



*Lit m o r a*  
Literary Magazine

Issue 0 - Genesis

# litmora literary magazine

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**ROWAN** is an Elden Ring fan.

**ALEX** believes text is an explosion.

**DAN** is lonely, allegedly.

**NATE's** favorite color is yellow.

**MIKE** is a chef in disguise.

**CEN's** in a room where the light won't find her.

**for**

*Rebecca Cuthbert &*

*Michael Sheehan*

And you sit and wonder what an accident is -  
how much life is luck and timing.  
And you think of him lit up by the sun,  
lying on his back, phone in his hand,  
lungs full.

- "Alvaro's Friend", **J.A. Hartley**, p. 115

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# Begin With the End

Yasmine Diaz

It all begins with the end  
Count the highlights with your friends  
The world could end in a blink  
From one sleep to the next

A sudden breath,  
A blink and a cough

You cross your fingers from behind  
Sometimes you can't help to lie  
What's the truth if not a worry  
But don't be sorry, be ready

A smile

We're just stardust  
Beating hearts wrapped around the planet  
Whatever we are we just grow here  
We're already leaving so soon

A breath

It's not over  
What was and what will be is still starting  
And every story has its ending  
We're just all beginning.

# Hold Up The Sky

Dilon Zeres

The sky is flame. Crimson with cerulean clouds. White edges between them.

In the far distance, beyond the frame of our scene, in the uncontrollable dark of corporeality and its many backstage distractions, a slow and effusive indigo seeps in.

Something is filling everything up. Unseen, but decisive. A deterministic flow, becoming heavier with every passing timestamp, thickening on the sides of walls until they engorge all of it. Somewhere, it has to be coming. Somewhere, it has to be leaving.

And that place is the spark.

But back on our stage, where Lina is and where she wanders, a return to structure and coordination seems to be enveloping—or rather, is it *entropy*ing?

Like things falling apart. Lina knows this. She's heard the music play and then be deafened to silence. She's seen the look of a lover that has lost their affection and interest, turning their head away for the last time.

Just another play, she often thought, and she could change that. Just another play at it and she could change everything.

As she strikes a match and fires up her cigarette, she wonders who uses matches anymore. Such an antique thing to do. History is not an idle plaything, but an old toy you still know how to handle out of habit. While habit is the history of our things and how we play with them. What is—a *circle*?

“Are you ready to do the scene?”

How funny to Lina, who thinks to herself, *has the scene not already started?* As she strokes away on smoke, standing there in spotlight, hooves glistening on stage, body constricting in a flower dress that threatens to wilt. Who was the genius that decided to do this so close to the heat of death?

“Lina, are you ready?” a stern voice asks again.

“Yes, I think so.” Lina replies.

“We don’t need you thinking. We need you acting.”

So, with that said, Lina discards the thought of taking her cigarette and shoving it in the eye of the Director barking at her, and she prepares to portray a version of herself she has never seen but which exists only in habit and simulacra.

A bit of hesitation. *Can I stop this?* She understands she can’t, so she forgets it. Then she’s off.

Lina looks up at the sky, its flames darkening, some kind of violet force pushing through them, itself becoming burdened by shadow with every drop of sky blood it consumes. A shy piano plays, somewhat spectral and lonely. Then the lights center, dim.

Looking up, Lina speaks, “Today is the day...”

A pause. Then she speaks again. “Of all the days in all the essence of time, today is the one I’ve been waiting for.”

In a nervous thrust she lifts her arms up, hands pointing to the sky, shaking. It is almost like her body is unsure if it should be doing this or not, but her anxiousness is channeled into energy, animating her movement in spite of her wavering.

“Today is the day!”

She says this with more electricity. Frenetic yet committed. A declaration yet also a request.

Silence from the Director. This must mean she’s doing well. So she continues.

“The days are soon to end—but I am here! Of all the places in all the essence of space, *here* is the place I’ve been waiting to be. To begin again!”

Lina twirls. Over and over. A somewhat mesmerizing circle. Feverish, fanatic. Like a ballerina in full moon rage. Until suddenly she stops, mid-action, arms still hanging, leg still suspended, her head facing a darkness offstage. She can feel that breath of hers straining.

“Again—another twirl.” the Director demands.

So she does another twirl.

“Another.” the Director demands.

Clenching her teeth, trying oh so desperately not to sigh or lash out, she does another twirl.

“I want it again.” the Director demands.

Stuck in pose, her back turned to the audience, her arms and leg caught in suspension, Lina ever so slightly turns her head to look at the Director, trying to confirm if that’s truly what they want. Without breaking pose, her vision doesn’t quite reach the shroud of the Director’s form. But a demand is a demand.

She twirls again, the mechanics of it getting loose now. Unstable. Like she’s thrashing instead of twirling.

“You’re not doing enough. Go again.” the Director demands.

Panting now, she contracts her chest muscles. She knows if they see her breathing in and out too much it will ruin the scene. Her movements have to be perfect and passionate, while also being repeatable. She has to articulate the habit completely or the illusion breaks entirely.

But she can feel her limbs tiring. That feeling of heaviness is on her now. Even her bones are sharpening, threatening to cut open her soft skin at any moment. This cannot be stopped, however—an actress is an actress, a director is a director, a demand is a demand.

So Lina does another twirl. Only to misstep.

As her foot touches the floor, her ankle snaps. Her whole body, falsely believing its leverage is still there, directs its momentum to the ankle anyway. So her body follows her downward, all into that one spot, all into the location of her sideways foot.

One after one, every bone in her body shatters against this focal point of force. It splits and sunders. Tendons pull as far as they can, like straps of hardened tar, until they too rip, despoiling her nerves in a million different bursts of agony. All the skin on her limbs smothers beneath a convulsive

curtain of blood and bone. Everything wraps into this impact, no matter where it belongs, rending.

And there she finally stops—breaking herself.

Lina shrieks. Only half of a shriek, though, as her lower throat caves in on itself. With no other option—every nerve still connected to her brain stabbing it in staccatos of pain, and every nerve disconnected now a phantom freak of misery—she just cries.

Her face, miraculously, remains rendered. Like a flower perched upon thorns. Then, when there are no tears left, her eyes twitch—the only expressible motion any part of her is still capable of.

A period of silence follows.

Until, at last, the Director rises from their seat. Another pause. Then, the applause starts. Others join in. A whole cavalcade of clapping comes over the stage, developing into glorious cheers.

*“Bravo! Bravo! You are so beautiful!”*

Lina cannot even process what is happening. None of her senses function. She has lapsed into the corporeal numbness that is prelude to death. *Awaiting.*

The sky is overtaken by indigo.

Little fuchsia stars twinkling are all that remain of the old shades. No clouds. No gods. No nothing. Just endless expanse—deep, voracious void. All amounting to nothing, ultimately, but the amount of which could crush anything.

Before the dust can settle, the Director’s voice interrupts—“Get up.”

Dust is dust. And a demand is a demand.

Altogether, Lina is restored. Reborn. Her whole body is normal again. Clean, upright, full of pulse and pump. The pain subsides but impressions of it linger.

“Another take.” the Director demands.

“Maybe we can try another scene? Please?” Lina asks, voice trembling.

The Director says nothing, then sits. They stare at her in an almost nihilist gaze.

“Only one more time, maybe?” Lina pleads, a tear falling from her eye.

“You sound like you’re begging—that’s not what your character is supposed to be doing.”

The Director’s word is final.

Lina looks up, hiding her terror. She thinks a brief thought of desperate death that never comes, an inkling of hopefulness that everything can end but nothing does, then proclaims, “Today is the day...”

A pause. Then she speaks again. “Of all the days in all the essence of time, today is the one I’ve been waiting for.”

In a nervous thrust she lifts her arms up, hands pointing to the sky, shaking. So fervently she does this parts of the sky seem to swirl away from the force of her fingers. Then they trickle back toward her. A magnetism calls to them.

Under this indigo sea, she becomes so swathed in its shadow her body is nothing but a silhouette. She is so forceful now. This time, she’ll be able to hit the notes even harder. A gorgeous hole she has become, punctured by habit, a black hole frame holding up the sky like it will never come down.

But it will. Because a demand is a demand.

# Star-Crossed Nebulae

J. Laposa

if i was to find you  
spitting up galaxies in my wake  
would you swallow each nova for me?

--become a dancing wonder amongst moons  
and breathe death into entire universes  
all for us  
maybe we could be the dancing wonder, together  
or the sleeping nebula  
spilling colour into sepia dreams



## Hey, when the sun explodes, where will you go?

Anne Smith

“God, I hope we never have to do that again,” Aspen laughs, the kind of laugh that sputters out of a shaky breath, and Abriel as stopped mocomounting how many times he’s said that. He shouldn’t have started in the first place. It had been a rough take off, if he remembered correctly, and Aspen stretches in his seat like a cat in a sunny spot. As he pilots the ship, connecting the shuttle to the station, Abriel taps a message out to headquarters. It’s illegible to him; it’s something he memorised, simple information like *Substance A reacted positively to Substance F, and the mechanics on Part  $\Phi$  work smoothly*. But he has to send it out on the dot. His telecommunicator buzzes with the response from Ms. St. Clair. Aspen sighs when he hears the sound, whispering “is she giving you grief?”

“Always,” he smiles at his fiancé, and with practised grace they both make their way onto the station.

Space is always humming. It’s a buzz that Abriel finds comforting now: the oxygen whistling, the pressure of the manufactured gravity, Aspen’s titanium feet hitting the metal floor in uncertain steps, and his fingers fiddling with the scratched-up plastic toolbox.

“You’d think they’d tell us anything about this stupid thing, but no, it’s always, ‘it’s a rudimentary fix,’ or ‘that’s classified, Kohler,’” Aspen complains loudly, blue eyes narrowing at the floor. Abriel takes his hand quietly, pressing fingertips into his palm. Aspen looks up, continuing, “I just...I’m so done with being sent up here to do god knows what. Upkeep?”

“You’re making sure this machine has power.”

“Power to do what? What are we doing? I’m...I don’t know,” his hand grips harshly, before he apologizes under his breath. Abriel grips back.

“How about, instead of worrying about this dusty thing that hasn’t even been used, we think about dinner?” Abriel offers the advice easily, and Aspen shrugs.

“We can think about that when we get home; this shouldn’t take more than half-an-hour.”

“Anything that takes only half-an-hour shouldn’t be something you worry about, Aspen.”

He laughs at that one, and they finally reach the corner of the station that houses the machine. It spans the whole room, with wires hanging from the ceiling, weaving together. It’s just like any other machine, and yet Abriel can’t stop a tickle from running down his spine. There’s a little window, the small red sun peaking out from the far left providing the only lighting. Aspen takes out a flashlight from his box, handing it to Abriel automatically.



He's certainly a master. Abriel knows that, but every time he watches the way his fiancé knows exactly which wire to pull, which part goes where, even with no information about the machine itself, he feels his face warm. Aspen can't possibly know what it does, and yet after twenty minutes, he rolls his shoulder and high-fives Abriel.

"Easy!"

The machine's two indicators light up in blue and red, and Abriel feels his communicator buzz on his wrist.

*Substance G and O reacted negatively to Substance AFM. There were casualties.*

Abriel rolls his eyes, and throws the switch on the machine.

"God, I hope we never have to do that again," Aspen laughs. Abriel relays the last message through his telecommunicator, with Ms. St. Clair replying with a rudimentary thanks. He gazes at his fiancé, taking in the way the moles dotting his face contract as he stretches in his seat, twisting with relief. They always reminded him of constellations, and Aspen catches his stare. He smiles, that crooked grin that's intimidating to the new recruits, and whispers, "you can look at me like that when we're done, okay?"

Abriel smiles back, and they head into that hallway that's become his world.

"Do you remember your first impression of Ms. St. Clair?" Abriel decides to start a conversation. Usually he lets Aspen talk, lets him air out his nerves, because those times are the ones where the machine gets fixed the fastest. But he's gotten bored these past few hundreds of hours. Or however long it's been. Aspen considers the question, and shrugs.

"Young. Bitchy. She's good at her job, though. I can always respect that," he says, tapping his prosthetic foot against the metal ground. Abriel focuses on the rhythmic thuds; he watches the way Aspen's skeletal tattoos peak out through the neck of his uniform.

Abriel's memory has started getting fuzzy. Ms. St. Clair is becoming nothing more than the person who texts him instructions, and the one who he parrots those instructions back to at the beginning of the loop. He hates it. He only remembers one conversation with her clearly.

"You always report directly to her, right? What did you think of her?" Aspen asks, and Abriel tries to think about something that happened so long ago for him.

"She's...she's something. I don't know why she trusts me so much."

He thinks that "trust" is the wrong word, but he doesn't know what else to call it.

"Vasquez, you are the only one who can complete this mission," she ends her powerpoint with a click of a button, and Abriel's still reeling from the first slide.

“So...there'll be a supernova? And we have a time machine,” he asks. He's not really asking. It's just incredulous, and he's hoping that when he says it, she'll start laughing. Her eyes sharpen instead, blue piercing, rooting him to his chair. She reminds him of Aspen, in that purely physical way, blonde and blue-eyed, scary. Aspen never made him afraid, though, not like her.

“It's currently without power, and we have only days until the advent. You are the one who will flip the switch. Only you will remember the loop occurs. You won't physically age, and you won't need to eat or sleep. But you will remember. We will relay progress to you after about an hour, and, after you reset the loop, you will relay it back to us. We can make breakthroughs, and we have a theory as to how to counteract the sun's life cycle.”

Abriel doesn't have anything to say about any of that. He's not a science guy, at least in that way. He just performs medical checkups. He doesn't have an option, either, so what's there to say? But there's another point: his fiancé's name coming up somewhere in that dense presentation.

“What does Aspen have to do with any of this?”

“You cannot fix the machine, can you?” She also isn't asking. Her gaze flicks back to the powerpoint, and she turns it back a slide, continuing, “that's why Kohler will be with you. He can turn the machine on. You must guarantee that he fixes the machine within an hour, or else.”

“And you think you can find a solution?”

“Vasquez,” she smiles, and nobody likes seeing her smile, “we have all the time in the world. Think of what's at stake, and think of what you'll be rewarded.”

He thinks of the house he could get for Aspen. A house they would own. A place they could call home, where his wheelchair won't bump into door frames and too-small corridors. They won't have to work anymore, at least, they won't have to work here. He could see Aspen painting again, painting more, and Ms. St. Clair promised that any children they have will be fully financially supported. They all will. And they'd save the world, which probably should've been his first thought, but it wasn't.

“You must realise that we can send Kohler alone. He's the only one who needs to be up there. He could turn on the machine. Your medical background has nothing to do with this mission.”

He knows they know his history. At least, Ms. St. Clair knows his history. The scars that line his thighs, row by row. The willingness he has to give up himself, especially for someone so much brighter and vivid. This is someone who's worth the weight of the world to him.

He nods. And she smiles again.

He ends up resetting while Aspen is mid-sentence this loop, which he always hates. They were talking about...it was that anecdote about him

throwing one of his prosthetic legs at a classmate in middle school. Abriel knows that talking about anti-gravity will get him to tell that one again, so when they make their way into the space station he comments about how much he hates that they can't turn off the artificial gravity.

"Y'know, that's why I wanted to become an astronaut in the first place," Aspen responds, which isn't exactly what Abriel was expecting, but he loves hearing any story.

"I think I know that one; you liked feeling weightless, right?"

"I guess. I liked that I could move so freely," Aspen picks at the socks layered over his compression suit, "I love my legs, but, man, did it suck sometimes when I first got them...well, actually, most of the time now, too. That's not their fault, though. For the first time I didn't have to think about it."

Abriel stares at the way his fingers roll the top of the socks, and he smiles at the way Aspen refers to his legs as "they." And he realises somewhere in the back of his mind that he hasn't eaten anything in...he's not allowing himself to count. If he counts, he'll lose his mind so much faster.

"What should we have for dinner?" He unwittingly interrupts, and Aspen sputters out a laugh. He stops in his tracks, clutching his stomach, and Abriel can't help laughing, too. Aspen looks up, smiling and sunny.

Abriel feels something slip down his face, and before he can even recognise he's crying Aspen takes his cheeks into his hands. His brows are knit, and Abriel can hear him talking but he can't...he can't hear what he's saying, and that's when his spine quivers from the weight of it all.

They end up rushing to turn on the machine, because Aspen wants to leave early.

"I'll make you something real nice, and we'll go out for ice cream, and we won't have to deal with the government's bullshit for at least a week!"

Abriel's telecommunicator buzzes.

*Positive reaction between Substance UO and Substance PW, Part E is functioning flawlessly.*

Aspen puts his hand over Abriel's wrist.

"We won't have to deal with them for a while," he kisses Abriel's brow, and Abriel smiles, turns and pushes the switch to On.

"I can't believe how long it's been since we've first met," Abriel starts the conversation, which is becoming his favourite thing in the whole world. Aspen shrugs.

"I mean, it's been a couple of years, I guess." It's a seemingly timid answer, but Abriel knows that Aspen is the real counter in this relationship.

He's the one who reminds him of anniversaries, even celebrating half-years with cake and confetti.

"How could I forget the guy who stomped on the foot of his commander, then sprinted into the seat next to me. I was afraid you'd hurt me," he's smiling as he teases, and Aspen glances away. They were on the same mission, but they'd never been introduced properly, because the government's space program was an organisational nightmare that didn't know how to communicate to do anything. After all, if they'd come up with an actual plan, they wouldn't have to sacrifice so much of Abriel's sanity.

"I-I would never hurt you! That guy...ugh I don't even want to think about him. But..." Aspen pauses, uncharacteristically, "I don't think I've ever told you this, but I think you took my breath away when I first saw you."

He hadn't told him that, but Abriel had access to all of their suits' medical metrics. He had seen Aspen's heart rate spike, but he had assumed it had been from almost breaking his boss's foot.

"How did they not fire you?"

"Nice pivot, darling. I was too good at my job. Better than the guy barking orders, anyway," Aspen smirks, and Abriel is faced with the machine again.

Abriel doesn't like looking at the machine. Its wires start shifting, and the murmur it emits when Aspen powers it up always crashes down on his shoulders. It's like it's breathing, exhaling and inhaling, and Abriel doesn't like the knowledge that the only thing that's really in this loop with him is the machine. Aspen doesn't know. But the machine does. He almost wishes he brought something for distraction, headphones, something. But he couldn't. Ms. St. Clair wouldn't allow it. He must be totally in the moment, in order to react to anything. He thinks she might be trying to support him, though. She tapped his shoulder before take-off, in some strange show of solidarity, maybe, and Aspen looked like he was going to kill her. He feels Aspen's finger poke the tip of his nose, and so he returns his focus to his fiancé. Their arms are linked together, and Abriel feels his wrist buzz, and Aspen's lips form a pout.

Sometimes he just wants to let the world end. It definitely isn't the first time he's thought this. It's always creeping in the back of his mind, wrapping itself around his being. He hates that he can't stop thinking about it, but he's gotten better. He no longer pierces himself in barely-lit bathrooms, like he used to on high school field trips. He stopped hiding box cutters in his pillowcase. He started to work towards something, anything at all. And he's finally established something about himself that he loves, and it's something that he never wants to let go of.

He loves Aspen the most, more than anyone else in the whole world. He hasn't seen the tattoo across Aspen's collarbone in god knows how long,

but he will never forget that those crow's wings are meant to be him. They're so intertwined. And he's finally admitting to himself that Aspen doesn't deserve this.

*Coming close to project completion.* Along with the longest string he's seen. He repeats it aloud, and Aspen starts questioning him before Abriel reaches out for the switch.

"Can I tell you something?" Abriel knows the answer already, but he always likes to ask. Aspen nods. "I think I wouldn't be alive if we hadn't met."

Abriel honestly can't recall if they've ever had this conversation, and Aspen just gazes up at him with focused intent. He stills, his attention completely on Abriel, and this intensity would make him crumble with anyone else. Aspen almost glares, not on purpose, of course, that's just how he looks, but there is a hint of something. Frustration, perhaps. It's closer to fear. Abriel can't tell.

"I love you," he says, as a conclusion, or maybe in want of a conclusion. He doesn't know why he brought it up, but the hallway is closing in on him and he thinks he wants to throw himself into the wall until his bones break, his skull splits open, and his brain matter sears as the sun consumes them all. But he won't. Cause Aspen is here staring at him, and nothing in the world is worse than seeing his fiancé upset.

"I love you, too," Aspen whispers to the floor, and they walk forward. He knows how Abriel gets sometimes.

"I want to eat Ben & Jerry's when we get back."

Aspen snorts.

He's stopped being able to describe it. It creeps from every corner of the room, like an overgrown plant, and he can't remember if this is at all what it used to look like. But it's almost impossible to breathe, and the sun burns red at the corner of his retina, just out the window. Sometimes he spends these moments gazing out the window, letting Aspen hold his own flashlight, or just use the headlamp he brought. But he likes being helpful, and so he takes the flashlight handed to him.

It never takes as long as getting there does. In minutes? It's longer, but the hallway spans for so many miles, and his legs never tire but sometimes he wishes that he kept all the physical experiences. He would feel hunger again, in that physical way, and thirst and...and so much more that he's lost. Is he even human anymore? What would make him inhuman? He thinks that the only reason he still recognises himself in the glimpses he sees in that tiny window is that Aspen looks at him with the same love.

And he hears something he's never heard before. Aspen stops his work, and springs up.

"What the hell was that?" Aspen asks, and suddenly that small window erupts with brilliant light.

Abriel crashes into Aspen, pulling his head into his shoulder, and he starts babbling endlessly.

"I know that I put so much pressure on you. I keep telling you things, things like 'I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you.' I've been treating you like...like an anchor, or an object, or a part of myself and...I'm so sorry. I know that I can't put this on you, put my existence on you alone. I just...I just want you to know that I'll always want to be in your life. Anything you want me to be. And if you want me to leave I will, and I'll be happy to."

Aspen pulls back, blonde hair reflecting all the bright lights from the window, kaleidoscopic, almost, blue eyes flecked with gold and red and warmth, and he glares up.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

And Abriel laughs, because the world is ending, or maybe it's beginning anew, and he wonders if the rings they had to leave on Earth mean anything at all anymore. Aspen brings him back down, grabbing his face with his hands, cradling it like a glass angel, like something precious.

"We are getting married, right? A-are you walking it back? Did I do something? I-I don't mind? What...what's happening?" Aspen's rambling too, and though his words speed up his hands stay gentle.

Abriel's telecommunicator buzzes.

*Mission Accomplished. Come back to HQ.*

"Abriel what the fuck is happening?"

And the lights dim just slightly, and the sun blazes in golden hues.

"I want ice cream, and a nap, and hot chocolate, and a hug, and--"

Aspen pinches him.

"You'll get all that! You'll marry me, and if you won't I'll kill you. A-and we've got to find somewhere else to work, because this job is driving us both insane. We'll figure something out!"



# A Midsaturn Night's Dream

Mike Escobar

Every night, at the same hour, I notice how calming your room truly is. The ambient light filters in through your window, leaving a warm amber trail across your bed, as if the tranquil rays of Saturn itself infuse the place where you sleep with cosmic energy.

Tonight, you seem frailer than ever, leaning on my shoulder. You feel as gentle as a feather as I guide you to your slumber. For the first time in my life, you appear helpless in my arms, weakened to a point of no return. I always knew this time would come.

You jest, saying, "The view of Saturn's rings always lulls me to sleep." But not tonight. Instead of lying down, we talk about the day and laugh at the many games we played.

As in previous nights, I sit here watching you sleep. I study your face with my eyes and become lost... the wrinkles, the unfamiliar mounds on your forehead. I imagine what you used to look like, how swiftly your appearance has changed. You are but a mirage of the man you used to be.

The aging process happened so quickly. At this moment, the complexity of it all dawns on me. However, tonight, sleep eludes you. After I lay you down, you remain lost in thought, gazing out the window. For a moment, you prepare to close your eyes and drift off to dreamland.

Tonight, though, feels different. It seems like you want answers. With a look of worry, you ask, "Why did you do this?"

I didn't expect such concern, considering what I had to do. If it weren't for the moon, there might have been another choice. If it weren't for our isolation, there might have been another choice. If it didn't mean I would be left alone on this crater, then perhaps there could have been another choice.

I reply, "Such a profound question for you to ask." I gaze out the window, my eyes resting on Saturn, and continue, "I'm not God, though sometimes I feel like I'm playing one." I look back at you lying on the bed. "Death cannot be determined; I don't know when or how we die."

The pain in your face is evident. Frustration builds—tears well up. You turn your gaze back to the window and say, "But at least technology is

striving to help us make things right.” You look back at me, tears streaming down your cheeks. “Right?”

“Why are you crying?” I ask. These are difficult questions tonight, as you should already be asleep. Although, this may be the last time I put you to bed.

You reply, “Because I've lived two whole lives with you, and the most recent one flew by in an instant.” Tears continue to flow as I wipe them away with my thumb.

I respond, my voice filled with care, “Don't you think this is hard for me too? Watching the man I love so deeply, the man I married, age rapidly before my eyes?”

You bite your lip, searching for the right words to say, aware that the pain lies on both sides. A part of you recognizes that I will have to go through this process repeatedly.

'I don't know if I can do this again,' I say.

You turn your gaze away from the window and reply, “I don't want you to be alone up here.”

I don't know how to respond because I know you're right. Loneliness is a death sentence without others around. I would feel out of place, and madness would take hold. This moon base is too vast for one person.

“If it weren't for your genetic anomaly, the procedure would have worked as planned,” I say.

You sit up in bed, struggling to lift your own weight. Before you can mutter a few words, you cough up blood into your handkerchief.

Looking up at me, you say, “Look, you only have five years left on this base. Don't go through this alone.”

“Well, how many times do you expect me to bring you back? I don't know what will happen next time. What if it's not just this? What if it's something else?”

You turn your gaze back to Saturn, captivated by its beauty. With a sigh, you acknowledge that I am right.



I say, "What is worse: being separated from someone you love or watching them die over and over again?"

I place my hand behind your neck and guide you back into bed, tucking you under the sheets. I settle you back onto your pillow, and you close your eyes, finding comfort in the realm of dreams.

Through the small slits of your eyes, you say, "Do what you will, but know this: Saturn feels truly and yet only beautiful when we both gaze out this window."

# Together

Allison Walters Luther

Let us walk into the sea  
Together  
Hand in hand  
Across the years  
And drink deeply  
Of the stars reflected from the skies

Let us dance into the midnight hour  
Together  
Like we did when  
We were young and hopeful  
In our new world  
And all that was before us was love

Let us talk  
Together  
Of times long past  
And times yet to come  
Of stolen kisses and  
Whispered frustrations that carry through walls

Let us burn  
Together  
As lovers do  
In the twin flames of desire and hate  
Always yearning  
For what is just out of reach

Let us die as we lived  
Together



The ship rocked back and forth along the surface of the deep blue water, sea foam rubbing at its sides. The sky was the perfect shade of navy blue to match the bright stars hidden by the threatening clouds overhead, slowly but surely approaching. A storm was soon to come, but the crew didn't think anything of it as they made an announcement on the comm to the passengers aboard their ship.

Inside the cockpit, two men rested for the stormy evening - Captain Jamison Jarmain, along with his co-captain and second-hand Lieutenant Murph 'Murphy' Richards. Both men sat lazily as they watched the storm heading towards them through the round windows above the desk. Jarmain rocked back and forth in his seat, while Murph sat with his head resting on his fist, trying not to doze off.

"Ya got a neck," said Jamison as he swiveled his head towards his counterpart, "or is your head that heavy with stones?"

Murph twitched awake with a small 'uff' as he stiffened his back in his chair. He let out a displeased grunt and rubbed the exhaustion out of his eyes.

"You just think you're so damn funny," Murph huffed at his captain, to which he chuckled.

"Funnier than you, at least."

Murphy rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, looking away from his captain. "Hey, c'mon, lighten up. You know I'm just playin' with you," spoke Jamison.

The only thing catching Murphy's attention at this point were the waves crashing against the poor, squeaky windows. He had never hoped that they would break and that the salty water would drown him to death - until now.

Murphy didn't have much of an issue with the captain, or Sir Jarmain as he liked to call him. He actually had quite the opposite of an issue. Murphy pretended to be cold and bitter towards Jarmain, but as he lay in his bunker at night, he wished he could treat his captain with the same tender care that his wife did.

"The fuck is wrong with ya? Hello? I said I ain't mean it, don't take it that deep," said Sir Jarmain, standing up mid sentence to walk behind Murphy's chair and put his hands on his shoulders from behind. "Earth to Zounderkite over here," he cackled to himself, laughing at his own joke.

This quickly caused Murphy to readjust himself in his chair, straightening his spine and tilting his black felt sailor's cap to cover the rosy pink blush developing across his nose and cheeks. He cleared his throat before rolling his shoulders and brushing the captain's hands away. "Leave me alone, please, sir," spoke Murph as he cleared his throat once again out of nervousness. "Just thinking about my bed, and the thunder, that's all."

“That’s all, eh?” snickered Jamison. “Damn better be. Don’t need my helper boy to be dreamin’ off in the pit thinking about some slag he’s planning on inviting to quarters tonight.”

“What! I- Captain!” he stumbled and whipped his head around with a panicked and embarrassed look on his face. If he thought he was blushing before, it was nothing compared to now. “That is most inappropriate!”

“I’m kidding!” Jarmain belted out through a laugh. He thought he was the funniest man in the world. “You’ve got no sense of humor, boy. You make it so easy,” he chuckled with a smile as he slapped his big palm down on Murphy’s hat, roughing up the hair underneath it.

The captain sighed and made his way back to his chair with a smile full of pride.

Murphy peered over at him from under the brim of his cap, cheeks still as red as ripe berries. He felt conflicted as to what he should do. He couldn’t reveal his feelings, as Jarmain had a wife, and was almost certain not to feel the same way. Flirting was off the charts - Murphy was the first to admit he was too much of a coward. Maybe just try to be nice? Perhaps, but he would rather die than be a kiss-ass to the already pompous captain. Ignoring his feelings seemed to be the best option.

Murph turned his head to look back longingly at the monstrous waves crashing against the window once more. The things he does - or doesn't do - for love.

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It's been twenty years since the then young Murph boarded that ship as the co-captain. As he walked down the cold autumn streets of Manhattan, he tucked his hands into his brand new trench coat, blowing warm air out of his mouth and watching it turn to vapor in the air. He smiled to himself like a crazy person as he did this twice, just to provoke a chuckle from himself. The sound of his black boots against the pavement brought him back to reality, as he checked both ways for cars before he made his way across the New York City streets.

It has also been twenty years since the boat sank because of a small accident that could have been easily avoided. Murph’s blamed himself for it ever since.

He will never forget the panicked and confused screams of the passengers coming from the dining hall as it flooded with water, only then realizing the grandiosity of his mistake. He turned around to make eye contact with his Captain, who was just as scared as he was. Murphy wished he could take it from him - the pain and fear that he caused. But all he could do was watch as Jarmain’s face transformed into one of solemn determination.

He especially will never forget being on the deck of the ship as he tried to get everyone off safely, to the best of his ability. He would usher women and children into lifeboats first, all while holding a child that was abandoned in the heat of the moment by their family. He remembered his eyes being clouded with both rain and tears as he was told to give the child to someone by the familiar voice behind him. He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood as he turned to his beloved, his captain.

“You're doing a great job, Murphy,” yelled Jarmain over the chaos. He put his hands on the younger's shoulders to bring him in closer. “You're doing everything you can. Get on the lifeboat, boy. I will... I'll see you on the other side!”

“You're lying!” Murphy yelled through tears, his throat molten with anger and sadness. “Come with me! There's - there's *more* than enough space on that one, sir! You can't... you can't leave me...” He trailed off before feeling a callused palm hold his cheek with a gentleness like none he had ever felt.

“I have got to stay here, Murph. You did everything,” the captain said, looking down at him. He pushed Murph's wet bangs away from his face to look at him directly. “I'm so proud of you. You're going to go on to do big things for me, Murph.” The captain caressed his cheekbone with his thumb before taking a pause and giving the boy a once over. He pulled away and finally disappeared into the din.

Murph stood there in disbelief as he watched Jarmain walk away from him, only to get swarmed by scared and confused passengers. He looked at the lifeboat next to him that contained one last open seat. With one more glance through the rain, he realized that that was the last he would ever see of the captain.

Murphy was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice he had already arrived at the cemetery. He adjusted the collar of his coat with the same lanky hand that held a small bouquet of lavender flowers.

He made his way through the twisty cemetery roads until he reached the destination he had been to so many times before. He paused to read the beautiful marbled headstone that housed the man whom he loved so many years ago.

JAMISON JARMAIN  
BELOVED SON, HUSBAND, AND FRIEND.  
OCT. 14TH 1870 - APRIL 27TH 1911  
“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER  
AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

He got down onto his knee to wipe the crusted mud from the bottom of the grave. Letting out a sigh, he looked through his card just to make sure he got the day right. He laid his flowers gently on the edge of the grave to rest and match the gifts that were laid out there already. He was

happy that his captain had so many people who loved him. He put the card in the envelope and tucked it under everything else that lay there. He took a few more minutes to admire the presents before pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with a match, preparing for his journey home.

As he walked out of the twisting cemetery, he could think of nothing else but the card he had written to his captain.

*Dear Beloved,*

*Happy birthday. I hope you are celebrating as much as I know you would love to. I bet the angels are playing the sweetest of songs for you on your special day, because I know I would. You are the bravest man I have ever known, and you remain my first love to this day. I miss you so much, Captain. If you're looking down, I hope you are proud of me.*

*Much love and*

*gratitude,*

*Murphy*

*Richards*





The samurai, having passed his final test, buried his master in a shallow grave at the foot of a snow-covered mountain next to his master, who was laid next to his master. Leaving him to rest, the samurai picked up his sword, and started walking.

He moved silently through the towns, spending the days in tea houses sipping drinks, the nights curled up sleeping against a wall with his sword tightly held against his chest. Word soon spread of an unnamed swordsman travelling throughout the land, whose gift with his weapon was unmatched. As rumours and whispers swirled about him, challengers appeared before him, weapons in hand. Fighters of every discipline sought to test their skills against him, in hopes of being able to boast a victory against him. The samurai stayed silent, taking on all who approached him. No matter how they tried, no man could penetrate his defences. None managed to cut his robe nor pierce his flesh.

Nor could any man withstand the power of his attack. With a single stroke, the samurai sliced his opponents' weapons into halves. He sent their bodies flying through the air. Their blood dripped down from the tip of his sword and splashed onto the floor. Onlookers gasped at his might and skill. Townsfolk kept their distance from him, averting their eyes when they walked past each other. The samurai paid their fear no mind. He simply continued his wandering, from town to town to town, his sword by his side, always ready for a duel. The peacefulness of the hillsides and pastures broken with the clashing of metals, the sound of air being sliced through by a sword. The pained yell of yet another defeated foe. And the story of the unconquerable samurai continued to be told.

One day, a young boy carrying a beat-up bamboo pole approached the samurai. He got on his knees, begging to be taken in under the samurai's wings, to teach him how to be strong. To teach him to be the best. The samurai stared the boy up and down, examining every scrawny bone, each underdeveloped muscle, the look in his eyes and the jaw set in his face. The boy would follow him on his travels; through the depths of the forests, the expanse of the plains, the chaos of the cities; all while undergoing the most

brutal training from the samurai, who had undergone the same from his master. In time the boy grew many sizes taller and many lengths wider. his muscles obtained mass and definition. His bamboo pole, discarded many miles before, was replaced with a sword of his own. The boy's mastery of his weapon, under the tutelage of the samurai, was now said to be comparable to that of his master. Now the townsfolk spoke not only of the undefeated swordsman - they also discussed the young disciple walking alongside him, whose power with a sword seemed equal to his master's.

After many years of teaching the boy, the samurai brought him to the foot of a snow-covered mountain, where a blacksmith fashioned him a new sword — Identical to the samurai's in every way. With this new sword gifted to the boy, the samurai told him he had been taught everything worth teaching. He told the boy that it was time for his final test.

Outside the blacksmith's home, everything was covered in white. Facing each other across a great distance, the samurai and the boy bowed deeply toward the other. Then, drawing their swords, they let out a great howl and charged. The sound made by the crossing of their swords frightened the birds away. The power of their attack sent a shockwave rippling through the trees, snow knocked off their branches to reveal the wood beneath. For a day and a night the samurai and his disciple traded blows, neither giving the other the advantage. They were evenly matched - the samurai had trained the boy well. He had studied the lessons, absorbed the blows, followed the teachings. And now the boy had in almost every aspect become the samurai himself. If they had wanted to, they could have fought for an eternity. As the sun awoke from its slumber, the two were still battling to a draw. The samurai felt the heat creeping up from the ground, the strength in his arms fading away, and he knew that it was time. With a bellow he broke away from the fight, creating distance. The boy saw the sun rise from over the horizon, and surmised that the duel was reaching its end. Mirroring each other's movements perfectly, the samurai and the boy bent their knees, swords pointed at each other. Almost simultaneously, the two launched their final attacks. They met in the middle crossing each other. And just like that, their battle was over.

As the sword pierced his flesh and swung across his chest, the samurai felt no pain. He felt no agony. What he felt could only be described as Peace. A burden had been lifted off his shoulders. He soared through the air as if on

wings, landing back on the ground in a crumpled heap. His sword flew a short distance away and buried itself in the snow. As the white surrounding him turned red, the samurai smiled. The samurai laughed.

The samurai said to the boy: “My feet are relieved! For I have no further need of walking. You — You are no longer Disciple. You are now Samurai.” With these dying words, the samurai turned his gaze towards the east, where the sun was now fully above the horizon line, and closed his eyes for the final time.

The newly-christened samurai, having passed his final test, buried his master in a shallow grave at the foot of a snow-covered mountain next to his master, who was laid next to his master, who was laid next to his master. Leaving him to rest, the samurai picked up his sword, and started walking.



## I Found You and You Became Me

Moonmoon Chowdury

I was merely the sum-total of my breaths,  
A traveler without a destination,  
A flower unfamiliar with its fragrance,  
A moon without roots and soil,  
Before I met you.

You unearthed the Spring in my petals,  
You spotted the frolicking fireflies  
In my overcast sky,  
You scoured the crusts of snow  
Slumbering on my windows,  
I saw my rainbow wings, for the very first time.

It only happened every few months, when Bethany's mom was feeling especially out of it, but it was a whole spectacle. Bethany's mom would burst into her room in the middle of the night and shake her awake.

"Get up," she would say.

Bethany would roll over and pretend it wasn't happening. Bethany's mom would then go to the light switch and flick it on and off, and on and off again.

"Get up!"

At this point it was futile. Bethany knew she was going shopping. The worst was when it happened on school nights. Bethany was always tired the next day, sometimes she fell asleep in class, and she was too embarrassed to tell her teachers why. It was her mom, after all; she couldn't just blame it all on her. She was a single mom, doing her best.

Bethany and her mom would get into their Dodge Neon and drive to the nearest Walmart—it was open twenty-four hours, so they could shop all they wanted. Then Bethany's mom would grab a cart and say, "Fill it with anything you want. *Anything!*"

The first time this happened, Bethany's face went red and her stomach sunk in excitement. *Anything* I want, she thought. Things must be on the up. No more embarrassing free lunches at school, no more Goodwill clothes. She'd be like one of the popular girls—happy and rich, living in a loving home. So she stuffed the cart with anything and everything she wanted. New clothes, new shoes, the fanciest school supplies, the trendiest toys, stuffed animals and dolls to decorate her room, fancy towels, nice pillows and blankets, she even thought of her mom and put a bread maker in the cart. The cart was so stuffed, Bethany had to pick up fallen toys and clothes as her mom jetted through the aisles. But then, Bethany's mom stopped. She shoved the cart up against a shelf in the pharmaceutical aisle, and she said, "OK, let's go." She took Bethany's hand and walked her out of the store with no more than they entered.

The second time this happened, Bethany stuffed the cart. But, again, they abandoned it. The third time, Bethany didn't fill the cart. This made Bethany's mom angry. Bethany learned that when her mom took her shopping, the only way for it to end was to fill the cart. And every time, they abandoned the cart, never buying anything or leaving the store with anything new.

This happened for years, until Bethany graduated high school and moved out. She bounced around with some piece of shit boyfriends until she landed on her feet in a mobile home. She finally had a place to herself. The mobile home was mostly empty—she had very little to her name, and

Bethany's mom was no help. In fact, they hadn't spoken since she moved out.

One night, Bethany couldn't sleep, so she went to Walmart. She filled her cart with all the things she'd never had as a kid. Clothes, shoes, fancy school supplies, trendy toys, stuffed animals and dolls, towels, pillows, and blankets. She planned to abandon everything in the cart, just like her mom. But when Bethany let go of the cart, she realized this wasn't enough for her. She thought for a second, then she stuffed a couple towels and toys into her coat and walked out of the store. Nobody noticed her, and no alarms sounded. Bethany returned to her mobile home and took her spoils out of her coat. It all belonged to her now.

She kept this up for nine years, pilfering small loads of shoplifting hauls every few months when she couldn't sleep. Her mobile home, which she still lived in, was stuffed full with everything she'd wanted as a kid. She could hardly move around without bumping into things.

#

When Bethany returned home from her mom's funeral, she tripped on a stuffed unicorn and fell to the floor. She lay on the floor for a couple minutes, staring at the mountains of retail contraband around her, and broke down in tears. That night, she couldn't sleep. So she drove to Walmart. This time, though, she brought some of her things with her. She went to the customer service desk and tried to explain everything. She said she didn't have receipts, but she wanted to return these things. She didn't want any money back or store credit, she only needed to return everything to its rightful owner. The man at the customer service desk laughed. He thought it was a prank.

"You don't understand," Bethany said. "I *need* to return everything here."

The man told her Walmart couldn't take it back, but she could take everything to Goodwill or sell it on eBay. Bethany left, dejected, without returning anything.

The next night, Bethany still hadn't slept. She put some of her things into her coat, drove to Walmart, and secretly returned them to where they belonged. She was an expert shoplifter, so she knew what she was doing. She just had to do everything backwards, become a reformed kleptomaniac. Bethany walked around the store with an empty cart and dropped everything off, pulling items from her coat and packing them neatly into place.

Bethany had shoplifted for nine years, and for seven years now she'd been steadily returning everything and more. She became obsessed with returning everything she had. She needed penance. Over the years, Bethany grew worried the workers would notice the crazy lady walking around for hours with an empty cart. She constantly changed her look to keep people off her trail. She dyed her hair—blonde, blue, purple, pink, green. She wore

nonprescription glasses. One time she wore a hijab even though she wasn't Muslim. Many times after Bethany came home from a long night of returning, she'd look in the mirror and she wouldn't even notice herself. She was transforming every day, and everything around her was becoming bare and desolate.

Before her last trip, Bethany realized she had nothing to return. Her mobile home was completely empty, save for the appliances that were there when she moved in. She still drove to Walmart and grabbed an empty cart. She walked around the store with nothing to return. Then she reached the women's clothing aisle. She undressed and returned her clothes to where they belonged. She was stark naked. Bethany ditched her cart, and she walked out of the store with absolutely nothing at all. People stared and gasped. Workers shouted at her and told her to never return. Little did they know, she had no reason to.

She'd left her car keys in her purse, which she'd left in the store. Bethany walked home four miles in the heavy August night heat. She went to turn on the box fan, but it wasn't there. Bethany smiled. She had stripped herself of everything, and she was finally free.



A neighbor came to our door on a September evening to tell us our cat was dead in the middle of the street. We lived in the ground floor apartment of an old house at the corner of an unmarked intersection. It was a neighborhood where street parking was tight. If drivers had a clear shot at the cross street, they often punched the gas and rocketed through.

Glen put down his beer and went to see what had happened. I stayed where I was on the old sofa with busted springs.

“Maybe it’s not our cat,” I said as Glen went outside, feeling a stab of pain like you get when you walk up a hill too fast. I moved to the open doorway and quietly called for our cat. The autumn air had a bite to it that cut through my thin top. I could hear a siren several blocks away near the hospital.

Glen came up the walkway and said, “You better come look.”

I left the front door ajar, not wanting to get locked out with our sleeping baby inside, as had happened a month earlier. Shivering, I folded my arms across my chest and walked down the steps. The stitch in my side became a stone in my stomach. Glen turned and went with me to the curb, then we squeezed between the car bumpers.

When I stepped from behind Glen, I saw Agnes, motionless on the pavement. Circled around her were six neighborhood cats. A black tom approached and touched his nose to her ear. The others gazed at Agnes with somber expressions. None spared a glance our way. Our cat’s short white fur with tabby patches looked perfectly groomed, except for the blood pooling beneath her head. Her green eyes, open wide, reflected the streetlight.

Glen pulled off his t-shirt and went to pick her up. The funeral came to a halt, and the cats scattered. A longhaired ginger we called Orange Fluffy lingered on the parking strip, her tail twice its usual size. She and Agnes had spent summer afternoons lolling on the warm sidewalk, drunk on heat.

Glen wrapped the shirt around the pliable body, then gently lifted Agnes. When we got to the porch, he handed her to me.

“Hold her while I get the shovel,” he said.

“She needs a towel.”

I stood there cradling our cat and listening for the baby. Crouched under parked cars and beneath deeply shadowed shrubs lurked the mourners, their bright eyes showing brief flashes of yellow. A disheveled man hurried past the house clutching a bag from the liquor store, giving me a quick nod as he

passed. The cat's blood soaked through the t-shirt onto the inside of my arm.

Agnes had been our initial attempt at parenthood. She climbed our Christmas tree twice as a kitten and brought it down both times. That was when we had the small apartment upstairs, above our current place. The location had the benefit of being within walking distance to Glen's favorite bars, which I knew figured into his decision to move in with me.

Glen came back with a threadbare towel and a shovel.

"Where should we bury her? Back by the alley?"

"No, not there. I want her here in front, under the rose bush."

Glen started digging. The fall rains had softened the ground, and the grave was soon ready. I could hear men arguing at the other end of the block. Glen put the towel around Agnes then set her in the hole. The soiled t-shirt hung limply from my hand. Blood congealed on my arm. I looked around for a flower to put on her body, but everything in the yard was dead. I reached under the towel to stroke her coat one last time, then Glen loaded the shovel and began filling the hole.

The sound of dirt landing in the pit was amplified by the darkness. When the hole was nearly filled, I thought I heard the baby crying and rushed back inside. I entered the house, but all was quiet. The only sound came from my own throat.

Glen finished, rinsed the shovel, then entered the house and washed his hands for a long time in the bathroom.

He found me in the nursery, holding the baby, stroking the damp little head. I wondered how I was supposed to protect a child from all the things I hadn't thought of yet. My parents had probably confronted the same concerns starting out, had done their best they could, and bad stuff had happened anyway.

Glen said, "You're getting blood on his pajamas."

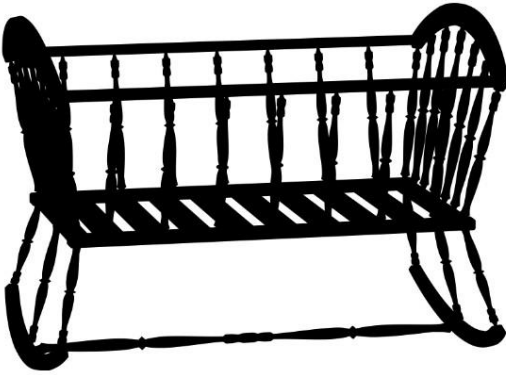
I didn't answer him. I grabbed a small quilt and carried the baby out to the porch and sat on the top step in the dark. Near eleven, the mourners returned to keep vigil at the patch of newly spaded dirt, ignoring me as before. They slipped away in the early hours, to go back to their secret lives where someone fed them and knew their names.





Daithí Kearney

Jewel



The final weeks of worry  
Washed away by tears of joy  
Tension in the air cut  
By the sound of your first cry

Mercury, Venus, Jupiter,  
Lined up in the western sky  
Salute you after sunset before  
A crescent Moon skips by

Gods all bow before you  
At sunrise you release a sigh  
You are a jewel on the necklace of my ecliptic  
Inspiring my lullaby

## The Baby Moves Into Her Own Room

From the beginning, I have been afraid.  
I know that someday you will die.

Because I know someday you will die.  
I wake up each night convinced it is today.

I wake up each night convinced today  
is not meant for you, for us.

You were always meant for us.  
But still I fear the empty bassinet.

Since I fear the empty bassinet,  
I sneak into your room at night.

When I sneak into your room at night,  
I place my hand on your chest to feel you breathe.

Even when I feel you breathe,  
I remember the beginning, and am afraid.

Danielle Estelle Ramsay



It was hot in the Indian sunlight, even though it was early December. The students were completing exams in stuffy classrooms where the ceiling fans whirred like dying insects. The rooms had the teacher's desk raised above the pupils. Girls bent over their papers, writing frantically. Every so often, a hand would shoot up for another sheet.

Sitting at the high desk, I noticed that every time I climbed down to hand out paper, I doubled over with a sharp pain that was increasingly hard to hide. At eight and a half months through my second pregnancy, these spasms worried me. I certainly did not want to be the first member of staff to give birth in a classroom! I believed in practical work and class involvement, but a demonstration of childbirth seemed to be stretching things too far.

Moreover, I was teaching in a convent school run by an order of nuns dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, so I probably couldn't rely on much assistance. To my relief, the bell rang for the end of the school day. Most teachers welcome the bell, especially at the end of a long, humid day. In this case I had been praying for it!

The students in their starched white blouses and red skirts, streamed out through the gates. With difficulty, I threaded my way through the crowd and luckily flagged down a taxi. By this time the spasms were more intense, making me bend over. The driver's puzzled, anxious expression reflected in his mirror. I counted off familiar landmarks like Lower Circular Road, Kolkata (Calcutta) Rugby Club, Kwality Restaurant - finally, at last the turn into Ballygunge Place!

The taxi came to a rattling halt as I fumbled in my bag for the key. As it happened, the door was opened by our Nepalese ayah. Taking one anxious look at me, her usually unflappable demeanour quickly changed. Despite her efforts, she couldn't disguise the panic on her face. My Bengali was kindergarten level and my Hindi, non-existent. However, no words, whatever the language, were needed to explain my doubling up with pain every ten minutes.

I too was near panic as I weighed my options. It didn't take long; my choices were limited. My husband, a journalist, was away on an assignment. My own family were thousands of miles away in leafy Surrey! I understood from the ayah's limited Bengali that she was not up for the role of midwife. She wanted me inside the hospital as soon as possible, but it was far away in Alipore, another part of the city. I had no transport!

I went out into the street. Total darkness hit me like a brick wall. The street lights were unlit, curtains tightly pulled. The usually busy city was silent. Rather belatedly, I remembered that India was at war with Pakistan over the future of East Pakistan, soon to become Bangladesh. Not the best night to look for a taxi!

Anti-aircraft guns lit up parts of the city with brilliant arcs of light. The silence was unnerving. Kolkata is rarely silent: the roar of traffic, the impatient hooting of horns, and the rattling of trams must make it one of the noisiest cities on earth! I thought the chances of finding a taxi in the circumstances was nil.

Just at that moment, a battle scarred black and yellow vehicle, lights dimmed, came crawling down the street. Even from several yards away, I could hear a strange tapping noise from the engine and a rattling, as if all the bodywork were loose. As I raised my arm, the taxi came to a noisy halt. The driver was a Sikh, his turban just visible in the darkness.

Pointing at my obviously pregnant figure, I whispered, "Forest Nursing Home, Alipore," before the next spasm gripped me.

I collapsed in the back seat. The stuffing was sticking out from the plastic covered seats as well as a few rusty springs. A few moments later, I considered jumping out. The taxi was swooping backwards and forwards across the road like a drunken seagull.

Somehow, we eventually crawled through the hospital gates. I was quickly ushered into a lift by a nervous receptionist. The nurse took one look at me doubled up in pain before hurrying me into a delivery room. After a quick check-up, she commented with barely concealed annoyance, "You've come far too early. You might as well go home."

The night sister suddenly appeared. She had hardly begun her check-up, before she shouted, "Get this patient ready now. She's about to give birth any minute!"

I had hardly got into bed, before I was holding a tiny, pucker-faced daughter in my arms. My own doctor rushed in, red-faced and flustered.

"Don't think I'm paying you. I delivered her myself!"

## Old Testament Genesis

Gerard Sarnat

She breathes softly, being born or dying.  
Sways noiseless, restless in her stillness.  
Waters gather, a single singing sea.  
Nothing is that otherwise might've been,  
Except a nullity of thunder and lightning.

Infinity hangs above the void:  
No bush or tree, crab or moth, fish or fowl,  
Beast or man casts shadows yet.  
Then the seventh angel from the seventh sun  
Trumpets a meteor's plunge to earth.

## Nativity Scene

Sritama Sen

I was born when the air was pregnant  
Ripe like a fruit on the verge of bursting  
spitting black seeds into the fertile earth.  
Then Herod, as my parents knew him  
smelt my skin like a dog in heat  
Before I spelt ami, baba, ma, he had already  
slipped the iron manacles of a bounty on my head.  
and the old books wouldn't agree, to be honest  
about specifics- some mumbo-jumbo on stars (But how many stars can you  
see, sweating on a state bus, between Jamalpur and Kolkata?)  
that is to say, there may or may not have been a proverbial journey of a  
hundred thousand feet  
Did you know, we ran out of seating in my concrete manger,  
glistening with May sweat and the tacky odor of new paint,  
Did you know, there were three kings in the master bedroom—  
if you can believe my mother on such issues; They gave us corded bamboo  
fans and Mortein coils,  
to keep the power-cut mosquitoes away  
from baby blood, from fresh milk-fed meat.  
Did you know: I did not hear a single angel sing the story of my birth to a  
listening ear, I may be God's daughter, but I was no messiah  
Did you know, It was silence that shaped my first coming into Earth.  
It is silence, deadblack, deafening, that has been my companion since.



# Blackout

Hayley Carpenter

Blackout  
(from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, Chapter 23)

## I. God's Punishment (Manic Depression)

I, roused to passion, feel soulless and heartless  
As if God made me leave mortal flesh  
And so wed me to my  
Desperation

## II. God's Punishment (Dissociation)

You set me before my second self  
And fate trembled  
I am torn between my likeness  
And myself  
For I still doubt you

## III. God's Mistake (Delusion)

You shall be convinced  
I, unearthly, earnest, and not entirely my own  
I want your countenance flushed  
With that torture of devotion  
Accept me

Say my name

# The Garden of Earthly Delights

Willow Page Delp

## 1: Left Panel

*“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.”*  
—Genesis 2:1

She woke up to brightness.

She had a vague conception that she was a *she*, that seemed right enough – but everything else, from the women dressed in blinding white, to the pastel-blue walls that enclosed her, and the stiff bed she lay upon, felt strange and unfamiliar. The overhead lamp bathed her in a spotlight of fluorescent yellow. She felt something scratch against her leg. When she looked down at herself, she saw that she was dressed in a paper medical gown.

She blinked at the gaggle of women, waiting for someone to speak and explain something. One of them broke the silence.

“It’s good to see you awake, Abigail,” she said, with a cordial smile. Her hair was a sun-kissed strawberry-blonde, cascading down her shoulders in styled waves, and her grin lit up the room with an intensified brilliance. The women around her, dressed in matching white dresses, seemed to glow at her voice.

Immediately, she felt herself seize up with resistance. *My name is not Abigail, she* thought, and searched her mind for another name. There was something there, something beneath the surface...

“My name is Heaven,” the woman said, and then leaned towards the bed. “I understand that you don’t remember anything, so I’ll explain as clearly as I can.

I am a founder of The Garden – short for The Garden of Earthly Delights. I helped create this community as a respite from the sins of the outside world. Degeneracy has rotted the Earth, and created an uninhabitable wasteland.” Heaven clucked in chiding disapproval, as if scolding a small child.

“But you were saved here, Abigail. No need to worry about such filth.”

“Th-thank you,” not-Abigail stammered, her questions growing. The word *degeneracy* burned a hole of discomfort in her stomach.

“Let’s get onto logistics, shall we? This room shall serve as your lodging for the time being –,” Heaven gestured towards various items of furniture as she spoke, “the dresser and closet – we have some clothes prepared for you, the mirror –,”

*Aida. I’m not Abigail, I’m Aida.*

Aida stopped listening to what Heaven had to say, scoping out her surroundings, her eyes darting around the room. There were no windows, and the only light source was artificial. An analog clock mounted to the wall read one-fifteen, but Aida had no idea if that was A.M. or P.M. The floor was hardwood. There was a desk and a chair adjacent to the bed, but without a computer or any books. It was like a hotel room, prepared for a brief guest visit – any guest, slotted in and out, with no evidence of life between stays.

*Even the cheapest hostels usually have windows,* Aida thought, but Heaven spoke with a finality that did not invite questions. Aida tuned back in, listening unchallengingly. The women in white all watched Heaven as she spoke, their eyes round with reverence.

“The Caretakers will administer your preliminary medical exam, and bring you food until you’re permitted to eat in the dining hall.”

*That’s what the women are,* Aida supposed, and as Heaven left through a door across the bed, the Caretakers quickly assembled, one of them brandishing an old-fashioned medical bag.

They had her strip down to her underwear beneath the gown – and performed a dizzying series of basic medical tests, which a Caretaker armed with a clipboard dutifully recorded. Her vision, her hearing, her reflexes, her short-term memory – “We have to make sure you’re healthy, and see what kind of job is right for you,” one proffered, to which Aida simply nodded. It wasn’t as if she had much of a choice.

“What is your name?” one Caretaker quizzed Aida.

“Abigail.”

The Caretaker nodded approvingly, and Aida narrowed her eyes.

—  
After they left (promising lunch), Aida was told to change into clothes of her comfort. She opened the closet, hoping for jeans and a sweater, and found



nothing but a series of long dresses in various muted colors. She touched one and felt cool silk against her fingertips. Mercifully, a few had small pockets, and Aida changed into a lilac-colored dress, reveling in the feeling of moving her hands within them. Pockets meant that she could hold things, *have* things, private things – a tiny victory in a strange new land.

Underneath the dresses sat rows of taupe-colored kitten heels, as well as a single pair of slippers. She checked the dresser for anything else, perhaps something more practical – but everything else resembled the clothing in the closet, sheen and formal, barely fit for walking – certainly not for running. Aida ran her hands against her calves, feeling bruises and sores against bronze-toned legs, suggesting something hardier than sleek gowns and modest heels – and, with a glance in the mirror, she could see bumps of biceps. *I am not made for delicacy*, she thought, spite growing as a lump in her throat.

She returned to her bed, where she had felt something scratch against her leg – and found a crumpled piece of paper, which she unfolded and flattened against the desk.

It was a legend, of some sort – matching arcane-looking symbols to letters. The words “SAVE THIS” were scrawled hastily across the top of the paper, in clumsy all-caps.

Aida pocketed the paper.

## 2: Middle Panel

*“And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

*–Genesis 2:16-17*

Aida did not know how many days passed. The clock ticked, but she could’ve sworn it stopped for hours – waiting, mockingly, taunting her with its imprecision. That was her only option, as the Caretakers who stopped by refused to provide information. They gave her a bowl of rice and chicken, with cheap plastic silverware and tight, withholding smiles.

Aida had been allotted a bathroom, with basic amenities – that and the bedroom were the only places she had, as her lodging was sealed off from the outside world.

When the Caretakers came to bring her food, she asked for castor oil, a better brush, and a bonnet – all of which were met with blank stares by the Caretakers, with their white dresses and faces. Aida didn't want to push her luck by asking for a phone, or a laptop – but still, it seemed as if she had crossed some invisible line.

In the end, there was a definitive response — they left a flat iron, coiled next to an outlet like a venomous snake.

—

A pamphlet appeared on Aida's dresser.

It had been left while Aida was sleeping, and when she awoke, she seized at the chance to flip through, desperate for a break from the boredom of solitude.

Printed on glossy pages was a description of the community – The Garden of Earthly Delights, “a sanctuary dedicated to the Care & Protection of its inhabitants”. The information was mostly dry, reading like an advertisement for a cross between a luxury resort and a nursing home, all with a vaguely evangelical sheen. The pages commended the virtue imbued within careers of Caretaking and Protecting (the former reserved for women, the latter for men). All new arrivals, the pamphlet dictated, had to be in mandatory quarantine, but would be integrated into the Garden and assigned fitting careers after a “reasonable waiting period”.

Within the pamphlet, there was a crude map – irritatingly simple, it depicted the Garden as an amorphous green blob with rough jewel-toned circles indicating the various buildings within the premises. They were mostly unsurprising – a dining hall, municipal building, medical center, recreation building – and a small blob indicating the lost and found building, colored in unassuming khaki. Aida didn't know why, but it caught her attention, and she scrutinized the map, her gaze returning again and again to the lost and found. She supposed it was because she was lost herself.

She was interrupted by a knock on the door, which she knew was from a Caretaker. Sometimes, they liked to knock, although it was only for the sake of politeness – they would enter anyway.

“You have been cleared to take a tour,” the Caretaker said, as means of introduction. Aida didn't remember this Caretaker – her pale face was dotted with freckles, and her blonde hair was pulled back in a French braid. Her lips

were drawn in a serious expression. “You’ve been given a pamphlet. Is there anywhere you would like to go in particular?”

“Lost and found,” Aida blurted out.

The Caretaker responded with an even stare. “Are you sure?”

“Well...it wasn’t officially cleared, but we do try to satisfy all requests. I suppose it’s alright. Come with me, Abigail.”

—

Aida rode in the backseat of a car.

For the first time, she saw sunlight – weak it was, filtering through graying clouds — and the sky, an uncertain blue, wavering in the face of possible rain.

It was irresistibly beautiful, and for a while she could do nothing but stare with her face pressed against the window, soaking it all in. The windows wouldn’t roll down, to her frustration – but this, at least, was something. She was beginning to ground herself in her surroundings – she had been living in a small carriage house, painted a dull mauve, tucked away from the rest of the polished suburban houses in the Garden. The houses went on for miles and miles, all sporting trimmed lawns, many with white picket fences. A few people – women in dresses, men in shirts and pants – wandered through the streets.

The Caretaker drove, utterly apathetic to it all – *but it must be nothing special when that’s what you see every day*, Aida figured, and felt jealousy and longing pricking at her chest.

Eventually, they stopped in front of the lost and found – an unassuming building painted the same tan color that had been depicted in the pamphlet. It looked like a library that had been shoddily refurbished.

“While we’re here, I lost an umbrella,” the Caretaker said, musing out loud as she parked. After she stepped out of the car, she opened the door for Aida – who barely resisted bolting through the wooden doors to get inside, forcing herself to slow down to not look suspicious.

The air in the lost and found building was stale, and thick with long-accumulated dust. There wasn’t anyone else inside, and minimal furniture –

the room held nothing but rows and rows of various items. Tote bags, water bottles, jackets – they all seemed so deeply, wonderfully human, all these strange old things that proved the existence of real people far more than the stone-faced Caretakers. Aida felt herself tearing up as she clutched the fabric of a moth-eaten hoodie.

She looked through the various knickknacks, watching the Caretaker in the back of her eye. There was only so long the Caretaker would tolerate this, she knew – the woman’s left hand gripped her located umbrella, and her blue eyes were trained upon Aida like a hawk.

Finally, Aida found it – something that rang a bell, loud and clear, in the back of her mind. It was an old backpack, embroidered with a bird on the front. The fabric was the color of heather, a faded but proud pinkish-purple.

The zippered mouth of the bag was empty, but as she rifled through the smaller compartments, she found a small notebook, barely bigger than her hand. She discreetly slipped it into the pocket of her dress and turned back to the Caretaker, shrugging while baring her empty hands.

“I was just curious,” Aida said, “Lots of stuff here – I wanted to learn more about the Garden.”

The Caretaker stared back at her with an unreadable expression. “Curiosity killed the cat,” she said.

### 3: Right Panel

*“So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.”*

*–Genesis 3:23*

Back in her room, Aida opened the notebook with the delicacy of opening butterfly wings. The pages shimmered with a fragile beauty.

Once she began to read, she saw nothing but strings of strange symbols – *the strange symbols*, she realized with a sharp gasp – *in her legend!* (Yet, despite her surprise, there was a part of her that felt as if it was nothing but confirmation. Her memory was beginning to restore itself.)

She sat at the desk, and began a mad dash of translation, her heart pounding – this was a diary, she learned, *her diary* – more of a political diary, a record in

the time of despair. Some of the pages had been torn out, and scant words had been wasted on personal affairs, but there were countless opinions and concerns logged in careful pen. This past Aida had opposed the Garden of Earthly Delights, condemned the creation of a water-wasting, fossil-fuel-burning oasis as the world suffered from climate catastrophe. She had penned her concerns about the founders, deceitful, bigoted ex-televangelists who sold eternal salvation with the same salesperson pitch they used to peddle weight loss products.

And – Aida’s hands began to tremble violently, and bile rose within her throat – she had condemned the memory serum that had been used on refugees to the Garden. She had doubted that these poor people were dosed consensually – and even if they were, how could someone consent to that? How could someone consent to losing all recollection of their friends, families, loved ones – losing the sheer magnitude of their mind? In the past, she couldn’t even fathom the trauma of such an absolute loss. In the past. Her head began to split with a migraine, and bile trickled from her mouth.

Aida stared at the floor below. Her mind tunneled an exit.

*“Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,  
behind them, a desert waste—  
nothing escapes them.”  
—Joel 2:3*

# Act of Creation

Mikey May

*The prophetic perfect tense is a literary technique used in the Torah and the Bible that describes future events that are so certain to happen that they are referred to in the past tense as if they had already happened.*

The mountains of Mikey are fallen;  
they shall no more rise.  
As flat as East Yorkshire,  
as flat as still waters,  
I am gone over the passage at last.

So rich I can taste it before it begins;  
so known I can read the words held in the pen;  
so sure I can feel the scars yet to be formed.  
Undoubtedly imminent.  
Already accomplished.  
Vividly, dramatically,  
complete, independent.

Too many times famished,  
vanished, scattered.  
Forsaken and dried up  
by so-called wise men.  
Banality of evil again and again.

Already *savirna*.  
Already *gamirna*.  
I am man enough.  
I am *frum* enough.  
I am body enough.  
I am convert enough.  
G-d has taken me out to the fields to bless me  
and my waiting is finally done.

As I rise from the tear-washed  
Ashes of my former self, I stumble forwards,  
Newly unaccustomed to the weight  
Of a living, breathing body.

It had taken a while,  
For my limbs to be reformed,  
For my organs to be slotted into place,  
For tissue to be rewoven into skin.  
And yet as I turn my head,  
I know I am not the same person  
That I was before.

Scars and burns remain from the  
Ordeal that I have survived.  
There are parts of me that have not  
Come back correctly, the cuts  
Still chafing and bleeding.  
I know I can no longer be the self  
That I was before.  
I know some people will miss her.  
But perhaps this change is a good thing:  
The old self combusted into flame,  
From which I arise and spread my wings.

# Effete

Mikey May

from the latin *ex* and *fetus*

meaning

*that which has given birth*

meaning

*worn out by bearing young*

meaning

*no longer fertile*

meaning

i gave birth to myself

meaning

i am exhausted by my own creation

meaning

i am both god and adam

michelangelo and david

zeus and athena

carved out of marble

carved out of clay

i cracked my skull open

in order to transform

this gayboy sprung forth

affected and effeminate

meaning

i am no longer fertile

i will not go forth and multiply

i cannot plant a garden

but i can raise a flower bed

i have hands to tend

and lips to kiss each silken petal

my limp wrists make my gestures

smooth and strong

meaning

i am still capable

of some effective action



## Paolo Friere

Donna Castañeda

Paolo Freire said *let love, the heart of revolution, into the room*

A tarantula wasp is beautiful in certain sunlight. If you've been a killer all your adult life, do you miss your own humanity?

Girls need shoes and invention of stars, but their bodies are breathed into small spaces, requiring them to live through winters without doorways. That was true the day I was born

as it is now.

Do you understand me?

Repeat this often—*love women, not debt or paint on small houses.*

[Reminder! The rainbow milkweed locust of Madagascar has a gorgeous blue, yellow, and red exoskeleton; designer colors that were never designed.]

Despite our future and past mistakes, red ants and people multiply continuously. Often, they fill a mass burial site where absence

stares skyward.

I don't want a martyr; I only want the sphynx moths to emerge at dusk to feed on nectar and fool us into thinking they are hummingbirds fluttering above white desert lilies.

## Mosaic

Taya Boyles

A green bush snake  
uncoils and slithers  
Over sun-baked branches  
Creeping into a Sycamore's hollow,  
blanching  
like peaches drying in the light.  
Night and dawn intermix;  
its ventral cells glisten.  
A hive ornaments another cavity  
same roots buzz nestled  
on a shared promise.  
Laying shells  
and nests  
in the sweet pot.

# Memories Blossom and Bloom

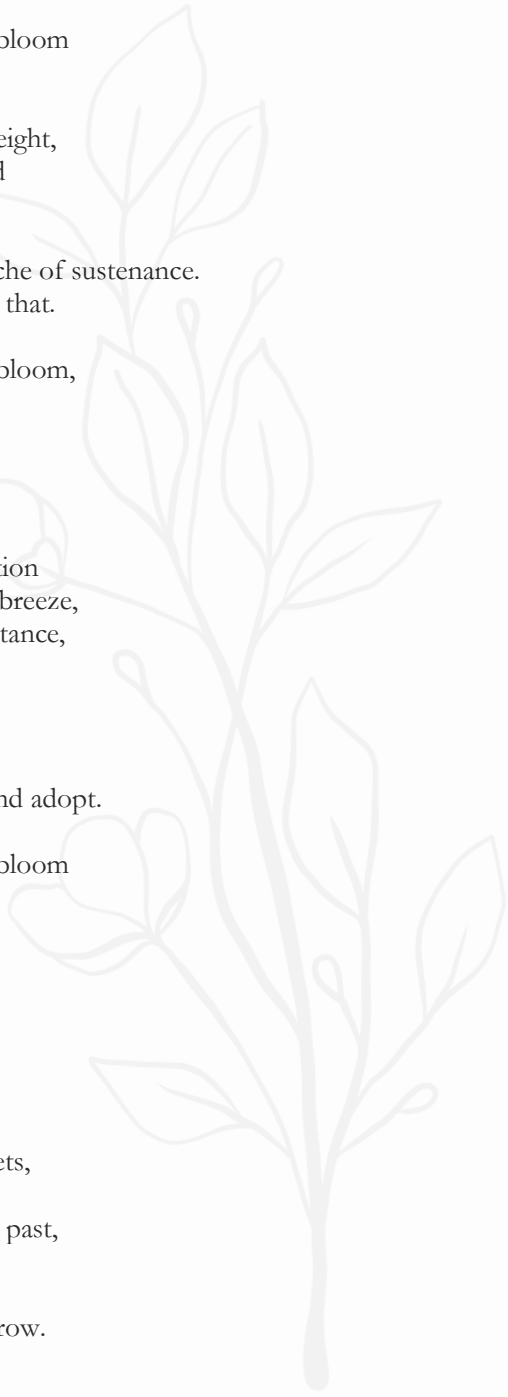
Terry Donohue

Memories blossom and bloom  
As flowers,  
To fruit in season,  
Then drop from their weight,  
A death burying the seed  
Under fallen leaves,  
Ready for rebirth  
Or a squirrel's winter cache of sustenance.  
Tales of the past are like that.

Memories blossom and bloom,  
Later the drying pods  
Burst open,  
Like hands  
Offering up  
Silken stars,  
Trembling with anticipation  
Of the opportunity of a breeze,  
An emigration to the distance,  
Where the past travels,  
Changing  
And changing with  
Foreign histories.  
Fables and Lore adapt and adopt.

Memories blossom and bloom  
In dark recesses of  
Dying wood,  
Ancient stone,  
Spores of lichen, fungi  
And mold,  
Lurking in corners  
And closets  
Of abandoned abodes,  
Hiding and seeking secrets,  
While decomposing  
The obsolescence of the past,  
While re-composing,  
loamy richness  
From which anew will grow.

Memories are...



Flavia ran startled, flustered, short of breath, shouting: “It’s very big and full of hair. Long! Maximus!” Flavia had never seen an adult man naked before and what had appeared in front of her was remarkably different from what she was used to seeing on the body of her younger brother.

How a naked man had ended up in the path of a twelve-year-old girl just before sunset on a sunny spring day was explained differently in different versions of the fable. The earliest accounts simply state that the man had spent the afternoon bathing with other men in a little cove by the forest in naked camaraderie and that, when he came back from a swim, he found all the men had gone and his robes had disappeared. Alternative, more modern versions explain that he had actually gone behind the rocks to hide a rampant erection and allude to complex psycho-sexual constructs that would have been alien to ancient Roman minds. In all versions of the tale, the man’s name is Florus.

Florus had searched for the shortest path through the forest to make his way home. When he bumped into Flavia, her shouts alerted the women of the nearby hamlet, where she lived with her mother, her aunts and a close-knit community of women, who had defied and escaped men’s rule and were governed by a rotating council of widows. It was a community where no man was allowed, and procreation was condemned. The babies and toddlers populating the village were tolerated only as an unfortunate product of the violence some of the women had experienced before they were redeemed and accepted in the matriarchal settlement. When a boy reached puberty, he was expelled without ceremony. Spears in their hands, the women gathered at the entrance of the hamlet to confront Florus. But the use of force was not needed. Claudia, the Eldest of the council, a topless huntress in her 50s, soon realised that the man’s flesh was indifferent to the women’s charms. Unambiguously inoffensive, his penis remained limp as he stood naked in front of the beautiful Amazons. In an unprecedented turn, Florus was welcomed by the tribe. The women took a fondness for him. He had gentle manners, a fair face and a body of pleasant proportions. They agreed to shelter him and make him part of the village on three conditions: 1) he had to forget his past; 2) he was to remain unclothed (except on the harshest days of winter, when he’d be allowed to use a woollen cover); and 3) he was to undertake in the village the physical chores that the women found too arduous to perform.

The years went by and Florus became a colourful asset of the matriarchy. He was easily recognisable not only because his innocuous

maleness was exposed but also because of a hat he weaved with wide leaves and that he wore at all times.

One day, Isis, the goddess, visited the hamlet. She was on a European tour, in a campaign to be syncretised with a Greek or Roman deity, somewhat resentful that she had fallen out of favour in Roman lands after the rise of Venus and Ceres. But, being older, Isis knew she was much more powerful than the local fertility goddesses.

She admired the strength of the women in this village. But when she was introduced to Florus, the arrangement outraged her. She could not conceive a man's penis perpetually flaccid in the company of women. When Florus tried to explain that there were objects of lust that would make a different impact, she did not want to know. She, who once restored virility to the corpse of Osiris by the river Nile, was now determined to make this young man fertile and get him to impregnate her.

To that end, she deployed her most seductive female charms. But she failed. She purchased the most powerful potion from a shop in Via Agra, where they had erected a church to St. Pryapus, now enjoying a short-lived period of canonization by an early Christian sect. But the potion also failed.

She conjured up for Florus dreams populated by handsome male athletes. But this stratagem failed as well. Florus always faltered when her body got too close to his.

Enraged, Isis cursed Florus for eternity. She turned him into a pink lip: the lobed lip of an orchid, the labellum, which serves as a platform – like a trampoline – where every spring an insect will land and will pollinate the orchid. And every spring since, hundreds and thousands and millions of orchids will bloom with a lip bearing the likeness of Florus, forever fertile now, forever reproducing himself. And this flower will get to be known as “*Orchis italica*”, “the Italian orchid”.

If you search for the “naked man orchid”, you'll see what Florus looks like: limp but very well hung; and wearing a fabulous hat.

## Untitled

Gabe Pellete

The beautiful calm white winter,  
And the violent harsh spring rushing it away.  
The act of melting, changing forms to fit the season.  
There is no chance of clinging, you're going to become something new.  
It was never your choice.  
For a time, it is simply desolate.  
A clean slate,  
A cloudy day.  
You're alone in your bedroom rotting.  
Waiting for the first flowers of spring.  
Waiting for the time that you are finally more than bare trees and mud.  
There is nothing you can do to jump start the process,  
And no one is waiting for you.

## Before We Lived

Devon Neal

Way back in early 2001, before we lived here,  
they raised the soft bones of our house out of the ground  
to stand, ribs exposed, in the sun on Haverly Drive.  
On the weekends, or in the late afternoon  
after the workers let their tools clatter and left,  
the house belonged to no one. The rain kissed  
the boards of its young frame; squirrels whispred  
into our living room, our kitchen; rabbits trited  
the floor's stiff strength; the wind explored  
each screw and bolt. In the bright pool  
of morning sun, before the workers returned,  
dew crept along the walls, a damp ghost,  
and before the doors and windows were delivered,  
our house was a home to the wild.

## Tilling the Earth

Lawrence Miles

I was following the conversation  
when you were accused  
and the mob formed instantly

I knew you were innocent and said nothing  
Chose no side believing that  
Washing my hands as Pilate was enough

I returned months later  
seeing the lone seedling in the scorched earth  
reaching for the sunlight

That seedling gave inspiration  
and I said to you  
“I would like to try again if you will let me”

and you did

The earth is bountiful again with a restored sky  
and I cannot imagine  
who I would be if I had not tried

The mob has dispersed  
taking away their platform of lies  
while I stand in silent gratitude

Thank you for showing me  
the earth will always heal itself  
if given the chance

I will do my best not to let you down again.



## Honeysuckle Summer

Hannah Bailey

Honeysuckle Summer  
the grass has grown green  
and the rain has come strong,  
during this honeysuckle summer,  
in a place that I don't belong.  
I'm starting all over and  
I'm beginning again.  
I just kind of wish  
that I still had a friend.  
burning these bridges  
meant finding my home;  
a new path to follow,  
a new place to roam.  
where I'm at, I wake up now,  
to the sun in the window.  
I await the winter snow, but for now,  
I have the shade of the weeping willow.  
the grass is growing brown  
and someday it will be gone, but for now,  
during this honeysuckle summer,  
I've figured out where I belong.



Ann Grá

## We Escaped Last Winter

We escaped late winter  
treading snow in light shoes  
with heavy steps  
now from time to time  
we dream of cold  
and phone suggests  
to look at the memories  
of moody dark abandoned land  
where pure fresh snow  
covers up the dirt each year  
blinding us momentarily  
until that one day  
when we ran away  
from melting innocence  
revealing the true colours  
coming through  
the shattered glass  
nonetheless-  
the spring will come  
putting all this dirt  
good use  
white flower buds  
will sprout with vehemence  
and peaceful days  
will recommence





## Exit Wound

Christiana Smith

The ice slips under my feet as I race across the frozen lake.  
The water underneath makes the clack of my heeled boots echo.  
I can not stop running. I keep chasing the white shadow.  
I first saw it as I inspected my broken-down car, the interior somehow emptied and hollowed. Its eyes stared through me, hair drained of any shine. Its white feathered coat hung from its form; the white shadow almost blended into the snow. I saw my breath, yet its stare was colder than the air. I wrapped my red coat tighter. The rain falls clear until it hits the frozen lake, droplets shattering into crystal fragments. I find a diamond nested in feathers. It is not ice; it is not cold against my fingertips. Standing on black charcoal in the middle of the lake, the white shadow stares with an icy gaze. I slip the diamond into my slingshot. The red elastic shoots. The shadow falls, unyielding. My face goes white. My heart goes frozen; I clutch it as I stumble toward the body. But there is no white shadow. I stand over myself, crimson staining the white feathered coat. I fall over, cry. My knees turn red from the sharp stone, my eyes turn red from tears. When I open them, I find only a white bird. I stand alone, its stiff corpse in my hands. I stare until my eyes sting, but it is always a bird. I discard it on that black charcoal island. I walk home, shivering in the pouring rain, heart still throbbing in my chest.



## The Shrine

Robert Pettus

Percy's khaki, 1990 Volvo shook and sputtered laboriously as it made its way up one of the many winding hills of Bloomfield road. It wasn't late, but it was dark. The overhanging trees blackened the road to the point that only the yellow lines were visible through the wobbling headlights. Two tall, cylindrical speakers sat duct-taped to the dash – bulky, white Hewlard Packards we had secretively stolen from the high-school computer lab. They weren't great, but they were far better than the Volvo's stock-speakers. Plus, they had an auxiliary chord that could connect to the Zune – our prized music-playing device. Percy scrolled through his collection of music – one hand on the wheel, the Iother on the Zune – as the car swerved across the middle lane and back to the right side of the road. He finally settled on Smashing Pumpkins. Cracked through the better, though still imperfect HP speakers, Billy Corgan's voice rang through the Volvo, out the windows, and into the otherwise silent night. We sang along with him:

*Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a... CAAAAAGGGGGGGE!*

The Volvo made it to the top of one hill and we would instantly see the next, each one curving into a wooded holler, as if part of a themed ride at an amusement park. The central Kentucky knobs, undisturbed and nearly uninhabited, are dark enough to hold ancient, sleeping secrets.

We were on our way to The Shrine – a religious monument atop one of the hills. No one knew why it was there – we definitely didn't, at least – it was just a place the local kids liked to go to kill time and scare one another. A wooden set of stairs led up the hill, to a rustic sanctuary at its summit. A few rows of brittle, makeshift pews lined the top, leading to an icon of Mary, standing high above the pews atop a pillar of stacked stone plucked from the creek below. An abandoned mobile-home lay halfway up the hill – a dystopian-looking side-attraction on the way to the more classic horror of The Shrine itself. Kids at school made up stories about the mobile-home. They said some crazy-fucker murdered his pregnant wife there, and that's why The Shrine was built atop the hill – as a place to pray for the souls of mother and baby. It was a bizarre place.

The Volvo skidded into the gravel parking lot and stopped abruptly. Percy cranked the hand-break and wrenched open the squeaking door:

“Well, let's fucking go, Ed,” he said. He sounded confident – or at least intentionally trying to sound confident – but uncertainty cracked his voice slightly.

We walked to the base of the stairs. Percy, ripping the speakers from the dash before exiting the vehicle, shoved them into his backpack. *Welcome*

*Home (Sanitarium)*, by Metallica, played. Percy had zipped-shut his backpack, so the music was a bit muffled, as if trapped inside, trying unsuccessfully to escape.

The first few steps creaked under our weight as we began our ascent. Small lanterns, featuring Catholic iconography of Mary, lined each side of the stairway. The candles, unused in who could guess how long, were unlit. Some of the makeshift stained glass encasing the lanterns was cracked – a scar across the face of the virgin mother.

Before making it to the top of the first part of the stairway, we noticed some headlights. Another car was pulling into the lot.

“Fuck,” said Percy, “I wonder who that could be?”

Smoke unfurled like a forest-fire from the now opening car doors, lifting high into the cold air before merging into the gathering fog:

“Let’s go, pussies!” said one of the voices from the car. Two of the other doors opened. There were two boys and one girl.

“God dammit,” I said, “That’s Lance and Philip. I don’t know who’s with them, probably Jasmine. She’s dating Lance, I think”

Lance and Philip were two kids from school – seniors. They were gigantic dicks.

Percy had already hopped the ledge of the stairway onto the forest floor below:

“Come on, dude!” he whispered aggressively, “Let’s fucking go!” He was nodding toward the trailer.

“I’m not going there, dude.”

“Dude...” responded Percy, “There’s nothing in there. It’s either go there, or deal with Lance and Philip, which – considering Lance has his lady here – probably won’t be good for us. He’ll want to impress her, or whatever; he’ll be on some serious bullshit, that’s for sure. So will Philip, wanting to impress Lance.”

Percy was right. I lunged over the railing and followed him up the hill and through the woods, to the abandoned mobile-home.

Lance, Philip, and Jasmine were in no hurry to ascend the stairway. They even seemed a little frightened, themselves, from what I could hear through my frantic scamper up the hillside:

“Did you hear that?” said Philip, “Sounded like something running up the hill! What the fuck was that?”

“Stop being such a little bitch,” said Lance. It was probably a squirrel. Those things sound as big as a deer when they’re running through piles of dry leaves. Let’s go!”

Lance hopped dramatically onto the foot of the first stair – clutching the railing to intentionally shake and sway the entirety of the brittle old stairway, as if to emphasize his nonchalance.

“What’s this?” he said, terror filling his voice, “What the fuck is this? Something is shaking the stairs! I can’t move!” Lance fell to the floor, flailing spasmodically. He then lay in opossum-like motionlessness for some time. Suddenly springing into animated wakefulness, he started laughing, pointing at Philip:

“Let’s go, you goddamn pussy!” He then barreled up the stairs, Philip and Jasmine following timidly behind.

Percy and I made it up to the mobile-home. It sat on weathered, buckling stilts against the slope of the hill, its fortifications shoved deep into the damp mud of the earth. The shutters, a strange, dark shade of purple, were crooked and asymmetrical – some of them having fallen to the ground below, now buried by years of dirt and plant-matter. A wooden staircase, not at all dissimilar to the one leading up to The Shrine, led from the hillside up to the rickety-looking storm door of the trailer. The door, closed but unlatched, banged periodically against the house as the wind blew. Wanting to create as little noise as possible, Percy avoided that trap in favor of the underbelly of the house. I followed him with the anxious pace of an inexperienced private trailing his staff-sergeant through a warzone, not thinking anything of the creeping darkness living below the trailer until well-settled within. Sinking into the moldy, clay-like goop of the sun-deprived interior, I crouched to hide, turning back toward the staircase leading to The Shrine. Lance and his retinue were now making their way up more quickly. Philip and Jasmine seemed even to have shed their previous fear. I looked over to Percy, who was now, for some reason, examining an ancient push lawn-mower partially wedged in the mud:

“Look at this shit!” whispered Percy, “It’s still perfectly good! I bet there’s all sorts of shit inside we could take out and sell! Maybe we could make enough for some real speakers for the Volvo! Some nice ones! Those bastards are nearly up to The Shrine, anyway! They can’t hear us! Let’s go check it out!”

Before I could express my disagreement, Percy stepped hurriedly back toward the wooden steps leading to the front door. Before making it out from within the intestines of the place, he accidentally kicked an old glass beer bottle, which lay incased in the mud. Dislodging itself, it flew spinning into the stairwell, not shattering, but creating a loud, obviously manmade clanking noise. Lance, Philip, and Jasmine's footsteps ceased:

"The fuck was that?" said Philip.

"Who knows" responded Lance, "Probably just a stray cat. Let's go check it out!"

"Dude!" said Philip, "I don't think that's such a good idea. There was another car in the parking lot, remember? It could be some weirdos – some freaks – in there doing god knows what. Fucking smack-heads, or some shit."

"Whatever," said Lance, "I'll go it alone; you're such a little bitch, Philip."

Lance hopped the railing of the stairwell to the hillside, leaves crunching under his weight.

"I'm not going there!" said Jasmine, "You two go, and I'll stay here! Fuck that shit!"

Philip, not wanting to waste his chance to remove himself from the expedition, responded:

"You can't stay here by yourself! I'll stay with you, just in case."

"Jesus!" yelled Lance turning back toward them, his voice now ironically carrying up the hill to the stone-stacked monument to the messiah's mother, "I guess I have to do everything myself!" Lance then barreled in the direction of the trailer.

"Fuck!" I whispered, looking to Percy for an idea. He didn't immediately provide me with one, so I repeated my concern: "Fuck!"

"Shit!" Percy responded in agreement, "Let's go! Follow me! Percy then sprinted up the stairs, into the trailer. I followed him clumsily, kicking other remnant trash – artifacts of a previous world – in complete disorder, creating even more of an obvious unnatural sound. Lance quickened his pace, the tempo of his footsteps now reverberating curved around the natural, spherical wall of the forest canopy.

We made it inside – though not unheard, and likely not unseen. Lance followed like a famished, rabid coyote. He wasn't far behind us; he had long legs. He was fast.

Upon entering the trailer, we bolted through the still-furnished living room into the bedroom on the far-end of the place – the side furthest from the stairwell leading up to The Shrine. A box spring, underneath a mattress, lay on the floor. Diving behind it – on the side furthest the entrance to the room – we laid down and made ourselves as small as possible, trying to shield our bodies from Lance's future field of vision.

He entered the trailer, slamming shut the creaking door:

“Helloooooooo!” he said gaily, walking briefly into the living room before turning away and heading into the kitchen. He opened the kitchen windows, looking outside in Philip and Jasmine's direction:

“Hey Philip, Hey babe!” he said, “It's not so bad in here! You all should come check it out!”

Jasmine and Philip both yelled something in response, but I was unable to hear it. Lance wasn't either, as he kept asking them to repeat themselves, screaming from the kitchen window on the other side of the trailer. Eventually giving up, he shut the window and turned back into the living room. He sat on the couch. I could hear it squeaking and buckling under his weight. A rat scurried out from underneath. Lance leapt up, crashing hard against the back wall of the trailer, cracking and denting it:

“What the fuck!” he screamed in fear before falling back down, laughing at his own jumpiness. “Fucking rats,” he concluded.

He got up from the couch and walked into to the bedroom:

“Hmm,” he said, “I wonder what was making all that noise I heard outside. It couldn't have been the rat... Rats can be pretty noisy, but not *that* noisy.”

He walked around the room, rubbing his chin in feigned thoughtfulness. He opened the closet opposite the bed aggressively. Nothing there. Turning, he jumped abruptly onto the mattress, crouching down – his face right next to ours:

“Well, what's this? It looks like it *is* two more rats! Two big ones! This goddamn place is infested! Good thing I have a passion for extermination! I'll even do it for free!”

Grabbing and ripping our shirts, he yanked us up and began dragging us out of the trailer. Neither us could keep balance. Percy fell down twice, each time berated by Lance for his lack of balance, each time his shirt ripping further. Frustrated, Lance tore the whole thing off, pushing Percy unclothed through the front door. Returning outside, he pulled Percy backward by his backpack – as if nocking a bow – and then shoved him down the stairs to the mud. Temporarily dislodging myself from his grasp, I was able to avoid that fate, running frantically down of my own accord.

“Look what I found!” yelled Lance to Philip and Jasmine, “Two big ass dirty rats!”

“That’s fucking gross,” said Jasmine, still unable to see us, “Don’t bring those things over here!”

“Oh, I’m bringing them!” said Lance.

Coming into their field of vision, Philip, at first nervous, began laughing hysterically:

“What the fuck are you two dumbasses doing here?” he said to us, “What were you two doing in that trailer, huh? I’ll bet I can guess!”

“And you would guess correctly!” said Lance, “I found them together in the bedroom! There’s still a mattress in that place! It’s dirty as hell! Bedbugs all over it, I’m sure! You two boys are fucking nasty!”

There was no escape, I knew that. We were to be Lance’s entertainment – his punching bags – until he tired of us.

We continued up the stairs. Percy and I were leading the way, shoved forward by Lance or Philip, who had at this point joined in, too, feeling as if there was no danger. He cackled and threw us into the stairwell if we moved too slowly. He was unnaturally sweaty, even though it was a breezy evening. He smelled like ass. At one point, I tripped, falling to the old, splintery stairs and bruising my shin. Philip pulled me up, crouched to my level and spewed his rancid, Grizzly-Wintergreen soaked breath into my face:

“You need to walk better than that, little man! Don’t trip me up! I’m not going to be happy if your clumsiness trips me up!”

He spit dip onto my pants and then shoved me forward. I fell again. The lanterns, depicting the Queen of Heaven, shook in quiet protest. We were nearly to the summit of the knob – nearly to The Shrine. Making it to the top, Philip dragged me past the three rows of makeshift pews, throwing me down in front of the stone altar. Lance did the same to Percy. Falling on

his back, his Zune came to life, playing *Decades*, by Joy Division. Lance and Philip stood over us ominously.

“What are you going to do to them, anyway?” said Jasmine, now sitting in the back row on one of the old, wobbly benches, “Is there any point to all of this? Like, I know they’re two little shitheads, but still... Isn’t this kind of a waste of time? I think it’s ruining The Shrine for me. This place is supposed to be scary, right? I must say, boys – so far I’m just bored!” She pulled a Newport Green from her pack and lit it, spitting out the menthol smoke in frustration.

“Of course there’s a point!” Lance said angrily. “These two little bastards need to stop thinking they can hide in the bushes and avoid us! It’s disrespectful! They need to be taught some manners! A simple hello! That’s all I wanted! Don’t just run away, am I right?” Lance looked to Philip, “Am I right, Phil?”

“Uh, yeah!” he responded in confusion, “Let’s teach these little fuckers some manners!”

Percy and I were kneeling as if in prayer at the foot of the altar. Not a traditional kneeling prayer-stance, though. We were cowering, covering our heads with our hands as if in preparation for a tornado. The ghostly keys and priestly vocals of Joy Division continued:

*“...Here are the young men, the weight on their shoulders; here are the young men, well where have they been? We knocked on the doors of Hell's darker chamber. Pushed to the limit, we dragged ourselves in...”*

My forehead felt the cold moss of the stone. Looking up, I saw the face of Mary in the portrait sitting atop the altar of The Shrine. At first her usual appearance, she shifted abruptly into a darker, more demented look. Her eyes went from calming and round to deep-black and blade-like, as if to inhale the soul of any unfortunate onlooker. Her mouth twisted into a curving grin, showing needle-pointed, serpentine fangs.

“Hello, there, young boys!” came a jovial voice from behind.

Jasmine turned and shrieked, falling off the rickety bench to the damp dirt below. Lance and Philip turned as well. Even Percy and I – trying our best to obey our orders – couldn’t help but turn around. There was an elderly woman, at least eighty, by her look, standing just beyond the row of pews. She had apparently just walked up, though not from the path. She



seemed to have come out of the woods. She was pregnant. She squatted down, barely able to walk. How a woman of that age – much less a pregnant woman of that age – could scale the entirety of the knob, especially through the wood, was beyond me. It simply wasn't possible. She fell to her knees and unleashed a cackling laugh.

“I think it's time!” she said, gripping her abdomen in clearly excruciating, though seemingly pleasant pain.

She fell to the earth, her back against the ground, and closed her eyes. Climbing out of her more quickly than humanly possible crawled a baby. Pink and wet, it clutched at the dirt – like any good primate grasping for a tree branch – into a handful, tasting it before looking up to the stone altar. Noticing Lance and Philip standing at the altar's head, the child shrieked in otherworldly, vibrational anger, shaking the trees, causing a bevy of doves to take flight in retreat. The newborn creature grew – within the space of only several seconds – from its previous wriggling form into a stature greater than that of Lance or Philip. Its face, at first new, shifted quickly into a leathery, eldritch hardness. After swelling to the height of a tall man, its legs continued their weed-like growth, spurring the totality of the beast's height to nearly ten feet. Still unfamiliar with walking, it wobbled clumsily toward the altar like a pair of vulnerable young trees during a thunderstorm. Jasmine screamed, crab walking backward on the ground, back to the barbed-wire fence lining the backside of The Shrine – leading from the top of the knob onto a neighboring cow field.

Philip swallowed his dip and wretched in both fear and disgust, dropping onto his knees, vomiting into the dirt. This irritated the newborn creature. Inadvisably darting forward, it crashed through the old, brittle pews and tripped hard into Philip, crushing him against the stone of The Shrine. The Shrine, though constructed of ancient creek rock, was somehow undamaged. The demon creature lifted Philip as though he were a living twig, slinging him backward, toward the old trailer, into the trees. The sound of him rolling through the leaves down the knob was heard. He was no louder than a squirrel, or a rat.

Lance cowered backward into the stone, gripping its chilled surface with sweaty palms.

“Whaa... *what?*” he squealed. The creature lifted him, held him over the shrine, and split him in half like crunchy, stale bread, his blood spilling down over the statue of the Virgin Mother – over both Percy and me. It drenched my shirt. It soaked Percy's still bare back. Looking up through the red rain, I saw the small statue of Mary, standing regally atop her creek rock

mound. Still grinning insanely, she then retreated into her usual, sublime stare.

Without warning, the creature dissolved into the dirt, which, upon closer examination, I noticed was stained crimson. The ground encircling The Shrine was soaked, not just from this singular satanic episode, but also from numerous, likely similar encounters.

I grabbed Percy and walked away, back down that ancient knob, to the safety of the Volvo.

Behind us, the old woman again cackled. She stood, now satisfied, gripping her still split-open body. Laughing continuously, she turned back into the woods, walking in the direction of the trailer, leaving a trail of blood in her wake.



## To Have and to Hold (To Halve and to Whole)

B. Craig Grafton

Two sisters stood before their King. They lived together in a small hovel of a run-down shack deep in the King's Royal Enchanted Forest. One was beautiful but dumb, the other ugly but cunning. Both wanted the cute little baby girl that the King now held before them in his outstretched arms. The sisters had been fighting over the child for the last week now and finally the ugly, but cunning one had gotten the beautiful but dumb one to agree to let the King decide who should get the child. The ugly but cunning one had a plan.

The King thought that he could handle this matter. After all, he deemed himself a wise and just ruler. Furthermore, he knew from the Bible the story of King Solomon and how to split a baby in two. And since the exact same circumstances presented themselves here, he thought it like slicing a piece of cake. So he said unto the sisters,

“Since you each claim the baby is yours, and since I have no way of knowing who is telling the truth and who is not, I am left with no choice but to divide the child in half and give you each a half, for half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.”

With that said, the King expected one of the sisters to immediately let out a shriek, speak up, and cry out, “Give the baby to my sister, My Lord, for she is the mother.” And so did the ugly but cunning sister. She too knew the story of King Solomon and was banking on it, figuring that her sister, who couldn't stand seeing a fly being harmed, would speak up and scream out “Let my sister have the child, My Lord.”

That was her game plan, anyway.

So, the ugly but cunning sister kept quiet. But the dumb but beautiful sister did not know the story of King Solomon and therefore did not know her lines in this little drama and was too dumb to say anything anyway. She just stood there with her mouth open, staring at the King, slack jawed, and said nothing.

Now, the King did not know what to do. For he was not that King Solomon wise of a king. But he was wise enough to have people around him who were wiser than himself; someone to make the tough decisions for him. Someone to put the blame on and fall on their sword if something went wrong. One of those someones was the King's Royal Magician. So the King

summoned him and asked him for his advice in this matter. The Royal Magician, always glad to put on a show for the King and thus justify his paycheck, assured the King that he indeed knew what to do here. That he would use his magical powers to resolve this matter and make his royal majesty come out smelling like a royal rose. The King upon hearing this let out a sigh of relief and commanded the Royal Magician to do his thing.

So, the Royal Magician took out his magical sorcerer's wand and walked over to the child still held by the King. He was certainly an impressive looking magician, that's for sure, with his long flowing purple floor-length robe with silver stars, moons, and crescents stenciled all over it and likewise matching cone shaped pointy hat. He also had long flowing shoulder length white hair and a likewise full flowing white beard hiding the many wrinkles of age etched upon his face.

With eyes closed he rocked back and forth on his purple pointy toed silk slippers and mumbled some incantations, a couple of which were 'abracadabras', and some other moaning words, none of which were known to anyone there for that was the way they were supposed to be, magical words known only by those who possessed magic. Then he waved his magic wand over the child and gently touched the child's forehead with it, causing a puff of white smoke to poof up out of nowhere, a truly traditional trite magical trick indeed, the old standard smoke and mirrors trick. With that done, he announced, "Now Your Majesty hold the child before you by her feet with her faceA facing forward for all of us to see."

The King did so, grasping the child by her ankles and dangling the child in front of him for all to see.

"Now tear the child in two," ordered the Royal Magician.

The King thought that the Royal Magician was saying this in order to get one of the sisters to come forward and give up the child using the old King Solomon trick again. He certainly couldn't be serious, thought the King. But alas neither sister said a word again.

They both said nothing for the same reasons as before and also because the child was not the child of either of them. They had not told the King this and therefore they reasoned that if he did indeed rip the child apart, though they both wanted the child, so what, they could live with that, no skin off their butts. They had found the baby on their doorstep one dark and dreary, but not stormy, night about a week ago. A not so gentle rap tap tapping scratching woke them from their deep sleep slumber that blackened night. The sisters thought that the wolf was at the door so they armed themselves accordingly with a pitchfork and ax and awaited their fate

expecting the worst. But when they heard the wail of a baby, they immediately flung open the door, saw the child, saw that no one else was there, and assumed the baby had been abandoned to their care by a mother either too poor or too ashamed to take care of the child herself.

Now neither sister had a child and as said both wanted this one. The ugly sister did not have a child because she knew no man would ever mate with someone as ugly as herself and thus she saw this as her one and only opportunity to have a child. And as to the beautiful but dumb sister she too wanted a child. It was common knowledge there in the Royal Enchanted Forest among the fairies, trolls, elves, dwarfs, and common folk alike that she was but a simpleton and that no man there would ever marry her for men always are smart enough to marry a woman smarter than themselves. They don't marry someone just because they're beautiful. Thus the dumb but beautiful sister never did get married and thus she too saw this as her one and only opportunity to have a child. So, they brought the babe in and for the past week they lovingly cared for the child, cooing, cuddling, and caressing the child ad nauseam ad infinitum. But after a while they got to fighting over the child and that's when the ugly but cunning sister got her sister to agree to let the King decide who should get the child. As said she was hoping to pull off the old King Solomon trick. But that plan was shot to hell now having backfired and blown up in her face twice.

After a moment of loud silence the Royal Magician repeated, "Go ahead and tear the child in two, Your Majesty."

The King couldn't believe his ears. He stood there dumbfounded, not knowing what to do or what to say. Finally he sputtered and spit out, "I ain't tearing no kid in two. You do it," he said and handed the kid to the Royal Magician. "That's a Royal Decree," he commanded in capital letters as in capital offense.

The Royal Magician took the child for he knew that even with all his magical powers they were not enough to save him from the King's wrath if he didn't obey a royal command. So he held the child before him by its feet the way the King had done, sucked in a deep breath, and mumbled to himself, "Here goes nothing." He began to rip the baby apart but as he did so the child did not let out a sound, not a whimper, not even a peep. Nor did the child's innards spill out. Nor did the child bleed for skin immediately grew over the torn and exposed parts making for two separate but equal babies. Seeing this the Royal Magician then gave one quick jerk, ripping the child in two. Then he handed the right half child to the beautiful but dumb sister and the left half to the ugly but cunning sister. Both halves had but one arm, one leg, one eye, one ear, one nose hole, and half a mouth.

Then he said unto them, “Do not ever let the two halves touch for if you do, the child will turn into one child again and if that happens I can only divide the child into upper and lower halves thereafter for this magic of splitting the child down the middle is but a once in a lifetime thing.

And always remember that there is a little bit of you in the child that I have handed you.”

Now the King spoke up to assert his authority and to remind the sisters that he was the one in charge here, not the Royal Magician. “And if that happens I will have to order that the child be divided into upper and lower halves, then one of you will end up with a child's rear end and have to go around kissing your child's butt for the rest of your life and believe you me you do not want that to happen.” Here the King spoke from personal experience.

“Now go forth and be not fruitful and multiply no more,” he commanded.

Now neither sister wanted such an ugly hideous deformed creature and both tried to palm and or pawn off their child on to the King. But he didn't want them either so he roared out in his most royal regal voice, “Take your child with you and leave or suffer the Royal Consequences.”

Both sisters knew that if they did not do as ordered their necks would either be in a noose or on the chopping block. So they left holding their child before them with two fingers as if they were holding a dead rat by the tail.

On their way home they were besides themselves not knowing what to do when they came upon a circus coming to town.

“Here is our answer,” said the ugly but cunning sister. “Here is where we can get rid of these freakish little monsters.

“Huh?” blurted out the beautiful but dumb sister having no idea what her sister was talking about.

“The circus, a circus always has a freak show doesn't it,” proclaimed the ugly but cunning sister. “We'll sell our children to the circus for their freak show, be rid of these cursed things, and make ourselves a pretty penny in the process.”

The ugly but cunning sister stepped forward and stopped the lead circus wagon and summoned the Ringmaster.

“We wish to sell you our children,” announced the ugly but cunning sister to the Ringmaster.

“They will make a fine attraction for your freakshow. See,” she said, holding up her child for the Ringmaster to see and elbowing her sister to do likewise. The Ringmaster looked over the children as the sisters posed and dangled them before him.

“Well they are different. I will say that for them,” commented the Ringmaster. “How much?”

“Thirty pieces of silver,” responded the ugly but cunning sister.

“Done,” said the Ringmaster, taking the thirty pieces from his purse and offering them to the ugly sister.

“A piece,” said the ugly but cunning sister not taking the money.

“That wasn’t what we agreed upon,” countered the Ringmaster. For the next thirty minutes or so they haggled over price. Finally the ugly but cunning sister gave up and agreed to thirty pieces of silver for both sisters truly wanted to be rid of these creatures. Thus the children were sold into freak show slavery. But the ugly but cunning sister did not tell the Ringmaster never to let the two halves touch or they would become one again. She didn’t tell him that because she knew that this would happen eventually anyway and when it did, this would be her way of getting back at and sticking it to him for not agreeing to her price of thirty pieces of silver apiece.

As to the dumb but beautiful sister it never crossed her mind to mention this to the Ringmaster. After the exchange of funds for babies the Ringmaster took one of the children back to the freak wagon and handed her to the 600 pound fat lady. Then he went and got the other one came back, and handed her to the woman who had no arms. But she did have feet and she took the child in her feet. He then explained to them that these children were now part of the show and told them to love them and take care of them as if they were their own children. With that said, he went back to his wagon and started the caravan on its way. The two sisters were long gone of course.

In the freak wagon there were three women, the fat lady, the lady with no arms, and the backwards cyclops lady. The backwards cyclops lady was normal in all respects except she had no eyes in the front of her head and only one in the back. Thus she always had to walk backwards to go forward to wherever she wanted to go and thus that’s why she was called the backwards cyclops lady.

Now the fat lady cuddled her baby to her bosom, almost smothering the poor child in her huge breasts. The armless lady cuddled her child with her bony feet against her bony chest. And the backwards cyclops lady, jealous of the other two, spoke up, “Hey you two, how about letting me hold them

for a while.” She was facing them with her one eye. So the other two went around behind her, which was really in front of her, faced her eyeless face, and placed their child in the outstretched arms of the backwards cyclops lady. The backwards cyclops lady snuggled the two babies to her chest and as she did so they touched. And as the Royal Magician predicted what would happen, happened. They became one child. The fat lady and the armless lady let out a co-joined shriek when they saw the now one piece child. Where were the two cute freak babies they had come to so instantly love? Then the backwards cyclops lady did likewise as she realized by touch that she was now holding one baby, not two. Their shrieks were so loud and so alarming that the Ringmaster held his horses and stopped the wagon train. He got down, came running back, and entered the freak wagon. There he saw the backwards cyclops lady holding one baby, not the two freak babies he had paid for. He took the child from her and examined it. It was normal in all respects except for one thing. Its right profile was as beautiful as the beautiful sister and its left profile was as ugly as the ugly sister for as the Royal Magician had said a little bit of each of them was in the child that he had handed them. The Ringmaster held up the newly formed child for all to see and turned it from side to side so that they could see each profile.

“Well I still got two for one so I guess we’ll keep the little freak,” announced the Ringmaster.

The three freak ladies let out a sigh of relief.

So the Ringmaster advertised her as ‘The Two Faced Woman’. And even though there were lots of two faced women in the world, and there always have been, this one nevertheless drew the large crowds. The three freak ladies named her Eve, even though she had only two faces, and she was deeply and dearly loved and cherished happily ever after by all three of them.

But in a freakish sort of way, of course.



## I. God Emperor

*The devil whispered in my ear, "I am coming for you."*

*I spoke back, "Crawl."*

*It snickered, hiding behind my ear again.*

Voth Elethbar wore red on the day he killed the *God Emperor*. With his skin as dark as night, his hair cut to its roots, it seemed as if a thick black veil covered his head. His robe tightened at the neck and seemed to vanish in mist at his ankles, flowed forward with the soft winds; his bare feet touched the marble, feeling its coldness. His face proudly displayed the only traces of ink on his body - the holy scripture of His word was printed on his cheeks and forehead, and a white dot lay below his lower lip.

In front of him, ahead of the open doors that led to the chamber before the Hall of Whispers, two *blazebearers* stood; they were barefoot, wearing purple cloaks with yellow, coned hoods covering their faces. Voth gasped, filling his lungs with air. The first guard ran toward him, spearhead pointing directly at him. He threw his weight to the wall ahead, it now becoming his floor. He fell towards both *blazebearers*. Voth let go of the air inside his lungs, and tapped the spear as he went beside the man in a flash. In a moment, the thick wooden shaft started to levitate. The man's grip was strong, his knuckles white already, but he let the spear go up, evidently not wanting to be dragged along with it.

The other guard remained on his feet, following Voth with his eyes. Just before hitting the wall, shifting his weight southward again, Voth flopped down and slid to a stop when his feet touched the wall. As he got up, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a spear coming toward him. Looking up, Voth put his palm out in front of the pointed end. When the spearhead grazed his dark skin, it shot upward in an instant; as if shot by a hundred hands, it fell to its floor, Voth's roof.

Ignoring it, both guards came running at him. He launched himself at the far wall. Voth plummeted down, arms extended, falling from the polished wall he had created, his toes still touching the floor. As he fell, Voth slapped both *blazebearers'* tunics. The two men shot sideways, one going left, and the other ricocheting to the right. Their bodies crashed against each wall. Voth turned back southward again instantly after the two got thrown. The *blazebearer* on the left was strapped to the wall by the cloak, though he made easy work of the

button that held it together at the neck, still maintaining his yellow hood. He was naked, like Voth below his red cloak, but his face and neck were still covered by the coned cloth. Voth gave him a moment to regain his breath, also giving time for his stomach to settle after the quick sewing. The other had met head-first with the wall to the right, and was completely motionless.

Moments after, Voth inhaled and steadied his breath. He began to levitate upwards, his center of gravity shifting slowly. He was now falling to the roof, with his feet up and his head down. When his cloak touched the white marble, he walked to the spear cleft into the rock. He breathed in again, gripping it, sewing it back down. The spear fell in a flash, Earth's gravity shackling back. The naked *blazebearer* tapped the back of his head twice and ran toward the spear.

Voth dashed to his right, where the dead *blazebearer* lay on the floor, and put his knees to the wall. He looked up to the naked man, who was waiting for Voth to reach the floor.

Voth inhaled and threw himself at the wall in front of him, the naked man's floor, and slid down. As two-sixths of his weight were still tied to the roof, the fall was graceful. The *blazebearer* seemed to be in deep thought, though still not diverting his sight from Voth. He breathed in, looking down at the fallen man. Him being the wiser, the spear hit the ground. The naked man forfeited the fight, it seemed; he had realized the man he was fighting against was unmatchable for him, invincible.

Throwing open the doors, Voth entered the Hall of Whispers. Inside, a long red rug made its way from Voth's feet to the *God Emperor*, the floor was of a marvelous, empty white, with only that long tapestry above it. The Hall of Whispers was like a cube, and on the far end of it was the Lord he had to slay. He wore a white robe, reading while sitting cross-legged with both arms on His knees.

The book was on the floor. He had a candle at his side, even though the roof gave way for enough sunlight to read comfortably. The *God Emperor* raised His head, looking up at the complex glass structure above. He muttered something, though Voth couldn't care less what. Voth had both hands at his side, looking straight at Him. After moments of silence, and as He returned to his reading, Voth reached the end of the tapestry. The *God Emperor* didn't mind him, long breaths coming out of His nostrils.

"*God Emperor.*" Voth whispered.

"Yes." He replied, also in that same low tone, stopping His reading and looking up.

"I am sorry to interrupt your reading."

He smiled, closing the book.

“I have come to kill you, *God Emperor*.”

He breathed again in that same slow stroke, his lungs filled with air, exhaling again by His nostrils.

“I see much hatred behind those eyes.”

“It is no such thing.”

“Then what is it?”

“The desire to be born anew. That is what is behind my eyes, *God Emperor*.”

“Then why do I gaze upon blood and murder?”

“Because a child, too, cries when it is born.”

The *God Emperor* rose from the red rug, His bare feet touching the tapestry.

“Tongue your name, *conquistador*.”

“Voth Elethbar, servant of the First, the Second, the Seventh, and the Tenth, for all the others have betrayed humanity.”

“And me too, the Seventy-Eighth?” The *God Emperor* chuckled, giving him a hand.

Voth took it, rising to meet His eyes, “You have brought tears to His children, and yet have no honor in wiping them. The third did the same. I wonder where He is now.”

The *God Emperor* frowned, “Will you conquer me, too?” He whispered.

Without warning, they both launched themselves towards each other. Voth tried to reach His cloak first, but thick brown arms suddenly clamped themselves on Voth’s neck. His mind reeled from the surprise. He strained and threw himself on the roof. He felt his gut being gripped by a powerful hand, as if his organs were a wet towel. He put his feet on the *God Emperor*’s abdomen and pushed back, planning to break His spinal cord.

Suddenly, He shot to the left, leaving Voth to fall onto the roof alone. He stammered, trying his best to regain his bearings.

He got up, groaning in pain. His shoulder hadn’t been crushed, just dislocated. He looked down to the wall where the *God Emperor* stood patiently, awaiting him. Voth gasped for air again, jumping up towards the ceiling. It was a maneuver which twisted his stomach, the grip got tighter. The *God Emperor* smiled, moving to the far wall.

Voth got thrown to the floor, the *God Emperor* pushing His feet onto Voth’s stomach. He weighed more and was far stronger than Voth. His knees were on Voth’s breasts, pressing the ribs, and His hands choked his neck, gripping tightly. Voth cried out and hit the *God Emperor*’s ears with his palms in a desperate attempt to get His grip to lighten and to allow for oxygen to get to his brain.

Disoriented, the *God Emperor* loosened his grasp. His knees were still pressing down on Voth, however, and they were crushing his ribs from their weight. Voth stabbed his fingers at His eyes, but missed, only grazing them. He gasped and the *God Emperor's* eyes shot upward, his eye sockets becoming curtains, blood falling down his cheeks. He let go. Voth gasped for air, completely disoriented. He felt like he was falling, feeling like he was sliding down every wall at once. He had lost his sense of direction, one of the many side effects of his powers; but he was indeed still on the floor, and took a few seconds to comprehend his situation.

The *God Emperor* lay on the ground, his neck twisted sideways, his knees crushed by the fall back down. Voth traveled up to the roof, arms extended, his vomit falling to the ground. He inhaled deeply. As he started floating downward, he noticed the doors. They were still open, and a man knelt beyond them.

“You stayed,” Voth whispered. The man did not hear the words, but entered when Voth’s toes touched the red tapestry.

“I presumed I would be the last one in the Palace of Truths,” he spoke softly as he walked hastily to Voth.

Voth drew in another breath as the man approached him.

## II. King of Kings

*It bit my earlobe, whispering again, “You are not strong to withstand the storm.”*

*The handle of the sword melted my skin as I gripped it harder.*

*“Then I will make the storm kneel to my feet, so that I can walk above it.”*

“I wonder, *God Emperor*. What is it to be born anew? Is it to leave behind? Or to grip your past so tightly it becomes a new thing entirely?”

“It is both.”

“How so?”

“You leave behind some things, and some others stay with you. Whether you desire it or not, they become ink in your skin; be it poisonous or not, only you can know.”

The man, whose name was Aleth, had taken up the good habit of conversing with the *God Emperor* from time to time.

After the death of the Seventy-Eighth, Voth Elethbar commissioned *The Genesis of the Peoples*. It has been two decades since then.

Thus, as His mind was as clear as the cloudless sky above him, as the birds sang to his rhythm, and as the Kingdom of the Kind became closer, war came first.

“Why is that?”

“War is useless for us, I think.”

Voth stayed silent, prompting Aleth to continue, “I have come to understand that we are a good people, so why do we have to fight to accomplish our supposedly noble deeds?”

“What would you say we do instead?”

“That... I don’t know.”

“Then why do you complain?”

Voth paused for a moment. “You see, Aleth, I was a slave before taking the cloak. And before that I was a boy. Between those two I was a soldier, and now I take my duty as *King of Kings*.” He rose up, the dim sunlight complementing his appearance. The tent in which they sat was white, and outside the muffled noise of soldiers, horses, and shouts could be heard. “And I was reborn, although I received my *Genesis* every time I thought differently than I had before. It is not as complex as many believe, rather, it is as simple as changing a bad behavior, or as complex as giving way to the *Kingdom of the Kind*.”

“During my time as a soldier, I ravaged the land I set my feet on, and that gave me scars my skin does not feel. As a slave I learned many things, such as kindness, compassion, and understanding.” Voth walked to the sliding curtains at the front of the tent and brushed them aside. Dusk entered the tent. “This is a lesson I want you to learn, too. You are my *blazebearer*, Aleth. My great commander, my first servant. You should know these things, as I have learned them. The texts of the First have been long forgotten, yet humanity is not guided to salvation by a text. It is guided to it itself. Love endlessly, for it is endless love that we seek; make your anger so expensive no one can buy it, and your smile so cheap it feels free. Remember that one who has been forgiven loves instead of hates.”

Voth Elethbar looked at him, his smile soft and kind.

Aleth was once again in deep thought.

*Why do you follow him?* they had always asked him.

*He is good, and good is always good,* he had always replied.

## Hear The Bells

Chinwe Okonkwo

It is only when I am entirely entranced by the metaphysical that I am a person. I am only whole while fully engrossed in my Hitchens and my Faulkner, my insufferable abstractions. I am a collection of meaningless prose. I love to hate and I hate to love. I am a poet, and I like big words; I like strong feelings and existential conceptions. Let us be friends and apportion our mornings with debating divine existence. I love mankind, and I observe it intently. I want to be near to the desolate, the devastated. I wish for them to hear the bells, to know a life, to understand that our pain is liberation. My bells are my Hitchens and my Faulkner – I am so grateful for the arts and humanities. Maybe we are nothing, but from that, we are all things – it is always up to us to become. We must choose to hear the bells, or perhaps, to ring a new sound.

## Approaching In Reverse

BEE LB

it's not that i can't write backwards, it's that i can't do it without thinking  
of carson's *short talk on walking backwards*. it's not that  
i can't think back, walk myself back to & through the past,  
it's that i can never figure out how to write an undoing. it's not that i haven't  
tried—  
i have no less than three scraps of reversal poems lamenting—  
it's that i've read at least four of tristan's reversal poems,  
& i don't see the point in doing something if i can't do it best.  
it's not that i don't see the fallacy in that logic, i know  
the benefit of doing something badly, of repetition being the cure  
to the ailment that is failure, it's just— i prefer one kind of failure  
over another— i prefer the illusion of perfection &  
the perfection of possibility before it's explored.  
it's not that i'm unfamiliar with endings, i've known death all my life, & grief,  
somehow longer, it's that the only endings i acknowledge  
are those i shape with my own two hands.  
it's not that every ending feeds into a beginning—  
i have met finality & shook its heavy hand— it's that the only thing  
final enough to feel is the end of feeling anything.  
it's not that i can't accept the duality or the nonlinearity or  
the cyclical nature of time & truth, it's that there are not words enough for  
me  
to explain to you what this acceptance means to me. it's not that  
it's too late to introduce you into this poem, it's that you've been here  
this whole time, it just took me a while to find you.



## Baba Began Again

Janis La Couvée

I want to ask her, this grandmother, my Baba, this young but not so young woman, this spinster, this housekeeper to the local village priest.

I want to ask her—were you afraid? Or, were you hopeful?

What did it feel like to leave behind your small village, bucolic rhythms played out over centuries? Did you go to the bees to tell them of your plans? whisper words of consolation, taste the honey one last time, the flavour of clover sweet on your tongue? Did you walk the woods in thankfulness, caress the trees, bend deep for a few mushrooms to make one last soup?

Did you gather the barn yard fowl round you, scatter grain as you clucked to chickens, ducks and geese? Did you imagine a new flock in a far-off land? Were you worried about what that would look like—muskeg and small woods? Or, were you reassured by the priest's words? This was a successful man who had made the leap to the New Country almost fifteen years ago—a hard-working man with a well-kept farm and a large family. A man who needed you more than anyone ever had—grown sons, daughters already married and the two youngest orphaned at the death of his first wife in childbirth.

This was a partnership he offered, a chance unlike any other. Was the prospect of a home and land, a place to make an imprint, enticing? What did it feel like to arrive to a well-built, sturdy wooden house knowing that the first years in this country meant sod houses and harnessing children to plows for want of oxen?

Did you draw the pail from the well and drink deep of this water, feel the minerals on your tongue? Did you count the cows in the barn, inhale the perfume of straw and warm bodies, stroke a flank before setting down the milking stool and pail?

Did you bring seeds from home and plant them by the front door to remind you of family you left behind?

Did you remember the words you whispered to women in labour as you struggled through childbirth?

Did you walk the woods and cry out in joy at mushrooms you recognized, the tiny sweet strawberries of spring?

What was it like to make a hundred pierogi a day, only to have them gobbled up at meals—to start all over the next day and the next?

Did you give thanks as you saved used thread from a garment, cut off buttons and fashioned a dress from flour sacks?

You had lived through Revolution and a Great War—was this heaven on earth for you here?

Lying in bed at night, warm against the solid back of a solid man, a man who loved you, who provided for you, a man who sat down to write a letter, a letter that changed your life.

## Teardrops

Tejasvee Nagar

my tears soak the bedsheets in a pain that my poems can't express,  
i wail like I've been born for the first time,  
the second was when they put a title over me.  
i think i exist only as a namesake,  
mother says that i gift a language to my thoughts,  
i give them my ability to speak,  
only to be crushed when they scream at me.  
i listen to the sound of life within me,  
I learnt that i can take one breath at a time,  
yet i feel like i am not a part of myself,  
and i try to get this out of my system.  
so, when my teardrops rush down my cheeks,  
i feel like I've been lost on purpose.  
I am scared to begin again,  
and live this life without any regrets.





# Heritage

Joseph Soares

basalt rock flows out the holes in the wall  
you punched in your parents' house in '93  
filling a space left behind  
by grief for boyhood.  
we all just want to feel full sometimes,  
even if that means praying on our knees  
anger is a funny beast,  
especially when it's genetic or learned,  
but it's nothing compared to fear,  
and isn't fear the basis of anger?  
for what is there to be angry about  
if it isn't for fear of what's to come?

# Hush Now, Hush Now

Percy Olsen

My hope leaves me exhausted  
An eroded top of statue  
That was once a face

For years I have searched for you  
My old song  
A faded melody  
Ringing in a pocket of air  
Just beyond my hearing

So hush now, hush now  
My loved, hush now  
We know how to soothe  
Your gums aflame

It brings no comfort  
To know your memory of  
This day will fade  
So hush now, hush now,  
My loved, hush now



# Things I Should Have Told My Sons

Lou Faber

1. You can lead a horse to water  
but if he is agoraphobic  
you will be walking home

2. You can run  
but doing so on ice  
will lead to useless bruising  
and broken bones

3. a bird in the hand  
will not be terribly happy  
and could shit  
all over your new shoes

4. All good things come  
and most go,  
but bad things linger  
if you allow it

5. In for a penny  
and no one will  
play poker with you.

6. Don't cross your bridges  
you could fall in the water  
and drown.

7. Half a loaf  
will always feed  
two fewer people than  
you have at the table

8. The pen is mightier  
than the pencil, if it  
uses permanent ink.



He sees butterflies.

He is no longer the seventy-eight year old with high blood pressure, cold hands, and a perpetually sore right shoulder picking up a prescription refill as he walks through the pharmacy section of Safeway.

It has been decades, nevertheless, today he is a nine-year-old fourth grader in Sacred Heart school, who fell out of a tree and onto the exposed barbs at the top of a playground chain link fence. He is walking home with a shred of skin flapping against his knee as blood stains his ripped Levi 501 jeans - the ones with the buttons he hated, the only ones sold at Jett's Department store in this little post-war town with not enough housing for families of men freshly discharged after World War II and Korea.

He limps from fence to sidewalk to trek the five blocks home without mentioning the blood and pain from the gash, when on his left he sees his mother's face on the driver's side as their two-tone green 1953 Oldsmobile Super '88 pulls to the curb. The car stops. His mother exits the car, opens the rear passenger door, and he, without hesitation, hops in. No words spoken. It's as if she knows - what, where, when, and how.

He recalls nothing until they arrive home. She tells him to stand in the bathtub. He struggles to remove his jeans. She allows the blood to drip. Then, as if by magic, and with a surgeon's grace, she lifts the flap of skin from the knee with the little finger of her left hand. Cleans the wound with her right hand, applies mercurochrome, then removes a Band-Aid from its tin container, fashioning a butterfly shape, pulling the cover from the adhesive, placing it over his knee. He hears muttering about a tetanus shot.

Decades later, the school is still there. As is the fence with its twisted links – now covered with protective tubing. Sometimes the image of that butterfly recurs –

when picking up a prescription refill,

when not in a hurry,

when he reads the Band-Aid labels –

flexible fabric,  
sensitive skin,  
liquid spray,  
the rounded butterfly –  
he remembers his mother's magical powers.

## **The Stretch**

Palak Jain

Salt means birth  
Burn means grow  
Trace a circle, finger coated in saliva and blood

Dig a hole,  
Lick the tips,  
Put it down, bring it  
home.





Glenis Moore

### Afterwards

He had to do everything for her:  
get her up, feed her, wash her,  
the body he had once desired worn frail  
by age and Parkinson's.  
He had no time for himself:  
an hour for the shopping  
while a volunteer sat with her  
in weary silence and maybe  
a snatched few minutes at night  
when she slept fitfully.  
But when she died he missed her.  
His world, previously overflowing  
with exhaustion, felt empty,  
lost and way too quiet.  
It took him almost a year  
afterwards to realise  
that he still had life enough  
left to fill it for himself.

Thomas Zimmerman

### You're Not Even Here

It's why I write about you now.  
Near-zeroes of your deathbeds:  
one of you so swollen, wracked,  
you couldn't even look at me;  
the other swirled in tides of incoherence,  
we were talking underwater.

Friends and I read other people's poems,  
beat them with a rubber hose  
to see how art creates safe spaces  
where we all can say and feel the things  
that might just kill us in the everyday:  
grief, guilt, and shame.

For me, it's not the missed I-love-yous.  
Maybe not.  
Not even missing you.  
It's just that I've felt freer with you gone

## Dispatch

Thomas Zimmerman

My dad would have been 94 today,  
and I'll be 63 next Saturday.  
Regardless of which Zimmerman's alive  
or dead, years fall like rain to swell the river,  
same mad god still counting drops. Now, drowned  
gold sun, dry champagne in your glass, strong ale  
in mine. I slept in late this morning, haven't  
showered. Mind's a dark pavilion, fairness  
in the shadow turning blue, and temples  
gray. I write because I want to feel  
alive: the poet in the book I'm reading  
says the same. New moon: late birdsong, whine  
of tires on the interstate, the bedroom  
window cracked to let the night air in,  
death floating lonely and austere. I feel it  
pass but know that it and I will cycle  
back. This dispatch from the planet, time,  
my molecules: so slightly all coheres.

## Our Birthday

John Grey

A solar nebula  
grabbed a chunk  
out of a  
molecular cloud  
by gravitational collapse  
and it spun and flattened  
into a circumstellar disk  
that, in turn,  
formed a planet.

A single cell  
came of age  
after the ruckus,  
asked, "Now what?"



how it beg(in)s,, in,, a backwards glance Under  
VioletSweet chords (and it was so god  
damn sweet) a stare one second Too Long, long,,  
long enough  
to

catch on your eyelash,, ((my intestines curl in on  
themselves)) and  
your fingertips pricked my wrist -

this was - it never was - what i planned,, i  
and How : these flowers crawl up my esophagus ,,  
((please,, i wanna be tangleTanglewrapped in your  
finest spider web))  
& do u beg for this? these smoke-saturated touches  
(thighs over thighs)  
Want& Colliding like so - i think my body grows  
flowers just for you,  
i pick them out of my skin, all shades of purple and  
red, and i think i like it,  
i think i like you,,,

# Ode to Infinity

Milo Arnone

i want to love you for the longest time  
which is something i never  
thought i'd say because at sixteen,  
i didn't imagine myself  
over eighteen—nineteen if i was  
lucky—in love, joyful—if even alive—  
but you arrive like sunlight  
ever-present, glorious, and suddenly  
i see a home, your smile  
on the walls, warm cheeks red  
with memories we've made,  
and there are windows, windows  
so we are always able  
to watch for something we haven't seen  
yet.  
the future has never felt so close. i count  
the days i don't fall  
asleep with you beside me, and while it is  
not too hard—for these days are  
so few—i never stop  
wanting to wake up with you in  
every morning, waiting for  
your breath against my cheek,  
eager to share the fresh air  
of this new day, hoping that last  
lonely night will finally be the last;  
i count the days i fall  
for you harder, not a  
tumble or a trip  
but a step off  
the edge into curiosity,  
thoughtful, intentional, into  
the rainbow of not-knowing  
but hoping, belief  
that there is always something new  
in tomorrow—these days have  
yet to stop. i want  
to love you for the longest time  
so that when winter springs  
and summer falls, our sun will  
always rise.

## Rising Phoenix

## Screams of Unfettered Minds

Walking in shadows, no fear of death  
Stuck on the breast of a beast cackling in jest  
With my walls now in ruins I open this heart  
Embracing my whole self while slowly being torn apart  
But is it worth it, you might ask? - YES!  
For when the time comes the traumas of my past  
Would have taught me the best countermeasure  
Even now with triggers turned bullets I lay  
Insomnia-wrecked brain telling lies upon lies  
About what people say, these demons will be slaughtered  
On that day I'll admit that I fell prey and I'm not proud  
Of the shit-woman I became  
Despite the qualities I lack someday I'll look back to when  
I fell off the track, a reminder to myself of the crack  
In my manifestations that encouraged my illusions of grandeur  
The very threads I tore when my  
Fucked-up soul was withered and sore  
Like a Phoenix I WILL RISE!  
Ashes scattered among none-the-wiser  
For there will be no demise of my soul  
Once consumed by that black fungal fear  
I will see, clarity ripping the blindfold from me  
And I will finally be unapologetically FREE!

THE END

# Evolve With Me

Hope Baxter

I pick a part myself  
Peeling away layer after layer  
Of old dead skin,  
Eventually every cell in my body will be brand new,  
Like a phoenix rising again  
Or the undead reborn.

Every part of me aching for this transformation  
For this surge of newness  
New me. New self. New IDENTITY!

I define me. I control me.  
I am myself, I am not something for you to understand or digest,  
I am not something for you to study  
And dissect

No that is not how you know me.

The new me has boundaries,  
Is not afraid to be afraid,  
Not concerned with your expectations,  
Of what you think I should Be. Do. Look like.

The new me  
Types on the keys likes she's playing a drum,  
Is ready to say every word she hits  
Like it is a song.  
And oh, my time has come to be unapologetically me  
And if you try to contain me I will just burst free.  
For my life is not for any other but myself.

My heart is an open door because walls  
Are what cause war  
And love is what resolves it.

I am not living my life afraid of someone leaving  
Because no one ever stayed in front of a locked door anyways.

# Today Merriam-Webster Dictionary Features the Words “Foible” and “Forte”

Kate Wylie

As in swords.

As in strength  
and weakness.

As in marriage.

As in anything  
silver-tipped.

As in Judas.

As in the second  
amendment.

As in *the opposite of a gun  
is wherever you point it.*

As in sitting on the stand  
as a young man with my father,  
canvas camouflage vests pulled  
tight around our chests, the cold  
November air closing in around  
us, when a sixteen-point buck  
came into view, when I pulled  
the trigger slow and steady like he  
showed me, and how the buck fell.

As in the field of memory.

As in burying our parents  
every generation.

As in peonies, fertility,  
infidelity.

As in knowing  
some men don't get to grow old.



As in the way Daunte Wright's name tastes like steel.

As in a white-picket fence  
reclaimed by ivy.

As in pinky promises  
we know won't be kept.

As in Congress.

As in the biggest cherry tree  
you've ever seen, perfect ruby  
hearts smushed underfoot,  
pits sticking in the grooves  
of a birdwatcher's boots.

As in the possibility of God.

As in peeling an orange,  
rind under your fingernails.

As in the Fourth of July sky  
exploding with fireworks.

As in long-stemmed roses.

As in saying a prayer  
over tonight's glass of whiskey.

As in the stick  
& gold of honey.

As in burning a flag  
when it becomes too tattered to fly.

As in waking up hungry.

As in seeing the end  
for what it is, or  
could be: the beginning.

our relationship is strengthened  
by the things we can't even  
tell ourselves  
but we mutely confide in each other –  
how you've always had  
a favorite  
or how i took a few  
of her pills  
(that damned weekend in '09)  
now whether this was  
the beginning or the end  
is unclear to me  
what is clear is that we  
can't go on like this forever  
what happens when we gas out?  
do we just live in purgatory,  
punishment for the projects  
we never finished?  
or do we find our way,  
crawling on hands and knees  
nails caked in dirt and blood  
until someone takes us in

I'm alone in the middle of this strange city. As I mindlessly wander the sweltering, narrow alleyways, I hope it's just me and the feral cats chasing terrier-sized rats. It's almost impossible to see much of anything, even with the flickering streetlights. The one nearest me gives up the ghost; I squint up to see the stars, but the dilapidated skyscrapers block out the sky like prison bars. I sigh and idly wonder how this day got so far off course. The morning had glowed bright and promised dreamlike adventures, not nightmarish horrors. I'd boarded the Greyhound, refreshed and eager for my summer vacation to commence. I was disembarking at my stop, ready for the brief jaunt to the international air port. There, I was going to meet up with my cousins before we boarded for our trip to France.

A tom-cat's yowling screech drags me back to my desperate present situation. Cautiously, I pick out a path through the vile, trash-strewn trail. Discolored beer glass cracks mournfully under my worn-thin Converse high-tops. A languid breeze wails. I startle when at least a dozen frayed trash bags writhe miserably to life in the wind. A particularly large white one reminds me of a phantom as it jerks against its barbed-wire fence jailer. I wish I had my cellphone. If only I wasn't jostled as I was digging it out of my Levi's this morning. I was only able to glance at the text before my iPhone made a suicidal jump to the asphalt. I'd sighed. Whatever "urgent message" my perpetually hyper cousin had to tell me would have to wait until we were face to face. At the time, I thought she just "had to share" she'd discovered that some super famous, hot pop singer or actor had visited this café or that historical sight, and, (of course), couldn't I shift our trip's agenda around so we could visit it, too? I'd laughed to myself and trotted off. Soon, however, I realized that something was seriously wrong. Instead of well-cared for modern architecture, I was being engulfed by decaying buildings from the last century. Digging around for a map, I shifted my backpack to one shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the flash of a blade as a thief slashed through my backpack's strap and bolted away.

For what had seemed an eternity I stood, petrified as the shock sank into me, cold and terrifying. I resumed my wandering.



In the alley, I'm dully aware of the deepening darkness: the ghostly moon has faded into oblivion. I shudder despite the suffocating heat, for predators love to hunt in the dark. It's now that I realized what my cousin had been trying to warn me about. She must've been trying to tell me that earlier she told me the wrong stop to get off at! And so, I realize the gravity of my situation. I am a lone high school girl in the innards of a strange, dangerous city without a map, wallet, or anyway to contact a rescuer. Alone, I am an easy target.

My fears are soon confirmed. I am warily scurrying past an abandoned factory when I hear the raucous shouts of a pack of teens. The stench of pot fills my nostrils, and I gag. I turn a corner and see them, lounging around on the factory's front entrance steps. By the glow of the joints, there's at least half a dozen of them. I long to turn around and run before I am spotted, but I know I cannot go back. I have no choice but to go forward. So I slink softly into the deep shadows on the opposite side of the avenue and begin my treacherous passage. I am two-thirds of the way past them when I stumble on the cracked sidewalk. The chatter stops. The gang certainly knows I am here now. I scramble to my feet but force myself to walk calmly away. I hear the scraping of combat boots as one of them rises to his feet. My heart sinks. Then a goon charges at me, bellowing like a deranged bull. I quicken my pace but refuse to run, knowing if I do, the entire pack will certainly hound me. He body-slams me. Startled, I squeak. I skid across the unforgiving concrete into the side of an overflowing dumpster.

Something putrid and moist oozes all over my right side and down my T-shirt's collar. This seems to satisfy the jerk, for he lopes back to his guffawing fellows who are watching from the depths of the shadows. Gasping for air, I choke on a hot trickle of bitter blood trailing down my tongue to my throat. Stiffly, I pull myself to my feet. I don't even look back; I just limp away. The night is oppressively dark now. I just want to curl up into fetal position and weep, but I force myself to keep moving. I resolve to move to stay alive, for I realize now I am certainly prey. Prey must be silent and constantly moving to survive to see the sunrise. So all night long I slip in and out of shadows. Past bars filled with profanity. Past the high who have passed out in the streets. Past crumbling mansions, haunted by the broken and hopeless. Past shoddy shanty towns run rampant by disease of body and

soul. Past a graffitied cathedral, long ago left desolate. I search for relief from the hounding hopelessness, but find none. No, not a single scrap of empathy, not a drop of compassion, not even a fleck of kindness. The poor souls dwelling in this cesspool are as cankered and broken as the buildings. They are more lost than I am.

## **Culture Heroes of Rot & Ruination**

Florence-Suzanne Reppert

The steel beams stand frozen in time against the tumultuous sky,  
sighing together like age-exhausted warriors post-battle.

I wonder in awe at the strength it took to erect these God-like creations  
and the fortitude it takes for them to still remain,  
alert and ready after all their makers have long since fallen.

I reach out my all too unworthy hand, aching to touch the war-scarred metal.  
Mineral stained with the centennial tears of rusted corrosion.

Needing to caress its abandoned carcass with a single sympathetic finger.

However, I withdraw with a despondent sigh.

To what end do we, toiling monsters of flesh and bone, build and forget?  
Leaving these once magnificent metallic deities to rot.

Is this all our 'humanity' has to offer?



Then the mountains spoke. Voiced it in chorus, on the ancient land of Turag. A world where trees walked, winds cried, rivers sang and the mountains talked. This place is not for humans to reside anymore but for natural lives and artificial intelligence. Turag, yes, this place, because humans have long been obliterated, like dinosaurs before them. Since then robots have replaced them. The organic world even as we speak, ceased to exist, as autumnal dirge swept through the pine forests of dead wood.

They all witnessed it, the sky, the oceans, and the mountains. But their voices couldn't be heard. In the days of humans, everyone thought they were mute, who neither heard nor spoke. But humans were wrong. They communicated and witnessed every human history. Humans didn't see what they saw. Just as well, they saw the end of the world. They saw it all coming. There was too much clunky background noise. Humans were really a noisy lot.

Turag, once a lush plateau. Birds frolicked in the rain. Wheat and rice grass grew and wavered under an autumn sky. Children played around, while mothers bar-b-qued corn over open fire-pits. Smoke nearly choked the neighboring mountains of the plateau. But the mountains never complained. They smiled and took it all in their stride. They waited patiently for a miracle to happen.

In the meantime, billions of years of civilization passed. Generations toppled one another. Kings died to make way for the new. Power corrupted Kings. Mighty Kings they might have been, who won battles, and killed people on the mountain steppes. The green fields turned scarlet, replacing the many resplendent shades. But wins and expansions were all that mattered to the Kings, one more despotic than the other, often sacrificed the innocent for self-aggrandizement and cared not much at all for justice, whether or not justice was meted out. Then a time came when nature revolted. Fields stopped producing bumper crops. Rains decided not to dole out the bountiful properties of the rainbow. Leaves shriveled up. Darkness blighted the sun. Blood-moon lit the world. Machines were empowered. This new age of machines initiated a different kind of rage. Annihilation of the humans underway, to take possession of the land. They didn't need nature to feed them, and neither did they care to find beauty in it.

Humans are long gone.

“Could men not have predicted this?” asked the blood moon to the mountains.

“They could very well have, because they were the ones to make these machines. But men ignored it in haste to chase success,” the Mountains answered. The Mountains said, “Enter our caves and view the paintings there; stories of life foreshadowed on the dim walls. But men paid no heed. Too much background noise; they came from war drums, drunken cheers of vacuous victories, and wonton amusements. Noise shrouded men’s judgment for everything that came to pass. Fools, they were fools! Those men, whose wisdom failed them. Only the stars knew how reckless they were. The massive destruction of innocent lives. Timeless settlements and resettlements, of nearly broken bones and spirits of men, women, and children. They looked like scattered peas to the gods above. Still, men endeavored to build communities and strange dwellings to shield themselves from showers, storms, and blustery winds. They chose to ignore the transience of life. They stopped to think that the life-giving, precious air, their lifeline, was sourced from an outer world; that they had no control over. The last breath taken, very well could be on those battlefields. Relentless battles, as if there were no tomorrows. Mortals inhaled this infinite air to harness what little strengths they could and stored them within their caged shells. A mortal existence, without any rhyme or reason. The immortals while they remained, so tied humans to timelines, and made them mortals. Ah! But humans didn’t think that far ahead. Too limited for predictions. That their passions exultant, looped them up into this paradox. That this paradox would also lead to the destruction of the human race. By far, their intelligence caused this downfall.”

“Did they have a choice?” asked blood moon.

“Well, you and I seemed to have outlived humans,” replied the mountains. While they spoke, a dust storm picked up on the far side of the plateau. A russet gust of winds rolled in and darkened the mountains, clogging up their crevices and valleys. It covered the blood moon too, rendering a sad world to further gloom.

*This wasn't the end, surely?* The mountains thought. They had difficulty breathing; the air had ceased. The trees stopped walking to regain their bearings; the rivers stopped singing. They broke out into hiccups and coughs. These tumults in the surroundings shook the peace. No human hand at play, to create this havoc. The machines ran amok, and kept losing their vital parts. There was no one to fix them. Machines could doctor one another, but they didn’t get that opportunity because even they couldn’t predict this. A human failing of flawed design, to be certain.

An impending disaster loomed. Another kind of warfare started within nature itself. The winds clashed with the rising tide. Mountains stood guard, to stop the storm from going any further. But the lightning then befell the mountain tips. A series of volcanic eruptions and melted glaciers paved the way for pandemonium. The overflowed lava wedded the falling flashes of lightning and danced in spiraled tango. Complete chaos beset the land of Turag. In the wake of a present danger, the blood- moon shot out of sight. The storms, and the lightning, left history in awe. Then a heat wave surged. Turag was hot again. Turag hotting up! The lava ran in a rivulet towards the swelling seas. The oceans submerged the mountains. The plateau of Turag, now under water, saw another breathing world beneath the oceans. Once again there was life. Mermaids swam unhindered. A clear sun ruled and gave humans a second chance.

## After the Storm

Emma Burnett

The blue globe spun serenely through space, following its pre-ordained trajectory around the sun. Up until about five minutes ago, the globe had been blue, but it had also been green, and brown, and white. But the Elohim had agreed: it was time for a hard reset.

This batch of lifeforms wasn't working out.

«At least it's not as bad as the dinosaurs,» Ba'al said. The others muttered agreement. That had been cataclysmic. For a start, it had been a lot of work to find an asteroid just the right size. They hadn't wanted to tear a new moon out of the planet, after all. And, also, it had made the whole planet very unpleasant to visit. Very hot. Pretty stinky.

*This is really messy, though. And I didn't like the screaming. It gave me all these feels. Yahweh had always been a little squeamish. Yahweh had actually made them bury all the corpses after the dinosaur event. It felt like it had taken eons. Plus, there's going to be a lot to mop up. And I don't want to be in charge of making the polar ice caps. Don't like the grating noise.*

'How long do you think it'll take?' Elah asked. 'To tidy all this up?'

WHY? YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE YOU NEED TO BE?

Shaddai's voice boomed, as it always did.

Elah sucked its incorporeal teeth, a habit it had picked up from the women who used to visit its temple, women who had spent time there talking about their husbands' drinking or gambling or fancy ladies. They'd done a lot of teeth sucking. 'Maybe. Maybe I just want to take a break, take some down time. Chill out.'

WE ARE IN THE INTERSTITIAL PLACE BETWEEN  
WORLDS. EXACTLY HOW MUCH MORE CHILLED DO YOU  
WANT TO BE?

«Hey! Relax, both of you! It's been, like, a few minutes tops.» Ba'al said, still staring at the turbulent planet-wide sea. Ba'al liked a good storm.

'Feels like longer,' Elah replied. 'There's nothing to do, now. How long will this take? I want a temple again, somewhere they'll feed me things again. Grapes and whatever.'

«Yeah, well, the water just finished rising. We've got, maybe, thirty, forty days?» It was always Ba'al who managed these projects. It liked keeping the records updated. «We'll let the waters finish washing everything away, let the sediment settle down. Then we can work together on re-forming the ice caps, decide where we want the continents to be, and kick this off again.

Third time lucky, hey?»

They watched as the waters swished around the planet, stared at eddy currents forming around the tips of mountain ranges, and at the bulge from the pull of the moon which looked like an un-popped boil.

Shaddai broke the silence. SO, WHAT DO WE WANT TO TRY  
GROWING NEXT?

*Something that doesn't shit, Yahweh suggested. Or scream.*

'Like tree people?' Elah's imagination didn't stretch far.

*Yeah, maybe. Or, corals?*

I THINK CORALS SHIT.

«Hold up, hold up,» Ba'al cut across the start of a promising line of enquiry. «We can't have this conversation without Addie. Anyone seen Addie?»

The Elohim considered briefly, and realised they hadn't. Not in at least two minutes, anyway. Not since the floods began in earnest.

'Hey, Shaddai, call Addie,' Elah said.

YOU CALL ADDIE, Shaddai snapped.

'You have the voice for it. All powerful and boomy. I've always admired your booming shouty voice.'

YOU'RE USING FLATTERY.

'Yeah, and?'

IT'S SURPRISINGLY EFFECTIVE. ADONAI, COME JOIN US!  
Shaddai's voiced boomed, the echo bouncing back off the blue planet, a rolling thunder of godlike magnitude.

«Good thing everything down there is dead,» said Ba'al. «That would have scared the life out of them.»

They waited for what felt like seconds. Nothing happened.

ADDIE! MANIFEST YOUR INCORPOREAL ASS OVER  
HERE!

The last of the Elohim popped out from the other side of the blue planet.

“Oh! Hi guys! Sorry, didn’t hear you. Because we’re in space, haha. What’s going on?”

*I don’t think you’re supposed to say ‘guys’ you know, Yahweh said. It’s not very inclusive.*

WHAT SHOULD WE SAY INSTEAD? Shaddai asked. HI GODS?

*Yeah, maybe, or...*

«Could everyone just keep to task, please? Addie, where have you been? We want to start planning for the next evolution.» Ba’al sounded like a pedantic accountant in the sort of equatorial civilisation that no longer existed. «We need everyone here, so we can deliberate.»

“Uhm. Well. So, yeah, about that.” It was hard to fidget without a body, without fingernails to pick or a stylus to chew, but Adonai was giving it a good go. “There was something I wanted to tell you, but then we ran out of time, and the flood just happened so fast...”

*It was really dramatic, right? Yahweh said. Like, whoa, get those waters to slow down a little, you know?*

‘Yeah, it kind of caught me out, how fast it went,’ Elah said. ‘Just a little heat on the polar ice and the waters were just like, whoosh, and then all that rain, and then, boom, there was no one left.’

“You say that,” Adonai glanced over at the blue ball. “You say there’s no one left, but...”

Shaddai was staring at the planet, scowling. WHAT IS THAT?

«What is what?» Ba’al’s voice took on a distinct similarity to nails on igneous rock. «What is *what*?»

THAT. Shaddai gestured towards the perfectly blue ball, entirely shades of blue except for a tiny speck, dark against the glittery planet-sea. The Elohim all zoomed in. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, ADONAI?

“Nothing!” Adonai wondered if the moon was big enough to hide behind. Maybe the sun would be a better choice. “I just, you know, didn’t agree about the whole annihilation business.”

«A hard reset, that’s what we agreed,» Ba’al said. «I have it in my notes, right here. 1656 AM, drown the world, start again. The population was out of control. We agreed, Addy.»

*Yeah, Addie, we agreed, Yahweh stuck out its tongue.*

«Shut up, Yaya.»

“Uhm. So, about that. I didn’t actually vote?” Adonai edged closer to Mars, in case it needed to duck behind something.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU DIDN’T VOTE? WE ALL VOTED. BA’AL HAS IT IN THE NOTES, Shaddai said.

“Actually, I excused myself, exactly when you voted,” replied Adonai. “Just nipped out for a pee. Because we were corporeal, and we were in that

really lovely room, remember, with all the bronzes? I didn't want to make a mess in there."

'Oh, yeah, that was a really lovely venue. Great food. We should use that aga—' Elah smacked its metaphysical forehead. 'Oh. Shit.'

"So, yeah. You all agreed. I didn't vote. But I guess the majority carries, anyway." Adonai gestured at the blue world. "It's mostly drowned."

«This isn't a democracy, you wazzock,» Ba'al said.

"What is it, then?"

THE KINGDOM OF GODS.

Yahweh tilted its head, and asked, *Right, but what actually does that mean? Like, really? cuz I've always wondered.*

SHUT UP, YAYA.

"You all made a big decision, and I guess that's fine, but I figured maybe I'll take a little decision and save just some of them. Like, a really small proportion." Adonai shrugged. "So, I warned someone, you know, a nice guy, keen to talk to the gods. Big into wine, but a good sharer, and a good listener. Anyway, I let him know that, you know, a big storm was coming, best to make preparations, that sort of thing. He seemed pretty worried, went and made this big boat, collected a lot of animals and the family members he liked. Seemed legit."

«You just warned someone. I see. Well, we'll just have to go and fix this problem. Lightning and big waves should do it, I think. Elah, you want to help me with this?» Ba'al began to roll up its immaterial sleeves.

"No! Wait! You can't." Adonai flapped in front of them. "Please, give them a chance."

WHY SHOULD WE? YOU HAVE MADE UNILATERAL DECISIONS ABOUT THE FATE OF THE EARTH, Shaddai sounded stern, disapproving.

"I mean, we make unilateral decisions about the fate of the Earth all the time. Just, we do it as a group. One voice of the gods. But they never have a say," Adonai gestured at the dot on the sea. "And I don't really think that's on. Can't we just leave them to it, see how they do for a bit?"

Yahweh nodded. *Actually, I'd be up for no more screaming. My head still hurts from a few minutes ago. I need an aspirin or something, and we just went and washed away all the willow trees.*

"They have seeds on the boat," Adonai said.

'That's not a boat, it's a floating island. It looks like they've got literally every animal on earth on that thing.' Elah was inspecting the boat, peacefully bobbing along like a cork. 'How in gods' names did they get polar bears onto that thing? I wouldn't want to be in charge of mucking out, that's for sure.'

"Not all the creatures made it aboard, I heard. Some things got left out, couldn't be found, or herded." Adonai shrugged.



*When can we plant the trees?* Yahweh asked.

Elah sucked its teeth again. ‘Shut up, Yaya.’

*Everyone STOP telling me to shut up! My head hurts, and we can't agree on stuff, and I just, you know what? I need a break! Yahweh pulled back from the group. I think I need to put some space between us. I'm going to go find another planet and see if they have willow trees, or those mushrooms that you lick that make you see the gods.*

YOU WANT TO SEE THE GODS? GET A MIRROR.

*Shut up, Shads! I'm going. You can't stop me.*

None of the Elohim tried.

«Oy vey. I guess that ruins any chance that we might reach an agreement in this millennia.» Disappointment emanated from Ba'al, as it tucked its notes between the fabrics of time. «While we wait for Yaya to get over its strop, perhaps I will do an inventory of habitable planetary systems in this quadrant of the universe.»

YOU DON'T NEED TO INVENTORY ANYTHING. WE ARE OMNICIENT, pointed out Shaddai.

But Ba'al was gone.

Elah waited for two whole seconds, then said in a hurry, ‘You know what? I think maybe I'll join Ba'al. Find a place with some sapient species that are keen to build a temple. I'll, uh. I'll see you both around?’

WAS IT SOMETHING I SAID?

Adonai shrugged. “Probably not. Probably something I did. Kind of destroys the all-knowing all-powerful concept, if you totally blank on one of your siblings filling a boat with sheep. And, to be honest, it always seemed like Elah was looking for an excuse to go off and do its own thing. Never been that keen on me.”

NOR ME. Shaddai paused, staring at the blue dot. I AM BEGINNING TO WONDER, HOWEVER, ABOUT WHAT ELSE IS OUT THERE. I'M TIRED OF DESTRUCTION. PERHAPS I WILL ALSO TAKE THIS TIME TO EXPLORE THE UNIVERSAL WILDS. FIND OUT IF THERE ARE CORALS ON OTHER PLANES OF EXISTENCE. IT SEEMS YOU HAVE ACQUIRED THIS WORLD, ADONAI. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN MANAGE ALONE?

Adonai smiled. There would need to be some serious clean-up to do, and some meteoric changes to the theology moving forward.

“Yeah, you go ahead. I've got this. I can take it from here.”

## Starting Over

Phil Temples

The two strangers walked down the middle of the once-busy street in a once-prosperous city, eyeing with disbelief the devastation before them. Everywhere they looked chaos reigned supreme: buildings were smoldering; cars were smashed to pieces as though some invisible fist from the sky had slammed down on top of them. The smell of death lingered in the air. Garbage and trash cans were haphazardly strewn about. Newspapers skipped along the ground in the breeze. Broken glass shards were embedded in telephone poles. There were no birds in the sky. A dog could be seen scurrying about in the distance. She reckoned it was quite possibly the only other living creature in their universe.

“Well,” she said.

They stopped. She looked into the man’s eyes. Then she reached out and took his hand and held it in hers.

“I’d say you and I are going to have to start things over. What’s your name again?”

## Children of the Storm #2

Ann Christine Tabaka

There is a storm inside each of us,  
it's been brewing from the start.  
It grows stronger with each step forward we take.

We march across a barren landscape.  
We shield our eyes from blinding light.  
There is no sin so great as those of our own making.  
Many trials confront us - but we fight on.  
A future that does not belong to us  
    is handed down from the past.  
We will never surrender.  
We will not be beaten down.  
Together we become a hurricane.  
It is the storm of freedom.  
It is the storm of truth.  
We are children of the everlasting storm.

Cath Nichols

## Comet Baby

Once I was luminous, fast as light, rising. Now  
    I have cooled, and cannot shift this crust,  
  
not even a crater to hold me. But I was not cast away  
    for my own safety: a coiled Superman or Moses.  
  
The midwife said I was a long baby, even when curled  
    (which caused my mother no end of amusement),  
  
but had she said 'tall' that wouldn't have cut it at all,  
    since babies are born horizontal on the whole.  
  
I continued to be long(-winded) all my life.

## Alvaro's Friend

J. A. Hartley

Alvaro's friend was stabbed the other day -  
through the heart by a stranger  
in the baking countryside  
with views of the city skyline behind  
and children on bikes  
and joggers and dogs in earshot -  
where stone pines lean stiff,  
green spiked heads in bulbous lines,  
below cloudless, empty blue sky  
and miles and scrubby miles of hills.

He called the ambulance himself  
from his own phone, in his own voice -  
it took them twenty minutes to come  
and when they did they found him dead,  
bled dry in the cool shade,  
ants trickling up the bark tracks,  
bumblebees buzzing the wildflowers,  
helicopters going back and forth  
with water for smoking bushfires.

And you sit and wonder what an accident is -  
how much life is luck and timing.  
And you think of him lit up by the sun,  
lying on his back, phone in his hand, lungs full.  
Perhaps an aeroplane, trailing dissipating tracks,  
was his last sight. Perhaps he thought, eyes dim,  
'God, I wish I was on it'.

## Remind Yourself This Is Just Practice Sam Calhoun

In the first flourishes of red light  
the rush of wind takes the last  
of the leaves into the ditch.  
I am standing in the medicine wheel,  
a garden cornered by cottonwoods,  
while the moon, waning crescent, hangs  
a cocked smile east.

House finches shoot like Leonids,  
flashing in the crooked birdbath,  
its cratered face a moon of it's own, leaning,  
the one I've been meaning to fix,  
the pedestal too heavy to lift on my own.

East. East they will ride the thermals,  
wings jostling like heartbeats.  
Soon the sun will cast  
my long shadow across the grass again,  
eclipsing all of the earth I can.

Somewhere the dog is asleep on the deck.  
She is dreaming.  
Somewhere the wife is drinking hot tea.  
When the mist touches the trees,  
it touches the sky, becomes one--  
I breathe in.



# How To Become a Writer: A Totally Accurate Guide from the Blue Devil's Favorite Mistake

Victoria Wraight

This is a formal apology to my advanced fiction writing professor who was subjected to my splatterpunk nightmare of a novella wrapped in a gothic bow and delivered with the sweet and sincere smile of a straight-A student (*sorry!*).

*The writer is born like an aviary beast, breaking free from bloody eggshells to spread the curse of purple prose and extended metaphors! She is a terror to behold.*

When I began college, my father told me to punch life's teeth out. This was the final sentiment that killed the tiny angel on my shoulder, her wings plucked by the tiny devil, who whispered and hissed into my ear when I dared to sleep.

She wanted me to transcribe her frustrations and nightmares, she wanted me to remember we were once terrified of the dark, and now we want to be in *The Dark*.

She wanted me to become the type of writer that would make Percy Shelley's calcified heart beat with terror.

*Look at me breaking repetition! Look at me starting a delicious opening to the rule of three. This is me breaking just to spite you.*

1. The first rule of writing is to have the unbridled confidence of William Blake when he introduced us to the man sized flea that enlightened us about the souls of men.
2. The second rule of writing is to be prepared to be gawked at as if you just introduced readers to a man sized flea that enlightens them about the souls of men.
3. The third rule of writing is to follow a pattern.
4. A fourth thing I learned is that if you break enough rules you're either a genius or an amateur.
5. A final fifth thing? If there are words in your skull that need to come out, let them out before they eat away at your eyes.

If your determination and tendency to seek out the bizarre and capture it in ink make a professor laugh in your face or declare the writing world would be lucky to have you, those are the right words.

If your strange, delightful, and utterly frightful tales earn you a concerned link to the school's counseling center or a gracious internship offer, those are the right words.

But then again, I'm a rotten wordsmith with too many books and not enough brains. There are too many voices screaming the same thing. If you want to be a writer, it's already too late.



## Contributors

Cover Artwork- Litmora Issue 0: Genesis – **Grace Dixon**

Grace Dixon is a freelance artist, focusing on design work, illustration, and a hint of 2D animation. She is a graduate of the State University of New York at Fredonia, with a BFA in Animation/Illustration and a BA in Art History. Outside of art, Grace also loves to sing, travel, read, and go to theme parks.

A MidSaturn Night's Dream - **Mike Escobar** (p.22-24)

Mike is a well seasoned chef, who once served art on a plate. Now – creative art can only tingle his taste buds. Mike is a digital media artist from Schenectady, New York and is currently a student at Fredonia University. He is enrolled in the BFA animation and illustration program, with a minor in creative writing. His passion projects include an adult cartoon tv show, and a diamond in the rough movie script.

Act of Creation / Effete - **Mikey May** (p.53, 55)

Mikey May (he/fae/xe) is a teacher and writer based in Birmingham, UK. Faer work focuses on trans liveabilities, institutional violences, and queer resistances. Mikey self-publishes solo and collaborative poetry zines about language, sex, and Taylor Swift at [www.mikeymay.itch.io](http://www.mikeymay.itch.io). Xyr debut chapbook, would you like to hold?, is forthcoming with Full House.

After the Storm – **Emma Burnett** (p.109-112)

Emma Burnett is a researcher and writer. She has had stories in MetaStellar, Elegant Literature, The Stygian Lepus, Roi Fainéant, The Sunlight Press, Fairfield Scribes, Five Minute Lit, Microfiction Monday, and Rejection Letters. You can find her @slashnburnett or [emmaburnett.uk](http://emmaburnett.uk).

Afterwards – **Glenis Moore** (p.94)

Glenis has been writing poetry since the beginning of the first Covid lockdown rather than take up baking. She does most of her writing at night as she suffers from severe insomnia. When she is not writing poetry she makes beaded jewellery, reads, cycles and sometimes runs 10K races slowly.

Alvaro's Friend – **J. A. Hartley** (p.115)

J.A.Hartley was born in England in 1973. He now lives in Madrid, Spain, with his wife and three children. He has published a series of YA novels called Shakespeare's Moon and has had poems published in magazines such as Cosmic Daffodil and Stark Nights. This year he completed his first Open Water swims which scared the life out of him.

Approaching in Reverse – **BEE LB** (p.85)

BEE LB is an array of letters, bound to impulse; a writer creating delicate connections. they have called any number of places home; currently, a single yellow wall in Michigan. they have been published in JAKE, OxMag, and Scud, among others. their portfolio can be found at [twinbrights.carrd.co](http://twinbrights.carrd.co)

The Baby Moves Into Her Own Room - **Danielle Estelle Ramsay** (p. 43)

Danielle Estelle Ramsay is a queer poet and writer based in the Pacific Northwest. She has been writing for as long as she can remember. She writes at intersections: grief with faith, queerness with religion, and so on. She is a United Methodist pastor, a parent, an anime fan, and she loves you very much.

Before We Lived - **Devon Neal** (p. 60)

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Bardstown, KY resident who received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and an MBA from The University of the Cumberlands. His work has been featured in *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *Dead Peasant*, *Paddler Press*, *MIDLVL MAG*, and others.

Begin with the End – **Yasmine Diaz** (p.8)

Yasmine Diaz is a writer hailing from NYC who dabbles in other arts such as painting, music and photography. When she isn't writing words she's curating music for her current vibe or typing on Twitter(X) @librarants

Blackout – **Hayley Carpenter** (p.45)

Hayley Carpenter is a recent graduate of Utah Valley University, having received a BS in English with a concentration in creative writing. While she saves up for graduate school, Hayley is jumping from writing project to writing project and dreaming about finally swimming in the ocean this Year.

Children of the Storm #2 – **Ann Christine Tabaka** (p.114)

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry; nominated for the 2023 Dwarf Stars award of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association; winner of Spillwords Press 2020 Publication of the Year. Her bio is featured in the “Who’s Who of Emerging Writers” 2020 and 2021.

Comet Baby – **Cath Nichols** (p.114)

Cath Nichols' work includes *Tales of Boy Nancy* (2005), *My Glamorous Assistant* (2007), and *This is Not a Stunt* (Valley Press, 2017). She was the first female presenter on BBC GMR's *Gaytalk* radio show in the 90s. Her poetry explores bodies, trans/gender lives, disability and nature. Cath is queer, disabled and autistic.

Crownorth: God Emperor – **Ulises Fernandez** (p.80-84)

Ulises Fernandez is a young aspiring Argentinian writer based in Buenos Aires. From an early age, Ulises loved writing and reading. The son of a teacher and avid book-eater, he took most of his artistic traits from his mother, whom he loves very much.

Culture Heroes of Rot and Ruination – **Florence-Susanne Reppert** (p.105)

Florence-Susanne Reppert is a poet/photographer from Pennsylvania. When they're not running Poetry as Promised Literary Magazine or hosting various open mics in the Lehigh Valley (including their own, Nowhere as Promised open mic) you can find them crocheting or bringing a weird goblin energy to their social media @schizo\_trash\_poet

Dispatch / You Aren't Even Here – **Thomas Zimmerman** (p.95, 94)

Thomas Zimmerman (he/him) teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Windows Review* <https://thebigwindowsreview.com/> at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. His poems have appeared recently in *Revolver*, *Roi Fainéant*, and *Trigger Warning*. His latest book is a poetry chapbook collaboration with Scott Schuer, *Two-Headed Monster* (Reaction Press/Zetataurus Press Press, 2023).

Website: <https://thomaszimmerman.wordpress.com> Twitter: @bwr\_tom Instagram: tzman2012

Dream / Untitled - **Irina Tall (Novikova)** (p. 1, 92-93) is an artist, illustrator, writer. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich.

Evolve with Me – **Hope Baxter** (p.99)

Hope Baxter is a blooming writer who pursues all things artistic with a love of natural beauty and all things mythical and magical. Outside of writing she loves being cuddled up watching a movie (one of her favourites is *Howls Moving Castle*) with her partner and dog, Bella.

Exit Wound - **Christiana Smith** (p.64)

Christiana Smith is a non-binary sapphic poet from the San Francisco Bay Area. As a child, they occasionally prayed to Greek gods in Catholic churches. Smith has previously been published in *The Talon Review*, *Gypsophila*, and *Free Verse Revolution*. They can be found on Twitter and Instagram @lavenderpressed.

Father / Heritage - **Joseph Soares** (p. 102, 88)

Joseph Soares is a writer from Ottawa, Ontario. He mainly writes poetry, often revolving around the themes of transness, madness, and addiction. His microchap *Life Again* can be found at Kith Books. He also has work out with en\*gendered lit and an upcoming CNF piece with *The Viridian Door*.

Free Birth – **Sarah Das Gupta** (p.42-43)

Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher who taught in India and Tanzania, as well as UK. Her work has been published in ten countries, including the US, UK, Canada, Australia, India and Nigeria. She is interested in most subjects, except computer games and football- her four grandsons are working on this!

The Garden of Earthly Delights – **Willow Page Delp** (p.46-52)

Willow Page Delp is a Jamaican-American student, writer, reader, book reviewer and feminist buzzkill. Their work has been published by The Lilac, The Indicator, News Decoder, All Existing Literary Magazine, and Roi Fainéant. They can be found on Instagram at @wxddo

Genesis – **Dre Levant** (p. 96)

Dre Levant (he/they) is a trans masc genderqueer artist & writer. Dre loves wearing as much glitter eyeshadow as possible, making art that is both vibrant and macabre, and building wine cellars in Minecraft. He is the author of "jack invites werewolves to the tea party" (alien buddha press '23) and "icarus rising" (kith books '23).

To Have and to Hold (To Halve and to Whole) - **B. Craig Grafton** (p. 74-79)

B. Craig Grafton is a retired attorney who has had several legal fiction western thrillers published by Two Gun Publishing. The Scarlet Leaf Review has published his book Twenty First Century American Fairy Tales under the name B. Craig Grafton.

His Butterfly – **Thomas Elson** (p.90- 91)

Thomas Elson's stories appear in numerous venues, including Mad Swirl, Blink-Ink, Ellipsis, Scapegoat, Bull, Cabinet of Heed, Flash Frontier, Ginosko, Short Édition, Litro, Journal of Expressive Writing, Dead Mule School, Selkie, New Ulster, Lampeter, and Adelaide. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

Hold up the Sky – **Dilon Zeres** (p.9-13)

Dilon Zeres is an irrealist writer. They enjoy daydreaming and stargazing. You can read their fiction/poetry blog at [The Finish Piece](#) or follow them on [twitter](#) and [instagram](#).

Honeysuckle Summer – **Hannah Bailey** (p.62)

Hannah Bailey (she/her) is a twenty-something poet-artist-creative hybrid located in the USA. When she isn't creating, you can find her disguised as a retail employee. She can be found on most social platforms at @harsemousecreative.

How to Become a Writer... – **Victoria Wraight** (p.118-119)

Victoria Wraight (she/her) is always looking for the cryptic and strange in her hometown of Buffalo, NY. When she isn't haunting bookstores, she can be found hunched over a coffee exploring her latest ideas. Her work has been featured in Diet Milk Mag, Coffin Bell, and Idle Ink.

Hush Now, Hush Now – **Percy Olsen** (p. 88)

Percy Olsen lives in Astoria, New York, where he practices law, spends quality time with his family and writes when he can. His work has recently appeared in *Bluepepper*, *WayWords*, *Fictionette* and *Robot Butt*.

I Found You and Became Me - **Moonmoon Chowdhury** (p.34)

Moonmoon Chowdhury is an Indian poet currently based in the Netherlands. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Borderless Journal, Tell Me Your Story, A second cup of tea by The Hive publishers, The Pine Cone Review, Sylvia magazine, Sonic Boom Journal, Amethyst Review, Last Leaves, Sixpence Society Literary Journal, Hot Pot Magazine, Tap into Poetry, and elsewhere.

The Italian Man Orchid – **Ernesto Sarazele** (p.58-59)

Ernesto Sarazele is a Basque poet, performer, film maker and event promoter based in London. His writing has been published in a variety of online and paper outlets, including a chapbook called 'In The Name of the Flesh'. He has recently completed a documentary about LGBTQ+ spoken word, 'Queer Tongues'

Jewel - **Daithí Kearney** (p. 41)

Daithí Kearney is an Irish poet and musician. From Co. Kerry, he now lives and lectures in Co. Louth on the east coast. His poetry is inspired by his surroundings and his young family. His poems have been recently published in Paddler Press, Patchwork Folklore Journal, Bubble Magazine and Martello.

Lost – **Elizabeth Mary Stone** (p.103-105)

Passionate about the piccolo, Elizabeth Mary Stone is an Honors sophomore student majoring in Music: History and Literature. Her life-long love of stories has recently led her to explore the Writing major. When not pursuing various academic interests, she can be found presiding as president of The Fredonia Honors Club.

Master and Student – **Jowell Tan** (p.32-34)

When not surviving Real Life, Jowell Tan writes about fictional lives. Never without a new story idea, he spends his nights typing and his days reading, juggling his many roles as a rat racer, a father, and a writer. He somehow stays afloat. He sometimes gets published by journals. He always tries his best. Say hi to him on twitter (@jwilltn) — he promises not to bite.

Memories Blossom and Bloom – **Terry Donohue** (p.57)

Terry Donohue is a poet, a short story writer, an artist, a curator, a real estate broker, and the mother of a grown son. Terry currently lives and works in Bolinas, CA, an enclave of many artists. Passionate about the arts, Terry enjoys photography, writing, poetry, and origami art in her free time. She comes from a strong creative background, having spent time working in the Chicago theater scene after graduating with honors from SUNY Oneonta and was an Arts Columnist for the Point Reyes Light.

Nativity Scene - **Sritama Sen** (p.44)

Sritama, Alo to her friends, is a trans sapphic poet who grew up in Kolkata, West Bengal. She earned her Master's in English Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and has had her work published in various international zines. Her poetry explores themes of trans identity and queerness in a Bengali context.

Ode to Infinity – **Milo Arnone** (p.97)

Milo Arnone is a 24-year-old poet from North Tonawanda. They have most recently been published in Jacob King's "The New Disposable," as well as three years consecutively in SUNY Fredonia's literary magazine "The Trident." In their free time, Milo enjoys touching grass and playing fetch with their clingy cat Sansa.

Old Testament Genesis – **Gerard Sarnat** (p.44)

Gerard Sarnat MD's authored HOMELESS CHRONICLES, Disputes, 17s, Melting Ice King. Gerry's published by Gargoyle, Newark Public Library, Blue Minaret, Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Northampton Review, New Haven Institute, Buddhist Review, American Journal Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, SF Magazine, NY Times. [Gerardsarnat.com](http://Gerardsarnat.com)

Our Birthday – **John Grey** (p.95)

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Stand, Washington Square Review and Sheepshead Review. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the McNeese Review, Santa Fe Literary Review and California Quarterly..

Paolo Friere – **Donna Castañeda** (p.56)

Donna Castañeda is a graduate of the MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her work can be found in *Metamorphosis: The Journal of Northwest Chicano Art and Culture*; *Journal of Undiscovered Poets*; *the San Antonio Review*; *Under a Warm Green Linden*; *Cholla Needles*; and *A Year in Ink*.

Phoenix - **Elan Ricarte** (p.54)

Elan Ricarte (she/they/he), a graduate of Bard College, writes poems based on the events of his own life, particularly on mental health. They enjoy writing stories and sharing them with their twin sister. Find her on Twitter with the handle @thatpipettegirl.

Pink Toenails- **Mehreen Ahmed** (p.106-108)

Multiple contests winner for short fiction, Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning Australian novelist born in Bangladesh. Her works have been nominated for Pushcart, botN and James Tait. She has authored eight books and has been twice a reader and juror for international awards. Her recent publications include Litro, Otoliths, Alien Buddha, Popshot Quarterly, Metachrosis Literary and more.

Remind Yourself This is Just Practice – **Sam Calhoun** (p. 116)

Sam Calhoun is a writer and photographer living in Elkmont, AL. He is the author of one chapbook, "Follow This Creek" (Foothills Publishing). His poems have appeared in Pregnant Moon Review, Westward Quarterly, Offerings, Waterways, and other journals.

Rising Phoenix – **SOUM (Screams of Unfettered Minds)** (p.98)

SOUM (Screams of Unfettered Minds) is a newly-formed female trio whose poems lean towards the darker aspects of life. They champion bringing awareness to mental health and social issues. Their style is raw, unapologetic, unfiltered, cheeky, and always heartfelt.

**SOUM can be found on:**

Twitter: @SOUMpoets

Website: [www.unfetterednfts.com](http://www.unfetterednfts.com)

Email: [screams@gmail.com](mailto:screams@gmail.com)

Sea Salt - **Yaneli Diaz** (p.27-31)

Yaneli Diaz is a writing major at SUNY Fredonia, Class of 2025. Yaneli has a passion for writing and plans on going into the entertainment industry one day. This is Yaneli's first short story to ever be published, and they are so excited to share it with you!

Self-Expression/Crystal Clear – **Rory Frasch** (p.26, 117)

Rory Frasch is an aspiring photographer and writer from New York. They enjoy superheroes, people watching, and copious amounts of coffee.

Shopping With Mom – **Riley Winchester** (p.35-37)

Riley Winchester is from Michigan. His stories and essays have appeared in various publications.

The Shrine – **Robert Pettus** (p.65-73)

Robert Pettus is an English as a Second Language teacher at the University of Cincinnati. Previously, he taught for four years in a combination of rural Thailand and Moscow, Russia. His short stories have been published in numerous literary journals, magazines, and webzines. Several have been narrated on podcasts. His first novel, titled Abry, was published this spring by Offbeat Reads. He lives in Kentucky with his wife, Mary, his daughter, Rowan, and his pet rabbit, Achilles.

The Stretch – **Palak Jain** (p.91)

Palak Jain is an 18 year old Mumbai resident studying Arts officially and Everything Under The Sun informally. She has been writing for many years but is just starting to submit her works for publishing.

Starting Over – **Phil Temples** (p.113)

Phil Temples is originally from the Midwest, but he's lived in the Boston area for most of his life. Phil has published five mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and four story anthologies in addition to over 220 online short stories. He is a member of GrubStreet and the Bagel Bards. You can learn more about him at <https://temples.com>.

Teardrops – **Tejasvee Nagar** (p.87)

Tejasvee Nagar are an avid reader. Their pronouns are he/she/they. They follow literary news and keep themselves updated about the literary world as they plan to pursue their degree in English. They have a keen interest in poetry, cooking, baking as well as creating playlists for leisure.

Things I Should Have Told My Sons – **Louis Faber** (p.89)

Louis Faber's work has appeared widely in the U.S., Europe and Asia, including in Arena Magazine (Australia), Glimpse, South Carolina Review, Rattle, Pearl, Dreich (Scotland), Alchemy Stone (U.K.), and Flora Fiction, Defenestration, Constellations, Jimson Weed and Atlanta Review, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Tilling The Earth – **Lawrence Miles** (p.61)

Lawrence Miles is a poet living in White Plains, NY. His work can be read at [lawrencemiles.substack.com](http://lawrencemiles.substack.com).

Today Merriam-Webster Dictionary – **Kate Wylie** (p.100-101)

is Featuring the Words 'Foible' and 'Forte'

Kate Wylie (she/they) is a poet from St. Louis, Missouri and 2023 Pacific University M.F.A. graduate. Wylie reads fiction for *The New Southern Fugitives* and serves the community as Assistant Professor at Webster University and Literary Obituaries Editor at *Northwest Review*.

We Escaped Last Winter - **Ann Grá** (p.63)

Ann Grá (Graigh) is a two-times finalist for the Hugo Awards (2020&2021) as a co-editor of Journey Planet fanzine, which featured her art&poetry. Her debut poetry collection “100% water” is coming out in 2023. Ann's poems are also in PorchLit Mag, Stark Nights.

Website: [anngry.com](http://anngry.com); tweets: @anngraigh

Untitled – **Jim Zola** (p.40)

Jim Zola is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.



take care of yourself.

-Tabi



「Yves Gue」