Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007). I thought *The Lady* very weak, with little hint in it of the Antonioni to come, which was surprising because even earlier Antonioni, *Story of a Love Affair*, seemed stronger and more prophetic of the giant en route.

I had seen *The Lady without Camelias* once before, at the 1965 New York Film Festival, and thought it feeble. (It's Antonioni's third film, made in 1953; *Story of a Love Affair* was made in 1950; then, in 1952, he made a three-episode picture, *I vinti* [1953].) *The Lady* was given its American theatrical premiere in 1981 by Film-at-the-Public, a branch of the Joseph Papp complex in Manhattan. And in 1981 it looked feebler than it did in 1965, not because of Antonioni's masterpieces, which are some of the paramount artworks of our age, but because shortly afterward I saw the first film. *The Lady* has a trite script: about a salesgirl who becomes a film star, gets notions of grandeur, makes an ambitious flop, then sinks back into sleazy pictures. Connected with this action are the stories of a marriage that she ruins and a lover who deserts her.

The script is flat as tinware, the acting bearably routine except for the star Lucia Bosè, who is unbearably routine. It's said that Antonioni wanted Gina Lollobrigida or Sophia Loren for the role, either of whom would at least have given the picture some personal sparkle, which now it has not. I don't understand the title: the heroine is not a modern courtesan, simply a lucky non-entity who takes some time to realize the extent of her luck. The big disappointment is the visual barrenness of the picture; Antonioni himself said that the camerawork was "more orthodox" (Samuels, 16) than in his first film.

One moment only is out of the ordinary: the first shot. From above we see Bosè walking idly back and forth on the curb of a street at night. She does this under the credits; with the last credit, she suddenly turns and goes into the film theater in front of which she has been waiting, goes in to see the last minute of the film in which she is starring . . . an angle and an action that interest us, that lead to a point, and that launch the story. But it's not much of a story.

### ***The Leopard*, Luchino Visconti, 1963**

In 2000 I had a shock that I have had before. I went to see a film that I had seen decades ago and discovered that my opinion of it had changed greatly. It was *The Leopard*, which was released in 1963, a large-scale drama by Luchino Visconti (1906-1976) of the Sicilian nobility in the time of the Garibaldi invasion. Seeing it again, I was overwhelmed. I was greatly stirred by this film, which in 1963 I had indicted to friends for shortcomings in acting and

directing. Most of the performances now seemed more integral and true than they had once seemed, and Visconti's virtuosity in directing, which I had once scorned for ostentation, now seemed much more at the service of the work.

I tried to understand what had changed. With the acting, the explanation was simple. Originally the distributors had feared to release this Italian film in the United States with subtitles. *The Leopard* had an American star, and they thought that audiences here would not want to hear him speaking Italian—or someone else speaking his Italian lines for him. So in the 1963 version the star, Burt Lancaster, spoke his own lines in English, and all the other actors were dubbed—quite unskillfully—into English. Most of those performances had been jarred askew by American voices. Now, when I heard these actors with their own voices, they seemed more rounded, three-dimensional, alive. The chief improvement, contradictory though it sounds, was in Lancaster, who plays a Sicilian prince. In 1963, with his own voice, he had seemed hollow. Now, dubbed in Italian, he was much more believable and commanding. (Lancaster had been dubbed by a famous Sicilian actor, Turi Ferro.) He even looked more princely. Though that earlier English soundtrack had hurt the rest of the cast, the replacement of Lancaster's somewhat gassy voice with one of ring and authority seemed to arch his back.

As for Visconti's directing, my altered response might well have been because, around the turn of the centu-

ry (and continuing into the present), I, like many others, had been starved for imaginative, individualistic filmmaking style—a treasure that was showered on us in the 1960s. In 2000, hungry for the feeling that a unique artist—not a corporation—had made a film, I was suffused with gratitude as I watched Visconti's hand figuratively caressing every measure of sumptuousness, of cultural texture, in scene after scene. Such a moment as the spreading of an immense tablecloth on the grass when the prince's family stops to picnic during the journey from Palermo to their summer palace, with the grooms walking the horses in the background to cool them down—I longed for it to linger. The very last moment of the picture, in a small Palermo square at midnight, where the prince kneels and crosses himself when a priest and acolytes hurry past to someone's bedside, now seems a peak in film art.

Explanations or not, I still felt somewhat miserable about my initial response to *The Leopard* in 1963, and in my misery I sought company. I remembered that Eliot in 1947 had publicly recanted the low opinion of John Milton that he had once published. (Ten years earlier he had written that Milton was a poet whose sensual capacities “had been withered early by book-learning” [Rudrum, 22].) I remembered, too, how Bernard Shaw, in his persona as music critic, had recanted in old age his much earlier dismissal of Johannes Brahms's *Requiem* (1868) as music that could be “patiently borne only by the corpse” (Dyment, 118). These lofty examples consoled me a bit; but they did more

than that. They confirmed my belief that criticism is always in some degree diaristic, a journal of experiences rather than a series of cast-iron pronouncements. This is one more proof of the mercurial nature of truth. Every serious critic speaks the truth of his opinions, but that truth comes from the person he is at that moment, not the person of his past or his future.

When we respond to a critic, we can keep in mind that both he and we are communicating at exactly that moment. Certainly a very great deal of criticism that I have been reading through the years has benefited me through those years, has stood firm. It is the exceptions that are worrisome.

Charles Rosen (1927-2012), once one of the most rewarding critics writing, magisterial in the fields of music and literature and painting and aesthetics, faced this dilemma, in himself and in his writing. In the introduction to his collection *Romantic Poets, Critics, and Other Madmen* (1998), Rosen says:

In collecting these essays, I have left them without correction. . . . I do not want to read any fictitious foresight into these essays, or to inject any observations on the most interesting of recent trends. It seemed more honest to try to bring them up to date by adding a postscript when an apology or second thoughts seemed advisable, or when subsequent developments needed to be remarked. Where some of

the discussion has dated, I hope that the reader will be pleased to remark a certain period flavor. (x-xi)

Those comments could helpfully preface any collection of criticism. But, though the postscript is useful to critics, it doesn't solve the problem, which besets everyone, critic or not. Our minds are freighted with beliefs that we may no longer believe.

That is the most important aspect. All these reservations are true for everyone, not just for critics. The plain, discomfiting fact is that every one of us who has watched plays and films or read books or listened to music or looked at painting and architecture is, in some measure, self-deceived. Filed away in the recesses of our minds are thousands of opinions that we have accumulated through our lives, and they make us think that we know what we think on all those subjects. We do not. All we know is what we once thought, and any earlier view of a work, if tested, might be hugely different from what we would think now.

What can we do about it? Other than realize that this condition exists, very little. We cannot spend our lives re-examining past experiences to keep our opinions up to date. We have to operate with a certain degree of trust. If someone asks your opinion of Laurence Olivier's acting of the title role in *Oedipus the King* (430 B.C.), which you might have seen three times in 1946, all you can do is summon up as best you can what you

felt and thought in 1946 and hope that you would react the same now. If the question is about *War and Peace* (1867), I myself can either sit down and re-read it before answering or dig out my memory file of what I thought when I last re-read it thirty years ago. All of us rely on what our former selves, sometimes quite different selves, once thought. It's a scary realization—that we are all carrying around in our heads a lot of opinions with which we might now disagree.

### ***Mafioso*, Alberto Lattuada, 1962**

If the name of the Italian director Alberto Lattuada (1914-2005) registers with film enthusiasts today, it is probably because in 1950 he allowed one of his screenwriters—a man named Federico Fellini—to co-direct a film with him. It was the start of Fellini's directing career, which soon eclipsed Lattuada's. This is hardly unjust. Lattuada's work is not near Fellini's, but some of it is well worth remembering.

In 2007 we had a chance to remember it, with one of Lattuada's best, *Mafioso*, made in 1962 with Alberto Sordi. Rialto Pictures had re-issued the film as part of its program to bring back valuable foreign pictures with freshened subtitles. The screenplay of *Mafioso* rests on a theme that was important in postwar Italian film—the contrast between northern and southern Italy (as in Ermanno Olmi's *The Fiancés* [1963] and Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and*

*His Brothers* [1960]). Apparently the end of the war made even clearer the contrast between the industrialized north and those parts of the south—Sicily, for chief instance—that were still in a previous century. (In Olmi's film, workers in a new Sicilian factory, all of whom had been farmers, do not come to work on a rainy day.)

Sordi plays a Sicilian who, white-coated and efficient, is now a technician at a Fiat plant in Milan. On his vacation he takes his blonde northern wife and their two blonde little girls back to his hometown in Sicily, which these northerners have never seen. The reunion in Sicily is full of kisses, mostly between Sordi and his relatives and friends: his wife is considerably more formal—initially, at least.

The Mafia is still what it always was in this town—supreme—and the local don is glad to see Sordi again because this up-to-date technician was once an apprentice (so to speak) in the Mafia. The don has a job for him, one that needs a new face. Sordi is torn about doing the job, torn between his past and his present, but he finally accepts because of the “concern” shown by the don and his henchmen about Sordi's family. (How solicitous and affectionate they are. How clear the threat is.) Sordi does the job, which involves a quick round trip to New York. His wife thinks he has been off

on a hunting trip with old friends.

The contrast between his Milanese self and his Sicilian self is sharp enough and comic, for a time. The comedy then slips into bitter satire—about concepts of honor and the enforcements of same. The triumph of the film, its most subtle and disturbing touch, is the very last shot, back in the Fiat plant. Sordi, bound by past obligations and what they entail, has committed a crime; so, conditioned as we are by our own conventions, we expect to see the effect of the crime on him. But in the last shot he is exactly as he was in the opening—brisk, technological. He has left the crime behind him with his Sicilian self. Simply by paying no attention to the contrast, Lattuada is telling us that these cultural counterpoints will continue in Italy—even though this Fiat plant is as modern as Sicily is not

Sordi was one of three Italian leading men in postwar Italian film—the others were Ugo Tognazzi and Nino Manfredi—who usually played the Average Man. Perhaps it was a reaction to the operatics and strutting of the fascist era, but postwar Italy had a fondness for the guy next door. Sordi always makes me wish he lived next door to me.

***The Organizer*, Mario Monicelli, 1963**

The world of *The Organizer* (1963; more accurately entitled *The Comrades* in Ital-

ian) is serious: Turin, Italy, at the turn of the century, where working conditions in the textile industry are terrible. A “professor” (Marcello Mastroianni), disenchanted with high-school teaching, comes to town to organize a strike. He has some success until one of the workers, the teenager Omero, is shot by soldiers defending the textile plant and its owners against violence. The workers then return to the job, apparently without any improvement in their lot. The point, however, is that the first shot has been fired: not only literally, in the case of Omero’s death, but also figuratively, in labor’s struggle against management. (This is the first time that these workers have gone on strike.) Such a struggle, of course, will continue into the twentieth century and beyond with increasing success in many Western countries.

While the world of *The Organizer* is serious, many of its characters are somewhat comic. The professor is slightly ridiculous from the moment we see him peering from a small window in the train that has taken him to Turin. His dress and manner are odd, he seems to be as concerned about finding his next meal as he is about organizing the strike, and his sexual appetite is almost as strong as his appetite for food. Yet he is absolutely sincere and persistent in his efforts on behalf of the workers. His comic and serious sides are shown together best when he awakens in a hall in Turin to realize that a union meeting is taking place right in front of him. No one has seen him, since he is behind a curtain. Unfazed by the interruption of

his sleep, he walks into the midst of the leaders onstage and immediately begins to advise the workers.

The biggest and toughest worker (Folco Lulli) is also the funniest, in the vulnerability or sensitivity we sense beneath his gruffness and in the difficulty with which he unleashes his strength, since his chest is so large that he can barely get his arms around it to throw punches. We laugh at him in the fight at the train station between the Turin workers and the scabs from another city; we pity him when, slightly disoriented after the fight and still on the tracks, he is run down by a racing train. Even the managers of the factory have their comic side: they don't seem to know how to handle this first strike by their workers, and the owner never lets his managers forget it, insulting and hectoring them at every turn.

Furthermore, there is sexual tension between several couples. One worker (Renato Salvatori) pursues Folco Lulli's daughter (Gabriella Giorgelli) throughout the film; she comically rebuffs his advances, only to reveal her deep love for him by the end of the film. The daughter of a Sicilian worker slowly becomes attached to Omero, only to lose him to a soldier's bullet; she then mourns him as if he were her husband. The professor and a prostitute, the daughter of one of the workers, fall for each other; it is from her bed that he is called to lead the workers' assault on the factory, just as he had been "called" from his bed to address them during their first meeting. The one female leader among the strikers, Cesarina, enjoys a playfully sexual relationship with her

colleagues despite her age; the old factory owner himself is not above attraction to women, as he indicates when he raps a lovely young woman on the behind as he passes her in his wheelchair during a party at his home. My point is not that sexual tension, or simply romance, is indigenous to comedy, but that in this film it is unrelated to the serious element. To be sure, the relationship between the Sicilian girl and Omero is ended when he is killed; but their love has not led to his death, as it would, say, in a tragedy about an affair between them doomed by the strong regional differences between their families.

One could say that the comic behaviors in *The Organizer* are leftovers from the director Mario Monicelli's previous films, many of which, like *Cops and Robbers* (1951) and *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), were comedies (a form to which he subsequently returned in *High Infidelity* [1964] and *Sex Quartet* [1966], among other movies), and that these leftovers are not properly "digested" by the new film. Some critics believe that *The Organizer* is a tragicomedy, that Monicelli (1915-2010) does in fact blend moments of comic relief with great tragedy in his film, but they offer no evidence of this blending. They seem to think that the mere existence side by side of humorous and serious elements is proof of tragic comedy bordering on the grotesque. My own feeling, upon re-seeing *The Organizer* after Monicelli's death, is that the comedy in this picture is jarring but that it is intentionally so. It does not exist in any real union with the serious elements, as it would if the film

were a genuine tragicomedy or instance of the grotesque.

*The Organizer's* characters seem to be comic figures who find themselves in tragic circumstances, yet are not subsumed by them. It is almost as if these characters exist in suspension in the realm of tragedy, ready to return to their native realm at the first chance. (This tension is mirrored by the visual style of the film, in which images that suggest nineteenth-century photography exist nearly in suspension in a moving, talking picture.) Their comic natures seem to protect many of these characters in the face of privation and physical pain; they are not the same as characters who, in another film, would suffer bravely. The figures in *The Organizer* don't want to suffer, find it silly that they have suffered for so long without acting against the management, and do what they can to make their lives better. They seem conscious less that they are suffering than that suffering is not appropriate to their natures.

*The Organizer* is Mario Monicelli's act of defiance against poverty and exploitation at one moment in the industrialization of Italy. His characters triumph in art, through maintaining their comic integrity, whereas workers in real life had recourse to no such integrity in their struggle against the factory owners. Their work was their life. The opposite is true for Monicelli's characters: their life is their work, their labor of love.

#### *Henry IV*, Marco Bellocchio, 1984

Pirandello's importance seems to me of an intellectual and moral nature, i.e., a cultural rather than an artistic one: he sought to introduce into popular culture the "dialectic" of modern philosophy, in contrast to the Aristotelian-Catholic mode of conceiving "the objectivity of reality." (Gramsci, "The Theatre of Pirandello": 30)

Thus Antonio Gramsci, who was a theater critic for four years in his late twenties. (Later, in his *Letters from Prison* [1947], he said that he had written enough about Pirandello in those years to make a book [84].) I venture to agree with Gramsci on the locus of Pirandello's importance, most clearly in *Henry IV* (1922). Many commentators compare that play with *Hamlet* (1601), a comparison that, for me, only underscores Gramsci's view. The lasting worth of *Henry IV* is not in its intrinsic artistic vitality but in its exploration of reality. No such choice is possible with *Hamlet*.

An Italian film of *Henry IV*, from 1984—seen by me then and reviewed recently—brings the subject up. It stars Marcello Mastroianni and was directed by Marco Bellocchio (born 1939), who made the adaptation with Tonino Guerra, celebrated for his work with Michelangelo Antonioni. The names bristle with promise, but it is not kept. (I cannot withhold comment on the aptness of the director's name. Even an Italian Dickens would not dare to call a film director Mr. Beautiful Eye.) And after all the film's faults are noted, the

central broken promise is Pirandello's.

To remind you: the time is today, in a castle. Twenty years earlier, a wealthy man (never named) was dressed for a carnival as Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, when he fell from his horse and hit his head. Apparently this man then became deluded that he *was* Henry IV and, with the support of his family, has been living in eleventh-century dress, attended by appropriately dressed servants. The present action of the play includes the woman he once loved in vain; her nineteen-year-old daughter, who is her youthful image; the woman's lover, who may have pricked Henry's horse on that fateful day; and a psychiatrist who visits Henry with them. The doctor's intent is to stage a shock that may bring Henry to his senses, but the result is that Henry—who has not always been as deluded as he seemed and who has partly taken refuge in his "affliction"—stabs the lover in a frenzy, and is now sealed into his delusion.

The oddity of the film is that it does something of what I think the play needs, and still it doesn't succeed. In my minority view, the last act of the play is the only material of genuine interest. A two-minute choric prologue could easily replace the previous two acts of tortuous exposition and padding. The screenplay, made for Italian television, though it doesn't follow this prescription, greatly condenses the acts leading to the climax; yet the work isn't saved. It remains a demonstration of views of reality, not a gripping drama.

Mastroianni struggles with the role of Henry—rather, he keeps struggling to struggle. Throughout the film he seems to be reaching for substance

to engage him and test him, substance that he can probe and crack open. All he seems able to find is a series of attitudes, admittedly somewhat more interesting than in several lesser films of his where he has been tempted to loaf. He isn't loafing here, but neither does his performance create the ark of mysteries that he and Pirandello wanted.

Bellocchio began his career smashingly with such strong films as *Fists in the Pocket* (1965), *China Is Near* (1967), and *In the Name of the Father* (1972). By the early 1980s he had lapsed into ambiguous vacuities like *Leap into the Void* (1980) and *The Eyes, the Mouth* (1982). Pirandello hasn't helped him here. The film adaptation puts in a couple of subtle touches to help the play-acting theme: when Henry falls from his horse (in flashback), he doesn't really strike his head hard; after he stabs his old rival and the wounded man is taken out, we see that Henry has used a trick, collapsible sword. But Bellocchio doesn't significantly use this "performance": his direction fragments into unwieldy bits. Any overview he may have of the work is never realized. A pity.

### **Tonino Guerra (1920-2012)**

The twentieth century keeps ending. The Italian screenwriter Tonino Guerra died on March 21, 2012, at the age of ninety-two. For the film world, he was a major figure. He wrote for and with Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Theo Angelopoulos. With *Amarcord* (1973), he and Fellini were nominated for an Oscar

for Best Original Screenplay. He was also enormously prolific in pop film. Not enough? He was a leading poet of his generation.

He collaborated with Antonioni on six films, including the great trilogy *L'avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961), and *L'eclisse* (1962). The director once said that when he had an idea for a film, he went away with Guerra for a couple of weeks and talked about it with him. In the introduction to a volume of his screenplays, Antonioni continued, "With Tonino we have long and violent arguments; he's helpful to me that way. But with him I can keep quiet as long as I wish without feeling embarrassed. And for this he's even more helpful to me" (*Screenplays*, xiv). (Almost a scene in *L'Eclisse*.) In any case, something more than a *grazie* at Guerra's passing.

#### **Suso Cecchi D'Amico (1914-2010)**

For years I thought that the eminent Italian screenwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico was a man, because of her first name. Then I met her son (a professor of English at the University of Rome), who explained that Suso is a dialect nickname for Susanna. This only increased my admiration for her. That she had built her exceptional career in a gender-biased world made it all the more remarkable. The film historian Gian Piero Brunetta says that she was the only significant Italian woman screenwriter of the postwar period (279). To the outside world—though presumably

she must have encountered some gender antipathies—she seemed to be moving from film to film simply because of her talent.

D'Amico, who died in Rome on July 31, 2010, at age ninety-six, began screenwriting in 1945—the last of her 118 pictures was in 2006. The first notable film on which she collaborated was nothing less than *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), with no less a director than Vittorio De Sica. But gravity was not her only mode: comedy frequently fizzed up along the way. Some of the comedies were *Miracle in Milan* (1951), also with De Sica; Alessandro Blasetti's *Too Bad She's Bad* (1955), which launched Sophia Loren; and Franco Zeffirelli's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), in English with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. It is hard to name a prominent postwar Italian director with whom she did not work. (Fellini, perhaps, but she may have written for him uncredited. She certainly knew him.) Among the celebrated with whom she did work were Michelangelo Antonioni (*Le Amiche* [1955]), Francesco Rosi (*Salvatore Giuliano* [1962]), and—her longest-lasting association—Luchino Visconti, who wanted her for almost all his films, including *Senso* (1954), *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), *The Leopard* (1963), and *The Stranger* (1967).

She liked collaborating. She said more than once that her idea of filmmaking, especially in Italy's golden age, was getting together with friends who were excited about the same idea. Yet the mere titles of many of her films—their generally high level—bespeak a writer who was especially wanted for

qualities of aspiration. I remember wanting to read comment on D'Amico only a few years after she began, and not finding any.

She is a classic instance of the right person in the right place at the right time. From a cultivated family (her father was a distinguished literary critic), gifted, and curious about this art to which intellectuals had not been much drawn in her country, she responded to the splendid postwar wave and helped to keep it cresting. I used to wish that we had some individual work of hers. Then I learned a rueful fact. When I met her son, we happened to talk about adaptations of novels, and I told him that I thought Harold Pinter's screenplay of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927), unproduced but published (in 1972), was the best film treatment of a great novel. D'Amico said, "Ah, but you haven't read my mother's version of it." Unproduced and unpublished, at least in English. I will obviously never know it. But the mere fact that she had written it heightened her unique luster.

### **Cesare Zavattini (1902-1989)**

On October 13, 1989, a man died in Rome at eighty-seven who had affected the film experience of millions around the world and yet was known to few of them. Cesare Zavattini was one of those rare and important figures—screenwriters who have had a huge influence on the careers of certain directors, even on certain periods. Zavattini, along with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, is one of the two outstanding writers of postwar Italian film. He wrote screenplays for many directors, including Alessandro Blaset-

ti and Luchino Visconti, but his signal work was done for Vittorio De Sica. Chief among these films are *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *Two Women* (1961), and *A Brief Vacation* (1973). Not all of Zavattini's screenplays were originals, but then neither were Boito's librettos.

He was a short, stocky, energetic man with a bald head and an undershot jaw, full of film talk and radical politics. In the late 1960s I visited him in his Rome apartment, and despite my strangulated Italian (he knew no English), it was an exhilarating morning.

So far as I could judge, he served De Sica in something of the same way that Edmund Wilson had served Scott Fitzgerald, as socio-political conscience. The day before we met, I had been in a sound studio where De Sica was supervising the music recording for *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1963), to which Zavattini had contributed but which had no wisp of the usual CZ social touch. Diffidently I mentioned this. He agreed vigorously, then pointed to the pile of five or six manuscripts on a corner of his huge desk. Those, he said, were the socially concerned films that he and De Sica could not get financed. So....

On the walls of his apartment were dozens of framed tiny paintings, some no larger than a postcard. (You can see a selection of them on the jacket of his autobiography, *Scenes from a Cinematic Life*, published by Prentice-Hall in 1970.) I asked about them, and he said that when he first came to Rome, he went to an art gallery and was struck

by a certain painter's work, but couldn't afford to buy anything. He wrote to the painter, told him how much money he could spend, and asked what he could get for it. The painter sent him a postcard-size painting, executed for him. Since then, as time and fortune advanced, Zavattini had written to all the painters he admired, including some big names, and had commissioned postcard-size paintings. Hence this collection.

He was a unique, nubbly, wry character. I presume to hope that these comments will serve as a small note of thanks from all of us who are indebted to him.

### **Valerio Zurlini (1926–1982)**

In September 2000, the Film Society of Lincoln Center presented a retrospective of the films of Valerio Zurlini. The response "Who?" is precisely why this program made me sad. Zurlini was one of the Italian directors who flourished after World War II. Of that group he is one of the least known in the United States. I had previously seen only one Zurlini film, *The Girl with the Suitcase* (1961), with Claudia Cardinale, which was included in this recent series. Of the other seven features in the group, I was able to see four. And they made me sad. The subjects were somber enough, true, but my sadness came because this retrospective could do little more than return Zurlini to obscurity.

His talent need not be exaggerated in order to heighten the pity: he is not in the top rank of Italian directors. His range is astonishing, from the pre-

dictable neorealism and existential suspension of the era to the sheerly political and the daringly symbolic, but his screenplays are not as consistently fine as his filmmaking. He was a director of audacity and—particularly—of vision. The first two minutes of *Family Diary* (1962), which was shot by the excellent Giuseppe Rotunno, establish Zurlini's impatience with assembly-line framing, his ability to see for himself yet without freakishness. His actors, notably Marcello Mastroianni in *Family Diary* and Alain Delon in *The Professor* (1972), are totally subscribed to his films.

Three Zurlini films were available on video in America in September 2000, and I hope they were sought out. But, after this retrospective, he surely sank back into the shadows from which he and so many other talented others (several of them remembered here) deserve to be rescued. Of course, there simply isn't room enough in the light for them all, but that fact doesn't make their obscurity less of a loss. The same goes for the six films recalled above (however flawed a few of them may be), and whose titles are worth repeating: *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, *The Lady without Camelias*, *The Leopard*, *Mafioso*, *The Organizer*, and *Henry IV*.

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# Everything is Beautiful at the Ballet

The Teardrop variation has to be postponed

until she learns the steps,

stops sobbing

because she found her feet.

Weeping Beauty no longer sleeps.

But will she dance?

She was shod by Prince Hemlock

with toe shoes.

They fit.

She won't wear them.

Kill time (no don't!)

for now with

Waltz of the Walking Wounded

—full audience participation

balled tissues falling from the sky

like snowflakes.

Mood music

John Cage, not Tchaikovsky.

The Woe Queen, Sugar Plum's cousin,

will twirl again.

She just needs a little time.

# Ink Sac

Vision blurred as white  
specters surround my body  
with unprecedented expressions.  
Some insipid, others wicked,  
extending ghastly appendages,  
my sunken body paralyzed in  
a gloomy void, belly of Man.  
One final gasp and I drown  
crowded with stain, tempted  
to give in to the compulsion  
of the world and its depravity.  
Spurred out into the planes of  
humankind, pure melanin. Alive.

# Crew of Sparrows

12.27.18

8.26 a.m.

32 degrees

Pressed into the tangle by caution, a massive crew of sparrows offhandedly anoints daybreak with a collective cacophony of joy, the narrative of the chilled dawn. Now that I've filled the feeders I'll walk down to the frozen pond thinking of ducks, of heron, though I know better.

# Night Heron

Twin red eyes glow  
in the heart of the palmettos,  
watching me watch them.

The fat pine fire burns  
more for effect tonight  
than any need. An image  
reflecting an image.

I'll sing you a song, a ditty  
a sailor might. And hope  
a chorus of croakers joins in.

Together we'll draw you  
from your hiding place,  
and dance among the stars,  
drifting out in the glittering gulf,  
drifting further and further  
from the darkened shore.

# Wake-Resilience

## *Rising*

At my mother's beach house, we closed the metal  
blinds before bed, we were cautious,

and the children fell asleep before I did, as I lay  
listening to the seething rocks in the  
hints of moonlight,

and then in the middle of the night a thundering  
reverberation startled me awake,

though only I woke of all of us, and unlike the  
forgotten dreams on either side of it, I  
remembered the shock

in the morning, and walking out to the porch, I  
found the glass of one patio pane shat-  
tered,

as my son and daughter said I would, and I  
thought—this is an early visitation of  
climate change—

the sea is angry, the sea is burning with anger,  
you can be good and still rouse the anger  
of nature,

you learn the right way long after you have be-  
gun to play, to play this instrument that  
gives you not music but life.

*Casa Arcoiris, Tijuana*

The superego is shaped by fear and, I think, the  
conscience is shaped by kindness,  
though they are both less like the sound of the  
ocean—present, constant—than they are  
like an Aeolian harp,  
the Romantic invention that made music in  
window frames as the wind passed over  
strings  
connected to a resounding wood-chamber, mak-  
ing an effort at beauty out of the energy  
of chance;  
we find our way towards goodness like a little  
globe of water wandering down a pane  
of glass,  
like refugees, allowed to pass into goodness by  
grace, and seeking shelter under worn  
tarps  
in the storms that constitute our failures, and the  
schools for our children that are like the  
sublime,  
the sublime we have survived, that has changed  
us, that has saved us, that has told us we  
are always arriving,  
even when we know, too, that we are always wait-  
ing, that time is a grace note, that time is  
a storm.

*Coda*

My daughter wrote a song on her ukulele about  
walking in the almost wholly concrete  
bed

of the creek that runs through our neighbor-  
hood, Santiago Creek, and she shared it  
on Instagram,

though now she has forbidden us, her family, a  
year later, to make reference to that song  
in any way,

embarrassed as she is by its innocence, and it  
seems to me that in a literal sense we  
have no innocence,

we have been like picadors to nature, but that  
music can create a sphere in which we  
are innocent,

in which, even, we can be surprised by the over-  
whelming evidence of our innocence—

a secret finally shared, a letter from a friend de-  
voured with our eyes while the envelope  
burns.

# Risk Management

The first time Bob saw the bear cub at the office was when he opened the bottom drawer of the file cabinet. The bear cub was lying on its back among the folds of a quilted blanket like an infant in a crib, looking up at him with cheerful brown eyes. The bear cub wiggled its meaty little paws at him.

“Whoa,” Bob said, quickly shutting the drawer.

Bob immediately forgot why he had opened the file cabinet. Was he getting something out or putting something in? He had no idea. By the time he walked back to his desk and sat down, he was beginning to talk himself out of the idea that a bear cub was occupying a bottom file drawer in the document storage room at his non-descript place of employment, which happened to be an insurance company specializing in fire and flood policies.

“Whatcha doin’ there Bob?” Cindy asked from her desk next to Bob’s. She wrote the policies. Bob kept track of them. They’d been a work team for a decade.

“I think I need to get a file,” Bob said.

“Okey-dokey, if you think so,” Cindy replied, her skilled fingers blurring over the computer keys.

Bob walked slowly back to document storage and stood before the file cabinet again. He studied the bottom drawer, which seemed to be moving in and out a fraction of an inch

every few seconds, almost as if it were breathing. The drawer was labeled, “T - Z.” Bob couldn’t think of a word for bear cub that started with T, U, V, W, X, Y, or Z. Bob had always believed that things belonged in their appropriate places.

Bob sighed. “What the hell,” he whispered as he opened the drawer. Sure enough, the bear cub was still there, still wiggling its big bear cub toes and looking at him with what he could only interpret as affection. The bear cub was cute, no doubt, but Bob wasn’t ready to return its affection just yet. Bob knew that even cute things could be dangerous. Bob had seen many situations where being cute could be used as an excellent disguise.

Bob looked around the document storage room. He was alone with the bear cub. The small staff of coworkers were in the main office ten steps through the doorway. He couldn’t very well call out, “Hey, who left the bear cub in the file cabinet?” This wasn’t a moldy sandwich in the office mini-fridge.

Bob wasn’t angry about the bear cub. He wasn’t even quite afraid of the bear cub. The best word to describe the feelings the bear cub brought up in Bob was *suspicion*. He was suspicious of this bear cub. He questioned its bear cub purpose and its bear cub motives and even its bear cub existence. What right did this bear cub have to interrupt his work day? It was almost lunch, and

he didn't want to waste his lunch half-hour dealing with some random bear cub.

Bob got down on one knee suspiciously. Cautiously would also be an accurate term. This was a wild animal, after all. What if its mother happened to be in another drawer somewhere close by? Mama bears were most dangerous when someone got between them and their bear cub. Bob had read that on the internet.

The bear cub watched Bob's kneeling approach. It seemed pleased to have company after being alone in the drawer for... for how long? Bob didn't remember the last time he had opened this particular drawer, and he was the one who did most of the filing.

The bear cub gurgled deep in its little bear cub throat, almost as if it were trying to imitate a grown bear's roar but didn't know how yet. Bob had to admit that the attempted roar was the cutest thing the bear cub had done so far, but he still wasn't ready to give the bear cub the benefit of the doubt.

"Hey, Cindy?" Bob called out, just loud enough for Cindy but not the rest of the office drones to hear. "You got a second? Something to show you back here."

The small but insistent sound of Cindy's fingers striking the keys stopped. "Coming," she called out. Cindy's heels clicked on the tile floor, and the alert little bear cub craned its neck a bit to look around Bob for the source of the sound.

Bob could see Cindy's shadow move across the floor and touch the bear cub. She put a hand on Bob's shoulder.

"Oh," she said. "You found Little Honey!"

"Little Honey?" Bob asked.

"Yeah," Cindy said. "That's what I call him."

Bob craned his neck to look up at Cindy. The overhead light haloed her face. Her husband drove a florist's delivery van and often stopped in just to give her a random rose and a quick kiss. She was pretty, Bob knew, in a grown-up-girl-next-door-at-the-next-desk kind of way. But at that moment, backlit by humming florescents, she looked like a literal angel right out of an art book that featured nothing but angels. Or maybe a television show about angels Bob had once seen as a child. The point is, she was glowing.

"Seriously?" Bob asked. "Little Honey Bear?"

"It's a good name for him, don't you think?" Cindy said, her words floating down to Bob as if from heaven.

Bob looked back at the bear cub. Little after-images from Cindy's angel light danced around the bear cub in Bob's field of vision. He had to admit that Little Honey Bear was a good name for the furry creature in the file drawer.

Bob started to stand, not the easiest maneuver considering his bad knee. Cindy grasped his arm and helped him up. Her grip was stronger than he would have expected. Once he was upright, Cindy kept her hand wrapped around his arm. Bob found her grip reassuring.

"How long has he been here?" Bob asked.

"Not long," Cindy replied. "A few years."

“A few years?” Bob marveled. “I file things here ten times a day. How have I missed seeing him?”

“Well,” Cindy explained, “he moves from drawer to drawer now and then. And not everyone can see Little Honey right away. Sometimes it takes a few tries.”

The two of them looked down at Little Honey like parents watching their first-born child.

“Who else knows about him?” Bob asked.

“Janice in HR. Phil in IT. And LaDonna in marketing,” Cindy said. “And now you, too, which makes me happy.”

“Why is he here?” Bob asked.

“No one really knows for sure, but I have a theory,” Cindy said. “I think he’s here to make us feel better about the world. It’s tough sometimes, what with work and pain and death. But Little Honey can take us away from that for a few moments each day. That’s his gift to us.”

Bob shook his head. He was as amazed with what Cindy was saying as he was with the idea that there was a bear cub named Little Honey in the bottom file drawer.

The two coworkers watched the bear cub for a while, and then Cindy said, “Wait here a second.” She released her friendly grip on his arm and went to a cupboard on the far wall. From her tiptoes, she reached into the back corner of an upper shelf. She found a zip-lock bag and extracted something that looked like a doggie biscuit. As she put the biscuit in Bob’s hand and closed his fingers around it, Little Honey watched the exchange with intense interest.

“If Little Honey lets you give him a treat, he’ll be your friend,” Cindy said to Bob. Then her voice lowered to a whisper. “But if he bites you, you’ll never see him again.”

The bear cub’s eyes moved from Bob’s treat-holding hand to his face and back again. Bob drew in a deep breath and held it as he let the treat slip from his palm to a loose grip between his thumb and fingertip. Little Honey’s deep, dark eyes widened. Did he want to eat the treat? Or did he want to eat Bob’s arm? Bob had no way to know for sure.

Bob, (Robert James Mann, Jr.)—age forty-one, married seventeen years to his college sweetheart, two teenaged kids, homeowner, the beginning of a bald spot, mows his own lawn, drives a six-year-old Honda Civic, B.S. in Business with a minor in Accounting and twelve credits toward an MBA he’ll never finish—had never been a man prone to fantasy. He filed documents by day and spent quiet evenings with his family. He slept soundly and usually didn’t remember his dreams. On weekends, he enjoyed quiet drives with his wife or going to the kids’ sports events where he cheered earnestly at half volume.

Bob wasn’t the kind of guy who took risks. But he slowly lowered the treat toward Little Honey, bending slightly at the waist, smiling, and cooing, “iiiiice bear, goood bear,” ready for whatever might happen next.

# Serpentine Route

Just before the rattler struck  
my ankle, hard bone cushioned with  
too little fat, my pounding heart reasoned  
I'd always headed this very direction.

Nothing could change destiny.  
Not looking over my shoulder into the abyss.  
Not whim, sudden change of plans.

Not last season's forewarning,  
a striped snake drooping overhead  
like tossed garland. Nor the time I warned  
a friend as we hiked Big Bend.

*Stop, listen!* He froze mere inches  
from a Mohave rattler gracing his path. Or  
when at ten I stepped in my brother's

footsteps through wild grass.  
My leg froze above his right imprint  
when without warning he turned and shot  
a moccasin poised to strike my calf.

His rescue merely delaying this.  
Regardless of my detours, walkabouts,  
false starts, cowering, all steps led

to a striking companion in my sleeping bag.

# Islander

Tonight, a visitor, one of the night-flounderers came  
to wake me for the third time this week,

banging on my overturned skiff's hull. They know  
I won't speak to them, but they come with their lights.

They come with their spears. Drunken. In the morning  
the beach will be swollen with the bludgeoned bodies

of stingrays and bloated fish heads. And sand sharks  
drowned in air. The men will have abandoned the beach.

Their boats will be gone until the next weekend.  
Unless the rains and warring winds come. Let them come.

# Eulogy

Every inch of my drained soul  
Found a crack of a soft home,  
In a dream I wanted to stay forever  
Your shoulder seemed like a change in the weather;  
Between sleep and awake  
A warmth forbade my skin to ache...  
Of the body once raped brutally,  
I could never thought I'd had a eulogy.

# April 22, 1994—For Linda

I pull the single thread  
from the black fabric  
and it begins to unweave  
the night from my life.

I stop pulling, and follow  
the thread with half-opened eyes  
to see the uncertain pattern  
that has long been too certain.

I follow the thread until  
I look up from the dark cloth.  
And your amber eyes  
confront me with new mystery—

how to weave what was single  
into a bright new cloth together.

# Toxic

I sip from your poison  
And I have never felt more alive  
I feel a storm coming in the distance  
But with a blindfold on, into the ocean I dive

Your dark eyes  
Staring into mine  
You make what is toxic  
Feel like the divine

You caused me so much pain  
Left me drowning in shame  
And somehow through it all  
Made me feel like I was the one to blame

I thought you were wise  
I thought you were strong  
But everything I thought  
Turned out to be wrong

But I swam through the waves  
And made it to the shore  
Leaving you behind  
Trying to take from me even more

Like a flower I have grown  
And now I am the one who is wise  
I see you for who you are  
As you take off your enchanting disguise

The storm has ended  
The sun has risen  
I am at peace now  
And you are forgiven.

# Bad News from the Lithosphere

In the kitchen, what are you doing  
busy with hands, glasses, a chorus  
of silver? Outside  
a quartzite darkness, cloud rags tattering  
and below, stones nest  
on the ocean bottoms, in the stream beds,  
and above stones spin in the planet spheres  
without oxygen. And you in the kitchen  
laying the table, setting out the crystal  
and the water slides over the boulders,  
the snowfields are hissing, the moonlight  
conspires and all of impassive Nature  
waits.

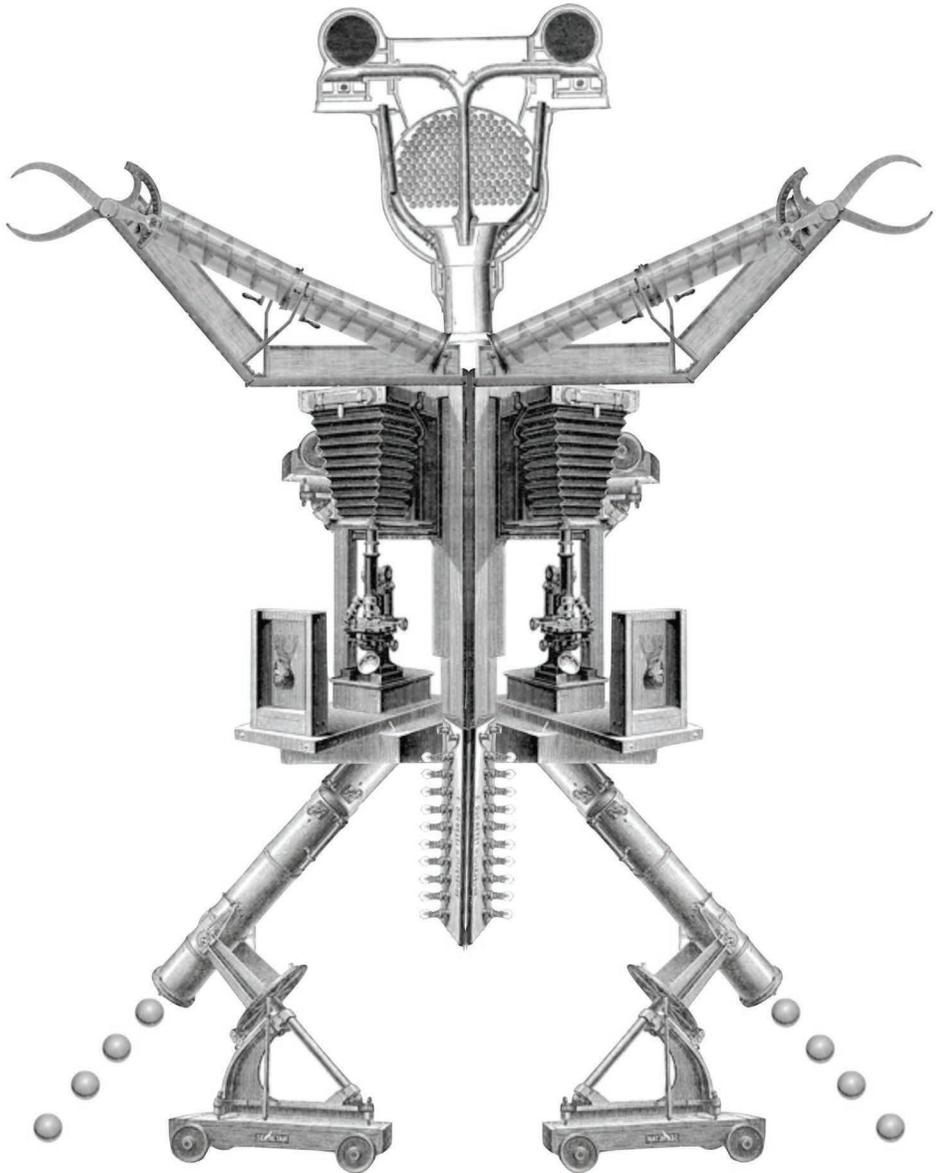
# of bones and breath

I, my skull,  
am dark.  
Air  
swirls  
in and out,  
near lips  
shut  
like my eyes  
to seal me  
inside  
what I am  
—bare life whispered  
in shoulders  
breasts  
that rise and fall  
to silence  
black as ice  
on frozen  
fish,  
me.

The horns,  
bells,  
scrapes  
and clashes  
that mask  
primal breathing  
wait  
outside  
with daylight  
hours  
while I  
ride  
the spine  
from sacral orange  
into blue,  
towards my  
indigo.

I see bones,  
breath,  
small pieces  
of the universe  
so still  
it scares me.  
I wonder  
where  
the people  
are.

# The Flirtatious Dance of Memory



# Sniffling in St. John's

A North Atlantic autumn on  
the Avalon Peninsula brings  
breezes that blow and  
lick the eyelashes of chilled  
Newfoundlanders plodding along the harbor.  
As the brawny bearded Millennial glides into  
the glassy vestibule of Scotiabank,  
he litters tears in a twisted pattern  
past deadpan cashpoints.  
Is he grieving a grim balance in a  
Powerchequing account or the departure of the  
dreadlocked harpist who dumped him?  
Or are stinging eyes pricked by particles in the wind  
merely mimicking an emotional meltdown?

# The Cheering Up

On the night Cat planned to fuck Buddy so she could try to get pregnant, he managed to get himself arrested on charges of aggravated rape. After the attack, for some bone-headed reason, he just sat there, waiting for the cops. He didn't even try to get away. What further infuriated Cat was that he didn't bother texting or calling her. She had to find out from the news on TV. You'd think he could have told her himself. He owed her that much.

Three months before, they had moved back to their hometown in Indiana because Chicago was no place to raise a kid. Too much crime, it was said. Too much crime? Like raping some girl isn't one of the worst crimes?

The only thing that made sense to Cat, when she wracked her brain trying to figure it out, was that Buddy never really wanted a family. Instead of saying so, he had made sure to get himself sent away. Well, now he had several decades of time to serve while congratulating himself for his narrow escape—from her.

Cat was temporarily living with her mother in a trailer park. She had been house-hunting for

something with three bedrooms. Now, with Buddy in the Federal Corrections Facility in Terre Haute, that was on hold. Instead of going to open houses, she decided to hang out with her old high school friend, Glee. They could compare notes on fucked-up boyfriends. Glee was a single parent also living with her mother. But at least Glee's boyfriend had plugged her *before* his incarceration in deportation jail. She had a child, now.

Cat drove over in the afternoon. When Glee opened the door, she was holding Joe, her son. Cat knew about the toddler. What she did not know was that Glee was also the care-taker of her elderly step-grandfather, Jack, who grunted instead of speaking.

"Welcome to my world," Glee said.

The house smelled like piss. Both Joe and Jack wore diapers. Jack was seated in a recliner. A side table held a tray of crusted-over mashed food of some sort. There was a sofa, a couple more chairs, and a coffee table. Joe's Sippy cup, crayons, toy trucks, and child harness covered its surface. On another side table was an iPad and papers. Jack grunted once every few seconds, and Joe

shrieked at the TV, tuned to a cartoon channel.

“Geez,” Cat said.

“Yeah. Be careful what you wish for,” Glee smirked. “I get to stay home with Joe by staying with Jack. His insurance policy pays me to take care of him. But as you can see, the house is a disaster. Hey, why don’t you have a nice conversation with Jack while I put Joe down for a nap? You can sit next to him.”

“A conversation with Jack? How? He doesn’t speak.”

“Just pretend he’s a boyfriend. They don’t listen, and they don’t say anything you want to hear.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Cat said, thinking of her life in Chicago with Buddy. Even though she told him a thousand times that she wanted a family, he always acted like it was a big surprise. By the time he would get out of Federal Corrections, he would be an old man. It would be too late for her to have kids with him. She could kick herself for staying with him for so long.

Glee returned without Joe.

“He’s good for an hour,” she said, sitting down in the vacant chair. “So what did you do in Chicago?”

“Whoring.”

Jack grunted loudly.

“Yeah? What was that like?”

“It paid the bills. We had a nice apartment by a park. Now I’m living in a trailer with my Mom. What are the papers on that table for?” She asked, changing the subject.

“I’m taking an on-line course. I started before Joe. I’ve got one semester of college under my belt. But it’s really slow going. You can’t imagine how much time it takes to care for a child and this old dumb-ass.”

Jack grunted loudly again.

Glee turned to him. “Just die already.” Then turning back to Cat, she said, “Jack and I are a match made in heaven, as you can see.”

As the conversation continued, Cat wound up tearfully telling Glee about Buddy, how he had done a terrible thing, how he had betrayed her, how furious she was, how she didn’t know what to do with her life now that he had messed it up.

“I think you need some cheering up, girlfriend,” Glee said. “Let’s go hear a band in a bar tonight. I can go late, after Joe’s asleep. My mom will be home from work. She’ll watch him.”

“Maybe.”

“Only thing is, we’ll have to take Jack.”

“What? How?”

“My mom is tired when she gets home. I can’t saddle her

with both Joe and Jack. I can't leave unless I take him with me. I'll tell my mom that I'm visiting you and your mom. She wouldn't be happy if she knew he was going with me to a bar."

That night, Cat met Glee in the parking lot behind the bar. The first job was to wrestle Jack out of the car. Once standing, he was given his walker, and the slow trudge around to the front door of the bar began. Because of Jack's age and disability, they were allowed to skip the line and go inside without waiting. Another piece of luck was that a booth was available. Jack sat on the outer edge. Glee ordered a shot and a beer for each of the three of them.

"Drink up," she told Jack.

Cat wondered what the alcohol would do if Jack took medicine. She downed her shot before dread could overtake her. The band warmed up for its first set. Glee was glancing around the room, probably looking for the unaccompanied men. The thought came to Cat that Glee might stick her with Jack, if she had an opportunity to go off with some guy. Holy hell! If Cat didn't act, she'd wind up taking care of Jack all night. As soon as the band played its first booming chords, she got up and danced away from the booth.

Thinking she would avoid Jack and force Glee to stay with

him, Cat made her way to the pack at the bar and ordered another shot. She found herself standing next to someone who began shouting to her over the music.

"Hi. Are you alone?" He asked.

He was scrawny, with pimples on his forehead.

"How old are you? Fourteen? Who let you in here?"

"I graduated. I may look like a kid, but I'm mature for my age."

"Right. Mature enough to score a fake ID. Whatever. I don't care. I just broke up with my boyfriend."

"Wanna dance?"

Cat danced with the boy without looking back at the booth. If she could stay upright for the full set, it might be safe to go back to Jack and Glee. The next song was a slow one. The boy grabbed her and held her in a tight clutch. He was stronger than he looked. They swayed to the music. She was reminded of Buddy. Up until now, she had been too pissed to miss the fucker. But right then, in a sensual embrace with another person, she understood how lonely she was, how disappointed. Federal Corrections was two hours away. She might never see Buddy again. What would be the point, anyway? She cried. The boy wiped her face with a handkerchief. She wept on his shoulder.

The song ended. The boy had her hand in his and did not let go. Cat, recovering, looked around. Another number was starting with a faster tempo. Suddenly, she was aware of Glee next to her, dancing along-side some guy. Glee winked at her as the boy whispered something in her ear, but the music was too loud to hear him. Glee was trying to hand her something. A pill. Ecstasy. Cat shook her head “no.” Glee shrugged and put the pill into her own mouth.

Cat could feel another crying jag coming on. The boy asked if she wanted an Oxy. Maybe that would calm her down. She nodded “yes” to the Oxy. The boy disappeared for a few minutes, then reappeared with pills. She accepted one. He handed her another shot as well. They continued to dance. She continued to cry, on and off. The boy steered her over to a corner where she could hear him. He asked her name.

“Cat,” she said.

“Little Kitty, will you let me take care of you? I know how.”

He put his hand on the crotch of her jeans. They swayed to the music. The boy sucked her neck.

Why did Buddy have to rape that girl? Cat had to practically beg him if she wanted to fuck. How could he be more into someone else

than her? Wasn't she pretty enough for him?

“Why, Buddy? Why wasn't I enough for you?” she said, out loud.

But the person messing with her wasn't Buddy, she realized. It was the boy.

There was a noise on the other side of the room, near the booth where Jack was supposed to be sitting. A crowd had gathered. Cat made her way back, pushing through. Jack was standing up, bracing himself with his walker. The crowd cheered him on. With effort, he lifted each leg and stomped down hard, with an audible grunt each time. The floor rattled. He was dancing. Shots were being handed to him. Without pausing, he deftly swallowed each in one gulp, then dropped the shot glass on the floor. To the crowds' delight, he had stomped on a couple of the glasses, shattering them.

Where was Glee? Cat could not see her. She did not know what to do.

“Buddy! Buddy! Help him,” she called to the boy, who was right behind her.

“You're so beautiful. I'm really into you,” he said into her ear.

As if in slow motion, Cat saw Jack fall. He stomped, and as his foot came down, he twisted to the right. The walker flew away from him. He buckled and both feet slid

forward. His right shoulder and arm hit the ground first. Then his head banged down heavily, bouncing, followed by the lower half of his body. He rolled onto the glass. Now he was on his back, still grunting. His startled eyes stared at the ceiling.

The crowd shrieked. Then silence, followed by a scream. It was Glee, edging forward as the crowd parted for her.

“Oh My God! Oh My God,” she kept yelling.

The band stopped playing. The house lights went up. The boy tried to tug Cat away. She was aware of several people speaking to the 911 dispatcher. Everyone else just stood there, quietly and ashamed. The bartenders had come onto the floor. They stared at Jack. One squatted down and put his hand on the old man’s chest.

“Don’t worry, Man. You’ll be okay. An ambulance will take you to the ER. They will take care of you there. You’ll make it,” he said soothingly, as the siren could be heard approaching.

Two EMTs came bustling into the bar with their stretcher and kits. Immediately, they took Jack’s vitals. They asked him his name.

“He can’t speak,” Cat said.

“Are you with him?”

“Not exactly. I came with his care-taker. Over there,” she said, nodding toward Glee.

Quickly, Jack was hoisted onto the stretcher and wheeled out to the ambulance. Glee followed. Before she left, she turned to Cat.

“Remember. If my mom asks, this happened at your place. Please.”

“I got it. Yes. My place,” Cat said.

She knew she should offer to go with Glee. The band continued with the set. The lights dimmed. The boy held her, and she danced with him. It did not seem possible to break away. She would let Buddy decide if she should stay or go. All she wanted was for him to be into her again.

The bartender swept up the glass. Somehow she had another shot, another Oxy. She danced with both arms on Buddy’s shoulders. He was kissing her, on her face, her eyelids, her mouth. His hand was rubbing her crotch.

“Buddy. Don’t leave me again.”

“Come with me. I’ll take care of you,” Buddy said.

“Where? Show me.”

Buddy took her hand and led her to the exit. Outside, he held her close, kissing her as he walked her to his car. She kept asking him not to leave her. She clung to him, stumbling, crying.

In his car, she dozed. She and Buddy would get married. They

would buy a house. Three bedrooms. One for them, and the other two for their children. A boy and a girl. They would get a dog. A cat. Recliners for the living room. A big TV. A lawn mower. Buddy would find a regular job.

It would be perfect.

# Party City

Apropos of nothing I am thinking  
about “the death fall,” 40 feet  
onto a hard surface like concrete.  
The abruptness and the speed,  
Walter Matthau dropping  
like a sack at the end of *Charade*,  
maybe time enough to think,  
“I’m so fucked,” and scream.  
There are other falls, endless ones,  
where every foot is death,  
but the surface is always receding.

On the phone screen  
A.G. Barr’s pixilated head  
settles like a jowly mountain  
of green-gray putty on his shoulders  
thick-framed glasses  
an ill-made disguise  
or like those frames added  
to humanize the empty, eyeless void  
of a Muppet.  
Rosenstein, behind and away,  
is the orange of a Muppet,  
and all eye, lid upon lid upon lid.

I watch their mouths moving  
on mute, a kind of terror-flapping,  
a black hole, a silent  
scream. Yes, this is the death fall,  
with no end. Something  
brushes up against me,  
it is a woman  
in the morning crush, in a smart  
suit, business casual. What strikes  
me are two overstuffed bags

held tight in her hand,  
they are unduly light, almost  
floating, the bags read  
PARTY CITY,  
they are metallic balloons,  
and if she loosened her grip  
even a little, they would fall up  
past Grand Central's flag  
all the way up,  
to the vaulted dome.

# The Context of February

I wake to the despair  
of a marriage  
not married,  
of a hunger  
with the only  
satiation  
bitter food.

I walk under  
a darkening  
February sky,  
mumbling against  
myself and what  
I've done and what  
I've loved.

A sudden V of geese  
cry overhead,  
their coordinated winging  
silencing me.  
And I thank the sky  
for telling me  
I am not important.

# Nova's Poem

all that summer we play  
planet of the apes

we're at their farm  
and because they have the horses  
my cousins get to be the apes  
my brothers are the astronauts  
and me I play the long-haired  
mute girl named nova

the way the movie goes  
astronauts land on a strange planet  
ruled by brainy apes  
the planet turns out to be earth  
but two thousand years later  
after maniacs blow it up

a talking doll and a chunk  
of the statue of liberty  
half buried in the beach  
are all that's left of a world  
the astronauts thought  
would tassel forever

the way our game goes  
we run through the high grass  
of the meadow  
the astronauts and I  
until we're caught by the apes  
on their horses and taken to the barn  
where the astronauts are threatened  
with lobotomy unless they can prove  
they have some skill the apes need  
the astronauts are good at sneaking  
cookies and landing a hand-held radio  
so the apes can listen to the ball game  
me I'm good at keeping secrets  
and the secret that summer  
is that the apes' dad is selling  
their farm to city planners

what I know that the apes don't know  
is that very soon all of this will be gone  
the meadow the horses the woods  
the barn the apple orchard  
and some pleasant white hens  
mute as I am let me tell you  
a farm scraped away to make room  
for a shopping mall is one kind of hurt  
but there are others

we play planet of the apes  
all summer long at their farm  
because it is fun  
and the way my brother  
the one they call bright eyes screams  
it's a madhouse a madhouse  
is funny as hell  
until one day

we're tired of being caught  
escaping and being caught again  
one day we refuse to run  
we rise up against the apes on their horses  
we pelt them with rocks  
we hit them with sticks  
the betrayal catches them by surprise  
I see it in their eyes  
and then it's over

from the dumb uproar of this game  
of apes and astronauts fighting  
from the meadow grass  
where I stand mute  
I watch the apes on horses  
retreating into the trees

and one riderless horse following behind  
keening from its heart

# Last Voyage of the Green Skiff

The equinox is upon us  
and the wind, confused, shifts  
but does not heed me.  
Nearly noon, I reach the island  
and its convention of insects.  
Almost no wind now.  
No place to hide except in water.  
I'm their prime target. My flesh  
their bounty.

More birds today than I've ever seen,  
all expecting rain, although the sky  
feigns indifference. I set up camp  
before walking to the spring for water.  
On the way a snake lies across the path,  
drying itself after shedding.  
It ignores me like a cloud passing  
before the sun. We are respectfully  
wary of one another. I consider, for a moment,  
moving it aside with my walking stick.

For a moment I am cold blooded enough  
to remember the one that bit me, the fever  
that causes my hand to cramp still,  
the journey back to land  
when every wave seemed to push  
against my oars, against my hope.  
As I step across the black path  
of his vision the first cold drops  
strike my back. A west wind sends us  
our wet and separate ways.

# The Dogwood Tree

Because you're young, you make excuses.  
You're nineteen & lovely. He's twenty-nine.  
Married with a penchant for sunsets & cigars.

He's your first love. You pretend you don't know better.  
You're broken. It's summer. The mouth is ripe for fruit.  
You need to slake your thirst. Whatever the price.

You devour a peach whole. The dogwood tree papers  
the yard in petals. Because you're night blooming  
you open like a well-mannered jessamine vine.  
A duvet of earth blankets your spine.

~

It's harvest moon. Time to move on. Grapes are ready  
for collecting. You summon Selene, goddess of moonlight.  
Your days are draped in sea, sky & sun.

You root like the dogwood. Flower in all those dark  
& spindly places. You branch into sky. Forever young,  
you ignite the world with yourself.

# Dead

is dark  
—black ice  
that never melts.  
You  
do not stay  
inside this word  
but float to  
me  
in layered memories  
that arrest  
then slide  
away  
like years  
fall  
off a clock.  
You come from  
yesterday,  
my childhood,  
the uncertain space  
carved between  
mother and  
grown up  
child.  
I must find  
another  
word.

# The One There Behind Me

I wear pendant like a tag, the one  
he gave me, wanting to be his. I think  
of him and message, like missing  
is mutual, like I always do, wearing  
necklaces while loving the road its  
melancholy and changing light. Plenty of  
space in those between of  
reflection with far away eyes when  
scent or wind direction stir  
up thoughts that drift  
to you.

In place at the right time too many  
times for me to resist  
anchoring in you. Nothing you'd welcome,  
but you'd not deny me fantasies of  
you keeping me awake across I-70,  
I-10, down the lovely I-81 and dreadful  
I-95 I loved for bringing me home  
to you.

Nowhere near where I'd head or return  
now; uprooted, you displaced us both.  
Seems my home lies in the way  
you rub your chin in thought and exhale  
your "yeah" when agreeing after  
deliberation. I finger my gemstone, pull  
thoughts back to him, wrestle  
to lay down short-term memories.  
Fancy him the love of my life with  
some qualms because much  
of the junket is past.  
Through most of it I held  
to you.

# Hunger-Song

Mother was found  
dead in bed

wearing Revlon Red Velvet  
shade thirty-two.

On the radio Nina Simone  
sang *Everything Must Change*.

*Nothing stays the same.*  
*Cause that's the way of time.*

Spring is here again.  
The crocus blooms first

a show-off  
in purples & yellows.

I am sluggish river  
meandering in lack.

Morning brings sparrow's  
hunger-song hoisting

the fog in my head. His language holy,  
an echo of the native song in myself.

My heart-sore lifts—  
swells luminous swells lodestar.

# Lost in Darwin

it is that kind of town  
to just go slack and empty  
to be nobodies in particular  
and by that notion  
more specifically ourselves  
where the world's largest ball of twine  
sits permanently parked  
beneath the water tower  
twine made from the same roughage we are  
animal gut  
volcanic ash  
and the marzipany murk of the lake

who could have imagined  
an infinite thing  
called possibility

for every crash  
there's a near miss  
for every failed ceremony  
a party  
but it's not even breakfast time yet

he parks his truck next to the water tower  
and holds my hand while we listen  
to the world's largest ball of twine  
surge  
sigh  
and rampage  
behaving like our itches and wishes  
careening in some third stanza  
and then grow mute

it symbolizes them  
mirrors them  
freeing us at last  
from the inaccuracy  
of words

# Involuntary Trance



# Getaway

Had the stag timed his bolt  
across the curving blacktop hills snaking the Oregon?  
Or did he flee gunshots amid the whoosh  
and pace of approaching cars?

Was he restless, or hungry  
when his ill-timed sprint was stopped by my  
arguing with my teen daughter about  
what to do with the remainder of  
carefree Vacation Day Four?

Perhaps we had grown bored,  
listless, seeking amusement at each bend in the road.  
The green car blurring beneath dappled  
leafy shadows. Both caught

off-guard by that thud  
as the car swerved, hooves kicking shards that  
freckled our faces. My teen stumbled out  
to find herself touching antlers.  
The buck heaved, shook.

Carefully she brushed glass  
from his forehead as his flat eyes conveyed  
more than she could articulate for  
the rest of the day. Or evening,

as she flailed across the motel pool  
maybe five exhales longer than her lithe body.  
She must have swum each length like  
a thing stuck in a stall, each whack  
on her crown vaguely

surprising, like the drop of blood  
bubbling up on her bit lip. Mechanical arms  
finally limp. While back in our room,  
this mother made calls to

Rent-A-Wreck, a tow truck.  
Boring issues that drained vacation to sepia,  
then black and white. Disruptive death.  
A drink, then more than two,  
the sudden impact,

damage, size of the buck  
swelling. In the pool, my child's spine stretched  
then compressed, neck a bent gooseneck  
lamp. My girl rammed

each end of the pool, replaying  
how his rack met our grill head-on, how  
by sheer force he had stopped us  
short.

# Votive Wood-Smoke

12.20.18

4.22 p.m.

42 degrees

*I've heard it in the chillest land –  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.  
-Emily Dickinson  
-314*

Pungent wood smoke invokes a melancholic joy as dusk overpaints the faded afternoon with darker tones, and numen night-shadows bless the candles in our windows, dabs of grace, messages of hope not seeking crumbs or anything else.

# Grandfather's Dream

Mine is the hunger,  
and mine the thirst,  
mine the weary journey along the unknown path  
mine the back bent by the burden  
of carrying your dreams.

Those dreams you formed in youth  
and packed away with care  
lovingly tended to in steerage  
to deposit upon these western shores  
your portion of the sojourn done.

All these years later expectations made unasked  
and duties assumed unknowing  
I trudge the path you visioned but never saw  
my feet in your boots along the Yankee road.

# Midlife Legacy

It's not so much that I love my Vintage  
'69 tee, my "maybe it'll help me get used  
to being 50" winter tax refund splurge when  
spring hovered at a civilized distance.

I wear it a lot but imagine it a less deliberate  
buy; two bucks at a thrift store and worn  
thin, a comfortable absence of  
shape, maybe  
bought by someone else. Twenty years hence

a twenty-something girl sifts  
through racks, discovers a grey, v-neck  
"Vintage 69" tee. Wears it to an Imagine  
Dragons reunion concert where the band wears

baseball caps and shouts lines a little hoarse.  
She's unsure of the guy she's with until they stop  
at the peak of a bridge en route  
to home and he wraps his arms around her hips.

She meets him like a sunburn.  
Bats dart above. There might be other  
people in the world, but she wouldn't know.  
This guy is everyone and she suddenly loves

them all their fingertips and lips,  
grasps and surprises.  
He wrinkles  
her soft shirt in hand. Kisses deep enough  
to catch her breath when remembering at 50.

# Heart, I'm Sorry I Did This to You

when I open the door to your faithful knocking  
I see now that you are my story  
more than once you have saved the page  
from some hermit's hut

you keep me from doing that thing  
where I turn myself into someone  
who doesn't belong anywhere

my feet were in cement while  
he complimented me long  
and he complimented me lavishly

I am no longer surprised by  
how often I drown

I often wish some epic bird  
would come and carry me away

I am no longer  
fond of newcomers  
I'm on guard  
I almost never cry

forgive me heart  
for not recalling you sooner  
for not swimming to you

I was thinking of someone else

# Collection

The best time to prune them  
is a winter's day when it's  
twenty below or more;  
then the sap is deep.  
But in the springtime it will rise  
throughout the clean trees.  
It is a blood that becomes  
the flat, white blossoms,  
the pea-sized swellings  
on the fruiting spurs beneath them.  
The wind will take the blossoms  
but the fruit remains  
and is sustained.  
Then in the autumn I fill my pail  
with hightops and windfalls,  
giving the bruised fruit to the Labradors,  
and as I trundle another barrowful  
the hundred yards to the kitchen  
where there are apples drying,  
apples cooking, mounds of apple  
peel and core, I ask myself:  
Wolf-River, MacIntosh, and Gravenstein--  
the apples are gathered.  
What of my lost children?

# “How are You?”

It is an invitation to get naked in sunlight  
just like that, while the person who  
asks how you are stands there  
expectant as if it were easy  
to sum up this mess  
in one sentence  
so you unscramble  
your heart in search of the  
word that describes everything  
about you in this moment under your  
smile, shrugged shoulders, quick hello.

# To: Joey

In a rehab ward on a 5250 hold, there are very few things to do. You go to group meetings, see a psychiatrist, eat in the cafeteria, and go to some kind of recreation, like the gym. You only get to do these things if you meet all your marks. On Day One, you aren't allowed off the ward. No cafeteria, no gym, nothing. You have twenty-four hours to prove that you understand and can obey the rules. Longest day of my life, or close to it anyway. (I gazed out the window of my room, told myself to stay in the moment, focus on getting out. I know why they put me here. I shouldn't have stared so long at those little blue pills at 2 am.)

But, I had to make the best of it. I went outside on the ward cigarette breaks every two hours, even though I don't smoke. I just needed to see the sky. I sat by the fence and closed my eyes, no thoughts, no words, only the warmth of the sun on my skin.

Day Two you get to leave the ward to go to supervised activities. We headed to the gym, which was right next to the Eating Disorder ward. I was jealous because those girls had unlimited access to the gym. I didn't understand that since

those girls had no energy anyway, right? Because they weren't eating, right? Shouldn't the gym be available to the people who really need that physical release of tension? I'm the type of person who releases a lot of stress and emotion through physical activity so I play hard and I love it. Anyway, there were basketball hoops and yoga mats and there was even music playing. No music is allowed on the ward, so this was an added bonus.

Our group was co-ed and the girls immediately gravitated to the yoga mats. (Bo-ring!) The guys grabbed basketballs and I grabbed a basketball, too, because I knew the exertion would be good for me. I started shooting and laughing with the guys (me, laughing? That was big.). It was great. I felt so much better running around, chasing the ball. I was disappointed that we didn't get longer exercise time. After 30 minutes, it was back to the ward, back to my room to shower and lay on my bed. Back to staring out the window.

The next day we headed to the gym again and there was this guy, Joey, who was friendly and funny. We started playing one-on-one. I connected with him in group where

he shared things about how he's so funny and can make people laugh, but that it's all fake, on the inside he's staring into the abyss, trapped in darkness where he can't get out. (I could totally relate. That's what put me here. You can't stare so long into that brooding blackness.) Joey was there because he put a gun to his head, an unbelievable intention if you met him anywhere because he comes off as this funny, charming guy. (I may not have had a gun, but my action with the little blue pills was the same and just as surprising to my family.)

Anyway, we had this one-on-one basketball game going and the radio was playing Foster the People, Pumped Up Kicks. (I didn't know that was the name of the song at the time. I found out later.) Being the goofball that he is, Joey started dancing as he dribbled the ball right before he made a shot. Not good dancing, just messing around. Since he made the shot, he decided that we had to dance before shooting the ball. It was hilarious!

I almost forgot where I was and why, lost in the moment, lost in the game. The song, the goofy dancing, knowing that this person is just as scarred and scared as I am, burned an image into my brain, a negative that I take out and look at every time I hear that song. (Did

I mention that I beat him? Yeah. I did. Maybe I'm a better dancer.)

For the rest of my stay, he was around. We sat in the hallway late at night and talked, two people who laugh to keep from crying, who stare into the darkness and wait. Not a romantic connection, but one of suffering, of battling, of understanding, hearing your own thoughts and feelings come out of someone else's mouth.

I don't know what happened to Joey. We didn't exchange information when I left. Rehab isn't the kind of place you want to make lasting relationships, not really. He was there indefinitely, until he knew he could make it if he left. I hope he's not there anymore. I hope he keeps climbing out of that dark pit (like I do). I heard that song on the radio tonight while I was doing dishes and the image of Joey dancing around with the basketball flashed into my brain. Funny how music can remind you of things that lay quietly for a time.

# Black-and-White Photos

Black-and-white photographs—  
leaves of an invisible tree, shed on the road,  
you never walk again,  
until you reach the point—  
nowhere else to go.

Faint smiles, funny bonnet, neatly trimmed  
mustache, tight epauletted uniform, and my dad  
in girls' dress on the unknowable friends' lap.  
Postcards from the other side of the mirror,

cracked long ago in the family apartment,  
where nobody lives, except my dream,  
interrupted abruptly by the alarm. Time to get up,  
go on and open the icebox of oblivion.  
Step into January of life,  
open frozen Jeep door.

# In Good Thunder for a Family Wedding Where the Groom Sings “Purple Rain” to His Bride

He sings with a heartfelt I-don't-know-what, wringing screeches, his eyes closed, his feet half-tapping. Despite swooning good looks, he has always been unlucky in love

yet here he is singing a black man's song  
in a tiny white town named after a Ho-Chunk chief  
about how he never meant to cause her any problems,

about how he only wants to see her laughing,  
which gives piquancy to this moment. It is after all,  
his fourth marriage to a hairdresser two decades

younger than him. He sings as if begging a blessing—  
from God, the church, from us, from his new bride's  
ex-boyfriends with all their apps, tattoos, and beards,

and his new bride, who he will no doubt annoy and fail  
in a thousand different ways, a thousand different times.  
He's up there now singing his heart and his guts out

like a cat caught on a barbed wire fence  
while the priest and the altar boys sweat and shift  
in their long, outdated robes. Everyone watching

and listening, just watching and listening. There's no time  
to think that he's singing well or badly, even when  
he forgets the lines and warbles off-key.

When the last word is done, our applause roars  
to a crescendo, all of us in good clothes,  
who would never stand up like that or sing like that,

not in a thousand years, let alone believe in marriage again  
over and over and over and over, so stupidly, so beautiful,  
none of us, in good clothes, sitting in the pews.

# After Heavy Rains

In one hand the therapist holds a coke can.  
Cradles it in the palm of the other.

*Tell me something about your childhood.*  
I tell her about that time. I was nine.

My mother crouched in a window frame. Ready—  
to jump. Her heart a shattered five & dime trinket.

*Really?* The therapist swings up her legs.  
Criss-crosses them on the tired leather chair.

*Go on*, a quick swig of Coke to quench her thirst  
draining the air & she settles in like hard pelting rain.

My childhood spills on the floor.  
Relay races its secrets to the door.

Outside a monsoon pummels the window.  
I storyboard darkness. Scatter in air like threshed straw.  
Sadness, my child-rooted friend,  
takes my hand. She plucks out the

goldcrest nesting in my hair.  
*Open*, she says & mines the secrets

binding my throat. *Go on, Go on*,  
she whispers, *Stand in the light*.

*Be pink like lilies—*  
*lifting after heavy rains.*

# Human Sacrifice

Farout

where breath implodes  
the wealth is darkness  
coiling innocence  
as if  
Eve's snake never left her lips.

Laughter floats  
piecemeal, a school day  
spent with a bully  
or a worn statue  
surrendering gestures  
to the speed of light.

Glands, sacs, viscera, hindgut  
always slipping  
into love  
never attempting to cope  
with millions  
of recombining honeymoons.  
Any arousal able to strike a pose  
will do  
as will the toy narratives  
churling to where  
the fairy pavement ends  
space a ripening trick.

# Lucidity

I am matter. Nothing but matter.

The thought steeped itself in some sort of truth, feeds off the dusk of my emotion, festers deep within my innards.

I am blessed (cursed) with lucidity. Only a lucid (pretentious) man would conclude that

I won't ever suck the marrow out of life.  
I won't even crack the bone.

Someday, I'll be nothing but a boxed carcass and a thimbleful of memories.

I am a blip in the simulation, a gigabyte of data uploaded to the cloud.

There has to be more.

I am matter, crystallized into tangible moments that are rooted into my brain and played on loop.

cracksmash connection of bat to ball,  
gangsta rap rattling my windows,

puking on the beach with friends,  
family and I baking in Florida sunglow,

lovesure stares, clasped hands,  
all of it flows to ink on page

and suddenly

I am made up of the universe and

I matter.

# Grandfather Remembers

Under leaden late night skies,  
on streets of grey stone and steel,  
the aged and weary men  
walk slowly through fog and rain  
singing the sad songs of home.

As aging exiles they trudge  
through the City they have built  
with their muscle, blood, and toil,  
which despite the long hard years  
never truly will be theirs.

Yet a scent that seems to linger  
as far winds cross the harbor,  
and when the rain falls gently  
sadness is somehow softer.

# October 25, 2001, at 6:45 p.m.

Silence–  
a paper sign on a gray door  
“Room R2”  
in plain red paper  
and plainer black letters  
and an open doorway–

a whiteness of hospital bed  
and hospital sheets–  
the stillness of this body  
mouth wide to hold  
the intubation tube–  
the infinity–

his coal black eyes  
covered with gauze,  
cloth coins for Chiron–  
the belly swollen  
like a small hill  
of red clay–

the empty flesh  
and vacant clothing–  
the surprise  
of being fatherless–  
and, instead of emptiness,  
an overwhelming knowing–

it is as it is  
as it must be  
as it will be  
forever  
in Room R2  
and hereafter–

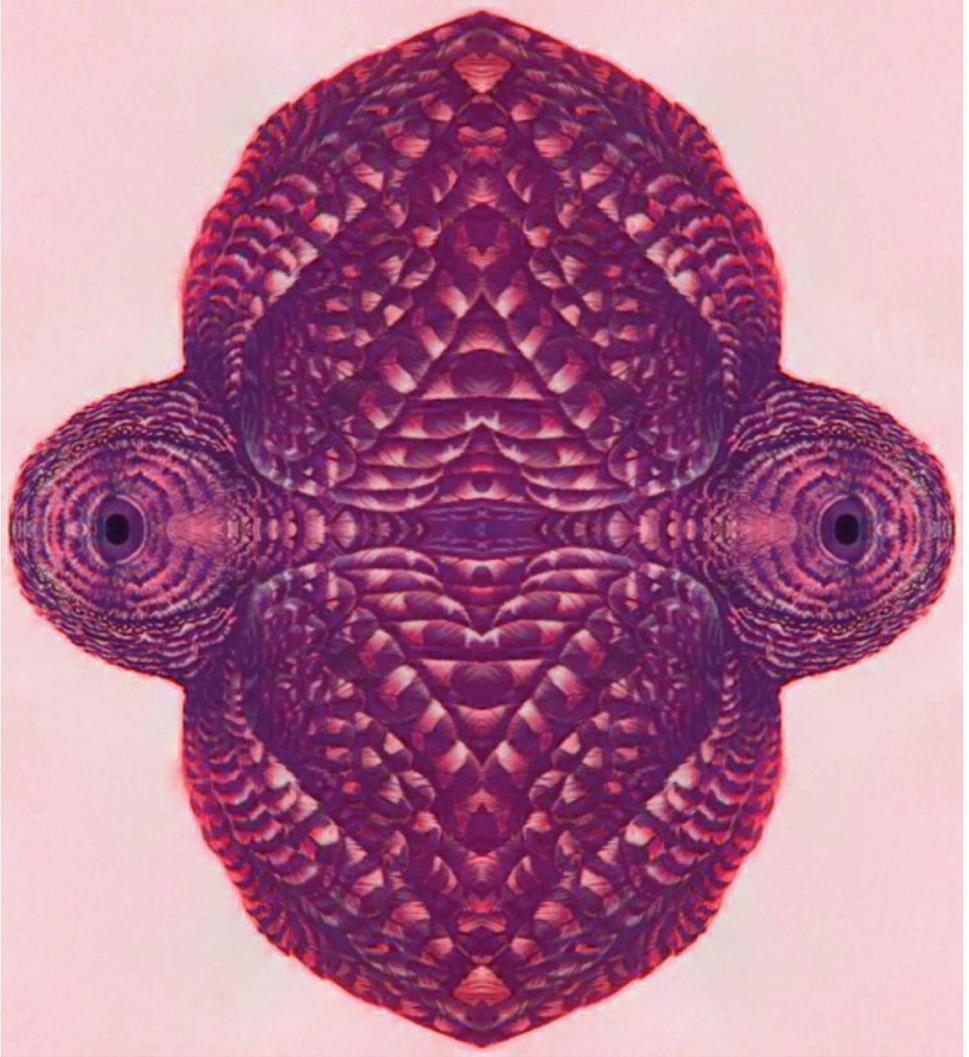
# Midnight Visit, Budapest Delight

I wanted to see the castle  
up close  
the thousand rooms  
lit up for us  
so we could see  
where kings and queens  
lay side by side  
and made themselves  
a home

I wanted to see  
the moat  
where they kept  
strangers out  
(tiny pirates  
jumping over puddles  
come to mind)  
everything is  
silly here  
so serious  
this history  
of strangers

I have come  
across the ocean  
to hold your hand  
and make  
shadows in  
the night  
let's dance with the ghosts  
who slept in those beds  
and wear their memories  
pretend we are royalty  
seal the castle  
raise the bridge and  
close off the moat  
and make ourselves a world tonight  
out of the castle  
and the thousand lights

# Curious As Perfume



# Living Flurries

12.30.18

11.50 a.m.

32 degrees

Patience? Yes. Today I will wait for the flurries.

Observers of the weather say they'll arrive by 9.15 a.m.

None came...I thought. But later, at the pond, I saw that some had, indeed, drifted down and when they touched the ice they lived.



# Witness to a Wreak

Side of the road roots drank the blood,  
rabbits sucking it into quivering noses,  
clouds roller skating on a rickety scalp.

Came the truck and the finagling car,  
transparent driver tongue vibrating  
gnawing song stuck in one nostril,  
came the jaw of the truck and the car.

No hills, no curves, no dips.  
Only magical confessions, intercourse with angels,  
meals, wounds, razor meringue.  
Only glued to the engine's purr.

# Caedmon's Song

Voices of the dead poets  
sealed in the silent sound.  
The consonants and vowels of the dead  
living their lives.  
The poets still alive,  
their voices in the caskets.  
The newlyweds, already bound to part.  
Black holes of pauses, a silent, starless night,  
regaining consciousness after the rustling blank.  
The British "R" reverberating on the verge,  
then casting lines, reflecting the moonscape.  
A thin, old girl, a bird, twitching muscle,  
her hidden rhythm is a hilly country road.  
The Nordic alien, an old Hellenic hero  
still mumbling his eternal echo rhymes.  
A farmer's voice, November brittle ice,  
wind in the treetops, a stone against the stone.  
A tone of time, that sounds for itself.  
The voice is dead only when air is gone.  
These are the sounds of the limestone landscape,  
of old lighthouse beam,  
of undercurrent stream,  
a sound of stone  
against the stone.

# Ghosted Album

1

Father, I am waiting  
here at the church, adorned  
in magnolia blossoms & dressed  
in my divorced sister's gown.

The gods have granted my chance.  
Hope you'll be here soon.

I imagine a drum roll  
announcing your arrival.  
In a father-of-the-bride-tux

you'll hold promises, apologies  
& alibis, close to the vest,  
of why you're not on time.

On your jacket, you'll carry  
the scent of Old Spice & Lucky Strikes,  
the ones without the filter.  
A friend once told me, *my father cried  
when he saw me in my wedding dress.*  
Look how the tongue eclipses the heart.

Father, you reach me from the dead.  
Hands ablated in burning regret.  
Look how the wind carries remorse.

Isn't a father supposed to mine  
the muscle of a daughter's heart?

I'll tell you about forgiveness—  
I say I do on days I don't.  
Yet still, you ghost my wedding album.

# Taper vs. Fade

It is the day after my mother goes into hospice and I pick up the scissors to cut my father's hair. He's sunk hunched into the guts of his lift chair, trusting and subdued, patiently waiting for me to begin. His walker where he can reach it.

The truth is, I can't cut it. I mean I can't get the scissors and comb lined up while I hold long stretches of his hair—the color of apparitions—between my fingers. I can't even wield the stupid barber shears right—I'm left-handed and sobbing like a concertina. I cannot do this thing, this doing what my mother has always done, which is cut my father's hair, his beautiful, thick hair now like shrieks climbing up the side of his head.

The more I try to fix it, the more it looks as if I am helping him blend his way onto the film set

of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—a world of serrated landscapes, sharp angles, tilted windows and walls, staircases clamoring discordant diagonals, trees with stabby leaves, and knives for grass.

I give him a mirror and he starts laughing—not over the German Expressionist haircut, I realize, but at some memory in his head. Laughing, he tells a story from when he was young, long-haired and hitchhiking. He got picked up in a van driven by nuns. They gave him a crew cut and then dropped him off at the YMCA. Cutting his hair becomes funny to me, too, because suddenly I get it: the intimacy of a daughter caring for her father in old age is not a good place for us to go for pictures of an ideal life, but here we are together and that's exactly why we go.

# Tears

Every morning, I emerge  
head first from a pool of doubt,  
the many stressors of the world  
worsening my ability to breathe.

And every morning when  
I'm welcomed by a storm,  
specks of light find themselves  
seeping effortlessly through  
the passing clouds.

I gather a collective whiff  
of mother nature's tears.  
She is never ashamed to cry  
no matter how much light  
penetrates as counsel.

And I reflect on how envious  
I am, of the world, and the people  
who comfortably inhabit it, since  
I cannot weep like Mother  
when I'm already drowning.

# Echoes Of You

Sometimes  
I hear your voice  
saying my name  
in my ear  
and it echoes  
out into the room  
and a part of me  
follows it  
out the window  
and you lead me up  
into the atmosphere  
where we are wide  
and strong

you on that side  
me still here  
listening  
and waiting for you  
to tell me  
how it is for  
you and

if you have finally  
made your way  
to where you belong  
to the place where  
the entire universe  
is your new home

# As an Altar Boy

As an altar boy I knelt  
before the rows of beeswax candles  
arranged in columns and lines  
as if an army of prayerful soldiers  
a company of hopes and fears  
flickering in platoon formation  
casting shadows upon the cold marble walls  
that glowed like a coat of many colours

As the summer Sunday light filtered through  
the stained glass saints  
while I held the censor  
with fragrant smoke arising  
perfume to Heaven

And in the Benediction  
I realized  
to achieve the bliss  
of forgiveness  
the need for sacred sin

# Suspect Number Five

Maria Alvarez ignored the sky that promised bad weather, the traffic growing noisier by the minute, the coughing street vendor who tried to sell her pirated books, and the knot in her stomach that tightened as she parked her car at Fresh Bounty's trolley-lined parking space. As a screaming, streaky-eyed, runny-nosed Jojo, pulled her through the supermarket's still half-stocked aisles, Maria was tempted to call her boss and take the day off. She did deserve it, but forced herself to save her sick day for a real emergency. Registers clicked and phones rang as Maria and Jojo walked amongst detergents, shampoos, cereals and finally found the wall of chocolate. Here Jojo filled her arms with more than just her promised fruit and nut bar. It was nine in the morning and Maria was too tired to argue with an already cranky three year-old.

Maria's trip to the cash-counter was cut short by the sound of many heavy footsteps and a loud voice, shouting indecipherable words. Before she knew it, she was surrounded by a swarm of brown uniforms and two rifles, though she took a few moments to realize what they were. She was pushed against the nearest wall, held in place by a heavy male body, her head turned the wrong way round. She heard Jojo howl, but could not see her. Cold metal touched her wrists, snapped, pinching skin. Through the gaps of the fingers that held her head, Maria began to make out a few words. *Charged. Kidnapping.*

*Silent.* There were sentences around these that made no sense. Jojo's screams had begun to fade. Fading footsteps told Maria she was being taken away.

When she could hear Jojo no more, Maria was yanked around, made to walk. By the time she stepped out of Fresh Bounty, the shock had cleared. Fear was yet to set in. From this window of sanity, Maria asked what was going on. Someone rammed a rifle's butt on her left foot. Someone else, pushed a nasty tasting roll of cloth in her mouth, tied it tight and let it cover part of her ears. They unlocked the handcuffs that had tied her hands to her back. They turned her around and handcuffed her hands straight this time. She did her best to avoid eye contact. She knew it was something you never did with the police. A female officer appeared before her and lifted Maria's chin with her forefinger. She made Maria look into her gray eyes, until Maria saw herself reflected in them. In the brown specked gray, she saw a slim palm rise, approach her cheek. A warm sting broke the scene. The officer pushed her in a car. Maria recalled that the police played by different rules.

In the car, Maria was made to sit between the female officer and a heavily cologned male one. For the next two hours, they talked, laughed, ate and drank in the car as if she did not exist. They dropped empty snack wrappers on her lap, guzzled water aloud. The female officer rummaged Maria's purse and pocketed a lipstick. Maria joined

in the game by sitting still, pretending she did not see or hear them either. It was not difficult. She kept her eyes fixed on the road beyond the windscreen. In her mind she saw Jojo, scared. Jojo hated strangers and had refused to eat breakfast that morning. It was only a matter of time until someone lost their temper with her. Sometimes, Maria sensed irritation and disappointment among her captors. She felt clips on her knuckles, tugs on her hair, fingers slithering and resting under her shirt and an occasional twisting of her forearm. Her mind was too clogged to register them.

Through the windscreen, beyond the outline of the head and torso of the constable driving them Maria saw the end of her town. She saw the edges of the road begin to sparkle. Cluttered homes and buildings changed to lazily stretched out bungalows. After some time her view was blocked by luxury coaches and tourist buses. Restaurants, shops, people's clothes turned into a chorus celebrating the seaside. The ride became bumpier. Her captors jostled her with joy. A sharp turn and a few more metres brought this celebration to an end. The female officer wrapped a scarf tight over Maria's face. Maria stumbled out of the car, and was lead across noise, sand, pebbles, flashes, two stairs and finally a wooden threshold that she bumped onto, almost falling, before being hit by a blast of air-conditioned cool.

Scarf and gag came out. They took Maria's fingerprints on a yellow cuboid and groped and patted her behind a screen. The female officer was with her all along, sneering, asking her to move faster. The cologned male officer

appeared once the screen was lifted and led them to a computer manned by a young girl without a badge, a name tag or a uniform. To her the male officer dictated,

“Interrogation room three. Reserved for the questioning of suspect number five in the matter of the kidnapping and possible child abuse of Lily D’Costa.”

Calling Interrogation Room Three, a room was an exaggeration. It was a small space with bare white walls. The window seemed to have been cut out as an afterthought, then covered with mesh as if it was a bad idea. A table with two chairs stood in the middle. Maria was dumped on one of these, warned not to make any noise or to try anything smart and then left alone. She heard the door thud and click. Then silence, a sound so new and sudden that Maria froze to her seat. Her back tingled, the handcuffs gnawed at her wrists, her shoes bit hard. Maria flung them off on reflex. Black spots appeared on her blue toes.

Maria's brain juggled with all the whats, whys, ifs and hows that had built up in the car. She tried to match it with the uniforms, ketchup stains on files with the national seal, sounds of swearing, and ringing phones in this new place. A part of her wondered what people at work would be thinking of her, skipping a day without warning. Her phone had disappeared with Jojo. She knew Jojo was not doing well. Jojo, for whom life was just an endless cycle of being fed and kept excited, would hate this place. From the light through the window, she guessed it was time for lunch. She told herself that the police would not let a child starve. She kept

repeating this to herself like a mantra, until her brain calmed down and began to distract itself with other things.

Maria was a good person, her brain said. She was an honest taxpaying citizen. She did not deserve to be here. Surely a building full of detectives would work that out. Somewhere, somebody had made a mistake that would soon be corrected. They would soon figure out that somebody like her would have nothing to do with Lily D'Costa. That child's face had been everywhere for months, since she had disappeared from a fancy sea-side resort, a resort with its own private beach-front. A child much like Jojo, in age and build, different only in the slight tweaks of their hair and faces. Lily D'Costa was sunshine bright, her dark hair tranquil as a clear night sky. Jojo was twilight on her best days.

If Jojo was indeed mistaken for Lily D'Costa, all Maria had to do was wait. They had her purse, with her keys and identity cards. When they came in she would ask them to search her apartment. She would tell them to look into the second drawer in the third panel of her cabinet where Jojo's birth certificate and other medical reports were. She closed her eyes, took deep breaths. She remembered that it was within her rights to demand a phone-call. She would request one.

The door opened sooner than she expected. The female officer entered looking displeased. Maria rose and asked for her phone call.

"You will get one, when we arrest you on paper," the officer said tugging Maria away from the table. Two steps later she asked,

"And who will you call? Your husband?"

Maria's tongue betrayed her and her mouth formed half words with no sound. Her husband had been dead for almost a year. The officer laughed and said, "I did not think so!"

They walked across desks to a place that was a mix between a room and a cubicle. It was large with two three seater sofas, a table with six chairs and a vending machine and two of its four walls had plain glass panels. Maria assumed they would be sound proof but as they got closer, she realized they were not. The cologned officer was standing outside, with a man in a suit, who took a glance at Maria and went into the room. The cologned officer said, "Let us check if you have a heart."

Maria did not reply. Her kind of people did not get into verbal duels with the police. She looked inside the room, this time at the people, and her eyes rested on one woman. She looked very different from her sad and reflective self on the news. Now she was more of an agitated angry. Her clothes and hair were more casual. Her eyes too rested on Maria for a while, before she turned away. Everyone turned to the same direction.

Jojo howled as she did when she was hungry, tired and angry, multiplied by ten. Maria tried to stretch and get a look but was pulled back. So she was forced to look through the glass once more. Lily D'Costa's mother looked confused but forced herself to smile. An elderly officer brought Jojo into the room.

It was the father who took Jojo first from the officer's hands. Maria had

no idea how strong her little girl really was until that day. She knew Jojo had spent all the time crying and being scared. But Jojo kept fighting, resisting attempts to transplant her in this odd tabelau. She scratched Lily D'Costa's father's face, when he tried to kiss her. Maria kept waiting for the mother to object, put a stop to this chaos, for she knew her own words would not count. But all she did was cup her hands and take Jojo from the father. Maria watched, ready to outrage as she tried to snuggle Jojo. And then Lily D'Costa's mother screamed. Jojo's daycare often sent complaints about her biting unwanted company.

She pulled Jojo away but did not let her go. Jojo twisted and turned fighting for freedom. And through this struggle, through her tear-stained eyes she saw Maria standing through the glass. She tried to jump, but Lily D'Costa's mother held her tight. It seemed as if she refused to see all the differences between the two children that Maria could so clearly see. Maybe everyone else saw it too, for the suited man rushed out of the room, signaled that Maria be brought in. The officers that arrested her exchanged unhappy looks, shrugged but followed his order. They whispered "Drugs?" to each other as they walked into the room. And then Jojo screamed,

"Mamma! I want home!"

Maria thought it was over then. Words flowed between people in the room and finally Jojo was free to run to Maria. It took a while to quieten her down, during which they were told to leave the room. Maria's handcuffs were still on, which meant she could not

pick Jojo up. The female officer, Maria and Jojo made a sad train and walked outside. Jojo held on to Maria's trousers. Soon, the male arresting officer joined them and ordered the female officer to *escort* Maria and Jojo home. He would not be joining them he said, before he apologized to Maria for all the inconvenience.

This drive seemed longer than before. It was the same car, with the same constable and the female officer. Jojo cried and babbled, the officer complained about the crying giving her a headache. The constable altered radio stations so the music would entertain Jojo somehow. It worked in bits and pieces. Maria offered Jojo whatever snacks she had in her bag, but she would not eat any. When they finally reached home, the officer followed them to Maria's apartment. It was a regular toddler's apartment, where nothing was where it should have been. The officer took one look and said, "She had her chance to get away."

Maria and Jojo spent a large part of what remained of the day, planted before the television watching all the Disney Princess movies that Jojo loved. They ordered pizza, because Jojo would not let Maria leave her side. When an exhausted Jojo went to sleep, Maria called her boss and told her about the day she had gone through. Her outraged boss promised to call a lawyer friend, and allowed her to take the next day off as well. Then Maria took a long shower to try and wash away the smells of the day, for she knew the memories would never leave.

But the day was not quite ready to leave her. Every week for a month, the

female officer would wait outside Maria's apartment. Every week she would say a variation of the same thing. If she were to hand Jojo over to the D'Costas she would be giving Jojo a better life. There were offers of compensation for her trouble. She was relentless. When she stopped visiting, she began calling and texting. She sent Maria pictures of the D'Costas' house and their vacation homes. She sent her pictures of the elementary school with topiaries in its grounds that Lily D'Costa was lined up to attend.

The night Maria had enough, she created the first Google Alert of her life. Soon her inbox was filled with links that reported the Lily D'Costa affair. She may not have the resources to pick a fight with the police, but she could get back at the D'Costas. When she was ready, she bought a dozen pre-paid cards that would show no country codes, from dealers in alleys at the back of shady markets, or men with tents pitched on highways. From then on it was just a game of waiting, judging, calculating and calling the hotline number that was on displayed on the website dedicated to finding Lily D'Costa.

Maria knew that one day she would be found. One day someone would see a pattern between Lily D'Costa's reported sightings and her tip-offs. One day, she knew she would slip, say too much, make someone suspicious enough to look for her. She had never been very good at geography. If she got caught there would be no getting away. Her boss's lawyer friend had called, offering help in case of any trouble, so at least something for

that time was in place. But until that happened, Maria would not stop.

From the news Maria learnt that she was not the only one trolling the Lily D'Costa hotline. There had been quite a few false alarms from places she had not pretended calling from. The D'Costas appeared often on her screen, sad and tired. One night they were shown standing together, on a sunny beach surrounded by reporters, wind sweeping their perfect hair. The mother stood dabbing her eyes with a tissue, while the father read from a piece of paper. It was an appeal to all those who called and jammed the hotline with no concrete news. He said he was begging them to understand what his family was going through, how each lost hope was a "lash to the depths of our souls."

To Maria it was just a load of sentimental nonsense. She wondered if there were others like her, working on the same plan. She wondered how suspect numbers one to four were dealing with their lives. Did they still get offers tempting them to part with their little girls? If there had been a suspect number six, where was she picked up and rattled from? Maybe every woman dealing with a cranky child, who had been hauled in cars and named suspects found this was the easiest path to retribution. It strengthened Maria's sense of purpose. As long as she was free, she would work hard to make sure that the D'Costas did not touch another child again.

# Jerusalem Heat

Walled city  
of tight streets  
Arab shops of pastel clothes  
chess sets  
and jewelry

humorless  
heads covered  
tourist scatter  
into cafes rising upon Roman streets  
Persian sandals and  
Egyptian stones.

exodus to Western Wall  
separated from ancient children  
and nations.

A golden mosque  
closed mid day  
suspicious and guarded.

Lines extend into Church of the Holy Sepulchre  
where Constantine wrote fantasies  
for the masses  
Via Delarosa never saw a bleeding man  
the Emperor's sleight of hand  
a snicker through the ages  
the joke is on all of us,  
defending what never was  
hot sun  
blinds covered eyes  
on the masks of Abraham  
lacking water and food  
twisted visions  
hallucinate  
the kind and pious.

The desert needs restoration  
from the dogmatic oasis  
replant and  
replace  
open the path  
remove the wall.

Yes the sun is delirious

# Colosseum

Geometry of death.  
Sun-blasted oval,  
sandblasted stone.  
Stale bread,  
a song of wind  
long gone  
to the groves  
of memory.

Interlacement, entwinement  
on the twilight  
of the valley.  
A tourist trap by day,  
cemetery of stone  
at night.

Now we know:  
salt on the soil of Carthage,  
salt beneath Masada,  
they had sailed on the sails  
toward nothingness  
of the bloodhounds  
of dead Caesars  
to the dead end.

We float on the somnolent siesta  
of Italian shadows  
in the courtyard:  
pasta is fresh, sauce  
of the ancient recipe,  
like sun, blasting impartially,  
blissfully, melting makeup  
on the mask of a face  
of a lively tour guide  
of the Berber origin.

# Passage to Stormville

The bus driver hits the brakes like  
he's divorcing them. Doors fling open.  
I step up, strangers eye my waddle.  
A seat in the middle finds me. The lights  
overhead remind me of my ex – dim,

unresponsive. Cannot read like this.  
Forced to scan the lithic shoreline or  
secretly study faces. Green ones, astral  
ones, pondering ones, lonely ones.  
Lonely faces, the bluest of all, don't

smile. When they do, they scream, *I'm  
trying here!* All of us. Together. Silent.  
One. Ferried by a coachman stomping  
the accelerator to the floorboard. *What's  
the matter, fella? Dog collar too tight?*

*Missed your bathroom break? Chasing  
a tornado?* I imagine this is our last ride  
and we're headed to nowhere in a metal  
casket. Hard to feel saintly when you're  
at the mercy of the sea.

# Magnificent Monarchs!

I'm not saying I'm a good driver.  
I merely have yet to wreck the car.  
It's normal for pregnant  
women to spot sounds like something  
I heard like beer is good  
for your teeth. Lili's tummy sprouts  
hair like a trail of ants, leading  
to her pubis, her honeypot.  
With so many options, she and I  
pick out the same sticker  
with a limit of one please per visit  
at Burr Oak Woods Nature Center.  
I apply mine to the inside cover  
of my notebook in the bathroom.  
Notice how easily ice breaks  
between young parents, how sexy  
the moms are now to me.

# In the Wild

For so many months  
I could feel her claws tugging at my skin  
A quiet purr in the distance  
From the lion deep within

I gave her some attention  
Some treats here and there  
A little bit of affection  
To let her know I cared

But as time went on  
Her needs became more intense  
As her claws dug deeper into my skin  
I knew this was a battle  
That I was not going to win.

Her purr became a loud roar  
Sending chills up my spine  
Was this really what I asked for?  
Was her struggle truly all mine?

How hard do I fight when I am starting to feel weak?  
How long do I battle when the words I should say, I cannot speak?

I close my eyes  
And let my lion break free  
So she can run into the wild  
Where she was always meant to be

But when my eyes begin to open  
I am running at her side  
Our fierceness is captivating  
We are feeling so alive

The stars begin to blur  
As we run at this intense speed  
We are on a midnight hunt  
To find everything that we need

Other animals cannot touch us  
We are the greatest of them all  
But I can't help but wonder if we run too fast  
That I will be the one to fall

The hunt leaves me feeling  
As I have never felt before  
Getting just what I have desired  
But craving so much more

I know this is dangerous  
And I should probably turn around  
But I don't want to stop  
And I don't want to be found

I prowl through the night  
Mud sticking to my skin  
When morning comes  
I realize it is just me  
And my lion within

I broke free from my cage  
What damage have I done?  
It's hard to say  
When you are still living in the wild  
Watching the beauty of the rising sun.

# Scuba Diving

As I master the technique and go deeper,  
I hit the bottom and spend more time  
with the habituals.

I feel the absent-minded touch  
of the coelenterates, big fishes  
slowly approach and stare into my eyes.  
I don't even want to think  
What's behind that look.

As I'm running out of air,  
I feel lonesome there.  
The sun rays dissipate  
in the twilight of water  
and only the still life: a squashed beer can,  
hair-bearing condom, spent bullet shells,  
make me think of home  
and I start going up  
back to my dream.

# Foot Rubs

Rub us!

Her pale toes wiggle as  
he grips each one with  
proper respect, never slipping a digit  
between them because those spaces are  
the mouths of the feet,  
and he wouldn't want them to gag.  
The chaste massages have been guaranteed  
each evening  
once her keys collapse on the counter  
and her flats are flung off,  
for two decades of marriage  
bookended by student ramen and osteoarthritis,  
every squeeze a sign of solidarity  
through flu and SlimFast failures and  
families crumbling like  
Gondwana.

Get the heel!

When tension seeps from a knob of bone  
repeatedly plastered against  
the steps of Robie Street,  
she clasps her hands and  
grinds her green eyes  
into giddy slits of gratitude.

# Elegy for a Mother Who Died Alone

Even the sun  
blackened  
the day I found you.

Even Antares—  
giant red star  
dimmed the night sky.

Through the window  
sparrows fluttered past the lawn  
gathering twigs, moss, feathers

for their nests while I circled  
the house of grief  
in shallow breath.

You who I carried  
in the muscle of my mouth  
should know:

morning breaks  
in empty hands.

I spit seeds  
into a crestfallen sky & demand:

Mother, where are you?  
If you're somewhere

between earth & abyss  
reach this way.

Come find me.

I've engraved your star  
in the safe of my heart.

# Belittling the Mentally Ill

Three decades ago, I would use my sore finger to push my dresser drawer closed, repeatedly. “Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.” The callus was hardly a bother to me anymore as I had been acting out this behavior for years. After one more round of counting to thirty, I would feel confident that the drawer was finally shut. “One, two, three...”

My ‘number’ was thirty. I don’t know why, but my waking hours were filled with this chronic computation. Turning off lights, shampooing my hair, and shutting the refrigerator are mere examples of my myriad of compulsions.

I was Ms. Everyday Mental Illness. That was me, possibly you as well. NAMI (National Alliance of Mental Illness) tells us 43.8 million adults experience mental illness in a given year. As O.C.D. took over my psyche, I also struggled with panic, depression, and agoraphobia. I was home-bound for three years in my twenties before my father allowed me to work with a psychologist. “We don’t have crazy people in our family. Take a nice walk and think about something else,” my mother said as she scolded me.

But no “walk” was going to help me. I needed treatment. The Mayo Clinic reports that Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder treatment may not result in a cure, but it can help bring symptoms under control so that they don’t rule your daily life. Some people need treatment (typically medication and therapy) for the rest of their lives.

Mental illness, even with the recent efforts to raise awareness on it, is still stigmatized and often belittled in even the most casual conversations.

I hear comments like, “They are so O.C.D.,” tossed around on TV, in books, and in conversations all the time. The casual use of these varying diagnoses may be heard by people who are not diagnosed with it. I recently heard a woman say to her friend while in a checkout line, “She is so O.C.D. Margaret would fold her clean clothes and put them away even if the world was ending.”

And it’s not unique just to O.C.D. People use depression, mania, schizophrenia, and so on in conversation the same way they talk about anyone that seems different.

“He’s schizophrenic,” one may say to describe a person who seems odd. “I’m sooooo depressed,” whines one woman. Clinical depression is a serious, all-consuming condition, and it is NOT the same as having a blue mood.

We don’t hear words like cancer or diabetes used so casually. Can you imagine someone saying, “Oh he’s so cancerous. He’s thin and bald and weak?”

We, as a society, comfort those with physical ailments. We coo over one who has had a surgery, or we bring food as a gift to our neighbor who broke his back. But with psychological conditions, we tend to back away as if they are contagious.

These casual belittling comments, while they may seem harmless in nature, are very destructive to those who struggle with mental illness. Human beings need to feel as if they are normal, if one can define that! Those of us with a psychological disorder already know we are ill. Hurtful comments that make light of these serious illnesses only increase the stigma and that can keep those struggling even more isolated and less likely to seek treatment.

According to the University of Michigan’s Counseling and Psycho-

logical Service, “The stigma that surrounds mental illness and those who experience it is very pervasive and ubiquitous. It is important to realize that common myths promoted by the media and popular culture are often inaccurate and destructive.”

When I was first diagnosed in 1976, I hadn’t heard of these disorders. Convinced that I was alone in my suffering, I left college and my dream to become a veterinarian. Following rounds with seven therapists and a slew of psychotropic medications, I eventually found some relief.

While the Mental Health stigma is being addressed, progress has still been slow, and children who suffer are labeled “special” while adults are “eccentric.”

When we hear someone disparage our condition, it serves to reinforce that we are “crazy, nuts, or insane.” Would you call a child with a limp a “spaz” or a woman with AIDS a “prostitute?”

We are all wrestling with something. The degree of that something seems to draw a line in the sand.

O.C.D., depression, and all other mental illnesses should not be used in careless jokes—you never know

who may be listening, and it only isolates us more.

Please respect all human-kind. We are all unique, and we all deserve compassion, tolerance, and patience.

“Self-stigma is not a person’s fault; nor is it a part of the person’s illness!

If the public did not hold negative and stigmatizing attitudes in the first place, these would never have become internalized, causing people the painful and disabling experience of self-stigma.”

—Patrick W. Corrigan

# Where Heaven Meets the Earth

Where heaven meets the earth  
Is where I'm going to go  
The secrets of this world  
I can wait no longer to know.  
I'm going to get there.

Deep into a forest of evergreens  
An old man rests upon a tree  
Looking at me with wisdom in his eyes  
He whispers "I see you are aching to be free.  
I've been to the edge of the earth  
Searching for something I thought I  
would never find  
But when I returned I realized what I  
longed for was already mine.  
I saw heaven across the ocean  
Felt the bliss tingle in my hands  
Still I felt myself turn away  
Trust me these were not my plans.  
I walked the journey home with no one  
by my side  
But in the quiet solitude  
Never had I felt more alive.  
Let your footsteps rest here with me  
Believe your spirit will soon be set free."

His beauty resonates inside me  
Still I continue on my way  
Though a lingering feeling inside  
Is pushing me to stay

I reach a field with velvet green mountains  
As I begin to feel a cool gentle rain  
I watch the clouds reflecting in the raindrops  
And something tells me now that I am here  
I will never be the same.

I walk bare feet down a winding path  
The smell of sea and salt in the air  
I have reached the vast, endless ocean  
And as the sun begins to set  
I am suddenly without a care

Where heaven meets the earth  
I know it is still far away  
But in this captivating beauty  
I have found a reason to stay

As the sky turns violet  
And the wind sings a gentle song  
There is no doubt in my mind  
This is where I now belong.

The secrets of the earth  
They shall remain  
But in this peace I have found  
I love the mysteries and the truth all the same.

As the night begins to fall  
The moon casts a silver glow upon the sea  
It is time to rest and let dreams fill my mind  
For at last my spirit has been set free.

# Above the Clouds

When rain falls from the heavens,  
it falls as if the oceans have been turned upside down.  
There's always sunshine above the clouds.

When fevered tears stain blotchy cheeks  
and knobby knees are hugged tightly to the chest,  
There's a sprout of a dream  
peeking its head through tightly packed soil.

When darkness rears his ugly head,  
his beady, lifeless eyes look right through one's inmost being.  
But there's a silver lining  
delicately laced into the clouds above.

And just when all hope  
has dissipated into a toxic vapor  
and the will to live has plummeted to earth  
like icy snowflakes impairing all who are around.

Remember,  
there's always sunshine above the clouds.

# Today (September 11, 2001)

Today, as two planes flew into the World Trade Center,  
I trimmed branches from the maple tree  
in front of our home.

Today, while another plane flew into the Pentagon,  
I cut one tall branch that  
grew from a low knot.

Today while the buildings collapsed and burned,  
I found three near-fledged  
cedar waxwing chicks

holding tight with tiny feet  
to the fallen branch  
straining necks upwards.

Above, in the crook of a branch that had been  
swept hard by the lopped and falling limb,  
a split nest from which they'd come.

I took the ladder from the garage, opened it  
against the tree, and rebuilt  
the nest as best I could.

Then I carried each chick gently back to nest,  
small clawed feet clutching  
desperately to my hands.

As I moved the last, it opened its mouth  
as if to ask me to speak  
a meal into its mouth.

Instead, it let out its thin alarm call,  
its parents flying in from somewhere,  
brushing my hair, screaming at me.

Today, as I saw these birds safely back  
in their rebuilt nest, three pyres  
burned in New York, Washington,

and an empty field in Pennsylvania.  
No hand can mend, no hand can carry  
these fallen back to nest.

# Beautiful You

It's been a long journey, I said  
But you have been with me all along  
Through all of the heartbreaks, all of the pain  
When everything seemed to go wrong

Through the lonely nights and the hard mornings  
You were always by my side  
Pushing me to get through them  
To love me, to make me feel alive

You never gave up on me  
You kept me going every single day  
When there were so many obstacles  
That kept standing in my way

You let me cry when I was sad  
And be wild when I felt free  
You let my mind take me wherever I wanted  
You let me, be me  
So I write you this poem  
So you can realize all that you have done  
Everything you have been through  
It didn't make you bitter  
It just made you a more beautiful you.

And I wanted to tell you to your face  
Just how much you are loved  
It couldn't be any clearer  
As I look into the mirror.

# Warning

Static and dead air  
on incoming calls.  
You will experience  
silence while you are waiting  
for the next available  
operator. Your call may be  
monitored for quality  
assurance purposes  
unless dead and static air  
interferes with your  
communication.  
Anything incoming  
may not be transmitted  
due to current conditions.

In the meantime,  
please be aware  
that proper entities  
are working to restore  
favorable conditions.  
Be advised to be alert  
and prepared for immediate  
change of circumstances.  
All assigned personnel  
should remain at their  
present locations and await  
further instructions.  
All nonessential personnel  
should proceed to the designated  
areas, avoiding static and dead air  
at all costs.

# Taking A Break

She strips  
everything off the walls, pulls  
pushes until the vacant floorboards scream;  
hibernating, weight wobbling, she gives up the days--  
night a perfectly poured skin  
for a senseless house doll  
relieved of touching retouching  
eyes ears mouth nose  
all the pockets of speech  
turned outside in  
somersaulting silence a caress

# The Wishing Well

Close upon the postern gate,  
beyond the walls of glory  
lies the ancient Holy Well  
where lovers in secret come  
to bless their desirous dreams.

Some in maddening frenzy,  
and some tear filled gentleness,  
throw coins into the blest deep  
as unspoken prayers of hope  
which fill the sacred darkness.

So let us go, you and I  
but cast seeds instead of coins  
so our shared dreams in time may  
rise as interwoven vines

# Steam Trained

She chattered on this dear  
on a full head of steam  
with a sharp whistle,

ad infinitum.

No way, really, of stopping her  
[even if I wanted to]  
water boils, becomes steam,  
steam condenses

becomes tears.

She babbles, brook-like  
at times melodious, at times  
her banks overflow.

She cannot let go of it  
fast enough.

Once on The Flying Scotsman

[a steam train]

I sat like Jonah in the whale  
bombarded with input  
flagellated by sensation,  
inside the kettle  
about to spout,  
then; I was the steam.

Now, she is the waterfall

I wait with Kleenex.

# Undoing/Undone

*The Linwood Gazette*

November 8, 1999

Jackson Bale, Headmaster at The Stanley Hall School for Girls in Dark Oak, Iowa, died Thursday when his Jeep collided head-on with a tractor-trailer. Bale was 54.

JULIA

She went out to look for him that night when he didn't come home. She had her doubts and her suspicions. She had started dinner and set the table and lit a fire and poured a glass of wine. She was expecting Jack to come in the door any minute, and his dog was pacing too. It didn't occur to her to imagine the worst. She only hoped he'd somehow been innocently waylaid. Or maybe something simple had gone wrong. A flat tire, say. She hoped he hadn't stopped in for a drink at the Owl downtown.

She put on her coat, and then his dog followed her to the door, insisting she bring him along for the ride.

The snow was meager, spitting softly. Night had only just begun to settle in and darken the empty fields on both sides of the road. But when she came to the top of the ridge by old Mrs. Ruggler's empty house, she saw the lights from the cruisers and the tow truck and the ambulance. She pulled over onto the shoulder and stopped. She closed her eyes, heard his dog's sharp whine, and sat there holding her breath, not daring to look, until someone tapped on the window. She turned and saw the trooper there, and he was opening the door for her, and she was falling out into the cold as his dog scrambled over her, and there was the Jeep, crushed against the ground, and Jack in pieces somewhere inside and underneath.

*The Linwood Gazette*

November 8, 1999

Jeanette Mae Ruggler, age 82, passed on peacefully Thursday

morning at the Dark Oak  
Community Hospital after a  
lingering illness.

#### ELGIN

The tract homes here on this piece-of-shit country road to nowhere are packed together like kids on a crowded bus, and he's behind the wheel of a car that's meant for highways and racetracks and autobahns, where speed is the whole point and purpose of the thing in the first place. But here it is instead, slopping in mud and slewing through curves, as he climbs the wooded hill up to the scenic ridge above. He's a good man, a smart man, a handsome man, he's been told. A man who would rather be younger than he is, would rather be elsewhere than here, would rather be anything other than this. Sent forth on a mission by his dear wife, who lost her way years ago and now has pretty much given up altogether on trying to find it again. Too tired to go anywhere, too fat to fit into this car, too much pain in her joints, not enough breath in her lungs. It was his duty, she said. He had to do it, for her, for her mother, for the good of this or that. But none of it was enough to get him moving, not at first. No, what did it was money, that's what. When he came to think that maybe this forlorn property might be worth something to someone somewhere. He can sell it, now that the old witch is dead and buried, now that it belongs to him. Well, not to him exactly. But to them, him and his dear, beloved Delph.

#### JULIA

The world goes on about its business, as if nothing has happened, and nothing has changed—embroiled in its own chaos that's got nothing to do with her. It's calm here. Quiet. The woods stretch out in all directions from this "Cottage in the Glen," as Jack called it when he bought it for himself all those years ago, before he met her. "Glenwood," as she renamed it later, where the two of them began the process of building what was meant to be a life together. A life that turned out to be all too brief, not even a year, not nearly enough. Jack is gone and now, who is she? Julia Bale. A young widow living alone in a crumbling old cottage in the woods.

She'll pour herself another glass of wine. And then another one after that. And then a whole new bottle, the kind with a screw top to keep it simple. She'll sit in Jack's chair. She'll cradle the bottle between her knees until it slips away and rolls across the floor. She'll stumble on the stairs.

She'll trip on the rug. She'll take a fall she won't remember and stay put where she is, in the hallway, sprawled. Curled on the rug. It doesn't matter. There's no one here to see. No one has to know.

### ELGIN

He's had it in his head that what he's going to find here is his clear memory of this place. His name is Elgin Frank, and he is forty-three years old, and his wife is almost fifty, but don't laugh. She was a beauty once, in her way, and once upon that time it was her flesh itself that drew him to her, but that was then, and now it is her flesh that pushes him away. Her name is Delph, as in Delphinium, as in the flower. They first came here to Dark Oak to visit with her mother, who was sick even then, but now has passed on to the better place that she alone believed in with all her heart. But that memory was set years ago, and what he thinks he recalls—an imposing red brick Georgian house, gabled and columned and settled down in the trees on the ridge that looks out over a flow of bountiful fields and wild woods, with smoke in the chimney and light in the windows and flowers in the yard—now seems to have become nothing more than a ramshackle mess stuffed with the accumulations of a hoarding old crone who clung to life the way she clung to her possessions, unwilling to give up on any of it. But that's all over and done with and in the end it wasn't up to her. He and Delph agreed that it was time for her to go. And then some. Turn off the machine, remove the tube, let nature take its course, they said. Except it was clear to him that Delph didn't exactly understand what that meant, and so he had to call the doctor back into the room to explain it more clearly, just to make sure she didn't try to pin any blame on him sometime in the future, and then she still nodded her head, so that was that. Delph was in a wheelchair herself at the time, so maybe it was just as well that she didn't take it all in completely but put up that wall of ignorance of hers and settled down safe and sound in a place that seemed to be happily empty and clean, no second thoughts and no pain. Go to the house, she told him, after it was done. See what you can find.

He pulls into the drive. Cuts the engine. Considers what their prospects here might be. The houses in the development down below the ridge are lit, like promises in the night.

## JULIA

This can't go on, of course. She knows she's going to have to pull herself together somehow. She can hear Jack telling her as much, just as he talked to his students, those wayward girls who were heading off in all the wrong directions, and it was up to him to steer them straight again. His first choice of method was to put them to work. Busy hands make happy girls, he liked to say. And she knows what Jack would tell her now. Something along the lines of this: Get busy, girl. There's not as much time as you think there is. One day you'll die too.

His sister Martha had stood there at the lectern in that hollow shell of an unglamorous church and talked about a life being a work in progress. And all you can do is carry on, because you never know, do you? It can be sudden. Get hit by a truck and that's the end of that, so you might as well keep yourself busy in the meantime. Deeds, not words.

Someone from the school has stocked the pantry and the fridge with food for her. They've also taken his dog, so she won't have to bother.

She can't be sure how long she was down on the hallway floor. She's also not sure whether the shimmering darkness outside the windows is morning just about to come on, or is it only the first gloomy inklings of another lonely night?

## ELGIN

He's made some calls, and what they're telling him is that he ought to just tear the house down and start all over. Seems the property is only worth the land it sits on, and he can sell that better if it's cleaned up and cleared out. Or its twenty acres could be broken up into smaller parcels and sold off one by one. So says the woman in the tight skirt and the fur coat and the open blouse, smiling like maybe she's inviting him to throw her down and fuck her right here on the front porch for everyone to see. Except there's no one but the birds out here now, and anyway when he steps a little closer to her she flashes a crimson frown and moves away. He lights a cigarette and takes a seat on one of a pair of weather-beaten Adirondacks instead. His father-in-law made them, he knows, after he retired and before he lost his strength and his mind, both at the same time.

He invites the realtor to join him, but how the hell is she supposed to sit, in that skirt and those stockings and those shoes? Instead she leans against the porch rail—and he's just waiting for it to give way beneath her, slight as she is, rickety as it's become, so she'll tumble backwards into

the mud, knees opened, feet in the air, and so on—as she explains about demolishing this house. He gets it that this might be for the best in the long run, but he also understands that such a process is going to cost him money he doesn't have.

And then it's not long before Delph is crying in his ear, telling him: "No, please, we can't. I won't let you. All my memories are there." And then she's making promises, between the whimpers and the gasps: "I'll get in shape. I'll get healthy. We could live in it ourselves."

Which he answers with such silence that she calls out his name, alarmed, and at that he shuts off the phone, pretending, even to himself, that the connection has been lost.

A big estate sale, maybe? Salvage the bricks at least? Or, now he's thinking, how about an unanticipated fire? He flicks his cigarette into the mud and watches it fizzle out.

## JULIA

She's standing at the bedroom window, and from here she can see the barn. Inside, she knows, her studio echoes with her absence.

She has to remind herself again: Jack is gone. She could try to hold on to a belief that he'll be back. He's on his way home. He's only been delayed. Chumming it up with his cronies downtown at the Owl. But no. There's that photo of the two of them together on the dresser, gathering dust. His clothes in the closet, empty of his arms and legs and all the rest. His big shoes on the floor. And the blanket she wove for them to share is a tangle of neutral colors across the empty bed.

She shrugs on one of his big sweaters and curls up to sleep, but it's no good, and now she's hungry. So she totters down the back stairs to the kitchen and on across the cold linoleum to the refrigerator, where she helps herself to the potluck offering from the folks over at the school, who loved her husband, too. She's gnawing on a piece of roast chicken when the yard light out back snaps on. Motion detector, she knows, but still it startles her and always has. She watches as some dark shape tiptoes through the glare across the grass before it slips into the shadows beside the barn. Its job done, the light snaps off, and darkness envelops the yard once more.

Maybe she ought to take this as a sign. Maybe she'll go back to work. Carry on, as Jack's sister Martha so convincingly advised.

## ELGIN

He dreamed he found a box of money hidden in this house. Delph would say it's just that crazy head of his—jam-packed with too much TV, too many movies, too much ignorant belief—and the stories he tells that are almost lies, but not really. His confabulations, is what she means. Sometimes he wonders why he married her, but he knows why: As usual, it had everything to do with money. Which was just fine, until it became clear that what he thought was wealth was only pretension, on her father's part, on her mother's part, and on her part too. They'd borrowed on the land for more than it was worth and then lost all those acres to the banks when the loans were called, and then to the developers after that. He surely could have left her then, but he didn't. And so the years rolled on anyway, and once you've settled into the rut that's become your life, it gets very difficult, maybe impossible, to climb back out again into the light of the unknown. And yet it seems that now, this right here, might actually be a real chance for him to do just that.

The least he can do as long as he's here is have a look around. He's begun to rummage through the old lady's junk, and the more he looks and the less he finds, the more convinced he gets that he must be on the right track, and that's how this story of his is destined to end. He'll find a box or a suitcase, and in it will be coins or cash or stocks or something of amazing impossible value, and then all his problems will be solved. Or most of them at least. There will always still be Delph, of course, but he can deal with her when that time comes.

The darkness outside the windows unravels as the lights in the mess of homes in the tracts below the ridge begin to flicker on.

## JULIA

It looks like that mysterious shadow monster of last night was nothing but a large cat. His tracks show him coming out of the trees to wander on into her studio through the dog door, so she supposes it's here that he's made a home while she's been away. Seems he's left traces of himself as well, to mark the territory as his own. He's even sprayed his reek over her work, as if that belongs to him now too. He's sharpened his claws here, leaving the arras snagged and torn. It stares back at her, offended. The loom that holds it shrugs and sighs.

This tapestry was meant to be a scene of children playing at recess in a schoolyard in the woods. She'd like to try and fix it, but first she'll have

to pull it apart, thread by thread. The bits of color pile up, disconnected now and meaningless.

All is in ruins. Nothing can ever be what it was.

ELGIN

He's opened every book (two hundred and eleven, standing side by side in bookcases here and there throughout the house), every suitcase (ten of them, in a storeroom under the stairs, empty), every box (fifty-three, stacked against the walls up in the attic, some labeled, most not, all filled with old clothes). And so on and so forth, long into the night.

JULIA

She's gone back out to the barn, first thing this morning, to check on the cat. She's even brought food for him, tuna in a can, along with a bowl for water. Maybe he'll begin to belong to her. She'll put him to work killing mice, and he'll be grateful for her care—the food, of course, but also the bedding that's come of her undoing in the corner of the room.

But he's not here. She supposes he's not going to show himself to her right away, but the pile of yarn from the tapestry looks like it would make a very good bed for a cat. It looks like it would make a good bed for a person. And nestled in it now, she worries about the waste, as if anyone might care, as if Jack might be watching and she's going to have to explain herself and her negligence to him. But Jack isn't here, and neither is the cat, and the light is too bright, and the loom that's always served as a kind of consolation has come to seem a threat.

ELGIN

He's been here for almost a week now, and he's ready to give up the search when he comes upon a locked metal box on a high shelf at the back of the deep closet on the topmost floor of the house. He cradles it in his arms.

This is it, he tells himself. It has to be.

He carries it down to the kitchen. He finds a hammer and bangs around until the hinges snap. What spills out then isn't money or gold or treasure, only a slither of stolen letters meant for other people, names he doesn't recognize, folks he doesn't know, all with addresses that match the houses in the tangled streets of the tracts below. Each envelope is stamped and postmarked on the front and then given a label on the back. Small print, red ink, in what he recognizes as the palsied jerk of a certain old woman's

pious hand. *Adulterer. Homosexual. Tart. Creep. Usurer. Liar. Bully. Pederast. Whoremonger. Drunk.*

JULIA

The next day and the day after that she sees tracks in the mud between the dirt road and the barn. She's pulled the phone out of the wall, and she's sent an e-mail to the school to assure them she's fine and she's not alone, her brother is here with her now, his name is Kit, he's come to help out and keep her company. So it's all for the best, no need to worry, etc.

But the truth is that she's spending all her days on her unweaving. And the piles of yarn grow.

ELGIN

He wonders how she labeled him. And Delph. He thinks he can guess, but what he knows for sure is that there's nothing worth anything to him here. And hasn't that always been so? He ought to know better by now. He ought to walk away from this mess. Let nature take its course, leave the place to fall to pieces on its own.

Instead he stands outside on the porch, feeds the damned and damning envelopes to his fire, one by one.

JULIA

The job is done. She's finished taking her tapestry apart. What used to be a schoolyard scene of trees and flowers and children playing in the grass is now a carpet of disconnected colored bits and pieces on the studio floor. Kit is nestled there, his black eyes gleaming as he watches her, and his purr is a warning that grows like the roaring of a fire billowing down from on high, the whoosh and crackle of flames within the skin beneath the midnight of his fur.

# Hand me Downs

Primordial clothing, always worn in the here and now  
Always made of the where we were before.

Your mother's cousin's daughter's dress—now yours—  
colorful yet gray, sleek but loose, extra poofy. Made of

Discarded fragments of us the garbage men collected—  
belts, silk, buttons, and thought patterns with dry clean instructions  
written in every language except the one you know. Made by  
Feather souls in the back of a truck  
Behind the could be otherwise. When you twirl in certain ways  
Uncertainty blends in with stains.

Buckle, strap, zip, tie, squeeze. Your mother helps you  
Put it on. She follows with a flashlight, picking up parts,  
Which fall to the side. A flower petal going back to the earth.  
Later she will insist you sew them back on.

# Cedar

12.31.18

8.14 a.m.

27 degrees

Prompted by pain inflicted upon myself yesterday after overdoing the “exercise thing,” I decide to get to the pond early today, navigating the rest of the day most gingerly, indeed. Dressed in its coarse coat, the only thing not aching in the cold is the cedar.

# Ghost the Moon

Comfort is Matterhorn in this midnight  
oasis of debauchery. Indulgence kept  
alive on a ventilator. Outside, the moon is  
yawning. Perfect time for light-despising  
zooplankton to migrate here and feed off

ashes exhaled by the crew. Blood cells  
die. Death smells like dark chocolate.  
Burns my nostrils, my skin. Water and  
bourbon become blood brothers before  
fighting each other to the grave. Whispers

in the woodwork are cataclysmic, or fade  
into nothingness, depending on need.  
Tchaikovsky once lived here. Now he  
weaves silk in the rafters laughing at us.  
I'm not lost. These condemned walls

sought me out amongst the spires. Taunted  
me. Promised cinnamon and sanctuary in  
glinting images. I am lost. In somewhere  
I don't belong. The door has become the  
wall which in turn has become a cage.

If the man doesn't arrest me, fear certainly  
will. I should've brought a gun.

# Spectatorship

Another damaged artifact, revolutions  
on the skyway keep me alive—

all the pavement and bent moon-  
time. Galaxies tugging at tendencies

what is the latest speculation of  
the latest spectator? I study the mechanics

of the back of a mask, try to decode  
philosophy but upside down

what do you make of me? And is it  
good or bad? Must the speculation of

everything include the language we cannot read?  
Which yourself is ours anyway?

All the answers are asteroids who wish  
To unwind clicks around a milky star ablation  
Blue-shift lower than my mind, or  
Higher than my mind I am unsure, with

Dust of dead archives chanting  
a name which might not be my own.

In never-changing clock-clicks, piled  
Speculation seems to display and parade  
Who they might think I might be.

# The Girl Next Door

I've never loved a window as much as yours.  
The wooden frame, splintered in places,  
the grilles dividing the glass into four squares,

one for every season I've hovered behind  
my window like a phantom, unseen, my hands  
passing through the idea of your hands,

uncertain if, given the chance, my grasp would  
enchant you or set you upon me like an eagle  
attacking a rabbit. You know how to use your talons:

at last year's orientation you ripped into a jock  
who had slipped his hand up my skirt. I wanted  
to hug you, but you swooped back into the crowd.

On campus I've seen you flirting with boys  
yet there are things—a wink, a sashay—  
which make me wonder if you've ever felt

the pulse of another girl's lips on yours.  
My heart is so imbued with confessions, so taut,  
I might, upon its breakage, be whisked away before

rousing the courage to knock on your door and exhale  
the days and hours I've been waiting for a sign.  
At the hospital, yours was the only troubled face

floating above me in the cluster of sorority sisters,  
yours the only voice that condemned the chugging,  
the broken teeth, the wet paper towels I was made

to eat when outed at lesbian film night. Even then,  
naked amid all that nakedness, I averted my eyes  
for fear of cheapening the fantasy of our lovemaking.

We've never engaged in real conversation,  
never plunged through the surface of each other's eyes  
yet somehow I sense you're the only one who could

fill my bare spaces in the breathtaking way  
that trees leaf out in spring. I've sketched our dawning  
a thousand different ways: a nod exchanged in passing,

a group science project gone awry, or my favorite,  
an impromptu stroll along the creek behind the dorms,  
my hand solid, fleshy, twining through yours

like the vines clinging to each other up and down  
the walls of our twin buildings. This morning  
you were sprawled in your reading nook,

your tears undressing themselves. Abashed,  
I turned away, my phantom body too weak  
to withstand rejection. Instead, I envisioned

clawing the person who, I surmised, had hurt you.  
If, today, I were to reveal one truth about myself  
I'd tell you I've become a fixture in this room,

a painting of a girl gazing through a window  
at an identical window, searching for a way in  
as the seasons fall one by one between us.

# The Pin-Up Man

framed, Herculean a butch two dimensional  
countenance sandwiched white-bred between  
burly arms and haunting apertures. Horizontal  
grooves crinkle with maturity baked for  
attention his eyes, dirty-ice-blue wol-  
fed-down the diners

a hirsute forearm brow born chin-crops  
playing lured-games with the cowboy's cupid  
kissed lips A chimera of studded possibilities  
wild horses and ropes, roil in the viewer's mind

the flash-blackened orbs reflect a headshot-  
the photographer back-lit by noon, skulking.  
The He man's irises, apertures unblinking  
reveal the voyeur's head and shoulders hidden  
within finger poised on the button

unfulfilled the desire to make him smile  
eats into the slices of glass separating the man  
from the meet. His parallel arms bar  
further invasion

# Beach 1958

A short  
trolley bus ride  
along  
Montrose Avenue  
to Broadway,  
end of the line.

A long  
three block walk  
to the beach  
past brick apartments,  
pulling my mother's hand  
until the trees and park  
are visible.

The sand is hot  
the lake is cold

but it doesn't matter,

nearby  
a white Nike Missile station  
behind a cyclone fence  
radiates  
a constant hum  
of the radar antennae  
which rotates slowly,

but it doesn't matter,

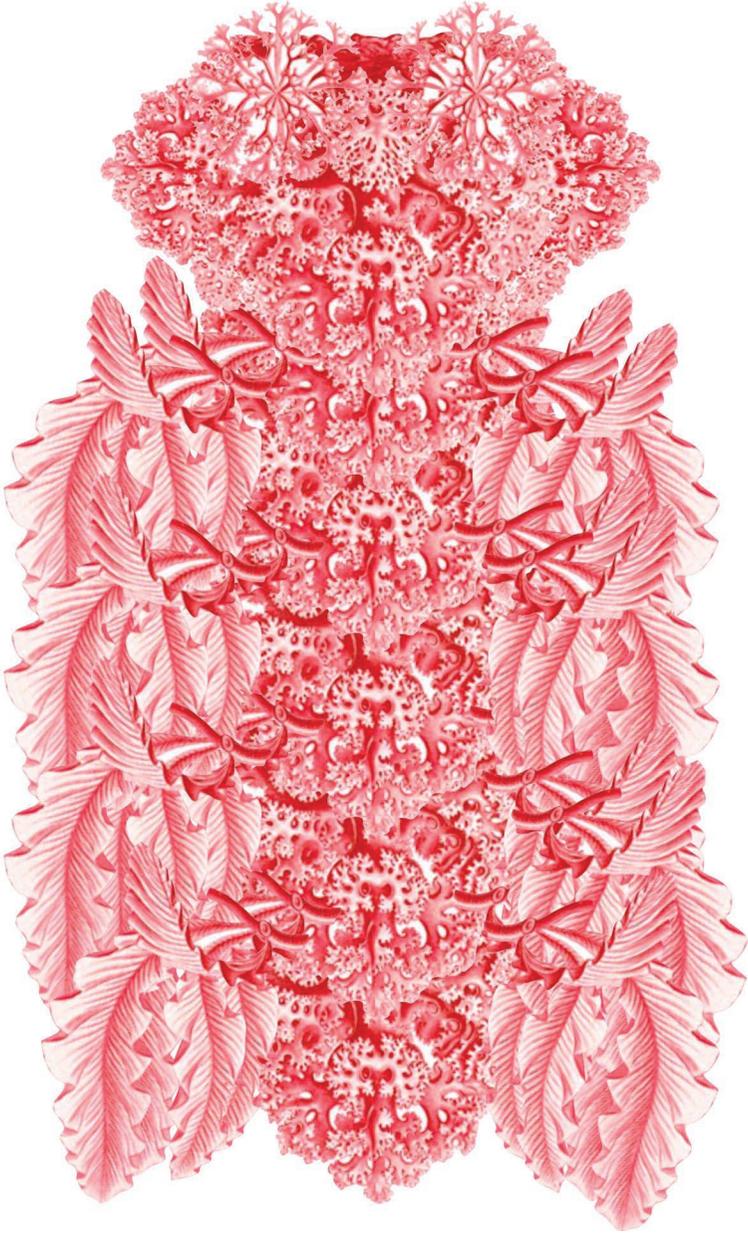
splashing is fun  
waving to mom.

A long shadow  
casts upon America 1958  
people gaze at the  
black and white sky  
with plastic sunglasses  
in wonder  
and fear,

but it doesn't matter,

tuna sandwich is good  
sun is warm  
in living color.

# The Manifestation of a Protoplasmic Vortex



# The Reasons I Won't Be Coming

Are numerous, and besides, I would hate to interrupt such a beautiful rendition of “Wind Beneath My Wings,”

your fingers gliding over the keys like a falcon in flight as if you felt my spirit billowing under your hands,

the notes rising and falling through the hall, cascading, stormlike, over the mourners. So young

and you refuse to cry like the rest. When I was still able to articulate my thoughts, I suggested the song might be

too advanced for you, but it was my favorite and you spent all your free time polishing the piece,

insisting that only in its true splendor would my voice emerge, would it waft on the melody, drift into your ear like a secret—

we had always confided in each other, after all. There were other signs you devised while I was dozing

which you noted down in flamboyant curlicues: a picture toppling to the floor, a gum wrapper tossing about

in the otherwise still air, a faint kiss on the nape of your neck, raising goosebumps. These are tricks you must learn

once you've attained your celestial powers, you lectured. I realized you had seen one too many episodes

of Ghost Whisperer but didn't say as much. Outside,  
a flock of sparrows alighted on a branch, shaking loose

autumn leaves. I fell silent for a spell, watching  
red and orange and yellow figures flutter toward the earth.

Soon, their skin would crack and scatter, leaving but a skeleton  
of their former glory. You caught me in the blur of your eye

and I nodded, despite myself. I never believed in your  
afterlife, in your winding staircase scattered with lily petals,

your flossy angel's wings, even as I lay in my hospital bed,  
eyes closed, furrowed body curling into its chrysalis

to await transformation, even as light poured into the container  
my soul would soon relinquish. Now, I'd love nothing more

than to spread my wings, supple as a butterfly's, come to rest  
on your shoulder, give you reason to say: I told you so.

Instead, I regard you from afar, from this inexplicable place,  
the music wafting over me, your tears beginning to splash

onto the keys. After the grief, the rage, after the desolation  
will come freedom. How could I, in death, ever deprive you

of life? As the last stark note skims across the silence  
you look up, into the swell of faces, oblivious to my applause.

I study your visage, a more exquisite copy of my own,  
and I know you understand the reasons I won't be coming.

# Sailing

the wind fills me  
like a sail  
enters my nose  
mouth  
skin  
every opening

propels me down the street  
till my feet are only going  
through the motions

jacket flapping  
hair flying back  
like a signal flag  
on a mast  
spelling out its message

this is why I grew it long again  
short hair had nothing  
to leave in the wind

I will not take the wheel  
for once  
I will not steer

# Riding on the Bus

Riding on the bus  
some June day riding  
through some steamy  
down and out metropolis,  
blocks and blocks of it;  
dirty streets,  
blasts of hot air assail us;  
it's high noon all the time  
seems to be;  
we passengers  
slouch in the seats;  
shorts and t-shirts,  
halters and summer dresses,  
bare arms and legs  
glisten in the heat.

Next to my hairy right thigh  
my groceries wilt,  
forlorn in their paper bag.

He's got the mumbles,  
some guy in front of me,

crazy.

Riding on the bus,  
we look out;  
looking for trouble  
bad boys on the corner  
whistling Dixie  
count the hours;  
faithful tenements  
await the night and violence.  
But for the moment  
windows open, tenants at work;  
nobody's looking  
for a throat to be cut.

Riding on the bus  
past pale green awnings  
half-shading yellow store glass  
we creep along;  
a girl in a white sundress,  
standing, swaying,  
hangs on the bus strap;  
her armpits sweat  
Diana's half-moons,  
twin dark crescents  
down her dress.  
I look and look at her;  
she's pretty and her skin,  
luminous in this light,  
could be very nearly  
painted by Monet;  
her existence  
made for his brush.

Riding on the bus,  
up-street, down-street,  
give a glance,  
watch the streetwalkers  
prance, display their wares,  
on the lookout  
for the tricks of the trade.  
Sweet Jesus, you sweaty slatterns,  
we don't care about you,  
we don't judge  
what you do for a living;  
go to it and good luck.

Riding on the bus  
we watch other things;  
the street repairs,  
the chattering jackhammers,  
the laborers' rackety work,  
they don't give a hoot  
who sees or hears  
nor do we really care  
about the life, the landscape  
we pass, heedless  
and numb to it all;  
it's there and not there,  
bound as we always are  
for someplace else.

Riding on the bus,  
dim lumbering barge  
by day or night,  
each window waiting  
for a Christ  
to be framed in it,  
something more than  
a self-portrait of  
boredom and constraint;  
something more than  
the breath of life all but lost  
in the limbo  
behind the dirty glass.

# Uncontained Thunderstorm

The tree roots oozed  
slippery like octopus tentacles  
sprawling over the edge  
to hunt

parched cement cracks  
sandwiched between roots below  
embedded with roots above  
dehydrating

They are dying of thirst  
broken wildflowers trampled in the rain  
and nothing can be held  
secure

Not rocks or runoff  
everything flows to the sea  
torrents swallowed into currents  
boulders crowding the floor

and the taste of mud suffocates  
all the squids and the sea

# BEING

Banal, the boring uselessness of progress  
Edging ever forward toward an unknown goal  
Insistent on righteousness in the vacuum of space-time  
Nodding to the smaller we's less engulfed in the weave  
Grinning like a madman on the way to Nirvana.

# Across the Blue Divide

Catamarans are useless in  
transporting refugees from war.

Desperate sails are spotted by  
coast guards miles away.

Double-hulled creatures make  
fantastic jigsaw puzzle portraits,  
but their tradeoff between speed  
and carrying capacity, described  
scientifically as

$$\text{Fn}_V = \frac{u}{\sqrt{gV^{1/3}}}$$

holds no quarter with warlords  
who have them in their  
crosshairs. I've cruised on a  
wave-piercing catamaran. Felt  
like I could touch Jupiter. But  
Jupiter and freedom aren't the  
same, not with bullets airmailed  
to your location.

# Shiva

I thought about the woman living in the crawlspace under my aunt's apartment building. I was sixteen, standing at the corner store, staring at my cousin's picture in the newspaper. The memory just popped in my head. Maybe it was because Andre made the same face in the photo when we saw her under the building: fear, but also a bit of anguish, like the woman's life was a burden he had to carry. I felt the same for him at that moment, staring at his picture on the front page. He'd wasted his life.

The summer before my cousin, Andre, started high school, the summer before my sixth-grade year, Andre and my aunt came across the street from their apartment to our bungalow most nights, my mother and aunt playing cards, sipping soda and gin, talking shit about our fathers. Me and Andre played in the neighborhood with the other kids, a fingernail moon hanging in the summer sky, cicadas singing love songs.

We played hide and seek outside Andre's apartment the night before school started.

Mitch, an eight-year-old who lived around the corner, whose hand-me-down shirts were cov-

ered in little balls of wearing fabric, reeking of stale Camels, was the youngest, forced to be 'it' every night. Mitch smiled gap teeth under his bowl cut, stubby fingers covering his eyes, waiting for Andre, the oldest, to spin him in circles while the other kids ran to hide, hands over their mouths to stifle laughter. When Mitch was good and dizzy, Andre would sprint through the field, leaving the boy to count to twenty before peeking.

Andre hit his growth spurt that summer, his arms and legs waving awkwardly as he ran. We met behind the building.

"Kevin," Andre said, motioning for me to follow.

He led me around the corner to a small opening leading underneath to the building's foundation. We crawled down on our hands and knees, dirt smudging my blue jeans.

"He'll never find us down here," Andre said, voice cracking, before hitting his head on a stud above him. He hadn't adjusted to his new body. We sat in the dark, the light of a flood lamp mounted on the wall outside poured yellow through the exit, a sour smell lingering in the darkness behind us.

“What’s that smell?” I asked Andre.

“I don’t know. Maybe something died down here?”

“Ain’t nobody dead,” rumbled from the darkness behind us. My heart skipped a beat, needles running across my skin. I could feel my cheeks turning red.

“Who’s that?” Andre asked to the darkness, after a couple of breaths.

“Who’s that?” rumbled back, “and what you doing down here, anyway?”

“We’re hiding,” I said nervously, and Andre nudged me to stay quiet.

“Hiding, huh?” the voice said, “hiding from what?”

“We’re sorry. We’ll leave now.” Andre said and started toward the exit.

“At least tell me your name. I seen you out there, playing your games, running these fields all hours of the night.” There was movement, a rustle getting closer.

“Andre, and this is Kevin.”

“Pleasure,” sounded only a foot or so away. The flame of a lighter exposed a round face. It was a lady, despite long whiskers protruding from the chin and lips. A long shawl covered a bulbus, naked frame, laying stomach down in the dirt, a towel wrapped around her head. She smiled dirty teeth and let

out a sigh, foul breath hitting my nostrils.

Andre grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the exit, dragging me back into the crisp summer air. We ran, Mitch spotting us in the field, “Found you!” he cried, pointing at us, but we didn’t stop.

We sprinted across the street into my kitchen. Our mothers sat at the table, dropping spades, sipping gin, 100s burning in a glass ashtray.

“What’s wrong?” they asked in unison as we clung to their breasts.

“She’s down there,” I said, pointing toward the door.

“Who?” my aunt asked.

“A woman underneath our building. In the space under the building,” Andre was panting.

My aunt walked across the street to get the building super, Franklin. Franklin waddled his large body around the corner outside, flashlight in one hand, baseball bat in the other.

“What’re you gonna do with that?” my mother asked, pointing toward the bat.

“It’s just to scare them. Most of the time you just gotta pound the walls a little and they leave.”

“Has this happened before?” I asked.

“She’s not the first,” Franklin said, shining the flashlight into the darkness underneath the apartment.

“You just going to shine the light in, or are going in to get her?” Andre asked.

“You wanna go back in and get her?” Franklin said with a smile, sclera a deep yellow under the flood light. Andre stayed silent.

She didn’t come out that night, even after Franklin yelled into the crawlspace to no response, scuffing the white siding of the building with a few pounds of the bat.

“If she’s still under there, she ain’t coming out. Probably wait ‘til we leave,” Franklin said, lungs heavy from the motion of swinging the bat, a drip of sweat running down his temple.

The next day, after school, while it was still light out, me and Andre went back to the opening, armed with our own flashlight. We poked our heads in, shining the beam in the darkness, searching for the woman. She was gone. All that was left was an old blanket bunched in the corner, covered in dirt.

We pulled our heads out and stood up, Andre asked how my first day of school was as he walked back to his apartment.

“Okay, I guess,” I told him, noticing the hint of a mustache poking-out above his lip, “you coming by tonight?”

He walked me to my front door, telling me he wouldn’t be

coming over that night, lighting a cigarette. I’d never seen him smoke; he held it awkwardly between two fingers. He said he was meeting some friends from his high school, that he’d see me some other time.

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I didn’t see Andre for a couple of months. Me and my mother were walking to Fresh Farms on Devon, where mom said the Arabs sold the best fish “straight from the Mediterranean, no farm raised bullshit,” she reiterated on our walk, “They do it right.”

It was cold by then, the wind icy, forcing a single tear to freeze in the corner of my eye. We walked straight to the fish counter in the back of the store, the smell of sumac and vanilla wafting up my nose. My mother argued prices with the man behind the counter. He couldn’t have been older than sixteen, nervous eyes wandering in search of help, a missing canine gave the impression he’d already lived a lifetime.

There was a falafel shop around the corner that sold the best sumac fries in the neighborhood, so I decided to grab a quick order while my mother haggled for the fish.

I turned the corner on Clark, walking another block, passing the alley behind Fresh Farms. I noticed his Bulls pullover, the one

he found in his brother's closet after he left the house. He was standing with a couple other guys, one around his age with braids, another with a full beard that looked a lot older. They were passing around a bottle.

"Andre," I shouted.

His head turned slowly, a smile creeping across his face.

"Hey little cousin," he said.

He'd never called me that before. When I got up close, I noticed a cigarette burning between his fingers.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Loan me twenty dollars," the boy with braids asked me.

"This is my cousin, man. Leave him alone," Andre said.

"What are you doing?" I asked, noticing a speck of drool coming from the corner of his mouth.

"How old are you?" the man with the beard said.

"Twelve."

"What school you go to?" he asked, pulling from the bottle. "My son is seven, goes to West Ridge."

"Clifton," I told him.

The boy with braids laughed and took the bottle, "He's a man," he said, stumbling back, leaning against the building. "Try this," he handed me the plastic fifth.

"Don't give this kid any gin," the man with the beard said.

I took the bottle, a couple of heavy gulps, before the next mouthful erupted onto the asphalt. I gagged, holding my stomach, saliva pouring from my mouth. The guys laughed, even the older one, patting me on the back.

"What the fuck is this?" my mom shouted from the street, marching down the alley, a shopping bag in each hand.

She looked at me hunched over, at the bottle in Andre's hand.

"This is what you show your cousin?" she said to him, "Wait until your mother hears about this." They all started laughing, my mother grabbing me by the wrist, cursing me out the entire way back to our bungalow.

I was grounded for a week. But a few days later, when my mother had to work late, Andre knocked on the door, asking if mom was here.

"She's working a double," I told him.

"My friends having a party. Get your jacket."

For the next couple years, I followed Andre around every day after school. He introduced me to people in the neighborhood. He seemed to know everyone.

\*\*\*

I walked to the corner store a couple blocks away from my mom's house, bought some ciga-

rettes at the counter. On a rack next to the cash register was the newspaper, *Three Dead on The Northside* printed on the front page above Andre's picture.

*Andre Thompson (22) was arrested for first degree murder in the early morning hours of May 15<sup>th</sup>.*

*Thompson reportedly fatally shot his girlfriend, Melissa Hayworth (18), along with her parents Mary Hayworth-Mitchell (42) and Donald Hayworth (47).*

*Police responded to a call of shots fired at the Hayworth home and found Thompson at the scene, reportedly in a state of confusion.*

*Phencyclidine (PCP) was found on Thompson at the time of the arrest. The murder weapon was later recovered behind the washing machine in the family basement.*

Her parents, they never liked each other, but Melissa, too? I read her name over and over, making sure it was her. I felt sick to my stomach. I thought it must have been an accident, something had just gone wrong. He was head over heels in love with her.

I remember when he brought her home to meet his mother. My aunt came over to our house the night after, having a few cocktails with mom, telling her about "this little girl Andre started bringing around."

She told us he just strolled through the door of the apartment after being gone for a couple of days, clutching the nervous girl's hand and introducing her.

"She's young," was all my aunt said.

Andre was eighteen by that point, and Melissa couldn't have been older than fourteen. She was shy but beautiful, blond hair running down her back, a tank top hugging her body. Andre held her close, "We're in love," he said sternly.

My aunt thought it over, batting at her hair for a moment, wiggling her toes into the carpet. She looked them up and down before deciding it was a lost cause and invited Melissa and her parents over for dinner the following week.

My aunt spent the day before Melissa and her family were coming to dinner scrubbing the house clean, choosing the best catfish to fry, buying top shelf gin.

She lit a few candles and set them on the table in the kitchen, waiting for the doorbell in a sun dress, matching nails shined red in open toed heels.

When the doorbell finally rang, two tired looking middle-aged folks in church clothes stood outside the door. My aunt invited them in, offering drinks, which they declined. Neither introduced themselves or offered my aunt a hand.

They sat at the table, she apologized for the extra seats, "I thought Andre and Melissa were coming for dinner, too," she said, setting a catfish fillet on each plate.

The blond mother stayed silent, her hands in her lap, looking down at the catfish. The father sat with his elbows on the table, an act Andre had been slapped for many times.

My aunt asked again if they wanted a drink as she sipped her gin and soda.

"We won't be staying long," the father said, the mother's eyes still pointed to the plate.

"I take it you aren't here for dinner," my aunt said, lighting a 100, deciding it was time to put pleasantries aside.

"You seem like a fine woman, but our Melissa's future is, well, she's going places that don't exactly align with Andre. Maybe this is something I could speak with his father about?"

My aunt blew a cloud of menthol across the table.

"Okay," the father said, "Well, I need you to make sure Andre stays away from Melissa, and the two just go on their separate ways."

"You'd have better luck talking to him yourself. Man to man."

The father sighed, "Yes, well, I've spoken to Andre about things, and he doesn't seem to understand. That's why we decided to come tonight, hoping you'd see our point."

My aunt swallowed a chunk of fish she'd taken from her plate, "I'm not sure you've made a point."

Melissa's father sat silently for a moment before grabbing his wife's wrist and leading her to the door.

My aunt pulled their plates across the table as they walked out of the apartment. There was no use wasting good catfish.

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I was sitting at a card table at T.J.'s a week after I saw Andre's picture. T.J. was a Vice Lord. He was the kind of guy who showed off his old Statesville I.D.

"Look how big I was, Kev," he said, the laminated card shining under fluorescent light.

I wondered if he carried it with him everywhere, waiting to show off the I.D. to the unsuspecting, or if he just put it on display for the younger guys coming around.

"Yeah, T.J., you were big," I said between drags of a Pall Mall, rubbing the sweat from my eyes.

It was hot, the cigarette's smoke hung in the humidity, fans hummed around the room, my elbows resting on the card table. We passed a bottle of gin back and

forth, every time T.J. finished a drink and stretched across the table his joints cracked, and the scent of his body came with the liquor.

I pulled from the bottle and took a sip of soda to wash it down. The high-pitched yelp of his dog came from a large kennel in the corner of the living room.

“Can I pet your dog?” I asked, knowing what his response would be. T.J. smiled crooked teeth, patting the tightly woven braids on his head with an open palm.

“Fuck no,” he said.

“C’mon, man. We’re friends,” the gin was really getting to get to me, I was trying to forget about Andre, “You’re like my brother,” I said, waving the cigarette in the air.

“If I ever need Shiva to bite you, I don’t want her to like you,” he said, motioning for me to pass him the bottle.

“Where’d you get that name?” I asked, “You don’t look like the religious type.”

T.J.’s eyes narrowed, “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Oh, yeah. Like that time you were in Statesville?” I said with smile.

T.J. shook his head, cursing under his breath.

“How’s Andre doing,” he asked me.

I shrugged, silent, eyes pointed to the floor. Mom kept

telling me I needed to visit, start writing him, but I couldn’t, not yet, I needed to get my head straight.

“I wrote a couple buddies about him. He’s going to be fine,” T.J. said.

“Mind your business,” I told him, pulling from the warm fifth before deciding I needed a nap, the wooden stairs moaning under me as I left T.J.’s apartment.

I walked the couple of blocks back home, passing the opening of the crawlspace under my aunt’s apartment where we had seen the woman all those years ago, staring up at the window to her living room. The light was on. I hit the button and she buzzed me in, not asking who it was.

She sat on the couch taken from my grandmother after she died, plastic preserving its original upholstery. Her feet resting on the coffee table, drink in her hand, but it didn’t look like there was any soda in the glass, and the gin certainly wasn’t top shelf.

“Sit, Kev,” she said to me, patting the seat next to her, “You hear about it?”

I nodded.

“I should have known it was coming. Not this, exactly, but something. His father was the same way,” she sipped her drink, brushed braids from her face, “You should have seen his father when I brought

him home to meet my parents,” she chuckled, shaking her head, “My daddy and him on the front lawn, screaming like a couple children, rolling around in the mud.”

“Where is he now, Andre’s dad?” I asked.

“Same place Andre’s going. Same place you’ll go, too,” she dragged her cigarette, smoke filling the living room.

I noticed a photo hanging above the television across the room, a cheap frame displaying an elementary school photo of Andre, bright eyes shining under a flat top and above a gap tooth smile. I remembered when he took it, when his mother came to our kitchen to show off how handsome her son was. I thought of a similar photo of me hanging in the living room of our bungalow across the street. I wondered if Melissa’s parents had a photo of her hanging in their living room.

I plucked a cigarette from the pack on the coffee table, inhaling deeply, blowing my own cloud of smoke into the air, wondering what ever happened to the woman living in the crawlspace under the building all those years ago, if her mother ever kept a picture of her hanging in the living room.

\*\*\*

T.J.’s girlfriend, Ashley, walked through the door of their

apartment the next night, me and T.J. back at the card table with a bottle of gin. Ashley had a waitress uniform wrapped around her thin body.

“Working hard, fellas?” she asked on her way to the back, “Don’t think about finishing that bottle before I get out of the shower,” she called from the bathroom before the water turned on.

I asked T.J. what he was doing today. I gave him twenty dollars for another bottle of gin. He walked out of the apartment before his girlfriend got out of the shower.

Ashley emerged wearing a towel. She was younger than T.J., not much older than me. She sat in his seat across the table, curling her index finger, an indication to pass her the bottle. Ashley poured the remainder into a glass and went through half of it in a couple of drinks.

“Where’d he go?” she finally asked.

“Ran to the store,” I said, “Hey, can I pet Shiva?”

Ashley looked at me and smiled. She walked to the kennel, her body still wet from the shower, small footprints dabbed the fake hardwood.

She opened the cage door, Shiva bolting out, entire body wiggling. Shiva sniffed around a bit, heavy paws thumping against

the floor, muscle roping through the dog's body and up the bulk of her neck. She had to weigh at least seventy-five pounds.

Shiva came to me, cautious at first, sniffing my hands before licking my palms and flipping to her stomach at my feet, begging for affection.

Ashley kept watch for T.J. out the window while I sat on the couch, stroking Shiva's head, her body plopped on my lap, heart beating slowly, an occasional sigh of satisfaction pushed through her nose. When Ashley saw T.J. hit the stairs, we pushed Shiva back in the kennel before he came inside, the dog begging to come out into the world.

# Lids Off—Solo Cup LB316

## ***Caution Hot!***

my hands warm around the Styrofoam perimeter  
of the morning's black-gold, spiked with clouds of cream  
swirling like dust devil's in the desert

lightning strikes—widespread forest fires char  
2.6 million acres in the USA alone

Federal Emergency Management Agency  
& the Federal Communications Commission  
conduct nationwide tests of *the Emergency Alert System*

*a stark black & white scrolling message* brings back  
the Cuban missile crisis & a five-year old's cringe  
beneath a plastic desk on asbestos tiles

seen from space—fires on the Earth spread like cancerous  
growths 2.6 million acres of oxygen producing trees consumed

## ***Precaution Caliente!!***

the tip of my tongue scalds in empathy as caffeine's  
speed induces fretting—

tattooed numbers in blue on  
pallid wrists, dance through my frontal lobes with  
swastika overlays—hurting for the latest purge of  
Trump-labeled foreigners ripped from sanctuary cities

the earth writhes—ripped apart in Florida by wind  
by water in Puerto Rico—cracked-open like a  
cyclist skull in Mexico

graves dug in Mexico City—bodies buried in rubble;  
thirst & hunger haunt the citizens of Puerto Rico  
they drink groundwater & bath in filth

***Attention Chaudé!***

age & mental illness combine to attack American school girls  
in Marseilles, France—hydrochloric acid erodes their skin  
*some like it hot*—as we can see by the *my dick's bigger  
than your dick* scenarios going on around the globe.

bile burns my esophagus—just another cup of joe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

# Purple

—*In memory of Prince Rogers Nelson*

To have seen you once, live, awash in purple  
glitter, ruffles billowing against your chest like

sea foam, or sequins cascading over your body,  
a lightning bolt flashing gold in a purple sky,

the apocalypse of your creation. If it had all ended in  
1999, I would have died happy, dancing away my life.

To have run, laughing, through a mist-filled  
concert hall, through the electric storm of your voice,

your words raining down on me, raining into me  
as you flung your head back, did the twirl, &

dropped into a death-defying split. To have heard  
the cry of a thousand flailing doves as you

materialized on stage, sheathed in white lace,  
crooning declarations of love so naked I trembled,

so wet I touched my lover in the places that made her  
call out my name, your bare chest heaving as you

watched us through the mystical glow of your eyes,  
grinning as you clicked your high heels to the throb

of our hearts, not quite a ménage à trois but  
the fingers of your songs strumming our bodies

from dusk till dawn, the tongue of your lyrics  
lingering in our mouths long after we kissed.

You said time was a construct of the mind;  
I thought it was an interminable river that would

one day carry me to the heart, soul, & breath  
of your music kingdom. We all have our fantasies

& this was mine. Then you were gone.  
Now, when I ride an elevator to the top floor

or a red Corvette speeds down the highway;  
when horses stampede through my dreams;

when I lie naked in a bed of violet petals  
or butterflies flutter in my belly & especially

during a storm, when the rain colors me all shades  
of purple & I want to hum your songs back to you,

I believe you must be godding it in the afterworld,  
playing a piano ballad on the keys of the Milky Way;

you must be rapping on the Big Dipper with your  
sticks, moving me to swing my hips.

At times I steal a glimpse of your mountain  
in the sky, where you stand, mighty and high,

a sparkling guitar strapped over your shoulder,  
trilling our tears away, bathing us in your purple rain.

# Oxygen

I didn't realize  
I was suffocating  
until the pure oxygen  
of having nothing to do today  
filled every cell  
and sent them floating  
to the surface

like champagne celebration bubbles  
or red balloons carrying me  
across a sky-blue sky

I didn't realize  
I was suffocating  
until I breathed the air up there

*don't look down*  
I keep telling myself  
*don't look down*

there are no facts  
on the ground

# Sunny Day

This sunny day  
not enough  
seeming transparent  
flimsy as a paper kite,  
it's a pretense, a hoax;  
the sun's a bright enough joke  
to poke through  
its evanescent scenery.

Only one child  
under the bright sun  
plays alone  
in the garden;  
beyond the garden gate  
well lost in the wide world

the playground is empty.

# Diagnosis C

Russian roulette with a  
rusty pistol  
walking blind  
on a frayed tightrope  
above toxic waters  
slow and unseen.

The loss is immense  
without a glance,  
all sunrises forgotten  
but truly longed for.

A whisper  
that irritated before,  
now a kiss of forgiveness,  
atonement  
a silent plea  
gives hope  
or death  
the air thick with soot  
a sidewalk slippery and  
dangerous  
yet I still meander  
with one eye closed  
hoping for a remission  
of fear.

# Karmic Three's

fear kites my throat, its wood-cross  
bars the upward movement of bile,

aleness clamps each orifice

abdominal cramps contest with backwash

enclosed like a spotted koi whose  
scales rub the tub's rim, emotion  
fins, weakening musculature

three, age-crusted, coins  
banded together with red string  
hang from the household keys  
brass coins, their square centers  
provide egress to the larger world  
of boxes blessed and unblessed

# Crown Shy

crown shy trees  
leave a space between  
so their neighbors can feel  
the sun, the rain, a breeze  
they do not compete  
for these resources

no throwing shade  
breaking limbs  
in winter winds  
there are no winners  
there are no losers

crown shy trees  
leave room at the top  
I look up and see  
rivers of air running through  
their lacy canopies

and wish everyone could be  
this nice as each of us reach  
for our piece of the sky

# Saltfish

In Trinidad, they salt fish. Cods.  
Typically ensnared in seines. In  
bubbly gill-speak, we curse the  
manufacturers of nylon for being.

Hauled to weary beaches like  
Italian mobsters in a dragnet.  
Natives without refrigeration  
will gut us, bury our memories,

prostrate our flesh on fig leaves,  
salted, in the roaring Caribbean  
sun. After three days, marry us to  
tomatoes and chilies like dowried

virgins, christen us *Saltfish Buljol*,  
then feed us to the enemy for  
breakfast. We had friends in carete  
and mackerel who exacted revenge

by jamming their needles for bones  
into unsuspecting gums. We're not  
sculpted the same. The least we  
can offer is a pungency abhorred  
by tourists. Maybe that's enough.

# Driving Home from the Hospital

If she could stay awake long enough to make it home, there might be eggs in the fridge. Maybe, just maybe. She would boil a couple, shower, and go to bed. The next time she got to the store she would buy several loaves of bread. She recalled reading an article about a man who survived over thirty years on bread and water alone. She could freeze bread. She'd stock up on some as soon as possible. She didn't have the time or energy to mess with meals.

Checking her rearview mirror, she noticed a pickup accelerating behind her, drawing almost close enough to kiss her rear bumper. She checked her speedometer. She didn't dare go much faster than 55. No way could she afford a ticket. The hospital bills were far beyond what they could handle already. A ticket might land them in the poorhouse. The pickup driver would get a lesson in patience tonight whether he wanted one or not.

He honked his horn. She set her cruise to four miles over the speed limit. Her friend had been ticketed at five miles over not long ago, but she'd never heard of four miles over causing trouble.

Again, he honked his horn. This time he held it down for effect. She felt tears on her cheeks. Two more

miles. The oncoming traffic didn't look like it would let up to allow him to pass. Even at this late hour. If only there were room somewhere for her to pull over.

She reached her turn at last. The truck accelerated, and with a final, lengthy honk of his horn, he somehow missed scraping her rear bumper as he squealed past. Loosening her grip on her now-sweaty steering wheel, she held one hand up in front of her face and confirmed the shaking. No surprise there.

One deep breath. Exhale. She continued the last two blocks down her quiet street, driving under the speed limit now, reminding herself to breathe all the way. No other cars were out. The front lights at every home on the street were out for the night. The sight calmed her. How she loved their neighborhood.

Stepping from the garage to the back porch, the light detected her motion and seemed to welcome her home. Right before his hospitalization a few weeks ago, her husband had installed the new light. She smiled for a moment as she remembered the day.

Forget the man in the truck, she told herself. Forget the hospital bills. Two eggs and bed. That's it.

As she stood under the porch light exploring her handbag for the house key, she noticed a brown paper sack a few feet over to the right, leaning against the house. She bent down and picked it up after peeking inside. Turning on the kitchen light, she set the bag on the table and removed her jacket after double-checking she'd locked the door behind her. A clear zippered pouch perched on top revealed chocolate chip cookies. She took one out and inhaled slowly. It smelled delicious. She snuck a bite and then another. The note taped to the side read:

*Dee,  
We've been thinking of you and hoped a few groceries might help. I made beef stew for the family tonight and have included two small containers you can either refrigerate or freeze. Also, we guessed you might be able to use a quart of milk, a dozen eggs, some bread, and*

*coffee. My daughter baked cookies today so we've included some of those, too. Our Michael will tend to your grass until your husband is back home where he belongs.*

*We are praying. Much love to you and Kevin!*

*Your neighbor,  
Renee*

Dee opened the fridge to put the eggs away on the empty egg shelf. It didn't even register that she'd been out of eggs. She planned to enjoy beef stew for a late dinner tonight. The second serving would be perfect for tomorrow or the next night. And she'd freeze half the bread, she thought, as she pulled out a slice to go with her beef stew. And she would not give the pickup driver another thought. Not if she could help it.

# Silence

There are so many things I could say right now.  
The expletives would fly off my words

if I opened my mouth, if I released them.  
The daffodils know. Their colors have paled

under my glower. Their petals have curled and rocked  
like a small child, crestfallen after a scolding.

They cower as I approach with my pruning shears.  
It's not fair, but I need to clip something.

I could fill the sky with flocks of words, startling  
winged creatures migrating from south to north,

from the place in my stomach where my anger  
has been nesting to the place on my face where

they would alight, flapping and squawking,  
in search of sustenance. By sustenance

I don't mean worms or fish. It's blood I'm after.  
Words clash in mid-fight just like birds

clash in mid-flight, whirling around each other  
in a downward spiral. I once saw two bald eagles,

talons locked, descending through a treetop.  
Only one flew away, a rabbit wedged in its beak.

I, too, could spread my wings, crash through  
our sliding glass doors, into the kitchen where

she's hacking vegetables for salad, the knife landing  
within millimeters of her hand: a provocation.

This time, I could give her the duel she desires.  
I could claw at her arguments until they've become

as maimed and bloody as a dying rabbit. I could perch  
on the edge of my dignity, singing until she retreated.

In every burst of silence we die a thousand deaths.  
In silence, I hobble around our garden, wounded,

searching for my voice among petals and leaves,  
for all my voices that long to echo across the sky.

# The Smallness of It

I remember those so-called good old days in England, growing up after the war.

All the cars were small and black, and people walked and caught the bus.

We walked, so we were healthier back then, and food was still scarce, so we ate less, and it was still real food, not pseudo food like so much of it today.

Everyone smoked cigarettes though, even in the cinema, so many people had breathing problems, as well as arthritis from the cold, damp climate.

None of the houses had central heating, just a coal fireplace, or a coke-burning furnace that almost, but not quite, heated up a couple of rooms.

No heat in the bedrooms though. Frost on the inside of the panes and air so cold you could see it, like smoke, when you breathed out in the early morning.

Cleanliness was not so important back then either, or dental hygiene. Friday night was bath night, willy nilly, and English teeth are infamous.

Fridges were only just coming in, so milk turned sour, and butter rancid. But we went shopping for food more often back then, ate fresh food more than today.

My father grew vegetables in our garden too. Rhubarb by the compost heap, near the strawberry bed...oh those pies my mother used to make.

I grew up without a TV too, oh blessed days without the onslaught of CNN and all the other news channels drowning us with a tsunami of information.

No cell phones, no computers, just one family phone, often a party-line with the house next door. But we all talked to each other in those days.

Now we bear the burden of the world's problems as well as our own. I miss  
the  
more personal connection with friends and family, eyeball to eyeball, heart  
to heart.

Today we have soulless technology, dehumanizing us if we let it. A ma  
chine  
can never replace a warm voice and eyes which show their love for us.

I'm grateful for all the modern conveniences, for technology that makes  
our lives  
easier and healthier, but we've lost the simple side of life, the smallness of it.

# All Dolled-Up

Identity masked, a broken doll, now, beheaded  
stumped by senseless anger, disavowed, beheaded.

What girl child abandoned you here, rife for display  
without a shroud of disguise, sex denied, cowed, beheaded?

White pine, once used mass, dis-played, with needled nether land,  
your shaming suits the boar's need for a sow beheaded.

Unarmed doll, removed of tell-tale procreative parts  
what male has left this tart message whose prow's beheaded?

Marked by loss, masked by absence, clarion of the word  
can Eve learn a lesson from those who were disavowed, beheaded?



# A Pause in Time

The middle-aged janitor  
mopped the men's room

floor of the public library  
with grease. Drilled a hole

behind the mirror to view  
the circus. *Punk'd* inspired.

Normally staid. Cracked  
from the influence of

today. The history of Italy  
had stained his mind,

specifically, those bits about  
what to do when in Rome.

# Post Op

my heart is in my throat  
all of the time now  
as surely as if it were surgically  
transplanted there

sighs and whispers whistle down  
the empty cavity where it used to beat  
glimpses of my life flicker round its walls  
like some sort of retro slide show  
of growing up and growing old

my heart is in my throat  
all of the time now  
as surely as if it were surgically  
transplanted there

filling the passageway  
filtering words  
once spoken so easily now choke me  
when they come literally from the heart  
and it is broken

my heart is in my throat  
all of the time now  
you are the surgeon  
where are the post op post love drugs

# Conversations

I twirled the curly handset cord just as I'd have stretched a strand  
of watermelon bubblegum, which I'd have been chewing if  
I hadn't fingered the circular slots of the  
rotary phone the shade of black leather boots,  
hearing the dial spin six times and then that  
confident teenage soprano  
with no trace of the Romanian syllables you'd spoken before you learned words  
like  
"Fountainhead" and "butt."  
We'd reached the age for pubic hair but not for legal contracts,  
and late nights-after Voltaire had been parsed and calculus had been cursed at—  
you sorted a basket of then-virginal angst over the older guy who visited you  
at work at Baskin Robbins and called you his multilingual mystery girl,  
or you fumed about your father who'd pissed out the home fires  
before absconding to the big city yet showed up at your church  
the way a cockroach creeps across a birthday cake.  
So I revealed the splotches of guilt oozing from behind an  
antiseptic plaster of perfectionism I'd slapped on to stanch  
the freakishness of misfitting in a family of Mennonite monoliths as a  
restless pervert hiding behind a bulwark of prayer books and lilacs.  
Now you're a competent adolescent psychiatrist while I've  
graduated to nightmares at noon.

# Contingencies of a Summer Night

If only a bolt of summer lightning hadn't hit a substation  
near Indian Point.

If only Son of Sam hadn't shot innocent kids our age (dark-haired girls  
especially)

who were parked in cars after disco dancing or bar hopping to catch live  
music.

If only we weren't warned to stay inside because he was getting too close to  
home

If only my parents hadn't gone to Vermont on vacation  
and left me alone with my pothead brother

If only my pothead brother (who wasn't really that bad, c'mon)  
hadn't had his band over the house for rehearsal (close to home)

If only his friend Billy, who worked at the Mobil gas station  
on Richmond Avenue, hadn't brought his friend along to listen

If only Sal and Judy had listened to their anxious parents  
and hadn't gone out dancing

If only Sal and Judy went right home instead of doing what kids do  
after a night of drinking and dancing

If only Son-of-Sam hadn't shot them with his delusional .44 caliber gun in  
his macho stance

If only there hadn't been a second lightning strike and if only Ravenswood 3,  
the biggest generator in New York City sometimes called Big Allis, hadn't  
shut down the entire New York City power grid

If only I had finished curling my hair with the curling iron  
and didn't have half a head of black curly hair and half  
a head of straight

If I hadn't been already dressed up in a white summer peasant blouse and  
ruffled red skirt

If only I hadn't just put on my brand-new red platform shoes I had yet to  
practice walking in

If only I hadn't decided to look like a girl with cherry lip gloss and dangling earrings

just to defy the Son of Sam and go to bars with my girlfriends to hear music and see boys.

If only at that moment the lights went out I hadn't stormed out of my bedroom to yell at my pothead brother and his friends for blowing a fuse (or so I thought)

If only I had practiced walking on those red platform shoes,

I wouldn't have tripped over the feet of a boy with long legs and big feet

If only he hadn't picked me up just as the lights sputtered on for a minute long enough for us to see each other's startled faces

If only I were able to go out but because the New York City grid went down and the Son of Sam was now out there somewhere in the dark

I wouldn't have collided with the father of my children

I wouldn't have these children who made me know love.

If not for the boy with the long legs who gave them to me

and if they had not been girls who I knew would not, no *could not just* be girls with cherry lip gloss and high heels

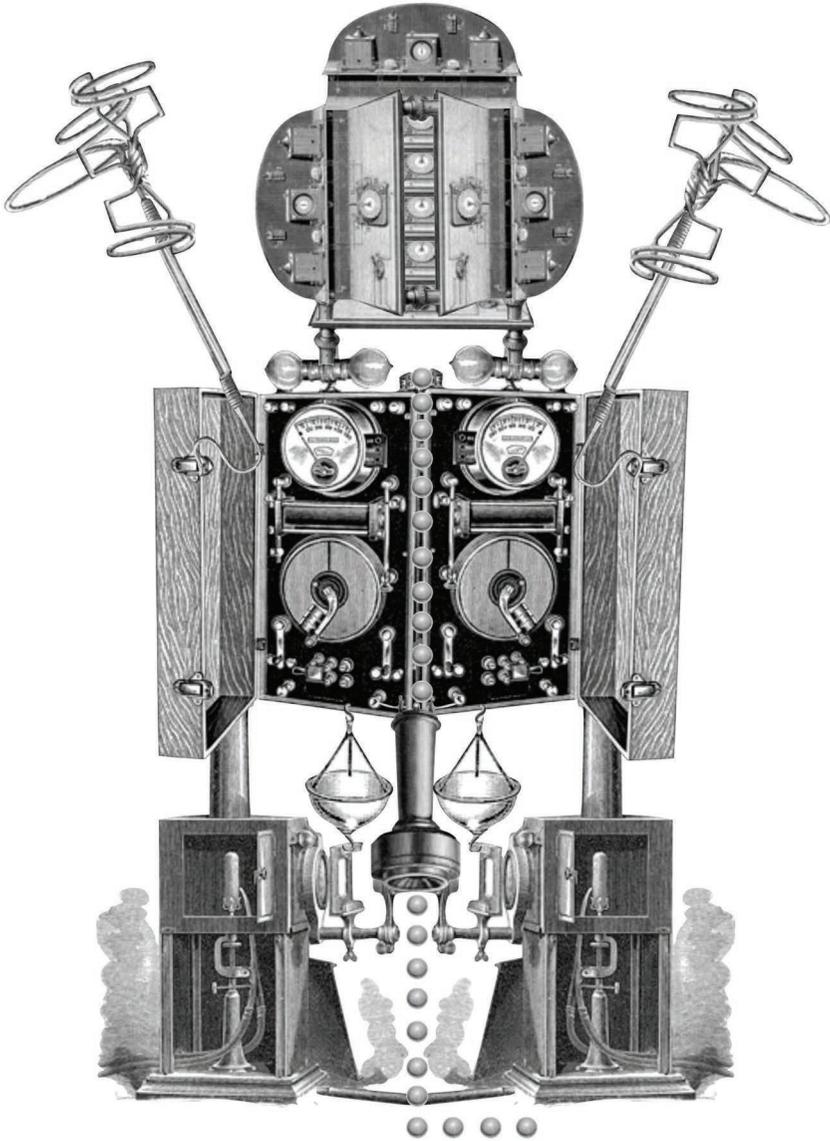
I might have just been satisfied to stay a dream-besotted girl

who just wanted to hear music, stare at boys, and gaze into the hazy darkness

as I did on that steamy July night in the summer of Sam.

But I didn't.

# Equipped for the Paradoxical Continuum



# Cross My Heart

As young girls, we would lay  
our secrets out like corpses,  
split them open, dissecting each other's  
lives with the solemnity of scientists  
then cross stitch them back together  
with a promise: never to tell a soul.  
*And hope to die*, we would chant  
as we buried all those trivial  
elementary school confessions deep  
in the earth of your backyard or mine.

When you were going through  
your Whitmanesque phase,  
I spent an entire day weaving you  
a bracelet out of blades of grass.  
You kept me up night after night,  
reciting verses into the receiver  
but I stifled my yawns, let you rattle on,  
because that's what best friends do:  
weave bracelets and suffer  
through lousy poetry readings.

I lied for you, time after time,  
so your parents wouldn't discover  
you were in detention for jabbering.  
When you noticed a suspicious red stain  
on the back of my white jeans  
you steered me to the nurse's station,  
pressing into me from behind.  
That is how it was between us.

So when she left a note in my locker,  
I entrusted you with my longest kept  
secret, the seed of which had been sprouting  
for years. I divulged my hopes, my fears,  
my intentions, and you're the only person  
in the world to whom I would have  
confided everything the next morning,  
had you asked. I would have said

it was my awakening, the sun rising  
through me, lighting up the darkest  
of nooks; it was the first kiss I had been  
rehearsing on my hand for years;  
it was my initiation into womanhood,  
the fireworks I had been envisioning  
since I botched that science project  
in sixth grade, all my fault for getting high  
on her vanilla-scented hair. It was  
the press of her fingertips on my back,  
our spare breasts touching, only just.

I would have told you the earth quaked,  
that entire civilizations plummeted  
to the center of the planet, and that  
as we stood, breathless, overlooking the lake,  
my body tingled in places I didn't realize  
existed. How was I to know my best friend  
had trailed me to the park, iPhone in hand?

Nowadays, you don't wear short skirts  
and carry pompoms, get tipsy at house parties,  
let oversexed boys grope you at school dances  
while I spend my afternoons at the park,  
overlooking the lake, heart split in half,  
barely beating, as if it were under knife point.  
Surely nobody wants to die, not really.  
But here I am, alone, daydreaming about  
death: yours and mine and hers.

# My Dearest

When I am dead, my dearest,  
you are free to roam  
and eat as much ice crème as you want  
leave all newspapers lying scattered on the floor  
it's all yesterday's news  
so is my obituary  
taken to the recycle center.

I am still present, my dearest,  
on another plane  
beyond our boxy reality  
maybe I'll have some help  
to guide you over the grief.

When I am dead, my dearest,  
The moon will be cast in shadow  
Jupiter moons will rotate  
So will the earth  
again and again.

# Flying Snail

Dark rain lifted the yellow snail kiddie pool  
from its perch on the swing set platform  
and hurtled it into the farthest-flung  
corner of the yard. It's fun to imagine the snail's  
buck-toothed, goofy grin in the moment  
it slams into the cedar pickets.

Fun to imagine the sky throwing its dark  
tantrum overhead, and what if  
the branch-ripping wind had slipped  
a finger under the rubber dish and flipped it  
over those planks onto Duncan Road  
and a Ford F-150 had swerved

away the blurry yellow form ahead  
into a station wagon  
full of children's songs like *Where Is  
Thumbkin* or some such mayhem  
and the snail's smile could not  
have melted, the decal being frozen?  
Far from the hilarity of that, the small pool  
traveled only a few paces  
before the weight of rain gathering  
in its inflatable rubber lining slowed the snail  
to a crawl. Which is, in its own way,  
pretty fun to imagine.

# The Day After a Diagnosis

Three simple words,  
answered easily

Three simple words,  
breezily spoken

Three simple words,  
exchanged daily

Three simple words,  
How are you?

while I stand frozen

# That Blue Day

Cloudless, gilded rays of sunshine—  
azure? china blue? No.

That sky was a blue cat's-eye marble  
almost electric, a remarkable  
never-to-be-forgotten blue—  
a severe clear day.

So when the shadow fell  
(not shade but moving darkness)  
over the guys working outside  
of body shops on Harbor Road

So when that shadow unspooled  
over the men in dry dock whose  
tools clanked and whirred  
on unseaworthy boats

So when that shadow hurried over  
the mother who had just dropped  
her kids off at school,  
the mother whose daydreams  
of coffee and alone-time distracted her

heads, bent over work, snapped up  
feet stopped legs in mid-stride  
dreamy eyes glanced down at darkening  
pavement, then awed, rolled upward, riveted  
to a massive plane flying too fast, too low  
blocking the sunshine.

Jet engines roared like freight trains  
barreling right over their heads—  
all stood awed  
all were frozen  
all astonished mouths went slack.

Most thought they were dreaming  
still in bed, not outside  
on this golden Tuesday morning.

And they couldn't understand  
what they had just seen—  
a roaring jet so close to the ground?  
It raced over the harbor,  
flew past the Statue of Liberty,  
crossed over to Governor's Island,  
then banked around  
rolled left, oblique,  
aimed for the tower.

On that bright morning,  
a shadow passed over  
Staten Islanders like a dark angel,

signaling the start  
of a sorrowful tale  
written with the indelible  
ink of trauma.

# About the Falling

There is much one wants to know about  
the falling: Once it has started  
how to stop.

Asking for a friend.

Once it has started how  
can it end?

One grasps for all simple explanations,  
much as pithy, anonymous  
apothegms were assimilated  
to Confucius with the  
packaging tag,  
“The Master said.”

About the falling, I have found  
a thorough guide;  
For those who need to know,

*from instructions for installing  
a shower caddy, for  
holding soap  
(notes on troubleshooting):*

About the falling

“In many cases, the falling down  
cause by  
the knob wasn’t tightened full

Many times you thought  
you have  
tightened it full enough  
but actually  
not.”

# My Refrigerator

Hard to identify which is the heart of my kitchen, my fridge or my range? The polarities of heat and cold, both necessary for balance, in the kitchen and in life.

I open the door and let my eyes caress lovingly my staples of organic chicken broth, butter, cream and cheeses, wine and kefir, whole milk for cappuccinos.

All the shelves are clean and presentable, the oddities aligned with my culinary peculiarities, almond flour, probiotics, anti-inflammatory spices, flax seed.

Who lives here? What weirdo uses colloidal silver? Electrolyte powder? Chia seeds? Maca powder? Green drink powder? Liquid chlorophyll? Tahini paste?

Nuts too. Nuts for a health nut? Perhaps, perhaps not, for then I see the little pot of bacon grease nestling in the corner in its fancy Fortnum & Mason stoneware pot,

legacy of my English mother and grandmother. “Everything tastes better with a touch of bacon”, I grew up hearing. In fact, *all* my naughty foods hearken back to my childhood.

Then my eyes ponder the vegetable and fruit drawers, and here the myth of fresh and healthy nutcase evaporates, for much as I try, there is always something rotten in the state of.....

I buy lots of carrots because they're so healthy, but if I'm not juicing veggie smoothies every day, there they mostly rot, or start growing whiskers, next to the slimy sticks of once

white and crunchy celery. I've learned to make some amazing soups though, using veggies just before they turn, combining them with other odd leftovers from solitary meals, transformed

into a pleasing harmony of most unlikely ingredients, which seem to get along very well in soup. Perhaps a good metaphor for the human race, for we are all together in this pot of stew

called life, so let's blend our talents in a harmonious recipe to the benefit of everyone, without losing our unique taste and texture and colorfulness in the process.

Lemons don't fare much better, often turning a fetching shade of powdery green before they're juiced, on their way to the scaffold. My goals are loftier than my achievements, I confess.

To sum up my fridge, I'd say it's a reasonable mix of healthy and sinful, of conscious and unconscious, and so long as it's eighty-twenty, I'll accept that. I'm only human, after all.

# Mango

Once again Adam was returning home from work well past midnight. After half an hour on an overheated bus, the frigid February wind felt like an assault. He turned the final corner on his route and stopped. Across the street where there should have been an unremarkable front yard was a lush, overgrown garden. He decided he must be already home and dreaming, but his hands and face were painfully cold, the pain too real for a dream. He turned his head down and resumed shuffling along the walk, inhaling the sharp, sweet scent of over-ripe fruit as he moved.

The next morning, he told himself it had been a dream. What other explanation could there be for a patch of tropical jungle in a Baltimore yard in winter? On his way to the bus stop, he made a point of noting the spot he'd dreamed about. It was a big, white house with a deep veranda. It was still early, before six, and all the front windows were dark. The yard held a patch of frost-covered grass separated from the sidewalk by a low hedge. No fruit trees, and not in any way overgrown. As he passed on the other side of the street he felt an impulse to cross and touch the grass, reassure himself of its solidity, but he was anxious to get to work and out of the cold.

The bus was hot and airless and already crowded. He hung from a strap, sweating in his coat as he fought to stay on his feet and not jostle the

other passengers. He recognized none of the other commuters, but then, most days people were just undifferentiated obstacles in his path. He rode the elevator in his building to the twelfth floor alone. It was still early for Prentiss Marketing.

At his desk he discovered the marketing report for Evers Paper that had kept him in the office so late the night before. He'd set it on Sue's desk a few minutes before going home, and here it was, seven in the morning, already covered in red scribbles and slashes. His heart began banging and a pain speared his left eye. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep, slow breaths.

"What, are you sleeping?"

Sue, sounding outraged. She was a heavy, fortyish woman with bleached hair, fake tan, and big white teeth. Today she wore a Chanel pink and gray suit stretched tight at the hips and upper arms. Probably purchased after her last diet.

"No," he replied, grabbing his jumbo coffee mug and starting for the break room.

"Well, chop chop! I want that report in plenty of time to make copies for the meeting tomorrow."

He stopped walking. Was this some kind of test? "The meeting isn't until Friday."

"Wrong, it's been moved up. So get a move on, babe." She called all her staff "babe" and "doll" like an old-time gangster. He wasn't sure if she

was too lazy to recall their names or if she didn't think they deserved names. Maybe both.

He rinsed his mug and filled it with coffee. The milk he'd put in the fridge the day before was gone, so he settled for black and returned to his desk.

His report had concluded that the typical American consumer preferred pink, scented toilet paper. Among Sue's comments were nuggets such as, "Isn't this obvious?" "Not conclusive!" "Find better data!" "For fuck's sake, pare this shit down!!!" and "Zzzzzz." The pain behind his eye intensified as he read, and the coffee tasted bitter. He drank it anyway. If Sue wanted better data, he was in for another late night.

Lilly, the woman in the neighboring cubicle, announced her presence with sustained coughing. Adam glanced at the clock. Seven ten already. The office would soon be full of distractions. He flipped on his computer and it played the startup jingle.

"Adam?" Lilly said through the wall. "How's it going?"

"Okay," he said.

"You work late again last night?"

Lilly's voice was warm with sympathy. Last thing he needed. He opened the browser and got to work.

Lunchtime came and went. Around two Adam pulled a packet of stale shortbread cookies out of his desk and munched his way through them, washing them down with cold coffee while squinting at a massive spreadsheet on consumer preferences

that he'd just discovered. Where had this data been a few days ago? It had been updated recently, and new questions polled, but the numbers on his screen wiggled and swayed. His gaze snagged on a column separating data by age.

"Oh *shit*," he muttered. He was going to have to address this.

He worked frantically, ignoring Lilly when she said goodnight. He broke out the age groups, using graphs to show that young consumers (20-30) preferred white unscented, single males leaned toward blue scented, and the traditional market (31-60 marrieds) went for pink scented. Even among trades, there were regional differences: Southerners preferred pink scented by a whopping 40 points, while the West Coast only gave it a 3-point lead. The charts in his report multiplied and became more complicated and the software grew more recalcitrant, refusing to size tables uniformly or place pie charts side by side.

Sue swept past his desk on her way out around six, wafting a too-sweet strawberry scent. "I hope you're not going to ask for more time, babe. If you can't meet the deadlines—"

"No problem, it'll be ready," he said, not bothering to look up.

She raised her voice as she moved to the elevator. "And by 'ready,' I hope you mean *worth* the paper it's *printed* on, just this once."

He heard the elevator doors thump closed. "*Worth* the paper it's *printed* on," he echoed.

The knife behind his eye twisted. He rose to get another bucket of coffee. The room rocked and he

gripped the edge of his desk. “Got up too fast,” he muttered.

“You say something?”

Dick from across the aisle, on his way out. Dick always left thirty seconds after Sue.

“No, nothing.” Adam grabbed his cup and turned to go. The cold sludge at the bottom of the cup splashed onto his shirt, leaving a big stain above his heart. “Fuck!”

“You don’t look too good, Adam. Maybe you should go home, get some sleep.”

“It’s just a coffee stain, Dick.”

Dick laughed as he turned to go. “I didn’t mean the stain.”

The office grew silent as Adam worked, making it easier to concentrate, but his eyes kept playing tricks on him. He had to read everything twice. When he was finally satisfied, he printed out a pristine copy and carried it into Sue’s office. It was 11:56. As usual, the glossy surface of her desk was clear except for a photo of a Collie and a flashy chrome pen set that included a lethal-looking letter opener. Adam assumed Lassie was as close as Sue got to a “loved one.” Sweet looking dog.

“Yeah, well, Hitler loved dogs,” he muttered as he lined up the edges of the report and centered it on her desk. He stood in the dim office for a moment, wondering if he should run twenty copies for the meeting, but decided there’d be time in the morning. Besides, Sue would no doubt demand last minute changes.

He turned and went to get his coat. In the elevator he felt the usual dread of the trip home—the long bus

ride, followed by the walk in the cold. As he stepped out of the building into the wind he realized he’d left his muffler behind—had he left it at work, or at home? He couldn’t remember. He thought about going back to his desk for it but couldn’t muster the energy.

He stood huddled at the bus stop, checking his watch every few minutes. He couldn’t seem to retain the time; he just knew it took forever for the bus to arrive. Once it did, it was warm and airless as usual but at least there weren’t any crowds. His hands and face began to thaw and his head bobbed on his neck as he struggled not to sleep.

When he got off the bus, he walked slowly, his head down. When he turned the final corner to his house, he glanced at the yard of the big, white house.

The garden was there again. He moved to cross the street but then hesitated, torn between curiosity and fear. It was all so real—the bird song, the scent of fruit, the humid warmth that seemed to beckon. He swayed on his feet, jerked awake, and turned to home.

The next morning, he was so nervous about the meeting he forgot to check the yard on the way in. At the office he hung up his coat, picked up his cup, and started for the break room. Sue was already there, helping herself to the last of the coffee. She never bothered to make more, but then, neither did most of the people at Prentiss.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “Listen, I’m going with Dick’s report today. You can get started crunching data for the

Reeves' account. Get me a preliminary by the end of the day."

Adam nodded. He couldn't seem to wake up. "What? You don't want me at the meeting?"

"No. Stay at your desk and get some work done. Dick and I will handle the presentation."

Normally this would have enraged Adam, but he was so tired he felt only relief. He nodded and opened a can of coffee grounds. Sue gave him an odd look. "Is that the same shirt you had on yesterday?"

"Uh . . ." Adam looked down at his shirt. It was wrinkled but unstained. "No. I just didn't have time to—"

"Christ! Just as well I don't need you in there. You look like hell." Sue left the room, her heels clicking loudly on the linoleum floor. Adam made coffee and stood at the machine, watching the water spurt into the carafe.

Lilly came in and when he glanced at her, she smiled. "How's it going?"

He shrugged. Why did she always ask him that? It was going the way it always went.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and went back to his desk. The Reeves account was a mess. They were an old company that had resisted new marketing techniques, and their profits had suffered. Their products—pens—came in an overwhelming variety: soft tip, hard tip, fine tip, colored, erasable. He'd need every minute of the day to put together an analysis.

At a little before noon, he watched Dick and Sue walk past his cubicle with Mr. Evers. Evers looked

happy. Dick looked rested and well pressed. Sue was holding a copy of the report, open to the final page, notes scribbled on it; it was the one Adam had written.

*That bitch.* She'd let Dick present Adam's report.

The knife behind his left eye dug and probed. His heart pounded. He rose and went to the bathroom, where he stood over the sink for a moment, waiting for his heart to stop banging and the pain in his head to recede. He needed to find another job, but it had taken over a year to get this one. Baltimore wasn't exactly New York. Maybe he should move to New York? Or Los Angeles? No more cold winters. But Los Angeles was so expensive and the competition there was stiff. He'd end up waiting on tables or cleaning swimming pools.

He bent, splashed his face with water, and reached for a paper towel. He glanced at the mirror and grimaced at his reflection. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair greasy. Hadn't he washed it this morning? Maybe he'd forgotten. He turned and moved back to his desk.

"How's the Reeve report coming?" Sue called from her office as he passed.

He nodded but kept moving. He flashed on an image of walking into her office, picking up her fancy letter opener, and stabbing her in the heart. He watched her face change from its customary sneer to shock as the blood sprayed over her well-polished desk.

"Get it to me tonight!" Sue yelled at his back.

Sometime in the afternoon Lilly set a bagel with cream cheese on Adam's desk. He ate it absent-mindedly, washing it down with cold coffee as he worked. It was almost eleven when he finished the report. He stood and watched as his printer spit it out, then stapled it and carried it to Sue's office. Back at his desk he put on his coat and then, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion, sat down to rest for a minute and closed his eyes.

He was tempted to put his head on his desk and go to sleep, but he rose and took the elevator down, listening to the soft clang of the cable. The bus was too hot again, but there was a seat near the front. He dozed off, his head propped against the window, and would have slept until the end of the line if the driver hadn't called to him. On the walk home, he kept stumbling on the cracks and buckles in the sidewalk. As tired as he was, he couldn't stop mentally grinding on about the details of the report, whether he should have used a smaller font—were there too many pages?—and whether the color coding had been consistent throughout—had he remembered to change the graph on page 7?

He had almost passed the yard when he got a lungful of sweet air and looked up. He stopped and turned his head.

It looked so real. Colorless in the moonlight, but real enough to touch.

He told himself he should keep walking, it would be morning again all too soon and he'd have another day of work to survive, but instead he crossed the street. He felt a warm, humid breeze on his face as he approached and heard the call of a distant bird. He squinted at the trees. Figs? And pomegranates? He reached for an orb hanging above his shoulder. It was soft and heavy, more oval than round and . . . he closed his eyes, brought it to his face and inhaled.

Mango. He laughed. Mangoes in winter. The scent made his mouth water. He remembered a hot summer morning, his mother at the kitchen counter in a sleeveless cotton dress, her hair gathered sloppily on top of her head, singing along with the radio and slicing mangoes for breakfast. What was the tune? Something about a moon dance. He reached out to pick another mango and stepped into the garden.

Lilly was the first to notice that Adam was still in his coat and not moving. "Adam?" she said, and set a hand on his shoulder to shake him. "Adam, Sue's already here," she whispered. "Wake up!" She bent and looked at his face. It was waxy pale and smiling. And still, perfectly still.

# In Catherine's Study

Looking for a pen or pencil, I opened the drawer.  
like a ward of comatose patients,  
like seventeen-year cicadas silent beneath winter earth,  
like Iron Age bog people tanning in Northern climes,  
Catherine's dusty poems lay undisturbed—

as though they had been waiting for me  
for twenty-nine silent years in this sooty drawer  
along with erasable bond paper  
two dried out pens (I tried them.)  
one ruler with advertising from a defunct shoe store  
three desiccated erasers (one still in its case)  
and a red pencil, sharpened to a nub.

Seeing her poems stacked here where she left them,  
typewriter ink now bleeding into fragile paper,  
I felt stunned and embarrassed  
as though I had accidentally unsealed  
a funerary urn and stood gaping  
at the remains within wondering who they were.

Just how many years, do you suppose,  
can our sleeping words lie?

# Glass Vertigo

Under glass  
under siege  
as others turn and twist their heads  
amazed at my tightrope dance—  
longing for a shattering of  
invisible glass—  
only I  
see the mirrored hallways,  
the trap doors,  
the mystery crystals  
that cling to an air tight channel,  
fumbling an attempt to balance  
what was formerly perfect  
now  
under glass vertigo skies.

# The Eye of the Storm

We had only just met,  
flirted over cocktails and bar chips,  
danced until we were dizzy and half-deaf  
and after the lights had dimmed  
we walked, fondling each other's lives  
through the grasp of our hands.  
On my front porch, I confessed  
I had never been with a woman.

So when you returned  
to my house the first night,  
I wasn't ready for your whistle,  
long and sharp, cutting across  
the sky in the way of lightening,  
severing the soft fabric of my dreams.  
Dazed, I felt your tempest  
casting debris about my room.

When I peeked out my window,  
you had turned, your disappointment  
trailing behind you like  
a mess of wet leaves caught on  
the back of your shoe.

The second night, I wasn't ready  
for the clatter of your pebbles,  
like raindrops come down in staccato.  
I didn't open the door  
but I was aroused and breathed it all in:  
the pounding of your desire  
like no deluge I had ever known.

The third night, I peered down at you,  
said I wasn't ready for the hurricane  
of your love, said I didn't want  
to be hurtled head over feet  
into the eye, not yet, not like this,

but you had brought rope and yards of  
hope and tenacious climbing feet.  
I laughed, offered to let down  
my hair for the occasion.  
*I have come to rescue you from the tower  
of your own denial,* you bellowed.  
I ran downstairs  
and somehow you were inside.

And I found I had never been readier  
for the thunder in your hips,  
the jolt of electricity  
as we moved around each other.  
*Why didn't you come sooner?* I cooed.  
These are the things I no longer  
wish to understand.  
I pulled you forth, doused my face  
in the roar, in the outpour,  
leapt wildly into the eye of the storm.

# Unspoken

You dare hush me  
Like I deserve to remain unspoken

You dare hush me  
Like my words don't resonate

You dare hush me  
As if the trees don't rustle as I walk by

You dare hush me  
Like others will not lead

You dare hush me  
In fear that I will utter the truth

# Say it to the Mountain

Here upon the shore, this  
narrow spit of land  
the fish is so out of place  
I almost miss seeing it,  
in the shadow, as it flexes its body,  
stops, and flexes again.

The fisherman is hidden  
by the trunk of a tree.  
He has tossed some smaller ones  
to his left, they are dead,  
iridescent armor fouled  
in their throes with sand.

*What, now you are squeamish?*  
the animals ask. But these  
fish you can't even eat.  
(Thanks, General Electric,  
we salute you!)

The fisherman eyes me  
as he puts on another lure.  
An older woman is picking up  
random garbage  
into a bag. Two yuppies have biked  
out here with their kid,  
and are smoothing out  
a blanket to picnic.  
It is the first real  
beautiful “day” of spring.  
It is all so natural,  
really, this defiant indifference.  
The big fish, still striving  
hopeful for water.

The man drawing a circle  
around himself,  
here in the sand.

Aren't we the fish, each  
learning, slowly, not to breathe?

And wasn't it Jesus  
who withered the fig?

# Red

Wildfire,  
fight the fight  
within,  
remove the blue,  
let it be true,  
sire the fire,  
and  
desire the  
reign

# Unit 105

His Iowa State ID listed Unit 105  
at the Days Inn just a few speed bumps  
off Merle Hay Road as his legal address,  
a fact fueled by  
seven years and six months spent  
on the first floor across the grimy game room where kids  
shrieked at air hockey and spilled Sprite.  
The hotel hobo had decamped to Des Moines  
since Seattle's techies were too cliquish, and  
he'd been priced out of Pasadena.  
Cocooning every afternoon in a king-sized bed with  
a view of the parking lot,  
this lexical artist translated  
surveys for a salary-  
on complimentary Innflux wifi-  
from the tongue of Tolstoy to the language of Lovecraft.  
Housekeepers in sky blue  
always asked about his Christmas cactus  
when they cleaned on Monday mornings,  
and the sitcomsque managers who  
never raised his rent  
brought him curried cauliflower in Tupperware tubs.  
The receptionist with the sea monster tattoo and  
pastel pink fingernail polish  
disclosed her dirty dramas to him during Marlboro breaks  
while the purr of the snowplow and moan of the lawn mower  
soothed the silences on weekends when  
his family forgot him.  
But when lip-chapping,  
spirit-walloping  
winters finally pushed the wanderer  
toward the fiery sprawl of Phoenix,  
his beloved lair reverted back to  
an Expedia special.



# Bodies of Water

—After John Cheever's *The Swimmer*

The sky is clear apart from the wall of thunderheads  
blossoming at the edges of the horizon.

The pool is uninterrupted,  
hooked like a tarp on the far corners of the world.

I stand on the diving board and look out at  
all the parties and backyards I must cross to get home.

Trees have blocked my view of the house  
at the end of the finish line and my family that waits within  
like the sage bush I walk by each day  
withering outside a house that always looks dark inside.

The sound of distant thunder is etched in the sky  
as I aim toward the water and break it,  
come up for air, and disappear beneath again.

How many times must I dive beneath the surface  
before I understand that one body of water sustains life  
and one is the life of the party?

How many times before realize I have chosen  
to swim in the wrong one?

# Morning Walkabout, New Home, One Week Before my Neighbor is Murdered

*for Leticia Arroyo Reyes*

The knobby trees are hewn  
to allow pedestrians safety from doubt.

Strewn leaves court tan sleeves  
at best mostly a pale khaki  
or even yellow knocked loose  
from their stem-hold  
by Santa Ana winds.

Two fluorescent pink poodles  
advertise a groomer  
to far too-little traffic  
since the freeway came through.

On the sidewalk just abutting the dream  
manicured grass of a condo complex  
the bottom and sides of a bird's nest  
haloed with a damp of moisture  
from last night's humid rain.

That quick tick of grief  
despite inevitability  
or any agency  
still hits me.

The stoplight releases  
a sluice of economy cars.

Dithering between morbid curiosity  
and empathy in case I could be  
that first responder I righted the nest  
to see left-over molting,  
a few feathers, a dried worm,  
and some inorganic material.

Not even a sliver of egg  
let alone a dead bird. I prefer  
my days to start in this manner.

# What I Can't Touch

The bats against the black sky above the yard last night  
were hard to determine.

Secret wings bruising the dark air  
made me want to climb the tree above the yard  
and witness a blind yellow eye  
caught in the light of a citronella candle.

Everything worth seeing is hidden,  
invisible, out of reach.

When I was a kid I touched the air and imagined  
that I could feel the mouths of ghosts on mine.  
their vaporous breath traveling through me like  
something unspoken.  
My mother looked worried when she caught me  
kissing the living room wall.

When my kites disappeared into the sky,  
I could feel their power,  
but in my hands, they were just paper and string.  
I let the wind take them  
and when they fell, I walked away.

I am still awed by the sound  
of a distant plane,  
the sight of a road unraveling  
into the furthest stretch,  
the smell of smoke in  
remote chimneys.

Anticipation, possibilities,  
Halloween is still my favorite holiday.  
A face hidden behind a mask  
is always more stirring than  
cut-outs where real eyes might be seen.

# The Void

Five years of searching had finally paid off.

A book so rare that I couldn't even find it on the internet. The void in my collection. The volume to fill the empty space that consumed my thoughts.

I had traveled thousands of miles for my company, always ensuring that some free time was built into my schedule to hunt through every used book store, every thrift store, every charity sale between Florida and Alaska.

"Not for sale."

"What do you mean?" I replied.

"I mean that it's not for sale."

Display only."

"But...but...I need it. I collect rare books."

"Me, too."

"Okay, name your price."

The clerk's eyes narrowed, but he maintained his smile. "Doing so would indicate that it's for sale. It's not."

"One thousand dollars," I stated, confident this would grab his attention.

"Look, I hate to disappoint you, but it belonged to my grandfather. It's got his name inside. The only way I'll give it up is when I pass it on to my son."

I hesitated, knowing that my next statement would lead to some marital tension when I got home. "Five thousand dollars."

To my astonishment, he didn't even blink. "You're free to look around

the store, but this conversation is closed."

I needed some space—some time to think. Five years, only to fail now? Like a marathon runner turning around and walking home rather than taking the final step. Months spent sifting through volumes in stores across the continent. Giant stores in the nation's largest cities, pungent shacks on desolate backroads with a handful of mildew-stained boxes of obscure titles. This could not—would not—continue. The quest would end today.

But it was foolishness. "After all, it's just a book," I told myself, walking with determination toward the exit.

A voice inside me replied, "You've earned it. Do whatever it takes."

The clerk looked up and arched an eyebrow as I clumsily adjusted my path and came to a stop in the Classics section. To steady my nerves, I selected a thick, hard-bound volume titled *Three* by *Dickens*. I turned it over and over in my hands.

Thumbing through the book, I found the opening line to *David Copperfield*: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." These words called to me, were written just for me. Why should I continue to play by the rules, only to meet guaranteed failure?

I felt something shift inside me. Instincts that I never knew I possessed

were awakened, and the solution became clear. A quick stroll, casual but silent, confirmed that we were alone. I glanced out into the parking lot. Empty. Without looking, I grabbed three more books from the shelves and advanced to the counter. The clerk tallied the prices. "Can I get you a bag for those?" he inquired.

"Yes, please," I replied.

As soon as he lowered his head, I grabbed Dickens and swung wildly. The sound, the feeling through my hands and arms was strangely satisfying. His eyes began to bulge in realization, but contact was made before he could even open them fully.

One strike was all it took. I sprinted around the counter and stood

over him, shaking but exhilarated. A quick search of the clerk's pockets revealed no key to the locked display case. Panicking, I lifted the cash register. I backed up four steps from the front of the case and charged. My makeshift battering ram found its mark. Glass sprayed across the floor.

Two quick kicks cleared away the rest of the shattered display window. The book was mine. I paused to allow the musty smell to soothe my senses.

Remembering that I needed to escape before I was caught, I peeked out the front window. Clear. I walked to my car, opened the door, and placed my newly won 1876 first edition of *Do Unto Others* delicately on the passenger seat. Grinning, I began my triumphant journey home to fill the void.

# Tiny Rescues

The day the ambulance passed,  
gutting the yard with its terrible flute, bidding a glimpse of a stiff,  
birds scattered and left you behind.  
The swing set slackened, but the warning refused to loose you.

At dinner, you could not forget.  
Six o'clock news only served to remind. Forks threatened like knives  
and your mother's concern went cold on the plate.

This was when you learned that there is no such thing as safe,  
that there are only tiny rescues, mending one hour to the next.

You would then discover the dust of prayers by the bed,  
that the cross on the wall was just wood used to dupe  
you into thinking you would survive,

that skinned knees would no longer hurt like a quest,  
but like a wound instead.

You would come to know fear, infirmity,  
the difference between moribund and dead,

and the dread that still keeps your eyes ajar,

afraid of the clock that knows

the blank between seconds,

the song of the siren, and the urgent, red jewel ringing the dark.

# Silver Fish

There were hundreds  
silver slippery fish  
coin sized and caught  
on hot pink strings  
swimming  
suspended  
hanging or being held  
breathless  
in the air

Invisible water  
evaporates  
their unseen lake  
coating  
dusty fish  
and their fuchsia strings

All of these slippery fish  
caught  
metal molded  
swimming dirty  
breathless  
in the sun

# Mom's Last Ride

The urn was cobalt blue  
heavy for someone  
who was skinny  
in her youth.

Her ashes sat next to me  
as she did many times  
when I was a child riding the bus or el  
or later in life as we rode to the grocery store.

This July morning  
on the way to the cemetery  
I played her favorite singer Nat King Cole  
in the too low convertible  
she never got to ride in.

At the cemetery  
I approach a familiar plot.  
They're all here now,  
my mom the last to arrive  
just like at the Christmas dinner table.

# The Creek Wonders About My Past

Entering the cool liquid

I wondered about the water's past.

If this bit recently flew wingless  
in nimbus clouds getting a god's-eye view  
of the whole world I knew and beyond....

Would atmospheric bacteria  
that's never touched soil  
see these transient droplets  
as inferior to other lofty moisture?

Would its earthy bouquet  
be more black truffle or Pig-Pen sweat?

A welcome umami accompaniment  
or that kid in overalls  
with dirt constantly arced under fingernails?

River water so out of place so airborne.

Then I imagined a tributary from some  
rushing rapids type of river  
dammed by man and downstream  
redammed by beavers to be this brook.

A thin black inner tube  
holds this awkward torso  
my arms akimbo, legs dangling  
but bent at the knees  
to avoid random rocks  
that might just jut from the muck  
unseen below.

My mind meandered along another stream,  
from library book to book to book  
as I'd recently returned a canvas sackful  
and wasn't allowed to lease any more for a week  
because of a stupid new  
'kids in the library' policy.

Books mainly with male narrators—  
the easiest storytellers  
for a young boy to relate to.  
In one they smuggled gold  
past occupying Nazis on sleds,  
in one a boy is blown up  
with a dynamite blasting cap,  
in one the best friend drowns  
crossing a river alone, and  
in another the best friend drowns  
while they raced across the river.

My story is much more mundane,  
filled with the smell of worn  
baseball gloves freshly oiled,  
perfecting the arc of a spat sunflower seed,  
filling every vase and souvenir  
stadium cup with neighborhood lilacs.

There were no close kidnappings,  
no running away from foster homes.

I never got my Maniac McGee  
to stir up some life in a stereotypical  
boring suburban hometown.

I wonder if the stream imagines  
the pasts of the debris floating  
past its bends and beaches.

The oak branch broken by storm—  
and what furious wind it must have been.

The soothing hand of his waters slowly  
smoothing away all trauma and sharp edges.

The elderly fallen leaf who lived  
a full life that season and drifted  
down a crispy brown.

I wonder if my story would bore the stream.

My science homework, tedious  
etching of graphite and ink in tiny ticks.

Are our Nintendo game tastes the same?

Would he find my cartoons funny?

Would he empathize best  
with the cloud skimming, airplane sketching  
Kit from *Tale Spin* where I  
embraced mostly jealousy?

Or would the words be a  
*waah-waah-waah* to his waves  
like the sound of Charlie Brown's adults?

Would the creek imagine my past  
or the lifetime of living parts within me—  
the slowly eroding chipped tooth,  
the ever sloughing epidermis,  
worker-bee white blood cells?

Is my past a mess of colors and sounds,  
as confusing as the present will become?

Or is it a mystery of ten trillion cells  
in this mammalian driftwood,  
the realm of a hundred trillion bacteria  
in their own tiny suburbs, regions,  
continental shelves.

Every body  
practically a galaxy unto themselves.

# (S)unflowers

like Downton Abbey servants  
welcoming their master home  
tall sunflowers bow in the wind  
along the long brick walk  
all the way to the gate

my mother always hated their  
simple, cheery, childlike shape  
nature's own smiley face

in many ways, I tend to agree  
but with the decline of sunshine  
they have become  
more Hansel and Gretel  
"come on in, children"  
fairytale scary

bent petals surround  
grey brown centers  
like unkempt crazy lady hair

curled furled leaves beckon  
frozen in motion

but the house is closed  
and no one will enter  
until summer comes again

# The Death of Ian Incognito

The world a stage,  
Shakespeare noted.  
And we the imposter,  
in our final call.

A few catch our last show.  
Unwitting, they snigger on cue,  
our fatal prelude,  
our convulsive caricature,  
our final self-deprecation.

A clown milking our last mockery,  
our closing burlesque pratfall,  
our irrevocable tremor,  
our departure in floodlights.

The guffaws intend no harm.  
No one knows our real name.  
We are just the familiar disguise  
of impulsive chuckles.

Yes, the stage is our world,  
where we regale in our farcical regalia,  
where we playact the death we die,  
defined abruptly only by the privation of others,  
their season of grieving like elephants.

Perhaps it's better this way,  
decomposing, never to be recovered,  
just the sound of laughter lost,  
or the fading fragment in someone's  
sleepless night.

# Wriggle...Stumble...Breathless

## Wriggle

Like a worm from a hook,  
You dangle

Knowing I should swim away

But perceiving I am hungry,  
You wiggle

## Stumble

You wrecked me with your nonchalance  
Broke me with your lack of chivalry

There's something twisted in what you do  
Your ability to stay a bit detached  
Like a sewing stitch that's way too loose  
Too many loops on the crochet row  
Or the staple that wiggles around the extra space  
beside the paper hole

You leave me shaken  
Unconnected and with too much room  
to lose all of my balance and poise

And when you walk  
You casually lead the way  
Neglectful and unmoved  
Leaving me to carry myself  
alone as I stumble and fall

Breathless

You simply didn't call  
Not out of spite  
Not out of cruelty  
You just didn't

Because for you  
I wasn't it  
So there was no point

I tried to make that mean  
I tried to make you harsh  
It would be easier then  
My hurt intentional  
I could be self-righteous

But you really only have one fault

You don't love me

No matter  
how much I love you  
how much I can give  
Want to give  
Want to get  
You don't

And that doesn't hurt you  
Cause you don't feel me  
Hurting  
There is no stab  
There is no cut  
Because for you  
It is as easy as a breath

# A Nearly New Room for Rent Less Than Three Blocks From Where You Need to Be

You do not enjoy new places.

You feel like an intruder  
penetrated when you enter the empty space  
like the last owner's breath has escaped  
its way inside you, through nostrils and into lungs  
painfully unwanted.

You taste some final argument on the tip  
of your tongue,  
words about something someone has forgotten,  
but this is all you know.

This room is not yours.

It never was yours.

Never  
will it be  
nor do you want it to be  
nor could it ever be  
even if you were to  
ever want it to be  
yours.

You know this. She told you as much before she left.

Your new room is only nearly new. You are the eleventh person to live here. You know this because you asked the landlord if any of the previous owners had been smokers. He told you surely at least one out of the previous ten had smoked, but he couldn't tell you which one it was, or how long ago, and said he likely wouldn't tell you even if he could. Probably several, he said. You smiled and asked the zip code, scribbled it onto the back of your hand as if to signify how unimportant it was. It smeared as you put away the pen. You caught him looking at you funny.

Where you need to be is a cinder-blocked room lit by a single, bare energy-efficient bulb, an elegant ivory swirl screwed into cracked plaster. Where you need to be is in this room with its solitary chair, a stack of legal pads – yellow or white, you don't think this matters – and nothing to write with. You will have walls and pages and empty lines. You will have words to bounce around at the walls, an aimless game of upmost importance. You know you will write nothing.

She does not come back.

Let's break the rules.

Pretend you are where you need to be.

Take a tennis ball with you to firmly establish this metaphor.

Take a dozen. Take two. Overflow your arms with plastic tubes.

Open several canisters and smell their newness, the neonyellowgreen.

Take an armful of open tubes

and fling tennis balls

all at once

at some corner of the cinder-blocked room.

Try to hear each of the balls bounce

individually at least once.

Then follow the echo

the echo,

the echo.

Wait.

Realize tennis balls are too fuzzy, are too soft, too yellow.

Replace them with racquetballs

a cute alternate spelling of the

sound that describes the

racket

of several dozen rubber balls

hurled at cinder blocks.

They sting when they hit your skin like blue pellets  
and the depth to their hollow bounces unnerves you.

You can feel each bounce as it echoes through you.

Decide this room is not where you need to be after all.

Your new room that is not yours smells like fried egg and something you  
can't quite identify. This smell will not go away for as long as you live in this  
only-new-to-you room. You will forever remember the weeks you spend  
in this place as the blanched yellow of a badly poached egg. You will catch  
yourself wrinkling your nose unconscious and then consciously.

Memories smell in waves.

The distance,  
or maybe I mean difference,  
between where you are and where you need to be  
is about three blocks

or

approximately

one

elongated

disappointment.

She left you in transit, the distance  
too minimal to be of significance.  
And yet she is far and you are near but  
you always knew this is how it would be.

Decide to keep both rooms, both your not-new room and the room where  
you are supposed to be. Alternate nights in the yellow egg room and the  
cinder-blocked room. Focus on observing nothing. Take different routes  
each time you leave, each time you return. Nothing can be familiar. Do not  
unpack. Leave each room empty and cold.

Let's pretend you're a symbol  
for something, maybe independence.  
Maybe loneliness.  
You mean this and nothing more.

Become okay with that.

Become okay.

Realize after three months that living in two empty rooms is not only un-  
usual, it's impractical. As is your obsession with alternating routes. You try  
to lose yourself on purpose but always eventually realize that you're never  
more than a block from one room or the other. Let this piss you off.

When she left, you were both leaving  
but then she was leaving,  
and you were leaving,  
but it was no longer the same.

Sit on the floor of the yellow egg room and wonder about  
permanently leaving one room for the other.  
Consider your lack of bruises.

This room is not yours.

It smells the wrong color and is the wrong color  
and is so far from where you need to be,  
but the distance is so abstract to you  
that you can't help but figure this room is some sort of home  
even if it isn't can't and never will be yours.

The cinder-blocked room,  
where rubber pellets pegged your skin,  
leaving red marks but no bruises,  
was never yours either,  
is only there as a reminder  
that when she left, you left too,  
only you're somehow still here.

Decide where here is. Decide where here should be. Go there.



# The Magnolia Review Ink Award

Ink Award Winner 2020

“Lines of Me” by Becca Saul

Finalists

“On the Nature and Uses of Sabotage” by Benjamin Harnett

“Bad News from the Lithosphere” by MacGregor Frank

“Shiva” by Anthony Koranda

“Cross My Heart” by Julie Weiss

In “Lines of Me,” Becca Saul exposes the beauty of aging in a woman’s body and life, using the conceit of lines of and in her flesh to unify the poem and as a revelatory image. “Once, there were willowy lines” when she was youthful. How much women are judged by those kinds of lines! The very “sunlight danced across my cheekbones,” as if a shallow lover caressing the fleeting beauty of the young woman.

As the speaker of the poem confronts the disconnect between some image of what a woman should be and appear, the lines in her once-smooth brow “furrowed over [that] notion.” As she ages, the lines as fuller curves as well as wrinkles grow.

Age is easier on me, as a male; but “Lines of Me’ opens the female experience a bit more for me as well as, I hope, other men and younger women, for that matter. But as in any good poem, the particular speaks to the universal: The emotion of watching one’s flesh sag, wrinkle, become translucent is an emotion we all feel if we live long enough.

Saul offers a solace at the end, that we do become more comfortable in our selves and bodies even as those bodies “loosen around the edges.” For a woman, there is defiance of the judgmental youthful and/or male eye in saying that, now, the heavier, thicker bones and flesh have grown “comfortable enough to fit me.” The image she owns of female beauty encompasses so much more.

Clear imagery, eloquent but not ostentatious music of language, honesty of emotion all combine in a unified work. For all these reasons, “Lines of Me’ deserves the 2020 Magnolia Ink Award as a complete literary work of a high order.

David Anthony Sam, the proud grandson of peasant immigrants from Poland and Syria, lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam’s poetry has appeared in over 90 publications and his poem, “First and Last,” won the 2018 Rebecca Lard Award. Sam’s five collections include *Final Inventory* (Prolific Press 2018) and *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, the 2016 Grand Prize winner GFT Press Chapbook Contest. He teaches creative writing at Germanna Community College and serves on the Board of the Virginia Poetry Society.

# Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the eleventh issue of The Magnolia Review!

The goal of making physical copies available in order to raise funds to pay for two free contributor copies and mailing costs of every issue of The Magnolia Review is still in process. I started my first year of graduate school in fall 2019, which has been an adventure. The Magnolia Review continues to accept rolling submissions year-round. I will continue to work on the archives in physical form.

If you would like to donate, please check out the Donate page on the website ([themagnoliareview.com](http://themagnoliareview.com)) and/or contact me at [themagnoliareview@gmail.com](mailto:themagnoliareview@gmail.com) for more information.

There are still physical copies of Volume 4, Issue 1 available. I am offering them for \$5 per copy with free shipping. Please contact me at [themagnoliareview@gmail.com](mailto:themagnoliareview@gmail.com) for more information.

Current status of fundraising:

Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2015, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2015, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 2, Issue 1, January 2016, 35 contributors: \$0/800

Volume 2, Issue 2, July 2016, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 3, Issue 1, January 2017, 30 contributors: \$0/700

Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2017, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2018, 48 contributors: Complete!

Volume 4, Issue 2, July 2018, 40 contributors: \$0/850

Volume 5, Issue 1, January 2019, 50 contributors: \$65/1080

Volume 5, Issue 2, July 2019, 43 contributors: \$0/980

Volume 6, Issue 1, January 2020, 67 contributors: \$0/1340

This issue's theme is A Day That Changed Me, and the optional theme for Volume 6, Issue 2 is A Defining Moment.

Keep writing, keep making art, keep reading, and keep creating.

Thank you for reading, and check out the next issue in July 2020.

Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder of The Magnolia Review

# Reviews

*Kind Chemist Wife: Musings at 3 AM* by Sarah Bigham. Psiki's Porch Publishing, 2020. 193 pages. \$12.00.

In six sections, Sarah shares poems and essays about her life. In “Beatitudes,” she says. “Remembering or dreaming of a time when anything is possible and the future seems magical may indeed be a cornerstone of happiness” (9). “Elementary” has notes to self with nuggets of wisdom from Sarah’s experiences. “Exiting Higher Education or What I Learned About Professors Before Becoming One Myself” shares three funny examples of a teacher who used Polaroids to remember names (but not the correct student) and to leave the office hour if the professor is wearing a kilt and playing the bagpipes (51). In “Voicemail,” the light blinks on the landline at Sarah’s office, and she relates, “The semesters flow by, and messages keep coming from people who need things and want things and ask things. As I do the often tedious work of returning the calls and answering the questions, I miss the messages with no action required except to ponder” (100).

In one section, Sarah shares her experiences with chronic illness. In “There Is No Manual for This,” she says, “I hope to get through each day, with a minimum of pain in my maximized-agony world. Successfully showering is an achievement. Getting into clothes is another accomplishment, one often completed only by leaning or sitting on the bed, as my balance is faulty these days” (143). Humor is present when Sarah wears a CPAP machine at night that “...makes me feel like I am hooked up to reverse vacuum cleaner or have an octopus adhered to my face” (145). Words are powerful, and “Words wound, inflicting the deepest slashes on those already in pain, already taxed in body and pain, already vulnerable due to the enormous effort required to simply exist” (157).

Every person has stories to tell, and Sarah shares her experiences in a way that informs my own life and relationships. I enjoyed reading Sarah’s essays and poems.

—Suzanna Anderson

Slide to Unlock: Poems by Julie E. Bloemeke. Little Rock, AR: Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020. 121 pages. \$18.00.

Bloemeke begins with the title poem “Slide to Unlock” and four sections, “Dialing In,” “Call Waiting,” “On the Line,” and “Cellular.” The collection is set in motion with “Caught in the present tense, / we are continuously poised // to receive its three-word / command, the insistence // we open with a fall: / Slide” (15).

My favorite poem of the collection is “Bodies of Water: Discovering Cote d’Azur on Bird Lake” after Claude Monet’s *Antibes Seen from La Salis* at Toledo Museum of Art. In the notes, Bloemeke said that “This is the only known Pre-Raphaelite painting where Ophelia turns from the water to make direct eye contact before her death” (112). Both the speaker and the boy

...who unknowingly stands

on the same stone square, his feet in parallel over the once-print of hers.

Behind him, Hughes’ Ophelia, her eyes an invitation to no before her drowned yes. (42)

Bloemeke’s word choices are perfect and each line is perfectly poised. Her first collection is a must-read, and I am eager to reread this collection as I wait for more.

—Suzanna Anderson

Skeleton Parade by Mela Blust. Chewsville, MD: APEP Publications, 2019. 48 pages. \$10.00 paperback.

Mela Blust’s gifted words grace pages of this special volume. *Skeleton Parade* contains poetry gems, beginning with “when the boys” and the lines “did they ever say they wanted to break you? / when they broke you? / no. / they never say that. / they say pretty words, / come here honey” (9). The Author’s Note at the end states that

“This book draws to the surface the wounds of my past. Coping with trauma is a vastly misunderstood process, with far-reaching effects on those who manage to survive it. This collection of poetry examines how the themes of how women experience trauma, chaos, and abuse, and, subsequently, move through life carrying that weight. Only when beginning to write about my past, and the trauma that I have endured, was I able to let go of some of that

darkness, and begin to find a place where there could be light.”

While I would love to speak about each poem and each line, I shall say instead that I enjoyed and cried at holding the jewelry Mela created, each gem held to the light and examined. The emotions trapped in the planes. The punch to the gut and each tear that falls, a hint at the truth finally verbalized. While every trauma experience is not the same, I am pleased to see how Mela found places with light. I hope to be able to say the same myself some day.

—Suzanna Anderson

a broken exit by Goirich Brahmachari. Self-published, 2019. 32 pages. \$2.72 paperback.

Goirich shares discarded poems from 2015 in this collection. The music of his lines and his rhythms flow in natural rhythms. In “5.” the line “as if, learning / could heal all our miseries” struck a chord as I am a current graduate student. Can learning heal our miseries? Our traumas? Is this possible? Why seek out such a solution as learning? Perhaps learning in the pursuit of wisdom is trying to grasp wisdom, and learning seems the obvious path.

Poetry amazes me at its timelessness. These poems written in 2015 by Goirich still ring true today in 2020, and “6.” is no different. While the details of fear change throughout time, fear may return. If only

rain could wash away our fears too, but tomorrow has always been just like today.

so i count the hours i must wait, to start for home again. (11)

Goirich shares his in between dreams, where the “...workers are all drunk and / weary- they do not pickpocket dreams as / they return home” (16). The section of “death and other hallucinations” continue the wisdom from preachers preaching “how to inhale the syntax, / and exhale the self.”

It is a pleasure to read Goirich’s collection of discarded poems. The music of his lines and word choices ring in the wisdom of pursuing learning, experiencing dreams, and finding life.

—Suzanna Anderson

Escaped Housewife Tries Hard to Blend In by Karen Craigo. Hermeneutic Chaos, 2016. 29 pages.

It is a shame that in my move I didn't find Karen's chapbook until I was in a different state. However, it was a joy to find this chapbook when I was unpacking. The motif of an escaped housewife is carried throughout each poem.

Karen begins with "Escaped Housewife Prepares to Try Out for Jeopardy!" and as she is "quizzing herself with answers / then rushing to press the horn" she finds that "She could tell him anything / and he would take the jumbled / pidgin of her uncertainty, / give it back eloquent and correct." Humor is welcome throughout when the Escaped Housewife discovers in "Escaped Housewife Sprouts a Dick" she finds "...a circus / in her bed, her sheets / stretching into a big top" and learning the bagpipes where "she can howl through her sleep / and rise ready / to start again" to eating a car and "She'd start, of course, with the soft / of it, but worries / she'd be found that way--lying / across the back seat, working her incisors / into a floor mat."

"Escaped Housewife Wants to Be Anyone Else" summarizes the chapbook:

She drains a sixteen-ouncer,  
throws it in a pond.

She lays down the last two-thirds  
of her own haiku

She'll try no more beginnings,  
looks instead to ends.

—Suzanna Anderson

Emily As Sometimes the Forest Wants the Fire by Darren C. Demaree. Columbus, OH: Harpoon Books, 2019. 128 pages. \$16.00 paperback.

The dedication of Darren's Emily As Sometimes the Forest Wants the Fire is to Emily, "a woman too beautiful and interesting to ever lose my attention." In "Emily as A Mango Hitting the Ground" the speaker imagines Emily falling from the tree and "...such a fall bruises deeply" and "I am sorry / I did my best to imagine / a way for you to be unscathed / or cradled in good context. / I failed to simply catch you" (3). Darren also brings in humor for "Emily as I Hold Three of Her Shoes:"

I would  
write poems

about swans,  
if I gave

a shit about  
swans. (9)

“Emily as A Strict Record of Our Herb Garden” continues the humor when growing a garden and the children have named the rabbit neighbors, so when Emily chases the rabbits away with a broom she “has some names / to interject between / some glorious profanity” (15). The speaker in “Emily as Elsewhere, Sunflowers” leaves presents for Emily “in places // she might be / one day. // If she’s never / there, // then the yellow / I’ve left behind // will grow / as a gift // to the places / that missed her” (27). “Emily as Madden Me Fair” has Emily pregnant on the couch directing the speaker to lift furniture,

not dragging, because  
the carrying is important  
if I’m to remember this  
experience, if I’m to expect  
her to do this ever again,  
our backs must be the same,  
like a gang with matching  
scars, the initiation  
of a second child has spirited  
that living room into myth  
& tale. (46)

Darren is inventive with transforming and traveling with Emily. This collection is a unique way to take a poet and the poetry with you on a journey of loving Emily and seeing Emily in a new light.

—Suzanna Anderson

Here, We Bury the Hearts by Dom Fonce. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2019. 34 pages. \$13.99 paperback.

Dom’s lyrical lines carry from the title poem to the final line of “hoping I don’t slip / through his grasps.” The speaker begins with “Within my living room lay the / charred corpse of a great man. // It doesn’t matter. / We bury the hearts first. / All of us” (1). The indentations of the lines bring the movement to the dead and death, the drumming of the heart.

In “For Amelia Conceller,” the speaker shares dates and letters and “Do you hear your heart pounding on the page-- / an ethereal reminder that you are not forgotten?” (5). The speaker in “Portrait of Youngstown as the Archetypal Fallen Kingdom” follows a boy who rests in a pile of rust every night, “And there is me, a black cloud swirling by, looking // down at those of decay, knowing

that the smell / of gold had once filled the air, feathering the world” (6). The speaker’s father died in “Undoings” and both mother and son grieve the father’s loss. The mother begs for the father to haunt her, and the son will “wipe my brow and exhale. You’ll be Zeus throwing bolts. I’ll hide / below the / stairwell and stash my ears in my back pockets and learn how to live in / the dark without you” (19).

The indentations and word choice guides the reader in “The Sounds of Ash” as the wind carries whispers of father’s voice from slopes to bonfires to beach sand. The speaker says that “The wind carries secrets” and “Now I’ve captured him in a vial that hangs / around my neck, sealed off / from air, silencing his cries--as a god / could do, as a father’s hand does to the back of / the neck of a stifled / tantrum” (30).

Dom shares his words about death and paints the life that remains, that grieves, that takes one step closer to death. A beautiful collection that is a must read.

—Suzanna Anderson

Boys by Daniel Edward Moore.  
Ocean Shores, WA: Duck Lake Books, 2020. 32 pages. \$11.99 paperback.

Daniel begins with “The Architect’s Son” where the speaker says “Every son’s neck is a skyscraper burning / a hole in the heaven of fathers. In time / the rain will come, but tears will only / extinguish the rage, for maybe a day / that feels like a year...” (1). The word choices sing with careful selection, and one example is in “Blue Collar Silence” where “There’s a car-seat in the yard / where a bottle of rain waits // for lips to return, waits for the mailman / to drop off a box wailing with wrenches inside” (6). The music of repetition is present in “Gone Blue, Gone Gray, Gone Away” when the speaker says, “Never have I listened so closely / to the stethoscope swinging from my soul, / or been so devoted to one man’s words // beating like a snare drum in both our wrists / at the end of a civil war battle, / gone blue, gone gray, gone away” (9).

The theme and subject of boys is carried throughout the collection. The poem “Dear Christ” is a letter that is signed by “Every boy in every man on every street in America”

(20). Daniel is a wordsmith who crafts songs to be read aloud.

—Suzanna Anderson

Verses of Realness by Bob McNeil. NYC: underground books, 2018. 44 pages. \$8.00 paperback.

Bob's poetry is indeed real and sings of the need for justice throughout the collection. One of my favorite illustrations is of Uncle Sam crying and holding out a hand with DEBT! repeated in the background. The illustration is next to "Billfold Souls" and "Suppose those Billfold Souls / Find the emotion known as despair / For a human who stares / At a pocket / That has no money in the fabric's lair." In "A Song for Sheroes," Bob repeats "Women, make men comprehend" to drive home that "each sister / Has a Harriet Tubman / Prepared to seek / A place where men / Do not abuse their Queens, / A place that erects Jewels of Respect." In "Veritas Vanished"

Aphorists say that  
The truth is cold—  
Cadaver-in-the-arctic cold.

Sure, the truth is a lot of things,  
But it's the thing  
That's not being told.

I believe  
The truth is a stranger  
That's about as foreign as an extra-terrestrial.

Bob's poems explore the need for justice and awareness of the entire range of human experience. I hope to see a world where "Sword of Words" sees a world where "We create / We shape / We mold / A cosmos of star-lustered concepts with words" and can continue to write and live in a more loving world.

—Suzanna Anderson

Love\_Is\_Love: An Anthology for LGBTQIA+ Teens edited by Emma Eden Ramos. USA: Lulu, 2019. 76 pages. \$10.00 paperback.

The anthology begins with a dedication to LGBTQIA+ teens everywhere and a quote from Lin-Manuel Miranda: "We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances that hope and love last longer And love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside." In "Namaste" by Serena Augusto-Cox, the speaker selects photos for a scrapbook with care, and

On paper  
We love ourselves,  
friends, times together

But inside  
dark shadows char the edges  
sneers of peers, bully barbs

Pull it back  
breathe deep into the belly  
weighed down  
release the shoulders  
blow shadow wisps away with  
breath

The story “This is Me in Grade Nine” by Kevin Craig shares the first day of high school and how family and friends support Kristy. When she prepares for school, her brother says “sis” and “The sis comment hits me in the feels in a way I don’t expect, so I usher Dillon out of my room as quick as I can. I will not cry, I will not cry. That top is waiting for me. I can’t wait to have those sleeves to shake around. First, however? Shower, hair, and make-up” (63).

Every poem, story, and artwork in the anthology is a must-read. Love is love is love.

—Suzanna Anderson

*Ghosts of You* by Cathy Ulrich. Los Angeles, CA: Okay Donkey Press, 2019. 175 pages. \$15.00 paperback.

This collection of short stories looks beyond the sensationalism of murder into the lives of the person and their stories. Cathy begins with “Being the Murdered Girl” and “The thing about being the murdered girl is you set the plot in motion” (1). In “Being the Murdered Clerk” the reward for information grows and “Your face will stay the same on the posters, your name. You are unchanging and dead. You will be, always, unchanging and dead” (24).

Cathy uses repetition in the stories effectively. In “Being the Murdered Homecoming Queen,” “You’ll be a picture in the yearbook memoriam section, next to the cancer kid, next to the boy who ran the stop sign, next to a trite poem about loss. You’ll be a ghost, a ghost, a ghost” (28). “Being the Murdered Moll” ends with “...your mouth still parted in death from the last words you had spoken, your mouth still parted, waiting, waiting for your Romeo’s kiss” (44). The speaker says in “Being the Murdered Princess,” “They’ll light candles for you again, the anniversary of your death, over and over, again. They’ll hold the candles till they are burnt away,

make wishes on the melt of wax curdling in their hands. Wish for a world with no more dead princesses, a world where you would have been queen” (54).

The stories beg to be read aloud. Each person is connected to the people in their lives after their death and moments before their untimely deaths. Cathy weaves these stories deftly.

—Suzanna Anderson



# Contributors

Stephen Barry is a trial lawyer, fly fisherman, and dad living in New York City. His poetry has appeared in a number of journals including *Boston Literary Magazine* and *Yes, Poetry*. His first chapbook, *The Things That We Lost*, was published by Big Table Publishing in 2014.

Susan P. Blevins was born in England, lived 26 years in Italy, and has now resided in the USA for the past 25 years, first in Taos, NM, and currently in Houston, TX. While living in Rome, she had a weekly column in an international, English-language newspaper, writing about food and restaurant reviews primarily, though not exclusively. Since living in the USA, she has written pieces on gardens and gardening for N. American and European publications, and she is now writing stories of her life and travels, and poetry, and gaining traction in various literary publications such as *New Verse News*, *Feminine Collective*, *Mused Bellaonline*, *Write Place at the Write Time*, *Scarlet Leaf*, to mention just a few. She loves reading, writing, cats, classical music, and stimulating conversation.

Heather M. Browne is a faith-based psychotherapist, recently nominated for the Pushcart Award, published in the *Orange Room*, *Boston Literary Review*, *Page & Spine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Red Fez*, *Electric Windmill*, *Apeiron*, *The Lake*, *Knot*, *mad swirl*. Red Dashboard published two collections: *Directions of Folding* and *Altar Call of Trumpets*.

JW Burns lives in Florida.

R. J. Cardullo is the author or editor of a number of books, including *Soundings on Cinema: Speaking to Film and Film Artists* (SUNY Press, 2008) and *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art* (McGill-Queens UP, 2004). He is also the chief American translator of the film criticism of the Frenchman André Bazin. Cardullo earned his master's and doctoral degrees from Yale University and received his B.A., from the University of Florida. He taught for four decades at the University of Michigan, Colgate, and New York University, as well as abroad.

Samantha Chasse is a graduate of Lindenwood University with my MFA in Writing. Chasse graduated from Quinnipiac University with a Bachelors in Theater. Previous writing experience includes two ten-minute plays which were featured in off-off Broadway festivals. Chasse's work has also been published in *Better than Starbucks Poetry Magazine* and *Inkling Magazine*.

Ranjabali Chaudhuri is a lawyer and an aspiring writer. Her work has appeared previously in the *Dime Show Review*. She lives in Amsterdam with her husband and three-year old daughter.

Susan Taylor Chehak is the author of several novels, including *The Great Disappointment*, *Smithereens*, *The Story of Annie D.*, and *Harmony*. Her most recent publications include two collections of short stories, *This Is That* and *It's Not About the Dog*, and a novel, *The Minor Apocalypse of Meena Krejci*. Her work has appeared in *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Ragazine*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Ducts*, *Crack the Spine*, *Pennsylvania English*, *The Chariton Review*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Sliver of Stone*, *Limestone*, *The Literary Nest*, and *The Coachella Review*.

Jenny Coates lives in the Seattle area and is a tax lawyer by profession, a poet by passion. Coates actually found that distilling complex tax concepts for clients isn't always so different from conveying the nuances of an emotional landscape through images with poetry.

Mirana Comstock is an award-winning writer, photographer, and musician. She has won multiple Best of Fest screenwriting awards from international film festivals. Her photographs are in the collections of the 9/11 Memorial Museum and the NY Historical Society and she exhibits frequently in NY and the Boston area. She has also created national ad campaigns for such clients as Timberland, Seagram's and JBL. A Juilliard-trained musician, she is currently mixing new music as singer/songwriter/ keyboardist for alt dance duo Theory of Tides. Her work as a lyricist and a photographer's eye for detail are both strong influences on her poetic voice.

Heather Cook studied literature and creative writing at the University at Buffalo. She is most interested in exploring the ways in which poetry lives off the page. When she is not writing, she is dabbling in photography and book arts.

Margo Davis has been pairing overseas writing residencies with adventure travel. Recently she explored most of Italy. 2020 writing adventures include Morocco and Budapest. Twice nominated for a Pushcart, Margo's poems have appeared in *Ocotillo Review*, *What Rough Beast*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Houston Chronicle*, and *Enchantment of the Ordinary*.

Leslie Dianne is a poet, novelist, screenwriter, playwright and performer whose work has been acclaimed internationally in places such as the Harrogate Fringe Festival in Great Britain, The International Arts Festival in Tuscany, Italy and at La Mama ETC in NYC. Her poems have appeared in *The Pangolin Review*, *Soft Cartel*, *Esthetic Apostle*, *PopShot*, *Ink and Voices*, *S/tick*, *Rue Scribe and Furtive Dalliance* and are forthcoming in *RAW Journal of Arts* and *Vita Brevis*.

Kristin Kowalski Ferragut is a regular contributor to open mics, at such venues as DiVerse Gaithersburg Poetry and Roots Studio. She has been the featured poet at Words Out Loud at Glen Echo and participates in local poetry and prose writing workshops, in addition to reading, hiking, teaching, and enjoying time with her children. Her work has appeared in *Beltway Quarterly*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, and *Bourgeon*, among others.

MacGregor Frank has, in the distant past, been published in a number of heterogeneous places including the journals *Quoin*, *Poet Lore*, *Imago*, and *Write Minds*, as well as in the anthology *North Words* (National Poetry Foundation, Orono, ME). He says "distant past" because the most recent of these publications has been the anthology, published in 1982. Frank is a retired associate professor of English.

Tom Franken is an undergraduate student at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. He is the co-founder of *bone&marrow*, an upcoming online literary magazine. His work has been published by *Penguin Review*, *Havik*, and *Volney Road Review*. Tom hopes to eventually write something as beautiful as the song “Africa” by Toto.

Carolyn Geduld is a mental health professional in Bloomington, Indiana. She is an emerging fiction writer with acceptances in *Persimmon Tree*, *Dual Coast*, and *Not Your Mother’s Breastmilk*.

Kathleen Gemmell pens for an array of publications. Kathleen is a storyteller, an animal welfare proponent, and a connoisseur of fine pizza!

Brian Glaser has published a book of poems, *The Sacred Heart*, and many essays on poetry and poetics. He is an assistant professor of English at Chapman University in Orange, California.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Midwest Quarterly*, *Poetry East and North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Hawaii Review*, and the *Dunes Review*.

A native of Moscow, Andrey Gritsman emigrated to the United States in 1981. He is a physician who is also a poet and essayist. Andrey has published five volumes of poetry in Russian. His poems, essays, and short stories in English have appeared or are forthcoming in over 60 literary journals, including *Pirene’s Fountain*, *Forge*, *Emprise Review*, *Amarillo Bay*, *Mad Hatter’s Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *decomp*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *New Orleans Review*, *Two Cities Review*, *Verdad*, *Whistling Shade*, *The Writer’s Chronicle*, and *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*.

Deborah Guzzi writes full time. Her third book, *The Hurricane*, is available through Prolific Press. Her poetry appears in *Allegro*, *Shooter*, *Ame-thyst Review & Foxglove Journal in the UK-Existere*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review & Subterranean Blue Poetry*, *Canada - Tincture*, *Australia - mgv2>publishing*, *France - Cha: Asian Review*, *Hong Kong*, *China - Vine Leaves Journal*, *Australia - Scarlet Leaf Review - Greece*, *pi-oneertown*, *Sounding Review*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *The Aureorean*, *Liquid Imagination*, *The Tishman Review*, & others in the USA.

Benjamin Harnett is a historian, fiction writer, poet, and digital engineer. His works have appeared recently in *Pithead Chapel*, *Brooklyn Quarterly*, *Moon City Review*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*. He lives in Beacon, NY with his wife Toni and their pets. He can be found most days on Twitter, @benharnett. He works for *The New York Times*.

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Piedmont Poetry Journal*, and a number of other online and in print poetry magazines over the years. The author has been a Pushcart nominee and over the years has been published in a few anthologies.

Julia Hatch self-identifies as a bookworm and once took a literature class instructed by Maya Angelou. When she's not reading or writing, she plays an impressive game of fetch with her cat while her other cat feigns disinterest. She resides with her family in Maryland after trying out several other locations. Her poetry has appeared or will appear in *Quail Bell*, *Sonder Midwest*, *Steam Ticket*, and *Gravitas*.

Kevin Hogg holds a M.A. in English Literature from Carleton University. He teaches high school English and Law, and he is a diehard Chicago Cubs fan. He writes short stories, poetry, non-fiction history, and children's books.

Zebulon Huset is a writer and photographer living in San Diego. His writing has recently appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Meridian*, *North American Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, *The Portland Review*, *The Maine Review*, and *The Roanoke Review* among others. He publishes a writing prompt blog (Notebooking Daily) and his flash fiction submission guide was reposted at *The Review Review*.

Anthony Koranda is a graduate student studying fiction in Chicago. You can learn more about him and his writing at [anthonykoranda.com](http://anthonykoranda.com)

Lori Lipsky is a writer and music teacher from Waunakee, Wisconsin. Her stories have been published by *The Avalon Literary Review*, *Fiction on the Web*, and *Spelk*. You can read more at [www.lorilipsky.com](http://www.lorilipsky.com).

Jeanne Lutz grew up on a small dairy farm in southern Minnesota, attended the National University of Ireland Galway, and spent two years in Japan. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Best-of-the-Net nominee, and Loft Mentor Series fellow for poetry, she is the author of the chapbook *Hearts and Harrows* and her poetry has appeared in *The Missouri Review*; *NonBinary Review*, *Conduit* and elsewhere. She divides her time between the family farm and working at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Sean Lynch is a working-class poet who lives in South Philly. His poems have been published in various journals including (*parenthetical*), *Chrysanthemum*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. He's the author of three chapbooks, the latest being *100 Haiku*, published in 2018 by Moonstone Press. You can find out more on [swlynch.com](http://swlynch.com)

Jennifer Makowsky received her MFA in Creative Writing from The University of Arizona. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Portland Review*, *Gargoyle*, *2 Bridges Review*, *Pamplermousse*, *The Matador Review*, and others. She lives in Tucson, Arizona where she teaches English to adult refugees at Pima Community College.

Delvon T. Mattingly, who also goes by D.T. Mattingly, is an emerging creative writer and a PhD student in epidemiology at the University of Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Maudlin House*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Star 82 Review*, and elsewhere. He currently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan with his two cats, Liam and Tsuki. Learn more about his work at <http://delvonmattingly.com/>. He tweets here: @Delvonmattingly

K. McGee grew up in California but has lived in Tokyo for twenty-five years. She serves as co-organizer of the Tokyo Writers Workshop and the Japan Writers Conference. She writes mainstream fiction, crime fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared recently in *Bete Noire*, *The Font*, *Mystery Weekly*, and *The Dark City Crime and Mystery Magazine*. Her story “Dot Rat” was included in Otto Penzler’s *The Best American Mystery Stories 2017*. She is currently working on a novel.

Underground Books presents a new version of Bob McNeil’s collection of poetry, *Verses of Realness*. This collection, unlike its predecessor, has more thought-provoking poems about the state of the world. And, as an added bonus, the book prominently showcases two of Bob’s startling illustrations. James Browning Kepple, Publisher of Underground Books, wrote: “By going deep inside our own selves, Bob McNeil guides the way to a new and improved view of what our world should be—something real and honest.” *Verses of Realness* can be purchased for \$8.00, plus \$4 shipping and handling. For copies of this book, send checks or money orders to Bob McNeil, PO Box 144, Hollis, NY 11423 or to this PayPal account: [mcneil\\_bob@yahoo.com](mailto:mcneil_bob@yahoo.com). If you have any questions, email Bob at [mcneil\\_bob@yahoo.com](mailto:mcneil_bob@yahoo.com) or call him at 917-889-1441.

Rachel Medina lives in the Pacific Northwest where she works in health-care by day and writes fiction and nonfiction, both long and short, by night. Her other interests include knitting, running, and drinking coffee.

Julie Morin’s short story, “How to Disappear,” was published by *Pacifica Literary Review*. Her novel, *Water for the Tin House*, was one of six finalists in the William Faulkner Creative Writing Competition. She received a degree in English from the University of Arizona. Her interests include playing the mandolin, home decorating, and cats.

Cameron Morse was diagnosed with a glioblastoma in 2014. With a 14.6 month life expectancy, he entered the Creative Writing Program at the University of Missouri—Kansas City and, in 2018, graduated with an M.F.A. His poems have been published in numerous magazines, including *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, *Portland Review* and *South Dakota Review*. His first poetry collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press’s 2018 Best Book Award. His three subsequent collections are *Father Me Again* (Spartan Press, 2018), *Coming Home with Cancer* (Blue Lyra Press, 2019), and *Terminal Destination* (Spartan Press, 2019). He lives with his pregnant wife Lili and son Theodore in Blue Springs, Missouri, where he manages Inklings’ Fourth Fridays Reading Series with Eve Brackenbury and serves as poetry editor for *Harbor Review*. For more information, check out his [Facebook page](#) or [website](#).

Louisa Muniz is a reading/writing tutor. She lives in Sayreville, N.J. with her husband & son. She holds a Master’s in Curriculum and Instruction from Kean University. Her work has been published in *Rose Red Review*, *Tinderbox Journal*, *Words Dance*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *PANK Magazine* & *Women’s Anthology TLDR Press*. She is the recent Sheila-Na-Gig Online 2019 Spring Contest Winner for her poem “Stone Turned Sand.”

Marianthi Papadim A 21 year-old dreamer, student at the English Language and Literature Department, who loves writing poetry under the tranquility of the stars.

Melanie Petrandis has been writing poems since she was a child, and over the past 10 years has been inspired to write about her process of finding peace within her life and self-acceptance. This will be her first publication. She lives in Florida and recently joined the Tallahassee Writer’s Association and is looking forward to sharing her work and receiving feedback. She has her Masters in Psychology and works as a counselor.

Jenna Pini studied Graphic Design and Creative Writing at Saginaw Valley State University (‘19). She has loved writing ever since she can remember. Her interests also include photography, painting and all things creative.

John Raffetto is a lifelong resident of Chicago. Some of his poetry has been published in print and various online magazine such as *Gloom Cupboard*, *Wilderness House*, *BlazeVox*, *Literary Orphans*, *Olentangy Review* & *Exact Change*. Raffetto was nominated for Pushcart Prize 2017. His book *Human Botany* is scheduled to be released in 2020. He holds degrees from the University of Illinois and Northeastern Illinois University. Raffetto worked as a horticulturalist and landscape designer for many years at the Chicago Park District which was a rich environment for drawing inspiration for poems concerning nature, people and the city. He is currently an adjunct professor at Triton College.

Robin Ray, formerly from Trinidad & Tobago, resides in Port Townsend, WA. Educated in English Composition at Iowa State University, his works have appeared at *Aphelion*, *Flash Fiction World*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Red Fez*, and elsewhere. His interests also include playing guitar and keyboards, writing songs, video editing, producing music with Cubase, and maintaining his online blog, *The Writings of an American Author*.

The Rotten Poets: “Rotten” is a collaborative poem written by Dr. Summer Qabazard’s Writing 102 class at Pima Community College, Northwest in Tucson, Arizona. We are “The Rotten Poets”: Alfred Betancourt, Victoria Combs, Talia Delgado, Kate Funk, Alexis Lopez, Abbey McGowan, Neo Northington, Summer Qabazard, Grace Stone, Gus Vazquez, and Taylor Williams. When we collaborated on this poem, one person started us off with the first line, then another person followed. After that, we stopped going in order and people started to contribute randomly. It was fun to build off other people’s ideas. It bonded us as a group. It also made it easier to write, since we could bounce ideas off everybody. Since we weren’t on our own, we didn’t ever stay stuck. Each person contributed at least a line. As we built and revised the poem, everyone had a say. We all listened to one another and respected our differences of opinion. We disagreed on some points but were able to reach a consensus peacefully every time.

Marguerite Maria Rivas's work has been published in numerous journals including *The America's Review*, *Waterways*, *The Mas Tequila Review*, and *Quarterday Review*. The author of two books of poetry, Rivas is an Associate Professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College and is at work on a new volume of poetry, *Rapid Transit*.

David Anthony Sam, the proud grandson of peasant immigrants from Poland and Syria, lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam's poetry has appeared in over 90 publications and his poem, "First and Last," won the 2018 Rebecca Lard Award. Sam's five collections include *Final Inventory* (Prolific Press 2018) and *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, the 2016 Grand Prize winner GFT Press Chapbook Contest. He teaches creative writing at Germanna Community College and serves on the Board of the Virginia Poetry Society.

Becca Saul studied nursing at Vanderbilt University. She participates in numerous craft seminars and workshops for creative writing and is currently pursuing fiction and poetry publication. Her interests also include gardening, working with children and cooking. Currently, she is a pediatric nurse practitioner working in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Joe Seale is a PhD. candidate in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Georgia where he also teaches writing and literature courses. He hails from rural southwest Alabama and has been teaching college writing since 2011. Primarily an author of short stories, Joe is currently working on a collection of linked flash fiction as well as his first novel. His work has appeared in journals such as *Down in the Dirt*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Bull and Cross*, *Red Dirt Forum*, *Grist*, *Red Fez*, *Dead Mule*, and *The Emerson Review*, among others.

John Sheirer (pronounced "shy-er") lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wonderful wife Betsy and happy dog Libby. He has taught writing and communications for 26 years at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, where he also serves as editor and faculty advisor for *Freshwater Literary Journal* (submissions welcome). He writes a monthly column on current events for his hometown newspaper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, and his books include memoir, fiction, poetry, essays, political satire, and photography. Find him at [JohnSheirer.com](http://JohnSheirer.com).

Zigzagging back and forth across the Canadian/US border, Adrian Slonaker works as a copywriter and copy editor. Adrian's work has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared in *Pangolin Review*, *Aerodrome*, *WINK: Writers in the Know* and others.

John L. Stanizzi is author of *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!*, *High Tide – Ebb Tide*, *Four Bits – Fifty 50-Word Pieces*, and *Chants*. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Rattle*, *Tar River Poetry*, and many others. Stanizzi has been translated into Italian and his work has appeared in many journals in Italy. He has read at venues all over New England, and his newest collection, *Sundowning*, will be out later this year with *Main Street Mag*. Stanizzi teaches literature at Manchester Community College in Manchester, CT and he lives with his wife, Carol, in Coventry.

Wylie Strout has previously published her short stories and poetry with *Gold Dust Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Ordinary Madness*, and *Literary Yard*. Her short film, “*Forgive Me, Suzy Parker*,” premiered at the Kansas City Film Festival in 2018. She enjoys all types of restaurants for good food and conversation along with her travels. In her spare time, Wylie enjoys theater, film, writing, and running by the ocean.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore City where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, and acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college. He is the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press).

Julie Weiss received her BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from SJSU. She's a 44-year-old ex-pat from Foster City, California, who moved to Spain in 2001. She works as a telephone English teacher from her home in Guadalajara, where she lives with her wife, 4-year-old daughter, and 1-year old son. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Lavender Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Santa Clara Review*, and *Sky Island Journal*, among others. You can find her on Twitter @colourofpoetry or on her website at <https://julieweiss2001.wordpress.com/>.

After several decades, Thomas Wells has picked up his poetry pen once again. His poems have recently appeared in *The Opiate Magazine* and *Tuck Magazine*. In past decades, his poems were published in numerous small journals including *Visions International*, *Cafeteria* and *West End Magazine*. In 1982 he also published a chapbook of poetry titled “Native Steel” available from *Black Buzzard Press*. He hails from San Jose Ca. where he enjoys most days of his retirement.

Bill Wolak has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared recently in *Naked in New Hope 2018*, *The 2019 Seattle Erotic Art Festival*, *Poetic Illusion*, *The Riverside Gallery, Hackensack, NJ*, *the 2019 Dirty Show in Detroit*, *2018 The Rochester Erotic Arts Festival*, and *The 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival*.