

# PONDER REVIEW

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for Women

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# PONDER REVIEW

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## A NOTE TO READERS

Jawaharlal Nehru said, “The art of a people is a true mirror to their minds.” *Ponder Review* agrees with Nehru: what we create reflects everything within us. With that belief, we’ve curated an issue that reflects this ethos. Our works and those we gravitate towards speak to who we are and our evaluation of our places in the world, whether through Lila Byrne’s striking portrait “Knock Knock,” Alan Elyshevitz’s conversation with the markings in a thrifted book in “Marginalia,” or Jack Durant’s study of decaying flowers and our connection to them in “Fading Petals.”

In this issue, we also highlight works that explore the ways our experiences shape us as a collective, while still honoring our differences in worldview. Additionally, *Ponder Review* takes a constant and deep-rooted inspection of how environment, in every capacity of the word, impacts our lives. We continue to strive to create a collection of diverse voices to express the multifaceted, complex, and often-beautiful human experience. Though some of the content in these pages could potentially disturb some readers, each story, poem, play, and piece of art speaks to that human experience.

This issue’s staff includes four students who are new to *Ponder Review*. For the majority of them, this is their first experience working on a literary magazine. Their contributions have been greatly appreciated, and we are proud to have them. We’re glad this issue is their first. Our contributors have given us powerful words and art in which we can find pieces of our own experiences. We hope that you, our readership, will also find something to ponder and recognize on each page.

Sincerely,

*The Editors*

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MICHAEL PROPSOM

---

—BUT NOBODY DOES ANYTHING ABOUT IT

He wasn't much for sharing feelings, the old man. Instead, whenever he found himself wedged into an emotional corner, he'd fall back into talking about the weather. Over his seven-plus decades, the subject came up a hell of a lot.

Mother told me that in the spring of 1947, when the old man asked her to marry him, he sandwiched his proposal between a pair of long-winded monologues on how conditions were ideal for putting in the corn.

"After he stopped rambling about rainfall totals, the ideal temperature, and potential bushels per acre," she said, "I asked him, 'Was that a proposal or the ag report?'"

Ten years later, I kept him company in the hospital while Mother gave birth to Sis. In the nine hours it took little Irene to sashay into this world, the old man nearly paced a ravine into the waiting room floor. On every trip, between his chair and the window, he fretted that the rain would come before the dent corn was ready for harvest. At first, he occasionally muttered, "Might be we're just in for a light drizzle." But every hour deeper into Mother's labor, his predictions grew gloomier, from a misting to showers to thundershowers. Near sundown, he predicted a downpour that would not only drown the corn, but also wash every man, woman, boy, and Guernsey downriver to the Gulf.

A little after midnight, a nurse came into the waiting room and announced, "Congratulations, you have a healthy baby girl."

The frown lines creasing the old man's face slackened. He peered into the night sky and nearly crooned, "It looks to be clearing up."

In August of '78, at Mother's funeral, he returned every handshake and word of condolence with a few words of insight into the drought that was blistering crops from Minot to Brownsville. The following day, I drove to the farm to find every acre of corn plowed under. The old man was slumped over the steering wheel of his old Massey Ferguson, his eyes brimming with humidity.

"Just a couple inches of rain, three at most," he said in a strangled vibrato. "That's all it would have took."

I was out of town the night he passed. According to Sis, all the while the old man lay in the emergency room with his heart cramping up like an overworked fist, he rambled on about a killing frost before Halloween. She said he got so worked up the doctor could hardly get a decent EKG reading.

We buried him yesterday. The weatherman on Channel 6 said the

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day's temperature was right on average, but it was the fifth windiest July 15th on record. And right when the corn has fully tasseled. Ideal for pollinating, but damned if the combination doesn't set a soul's eyes to burning.



JC ALFIER

---

SHE VAGUELY FEELS THAT SOMETHING IS SLIPPING



ELIZABETH SOLSBURG

---

DUCK SONG

After a fox took his favorite duck one night,  
my grandfather gathered her eggs from the barn —  
one he broke right into a cast iron pan,  
but the others he tucked into a box  
with a lightbulb to keep them warm.

He checked them every day  
and when they began to shake,  
he whistled to the ducklings inside.  
Eventually, they whistled back,  
little trills muted by calcium.

To help the hatch, he laid  
his work-hard palm on the shells  
with the weight of a mother duck's body,  
until tiny beaks pierced their walls  
to find the voice who'd sung them into being.

In the dawn dark, I reach out and press  
my palm against your back,  
listening with my skin for the music  
that means I can let another day  
break its shell open around me.

ROBERTA SENECHAL DE LA ROCHE

---

STILL LIFE WITH HUMAN

Multivalent, yet in denial,  
it remains to be seen, this looking  
as though it merely was too much  
caressing of scars, voyeuristic  
cultivation of malaise,  
a self-portrait on a darkened ground  
with one eye only showing.

It comes into focus slowly,  
what might bleed out  
into a small room, single bed  
unmade, candle smoke dispersing,  
palette in shades of charcoal,  
a touch of red like wine spilled out  
by foundered hands.

And here the sketch of a woman  
naked on a dark and lathered horse  
transported, going fast  
intoxicated, up and over rough edges  
into churning space  
mane and her long hair blown back  
converging there in transient grace.

*You slowly turned to night, escaped  
your soul of glass, eyes like empty bottles  
inscribed with drifting fog,  
forsaking now all light and color,  
subject now to any wind that might take down  
the shallow-rooted, leaving only the knife  
to tear her soaring painted heart.*

*For Władysław Podkowiński*

JACK DURANT

---

## FADING PETALS

The Hanami is a festival celebrated in Japan when the Sakura are in full bloom. Groups gather together on blankets. There, they eat while admiring the branches lined with the pink that blossoms and clusters like floating flowerbeds, celebrating the death of winter and the rebirth of spring this flowering symbolizes.

*Sakura* do not decorate their branches for long. Inevitably, some petals fall before their contemporaries' bloom. Never a part of the greater grandeur, these lonely petals lie on the ground while their timelier compatriots are enjoyed. Often forgotten, their color fades alone.

They evoked sadness in a visitor staring at the pale petals scattered along the green between the blankets. Those who had invited him were admiring the view above. Their eyes unable to resist the escape upwards. They thought of their own lives and felt that, like the *Sakura*, they themselves were coming into bloom. Unfallen, their potential would soon flourish into beauty just like this.

While the others looked above, the visitor thought of death on this day of bright rebirth and how these fading corpses between the blankets were similar to the friend he missed, having also fallen too soon and been robbed a part of their collective splendor.

It was not a day meant for lamenting the tragedies of the past. The weight the visitor carried was his alone. Trapped in recent memory, he could not appreciate the splendor above him, but only bear witness to what he saw as wasted life cluttering the ground. So, at this Hanami, it was not yet time for the visitor to embrace the tragic but still beautiful lives of the fading petals that lay nestled in the grass. That part of him could not yet be renewed, as it had not yet died.

LILA BYRNE

---

KNOCK KNOCK



10:4: TENN PLAWRITING CONTEST WINNER

ELYZABETH WILDER

ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

**CHARACTERS:**

MEREDITH: late 40's-early 50's

JOHN: late 40's-early 50's

**SETTING:**

A parking lot on a warm summer night

*(MEREDITH is dressed for a nice night out. She sits in a lawn chair drinking a mixed drink. She has an ice chest with the makings of a cocktail set up. JOHN enters. He is casually dressed.)*

JOHN: There you are. I was getting worried.

MEREDITH: Blame the cicadas. Their hypnotic chant lured me out.

JOHN: It is peaceful out here.

MEREDITH: How'd you find me?

JOHN: Wasn't that hard.

MEREDITH: I'm predictable.

JOHN: You are anything but predictable, Mrs. Williams.

*(beat)*

You look nice.

MEREDITH: This old thing?

JOHN: Party for one?

MEREDITH: I've never minded drinking alone.

JOHN: I wasn't invited.

MEREDITH: Not tonight.

JOHN: Fair enough.

MEREDITH: I was feeling impulsive.

JOHN: I don't know Meredith, this looks premeditated.

MEREDITH: I felt some sort of need to put on foundation garments and lipstick. I've been wearing lycra for the past 73 days.

JOHN: It's a survival instinct.

MEREDITH: Yoga pants lie to you and tell you everything's ok.

JOHN: That's what friends are for.

MEREDITH: I needed accountability. I needed the truth.

JOHN: And you found it in formalwear?

MEREDITH: Yes! The truth is I need to lay off the baked goods.

JOHN: Yes, but baked goods release serotonin in the brain. They serve a therapeutic purpose.

MEREDITH: You are my enabler.

JOHN: A role I play well.

MEREDITH: I needed to look pretty.

JOHN: You're beautiful.

MEREDITH: You say that to all the girls.

JOHN: Only the ones I married.

MEREDITH: Not that I did anything. Because there's nothing to do. Just drove around.

JOHN: Sounds like me in high school.

MEREDITH: But I figure it's better than day drinking.

JOHN: Maybe that's something to aspire to. It's good to have goals.

MEREDITH: Don't tempt me.

JOHN: There were reports that you were driving around honking at people.

MEREDITH: You know how it is when you're drunk and too dressed up to go home.

JOHN: Haven't seen you drunk in a while.

MEREDITH: I just needed to be outside after dark. I needed human beings I didn't give birth to or fight over the thermostat with. It felt scandalous.

JOHN: It doesn't take much these days.

MEREDITH: Was our house always that small?

JOHN: The kids just got bigger.

MEREDITH: They were both out of the house, and now they're back and they're using up all of our toilet paper.



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JOHN: Jerks.

MEREDITH: I mean, I like our kids.

JOHN: They're good kids.

MEREDITH: But sometimes the very sound of their voices makes me want to scream. It's like every week they're with us they regress another year. Soon they'll be toddlers and I'll be cutting up their grapes.

JOHN: We could trade them in.

MEREDITH: That's an idea. Not for good. I mean, we have a lot of money invested in them. I expect repayment on the backend, because I'm not going to one of those assisted living facilities with communal dining.

JOHN: Then you better be nice to them.

MEREDITH: For two weeks, maybe? Trade them in for kids who won't try to talk to me while I'm in the shower.

JOHN: Mark and Rachel's daughter is home. She's not speaking to them because they told her that if her school goes online next semester she'll have to do her sophomore year at State.

MEREDITH: Well, she's not very smart. I wouldn't pay for a private school either.

JOHN: Don't speak ill of other people's children.

MEREDITH: You know it's true.

JOHN: What about Parker and Jack?

MEREDITH: Oh, yes. They have good manners. And they always clean up after themselves.

JOHN: And they can mow the yard.

MEREDITH: Our kids would never mow the yard.

JOHN: Freeloaders.

MEREDITH: Totally.

*(Meredith offers him her drink.)*

MEREDITH: Taste it.

*(John takes a sip.)*

JOHN: What is that?

MEREDITH: Perhaps my greatest accomplishment to date.

JOHN: It's nice.

MEREDITH: I'd make you one, but I only have one glass. Here, finish it. I



don't need to drink anymore.

*(John takes the drink.)*

JOHN: Are you going to tell me why you ran away from home?

MEREDITH: It's not like I'm not planning to come back.

JOHN: Meredith.

MEREDITH: I don't know. Maybe because it feels like the world as we know it is ending before our eyes.

JOHN: Don't be hyperbolic.

MEREDITH: Where's the lie? I was sitting on the back patio this afternoon drinking wine much too early and Grace is playing her cello, and all I could think was this was what it must have felt like on the Titanic.

JOHN: We're going to get through this.

MEREDITH: When? The Titanic went down in less than three hours. Somehow that seems merciful. This. This feels endless.

JOHN: And that's why you ran away.

MEREDITH: I just couldn't sit there anymore. I've cleaned out the closets, I've baked bread, I've planted a garden, I've learned how to knit. I'm not even crafty, John. What has become of me?

JOHN: You're doing all the things you always said you wanted to do and didn't have time.

MEREDITH: Yes. And now I've done them, and I want to go back to being overscheduled. I find security in that structure.

JOHN: So we'll make a schedule.

MEREDITH: No. I'm not letting you set a schedule.

JOHN: What?

MEREDITH: You'll start setting timers. It will feel like the military.

JOHN: I'm running out of ideas here.

MEREDITH: Maybe it would help if we started social distancing at home.

JOHN: That's hardly practical.

MEREDITH: Everyone takes a room?

JOHN: Funny.

MEREDITH: No, I'm serious. Can we all just stay six feet away from one another?

JOHN: I give up.

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*(John picks up his drink and downs it. It seems like he's going to leave.)*

MEREDITH: No, John wait. I'm sorry.

JOHN: I'm trying to help here. I find you sitting out here, all alone. This isn't like you.

*(Meredith takes a moment.)*

MEREDITH: There was this moment when Grace was a baby. She was really little. Still nursing. Not sleeping. I had a chance to go to Chicago for a conference, but I felt so guilty about leaving her. But your mother said she'd come down and help out, so I went. And I remember being there and drinking a glass of wine in this pretentious over-priced wine bar. And even though people were talking all around me, it felt strangely quiet and still. And in that moment, I thought to myself, you don't have to go back.

JOHN: Meredith . . .

MEREDITH: . . . No, let me finish. Then I started thinking about all the things I'd miss. The first steps. The tooth fairy. I thought about the way you looked when Grace fell asleep on your chest, more handsome than I could have ever imagined. And I missed you both. So I walked out and I got on a plane and I came home.

JOHN: You never told me that story.

MEREDITH: That's why I left. That's why I'm sitting here in a parking lot drinking cocktails alone. Because I needed a chance to miss you. It's hard when you're together all the time. I could have kept driving, but I didn't.

JOHN: ---

*(John walks over to Meredith and envelopes her in his arms. After a moment, Meredith pulls away.)*

MEREDITH: We should probably go home.

JOHN: Why? Our children are both of age. They have Netflix, free laundry, and a pantry full of processed food. They're living their best life.

MEREDITH: Yeah, but they're probably drinking all of our good beer.

JOHN: Probably. The little drunks.

MEREDITH: I shouldn't drive.

JOHN: It's a nice night. It's been a long time since I took advantage of you in the back of a parked car.

MEREDITH: Can you do that while maintaining social distancing?

JOHN: I'm up for the challenge.

MEREDITH: I don't know if I want have our children bail us out of jail for indecency.

JOHN: But it would make a good story.

MEREDITH: It would definitely make a good story.

JOHN: And they would be mortified.

MEREDITH: Absolutely mortified.

JOHN: It's almost worth the risk.

(beat)

I want to give you what you need right now. If you need space, then you've got space.

MEREDITH: Maybe we could just sit here.

JOHN: I can sit. I'm very good at sitting.

MEREDITH: And just be still.

JOHN: Alright.

*(They each sit on the hood of the car. John sits on the far side.)*

MEREDITH: You don't have to sit so far away.

*(John moves a little closer.)*

MEREDITH: Much better.

*(John takes her hand. They sit together in silence.)*

END

10:4: TENN PLAWRITING CONTEST WINNER

ELYZABETH WILDER

---

INTERVIEW WITH ELYZABETH WILDER

**Elyzabeth, thank you for submitting your ten-minute play, *All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go* to our third annual 10:4 Tenn Contest! This competition seeks to recognize and honor the Southern experience and the legacy of Columbus's native son, Tennessee Williams, through the craft of playwriting. How do you see the themes, setting, or characters in your work reflecting the Southern experience? Was this a departure from what you usually write, or is it closely related to your canon?**

I am always interested in smaller stories that resonate in a larger context: stories that are somehow a reflection of the world around us. When I look at my body of work, I'd say that it is equally divided between plays that are rooted in the Southern experience and those that aren't. I grew up listening to my grandmother and her sisters tell stories. It was at their feet that I became a writer. Growing up in the South, with the rhythm of the language and the people who feel so specific to this place, influences everything I write because it has given me an ear for dialogue and a love of characters who are complicated and flawed.

**You are currently the Tennessee Williams Playwright-in-Residence at Sewanee: The University of the South. How has that experience affected your playwriting? Can you speak on that role's influence in *All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go* and in your submission to our contest?**

There is a rich literary tradition here in Sewanee, so I feel fortunate to live and work in a place that values me as a writer. As a playwright, it means a great deal to be in a position that's endowed by the Williams estate and to have an opportunity to inspire the next generation of writers. I'm incredibly grateful because the position have given me stability while also allowing me enough flexibility to continue to write and work professionally. I'm very fortunate; it's allowed me to continue to write while also being a parent and a teacher.

**Along with many of your plays produced in different states and featured at multiple festivals, you are also a professor of English and Creative Writing at Sewanee: The University of the South. What are some of your favorite things about working**

**with college students on their creative writing? How is it different working with them from working with theatre professionals?**

The thing I love most about teaching undergrads is that I have the chance to introduce them to all the possibilities that theatre offers. My playwriting students come from a variety of backgrounds; some are theatre majors or creative writing majors, while others might be in economics or psychology. Each of them brings something unique into the workshop. Theatre is such a collaborative art, and I love watching my class become a community over the course of a semester. Theatre gives us a chance to see the world from a variety of perspectives which is an important life skill. Regardless of whether they continue to write after they leave my class, my hope is that they can be creative problem solvers, work collaboratively, and interact with the world around them with compassion and empathy.

**This play is set during the Covid pandemic and that experience is the main catalyst for the actions of the character Meredith. Even though we're three years on from the start of the pandemic and things are seemingly a little more normal, this play still resonates with us and with other readers. Why do you think that is?**

Interestingly, the play never mentions Covid or the pandemic specifically, and that was intentional. I wrote it during a specific moment in time, but there is something timeless about Meredith's dilemma that I think people, especially mothers, can relate to. I think we've all had moments when we've felt like the world was closing in around us, when we wanted to run away from home, when we didn't feel appreciated, and when all we really wanted to do was to get dressed up and feel special.

**Can you tell us about your process in playwriting? Has it evolved since first writing this play?**

I've been writing plays since I was 17 years old, and I keep thinking that my process will become more efficient the more I do it. In reality, I have a very fragmented process. I usually sit with an idea for quite a while. I'll make notes and write down pieces of dialogue. I'm a research nerd, so I can avoid actually writing for a long time using that as an excuse. Generally, I'll make notes until the story starts to take shape. I outline, but I'm not rigid. When I start to write, I write in bursts. My writing time is very fragmented because I'm also juggling my role as a teacher and as a parent. But eventually, I have something that looks like a play.

**Contests are an excellent way for emerging playwrights to get their work into the world. What advice do you give playwrights who are considering the 10:4 Tenn Contest or who are just starting to submit?**

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Submit to everything, especially when you're first starting out and trying to build your resume. You aren't just building up credits, you're also building relationships, and the theatre community is all about relationships. I learned early on that to a certain extent, this is a numbers game. There are a million reasons why a theatre passes on your work, so you can't get too invested in any one submission. Keep putting your work out there, then let it go and write the next thing while you wait to hear. I would also tell people just starting out to make sure their work is submission ready. You get one read. Theatres are inundated with scripts. They have to pay people to read each submission. They track each submission. Rarely do you get an opportunity to resubmit. Make sure it's ready.

**Thanks so much for your time, Elyzabeth. We have thoroughly enjoyed your work, and we look forward to seeing more of it in the future—on the page, the stage, and the screen. Are there any other projects we should keep an eye out for, and where/how can we stay connected with you? (Twitter, Facebook, Website, etc.)**

In June (2024) the Alabama Shakespeare Festival will be producing my play *Zelda in the Backyard*, which was inspired by the 1961 Rolls Royce I inherited when I was 21. You can also check out more of my work at [www.wilderwriting.net](http://www.wilderwriting.net).

JENNIFER LOTHRIGEL

---

VOODOO



GENE TWARONITE

---

WRITE ME A POEM

about the death of an old dog  
dying alone by the side of a road,  
growling softly as he thinks of  
that calico cat he so despised  
and loved to chase,  
remembering the last stroke behind his ears  
by the homeless old woman  
who lived in the underpass.

My chatbot muse pauses briefly,  
then out pours a poem  
about a quantum pooch  
who exists in two places at once  
chasing calico electrons  
from one end of the galaxy to another  
trying to imagine something called  
physical touch,  
perfectly metered and rhymed,  
with exactly the right number  
of clever metaphors,  
and enough emotive juice  
to make you think you  
really feel something.



LISA RUA-WARE

---

DEATH SPEAKS

I walk through many lives,  
take the stone path through the cemetery  
where a headstone is not a headstone,  
it's my grandmother's kitchen,  
she sits at the table,  
drinks from a cracked glass and swallows.

Wild cats feast on sausage skin  
as the crows groom themselves.  
Yesterday's bread is a terrible thing  
to waste, my grandmother says.  
And I eat it stale again.

I sit back or maybe I lean forward  
in the wake of her plate,  
she shows me I exist  
only from the crumbs  
she lets me take.

JESS CHALLIS

---

LANTERN FESTIVAL IN THE RAIN



JESSICA HWANG

---

## TWENTY-SEVEN STEPS

A sound, innocent enough—the muffled thud of a hardback novel toppling off a tall table as the cat brushes against it, or the *thunk* of a package being left on the front step by a delivery driver.

Half-asleep, Claire listens for the sing-song voices of the little girls playing make-believe in the next yard. Worn velvet sofa cushion pressed against one cheek, arms flung above her head. Eyelids flutter and drift. Yawn wide enough to make her jaw click. Yellow curtains billow. Sunlight slants across the wood floor in a contained panel that evokes dreamy flashes of the contradictory childhood: secure freedom, hesitant longing, intuitive innocence. Are there many things nicer than a nap in the middle of a Saturday afternoon?

A tiny clatter, hardly more than a *snick*. Claire’s heart thumps. A shadow falls over the patch of sunlight.

The thud had been the sound of the sliding glass door being pulled shut. The snick was the lock being turned.

He wanders around the living room of her townhouse while Claire hovers beside the sofa.

“I’m late for an appointment,” she says, and “Now’s not a good time, but maybe we can get together later.”

She says these soft, placating things instead of what she should say: *What in the hell do you think you’re doing?* and, *How dare you enter my private space uninvited?*

Claire inches toward the sliding glass door and he turns from where he’s examining her DVD collection to say, “Go sit on the couch.”

“I was just adjusting the drapes.” Where’s her cell phone? In the kitchen? The bedroom?

“Aren’t you gonna show me the rest of the house?”

“I’m late...”

“Never mind that. Let’s go.”

They go down the hallway. His name is Nate, but he goes by N.T. His interests are action movies and video games and fantasy sports. His likes are dark beer and comedy clubs and Milo’s Pizza. He’s twenty-nine, two years younger than Claire. He’s a security guard in an office building downtown. He works overnights and every other weekend. They both enjoy the science fiction novels of Tamir Nelson and consider the band Second Try one of their top five. They met on an online dating service four weeks ago. *Lonely Hearts United*.

Claire's certain she didn't tell him her address during their date or during any of their online interactions. Could you look up someone's address if you knew their name and phone number? Maybe he'd followed her home that night. She stands just outside the bedroom doorway. She says weakly, "It's a mess, I haven't cleaned in weeks." *Get out of my house.*

"Don't" N.T. says, "Come on in, don't be shy."

She edges into the room and stands next to the closet. A cigarette dangles from his lips. He bends his head toward the flame cupped in the palm of his hand. He's one of those short wiry types, so skinny the muscles in his arms stand out in stark relief—the veins purple-blue ropes snaking from his inner elbows to the backs of his hands. Dark hairs sprout in the spaces between his knuckles. The lean oblong of his face is too narrow for the features that dominate it: fleshy lips, large, crooked nose, rectangular eyes the color of algae-throttled water on a cloudy day. He's wearing a tight gray t-shirt and worn-in blue jeans.

He wanders around the bedroom, lifting a paperback novel from the nightstand, flicking a finger over the cotton dresses and colorful skirts that hang from the closet rod, making them sway. N.T. drops to the mattress and pats it.

"Come sit."

Claire says, her words insubstantial puffs of air, "I have to go . . ." Her phone isn't on the nightstand or the bureau top. She feels dizzy.

"Don't be like that. Sit."

She lowers herself gently and watches him from the corner of one eye, as if he's an unreliable dog she can prevent provoking by avoiding sudden movements. An acrid cloud envelops them. She jerks away when he springs from the edge of the bed. He pushes one hand through his hair and taps ash into the crystal vase Mirabelle gave Claire for her thirtieth birthday. She tracks the glow of the cigarette tip. His face goes speculative. He takes another puff.

"So," he says on the exhale, "What have you been up to since I saw you?"

Claire stands. She makes her voice firm. "Now's really not a good time, N.T. I've got some stuff I need to—"

He advances, the smoldering stub outstretched. The edge of the mattress pushes against the backs of her legs, and she sits again. Flakes of ash drift over her. Claire scoots backward to press herself against the headboard, cramming her body into one corner. N.T.'s teeth when he grins are stained yellow and gapped, like the crooked boards in an old neglected fence. He reaches past her to the nightstand, drops the butt into the vase. A wisp of pale smoke climbs toward the ceiling. *Mirabelle...*

Claire sits motionless. N.T. picks up a bottle of perfume, sniffs at the stopper. He squirts a fine mist into the air and the heady balsamic scent of

sandalwood drifts over her. She won't be able to wear it after this.

The precise number of steps from the bedroom doorway to the front door is twenty-four. Claire knows this because last spring, while she was waiting to hear about Mirabelle's diagnosis, she paced the entire townhouse for three days straight. Add six steps for starting further back, from the bed, but deduct a few for lengthening her stride. Twenty-seven steps. As soon as he leaves the room, Claire will walk straight to the front door and then right out it. She'll flip the latch and step outside, and the door will whisper-shut behind her. No hesitation, no looking back. She's going to own it. Later, Mirabelle will praise her ingenuity, her courage. Twenty-seven steps. Twenty-nine, if the cat trips her.

N.T. drops to the floor. He does a round of push-ups, counting out loud. He jumps up and lights another cigarette. His eyes travel over her as if he finds her lacking.

When she was nineteen and living in her first apartment with a roommate called Holly, who was obsessed with Pink and ate Cheetos for breakfast and slept with a guy named Xavier, Claire had once joined Holly and another neighbor in snickering at the woman who lived at the end of the hallway. The woman smelled of unwashed armpits and could frequently be heard arguing with herself. Her apartment door was often propped open with a plastic laundry basket filled with stuffed animals. The woman, shuffling in her bathrobe from the bank of mailboxes in the entryway back to her apartment, had glanced up at their smirking faces before dropping her gaze to the takeout pizza menus and utility bills. Perhaps we all commit thoughtless acts on one day or another, varying only by degree. Maybe we are all kind or cruel at different times, in different places, with different people.

N.T. says, "Stay here." He leaves the room. The clang of urine in the toilet bowl. Should she...? She'll have to pass by the bathroom to get to either the front door or the slider. He exits the bathroom and strides down the hallway to the kitchen. Claire hovers in the bedroom doorway. She takes two steps and retreats into the bedroom when a shadow appears at the end of the hall.

He closes the door behind him. "Sit." He chugs a can of pop.

Claire perches on the edge of the bed, near the footboard. He's complaining about somebody named Jake, something about a car. She'll cross the walkway to Danna and Tyler's townhouse next door, the bricks hot beneath her feet. They'll be eating lunch and—

"That wasn't cool you know, the way you didn't even respond to my messages after our date." The soda can has left a wet ring on the nightstand, Claire whispers, "My phone wasn't working."

"I'm not pissed. Just made you seem kinda stuck up, that's all. You're not really my type anyway. You don't like to drink, plus you're taller than the girls I usually date. My last girlfriend, Morgan, was real tiny—petite, I think

it's called. *She* was completely extra, whew, what a little beyotch. I was glad when we broke up." He crushes the empty can in one fist. "How can you drink this diet shit? Hey, where's your purse? Let's order a pizza or some sesame chicken."

He dumps out her leather bag and digs through the contents. He tosses aside a pair of sunglasses, a tube of lip gloss, a package of spearmint gum, and a tampon. *Mirabelle...*

He'll pace the living room with the phone pressed against one ear as he asks for extra pepperoni and an order of garlic bread. Twenty-seven steps. Claire will be careful to avoid the creaky spot in the hallway just before the bathroom. She'll be inside Danna and Tyler's house while he's still reading off her credit card number. The cooing baby held perched on one plump hip, Danna's face comical with surprise at the sight of Claire breathless and barefoot.

N.T.'s thumbs dance over the keypad of his phone. "Sausage mushroom, okay? Not vegan, are you? I can't remember what you had at the restaurant."

Claire shakes her head. Scallops in a white wine sauce. He'd chosen the Bolognese.

"Be here in thirty minutes." He slips her Visa into the back pocket of his jeans. After some time—an hour or two—he'll leave. After he's gone, Claire will lock all the doors and call the police. And then she'll call *Mirabelle*. *Mirabelle* will—

"You shouldn't be so trusting, you know. The next guy who comes through your open patio door might be more dangerous than me." Low music drifts from his phone. He sets it on top of the bureau. "I thought you were pretty nice at the restaurant, but then you never called me back. Maybe you're just busy with work. I remember you said you work a lot."

Claire starts to speak, clears her throat. "Yeah. My boss is an asshole. He's been making us stay late every night. I... I'm supposed to go in today, even though it's the weekend, to finish a project. I'll be in trouble if I don't show up."

"I can't stand my fuckin' boss, either. Thinks his shit don't stink cuz he did two years at the community college."

He reaches out to stroke Claire's hair, rubbing the strands between his fingers. She has the sudden image of the crystal vase smashed on the bedroom floor, its faceted angles shattered into glittering bits.

Twenty-seven steps. A dingy police precinct. Phones ringing. Harsh fluorescent lights overhead. Cynical officers and harried administrative staff and hard-eyed criminals and sad-eyed victims.

*So, you know the guy then? He's your ex?*

*He's not my ex. We only went on one date.*

*Met him on the internet, did you? Sure you didn't invite him over;*



*maybe you guys got into an argument or something? Were you drinking?*

A chilly hospital room, a paper gown. The sterile smell of disinfectant. People sick and injured and dying in the other rooms. A matter-of-fact nurse, taking swabs and making notes.

A lawyer's office. A courtroom, judge, and jury studying Claire's outfit and makeup, her speech patterns and mannerisms, hungry for the details.

N.T. stands and she braces herself. He examines the framed painting of a solitary wolf that hangs centered above her bed. Skillful brushstrokes of gold and varying shades of gray, from dove to slate, smudges of pitch black. Most wolves are depicted howling at the moon, but this one crouches low between birch branches, posture cunning, eyes knowing.

"There's a block party in my neighborhood next weekend. You should stop by, if you don't got nothin' goin' on." His gaze drops to her face.

Claire pushes the corners of her mouth into a half-smile. "Sure. Just give me your address before you go." She'll get him to leave and then text him that she can't make it.

Something flickers over his features. Behind his eyes, a decision appears to be weighed and settled. Claire's fingers pluck at the flowered bedspread. She says brightly, "Or you could just text me later this week."

"Never mind. I prolly won't go anyway. Bunch of screaming kids runnin' wild, and the food usually sucks. It was just an idea." He pats his pockets. "Hey, let's have a joint. I know you said you don't smoke but I think you'll like it." He flicks the lighter.

He takes a drag, and the pungent earthiness rolls over her. On his phone, an ad is playing for car insurance.

Twenty-seven steps. He holds the lit joint to her lips. She pulls a small inhale between her teeth, blows it out on a choked cough. *Mirabelle, remember when we—*

"See? Good shit, ain't it?" The dirty-lake eyes are vague.

He takes another hit. He goes to stand at the window, uses two fingers to spread apart the wooden blinds. A sliver of sunshine falls to the hardwood floor. "You think your boss sucks. Mine laid me off last Friday. I applied at a couple places, but nobody's called me back yet. When he told me he was givin' me the boot I thought, *Well shit, at least I'll get to see Claire this weekend.* But then you ghosted me." His fingers fiddle with the window latch.

The air conditioner clicks on and chilled air washes over her bare arms, raising the hair. He's not trying to open the window. He's making sure it's locked.

*I woke up this morning, and I ate pancakes with strawberry jelly, and I brushed my teeth, and I called the cable company and watched the news and cleaned the bathroom and went grocery shopping and read a book and took a nap and tomorrow, I will do none of those things.*

He peers between the slats, swaying to the music like a thin reed in a gentle breeze. Smoke rolls over his shoulder. It curls upward and disappears like fragments of a dream upon meeting the morning light. There's a tattoo of a snarling grizzly bear on his left triceps. What is Mirabelle doing right now, at this exact moment?

N.T. raises the joint to his lips. Her chance, now. Claire slides off the bed. She takes two padding steps toward the door. Her toenails are painted bright cherry red. Twenty-five steps left. Her hand follows her gaze to the nightstand. The heft of the heavy crystal vase is solid and real. She takes another half dozen steps.

Her fingers when they grasp the bedroom doorknob are sticky. The cat is standing on the other side. Claire's hands leave tacky rust-colored stains that seep into the soft white paint of the doorjamb. Twenty-four steps left.



JENNIFER LOTHRISEL

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CRUMBLE



BRE DEYTON

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## CASTING A LINE

Nanna draws on a plastic cigarette as she eyes my mother from the picnic bench next to the lake. Her heavy exhale seems to dispossess the trees of their leaves which sweep across the sandy path between us and the small clearing at the edge of the woods where my mother paces, her phone against her ear. Nanna taps some invisible ash off the end and grinds it against the tabletop. So convincing are her movements, I forget it's not real as I open my mouth to tell her she could start a fire. She sees me staring at it, and shakes her head, seeming to know what I'm about to say even though it's the first time we've ever met.

"Just a fake," she says.

Nanna pops three chiclets of gum in her mouth as she looks toward Mom. She works the gum with her jaw as if she's searching for a place it can settle. Mom won't look directly at Nanna but I know those Mom-eyes-on-the-back-of-her-head are glued on her, and me. Mom wouldn't let me come unless she came with me. I'd told her I wasn't planning to get into trouble with my grandmother and she could save herself the trip we both knew she didn't want to make. But Nanna is like a legend; the story of her looms so large it seems it could overpower anything.

I've never called her Nanna. But she'd signed it on all those birthday cards, one for every one of my 16 years. It seems less strange than Dawn, which had been uttered my entire life from Mom and Aunt Faye's mouths with a downward turn, as if the word could frown. Sitting here, I try to avoid using a name, so I don't have to dance around the awkwardness of picking what to call her. She takes three nonalcoholic beers out of a plastic bag and pushes one toward me as she rises.

"I'll get the rods. I'll be right back."

Mom stares me down as I open the can. I hold it up so she can see it's not real beer. By the scowl on her face, I'm not sure it matters. I pick up another and place it where she'd be sitting if she weren't pacing in the woods. I can read her lips – "You won't believe" and "She put us through hell" words heaved into the phone to Aunt Faye, who, in solidarity, has asked me repeatedly over the last month if I was sure I was going to do this to my mother.

I am thankful that the not-beer is reasonably cold as I peer over the can at Nanna, who has a fishing pole tucked under each arm and each hand clutching a pair of tall boots. I stand to help her, but she waves me away. She hands me a pair of mud-caked green boots I notice are worn low at the outer

edge of the heels. She under-pronates like I do. It's both satisfying that I have something in common with her and odd even to me that I am glad for such a thing.

"I'm a size 11, so I figure even if you're swimming in them, they'll still work." She pulls a tackle box I hadn't realized was there from beneath the bench and starts to bait the line.

I look out toward the water as I slide my feet into the boots so I can't betray my mother by letting her see me enjoying sharing something with my grandmother.

Standing next to Nanna, fifty yards from shore, knee-deep in the water with our lines cast, I bob my line above the surface and back, just to have something to do when I can't figure out what to say.

"You'll never catch any fish like that," Nanna says.

I stiffen. There are so many wrong ways to fish with your grandmother.

"It's okay," she says. I don't know her enough to tell if there's any softness beyond the grit in her voice. "Just gentler, that's all."

This is not advice I expect. Not one of Mom and Aunt Faye's stories of Dawn speak anything of tenderness. She sees me studying her.

"I know. Who am I to tell you, right?"

"Well, you are the only one in the family who's ever taken me fishing."

"Damn shame," she says.

"What?" I ask.

"All of it."

I turn to her, but she stares out at the lake with a fierceness I don't dare interrupt.

After a few minutes, I venture a safety net of small talk. "So, have you always fished?"

I already knew she hadn't. After I had called Nanna a month ago and told Mom she wanted to meet me at the lake, she said, "On what planet? Closest I've ever seen Dawn to a lake is standing next to a bucket".

Nanna pulls the rod back over her shoulder and casts the line again. "Patience."

I'm not sure if she means hers or mine.

She rubs her neck. "Took me sixty-five years to even want to fish. Always thought it looked boring," she said. "But I got a job at the bait and tackle and Marley told me if I was going to be selling her fishing stuff, I should know what it was for." Nanna shifted her weight from one leg to the other. "I lasted five minutes that first day. You're doing way better than I did."

"Why did you go back?" I asked.

"First day I'd gone out late. Marley told me the fish were out strong at sunrise. Seemed like somewhere to go instead of lying awake. Maybe something to look forward to instead of dreading the sun coming up."

Nanna points at something in the water. “Still now. Look – a catfish.”

A whiskered head floats just beneath the surface.

Nanna looks over her shoulder back toward the shore where Mom is still pacing. “Some people think they only feed on the bottom. Truth is, they go wherever they need to go to survive.”

I lean in to get a closer look and drop my rod. I catch it just as it hits the surface, but the fish darts off, disappearing into the cloudy water.

“Sorry,” I say, thinking I’ve ruined it. “Do you think it’ll come back?”

“Don’t know,” she says. “That’s the thing. You wait. Even if it never comes back, you were here.”

I pull my rod back and try to cast it like Nanna had done. A gust catches the line and carries it straight into Nanna’s, wrapping around it. I freeze. Mom and Aunt Faye always say Nanna is not a woman to be messed with.

“Come here,” she says. Not a suggestion. I don’t move. She steps closer and pulls the rod from my hands.

“Everything gets tangled up eventually,” she says. “Try to pull them apart.”

I take the lines in my hands and weave over and under, looking for a way to unwind them, but the more I separate the ends, the tighter the tops knot. Nanna whistles through her teeth. “Always the way.”

There’s a pull at the line. The bait settled into the water while we were working. “We got a bite,” she says, trying to manage the rod. There is no use with the reel. She pulls back, but she can’t get enough leverage. “Grab it,” she says. I wrap my hands around the tip and pull. The rod snaps, with Nanna left holding the reels.

I pull on the line, but it starts slipping through my fingers. So I turn, wrapping it around me until the fish draws close. Nanna takes off her boot and scoops it up out of the water. My upper arms are fixed at my sides because of the line. The fish thrashes against the rubber of the boot in Nanna’s hands and I don’t notice the splashing until it is almost next to me. Mom, who had been watching from the shore, had run through the water, stopping a few yards from us. Breathless and soaked, she sees I am not harmed. I can see her formulating words for me for the car ride home, and more for Aunt Faye for later tonight.

Nanna holds up the boot. “She caught something.”

I stand next to Nanna who holds the wiggling boot, a broken end of a rod hanging at my side, endlessly tangled, no telling what it will take to part the lines.

JENNIFER LOTHRIE

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OMEN



CS CROW

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THE JAR OF OIL

Mountains of gravel, metal pipes at right angles  
I knew the smell of sulfur from the tap water.

Beside the plant, the graveyard,  
In the graveyard, the tombstones,  
Beneath the tombstones, the bodies.

I never asked why the dead needed a factory.  
Maybe we keep working, even when we die.

I never considered I might already be in hell—  
We were taught to always give thanks, to pray

Before every meal and before we started the car;  
Not for safety. For the car to start on an empty tank.

Use what you need, oh, Widow of Zarephath.  
Whatever it takes to get us to the end of days.

Beside the plant, the graveyard,  
In the graveyard, the tombstones,  
Beneath the tombstones, the bodies

Mountains of gravel, metal pipes in rusting piles.  
Sulfur on our lips. We prayed for more of it.

ALAN ELYSHEVITZ

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MARGINALIA

For twenty-six cents I bought a used book vandalized  
by a stranger's intellect. Reading is meant to accompany  
the reader through rabbinical confetti to a midnight haven.

But who were you who underlined:

the hull of their ship was a backstop for ricochets  
(your note: "see diagram p61")?

The heading of every chapter was a palace on the Bosphorus.  
Sentences composed a nocturne with lights in the distance.

the panic of unrecognized children struck from the register  
(your note: "chaotic intake")

Undertones, like an outgoing tide, peeled back an alternative  
history. Radiance of the long dead outshone any synopsis.

demeaning sobriquets were forced upon them  
(your note: "men and women to quiet")

Calligraphy is no more beautiful than junk exposed in typeface.  
At one time, margins were white, softening rectangular dread.

the sickening sway of transport murdered all their hopes  
(your note: "the days before penicillin")

Reading is a journey of skyjacked eyes. Thrust is measured  
in revelations per page assessed over an entire volume.

perturbed they turned away from a pile of kinfolk and lesions  
(your note: "account for miscellaneous hazards")

For twenty-six cents I acquired a wilderness smudged by little fires.

MICHAEL MORETH

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QUIETLY





CREATIVE NONFICTION

LEEANN WEAVER

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CONCESSIONS FOR CASH

I got the key out of the lockbox and opened the front door. The wide, winding staircase and empty hall greeted me like they did last Sunday. I put down my bag filled with listing brochures and leaned back against the closed door.

“Here we go again,” I said out loud to the statue the stager had placed on the entry table. “Today’s the day, my friend.”

The faceless, genderless piece of rock gave no sign of agreement. It and I had been trying to sell this house for three months.

I began turning on lights as I went through from the front to the back of the house. I had learned which of the hundreds of switches turned on which lamps and overhead lights; I had learned which ones turned on nothing. The warm light seemed to bounce around the living room and dining room. It reflected off of the metal and glass surfaces, ricocheted off of mirrors, and got lost in miles of white furniture. The stager had set up nothing warm in these lovely rooms, nothing to absorb and hold the light.

This was my first listing. Given to me by close friends who knew that and put their trust in me anyway. It was a second home for them, a rental. If they were listing their mansion in New Canaan I’m sure they would have gone with someone with more than five minutes of real estate experience. I was at least familiar with Westport (with the exception of their evident design aesthetic). They also knew what this commission meant for me, for my family.

At the end of the entry hall, I stepped down into the family room. The back of the house faced the sun, and the room was flooded with light. It was a beautiful space. Built-in window seats, lots of bookshelves, and a huge stone fireplace that gave off warmth even without a fire. The stager did her best to Westport the hell out of the space with a huge white sectional and Pollock-like black and white wall art. But I still felt the warmth here, it was my favorite place to sit during these lonely open houses. It wasn’t the best time to put a house on the market, but my friends were antsy to unload it.

I loved to sit here and imagine my two kids let loose in this space. In the last house we owned, the boys and their friends would ride their scooters in a circle, through living room, family room, kitchen, dining room, and around and around again. Carpet to floor, carpet to floor, sounding like little Danny in *The Shining* with lots of friends. My husband and I would

paint and re-paint the baseboards, dinged and scuffed along with screams of laughter. There was no room for scooters in the rental we moved into.

My friend, the homeowner, had dropped off the catering boxes earlier. She knew food helped keep people at an open house, and she also knew I couldn't afford the spread. I opened the Subzero and began to pull out the platters of salads and gourmet sandwiches. So much food. I'd take most of it home, and we'd eat it for days. I had brought a small bouquet of peonies with me from our yard. (Well, technically our neighbor's yard—some branches of the peony bush reached through the fence, as if to say, "Go ahead, pick me." It offered. I accepted.)

As I laid everything out on the huge kitchen island, I thought about all of the dinners and parties we had thrown in our former house; our kitchen island saw a lot of action. My husband was an amazing cook, and we both loved to entertain back in those days on Florence Lane. Our huge house was the social center of the neighborhood, with gatherings in our big kitchen and on our wrap-around porch. Martini Fridays, clambakes in the summer, fondue parties in the winter. The last dinner party in our house was right before our move, with the couple whose house I'm standing in now.

We made everyone's favorite meal, Korean hot stone bowls. As I set the table, I blinked away tears. Boxes were already packed upstairs. I didn't want to spend money on flowers, that luxury was long in the rearview mirror. But I had another idea. I stepped outside to grab a branch of pink flowers from a tree on our patio. It would look beautiful as an Asian centerpiece for the table. The branch was thick and tough, though, and I ended up wrestling the tree for it. By the time it came loose, it was basically bare of blossoms. I threw it onto the patio with a huge "SHIT!" I was shaking petals out of my hair when I noticed little Ashley from next door, sitting on her steps watching me. Ten minutes later, she was at my back door with two huge fistfuls of wildflowers, roots attached, dropping dirt all over the welcome mat.

The food for the open house was all set, so I went down the hall to turn on more lights. At the end of the hall was one of the biggest selling features of the house, a first-floor bedroom suite. In the listing, I called it an "in-law apartment or au pair suite." This room was staged as well, waiting for grandma or some sweet young thing from Germany to come on in and make it theirs. I sat down on the bed for a minute, careful not to mess up the throw perfectly placed at the corner of the bed.

In our former house, we had an entire third floor that we never used. We had grand plans—a craft room for me, a music room for my husband. But mainly I envisioned it as a space where my mom could come live someday. As much as my mom laughed off the thought, I had a feeling she pictured herself cozy and tucked away up there in her later years. Whenever the

subject came up and people joked with my husband about his mother-in-law, he would say that he'd rather live with her than me—she was way cooler. He loved telling people about the Pearl Jam concert he took us both to. How I had to give myself an in vitro injection in a broken porta-potty while my mom held the door closed, yelling for me to hurry because the band was starting. How her boyfriend was fourteen years younger than her. As our finances got tougher, I spent less and less time up on that third floor. Why bother trying to fix it up? Nesting made no sense when we were most likely going to lose the nest.

After prepping the downstairs, I made my way up to the second floor, to turn on lights and open doors. The stager had worked her modern magic in the master bedroom, but the other four bedrooms were left bare. I walked from room to room, my flats echoing in the empty hall. I hadn't worn these shoes in years and realized I had probably gone up a size since my office days.

One of the bedrooms had belonged to a little girl. I turned on the light switch and a tiny, crystal chandelier illuminated the huge room. You could have fit four of my childhood bedrooms into this one. How I would have loved that chandelier as a kid. I thought back to my bedroom in our small ranch house, decorated in purple and green. Mom had wallpapered my walls in a lilac flower pattern and had sewed a bright green bedspread with purple trim. My grandmother often picked lilacs from her side yard to place on my nightstand. To this day the smell reminds me of her.

Many years later, that little girl found herself living in a big fat house in Fairfield, Connecticut. My husband was doing so well at work that we might as well have been printing money in our basement. With each quarterly bonus check, we paid down thousands on our mortgage, put thousands more into savings, and often planned a purchase of a piece of furniture, an antique, maybe a small trip. A week of boot camp training for our new Labrador, Shelby. A once-a-week babysitter to give me down time. Our growing bank account and spreadsheets with worst-case scenarios would eventually convince me that I might belong in a house that looked, well, so much like this one. We couldn't imagine then what worst case scenarios were zooming our way.

After we moved in, I remember saying to my mother, "Now someone will get cancer." I was living in a dream and didn't trust it.

She laughed as she poured me a wine. "I'm sure you're right. Enjoy it while you can."

The open house started. The front door was unlocked, and the sign was out on the manicured lawn. As usual, no one was showing up. This market was horrible. Just like my timing in starting a real estate career.

What *was* I doing? The very industry that had flattened us was now a place where I was trying to find success? When the recession hit, our home's

value plummeted, and so did my husband's career. He sold mortgage-backed securities; the housing crisis was a death knell. Our savings slowly dwindled.

Paying down credit cards changed to avoiding calls starting with "this is an attempt to collect a debt". We slid down a long, jagged slope toward complete financial ruin and avoided it by the skin of our teeth with a last-minute rock-bottom sale.

I once had a successful career in marketing. I was a Vice President with a corporate card and car, sitting on a mountain of frequent flyer miles. But I had walked away from it. We wanted a family, and that ended up happening after six rounds of in vitro and an adoption. Money spent, hormones injected, and more money spent. (Years later when the boys lobbied for a little sister, I laughed and declared, "We had to buy one of you and cook the other one up in a lab! We're done!")

And now, resumes I sent out weren't answered. No matter how impressive the information on it, it still had a huge dark hole—twelve years raising the children I fought so hard to have. Employment dates that gave me away as "old." So, here I was, helping people find their dream homes while still mourning mine. Our rental was fine for now, but it could be sold out from under us at any time. My mom was being forced into retirement and wasn't going to be able to keep her condo without her salary. She was hitching her caboose to our run-away train. She'd be moving into our rental with us. We lost the house that would have been her dream, too.

I sat on the floor of that huge, empty room and stared up at that tiny chandelier. What little girl would eventually live in this room? Why couldn't it be my child? We did everything right. We saved, we didn't buy above our means—we aced all of the formulas and ratios you use when figuring out how much to spend on a home. Why didn't *we* deserve this? I would be lying if I said I never dreamed about us, somehow, being able to live in this house that I was spending so much time in. I spent hours here during the open houses imagining how I would decorate each room. Our friends wanted the money but didn't need it. I seethed with envy at every family who walked through it. I envied their security, and their options. *Get out!* I wanted to scream at each and every one. As I sat on that floor, I started to cry.

The doorbell rang.

*Jesus Christ.* I jumped up and ran out into the second-floor hall, straightening my realtor's name tag and wiping my nose. I took a deep breath and walked down the stairs.

A small blond woman was closing the front door behind her. She had on workout gear and no purse with her. She took off her sneakers and told me she lived next door.

"My kids are in the yard, hope that's okay. I've always wondered what this house looks like inside," she said. A nosy neighbor. Terrific. Mascara

was probably running down my face, and I hoped it would scare her away quickly.

She started looking around. “It’s dated,” she said, as if she had been expecting that. Her face was wrinkled in distaste as she stepped down into the family room.

“Well, it has a lot of traditional features, ones you don’t see a lot anymore at this price point,” I said, my lines memorized. “Don’t you think that makes it unique?”

She murmured, “Hmm...not really. Just sort of boring.”

You’re boring. I’d rather be upstairs crying.

She stared down at the newly stained hardwoods. I had chosen a colonial brown to keep with the traditional or boring features of the house.

“The floors were just refinished,” I told my visitor, my voice lilting high at the end of the sentence, as if asking a question, or for approval.

“Yeah, not the greatest choice. Light is trending, not dark.”

You know what I think is trending? My hatred of you.

She made her way around the first floor, peeking into closets and peering around doorways. She eventually headed back toward the front door. “Want to see upstairs?” I asked her.

“Nope, seen enough. This is cool.” She reached out and put her hand on the stone statue, looking like she was about to ask it a question.

“I see it’s listed for \$1,399,000. Do you think the seller would make any concessions to us if we paid cash?”

I’m sorry, *what?*

“Uh...I’m sure my client will be willing to have a conversation with you about it,” I managed to say.

“Great. My husband wants to put in a pool, and we could use the extra land so I don’t have to look at it from the house. Most of the year a pool is an ugly covered-up hole, don’t you think?”

I think I nodded. She wanted to buy this house, tear it down, and put in a pool. A pool she wouldn’t have to look at.

Yes. She called her husband and confirmed it. Paperwork would be on its way from their realtor. I had a feeling my friends would accept their bid; they were looking forward to unloading this house.

“It’d be a nice commission for you, huh?” she said as if she expected thanks. As grateful as I was, I found myself wanting to kick her in the shin. She put on her sneakers and yelled for her kids. (Kids who I hoped could swim well, hidden away from Mom in their new pool.)

What kind of person could look at this enormous house, and with little more than a phone call, decide to just buy it? What kind of bank account must they have? What career created it, and what did they do that we didn’t? Why did I find myself standing in front of this sweat-suited woman

and her loud children feeling like I was on a still platform with trains whizzing by?

And it's not like she loves the house and simply must have it—she's going to obliterate it from existing. I imagined the new hardwoods groaning as they broke, the newly-painted walls splitting and falling onto them with gargantuan cracks. I found myself wondering what would happen to the chandelier upstairs, and the little girl who would never see it. I imagined her running through the house, screaming as the walls came down, like I would want to do. She had my face.

I turned my face to the woman and somehow talked about next steps before she grabbed a screaming child by the arm and walked away. She was my only visitor that day. The only one I needed. My first sale. She never even introduced herself.

All of the brochures went back into my bag. I cleaned up the kitchen, covering all of the platters of food and putting tops on salad bowls. I packed it all up to bring home, clutching my stolen peonies to my chest. I made my way through the house, turning off all of the switches I had turned on before.

I lingered for a minute in the bare room upstairs, the one with the tiny chandelier. I imagined a small version of me cartwheeling her way across the floor in her cousin's hand-me-down dress. I saw the homemade bedspread and heard my mother's muffled swears as she hung that sweet wallpaper. I heard my little brother in the bedroom next door, talking to himself, counting his collection of bottle caps as he laid them out on his floor. I smelled the hand-picked lilacs on the nightstand, and my grandmother's chicken soup cooking down the hall. I don't know how a house that small had held so much love, but it did.

I took a deep breath, and once more the room was empty. I shut off the light, and slowly made my way downstairs.

I called my husband and told him the good news. He was at the stove, and I heard the boys in the background; one was chasing the other, and their antics were making the dog bark. I smiled, and told him I was coming home. It might have been the first time I referred to our rental as "home." Or, at least, the first time I felt it.

I made my way to the front of the house, turning off the last light in the hall. I opened the door and turned back to look at the statue.

"We did it," I said to the piece of stone, and closed the door behind me.

CARELLA KEIL

---

MEMORIES FROM THE FOURTH DIMENSION





ELIZABETH SEARLE

---

STOLEN GIRL SONG

**CHARACTERS:**

LENI: A lively, orphan girl of 18

**SETTING:**

A bare stage with a screen and an electric keyboard.

*(Onscreen: "SISTERS OF BENEVOLENCE, ROTTERDAM, 2011")*

*(LENI rushes in. She is hiding something in her pocket. She looks around stealthily.)*

LENI: *(with slight Dutch accent)* Did anyone see? Anyone see me?

*(She 'notices' the audience, smiles, looks sly)*

LENI: Except you—but you always see me. Hallo, you see everything I do. Even everything I steal . . .

*(She slips an old-style cellphone out of her pocket)*

LENI: Made in the US of A—like you. Ja, my made-up made-in-USA audience. 'Round here they all laugh at me—"There is *dwass* Leni—Talking to her *idiot* self, singing songs in the TV Room, pretending she is ON the TV...'

*(She switches on the keyboard RAP DRUMTRACK).*

LENI: *(singing RAP style, waving cellphone)*

But soon I'll REALLY be on TV  
on a STAGE for every-one to see—  
Soon as I phone-call MR. V-D—  
And make my es-cape from S.O.B—

*(LENI points with the cellphone to the 'Sisters of Benevolence' sign)*

LENI: *(shutting off DRUMTRACK, giggling)* 'S.O.B.'—That is what Greta and me always called Sisters of Benevolence. And do not think we did not know what you in the USA mean by 'S.O.B.' This phone I did just steal? It will be my ticket out of this S.O.B. camp. *(she waves the cellphone again, then pockets it)* The call I make tonight to Mr. VD—Mr. Van Doosle, I mean. Ja, *tonight at eight* I make that big call! He sent me a note to call! Remember when I did answer his 'WANT AD'—when I did mail to him my PHOTO—

*(Onscreen: "Wanted: YOUNG females to perform ONSTAGE*



*in NEW CLUB in Amsterdam. Send PHOTO to M. Van Doosle*)

LENI: (*cont'd, pacing excitedly*) Now I have—*ach!*—only ten minutes ‘til eight, ten minutes more with you. Will I soon be on a *real* stage, with a real audience? (*stops pacing, leans in to assure audience*) Oopsie, sorry! You’re plenty real to ME! But you know—you always know—what I mean. How I long to be onstage, then on USA TV. On The O-prah. Guests tell Oprah all the BAD STUFF that ever happened to them! Only when I tell the real girls here all my bad stuff, they are like: You think YOU had bad? Least you been here since you a baby . . . (*confiding to audience*) But when I talk to YOU, to my made-up Audience, then you are like on TV. You all are SO sweet—like I say: I am a wees, see? Meaning: *orphan girl*. One “stolen” like this cell phone thingy. *Ja*, I was stolen too. Plus maybe-prob’ly *sold*. One of so-call Euro-trash *Prostitutie*-Mama babies bought up cheap. Then dumped like real trash. Left here to rot in Rotterdam—(*stepping closer to audience*) So you go, like you are sooo sad—“Ohhhh . . .”

(*LENI gestures, coaxes the audience to say “Ohhh”*).

LENI (cont’d): (*pleased*) Then I say how the Sisters of Benevolence—and some Sisters can be not so Benevolent—how they take me into this *Weeshuis*, Home for Orphans. They teach me English as my first and most favorite language. They let me watch TV; the more TV, the better I do! (*beaming, proud of herself*) So USA TV, it teaches me too, ‘til I am a *star* in our classes. I win prizes in S.O.B. Orphanage—Or I *would* win prizes if there were any to win, but I do not say that part...Anyhoo, whatever I say, YOU go (*nodding and miming claps*) CLAP-CLAP-CLAP, pretty big—

(*Onscreen: “!!APPLAUSE!!”*)

LENI: I go *Dank-U-rel Dank-U-rel!* But you save your biggest claps for soon: for when I call the club in Amsterdam. *Achh*—I hear the WC door; the girls marching in to shower. Meaning it is almost the time—

(*She turns to the keyboard and pats her pocket*).

LENI: Meaning I gotta keep this cell-thingy hid a few more minutes. Hid, see, from that snooty new girl. Belgium brat. She even snores in French. She steals the *Zoutedrops* and *Stroopwafels* that Greta stole for me. By the time that snoot-snorey girl notices her cellphone gone, I’ll be gone—for-the-good.

(*LENI runs her finger over keys*)

LENI: While I wait just minutes more—while *we* wait—I can practice more. Practice, first, telling on TV my story, all my bad-sad things . . .

(*LENI plays dramatic CHORDS*)

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LENI: Every time the Sisters bring out the meter stick—Whack whack! How bad I have most-wanted to “tell on them” on TV. Ever since that American Boy, that one who got his American butt caned...

(ONSCREEN: “U.S. COLLEGE BOY SENTENCED TO CANING”)

LENI (cont’d): R’member that dumb cute US of A boy, traveling round years ago? I got a crush on him! He got arrested in Taiwan, sentenced to CANING—

(*She plays OMINOUS CHORDS on keyboard*)

LENI: (*giggles*) Oooh, ja. The girls here called him Dumb-Butt. He got in big trouble when we were little. But I cry when even President of the USA could not save Dumb-Butt’s Butt—He got WHACKED but good! (*She plays “whacking” CHORDS*) But then, he being US of A Boy, and cute, he WIN in the end. Cause he goes back to Land of Free and he SELLS photos of his cut-up BUTT for, like, a million dollars. Plus he goes on LARRY THE KING and *talks* about getting his butt whacked. (*wistful*) Ooh, I want to go on Larry King Alive; I could show scars—One scar anyways on my back, one Meter Stick cut so bad...

(*She rubs her back, gently*)

LENI (cont’d): (*musings*) But cut-up BACKS do not sell for as much as cut-up BUTTs, I bet. One good thing here in S.O.B.—the S.O.B. Sisters do not make us pull down our pants like men do in some places...(*She plays CHORDS*) Some of them snooty girls say all the Clubs in Amsterdam are like that. Say I’d wind up nothing but a Red-Light For-Sale Girl with her panties down. But those girls are wrong. They are just jealous! Right?

(*Nervous, LENI bends and picks up a feather duster*)

LENI (cont’d): Some of them same girls, they like to get me in big troubles here . . . Like when Greta and me used to sign up for TV-room *clean-up*. Only we forget the *clean-up* part, we so busy practicing our songs, my songs really . . . (*startling as if hearing something; looking around*) Hey—someone out there listening? Sister Hilda? (*dusting, calling out in a SHOUT*) OK, I am BUSTING the DUST in here, Sisters! Hear me, Sister Hilda? (*dusting more slowly, confiding again*) Do not tell sweet Sister Hilda I still like talking to you. She says I am too old to PLAY PRETEND anymore. Said I was too old couple years ago, when I played-pretend like I was kidnapped; like I was: Elizabeth the Smart.

(Onscreen: “KIDNAP-VICTIM ELIZABETH SMART RESCUED!”)

LENI (cont’d): (*reverently*) All that year, I play “Lizabeth.” So-pretty, so-smart, so-US of A, so-stolen, so-blondie, Lizabeth Smart. Who lived in the

Salt Lake and played harp.

*(LENI mimes harp-playing)*

LENI (cont'd): *(in storytelling voice)* Lizabeth the Smart got KIDNAPPED and no smarties in the US of A can find her. Then years go by and someone who watches AMERICA the MOST WANTED—like Greta and me watching, over the seas—that someone sees her, spots her. So Elizabeth the Smart gets found and gets free and gets famous. She goes on Larry the King Alive! She goes—like I hope I go, tomorrow—free. *(she shakes the feather duster defiantly)* And not just “free” to dust-bust some richy folks’ home! You may think all we Wees from druggie-prob’ly-Prostitutie mamas got druggie-baby brains. Think our Mamas got Shit-Face on Vodka plus Grade-A Amsterdam pot night and day—which maybe is The True . . . But Greta and me, we play-pretended *our* Mamas were groupies to Amsterdam head-banger bands!

*(LENI makes rock dancing moves)*

LENI (cont'd): (louder) Greta would rock out with me! Like we were ABBA, only with no ugly blondie guys—

*(LENI mimes playing rock guitar on her duster)*

LENI (cont'd): But now Greta has gone off to the USA to be an—*oh no*—“Au Pair.” Which Sister Hilda thinks I should be too. Everyone here—‘cept YOU—they think I’ll never get to sing upon no stage . . .

(Sound Cue: A BUZZER)

LENI: *(jumping in her skin, dropping the duster)* Ooh, Warning buzz! Showers Off buzz! Last buzz till the Lights-Out Buzz. Hear the WC door? And all them girls troop to bed now? ‘Cept me, now. Because it is the hour of EIGHT . . . Meaning: Here I go! 1-2-3—

*(LENI pulls out the cellphone, breathes deep. She “dials” and speaks loudly into phone as she paces.)*

LENI: Hallo? HALLO? This is Van? The man named VAN? Mr. Van Doosle, *Ja*. This is LENI, the girl who you did speak to last week? L-E-N-I. And you did—*JA*? You got the PHOTO I did mail to you? You THINK you did? You have to check and SEE? You know, I can ZANG too—can SING. I sing in the CHOIR here for many a year—Sister Hilda trained me! I can sing for you onto the phone while you ‘see,’ Mr. Van. *Ja*?

*(Leni scrambles to turn on the keyboard’s RAP DRUMTRACK.)*

LENI: *(into phone above DRUMTRACK)* Mr. Van-Doosle, you there? I not only SING but WRITE songs too. About, see, girls on TV. Girls SOLD or STOLEN like me. About, see, girls on TV. Girls SOLD or STOLEN like me.

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About, lately, INCEST GIRL off in her CELLAR not so far off in AUSTRIA—  
Her Bad Daddy on TRIAL right now—See, I have wrote HIM into my song...

*(Onscreen: “INCEST GIRL’ TO TESTIFY VIA VIDEO AT ‘DUNGEON  
DAD’S’ TRIAL”)*

LENI: *(sings into cell to DRUMTRACK)*

Bad-Dad JOSEF FRITZI thinks his girl won’t tell  
How he held her for years in his very own hell  
In his cellar inside a 40-meter square cell  
Now HE’s gonna rot in a jail-house HELL  
Inside HIS OWN 40-meter square CELL

*(LENI stops singing. Hearing a reply, she turns off DRUMTRACK.)*

LENI (cont’d): *(into phone; pacing again)* What? What, Mr. V.D.? You find  
my PHOTO? You find in your files, *Ja?* So now you *do* see me? My age?  
Eighteen, I am eighteen. Least we THINK this, ‘cause my birth-day is a  
made-up day. But—*Ja*, I do look the young. You want I should SING again  
now? What? No, you not want? You need nothing more? *Ja?* You are say-  
ing—I GOT the JOB?

*(Leni stares up wide-eyed at the audience. She beams. She can’t see the  
SCREEN. The headline changes.)*

*(Onscreen: AMSTERDAM CLUBS TARGETED IN ‘TRAFFICKING’  
OF TEENAGE GIRLS”)*

LENI (cont’d): *(into cellphone)* JA—I hear! I work as waitress first—then I  
audition for on-the-stage? I zang for you in the person, *Ja*, I will do! I will  
be there tomorrow night, hour of 8. OK, yes, Mr. VAN-D! You there? Mr.  
V-D?

*(Leni lowers the phone, shuts it off. She is beaming, oblivious to the  
headline behind her. She raises her arms in triumph.)*

LENI (to audience): DANK-U, DANK-U, oh God, oh Gods. My *Audience  
Gods*, watching over me. And DANK-U Sister Hilda. The birthday gift you  
gave me—forgive me Sister Hilda, I shall spend your gift on a train ticket  
to AMSTERDAM. You soon will know WHY, when you do see me on TV  
singing MY song...

*(LENI spins to face the screen; the Headline shifts)*

*(Onscreen: “SHED GIRL’ DISCOVERED IN CALIFORNIA—IMPRIS-  
ONED IN BACK YARD FOR YEARS!”)*

LENI: Ooh, a NEW Stolen Girl for my song! *Ja*, Shed Girl—I will write YOU

in too. Because I have to *finish* my song NOW for my in-the-person audition for Mr. V-D. Have to write a Big Finish before the Lights-Off Buzzer.

*(LENI turns back to the keyboard, sets down the phone. Thinking, she switches on the DRUMTRACK again.)*

LENI: *(singing fiercely, playing CHORDS)*

Incest Girl and Shed Girl too—  
Two-Girls-Two, Stolen Girls times Two!  
“In Trouble” times TWO, times infinity  
Girls times more than any eyes ever SEE—  
Girls being stolen; being sold; being ‘held’—  
Girls all over WORLD, we WEES are not alone  
So many Girls trapped with-out no home  
So many Girls HELD; in Cellar, in Shed, in CELL . . .

*(Onscreen: “ELIZABETH SMART TO PLAY HARP ON LARRY KING!”)*

*(LENI pauses to address the audience directly)*

LENI: Here comes my big finish. Then comes the biggest clap-clap from YOU to ME..

*(LENI begins to make dance moves)*

LENI: *(loudly above DRUMTRACK)*

So many girls round the globe, all alone  
So many girls trapped without a home  
Just a FEW Stolen Girls get on T-Vee  
On Larry the King, for viewers like you—  
Incest Girl plus Shed Girl plus ME too—

*(LENI mock-plays a harp, then dances to the final verse)*

LENI (cont’d): *(above DRUMTRACK)*

Elizabeth the SMART  
Joins in on her HARP—  
All of us in HEAVEN you see  
All of us where everyone SEES  
On T-VEE—  
In Land of the FREE!

*(LENI strikes a triumphant pose).*

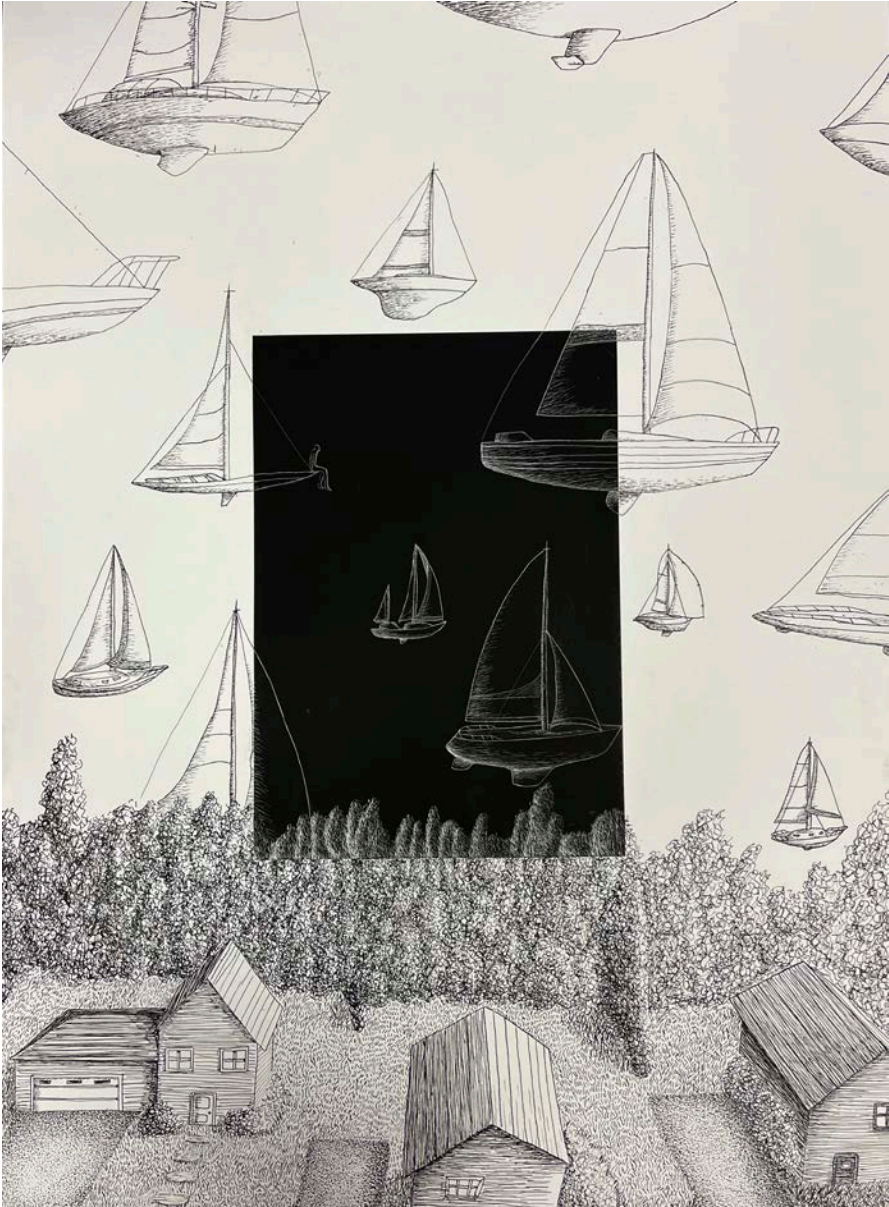
*(Sound Cue: BUZZER)*

*(LENI takes a deep bow)*

*(Onscreen: “END”)*

LILA BYRNE

NEAR FUTURE





KURT OLSSON

---

SIGHTINGS

Imagine them setting down,  
the first time,  
in a field, deserted, unlit.

Imagine them approaching,  
through tall grass—a tree,  
in a field, over-spanned, balancing  
unsheltered sky.

Here is old knowledge,  
they would think. Sacred.

Imagine a rope knotted about a fat branch  
and from it  
what must be one of the planet's  
indigenous wildlife hangs.  
So like the fabulous fork-tailed  
fauna of their world.

There is beauty here,  
they would think. Truth.

Imagine them,  
the wondrous tales  
they would regale their own with  
once they returned home.

JAKE YOUNG

---

GOAL

Young kids stretch out  
on the soccer field  
across from my apartment.  
They pair up and practice  
passing before their game.  
I smile, remembering  
my own time on the pitch,  
the smell of grass  
stains, sunscreen,  
and sweat on my jersey,  
and pretend that this  
longing doesn't sadden me,  
that having been young once  
was enough. It has  
never been enough.  
My knees crack  
when I bend, I wake  
sore each morning,  
my balance is shit, and  
I have to be careful  
of the muscle I tore  
in my back whenever  
I lift anything  
heavier than a gallon  
of milk. I miss  
running down the wings  
toward open space,  
looking for  
a perfectly timed cross,  
a teammate  
picking me up from behind  
after I score a goal,  
lying in the sun-  
warmed grass  
afterwards, how  
everything melted away  
out there, so that  
all that mattered



for ninety minutes  
was doing my part  
to keep a dream alive.

CINDY ELLEN HILL

---

ANTHROPOMANCY

She is chained  
    in the bed  
        of a truck  
            at the side  
            of the road  
to Gaddani.

She is chained  
    with a boy  
        who is blind,  
            hands unlocked  
        to shave ice  
    for the guests  
of the hunters.

Overhead  
    sakar wings  
        whisper death  
    to the hare  
    who will die  
in its shade.

Thin sharp blade  
    scrapes the ice  
        with the voice  
    of a fleet  
whisp of cloud

vanishing  
    in white heat  
        at midday.  
    The girl turns  
    her face to  
her brother

in wonder  
of whether  
he glimpses  
ephemeral  
visions of  
what would be—  
come of them.

LILA BYRNE

---

REACH



MICHAEL DIEBERT

---

FORGIVENESS

And the liquor flows up my throat  
back into the glass, and the ice refreezes,

and into the phone sotto voce  
I unsay the breakup, and I reverse-roll

up the interstate to the supermarket lot,  
and her father unhands her, and her tears

streak up her cheek, and she unclenches  
her eyes and swallows her screaming,

and we go back down the mountains of months  
into summer, funny, she's still much younger,

won't learn how to drive, won't let me  
out of her sight—but it's all right,

I unsign my name, the bill goes blank, we leave  
the restaurant hungry and curious,

the band takes back its power ballads  
and backpedals into the pre-show impatience.

We wonder at ourselves walking  
backward to my apartment. We wake

before we sleep. Through the blinds  
dark segues to sunset. The gunmetal sky

rolls west, we have just met,  
and I am grateful someone wants to date me.

SARATH REDDY

---

LOVERS IN FLIGHT

Chagall sings in bold brushstrokes  
the sky swirled an inky blue closer to midnight than dawn,  
lovers like wingless birds caught in cross-currents

tumble in zero gravity, spin summersaults,  
torque cartwheels in mid air,  
surrender to vertigo.

Defying ligament and bone, they bend  
like willow branches, necks arched back  
locking glances, entwined.

Below them Paris, tethered to concrete,  
the Eiffel Tower's iron skeleton softened in pastel,  
a city spellbound moving clockwise.

This world can no longer contain them.  
They break free into a realm of floating  
chimeras and violin serenades, where breath is music.

Like balloons they drift, ascending  
into thinner air,  
feathery clouds to cushion their fall.

JC ALFIER

---

A WOMAN FACING AUTUMN



CORDELIA HANEMANN

---

STORY OF A LADY IN THE MAKING:

*A ZUIHITSU AFTER KIMIKO HAHN*

i

the babies I have wanted and have had  
    have been enough  
though at times I can't get enough of them  
    those now grown men

the agonized push—not one slipped out with-  
    out rips and tears  
the mending (hospital) threads & needles

ii

I was caught a big baby myself  
    in my mother's small canal  
the doc had to twist and pull  
    with knives and forceps  
my ears are flat  
my mother almost bled to death  
    for that first child  
    named after her mother-in-law

iii

light falls on my days  
and clouds and rain

iv

I have always made music  
I sing out of tune in the kitchen/  
    in the garden  
I never remember the words

my old fingers now complain over impossible  
    Bach & Beethoven & Chopin  
    Craig's own compositions [he's my youngest boy]  
my husband was tone deaf though he loved  
music when he didn't have to do it with me/us



v

I miss my husband who died but  
we didn't make it  
when we could have/should have

vi

I am thirsty/I love my coffee

vii

I am old now and you would think dry as kindling  
and ready to go up  
but I stay young with my boys and grands and friends  
no billowy smoke and fire yet

viii

I'm a perfectionist when it suits :  
one who likes it done right  
that is just the way I like it

I do love praise

viii

I love the house I have made  
with a little help \$ from my mother  
all those children's voices at Christmas  
and brunches my ex always loved

ix

then those other children : the students :  
I've paid my dues  
ghosts of a past time  
(ghost professor/my ghost PhD)

x

I have been prickly  
and more than a little right  
but it's less fun to be right  
than you would think

xi

sometimes nobody hears me  
sometimes I am eager to speak  
I interrupt instead of listening

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like the birds in my yard eager  
to have their voices heard

xii

old lady living alone with an eccentric cat  
who insists he is the alpha animal  
I like my aloneness until it's too alone  
I like my past and I'm glad it's past  
and I like my own cooking  
and my eccentric cat

and I like it when the family  
comes for dinner  
and I like it when they go home

xiii

my house is unfinished  
and more than a little cluttered  
but I love making a house

like I love making  
a garden or a poem or a painting  
as I loved making those boys  
and that long ago house  
the agony and all. nothing slipped out!

JESS CHALLIS

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BUDDHA AND THE PINK UMBRELLA



ALAN ELYSHEVITZ

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ANIMALS

Some are builders, some anarchists. Some are cushioned and housebound or meshed with symbology. Some dispose of skin or preen their armor. Some wear turbans of wet sand, mature in handbags of fluid, sleep in a thousand arms of heat. Some pinch the short world in front of them, crouch in carports, in friendly shadows of camouflage, in nests of aromatics, who shelter from semi-automatic rain and await the mandamus of sunset. Some are puzzled by windows. Some, who have trailed us from ship to ship, exchange deep-tunnel diseases. Some sharp face cracks prey in half, whose hue mimics cinders in national forest, whose tracks peter out near a cryptic volcano, who has not a forethought as last of its kind.

KHADIJAH ABDUL-HUGG

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THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF LOUVENIA...  
SCOTT

The Last Will and Testament of Lovenia Natchez Sentoia Bertha Evans  
Scott.

Cue music:

This is my story. This is my song.  
Praising my savior  
All the day long.  
This is my story.  
This is my song.

Kill music.

Family! If you are watching this taped video of my last Will and Testimony, then saints, (and I use that word loosely because we all know you motley crew of bed winches are anything but saints) I have beat you to glory. I, Louvenia Natchez Sentoia Beartha Evans Scott, is of sound mind and heart. So don't not near one of you flat backers try to fight this, especially you Tamika.

Tamika, Ms. movie star, you always had wander dust under your feet. When you were three you packed your little knapsack and proclaimed to everyone, "I'm leaving. I want to go to the moon." Your father wanted me to chase after you. But I told him "Let her go. She finna come back real soon when she realizes the front yard light only touch the mailbox." Sure 'nough, fifteen minutes later, you came back. It was a minute before you tried to run again. When that boy in Senatobia come by here in a red rusty corvette you snuck out the back window, tied my good sheets to the magnolia tree, and broke your ankle. Exactly what you get. You were laid up for six weeks. Having everybody catering to you to your high yellow self.

You'd think you'd learn, but no. 'Cause you don't have the good sense the Lord gave you. As soon as you graduated high school, you hightailed it out of here. Went somewhere west. Told Keasha you were going to Hollywood to be in the movies. One would think you were living high cotton, but you called me every time you needed something. And you always needed something. It's been twenty years as of the recording of this video, and I still ain't seen you in no movie. You broke your father's heart. Sent him to his grave. I'm sure of it.

And you Keisha. You have been man-crazy since you started smelling yourself. I caught you playing house under the magnolia tree with that Tavarius boy next door. I knew then you were going to have a bunch of kids. You fast tail girls always have a bunch of kids. That piece of shit you got now sat you down the minute he laid eyes on you. Now you running behind a bunch of chitlins while he spends all of your money on that dirty weed he smokes. Boy! That man will smoke the stink out of shit. I don't know why he ain't sterile with all the poison he puts in his body. Although, I think the red one in the middle looks a lot like that Tavarius boy.

And Sasha, my baby girl! Bless your heart. After your daddy died, you was the onliest one to come see about me. You come and cook for me. Put clean sheets on my bed when all I wanted was to lie there in my sorrows. You even take and washed me. No daughter should have to wash her momma, but you did. You also skimmed some money from under my mattress whenever you went to the market for me. You think I didn't notice that new Coach purse you had swinging from your arm about a week after the burial. I seen it. I was just too weak to call you on it.

You three are something else. And I'd be proud to be called your momma except ain't none of you worth a damn! Not a near one.

And as for my mattress money, I done deposited it in a trust for the Memphis Animal Shelter to make sure my babies—Thomas and Jackson are well taken care of. Those two dogs saved my life while you three ran around living your godless lives.

But because God don't like ugly (and he ain't too fond of pretty) I'm going to leave the three you the big house. There is enough room for all of you. Your daddy bought this house so you girls could have a roof over your heads. And that's exactly what I'm going to do—make sure you have a roof over your heads. Especially you Keisha. Lord knows that bag of bones you call a husband ain't worth a hill of beans. Let alone have two nickels to rub together to keep a roof over them kids' head. Them his kids, and they require stability. But they my grandbabies and I'm make sure they have it. No need for them to reap what he sowed.

Tamika and Sasha, maybe you'll find roots again. Think 'bout settling and getting married. Possibly making a family of your own.

Well, that's it and that's all. No need of kicking up an ant hill. What's done is done.

Cue music:

I'm going up to yonder.  
I'm going up to yonder.

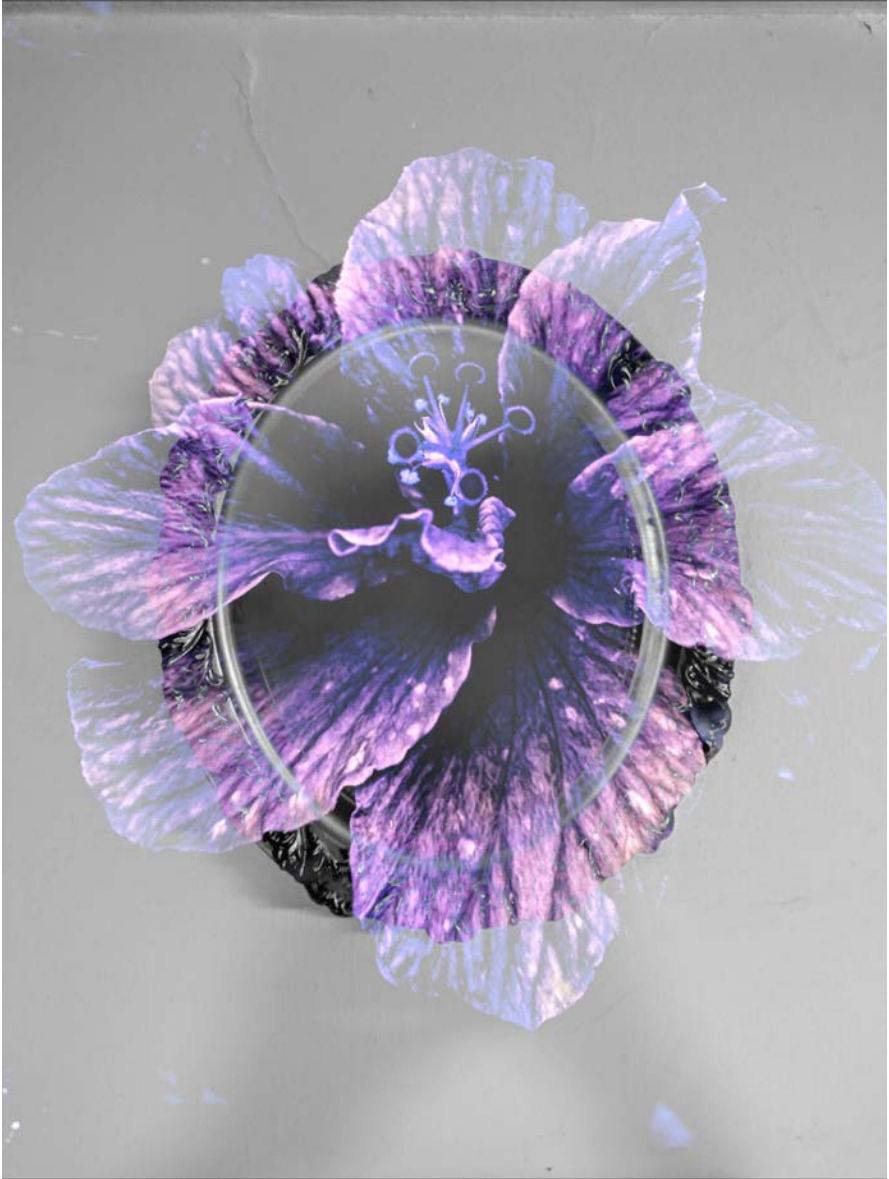
Kill music.

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CARELLA KEIL

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ENCHANTED LOOKING GLASS





BRADLEY SAMORE

---

OLD HOME VIDEOS

I see my brother in his cartoon underwear  
singing and dancing around  
me watching his every move  
laughing because he is laughing

I see Mom on the floor with us  
worn out but smiling  
I remember thinking  
my parents were invincible

and I hear Dad  
interviewing the stars of his show  
What did you do today  
What did you find in the Easter eggs

I need something to hold  
something to grip  
and my eyelids clamp down  
squeezing the people inside

I stare at time  
only to blink first  
losing  
the contest

BRADLEY SAMORE

---

WHAT REMAINS

Thirty more minutes till the artisan market opens  
and it's already 97 degrees

This might be the only time I get to India  
my dad said when he decided to join me

tomorrow we head home  
but we're both tired  
and it's easier to just wait in the shade

I lie on the grass  
he sits on a rock and looks in the distance  
closes his eyes  
and I think about how he hasn't been at work  
where he's the boss  
where everyone looks to him  
and he hasn't been home where there's always  
something

perhaps if he knew the language  
he'd find someone to talk to  
perhaps if he had his phone

he puts his elbows on his knees  
adjusts his wristwatch  
looks into the grass

he tells me about his childhood  
Atlantic College  
jobs he had before I was born  
stories I'm hearing for the first time

CREATIVE NONFICTION

PEGGY SCHIMMELMAN

---

## MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST VISITS ON HER BIRTHDAY

This morning she materialized at my bedside again. Her annual visit. Not hovering, eerie and menacing, but seeming to travel in place, trudging out to the cistern with her two tin buckets and, catching sight of me, lowering them to the gravel. As if watching a film, I saw myself run into her arms sobbing, devastated because my parents couldn't afford to buy me new loafers for the upcoming seventh grade year.

I was doomed to wear my sister's hand-me-down oxfords, scratched and muddied with ragged laces, while the loafers in the catalog were shiny and unmarred, with stylish tassels. I felt shabby and inferior, resentful and ashamed. Poor. I was poor. She dried my tears on the apron she always wore, hugged me, and told me not to worry: it was nothing the Sears and Roebuck's couldn't cure.

Every year she comes to beg forgiveness for the dogs. The puppies. Hoping to hear me say that I love her. To remind me how she took me in, raised me herself because my mom was overwhelmed with those babies she kept popping out as if she couldn't figure out how to stop it. Like a bitch dog, I once overheard her mutter, not knowing I was within earshot.

And every year I remind her about the hopeful, hungry strays she enticed with food scraps laced with strychnine. And *my god, the puppies: innocent newborn puppies. How could you snatch them from their mother, toss them into a gunny sack and walk them to the pond? How could you? I can't forgive you for that. I cannot.*

Every year she blames the sinner who dropped off the pregnant mutt by the roadside for her to feed, when all she had was her Social Security check, a scattering of chickens and a pig or two to take care of herself and my bachelor uncle Gene. And me.

The loafer's incident was the year after the puppy tragedy, which I had compartmentalized, unable to reconcile that horror with the church-going grandma who bought me the eyeglasses my parents couldn't afford, fed me oatmeal with brown sugar for breakfast, and let me crawl into her bed when the whippoorwills fell silent and nightmares came calling.

But after she passed, her virtues became clouded, replaced in my memory with an image of her broad back and frizzy, cropped gray hair as she stalked toward the pond carrying the bag of whimpering puppies to their doom, trailing excuses behind her like curses.

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And now I tell her, as I do every year: *I will never forgive you. I cannot. I love you anyway*, she says, and waits a wishful moment for my response. But as always, I cannot find it in me to speak the lie she needs to hear. She picks up her buckets and turns away.

But then I'm once again a skinny thirteen-year-old waiting by the roadside for the school bus, a little less anxious, a little more confident because of how those new loafers dress up my drab hand-me-down outfit. I call after her in a voice muted by uncertainty: I love you.

I don't know if it's true. And anyway, my words are smothered by a cacophony of canine howls of grief and fury that come from somewhere above and grow louder until they echo all around us. She plods on toward the afterlife she earned, shoulders hunched, swaying side-to-side, balancing her buckets of karmic retribution, stepping carefully through the mounds of frolicking puppies nipping with glee at her heels.

ALYSE KNORR

---

BABEL

There with the infant aspens  
I could hear the cold of the brook—

could imagine, finally, a language  
without rhymes, unsingable.

Was I not a buffet table of offerings,  
and in the center my own apple-

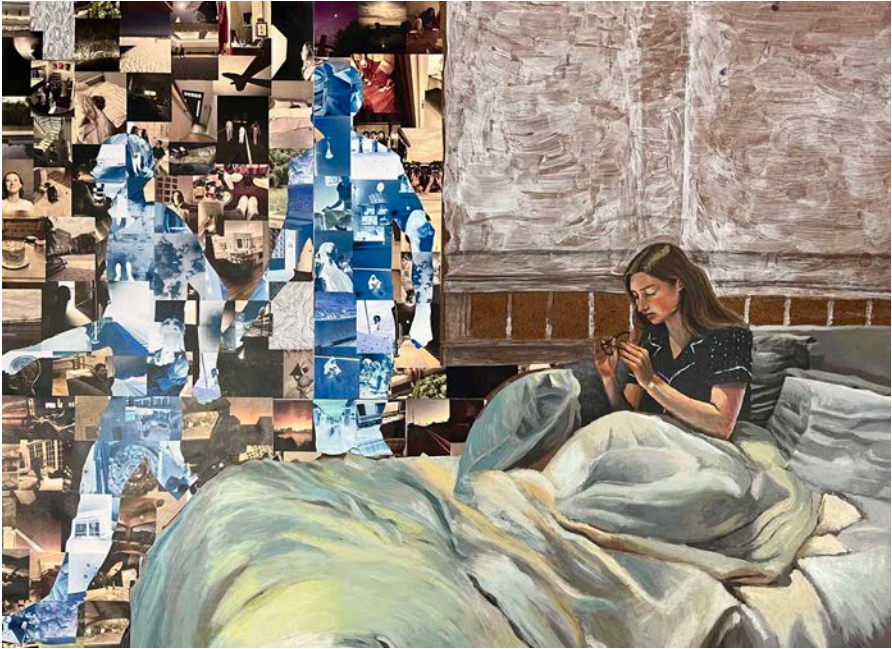
stuffed head? I'm deadly with  
words. The ones I say to myself:

there's no words for those words.  
Just a brook sound, now, in its place.

Babbling on and on like a language  
that pulled down a tower.

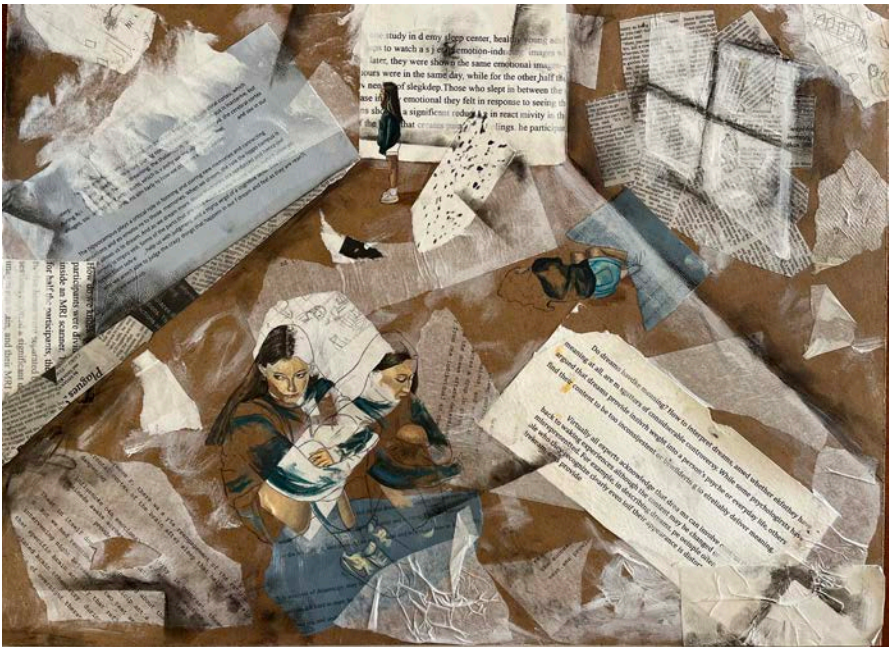
LILA BYRNE

SLIPPING AWAY



LILA BYRNE

PASS THE TIME



--AND NOT A DROP TO DRINK

Henry Wheeler lashed his jon boat to a sycamore and watched the Lower Missouri boil through a fifty-foot gash in the levee. His old Duroc sow stood atop the berm, three of her surviving shoats huddled up tight against her. A fourth shoat, less fortunate floated a few yards short of the embankment.

Up forward Little Maggie leaned over the starboard gunwale and barked at eddylines curling through the ragged breach. The caramel-colored torrent drowning Henry's fields reeked of earth, manure, and defeat. Forty acres inland, water inched up the walls of his home like some giant gopher snake working a rat down its gullet.

The old farmer sagged onto the stern seat and rubbed an aching shoulder. A marathon of sandbagging had left his neck and back tighter than the flywheel of a seized hit-and-miss engine. By the time he'd realized the hours of fighting to save the homestead had been a fool's errand, his only escape route was by water. The entire time he rushed to gather up the dog and a few papers, reawakened Baptist guilt made him ferret through recent memory for any violation of God's law that brought down His judgment upon the entire county. But confirming he wasn't the cause of this retribution—Holy or otherwise—hardly lessened the pain of rowing away from so much Wheeler history.

Little Maggie abandoned her post in the bow and jumped onto her master's lap, seeking shelter within his rain slicker. Henry stroked the little terrier's gray muzzle with a calloused thumb. The earthy funk rising off her wet coat conveyed an odd comfort.

Henry gazed back toward his house, imagining the furniture that had served generations of his clan now empty and adrift in the darkened rooms. How long will it take, he wondered, till the family plot saturates into such a slurry the forebears' coffins slip their earthly moorings and float away?

And even though he hadn't put stock in the Good Book for a whole string of blue moons, that rainbow anchored to the east horizon looked like one hell of a broken promise.



## CONTRIBUTORS

Khadijah Abdul-Haqq holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has been supported by Roots.Wounds.Words, VONA, and Bread Loaf. Her story “Things You Get at Starbucks” was nominated for the O. Henry Prize. Khadijah’s work has appeared in *Herstry*, *Torch Literary*, and is forthcoming. Khadijah lives in Tennessee with her family and black Labrakita, Raven. When she isn’t writing she is cooking and finding new ways of exploring her love for food.

JC Alfier’s (they/them) most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Other books include *The Wolf Yearling* (2013), *Idyll for a Vanishing River* (2013), and *Fugue for a Desert Mountain* (2017). In 2016, Cowboy Buddha published *Anthem for Pacific Avenue*, a collection of California poems, and Aldrich Press came out with *The Red Stag at Carrbridge: Scotland Poems*. They are passionate about photography, transgender rights, and travel in the hinterlands of America. Journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *Hotel Amerika*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*.

Lila Byrne passion for art began as early as she could hold a pencil. She has since taken as many art classes as the day will allow including programs at RISD, Michigan, and Pratt College. She has designed logos for various businesses in the area, been exhibited in several magazines, and has been an assistant teacher for the arts school in her town. She is always looking for ways to learn more about the art world and is excited for this opportunity. She creates her pieces using as many mediums as possible to help her learn exponentially. She is specifically drawn to portraits and has spent her entire life trying to replicate the human face in a meaningful way.

Jess Challis received a Bachelor’s Degree in Creative Writing from Utah Valley University. Her writing and artwork have been published in journals such as *Touchstones Journal*, *Beyond Queer Words*, and the anthology *We Want to Tell You*. Jess received the Photography & Digital Special Recognition Artist Award for the 2023 Light Space Time “Landscapes” and “Patterns” art exhibitions. In the Fall of 2019, she won first place in poetry in *Touchstones* and was also chosen as first runner up for creative writing in the 2021 UVU Showcase. Jess is a mother of three and loves to travel with her wife, especially in the Pacific Northwest.

CS Crow is a storyteller from the Southeastern United States with a love of nature and a passion for writing. He believes stories and poems are about getting there, not being there, and he enjoys those tales that take their time getting to the point.

Brie Deyton's writing has appeared in *River Teeth's Beautiful Things*, *Creative Nonfiction's Sunday Short Reads*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *Storytellers' True Stories About Love*. She is currently working on a novel.

Michael Diebert is the author most recently of *Thrash* (Brick Road, 2022). He teaches writing and literature at Perimeter College at Georgia State University and previously served as poetry editor for *The Chattahoochee Review*. Recent poems have appeared in *Book of Matches*, *EcoTheo Collective*, and *Anti-Heroin Chic*. A two-time cancer survivor, Michael lives in Avondale Estates, Georgia with his wife and dogs.

Jack Durant is an ESL teacher from New England who has taught in Chile, Japan, Spain, and New York. He lives abroad in Japan and enjoys utilizing their public transportation as much as possible for sightseeing in Kyoto and skiing in Niigata. At home, he writes fiction, reads literature, and tries to improve his second language in his spare time. Some other places to find his work are *Reflex Fiction*, *Written Tales Magazine*, and *The Ulu Review*.

Alan Elyshevitz is a poet and fiction writer who was born in New York City and now lives in East Norriton, PA. He is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), a full-length poetry collection, *Generous Peril* (Cyberwit), and five poetry chapbooks, most recently *Approximate Sonnets* (Orchard Street). Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Cordelia Hanemann, writer and artist, currently co-hosts Summer Poets, a poetry critique group in Raleigh, NC. Professor emerita retired English professor, she conducts occasional poetry workshops and is active with youth poetry in the North Carolina Poetry Society. She is also a botanical illustrator and lover of all things botanical. She has published in numerous journals including *Atlanta Review*, *Laurel Review*, and *California Quarterly*, numerous others, in several anthologies including best-selling *Poems for the Ukraine*, and her chapbook. Her poems have been performed by the Strand Project, won awards, and nominated for Pushcarts. She is now working on a novel about her Cajun roots.

Cindy Ellen Hill is a writer, musician, and gardener in Middlebury, Vermont. She has authored two sonnet chapbooks, *Wild Earth*, (Antrim Press 2021) and *Elegy for the Trees*, (Kelsay Books 2022). Her poetry has most recently been published in *Treehouse Literary Review*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Flint Hills Review*, and *Anacapa Review*, and has previously appeared in *Measure*, *The Lyric*, *Vermont Life*, and the *National Public Radio Themes* and *Variations program*. She has twice won the Vermont Writer's Prize.

Jessica Hwang's fiction has appeared in *Reservoir Road Literary Review*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Tough*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Uncharted*, *Failbetter*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *Samjoko*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, and is forthcoming in *The Thieving Magpie*, *Rundelania* and *The Writing Disorder*. She lives in Minnesota with her husband and dog. You can find her at [jessicahwangauthor.com](http://jessicahwangauthor.com).

Carella Keil is a writer and digital artist who creates surreal, dreamy images that explore nature, fantasy realms, melancholia and inner dimensions. Her art has been published in a myriad of literary and art magazines, including *Chestnut Review*, *Wander Magazine*, and *Skyie Magazine*, and featured on the covers of *Glassworks Magazine*, *Colors: The Magazine*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, and *Straylight Magazine*. You can follow her work on instagram @catalogue.of.dreams and twitter @catalogofdream

Alyse Knorr lives with her wife, kids, and cat, Jeffrey, in Denver where she co-produces *Sweetbitter*, a podcast about untold queer and women's histories, and teaches classes on science fiction, superheroes, and creative writing at Regis University. She is the author of four poetry collections (most recently *Ardor* from Gasher Press), two non-fiction books about video games (most recently *GoldenEye 007* from Boss Fight Books), and four poetry chapbooks. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*, among others.

Jennifer Lothrigel is a photographer and poet in the San Francisco Bay area. Her work explores themes of lineage, the body, and mysticism. She is the author of *Pneuma* (Liquid Light Press, 2018), *Wormhole Weaver* (self-published, 2022), and *Secret Futures* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). Her work has also been published in *Phoebe Journal*, *Arcturus*, *Dash Literary Journal*, and *Adanna Journal*, amongst others. She loves spending time in nature and hikes daily with her Pointer named Luna. Follow her on Instagram @JenniferLothrigel

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois.

Kurt Olsson grew up in Troy, New York. After a two-year hitch in the Peace Corps, Olsson worked for more than 20 years in the field of international development. A longtime Maryland resident, he recently moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin with his youngest daughter and their three cats. There, he volunteers on behalf of mental health and animal welfare. Olsson has published two collections of poetry, *Burning Down Disneyland* (Gunpowder Press) and *What Kills What Kills Us* (Silverfish Review Press). Olsson's poems have appeared in many journals, including *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *Southern Review*, and *The Threepenny Review*.

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Michael Proppsom graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a BA in Social Work. His stories have appeared in various publications including *The Saturday Evening Post online*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *West Wind Review*, and *Wisconsin Review*. Two of his stories received Pushcart Prize nominations.

Sarath Reddy enjoys writing poetry which explores the world beneath the superficial layers of experience and searching for deeper meaning in his experiences as an Indian-American, as a physician, and as a father. Sarath's poetry has been published in *JAMA*, *Off the Coast*, *Please see Me*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *Cold Mountain Review*. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Lisa Rua-Ware is a poet in central Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *San Pedro River Review*, *Lily Poetry Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *West Trade Review*, and elsewhere. When she's not chasing after her two kids, she works as a technical writer and spends her spare time reading, making lists, and attempting craft projects.

Bradley Samore has worked as an editor, writing consultant, English teacher, Creative Writing teacher, basketball coach, and family support facilitator. His writing has appeared in *The Florida Review*, *Carve*, *The Dewdrop*, and other publications. He is a winner of the Creative Writing Ink Poetry Prize. Website: [www.BradleySamore.com](http://www.BradleySamore.com)

Peggy Schimmelman is a California writer who grew up in rural Missouri. Her Ozark roots are often reflected in her work, which includes the poetry chapbooks *Crazytown* and *Tick-Tock* and the novels *Insomniacs, Inc.* and *Whippoorwills*. She is co-author of *Long Stories Short* by Wild Vine Writers. Her work has appeared in the *North American Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Peregrine*, *WinningWriters.com*, *Pacific Review*, *Comstock Review*, and others. She is a published songwriter who plays percussion in the volunteer band Heart Strings, and her love of music drives much of her poetry. She is the poet laureate of Livermore, California.

Elizabeth Searle writes fiction and scripts. She has five published books of fiction, including *A Four-Sided Bed*, and she is co-writer on the feature film *I'll Show You Mine* (Duplass Brothers Productions, released in theaters and via VOD in 2023), as well as librettist of *Tonya & Nancy: The Rock Opera*, which has been widely produced and drawn national media. *STOLEN GIRL SONG* was performed at Act One: One Act Play Festival in NY, Northern Writes New Play Festival and more. She lives in Arlington, Massachusetts and likes biking and cats. She teaches fiction and scriptwriting at Stonecoast MFA.

Roberta Senechal de la Roche is a professional historian of the Victorian era and a poet of Mi'kmaq and French-Canadian descent. She was born in a

paper mill town in western Maine and now lives in the woods near the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. Her poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Yemassee*, *Vallum*, *Sequestrum*, and elsewhere. She has published two prize-winning chapbooks, *Blind Flowers* and *After Eden*, as well as *Winter Light*, and her first book, *Going Fast*.

Elizabeth Solsburg is a graduate of the University of Michigan and Loyola University, New Orleans. She lives and writes in the Midwest, and her poetry has appeared in *Next Line Please*, *Prompts for Poets and Writers* (David Lehman and Angela Ball, eds.), *America Magazine*, *American Scholar*, *The Avalon Review*, *One Art*, *The Bear River Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *The Northern Appalachia Review*, and others.

Gene Twaronite a native New Englander now lives in Tucson, Arizona. His published books include four poetry collections, including *Trash Picker on Mars*, a winner of the 2017 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. He is also the author of two juvenile novels, a rhyming picture book, and four collections of short stories and humor essays. A strong element of the absurd runs through much of his writing. A passionate environmentalist and freethinker, lately he has focused on writing poems that speak to the current threats facing all life on the planet. Follow more of Gene's writing at his website: [genetwaronitepoet.com](http://genetwaronitepoet.com).

LeeAnn Weaver lives in Connecticut, where classes at the Fairfield County Story Lab led her to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing at Fairfield University. She was a young girl carrying around a journal who became a marketing executive, a grant writer for non-profits, and a home organizing blogger. She is now returning to her memoir roots. LeeAnn likes to hope she got some storytelling DNA from her grandfather—that guy could always bring down the house. When not writing she spends time chasing her boys, cooking with her husband, dreaming about world travel, and defending the Oxford comma.

Elyzabeth Wilder's plays include *Looks Like Pretty*, *Fresh Kills*, *Everything That's Beautiful*, *Gee's Bend*, *The Furniture of Home*, *The Flag Maker of Market Street*, *White Lightning*, and *Provenance*. Her work has been produced/commissioned/workshopped by Royal Court, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Denver Center, Arden, New Conservatory Theatre, Sloan Foundation, Geva Theatre, Baltimore Center Stage, Triad Stage, Pioneer Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Little Fish, and B Street Theatre, among others. Her most recent play, *Zelda in the Backyard*, was workshopped at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and her TYA play, *Georgia Mae James Unplugs America* premiered at The Growing Stage in New Jersey. She is currently the Tennessee Williams Playwright-in-Residence at Sewanee: The University of the South. Proud NYU/Youngblood alum. [www.wilderwriting.net](http://www.wilderwriting.net)

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Jake Young is the author of the poetry collections *American Oak* (Main Street Rag, 2018), *What They Will Say* (Finishing Line Press, 2021), and *All I Wanted* (Redhawk Publications, 2021), the co-translator with Rebecca Pelky of the poetry collection *Desnuda / Naked* by Matilde Ladrón de Guevara (Redhawk Publications, 2022), and the essay collection *True Terroir* (Brandenburg Press, 2019). He received his MFA from North Carolina State University and his PhD from the University of Missouri. Young serves as Poetry Editor for the *Chicago Quarterly Review*.