The Raw Art Review:
A Journal of Storm and Urge

Winter 2020
The Raw Art Review: A Journal of Storm and Urge

The Raw Art Review is a publication of UnCollected Press published quarterly. RAR accepts submissions for publication from the Submittable platform or by email invitation from RAR editors.

Subscriptions to RAR are $35 per year and can be purchased at the RAR website.

Subscriptions will include 4 issues of the RAR Journal and at least 2 books of the subscriber’s choice published by UnCollected Press.

Please consider subscribing, donating or becoming a patron. All three levels of giving can be found on the RAR “Subscribe and Support” page:

https://therawartreview.com/subscribe-and-support/

COVER ART:  
Waiting
by Sarah Hussein
12 W * 19 H inches
oil on canvas

©2020 Henry G. Stanton, UnCollected Press
ISBN: 978-1-71678-803-1
MUSIC AS SCRIPTURE

What we admire most about music might be this – that at its best, it escapes thought’s context, all mental concepts; that it provides evidence spirit can rise up (life’s flame), freedom’s vitality enough to give us wings.

We ride on the delicacy of the strings, enflamed by the spark of percussion and woodwinds.

The heart weeps, cinders rekindled as oud colludes with double bass, cries out against tyranny, oppression, injustice, violence.

We are seduced, led into the desert, reduced to tears – the rababa, drums, the Bedouin band – music to bless the land, rhythm and beat each woman and man can understand:

may all beings be happy, free from suffering, at peace.

Scripture of orchestra – piano, percussion, accordion, oud drowning out the babel of rude rabble
beyond walls of opera house:
industry, construction,
sky-scraping, earth-rape, pulling
(pearling) new islands from the sea.
Music uttering the tragedy
of invasion and the vanished.
Praise all music makers their breath
and strength to go on airstreaming,
strumming and dreaming,
humming and drumming.

Diana Woodcock
(Winner RAR December 2019 Poet-in-Residence Contest)
SVALBARD GLOBAL SEED VAULT

Outside Longyearbyen, eight hundred miles from the North Pole, scientists, counting and envisioning the cost of past and future disasters – even Syria’s civil war – Aleppo’s seed bank destroyed by bombing 2015 –

have tucked into a mountainside, ensured in permafrost, ample space for four and a half billion critical crop seeds worldwide. If the worst should happen, this backup collection will safeguard vegetation.

Or is it all mere speculation – no place feasible but the hereafter. But how to disentangle ourselves from earthly (Arctic) time and space? Standing in front of the entrance to the doomsday seed vault,

something about it putting a halt to doubt, I began envisioning what the seeds are all about. Was it too late to practice faith? Dalal from Kuwait had brought seeds from her desert home,
assuming she could contribute them right there and then.
Tottering on the threshold of before and after, I prayed for faith as small as that biblical mustard seed. Immerse myself,

I coaxed, in the hope of seeds, that someday planted, they can reverse the damage.
Feeling a thirst for roots, recalling the burning bush – how thorns and thistles are not

the earth’s original natural fruit – I wished upon a seed deposited just then in the scat of that snow bunting warbling and hunting insects beside the mountain stream flowing past the global seed vault,

toward the sea, under the midnight sun.

Diana Woodcock
(Winner RAR December 2019 Poet-in-Residence Contest)

In 2015, the first withdrawal was made by researchers in Syria after their seedbank in Aleppo was destroyed by bombing. Those seeds have since been sent to Morocco and Lebanon, where they’ll be planted and used to research how to grow crops in the arid region.
SURVIVOR

For Ngawang Sangdrol, Tibetan nun, released after eleven years

I walk beside the lake, late afternoon, waves restless and seagulls drowsy in sun along its shore. Five cormorants on the decaying pier allowing me to watch them watching for fish, shadows under shadows on the water. If I hold a sprig of rosemary to my nose and inhale deeply, for a moment flesh will not burn. The chinaberry tree with its wrinkled stone tells of its own hard journey: pride of India transplanted here; its transformation imminent—fragrant purple petals on slender stalks. The otherwise useless chaulmoogra yields an acrid oil that eases leprosy. Once, at the foot of a live oak, I broke down and wept. Acorn cups were scattered throughout the woods, turned up by the gods to catch rain for squirrels and quail to drink. All things find their place. I come back to settle before the fire, drawn like the pandora sphinx moth to the candle in the window. I slice the carambola into five equal pieces, five cormorants on the pier, five women screaming, five beatings each day, and the cattle prods. The Chinese prison guards went home at the end of their shifts to wives and daughters. A phantom orchid in moist pinewoods feasts on forest duff—the fungus in its roots a saving grace.

Diana Woodcock
(Winner RAR December 2019 Poet-in-Residence Contest)
Bliss

The woman wears the dress.
The dress wears the dress.
The dress wears the woman.

She used to be big. She could remember walking into rooms and her self would blossom past its skin perimeters, bounce off of walls and rub against people. Her laughter rang into notes that danced down hallways and made crystal glasses shiver. At least, she thinks it was her. Her memories have been gauze-wrapped and secreted away.

You were so vibrant. So stinking sexy. Every guy wanted you. You were a force, an original, he says. How did you turn to dust, to glass splinters in the carpet, burnt crumbs that can’t be shaken from the toaster?

He says those things, but he likes her this size. He can feel sorry for her and hate her now that she’s small. He can slip her into his pocket and carry her with him. Sometimes, he rubs his thumb along the length of her body. Sometimes she arches her back. Sometimes he snags a hangnail on her skirt.

It’s gotten so she can’t see out of his pocket without jumping. The trash is full and spilling onto the floor. Dishes are crusted with egg and stacked in filmy water in the sink. She’d rather stay in his pocket’s soft lining, cotton-balled. Playing solitaire.

Beth Balousek
(Winner RAR January 2020 Poet-in-Residence Contest)
Born/Borne

She met her sons long before they were borne of her.

The first came to her as a series of crystal matryoshka dolls - his self nestled inside his self, inside his self. His smile fragmented by his glass layers. He floated loftily near the ceilings of rooms, catching the sun as he wobbled a singular parade.

The other, she met on the bank of some muddy river she didn’t recognize. It was summer and the water ran high. He kicked stones into the water and refused to show his face. She tried to turn his head toward her, but he twisted away and hunched his shoulders against her.

The streets she walks now, she once walked with them. Ghosts of their grubby hands slip in and out of her fingers, fluttering. She has learned not to grab.

She carries her self inside of herself. She was. She is. She is swaddled by lines that have been drawn in dark arcs to mark her existence. She begins and ends, chafing against some corrugated paper shell, sipping small breaths from its dusty confines.

So much of life has been spent waiting, waiting to reach milestones, events. She is waiting for a man who draws in his sleep, or a woman who gives everyone the same haircut. Someone predictable, with no end.

Beth Balousek
(Winner RAR January 2020 Poet-in-Residence Contest)
**Good Cook**

It was 1963. It was Dallas, and blood and brains and the coppery smell of anguish. Her boys played with cap guns. They killed each other daily. It was 1969. It was Vietnam and men coming home without the legs they left on. Her boys pledged allegiance daily.

She began to feed them, her boys. Fried pounds of crispy bacon, cheese-loaded omelettes. She plied them with pancakes and waffles smothered in butter. They crunched down bright bowls of Kaboom. She laced their lunch boxes with Twinkies.

Dinners were debauchments. Gleaming shanks of lamb. Roasted turkeys and slabs of beef. Biscuits and breads and rolls to sop up the blood. She gave them borderline diabetes and mild hypertension. She swelled them to sizes that were difficult to shop for. They grew uncomfortable, but dependent. Her love swelled with each pound she painted on them.

She snaps the neck bones using her thumb and pointer fingers mostly. Moves her fingers like she’s singing the eensie weensie spider and the irony is all but lost on the chicken. The neck bones - that tender bit of spine - no thicker than her finger. A snap of a green bean or one of those thin breadsticks that get scraped across the butter. They would not get her babies. Not her babies. No.

Beth Balousek
(Winner RAR January 2020 Poet-in-Residence Contest)
Men in White
by Sarah Hussein
Fatima recognized one of the human heads. She said to her brother, “This particular head belonged to the fighter, Michael.” Michael was an Englishman who joined the Sons of Ahwah. Everyone knew Michael. There was a swath of Sheffield in the uncovered space around his eyes, like a racoon. Michael displeased the Sons of Ahwah because he wore Union Jack boxers beneath his uniform.

Being clever, Fatima easily updated her biographical understanding of all things. “Saint Michael,” she said, “is the one who raped Mahdia.”

“Don’t talk stupid,” Umar said. “He fixed the internet.” Fatima was undeterred. “You can fix the internet and rape Mahdia.”

“You’re a pig,” Umar said. “How do you know these things? How?”

Fatima said that women and girls share a kind of sad commerce. They barter news of the abominations of men and no one is any wiser or richer for the knowledge.

Umar counterpointed by saying that he, too, was sad. The plan was to use the heads as goalposts in the abandoned car park. But none of his friends came to play football. He had worn his Lions of Mesopotamia jersey for absolutely nothing.

Umar gathered up the heads into a burlap sack and slung it over his shoulder. He took Fatima’s hand, which he always did, even if she had the heart of an executioner. His father once said to him, prophetically, as it turned out, “If I am not here, you must take care of the girls and your mother.” Umar imagined easier work wearing a suicide vest.

It was bad luck that the interior of the marble factory had been blown out by allied bombs and that the hole in one wall made a direct line of sight through the window frame in another wall. Three Sons of Ahwah fighters spotted two of the six heads floating above the shards of marble mortuary. The Sons of Ahwah fighters were all dressed in black, like cowboys from an old
American Western whose clothing, alone, telegraphed their intentions.

Fatima and Umar froze in their steps, like statues of the dictator before the liberation of his people.

One of the Sons of Ahwah fighters took the bag from Umar and struck him forcefully in the face with the palm of his hand. The others trained their rifles upon the boy. Apparently, the girl was useless. The contents of the bag were emptied onto the ground.

Fatima was a callous documentarian of human behaviour and, as a result, clever as a fox. She needed a coup of some sort that would be a talisman against her brother’s beating and her own possible lashing or rape. A curfew was a curfew. Examples must be made.

Fatima gathered the heads of the Sons of Ahwah traitors into a tight square. She squatted over the heads of the Sons of Ahwah traitors, lifted her skirt and produced a stream of urine and demonic curses. Subsequently, she grunted and exposed her horse’s teeth while defecating a mealy rope of half-digested rice, saffron and mint.

The three Sons of Ahwah fighters managed disgust in three different languages but they all wore the same choral mask from Greek tragedy. No one was fooling anyone.

After the fighters had left, Umar said to his sister, “You’re a pig.” He added, “And you’ve ruined my goalposts.”

Fatima did not have a reply for that. Football was serious business.

When they got home, they could hear their little sister mimicking their mother. “IN-DI-A-NA” she would say or “O-HI-O.” Home schooling was the thing since the Sons of Ahwah came to town. For some few weeks, Anaam had sent Shaimaa to one of the Sons of Ahwah schools, but the idiot child (so called by her mother) was not a discerning pupil in any respect. Her homework would include repeatedly drawing and colouring the Sons of Ahwah flag. Her mother would not tolerate it.

Anaam interrupted her lesson between California and Minnesota. These days, she always looked at her children with a mixture of contempt and pity. One fueled the other and created a
kind of septic anger, shit always at the ready to hit the fan. “It’s
dark! Where have you been?”

Because Fatima had already told him what to say, Umar
spoke with charm and authority.

“It is like this, dear mother.”

He said his sister had to use the public toilet, which was
true enough, because their toilet had been smashed to bits by
Sons of Ahwah fighters looking for contraband. And it was also
true that Umar always accompanied the females out of doors. It
was one of the Laws of the Sons of Ahwah. Umar did not mention
shameful acts that would surely offend Allah.

Once again, Anaam recognized arrogance in her son’s
tone. Obviously, his sister’s lies would embolden him, but there
was more to it than that. Umar was making a seamless transition
toward scorn for women simply because he was empowered
to do so.

For this reason, Anaam aspirated profanity behind her veil.
Umar’s ears pricked immediately, like those of a dog. He
discerned possibly unpleasant syllables in his mother’s whispered,
humid dispatches. Anyway, the niqab was a great diplomat.

Anaam said to Umar, “Swear on your father’s beard!” And
she produced a potpourri bag full of her husband’s lihyah. She
kept the beard hair in an interior pocket of her cloak.

Because Omar, their father, had lived on principle, he did
not live long. He was a barber when the Sons of Ahwah usurped
control of the city. He refused to believe that growing the beard
was wajib or mandatory and, after weeks of grudging conformity,
shaved, with an electric razor, no less, to protest beard fetishism.

Unfortunately, Omar underestimated the threat of the Sons
of Ahwah, calling them a few bad apples and a little boys club. He
took his naked face outside and was never seen again, become,
as Fatima liked to say, wistfully, one of the supernatural beings or
jinn. To which, her mother said, “Have you no feelings?” Fatima
said that if feelings could be attached to kebab, she would
welcome them instantly.

Umar touched the bristling remains of his father’s beard
and produced a peculiar spectacle. He declined his head and
raised his hand, as if his testimony were legal and incontrovertible. “I swear,” he said, “to nothing but the truth.”

At the same time that Anaam screamed, “Liar!”, Fatima broke her silence with an angry announcement of her own. “We need meat, mother! I have more diarrhea than the prime minister!”

Anaam wanted to slap Umar and Fatima. It was just a matter of deciding whose insolence deserved the quicker rebuke. Instead, she settled upon gallows humour, literally. “You want meat?” she asked. “Then, go to the butcher shop!”

The butcher shop was the town square where criminals were hung or decapitated by the Sons of Ahwah for crimes great and small. Umar had collected his goalposts there.

Fatima wanted to say that she was, at least, open to the idea of cannibalism. After all, animal protein had largely disappeared at about the same time as local imams were replaced by vegetarians from neighbouring states or so cause and effect would have it.

But her mother raised her hand in the air to signal the limit of her endurance. “Whatever you say,” she said, looking wearily at Fatima, “it will mean my death. Go to bed. All of you. It exhausts me being your mother.” Going to bed meant carving out space on a shared mattress beneath one comforter whose theme was Mickey Mouse and his Magic Kingdom. All other mattresses and linen were donated to the hospital for the Sons of Ahwah fighters.

The next day began with mixed media – the cry of a child, the hum of unmanned, aerial vehicles and a clear blue sky. The idiot child (so called by her mother) opened her eyes at the same time as the muezzin began his pre-dawn call to prayer. Shortly thereafter, at daybreak, Shaimaa immediately started screaming, “Virginia! Nevada!”

Fatima owed a deep debt of gratitude to one of the heads that she had recently pissed and shat upon. Because Saint Michael had fixed the internet, she learned that drones were often controlled in Virginia and Nevada. As a result, she taught her sister to scream the names of these states whenever the day broke blue. Clear skies meant American drones would buzz the city looking for targets for their missiles.
As a result, it was important to avoid those places on drone days where the Sons of Ahwah fighters might gather – hospitals, schools, mosques, industries, private homes and markets. Of course, the fear of being atomized instantly was an existential threat and, therefore, somewhat less worrisome than lifestyle modifications such as lashing or amputation.

Anyway, Anaam knew what everyone was thinking and announced, “I’m going to the market. I don’t care. Allah is good because his servants can only die once.” And she immediately donned her burqa and began stuffing the interior pockets with beauty products. Before the re-introduction of the seventh century, Anaam worked with her husband, not as a barber, but as a beautician. Like a dragon, she stored her remaining hoard in the root cellar beneath the mattress. It was better than currency.

Several of the crowd at the market had some money with which to purchase onions, potatoes, garlic and the occasional orange or lemon. Most of the crowd had little or no money and, like Anaam, arrived at the market with goods to barter. Because the women were dressed in black and because their movement winnowed like a giant cloud of sand, they called their furtive trade a black market haboob.

Ahmed, a vegetable salesman, quickly assessed the eyes and height of Anaam, “I know you. You’re like the others who look but don’t buy. Move away and let pass women with money.”

Anaam said she was interested in what couldn’t be seen. She gestured with her head toward the Coca Cola cooler. Legend had it that the cooler contained skewers of marinating lamb.

“Even if you could see it,” said Ahmed, “you couldn’t buy it. Get away!”

Anaam retorted, “I cannot see Allah, but I love him deeply!” It was blasphemy to compare Allah to lamb kebabs but these were difficult times.

Of course, Ahmed was right. The women continued to circulate like rabid brokers at the stock exchange, but few were buying from the merchants. Their numbers far exceeded actual market capitalization. It was all very suspicious.

As for Anaam, locomotion was difficult. Within multiple pockets sewn into the lining of her burqa were many clear glass,
round bottles with black pumps, representatives of Maybelline, L’Oréal, Clinique and Estee Lauder, among others. As a result, her thighs and buttocks were often bruised by trundling about like a heavily laden camel. Fortunately, this time, there would be no wasted movement. Her rich friend, Rahma, was the size of an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf.

Anaam whispered into Rahma’s ear, “I have the avocado mask and the Dead Sea mud and,” for somewhat comic effect, “all the perfumes of Arabia.” She identified the prices and Rahma was only too happy to place her order and pay. How vain you must be! thought Anaam, since all women were compelled to cover their faces and wear gloves.

But Anaam did not know that she, too, was judged harshly, that others believed she did the devil’s work, bartering lotions and creams that whispered into the hearts of her helpless victims. Because of Anaam, children swallowed soupy confections of rice and onions while their mothers applied candlelit complexions.

Of course, it would be risky to purchase the lamb skewers. A sudden windfall would draw attention from the vendors and the Sons of Ahwah minders. Nonetheless, and before the four of them were extinct, she wanted to provide one last serving of meat to her misogynist son, her glib, sociopathic daughter, and her last idiot child (so called by her mother).

She had only just purchased and hidden her precious cargo when all hell broke loose. Rahma had dropped a fragrance bomb and followed the bottle to the ground, casting about like a deranged shepherd for her lost sheep. Regrettably, reunion with her Bois Noir, (for men, no less), clinched the prosecution’s case. Sons of Ahwah fighters circled, their vintage Kalashnikovs at the ready.

Immediately, Rahma’s clothing was torn and stripped from her body, both her burqa and her undergarment of embroidered tulip on black. From various pockets, crevices and folds fell chocolates, olives, camembert, a Swiss army knife and kerosene. While she wept and screamed, Rahma was slapped, kicked, punched and called disgusting names. Finally, by her long, black hair with caramel highlights, two Sons of Ahwah soldiers pulled her through the dust and toward the interrogation centre.
At some distance away, moving very quickly and attaching her eyes to the ground, Anaam was breathless with both horror and elation. Already, imagination had produced a dog’s muzzle of her nose, filled either nostril with the smell of roasting lamb and the flayed flesh of Rahma. She calmed her conscience with the assurance that everyone would end up dead or tortured eventually and, therefore, in such an environment, the procurement of lamb kebabs did not come with moral baggage.

Later that night, after the great debauch of kebab and fried aubergine, Fatima suggested that they offer a prayer for Rahma.

Anaam was caught off guard and assumed a defensive posture, “What do you mean by that?”

Fatima shrugged her shoulders and spoke calmly, as though she were merely underscoring the contribution of a corporate sponsor: “As you have stated, mother, the evening meal was brought to us by Rahma.”

Anaam had avoided description of the unpleasant scene at the market. Rahma’s hubris had cost her dearly. The children were apprised of the first instance, not the second. As a result, she assumed, the lamb had no bitter aftertaste.

However, and before Anaam could offer praise to Allah for the commerce of Rahma, Fatima insinuated her demonic eyes and horse’s teeth not three inches from her mother’s face. “Yes,” she said, “let us offer a prayer of long life for Rahma.” One did not need to study the Koran to read Fatima’s sarcasm and the reason for it. News travels fast.

It was a painful barb. Anaam had assumed that constant supervision of her children would produce something like the Stockholm syndrome, uncritical love of their captor. But the opposite was true. For serving lamb, she was a scapegoat for the sins of the Sons of Ahwah.

Said Umar, in the somewhat twisted logic of his addled brain, “It is like this, dear mother. One day you are here and the next, you can’t organize a football game.”

Anaam became enraged. “Get into the other room!” she screamed. “All of you! And bring the mattress!” She thrust the idiot child (so called by her mother) into Fatima’s arms and intoned gravely, “You can all sleep in there tonight.”
But Umar, dragging the mattress with little enthusiasm and contemplating resistance, said the following, “Who are you to order me?”

Anaam knew immediately that this was the last order he would take from her. “I am your mother.” The card was played. There were no more. Umar and the others retreated into the spare room.

After she had closed the door on her tormentors, Anaam curled into a fetal position on the Micky Mouse comforter. She might have cried for the loss of her husband, the loss of her friend or even the loss of her own estranged children, but, instead, she cried for fear, fear that Rahma, a kind of Freemason in a maternal order of secrets, would provide all the testimony necessary to have Anaam tortured or hung. In fact, she could not have imagined the quality of her divination nor the remarkable prescience of its messenger.

Indeed, she and her grown children were woken at three in the morning by Shaimaa, the messenger. Perhaps the idiot child (so called by her mother) was an idiot savant, after all. She began screaming “Texas! Texas! Texas!”

Because Saint Michael had fixed the internet, Fatima had read about forced entry in the Longhorn state, taught Shaimaa to scream Texas at the first sign of law enforcement. It was the work of an angel or a devil that Shaimaa began screaming well before the arrival of Sons of Ahwah fighters.

Fatima poked her weary head out of the spare room, said, “Listen, mother. This is bad news for you.”

But it was also bad news for Umar. Not only did the Sons of Ahwah fighters arrest Anaam, but they conscripted the boy, too. Afterward, Fatima looked at Shaimaa on her back in the Mickey Mouse linen, said, “A useless warning is a house on fire.” It did not occur to her to blame the child’s teacher. It did occur to her that she, of the whole cursed family, had received the cruelest blow, left to care for another human being.

The very next day, the bad apples and little boys on the Sons of Ahwah Board of Authority published their decision. Anaam and Rahma were to be thrown off the roof of the tallest building in town, a radio station. Fatima read the details of the
fatwah attached to a traffic sign that enjoined against noise, *No Horning*. She was stunned.

Apparently, Anaam was not being punished for her crimes against the seventh century, but her crimes against the twenty-first century. It was news to Fatima that her mother, the capitalist whore, had committed massive fraud before the arrival of the Sons of Ahwah, filling the very best brand name packaging with generic product. Fatima tried to imagine how much or how little suffering her mother had endured. She liked to think that Anaam spoke swiftly, not to avoid blood-letting, but to make herself right with Allah before she was executed.

Fatima’s little sister was glued to her left leg. She detached the idiot child (so called by her mother) and shared an observation both sanguine and philosophical: “It is a world without moral center when perpetrators of legitimate criminal activity receive the same punishment as those addicted to cigarettes or hubble-bubble.” It was unclear from her tone which group she reproved.

Shaimaa was ambivalent. “Washington” she said.

That night, Fatima’s subconscious gerrymandered fresh boundaries for her dreams. Her mother was tossed from the roof of the radio station, but, miraculously, she planed through the air like a flying squirrel, lift provided by the ample folds within the inseam of her burqa. She flew to the capital and to all the great capitals of all the great states and then into outer space and through the Milky Way and through two hundred million galaxies beyond. To an uncritical observer, Anaam was looking for freedom and justice in the twinkling light that wheeled about the universe of dark matter. But the Fatima of Fatima’s dream felt deeply embarrassed by her mother’s disingenuous posturing, zipping through billions of light years in search of business as usual.

Suddenly, she was woken by tugs on her shoulder and the voice of a parrot, not her sister’s.

“Fatima. Fatima. Fatima.”

Umar explained that he had been freed from military service because he did not, so to speak, pass the physical. He had a wine birth mark on his testicles that, according to him, was a contagious skin disease that caused impotence and apostasy. No one wanted anything to do with him.
I don’t want to die,” Umar said. “By the way,” he added, “mother and Rahma will be thrown off the roof of the radio station later today.”

Fatima shrugged her shoulders and reconfigured her veil of cynicism. “Maybe she will fly.” She added quickly, “They do the same thing to corrupt business people in the west. That explains eclipses of the sun and the moon.”

Umar said he didn’t know anything about that. And then he did a curious thing. He took Shaimaa into his arms for the first time since she was born and looked at her, admittedly, like leftover aubergine.

Fatima had already sensed a sea change in her brother’s attitude toward gender relations. Distaste for his Sons of Ahwah captors and fear of mortification of his own flesh had opened a pathway for détente with his sisters. “Fatima,” he offered, “you’re mostly not a pig.” It was a start.

That afternoon, snow began to fall or so it seemed. Once again, the Americans were dropping leaflets from their airplanes suggesting that everyone flee the city before imminent military assault. They, the central government and a variety of other altruistic factions promised that liberation was at hand.

“No one will go to the camps,” Umar said. “At least, the Sons of Ahwah give us water and electricity.”

If Fatima had political opinions, she did not share them. This one time, however, low embers of gratitude burned in her belly. According to Umar, she was mostly not a pig. “You are right, brother. No one will go to the camps.”

And no one read the confetti as it fell from the sky. In fact, it was, ironically, festive prelude to the launching of Anaam and Rahma from the radio station roof. Fatima steered her little sister’s hand toward the sky.

“Look,” she said. “Your mother is preparing a lesson on gravity.”

For Shaimaa, pedagogy was a ladder whose rungs were made of sand. Because of this, she was the best witness to the day’s events.

But Umar feared learning or trauma where none was possible. “We will not look,” he said, plucking the idiot child (so
called by her mother) from the arms of Fatima. Opinion was split on the matter, but each in the crowd listened quietly as religious leaders read out the crimes and sentences.

Thereafter, when Anaam and Rahma took each other’s hand and coiled somewhat in preparation to jump, Fatima thought it imprudent on her mother’s part to attach her last earthbound moments to the much heavier Rahma. Obviously, she was unacquainted with Einstein’s general theory of relativity, the lightness of being afforded by forgiveness nor, for that matter, the value of a human hand.

Said Umar, looking away but standing in front of Fatima, reading events in her glowing face, “How can you watch?”

Fatima could watch because Anaam and Rahma had already creased the air with forgotten data. “I only believe,” she said, “what my eyes can’t see.” Similarly, the sickening sound of buckling bone produced only waves of denial. “And I only believe what my ears can’t hear.” Of course, she was referring to the world of her fabulous dream where pancaked flesh is no more real than a pixel of animation and every human injury is merely a comedic device.

And so, as Fatima stared at Rahma’s broken legs and obvious and stupendous fractures to her mother’s cervical vertebrae, she patiently awaited the recombination and flight of the capitalist whores and some fusion of slipstream and rapture that would vacuum her city from the face of the earth and up and into and beyond the contracting lungs of the universe. After all, the cycle of liberation and occupation punctuated by death and misery and false hope was no more a credible human story than Mickey Mouse and his Magic Kingdom. For confirmation of her thesis, Fatima looked at pools of blood from the mouths of Anaam and Rahma. Indeed, each looked very much like a conversation bubble for the finger of Allah. Flesh and word were cleared for takeoff.

Said Fatima to her siblings, excluding irony from her feverish visions, exposing her horse’s teeth, “Our liberty has been bought with kebab and fried aubergine.”
Of course, Umar and Shaimaa had no idea what their sister meant or why she chose this moment to recall their last family meal.
Sunflower
by Vincent Zepp
HEAD OF HAY

Uninvited ear at my dining.
Hearing jaw.

Sound of
pandemic interest
in my body.

A diversion
from the normal
low hum
of self-concern.

Old enough
to matter,
to realize I was
always young enough.

Time shrinks
full of scarecrows.

Hay in belly,
and eggs for eyes
in head of hay.

by Leon Fedolfi
TRIPTYCH OF THINGS

1
A favorite blue shirt wears my loyalty.
Beside hangs a pima cotton, fine stitch
for my affection.

2
When young, I wore a glove of wonder
snug to my hand with anticipation -
fame of little round stars
falling in day.

Crack of air - a herald for sight to arc
along a shirt-blue sky,
down to celebration in my head.

3
Survivor of probability - a time kiss -
a table I love.

Human rubbed into surface -
carved names and finger smears.
Vibration of discourses passed down
through five generations in its fiber and grain.

Surrounded still by hum of symbol songs -
confessions of intimacy, social gatherings.

Now, a resting computer on its rib cage -
the fine stitch evolutionary arc of thing.

Descendant of same atoms, it could be a tree -
if not sculpted by intent. Once organic,
now a pause in being.

It may be a part of me, as I will not part with it.
My two small mirrors -
hold glances of glances looking back.

by Leon Fedolfi
PLACEBO

Hegemony in science dress.

Am I the placebo in our relationship, or are you?
Are we both real medicine - maybe toxic, maybe not?

I want the authentic you when I suffer small hopes -
a chicken pox drawing on my skin of thought.

Do not abstract me, and I will do the same.  
We should extract together
foolish experiments.

One way or the other with this drug.

by Leon Fedolfi
Sisters

That sometimes I wear your makeup and bra
Padding the cups to top up my self-esteem.
Then gazing in the mirror with practised precision,
I smile in that flirty way Mama taught only you while I played football with
Daddy
Wondering whether you’d be the better twin

If your skin wasn’t Mama’s lemony yellow and bergamot-scented
And the swells of your breasts didn’t rise above a slender waist
That carried skirts and trousers as if by heavenly design

While I, husky-voiced, taller by a head
With cherries for breasts and Daddy’s midnight-blue skin,
Slipped into the role of the brother we never had

By AB Mambo
The Dancers
by Sarah Hussein
Cold Season

The snow melt unburied the carnage
from the cold season
willow ash and maple’s stripped branches
soaked in winter’s blood
crooked themselves beseechingly
for a little more of the sun’s nourishment

There were such hobgoblins
in the winter’s nights
nibbling at the edges of thought
such catastrophes of the body that
I nurtured a wish to simply
be torn away in my sleep
in a strong gust of dreams
--one breath then no more—
and scattered amongst others I’d known

but now I rise at first light
to put to fire the conquered bones in the garden
letting the burning scents mingle
in my hair and wools
and when I return to you
you bend to kiss the top of my head
inhaling a smoky aroma
and then wipe a smudge of ash from my forehead

by Gary Beaumier
Ghosting

The aircraft lights wink behind the copse
of dying ash in the moments shy of dawn
soon the trees will tumble down
one and then another
to give a little more horizon
and who could know in the plane
that somewhere in their distance I watch

I have walked the long night
on the road by the sea
where lights are all that define the ships
plying the phosphorescent waves
but I don’t know why

and I don’t know how I became this…
at first I thought it was just a dreaming
or light headedness
but maybe I am
little more than a slip of smoke
from a guttered candle taken on a current of air
its afterimage held in the few memories of others

that my footfalls make no sound now…
that you passed me in the hallway this evening
and took no notice…

…and yet I follow a silverying of light
escaping beneath the bedroom door
(you have assumed some of my side of the bed now)
as I have come to remember
you are still my destination
and maybe you will lift your head
and say my name

by Gary Beaumier
If Night So Too the Morning

Did you know I whisper things to you
in the night when you are seized in a paralytic sleep
we are nights conquest in its negligee of fog
night that mimics our finality

Did we defy mortality long ago
with our little deaths
our delicious agonized finishes

I hover my face over you
to match my breathing to yours
and wonder of the course and variance
of your dreams as I whisper

let them commingle--these dreams--
in some recitation of our infirmities
--a weakness here a breakage acknowledged--
this is how night works its murderous ways

we are now with badly mended wings
but I will fly these hours with you
to where night takes us as its downdrafts
smash us to the ground

I whisper regrets with a crumpled face
I whisper love with ashen breath
I whisper lust with a kiss to you hand
and even as the grey dawn creeps
beyond the shuttered windows
and everything is stripped away

It is then we find ourselves new
and perfect again.

by Gary Beaumier
Prophetess

I saw the oldest woman in the world
die today in Florida

in a pool of blue glass
idential, she said.

Her browned skin layered
in perfect circles

like the rings of a lake
expanding after interruption.

She walked like a swan
toes out, nose up

and it could be Egypt,
the desert, a Mexican plaza

lined with gold that held
her small feet

as she shuffled along.
The fish, dead, roll beneath

in water thin and clear,
washed up from bathhouses

and purity cellars
doorways inked

with secret symbols
and pigs’ blood

soaking through the floor.

by Rachel Kaufman
(previously published by Good Works Review)
AT THESE LIMITS

When I looked up, the priest
was gone and another round man
had taken his place.
When this one prayed
he put his feet together,
clasped his eyes, pressed
his ears back.
Next door, she fastened
her hands to her waist
and sent away envelope
after envelope
which were clinging
to her carpeted floor.
We wend our weary way,
distrobing, unmounting, covering—
I have not taken milk
from the mouths
of children. I am swallowing
the earth, however,
and it is ripe and clean
and spills down my chin.

by Rachel Kaufman
(previously published by *Kalliope Magazine*)
New Flesh Thief’s Head in a Jar
by William Brown
WHAT IT IS LIKE TO LIVE
by Elizabeth Kirschner

Alone in the school yard, a blizzard suddenly blows in, and within moments, puts me in its calculated coma. A small circus bear, I paw the air with my red mittens while my lungs cry like feathers. I spin and spin, a top.

My stocking cap, the ones boys like to yank off when they sneak onto the girl’s playground, this the wind takes with ease. Snow begins to fall under my skin. I shiver while my brain stem hardens.

The blizzard halts me in the stasis between fight and flight. To be lost in a storm, any storm, is to know that the angels, like pregnant women, dispense with us freely.

The boys, they chase us while our skirts move in a thievish rush of wind. Underneath: the beginning of all mystery.

The boys, of course, get caught. Sister Claret, who has no niggling tenderness toward any of us, says, “You girls have no modesty. I can even see your Kotex.”

Our punishment is to come to school that Saturday to scrub the school’s corridor with a toothbrush. Down on our hands and knees, each tick-tack-toe tile is beige, boring as God.

I scrub and scrub while glancing into a nearby classroom where I see myself ferrying down aisles, like a small Venetian, past desks long bolted to the floor, gondolas in
deep canals, in order to brush the chalk dust from the good Sister’s veils while the globe atop her desk, needled by its axis, spins and spins its little world.

Every morning, we girls kneel to show her our skirts are long enough. A yardstick is used to measure the length from floor to knee.

While kneeling, I long to step inside Sister Claret’s confessional, to watch her undress, tissue falling from her sleeves, her breasts clear, tiny as raindrops. I watch her wipe those breasts away, her hands, small dark erasers.

The day of the blizzard, I walk home after school. Still snowing, the road appears, disappears, caked by briskets of snow. Lonely as an orphan, the voice of the storm tries to erase me the way Sister Claret erases her own breasts.

When I walk into the house, a bottle tears through the air, shatters when I grab it with my hand. It splits a vein, turns my fingers purple.

I can’t even make a fist. I use the other hand to indicate I’m okay.

Mom’s giddy, the way people are when their lives go up in smoke. Her eyes, drawn into tiny brown sacks, gleam—the alcohol on her smells like snow and her meanness, it’s nebulous as gas or dust.

“Your father,” she says. In that instant, she has pinned the tail on the donkey. “He lost the job again.”
When a boom comes from the wood stove, red roar, blue applause, I stand, clutch my hand. With a Ferris wheel smile on my face, I see him, fingerling his pant zipper, like a snake’s tongue. Up, down, it goes. The sound, it rips stitches.

She harrows me, “Go to your room,” she says, as if her voice could penetrate my private parts, which are many—my teeth, my hair, my tears, which are dirty as a sock, but I just stand there, staring at my father’s head, which is bald as a bulb of garlic.

“Do as I say, Patty” she goes on, “or else.”

I go halfway up the steep stairs, squat. My parents look like clay figures dipped in oil paint. I watch Mom’s hands go up, make the fists mine can’t.

When they come down upon my father, I remember the Playhouse. Down in the woods. Where I held tea parties with my Patty Play Pal.

“Lift your little finger,” I said as I held the cup, which was wreathed in Banded Peacock butterflies, “just like this.”

When she didn’t answer, I wanted to slap her, but she was pretty, much too pretty. She was also bigger than me.

That’s when I heard snapping sounds—quick, neat, like a turtle’s mouth. “Patty,” came a voice, “oh my little Patty Melt, guess who’s here?”
I didn’t answer. Instead, I ducked behind my doll, made her my human shield. Peeking out, I glimpsed a hunter’s hat. Bright orange, a boiling sky. “Patty,” came the voice again, “Come out, come out, from wherever you are.”

Sickly sweet, that voice made my stomach turn, like a cherry cough drop.

It was Dad. In his Hush Puppy slippers with the backs broken down. Into the Playhouse he came, fast as a gash.

There was no one to make him reasonable as he ripped Patty out of my grip. No one to make him reasonable, as he got out the razor and cut the hair off her head.

No one, as he said, “You’re next,” while holding the razor to her throat.

I could hear Mom saying, “Everyday is like this,” just as Patty’s head hit the floor, dull as a door with a hole punched through it. It rolled, the way heads do.

_Holy dum-dum, silly ottie ay._ This is what happens, _Holy dum-dum, rum-dee-dum._ To people like me, _silly ottie ay ae._

The sound of his Hush Puppies. _Silly ottie ay,_ like squishy seaweed as he went away, _Holy dum-dum, rum-dee-dum._

Big as a block, I cradled that head—it couldn’t talk, couldn’t walk, that head, which like a ball with no bounce, rolled away, strolled away, as it stayed dead, played dead.
When I walked back up to the house, I wanted my girlhood to circle me, like a coat, but my mouth, rotted and anonymous, felt thicketed in sludge. It opened, shut.

Smelling brittle, I snuck into the house, right past Dad who was polishing the shoes. White and eyeless, the clock ticked. Had someone wound it with a knife?

“Soybeans,” he said, “the future is in soybeans.” His face, this was the color of my old sandbox.

I went into my room, closed the door, got into bed where the streetlight blazed, a neon fig.

While my brain split, a nesting doll, I wondered: had my father stolen my screams? Would I wear what he did to me, like gills, or a new way to breathe? Aren’t minds like family and isn’t dying one of the exits it can take?

In the middle of the night, I crept down the hallway into my parent’s room where they lay on the bed, smelling like the fungi on ingrown toenails. As I walked over to their bureau, house flies brained them.

Inside its drawers: the smell of pine; of lavender. Inside the lavender: nests of stuffing. Inside that: my mother’s nylons, a dot of semen, violent longing.

Inside that—a roach nibbling through silk, the sound of it, dust on a bat’s wing.
Because death is utterly banal, like an arm pulled through a sleeve, I wanted to be against it, but I wasn’t, not entirely, nor were my parents who curled, a question mark, under a ceiling that leaked yellow light.

Because I wanted to do what my father did to Patty, I padded down the hallway, out the front door, and ran away.

After running away, and letting years, like a mute correspondence pass, I rent an apartment, dark as porn, in a house with no before or after, with no faith in, no walls, no shelves—here I live alongside a cripple named Lloyd and an imbecile named Elmer.

On Catlyn Avenue, the dark evergreen days turn and turn. The two men, they live upstairs. Elmer is next door to Lloyd. In a room that’s soiled newspaper.

He has pictures of naked ladies. Wears sunglasses on Saturdays. Works as a dishwasher. Each plate a slice of moon. Each glass hot and ready for his cock. He likes my legs. Leaves me notes in the mailbox alongside penny candy, as I once did for my mother.

Lloyd sits in his green chair all night long. Tells of his broken body to a TV that blasts the news about a headless body in a topless bar. His face is as soft as my inner thighs, but the rest of him is a tarnished medal.

One night, I sit at my desk, grab one of my father’s stubby red pencils. I write Elmer and Lloyd a letter in the pitch dark, imitating a blind child whom I had watched write her name.
on the chalkboard. Each shaky line leads to another until the words are more like pictures which resemble the attitudes of the sainted sacred.

This work doesn’t last long because the cold comes in. I crawl into bed, pull the licorice black bedspread up to my chin. I fluff my lozenge-hard pillow and lay my hair on it, as though it were a dancer’s fan.

While the street lamp blooms in my bedroom, I listen to the *tap, tap, tap* of Lloyd’s wooden leg thumping down the stairs where wallpaper, dimmed by old florals, peels off. His leg is a twisted cask, a complicated bramble. It holds him hostage.

There’s a knock on my door. I get up. Wearing my mother’s flesh-colored nightgown, I open it.

It’s Triplett, not Lloyd.

“Hi,” I say. My head is down. I’m afraid to kiss him.

“Can I come in?” he asks. His hair falls in long auburn waves. His face, white as a scare tactic, has blue, blue eyes. Forget-me-nots. Cornflowers. Like my Patty Play, he’s pretty, way too pretty.

“Of course,” I whisper, then take his hand, lead him to my bed.
I am nineteen. My body is a dream, is the myth surrounding Catlyn Avenue. I pull my nightgown over my head. It leaves my hair a desirable mess.

“Oh,” he says, as he kisses me. I unzip his white Chinos. The sound of it is skin pulled off a snake.

Because Triplett wants me, I let him. When the condom, soft as a mouse, breaks, the cartography of longing pulses onto my thighs. I wipe it away, as Sister Claret did her breasts.

And then, like a paler version of my father, he’s gone. His vanishing is an abyss, one in which an infant screams. And screams and screams.

In the yard, the landlord’s dog is perpetually leashed. The dog turns manic circles, is a goldfish in a dime store bowl.

I go outside, walk. The landlord’s shape fills his window like a shadow self, then drops from sight. I walk, barefoot in the melting snow, as though it were my genius to do so. I’m wearing my only dress. Blue birds weep in its torn sleeves.

I walk, hold each breast in my trembling hands while the snow starts to fall, huge flakes, like voluptuous birds—and clouds, the color of a romantic rose, these throb quicker than the human heart, throb, flutter, like a red ear on a wet pillow.

Flushed, cold, I return to the house on Catlyn Avenue, knock on Elmer’s door. When he answers, my hand goes to
his face. Cool as a clamshell. With no meat inside, but chubby as a club.

Nights, he clicks a spoon against the silver radiators. The rhythm of heartbreak, of distress, of broken bottles flying through the air, of glass, shattering, a rainbow of glass, like skinned fish, the scales, glistening, like a stripper’s pasties.

He steps aside, let’s me in. “How about a Coke?” he asks.

“A beer would be better, thanks.”

Elmer grabs two from a fridge that looks like a well-fed tomb. When he hands me mine, I remember how my father once courted my mother. Instead of flowers, he brought her a basket full of beer. A bouquet of bottles, sudsy, frothy, like scum on a summer pond.

Frightened, Elmer backs into an overstuffed chair. Doilies are on it, like soiled diapers. The sound of him humphing into the chair, deflates. His jaw, it hangs, jowly, like a clown’s.

I walk over, straddle him, hike up my dress. The birds, blue as a nightmare, arc their injured wings.

Sounds fill the room. Kitten whispers, cries like kites slapped against the head. When I kiss Elmer’s thrash of a face, his sigh is as lonely as a red cello’s string.

The beer bottle. This I smack against the coffee table until its neck snaps, the way a bird’s does when a cat nabs it, the
way my Patty Play Pal’s did when Dad knifed it, the stalk of it, celeriac.

The bottle, brown as a scowl, or a moth’s head, this I press against Elmer’s flabby neck, a low tech crown of thorns. With it, I sketch a zigzag of lines.

I’m about to cut: to score a single, sharp-edged pattern; but Elmer’s fixed hysteria is rendered obsolete when little Lloyd rushes in.

Instead of batting the bottle out of my hand, Lloyd bats at the tinsel streamers on the electric fan, then drops his crutch. Looking obscenely green, obscenely jewel-toned, obscenely neck-like, he somehow possesses both grandeur and decadency as he begins to dance.

Like a space invader in an arcane video game, Lloyd, hapless and demented, flaps around the room with spittle on his lips. His fingers wilt, like vegetables in a drawer and the look in his eyes, his thousand, groping green eyes, as he step-drags, step-drags, this is the worst of all, lacerating and unforgivable, as if to say, this is what it’s like to live.

Poor eyes. Poor eyes that see me weeping, the beer bottle now rolling on the floor, like the grossest of tumors and Elmer’s lap, soggy as the Kotex Sister Claret insisted she saw when we girls forgot to cross our legs.

The smell has temperature and space while a rat reveals itself in the corner the way a woman tenses in and out of the light—like Lloyd, like Elmer, like me.
The Goodbye
by Sarah Hussein
Benumbed

I am frozen.
My fingers turn blue like glaciers
and melt into the ceaseless snow.
My phantom digits really
hurt.

We are all skating on thin ice
as if to flirt
with peril. How odd I haven’t
run into the other nine billion
shivering humans.
Though I’ve seen their cars buried
under an avalanche of warnings.

I used to spend long sunny days
cleaning dirt
from under my fingernails during
the Nice Age,
when the sun and photosynthesis
seduced me to garden
for hours.

Now in the sixth
Ice Age
we perish under a trillion pounds
of snowflakes so shrewd,
each one impersonates
a flower.

Plant is one letter short of planet
yet the two are inextricably linked.
I spread some seeds in the snow.

by Debbie Fox
NAMED

Ten minutes out of the harbor and already
Someone sights the singular spray that means
We are in their presence. We line the railing
Ready to take communion.

Two young fin whales swimming shallow
Like some cosmic dance, arch breathe dive
Spray spume shine all grace
And the gladness rises in me

Filling flooding every empty chamber.
Next a big humpback
Fifty feet of glide and glisten. They’ve given her
A name, Diablo, identified by her all black fluke

The final gesture of the tail announcing
Her particular story, the little they know of it
By research, sightings, guesses. Then Scylla
And her calf, the fourteenth calf

She has brought back to these waters
After birthing in the Silver Banks off the Dominican Republic.
How many thousands of miles of ocean odyssey
Maps in the mind, water routes in the blood

Timetables of current and starshine.
We turn back toward the harbor, time to go in.
I don’t care who sees me wiping tears from my cheeks.
But, as if to say we cannot calculate abundance,
The sea offers yet another feast, a final humpback
And her calf, the young one breaching seven times
Each a day of creation, light and darkness, life
Propelled out of the water by what looks like

Sheer play, perhaps some kind of practice
For survival, a practice I need, too.
Perhaps my discipline is to tell the story
and leave gaps for all that I do not know

and never will. I whisper to the whales
How my grandmother and grandfather sailed on a ship
From Amsterdam to Ellis Island in eleven days
With two small children, one and four

Because two other children had died in Holland
And there was no work, no promise of land
No freedom of worship. How they were given stolen land
Platted, pieced by greed and guns.

I am wondering how to survive in my house
In my skin and tell the story of sea and land
How to be happy that we have not yet figured out
How to build walls in the ocean

How to hope for survival when everyone’s name
Can be written with their bodies without fear.

by Gary Boelhower
“Bus Poem 1”

On this rainy
Tuesday bus,
a boy with a blueberry
bow tie
is studying
for class
while a butternut squash
pays his way
in change.
And the seasons change all
around us
on this
not-so-magic bus.
It’s cold in the winter and
hot in the summer and
it stops
more
than it
starts.
Now it’s just me
and the driver,
and he smiles like a double
fudge brownie.
He smiles back at me
in the mirror
as if to say
“Now I can show you,”
as the bus bursts
into a tongue
of green
flame,
and the wheels lift
up
and off
the street.

by Joe Nolan
Self-portrait
by Blair Treuer
That One Luminous Channel
“Your region becomes embedded in you.”—Anne Sexton

She means growing up near the sea or a cornfield, the breaking waves becoming as much your rhythm as the rise and fall of your mother’s breath, the scent of ripe corn as much the taste on your tongue as your father’s tobacco.

But if you stay no place long enough to become its child, no place long enough for the sea to stretch your vision, for corn silk to wrap your bones, then only what is similar from place to place can embed itself, and your region is metaphor.

Everywhere you know the storm gathering, the descending pressure startling the hairs on your arms, widening your eyes for the first flash, furrowing your ears for thunder’s seed. You can taste metal on the back of your tongue barely sweetened by the smell of rain. Over the whole earth, lightning bursts 100 times each second, and you want a few seconds of one thin ribbon sending out waves of rarefaction, compression, illuminated thunder; you want one thunderbolt, one long moment in the third eye of Shiva the destroyer, and in the next moment the thunder seed
growing in the beat of your heart, the in and out of your breath, the dilating and contracting of your irises while you count the seconds from the next flash to the next thunder and closer and closer it comes.

by Karen Bowden
Apologia

I rarely know what is me
until I happen,
so I don’t know what to hide
or what isn’t me,
so I don’t know where to hide.

I amuse myself by crossing
my arms over my chest
as if for protection,
but my heart’s rarely there
where it’s supposed to be,
sitting more often on my sleeve,
my shoulder, my right knee,
in the middle of my forehead.

I am surprised how genuine
what I am not can be
and how fatuous what I turn out
to be can seem.

by Karen Bowden
To Harrow the Sea

after a reading by Robert Duncan

aloneness measured
imagined, urging
a grey poet toward his paradox
knowing what he does
not believe
disbelief enchants knowledge
and births a goddess
a woman bereft of women who serves
aphrodisiac on somnolent feet
that multiply from the rhymed silences
of a man who dances with his bare hands
the choreography of an ocean
that is not merely haunted but harrowed

to harrow the sea
to descend through the ages past sirens
past a decapitated priestess
and rake the soil of oceanus
with unyellowed teeth
requires disbelief
and a poet’s faith
that disturbing the deep nourishes seeds

by Karen Bowden
Luella
by Blair Treuer
Dearest Joni,

I was startled when I happened to see your photo on the cover of *UK Art News*, with the caption “New Artist-in-Residence at the Darcotes Centre for Contemporary Art.” You were looking straight into my eyes. But I was totally gobsmacked to get a response to my letter. I didn’t dare to expect that.

It’s great to hear from you. It’s been a long time. Ten years? Fifteen?

You say you’re now a serious artist, a teaching artist. Private students. Probably rich. Solo exhibitions all over Europe. Fantastic.

You say you sorted out your priorities. Purpose and direction. I’m happy for you.

And glad to see you didn’t change your name to Epona. I hoped you wouldn’t. Epona was a horse goddess. Not really an artist’s name, was it?

By the way, a trivial thing: the black ink on your letter wasn’t all the same tone. Did you notice? Probably not. The differences were subtle. But obvious to my eye. Obvious to those of us who are facile with Ansel Adams’ zone system for black-and-white photos. I had that Linhof 4x5. An awesome camera. But my craft didn’t count. Galleries rejected my work. You do remember, don’t you? My Charing Cross darkroom was an oasis. My gallery. But I left it when I moved to Tangier. Negatives, too. And I don’t take photos anymore. But I could.

Maybe I’ve changed a bit since you left, Joni. Or maybe not. But as you always said—and you were always right—I should keep my eyes open. Pay attention, you said. And I do pay attention. I watch a twitchy cokehead in my local bar who drinks cheap beer with Elmer, a man who worked 37 years in a linoleum
factory. Elmer has carbon tetrachloride eyes. They play pinball and Elmer beats the suffering Jesus out of him. They don’t believe in art. It figures.

I’ve sorted out my priorities, too. I see the obvious. And beyond. I channel synchronicities with the universe. I’ve been a Death Valley curandero, curing altitude sickness with protein tea from lichen found in cosmic forests. An Alaskan malamute, with a Canadian postage stamp in its mouth, on a sled ride from the New Jersey shore to Cambodia. And Henry Kissinger, peddling black-market hand grenades for a first-class ticket to Uruguay on Arctic Air. These are good times. I pay attention.

Did you know this is the Year of the Snake in the Sky? And an excellent year for masks. Genuine tribal masks, with high price tags, are sold at Ye Olde Antique Shoppe across the street. These are masks Margaret Mead smuggled. She hawked them for favors in the academic community. They’re too small for adults. Pygmies, maybe. Rich kids like them, wear them on Halloween, their tiny poison apples in Gucci handbags. Rich kids have tutors who tell them what is and what is not genuine, what is artistic. Tutors don’t tell them that if you take poverty away from the poor, they’ll have nothing. Nothing at all.

Joni, even after all these years, I remember everything. The blister on the tip of your left thumb. The hole in your Capezio pointe shoe. When you danced. Before you painted. That injured sea gull, at home, in Salt Lake City. Its blind eye. That leak in the squirrel’s nest in the middle of January which let in the ice. In Toronto. Dead. The squirrel. Maybe Jesus walked on ice.

You say you attended a gala banquet at the Musee d’Orsay to celebrate some artist whose name, sorry, I can’t remember. And you ate roast squab with porcini. Which reminds me, I’m still hungry for Brazil. You, too? But about squab. Are you aware that squab is just a cover-up name for pigeon? You ate a pigeon.
Messy creatures that whitewash statues of genuine artists. Remember Rodin’s, in Budapest? Eating a trashy pigeon is just a short step from eating a cockroach. Kafka would be dumbstruck. If you take hunger away from the starving, what do they have left? Nothing. Nothing at all.

So, Joni, that’s the news from here. Oh, I should mention I’ve started writing again. I remember you used to like my stories. Some of them. I write what I know. What I see.

And I’m working on a new story. Its main character is Herr Hoden, a paleo-urologist. His research shows that after quadrupedal humanoids channeled into bipedal humans, the body, in perfect synchronicity with cosmic ethers, evolved to where adult males didn’t crush their testicles when they sat down. It’s already a long, complex piece about pain, anatomy, matriarchy and ambition. I’ll not bother you with details. It might not be fiction. The New Yorker will want it and I’ll let you know when it’s published.

I hope your career soars to the stars. I hope your ambitions materialize. All your priorities. Maybe we’ll get back together. Sometime. Maybe inspire each other. Again. Pay attention, my dearest.

Ethan

#   #   #
Smells Like Bukowski

August night in Grenada, MS

Had to choose between two hotels, and I took a room beside the one where three men shot each other the week before.

My credit card didn’t work, didn’t work. Good thing the night teller preferred cash.

Even the threat of a fistful of Apple Jacks and community milk for breakfast couldn’t keep me down.

The ice machine was stacked and clean—I poured some E & J brandy and Sprite.

Three towels and no washcloth like the night in San Juan when the caretaker told you they don’t use washcloths in Puerto Rico, and you let him have it. I let it go.

Swivel-lock gone from the door, I jammed a chair against the handle.

Bukowski said if it doesn’t roar out of you, do something else. I’m back in the game, baby, back in the game.

by Kevin McGowan
Bukowski’s Mailbox, 3-11-94

The stars are out tonight,  
and the letter carrier  
who might have known Bukowski  
who might have liked Bukowski  
does not know.  
Bukowski went under ground  
yesterday.

The mortgage note, second notice.  
An honorary lifetime membership  
to Hells’ Angels, Santa Rosa Chapter.  
The gas bill long overdue.  
A letter from Poetry dated 3-7,  
“These almost made it.”  
Scribbled on stationery:

Hank,

I’m returning the poems I took  
from you years ago. Sorry.

Alice

A letter from Poetry dated 3-9,  
“We have reconsidered and would  
like to publish. . . .”

And God says, circling the stars,  
I need to make one poet.

by Kevin McGowan
Scranton Marathon

Jolted awake by pothole art near Scranton
around midnight,
on the road from Chattanooga
out of gas out of patience
out of season out of mind.
Denim shorts don’t work well
at forty-two degrees.

Buona’s Pizza closed.
Green Ridge Pizza closed.
Cell phone dead,
little chance of phoning a friend.

Scott at the Sleep Inn
said the hotels for an hour in any direction
were booked because of the marathon
the next day.

Found the all-night Denny’s on Route 6
and ordered the lumberjack special:
two eggs fried hard
two sausages
two bacon strips
two pancakes
two sourdough toast,
two hot teas black.

Three college girls laughed in Spanish
in the booth behind me.
A loud Goth got in a fight with the waitress.

I slept in the back seat of my Civic,
fetal position, Marlboro blanket,
little water left,
dreaming of not dying,
of not getting frostbite,
thinking of another October night,
Bam and Al and I shivering in a Salvation Army clothesbin,
smothering ourselves with donated shirts.
Forty degree repeat performance
forty years after.

by Kevin McGowan
Soft Tissue
by William Brown
INTO THE DARK
by Pamela Sumners

Our father was a mile tall and I once thought he made the sun. He had a stare as black and nameless as a Mississippi night that could fix you in a moment, and hair all snow-silver white, flat across his head. He was a preacher, and a gambler after that, when I was already gone to The Place. I guess those two callings are not that far apart—gambling and preaching—gambling on the chance that there’s a god, the God, god of Abraham and the Ishmael that Grandmother named him for, the Bible’s wanderer. God of our fathers, God who stretched His hands over the waters and parted them the way Father threw an embrace around our family that divided us from others, even ourselves, as surely as a burning tree in a garden. My father, our father, was a high school defensive back who said his everlasting regret was batting down a pass he should have intercepted.

We used to have family meetings before Bible study on Wednesdays, but on this April Monday he called us all into the study. I remember every word he said all week long, but I’m like that, remembering things. He always told us that we should love words, that they’re beautiful and a little pitiful to have to communicate with, but they’re all we’ve got. So I remember.

Father cleared his throat and stared at Mother’s freshly cleaned carpet. “Bubba will not be coming home to us again,” he said, his tone flat and final. The thought of blue came to me, the shade of blue that is cyanide. What did he mean? He and Bubba had been fussing, at least as much as anyone could fuss with Father, because it mainly didn’t occur to us to do it, or at least not often. He had every right to expect us to follow the rules and not fuss about it. We had to wait for what Father would say next. Did Bubba run off to Memphis in a huff? Had Father banished him? We stared at him in confusion, but Father just continued to stare at the carpet as if fixated on the one speck of dirt that the machine had left, as malicious in the flawless pile of the weave as a jag of glass in the beach.
It was as though Father for once couldn’t find his voice. Mother stared down at her hands and finally choked out, “The Lord saw fit to take my angel boy.” She did not look at us, and she did not move. It seemed as though there were ashes, ashes all over, ready to cave down on my head. When finally Mother looked up, it was my eyes she met. It seemed like something in her eyes was slipping, that she was looking into the future, where The Place waited for both of us. I had never known her ever before to speak while Father had the floor, which he usually did.

And there was a difference in Father, too—his voice sounded different when he told us, “They found him at the lake.” It was such a hoarse voice. I wondered if God sounded like that when Christ was withering at Golgatha. But no, Jesus wanted water, so God wouldn’t have spoken in such a parched voice. I saw Father’s Adam’s apple working as he tried to decide whether to say something else or wait for us to say something. There was nothing to say because if you opened your mouth all the ashes would flood in and your whole body would taste of ashes. Bro asked how, and Father said that only the Lord knew and there must have been a purpose for it. Nikki was quiver-crying but no sobbing sound came out. I heard her breath catching in her throat. But she didn’t really cry, just stared at me like there was glass between us, and she looked so small and frightened on the other side of it, like when she was born and I was looking through the windows at her in her little box. Now my eyes had slipped down to where my mouth should be and I couldn’t open them or the ashes would be in my eyes, too. So I kept them closed, thinking of looking in a mirror to find your face all switched around.

I was thinking then of how Bubba had left the house—voices in the study. The door was closed and I was upstairs. I couldn’t hear the words but Father’s voice was raised to his hellfire sermon pitch. I was sure Mother heard it too, though she kept folding the clothes and talking about the new dress she’d put on layaway for me at Five Points West Parisian’s that she wanted me to wear on TV. Bubba and I were “so photogenic,” they said, so we were the kid hosts of the Mouseketeers Saturday program. We didn’t do anything but say “Welcome,
Mouseketeers!” and look neat and clean. Bubba was feeling too old for it, but it made Mother so happy to see him in his suits, and Bubba did like his suits, not like most boys. Mother was fanatical about dirt and about the cleanliness of her children. When I was a baby she even rolled up the edge of a soapy washcloth and cleaned my nostrils.

I waited until Mother went back to the garage for another load of wash and crept downstairs to Father’s study. I heard excited words, a harsh tone, but I couldn’t make out much until Father put out a full-on thunder voice, terrible, piercing, words spat slowly and deliberately: “You impudent!” “four generation of this family’s sons,” “God’s plan,” “You will go where I tell you to go, and that is Covenant College and that is that!” Bubba said something softly that I couldn’t make out. Father yelled back “And this unnatural thing, this disgusting—I won’t even say it! An abomination is what it is!” Bubba said something again, and Father thundered, “Go then, and nevermore be son of mine!” I heard a thud like a book had been thrown on the floor.

I ducked around the corner and heard Bubba’s shoes thumping up and then back down the stairs. Then I heard the front door slam. I could hear Father pacing and muttering “Absolom, Absolom.” I was scared for Bubba and scared for myself, too, feeling like a slender thread Father might cut with the irritated flail of a man shaking off a cobweb. But after all that fuss was dinner, and Father seemed the same as he always was, gravely giving thanks, policing our table manners. When Bro asked where Bubba was Father just cleared his throat and stared at him, which was Father’s way of closing a discussion.

It had never really come to anything before, but now Bubba wasn’t just not home for dinner and this time he’d gone for good, not just hitchhiked to Nashville or maybe down to New Orleans. When I looked at Mother I knew she had seen the ashes too. It was an awful, veiled look in her eyes. Father had us kneel to pray for strength. I thought of that dinner on that night when Bubba wasn’t there and of how Bubba couldn’t ever have any roast or Grandmother’s pear preserves or anything good to eat with us again, and I cried. I wasn’t sure I cried for Bubba. I cried that I would have things he would not ever
have again. I cried because my heart was a divided landscape, because I was told there was a life where there was harp music on one hand and sulfur on the other, cried because there was still that horrible proof of mortality, those shattering hands curled over the breast, hands that only a week ago carved for Nikki a butter knife of pine, that yesterday buttoned his shirt, started the ignition in Mother’s Riviera. Those hands I could imagine so expressively appealing to Father now folded like resting limp butterflies over his chest as he lay on some white table in a cold room. When Grandfather died, Bubba said his death brought us all closer to our own, which I thought was a somewhat morose thing to say.

Death wasn’t really all that was heavy in the house. Death is a big noun, but is was more than this. We had not much seen or felt each other’s tears, and the tears didn’t matter so much, didn’t prove anything. It was more like an immoveable darkness had settled on the furniture like something less visible than dust but came off on your fingers all the same. The darkness didn’t hide in corners or cracks in the ceiling. It perched on the family Bible where our birthdays all were entered in Mother’s elegant cursive. It was on the German clock Uncle Luke brought back from the War. It stared out in the way of an argument we had not begun yet. The darkness was Father locked in his study, Father pacing the living room, Father taking up smoking and even doing it indoors as if no one could smell it or see the low haze of smoke when he opened the study door.

That Thursday Bro put on his good gray flannel suit and Nikki and I wore our Easter dresses. We took our places along the front row to wait for Father’s address and smiled and said “Thank you so much” to the ladies who tapped on our backs or came over to say what a fine boy Bubba was and how lucky we were to have him for as long as we did. Bro mainly stared at his hands, clinched in his lap, nails bitten to the quick the way he’s always bitten them. I couldn’t breathe with the smell of flowers and ladies’ perfume. I was staring ahead, staring at nothing—not at Father, or the altar, not at the candles. I kept my mouth tight to keep the ashes out.
Father cleared his throat once and looked very solemn, as though he were the coroner finally pronouncing Bubba dead. Then he put on his glasses and began in a clear, strong voice, the voice he always had from the pulpit. He always looked fierce with the word of the Lord. “The miracle of human interaction is a strange, marvelous thing. It can break people down as a prism breaks light and it can carry the seed of life in its fragile veins. It is more the need we have for some otherness, something besides ourselves. It is the catalyst for life.” The f-sound whistled through Father’s lips. “So we die, hurt and heal; so we are born and bring others life; so we sometimes perceive even one another’s secrets, because we are created with the desire to reach out to others. It is when we do not reach out to break another person’s loneliness that we commit a grave trespass against the Creator. Bubba reached out to touch us, and we reached back. He was a bright flame at which we wanted to warm ourselves.”

I knew it was rude, but I was numb and bored and a little put off that it sounded like words Father might have tossed into any old sermon or any eulogy for anybody, even someone he didn’t know. So I turned my head and scanned the rows behind us. Bubba’s best friend Billy Martin was sitting with a clump of Bubba’s teammates. I always thought his blue veins were so pronounced because his skin was so pale and his face so thin. Mother always said Billy’s complexion was so perfect, like a little porcelain doll. His face was delicate, his mouth plump, his teeth perfect. Mother said he was so pretty he ought to have been a girl.

Billy called Bubba Paul, which is what he liked to be called away from home. Today Billy’s face was taut, as though wires were stringing his lips shut in a straight line. Maybe he was trying to keep the ashes out, too. I know that he must be hurting like we were. Bubba and Billy went everywhere together. “Two peas in a pod,” Mother always said. “Joined at the hip.” Billy Martin never looked up but wiped his eyes a couple of times.

I began to wish profoundly for a piece of gum. My mouth was so dry I was almost glad this wasn’t real Sunday church because we wouldn’t have to sing so much and I wouldn’t have to lead the youth group in rounds. I wanted Nikki to snuffle more quietly and not to have those
little hiccups in her breath and I wanted Bro to unclench his fists and spread his palms on his knees. I wanted gum so that when the ashes came they’d taste like Juicy Fruit.

“There is a poem by Mr. A.E. Housman that reminds me of Bubba that I want to share with you now. . .”

The skinny strap of Nikki’s slip was sliding down her shoulder and out of her sleeve, and she was trying to squirm it back into place. I felt squirmy, too, wanting to wriggle free of the buttock-blessing pews and crawl into a colored glass pane over the choir loft. I didn’t hear the beginning of the poem, I was trying so hard to escape and rematerialize as glass. Father’s voice, remarkable, resonant, hypnotic, lulled me like rain. I started to pay attention to the words and not just the undulating cadence of Father’s voice when I saw Bubba’s coach studying me.

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads who wore their honors out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man. . .
And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl’s.

Father nudged his glasses up and peered out past our row, maybe trying like me to astrally project all the way to the back and out the door. He paused suddenly, and the abrupt silence seemed almost angry.

“Bubba was one who had many laurels in this world. Many times he distinguished himself on the athletic field, in the classroom, in the church. He was a young man of great faith, and as most of you know, bound for seminary in the fall.” Bro and I furtively glanced at each other. He clenched his fists tighter. The ladies behind us issued a hushed chorus of “Amens.” Father’s chest became a huge ball, all puffed out with the glory of the Lord.
“In a way, Bubba was like that laurel tree he helped me to plant in our yard at home.” Bro made a slight snorting sound, and we looked at each other in shocked confusion. There was no laurel tree in our yard. There was a sad old hackberry tree and a birthbath about halfway to the road out front, and a rusty swingset with a busted chain out back. But maybe Father was speaking in parables, like Jesus saying “Know ye the parable of the fig tree” or “Know ye the parable of the mustard seed.” Maybe this was Ishmael’s parable of the laurel tree.

Billy Martin didn’t look like he understood parables. He was glaring at Father, mouth agape, shaking his head slowly back and forth.

“The laurel is a lovely strain when it first begins to glow with its faint, budding green, but no bloom is more maligned. The Greeks have it that the river god turned a girl named Daphne into the laurel tree so she could stop running from the sun god Apollo. She was turned still then, no longer fleeing in fear. Stillness lurks all around the laurel tree. The laurel tree is fixed, never to run again, free of the pursuit by the things of this world.” Father paused for awhile before continuing, “Yes, Bubba was like that laurel tree he helped me to plant. There will be times now when I will look out my study window and see my fallen boy on that mound where we planted that tree, he and I . . .”

“What’s he even talking about?” Bro whispered. “There’s no laurel tree. And you can’t see any trees from his study.”

“It’s a parable,” I whispered back.

“I will remember digging into the hard clay and raising that bed, splaying the delicate roots with my fingers. But the laurel died, as Bubba died, because the glory of this world is short. . . .”

“You’re still standing,” Bro muttered. Billy Martin got up and let the door clatter on his way out.

“The life of a laurel tree, symbol of the world’s honor and glory, is necessarily transient.” He read more, about how Bubba did not die the subtle, more horrible death we die each day when we deaden ourselves to the needs of others. He finally said something about how the laurel and Bubba were beautiful because they were simple and unpretentious, and how it was the simple things that we never forget, that become our habits.
I don’t know why the whole time he was talking, I was thinking “Whenever Richard Cory went downtown. . .” The line repeated itself like a song with a heavy bass, and then Father’s voice broke in like static over the radio. I tried to switch the channels but always there was the poem or Father’s voice turning in circles, spinning, spinning, spinning me out to that sealed coffin by the blue velvet curtain. And I thought of the darkness in the casket, how no one was ever going to open it again to let the darkness out, how when Father’s eulogy was done the darkness would still be there like the ringing in your ears that sounds like a whole orchestra of July crickets, chirping in notes so shrill that even the Almighty Himself couldn’t play them; that the darkness was going to be there like the water in Bubba’s lungs. It finally was over. I heard a lady outside talking—“Can you imagine having to preach at your own son’s funeral? What a brave soul.” The cemetery where we had always been buried was a long way down the highway. All I remember of the time at graveside is Mother holding Nikki and shushing her not to cry through her own tears. Mother didn’t ride back to the house with us but rode instead with Aunt Inez. On the way home people kept pulling off the road to let our procession pass. I turned to watch them until they were shrunken to pinpoints out the window. When we were home and the neighbors and church people had left their ham and beans and pies and gone, I lay on my stomach for awhile and tried to write a poem for Father because he looked so grim now, as though all the air went out of him when the people left and he just sort of deflated. I worked Jesus in because I knew Father wouldn’t like it if I left Him out, made death just so much darkness and ashes. But you couldn’t really talk about Bubba and Jesus at the same time unless you were talking about supper on the grounds or going off to Covenant where Bubba didn’t want to go. You couldn’t really talk about Bubba and being dead at the same time, either, because that was too real and Bubba should be coming in from ball practice with Bro and telling Bro how gross it was when Bro drank milk straight from the bottle. Bubba should be just playing a joke on us, like that time at Grandmother’s when I was really little and he told me a swamp monster had crawled
out of Grandmother’s pond and eaten cousin Joey. He should just be breezing in and out of doors, sometimes storming away from Father like it was for good and all and come back smiling, blameless as the wind and about as obedient.

The poem wasn’t very good but I decided to give it to Father anyway. I copied it over in my prettiest handwriting and rolled it into a scroll, bound it with some yellow ribbon I had left over from when I made Bubba’s last birthday card. When I went down into the den I saw that Mother had pressed a rose into the Bible and put down on the family page the note, “Paul Andrew Masters, April 13, 1960.” I couldn’t just leave the poem there, by the opened Bible. I went down the hall to look for Father.

There was a sliver of light from his cracked-open study door. I heard him talking in low tones to Uncle Luke. They sounded like they were sneaking a secret over on us, so I leaned in toward the door. I heard “coroner,” “no one knows” and the sound of Father sobbing. My uncle’s voice was soft and reassuring, unusually tender. “You did right,” “the kids couldn’t know,” “saved everybody’s reputation,” “preacher’s kid with pills,” “and then that other business that would’ve come out sooner or later,” “killed hisself.”

There was the sound of Father’s sniffing. Then Uncle Luke again: “You didn’t tell Beatrice the boy was like that, you know—did you?” “No,” my Father’s voice whispered. “No reason to tell her that.” Father’s sounded weak and resigned. “No, no. The boy was just confused, is all. A little too exclusive with that Billy Lowell. It influenced him, is all. He would’ve outgrown it and seen the light at Covenant if . . .” His words fell off. For a professional convincer, he sounded like a man who didn’t believe himself.

The anger seeped from my ears to my feet, my whole body becoming part of the fire. I saw Father speaking to the congregation, accepting their pecan pies and casseroles when he knew all along. I now remembered his words at the service as sly and thought it couldn’t be true that Bubba could be righteous and have been like Uncle Luke said because Father had always said that that was impossible. I thought that Bubba couldn’t be in heaven like Father said if it wasn’t an accident.
saw Father assuring all those people with words that could have been sewer gases spilling out of his mouth and floating over the pews. I saw a laurel tree choked with weeds. And finally I saw Bubba staring at Father like he did, his lip in a little wordless snarl, his eyes set so deep that you wondered if someone hadn’t come up with a forked stick and shoved them back there. His intense stare, matching Father’s, trying to make him blink.

I saw it happen: him idling Mother’s Riviera on Timberlake Road, swallowing those pills and cutting the lights, sitting in the dark for awhile in the loblollies. I saw him stumble past the “Park closes at dark” signs, stagger onto the shore and take off his socks and shoes to test the cold water, too cold.

He took his watch off and tucked it in a shoe. He waded past calf-high into knee-deep, then shoulder-deep water. He just kept walking, thinking the whole time that it wasn’t the way he should die, with a bottleful of Mother’s pills. He should have taken Father’s revolver and squeezed until there wasn’t anything left of Father, squeezed until finally there was nothing left of him, either. He should have taken that way out, feeling a cool bullet gouge out whatever demon danced in the blue veins of his temples that made him the way he was, a broken and shameful thing, not man enough to live. Or he should have taken a knife and cut the tendonous thread that held his life together. Pills, a cowardly, girly way out, with water to hold him down after he could not take another groggy step.

I felt robbed by him, by Father, by all the church people. I wondered how mad Thoreau was when his brother died from a rusty shaving razor, but at least that was an accident. I wanted him to come back and tell us that he didn’t mean it, it was just a terrible misunderstanding with the universe, that he wanted us back.

I started to cry as the ashes filled up in my mouth and the light went black around the bodies of my father and my uncle. “Bubba! Bubba!” I said. “Wait! It’s dark out there.”
New Flesh Temptation Chaos
by William Brown
WHEN OUR MOTHER DIED

The flame went out in the dark when someone opened the door
And the storm broke in.
But we were silent even before that, like old people, serious
The wind and rain didn’t tell us anything new,
We didn’t feel the slap of broken branches on our face
Our soil was black already and the angels had fallen from heaven.
I remember only now –
We couldn’t say consoling words,
Couldn’t look at each other like family around the dinner table
After a good day’s work.
We just sat there, two orphans,

Alone.

by Marcella Hunyadi
SALTED ALMONDS

I went to visit my lover the last time,
We talked at the top of the staircase while the wind outside
Blew the tiles off the roof and
Hard raindrops fell.
We said our goodbyes, we knew it was over.
Then I left and bought some salted almonds and met up with a friend
Who talked about nihilism and how it was making a comeback.
I told him, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.
I was only joking, my mouth full of almonds,
But he stared at me with steel blue eyes
And didn’t wipe the salt off my face.
It is dangerous to confuse life with art
But I love art and art loves me back
So I leave a trail of houses with no tiles
And my skin is drying out from salt.
I finally went to a coffee house because I was thirsty,
The wind shut the door behind me with a bang –
I cursed at it, drank some hibiscus tea, read an article in the Times
I didn’t agree with.
The truth is: back at the top of the staircase
I thought, maybe it would be best to die
And stick my tongue out –
Let the wind cover my face with tiles,
Salt and all.

by Marcella Hunyadi
NAKED MEN

Once I was a child
Who knew life’s priorities.
From a puff of smoke.
Not my priorities –
My mother’s smoke.
She sat with her liquor and cigarette
At the family table, made with her godly hands
Out of shadowy pine and a spit of faith.
The circles around her eyes got darker and darker
As she leaned on that venerable furniture,
Playing cards with men, all naked and drunk –
The men were drunk, that is.
My mother was as sober as a tombstone
As she waited with eyes
full of longing –
Not for me,
But for a man
To touch her
Or not touch her
To want something more
Or perhaps, for God to adjust her hand.
While I lay on my back behind the curtain and watched her,
And swallowed the naked men.

by Marcella Hunyadi
Amazonas

by Doug May
The Ascetic

Beat hunger and you begin to beat the rest.
I hadn't eaten for three days.
People say it feels like death to be that sick,
but no it was more like everything else was dying
and I was the only one left.
It was a mess too,
like mastiffs being starved for war.
I'd gulp for air
only to be rewarded with black dogs
dragging their kill up my throat.
I'd try to explain, this is not what I want,
this is not what I meant
when I said I'd be an ascetic writer,
someone who writes like a vulture
picking through clots and gristle.
I couldn't bare it any longer so I bore it longer and
darkness wasn't dark anymore and the
light was all bleeding with opened eyes and
god was a dung beetle clicking in the corner

but then

a glass of water

would appear

and she would tell me
to drink

and I would.

by Stefen Holtrey
Bird Poem

I wrote her a bird poem
just a stupid thing really but
I hoped the touch of it might
burn us like a good scar
but she said
now is not the time for bird poems.
People are dying, or don't you know that?

I said
sure I know that but
I'm sick of reading and writing and dying
so that's why I'm writing bird poems.
People don't die in bird poems
or if they do its just for a little while
and with no great inconvenience.
Bird poems make bread of death and
in bird poems the leaves glory and fall
and though every bird is counted when it
falls, the poem usually ends before
the bones show, before their bodies open like
little half-built churches.
To which she would probably say
There is death behind every poem,
to which I would reply
There is almost-death behind every poem,
like Elvis Presley spinning atop the
eagle-coated arms of a silver dollar
somewhere in New Mexico
or the Bennu bird farting jet smoke over the Nile
or like how a blackbird is still a blackbird
when another shot cleaves a crowd.

by Stefen Holtrey
On Seeing a Spider inside the Terracotta Pottery of a Contemporary Art Exhibit (Opening Night)

An everglade cemetery floods and coffins of jellied wood burp up their contents. No cradles for the dead, but Chiron is a god of copper and salt, and the sea here runs through the sawgrass like a nun combing her hair with the tips of her fingers.

Fifteen thousand years now mankind has been trying to die here and succeeding. Corpses outnumber the living. Ask the cicadas. Ask the maneaters.

Chiron accepts coin too, maybe the only god who does.
Where's he spend it? The maroon parlor of an offramp casino, sweating like mustard gas,
shucking the gold arm of a slot machine?

Gods of death are surely
the unluckiest of the lot,
always being cheated.

There are no coins for the dead now.
We're all in debt.

One imagines hurricane season,
fleets of corpses setting off without a captain,
and later a florida man changes profession,
from chaplain to sculptor,
kisses his shaking hands,
and begins to work the new mud into urns.

by Stefhen Holtrey
Dickey is crying as he tells me his war buddy, some poor dead kid by the name of Willy Kemp, has been reincarnated as a horse. I don’t argue, have learned better than to engage in anything like conversation when Dickey starts to slip; just settle down on the log next to him, and light a couple of cigarettes. If the owners see him like this they’ll find a way to push us off the job, and we both need the money. I find the best way is to sit back and listen, let the fire burn itself out. I pass one across, and Dickey takes the cigarette in his good hand. It trembles a bit, and I have time to marvel at the neatness of his nails, trimmed and clean. That is something he never lets go. Bills unpaid. House gone to shit, lawn a mess of weeds and broken glass. Still, no matter how bad he gets, Dickey tends himself well. Short nails, clean teeth and a close shave. Despite whatever jumbled torture now lives in Dickey Ransom’s head, the man keeps his hygiene in top condition. Battle ready. He takes a drag from the smoke, held overhand between thumb and forefinger, cherry obscured from view. This is new as well, another habit picked up from his season in Hell. His head hangs down, a tear occasionally falling from his trembling chin. I place a hand on his back, making sure to avoid the scarred mass of his shoulder, and am alarmed at the obvious protrusions of his spine, knots among taut skin and insectile thinness. His body shivers, despite the heat of the day. Dickey is a high-tension wire, possessed by electric ghosts. The horse has moved off a-ways now, thirsty, in the direction of the aluminum water trough. I glance back over at Dickey and see him watching it, guilt and grief pulling his eyebrows down and in, tears standing in his bleary eyes. “Kemp was a buck Private, over there less than a month. Caught one on patrol outside Ghazni.” He continues watching the horse, black coat shining as it bends to drink, a heliotropic sparkle in the midday sun. Dickey’s voice is weary, drained and dead. It’s been a year since we got the letter, the Purple Heart and discharge papers, and, weeks later, whatever is left of Dickey. Sharon seems to be holding up well, considering. The kid turns four this month, too young to really understand what her daddy is, what keeps him up at night, pacing and yelling, or, when it’s really bad, sitting like a stone, staring at...
things we’re blessed not to see. She’ll learn in time, I’m sure. Can’t be helped. Kids collect knowledge like ticks in high grass, unnoticed and deadly, identified only by complications down the line.

I finish my cigarette, field strip it and pocket the filter. Dickey can’t abide a cigarette butt; a habit I’m happy to indulge. I stand, wipe my sweaty hands on the front of my jeans, clear my throat. “Ok, buddy. Mrs. Conover says she needs these stalls mucked and graded by the end of the day. I’ll take the Bobcat along the drain line while you finish up here. Sound good?” My voice is measured, calm and commanding, just this side of patronizing. It’s a thin line, and I walk it well. Dickey absently strips his cigarette, slips it into the front pocket of his dusty overalls. “Worse things, I guess, than being some rich lady’s show horse, prancing around for all the fancy people.” He pauses. I wait. “You reckon he likes it here?” Dickey looks up at me, dark eyes swimming and hopeful, the eyes of a child asking important, eternal questions, the true nature of the Tooth Fairy, or Santa, or God. I look down at my brother, attempt a reassuring smile, fail. “I reckon so, Dickey. He looks mighty fine to me.” The horse that may or may not be the late Private William F. Kemp stands in the far corner of the lot, cropping its teeth on a worn wooden fence board. Dickey wipes his eyes, nods, extends a hand. I pull him up.

When we leave, the paddock is pristine and perfect; the sun a bare hint on the horizon, the sky awash with orange-purple fire. As we drive home, I mull Dickey’s words over in my head. I look, see him slumped in the passenger seat, dirty and exhausted, crouched forward, favoring his injured shoulder even in sleep. It can be difficult sometimes to disregard his failings, the twisted waste of his body, his poisoned mind and whatever fractured madness grows within it. Despite this, it is clear that Dickey is not without some deep-set, primordial wisdom. He is correct on at least one account: There are, without a doubt, worse things.
Men in Blue
by Sarah Hussein
Unfinished report on something

Outside, my new America was waking up
to nightmare. . .
—Julia Alvarez, “American Dreams”

I’m thinking of Yazmin Juarez
and her little girl,
immigrants from Guatemala,
asylum seekers consigned to a
South Texas holding facility

I’m wondering about
Yazmin’s daughter
19-month-old Mariee
requiring medical treatment —
she has a name, Mariee —
given only Tylenol for bronchitis,
104-degree fever, diarrhea,
vomiting, and ear infection —
Tylenol —
denied emergency treatment 5 times—
that little girl, Mariee —
say her name

I’m grieving for mother and child,
after 20 days
released to New Jersey relatives,
Mariee taken to Children’s Hospital
in Philadelphia,
where she died on May 10, 2018,
6 weeks after detention,
close to her 2nd birthday —
Yazmin, Mariee —
say their names

And now I’m also thinking about
this anonymous message, handwritten
on a torn sheet of notebook paper,
that just appeared on my sidewalk:

Something killed
our baby robins.
I found the nest
in the yard and the mother trying to feed her dying babies. I was really hoping her babies would grow and fly away.

Mariee Juarez — say her name

—Susan Gundlach
GOLPES AFTER VALLEJO

“Hay golpes en la vida tan fuertes...”*
not tiny insults like the cat’s claw
piercing your sweet big toe
till it spouts crimson tears
You are sturdy and have antiseptic
The cut is but an inch in your miles and miles of life

Still
“Hay golpes en la vida tan fuertes...”
Blows so hard in life
So strong

“Hay golpes ...”
they shot off his face
that boy, so pure and golden
fresh from the island when I first knew him
now a man, a father
who cannot stand whole for his progeny:
three children
two stateside, one on the island

Yes
“Hay golpes en la vida tan fuertes...”
Blows so hard in life
So strong

“golpes ...”
they severed his identity
one bullet that sliced through his face
amputating the chin, half the mouth
half his face fell off,
the jaw bones, left splintered
died

Hay golpes en la vida tan fuertes...
Blows so hard
Perhaps not softened but cushioned
By a sister who unravels miles and miles of life
To cocoon this shattered man
To wrap those golpes en la vida
in the endless silk
of her love

* Line from Cesar Vallejo

by Tamra Plotnick
My Grandfather as Trace Mineral

Planted beyond the backyard, the truck garden grows in string-straight rows of pole beans, mustard greens, and corn. Vines of cucumber creep and sprawl, twining with squash. We eat red radishes pulled right from the ground, crisp and bitter and gritty with dirt.

In soot-smudged dusk, Granddaddy funnels mustard broth into dirt; kneeling in damp grass, we wait for nightcrawlers to worry their way to the surface. My clumsy hands tug worms from earth and drop them, squirming, into coffee grounds banked in a jar.

Due to minerals absent from soil, then food, children in Tibet grow knock-kneed, crook-armed, their joints knobbed and bulbous as turnips. Kashin-Beck disease rots cartilage till nothing remains to cushion bone. Selenium supplements, derived from mustard seed, do little to hinder the affliction.

The black plank floor at East End Seed is stacked with bushel sacks of feed, lengths of garden hose, flat bags of lime. My granddad slips me peppermints from an ashtray on the counter. The folds of his jacket exhale cigarette smoke; his knuckles are cracked.

Mandalas are sifted in intricate design, taking days to construct but mere breath to sweep away. Buddhist monks consecrate this art by chanting, their throat-song fracturing tones into pitches distinct as colored grains of sand. Even the floorboards buzz with the vibrations of this singing.

When my grandfather’s ash returns to the earth, the potash supplies essential nutrients to soil. Other mourners kneel in loam recommended for root vegetables and mustard and my knotted knees alone refuse to fold. Furrowed with nightcrawlers, my swollen throat ululates and ruptures. Even headstones thrum with the vibrations of my sorrow.

by Terry Hall Bodine
Dawn Crane Dance
by Kim McNealy Sosin
Dirt to Dirt
by Richard Birken

The bee had been on the ground itself. Above ground was bad enough; Raymond knew to be careful above ground. Even in his bedroom, he could hear the bees and wasps waiting just outside the window. But most times, they were busy elsewhere. Most times, he could go outside and miss them, and he didn’t stand very high off the ground anyway. But now his best friend Ronny, two years younger even than Raymond, who should have been safe as low as he stood, lay on the ground crying wildly and holding his foot where it had found the bee and the bee’s stinger had found the soft flesh of his instep. As Ronny’s mother raced the two front yards between, Raymond studied the ground.

LA was like that; things just happened. One day, the lawn seemed safer than above ground; today it proved not to be. One day, the quiet street ran smooth and car-lined; the next, earth movers lifted the pavement into the sky as if it were paper, the street became dirt piles and crevasses, footbridges formed haphazardly from planks of wood, and loud dirty men and loud smoky smelly equipment crawled and pounded everywhere.

As Ronny’s mother, ignoring Raymond completely, picked her son off the ground and carried him home cradled in her arms like the weekly groceries, Raymond, afraid to look at or listen to Ronny’s wailing any longer, looked instead at the unsafe ground. He guessed he had always known about the ground because he knew about dirt, but he didn’t need to have it confirmed in such a blatant way. As the bee proved to be as temporary as the pavement, weakly buzzing in a circle while the life energy surged out of it like air from a punctured life raft; as Raymond watched it die and realized, truly realized, that what the adults said was true, that bees did die after leaving their stingers impaled inside their victims (only after, of course), he had to face that he now had seen with his
own eyes what he had kept at bay from his fears: the ground offered no more security than the above ground.

In fact, maybe it offered less, because Raymond had never seen anyone get stung before and today he had seen his best friend get stung from the ground. Of course, a person couldn’t fall from the ground like a person could from above ground. There was that to consider. But, really, Raymond should have known better about the ground. Not only had he watched the earth movers shove the ground aside as if it were nothing at all, there was the long crack in his own front lawn as evidence.

The crack in the lawn was the first thing he remembered noticing about the outdoors. He didn’t remember a whole lot about his first years indoors, outdoors, or otherdoors, but he remembered that crack. In his imagination, the crack was always wider than it actually was, but in truth it was wide enough. The adults said it was from an earthquake, but they didn’t say it to him. He’d never asked. But he heard. He heard lots of things he wished he didn’t remember.

He did remember the few times when the rains dropped hard and the street flooded over the curbs, remembered getting out of the car and practically having to swim to his front door. He kind of liked those times; it was fun to see everyone soaking wet and laughing about the absurdity of it all. But they said that wouldn’t happen anymore with the storm drains. Or with the sewers, whichever it was.

After awhile, once he got used to it and it became what was normal, Raymond didn’t mind the machines or the loud dirty men or even having to walk several blocks to get to the car. The men were large and scary looking, but they were nice, too. And the machines were fun to climb on when the men weren’t working and the adults weren’t watching. Which seemed like most of the time. Adults and children didn’t so much live in the same world as in parallel worlds, aware the other existed but not terribly interested. Sometimes the two worlds joined, such as when his father took
them all to the beach in the old pick-up truck and life was great, or when he had to spend time with his grandmother, when it could be awful. But most of the time the worlds moved alongside one another, just out of reach but not of hearing, like two strangers flying kites in the same piece of sky. The kites moved in the same general direction, the strangers were aware of each other, but if something happened to one person’s kite, while the other person knew the same thing could happen to his, the thing was, it wasn’t his kite. It was the other person’s kite.

The bee, motionless now in death, ants already approaching, still held some theoretical species threat to Raymond, so he moved to the edge of his lawn closest to Ronny’s house. He strained to listen, but couldn’t hear anything over the noise of the working men and machines. For a moment he wondered what to do, but decided it was too soon to inquire after Ronny; that thought brought some relief.

Instead, he thought of visiting Aunt Ruthie, who lived next-door between his house and Ronny’s. She wasn’t really his aunt; she was aunt to the whole block. She was older even than his parents, but she lived alone. He spent a lot of time at her house, but all he really knew about her was that she liked to give sweets to children. One day two of her young real nieces visited Aunt Ruthie; Raymond wandered into her back yard to find the two girls, older than Raymond, sitting at a small round table holding a tea party without tea. They invited Raymond to join them. He didn’t really want to. Somehow they reminded him of his grandmother, who was best avoided but who tried so hard to make herself unavoidable, but they also reminded him of something else, something he could feel but not name. But he joined them. He didn’t remember much about it except the strange sensations he felt afterward; it was nothing solid, nothing he could put vision to. Still, the memory, though faceless and formless, was somehow uncomfortable if not unpleasant, and produced a feeling something like guilt.
He looked down at the crack in the lawn, his crack. Lots of the neighbor’s lawns had cracks, but this was his crack, the one he remembered when he wasn’t trying. What with the bee and all, he figured he couldn’t feel any more unsettled, so he let himself dwell on the crack, observing not just its outlines, which was as far as he usually dared go, but looked into the fissure between. There was only more dirt, just like the dirt caked inside the trenches that used to be his street. He observed the dirt, but he wouldn’t bend over and touch it. He couldn’t understand how the other kids could play in the dirt piles that were left each time the men and machines came, couldn’t understand why they didn’t mind getting their hands encrusted with it, even reveled in it. He shivered at the mere thought of it.

That was just a thing with him, a disconnect between hands and dirt, between hands and sticky stuff. One time, he’d gone to a school carnival with his older sister. She led him to a bungalow and then left with a boy, as usual, leaving him surrounded by unfamiliar desks and chairs and other kids waiting for something fun to happen. He loved carnivals. There was a permanent one on the main road to the east he called the merry-go-round. The largest attraction was a Ferris wheel, which he was afraid to ride, but he liked the games and, most of all, the Scots Burger next door, where the burgers tasted just like McDonald’s before there was McDonald’s. The street was a huge street with more lanes than he could count. All the main streets were like that; he didn’t mind them as long as he didn’t have to cross one alone. (The first time his parents sent him to school with just his brother as escort had been a disaster. Afraid to cross the wooden plank thrown across the trench that served as footbridge, he had to endure his brother angrily pulling him across. When they reached the main street across from the elementary school, he started walking with his brother but stopped on the center island when the light started flashing “Don’t Walk” in red. “Don’t Walk” seemed pretty clear to him. His brother had run across and stood all the way on the other
side, and, ruddy face turning redder and redder, kept yelling at Raymond to cross. Raymond had obviously embarrassed his brother again. But Raymond stood his ground and waited for the light to return to flashing “Walk” in green before finishing crossing the street, and his brother rewarded his stupidity by punching him on the arm. There were costs to big brothers just as there were with dirt. So he liked carnivals. But when an adult brought a huge plastic pail to his desk and poured blue starch on white paper, Raymond figured out they were supposed to dip their fingers in it and start painting or something; he bolted from the desk, crying loudly, and ran down the wooden steps. An adult followed, but his sister heard, ran over and waved the adult off. Through his tears Raymond tried to explain that he was afraid of putting his fingers in the muck they’d poured on his desk. He wasn’t sure she understood or cared to understand, but he understood that she wasn’t happy. She grabbed his hand roughly, told the boy something, then dragged Raymond home. He cried all the way, not just on account of the muck, but because he didn’t want to leave the carnival or make his sister unhappy; he just wanted to leave that bungalow and the gooey blue starch.

So naturally he couldn’t understand how anyone could enjoy playing in dirt. They even did it when it was wet and muddy; in fact, they liked it better. They’d call to him, standing alone on his lawn, away from the crack, and tell him to come and play, knowing all along that he wouldn’t; they just wanted to mock him, show how proud they were and how ashamed he should be.

But that’s the way it is with dirt. Raymond had no problem with dirt per se; he just didn’t want to get intimate with it.

After awhile, Raymond ran out of things to worry about and went inside the house. It was safe, because his grandmother was spending the afternoon at some place or other playing cards. She was one of those people who was too often cajoling affection without doing anything to merit it, and responded harshly and manifestly to the inevitable rejections. She was also one of the only
people in LA who relied on the bus to get around; she never even tried to learn to drive. That just made her seem stranger and sadder. His mother’s entire family appeared sad and old; even the younger ones looked old before their time except for one set of cousins who were the only part of his mother’s family, the family in LA, his father being from New York, that he, his brother and sister could stand visiting.

His mother was in the kitchen readying dinner; that meant his father would be home soon. The ground felt sturdier when his dad was home. When he had one of his recurring nightmares, which was often, he would wake himself and go into their bedroom and crawl into bed between them. Otherwise, he had only his thumb to content himself with. It was a juicy, tasty thumb. At this point, he liked it more than he needed it, but at not quite seven, the difference between wanting and needing can be baffling, though he noticed that, at times, adults seemed to have that problem, too.

His mother noticed Raymond hovering about her stout legs. Where’s Ronny?” she asked while opening the oven to check on the roast. “I thought you two were playing.”

“He got stung.” Raymond tried to see past his mother’s arms at what dinner would be.

His mother closed the oven door and put the oven mitt on the cutting board. “Stung by what?”

“A bee.” His nose told him there would be roast for dinner. His mother made a lot of roasts. The best part would be if there were leftovers; then she might make barbeque beef sandwiches on French rolls.

“Is he all right? Does his mother know?” She bent down so she could hear better.

“I guess so. She carried him home.”

“Carried him home? He was hurt that bad?” She untied her apron, folded it and put it on the kitchen table.

“He was crying pretty loud,” Raymond added.
His mother reached down and took his hand. “We should go over and see if he’s all right,” she said, and began pulling him to the front door. He liked when she held his hand. Whenever they went to department stores together, he would manage to disappear into the clothing racks and reappear pulling on some other woman’s dress. He hated feeling lost, hated when the store manager called for his mother on the loudspeaker, but he always did it. Afterwards, his mother would hold his hand tightly.

They walked across Aunt Ruthie’s yard to Ronny’s house. Raymond didn’t usually go inside; he and Ronny generally played outside or at his house. Ronny’s older brother was much older than Ronny and Raymond, even older than Raymond’s brother. One day, Ronny’s brother came home bleeding all over the sidewalk. When somebody asked him why he was bleeding, he’d answered, “I was fishing.” Raymond pictured a huge fish tearing at Ronny’s brother’s face, but he’d been fishing with his father and brother so it was hard to believe. Still, the image stuck in Raymond’s mind, the pictures words left him with being stronger than their mere definitions.

His mother, still holding his hand, knocked on Ronny’s door. Ronny’s mother answered. Raymond looked inside and spotted Ronny lying on the couch with his foot resting on an ice pack. He wasn’t crying anymore. “Is Ronny all right?” his mother asked. “Ray says he got stung by a bee.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine,” Ronny’s mother said. “It’s a little swollen is all. I have it on ice and put some ointment on it.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I’m glad it’s nothing bad. Ray just told me and I wanted to see if there was anything we could do.”

“Thank you, but he’ll be fine. What are you making for dinner?”

“Oh, just a roast.” Raymond feared women talk was about to begin. That could take a long time. His mother still held his hand tightly, so he couldn’t slip away. But she saved him. “Well, I’d better get back. I left the oven on. Tell Ronny we hope he feels
better soon.” Raymond felt relieved; before the door closed his mother was leading him back to his house, where he wouldn’t have to worry about bees until bedtime.

Raymond’s father came home in time for a short nap. Dinner was at six thirty per family custom, and they devoured large quantities of food, as was also the custom. Raymond wanted to tell the story of the bee, but, as usual, his sister dominated conversation, gossiping about friends and enemies. Raymond decided to forget the bee, and his mother neglected to mention it, so it remained a secret to the rest of the family. After a little television, Raymond prepared for bed.

He found this last bathrooming particularly difficult, even in a family where everyone had a peculiar problem with evacuation. Once he was dressed in his pajamas he didn’t like to leave his bedroom because the opening for his genitalia had no seal. He feared that, in the instance that company surprised him, the opening would fly open and he would be worse than embarrassed. So the last bathrooming became a major ordeal that had to be executed exactly right. It seemed there was always a drop or two remaining that, if left unexpelled, would grow into a larger and larger pressure forcing him to go out into the family room to reach the bathroom and thus accidentally expose himself.

But every experience has to end sometime, and he propelled himself into bed. His mother gave him a gentle kiss goodnight, pulled the covers snuggly to his chin, and turned the overhead light out as she closed the door behind her.

Now came the waiting. Raymond didn’t yet know it, but he was born at two in the morning; maybe that was the reason. Whatever it was, he could never fall asleep before eleven or twelve; he would listen to the muffled sound of the television in the next room or play with toy army men he’d smuggled into his bed. In the dark, he had to figure out which was which by feel, but he’d grown skilled at it. He couldn’t set up one of his grand battlefields, of course, but he could play out a small skirmish
beneath the covers. His brother had bequeathed the army men to him; that’s how he got all his toys, and his clothes, too. But that suited him fine, since his brother was his most formidable model of play and behavior.

After a short time, his brother entered the room. Raymond heard his mother’s practiced hands turn on the vaporizer, which consisted of a sort of steam kettle going back and forth with a loud buzz on each transit. His mother made sure his brother’s bronchodilator rested within his arm’s reach, then went back out. His brother practiced a few belches. Raymond would usually utter some of his own, learning from the master -- his brother could speak whole sentences in belch -- but tonight he didn’t want to start talking. That usually led to his getting picked on for something, and Raymond knew he couldn’t keep his fear to fall asleep and dream of bees from his brother. His brother’s wheezing slowly became regular, indicating he had fallen asleep. His brother had the ability, which Raymond lacked, of falling asleep immediately upon deciding to. Raymond envied his older brother much, and this was one of the talents he envied most.

Raymond took another hour to fall asleep, and, as expected, dreamed of bees and Ronny’s wild crying face. He had accumulated still another recurring dream to rotate into his repertoire. The most notable was the one that followed a visit he and his mother made to the corner one day. A woman neither he nor his mother had met before stood on her lawn wearing a thin white nightgown. His mother stopped to say hello. Somewhere in the process, a girl appeared and led Raymond into her back yard. Desiccated avocados littered the ground, and a small grove of short trees formed a kind of garden. That’s all Raymond remembered, but ever since he’d been having a dream in which, when he entered that back yard, white sheeted ghosts floated ominously about the trees and the shriveled avocados fallen unwanted to the ground. The ground consisted of coarse clumps of dusty, dry dirt, dirt that looked as if it would stick if touched and
be impossible to wash off. The dream, or the experience, left Raymond a little afraid of avocados, not that anybody ate them at the time so he seldom had to see one. Still, despite nothing happening in the dream to harm anyone, it always left Raymond feeling uneasy in the morning. All of his recurring dreams were nightmares; none felt pleasant, and though nothing terrible happened in any of them, there was always the sense of threat in them.

When his mother woke him the next morning he felt like he hadn’t slept even though he had. Nightmares left him like that. His brother, as usual, fought against getting up, so Raymond grabbed a few extra minutes of faux sleep. But eventually they both gave in to his mother’s increasingly annoyed pleadings, as they always did after exacting their price.

By the time Raymond washed and dressed for breakfast, his mother was on the telephone. After a couple of minutes, she handed the phone to his father. “You’d better take this,” she said to him. He stood, looking important, and took the phone. Raymond didn’t listen as he ate his eggs, but he knew his mother was listening very carefully at his father’s side.

“What is it?” his brother asked, but his mother hushed him.

“You two go on to school or you’ll be late,” she said, then turned her head again to her husband and the telephone.

Raymond trustingly followed his brother out of the house, over the rocking wooden plank bridge, and across the main street at the end of the long block. Having a big brother is like that; no matter how many times he torments the younger, the younger has no choice but to trust the stronger, larger, and more experienced.

After school, Raymond’s mother looked different. There was a sense of purpose to her other than her usual household busyness. His grandmother was home looking needy, so he went outside to play. He watched the men climb into and out of the trench for awhile; they seldom appeared to be doing anything to progress the task. When they dug up the street, it stayed dug for
months. It was hard to gauge any progress until they put the pavement back, when the first foul smell of moldering tar announced that the family needn’t walk several blocks to get to the car anymore, Raymond wouldn’t have to cross perilous wooden planks, and the dirt would finally be returned underground where Raymond could feel at peace with it.

Raymond decided enough time had passed to make it okay to visit Ronny without too much bother to Ronny’s mother or angst to him. He walked over and knocked on the door. Ronny’s mother let him in; Ronny sat on the couch with his foot resting on a pillow. Some ointment glistened over the red swelling.

“Is it better?” Raymond asked. He stayed on his feet, instead of sitting down, in case he found it necessary to leave quickly.

“Yeah.” Raymond still spoke with a young voice, but Ronny spoke with a very young voice. “It just itches now.”

“That’s good. When will you be able to come out and play?”

“Mom says another day. But it just itches now.” He held up his foot and pointed to the red blotch. “See?”

Raymond didn’t look; his curiosity ran in other directions.

“Yeah.”

“Want to play a game or something?” Raymond considered that, but decided he didn’t want to spend any more time near that foot than he needed to.

“No. I have to go home,” he lied. “I just wanted to see if you were better.”

“Yeah,” Ronny said. “It just itches.”

Raymond left and wandered over to Aunt Ruthie’s. She saw him wavering outside the kitchen door, so she opened it and bid him to come inside. He followed her to the kitchen table, home of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of treats. Not disappointed, she supplied him with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. He took three, and watched crumbs fall to the kitchen floor as he ate.
“So how are you, young man?” She was a plain woman, with white hair swirled high atop her head. She’d given up on any but the most basic make-up years ago, and seemed resolved to the spinster life. Children liked Aunt Ruthie. Her consistently gentle demeanor and welcoming, patient attitude stood in marked contrast to their parents’ more hectic interactions with them. Of course, she didn’t have to endure them all day and all night; she had the luxury of picking her spots. Still, most of the children had little to say to adults, and Raymond was no different. As welcoming as Aunt Ruthie’s kitchen could be, it still belonged to the largely alien adult world, a world Raymond wasn’t eager to understand and that didn’t seem eager to understand him.

“Fine.”

“That’s good. And how’s little Ronny?”

Raymond always took it for granted that anything that happened in his small world, a world in which he was generally afraid to travel more than one block in either direction unaccompanied, would be known to everybody else who lived in that world. “He’s better. It only itches now.”

“You have to be careful around bees. Have your parents decided yet where you’re going?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t know they were planning to go anywhere. It wasn’t time for their annual trip to Lake Arrowhead.

“Well, it’s too bad. Just a shame.” She shook her head at the travail of it all, whatever it was she was talking about.

Raymond wanted to know what was a shame, but he didn’t want to ask. But he was a bright child and instantly connected it to the morning’s telephone call and his mother’s unusual kind of busyness. He needed to go home. He said his goodbyes and walked over to his front lawn, then stopped to watch the workmen ready to leave for the day. They were caked in dirt. Raymond didn’t understand how anyone could live that way, day after day, having to muck in the dirt like ants. He was still a little afraid of these burly dirt-encrusted men, even after all this time and familiarity.
Perhaps one couldn’t really become familiar with people who
could live so differently than one imagined he would be able to
tolerate; imagined, because he lacked experience to go with his
fears, they were just there, foundationless but as solid as he was.

When he went inside his father was already home from
work; he sat in a chair he’d dragged into the hallway while he
spoke on the sturdy black telephone. Raymond loved that phone; it
felt so solid and smooth. Sometimes he liked to just hold it in his
hand. Raymond’s sister, brother and mother stood behind his
father, listening.

Raymond automatically positioned himself next to his
brother. “Are we going somewhere?” he whispered to him.

“Ssh,” his brother hissed. Raymond decided standing
quietly was the appropriate thing to do.

When his father got off the phone, his mother looked
intently at him. Raymond watched his father, too, because that was
where any information would come from in a situation like this.
“It looks like we’re moving to the Valley,” his father announced,
standing up. He gave his wife a peck on the cheek. Everybody but
Raymond dispersed to their normal routines, leaving him standing
alone in the hallway wondering what the Valley was, why they
were moving and why everybody else seemed to know something
important was going on except him.

That week, the house was a bustle. Everybody seemed to
have a purpose except Raymond, so he stayed out of the way. He
spent a lot of time on the front lawn. At the end of the next week,
the men left the trenches and abandoned their machines. Raymond
knew from experience that meant the tar would be coming soon
and his street would be back. But he also knew that not long after
that, he’d be moving to some place called the Valley and it
wouldn’t be his street anymore.

On Saturday, a bunch of boys were playing on the dirt
piles. Knowing the dirt would be disappearing soon, they played
with a deeper intensity than usual. They engaged in a spirited war
of dirt clods, the kind Raymond’s mother always insisted would result in Raymond losing an eye if he ever engaged in such an activity. Of course, they didn’t know about dirt. Raymond hadn’t told anyone about dirt. If they didn’t know, if they couldn’t see about dirt, that was their problem.

But today everything felt different. Raymond felt less preoccupied with thoughts. Watching the other children, he felt not revulsion but instead envy at their joy. Raymond liked fun as much as, if not more than, the next guy. In fact, he lived for fun, though it was often hard for him to come by. He found himself running out to the dirt piles and, before he could think about it, he was immersed in dirt and forming and aiming dirt clods with the rest of them. All in all, it was a good day for Raymond, one of the best in a long time.

The Valley of Saint Ferdinand rested in a basin just beyond the hills of his native West LA. The Valley, as everybody called it, resided “over the hill.” He’d heard the term “over the hill,” but hadn’t known that meant somebody was going to the Valley; now it would be him going over the hill. A lot of people would be going over the hill in succeeding years. Air conditioning allowed people to push further and further from the cooling breezes of the ocean to find cheaper homes in places that, until recently, had been considered almost uninhabitable desert. None of these places, which are really part of LA even if not officially, such as Newhall and Saugus, Simi Valley and, really, even Phoenix and Las Vegas and all the other bulging cities of the western deserts, are really inhabitable in any natural sense. These desert places are just dry caked dirt; even the air is dirt trapped by inversion layers and oppressive heat. But air conditioning, swimming pools and automobiles, plus a willingness to die of cancer and wheeze with asthma and never spend too much time outdoors during the high heat of day allowed those fleeing the East to slowly transform the West into another East minus only the humidity and the plethora of biting insects.
To slake this thirst to sprawl, copious amounts of water lacking in desert places were needed; some very clever speculators bought up the deserts and stole the water from places like the Owens Valley and the Colorado River and northern California. The great San Joaquin Valley and smaller vales like the Valley of Saint Ferdinand and the Santa Clara Valley sprouted orchards and vegetable farms and ranches. Then the speculators realized people brought even greater profit; they bought back the orchards and ranches and subdivided them, flattened the hills and subdivided them, too, and built acres and acres of identical houses to sell to people fleeing the East or fleeing the minorities who had come to live in the city.

But this didn’t mean anything to Raymond; to him sprawl was just something one did on the lawn on a cloudy day trying to distinguish the animals soaring overhead before they dissipated. All he knew was that his family was fleeing the newest freeway. After the automobile companies bought LA’s public transit system and sold it to San Francisco, they sold so many automobiles to southern Californians that the cars ran out of pavement on which to drive. And so somebody decided to build freeways that turned even the air itself into dirt; like the other children, Raymond thought it perfectly natural to have his lungs hurt after a day of play because that was all he ever knew. What was worse, Raymond’s house would now be sacrificed not for the firmament of the new freeway, or even the off-ramp near his house, but so the pile of dirt supporting the off-ramp would have a bed to rest upon. Since Raymond’s father could no longer afford to live in West LA if it meant buying a new house, the family would be going over the hill.

Raymond’s knowledge of these happenings was meager, at best, but he did know he was leaving everything he had grown familiar with in that dark house of dark dreams in that amorphously scary neighborhood, that more, the very structure, even the cracked front lawn, would be gone, and that for some
reason that was all right with him. He didn’t -- would never -- understand why this place and what had gone on there from day to day from the moment of his birth seemed so dark, so little remembered even at his young age, so vague. He only knew he would turn seven in a different place and that was all right with him, the person who was afraid to go so far as around the corner unaccompanied.

His last day living in West LA, Raymond went coasting with his friends, riding belly down on a sled on wheels called the freeway flyer propelled by feet and slopes but with hand brakes like a bicycle. That night, the family went to bed early, as it always did before a trip. Raymond slept in his clam diggers so he would be ready to go; his father liked to get an early start when they traveled, usually leaving before the sun came up, before Raymond and his brother were actually awake. As usual, Raymond couldn’t fall asleep until after midnight; instead, he listened without choice to his brother’s wheezing and the vaporizer buzzing back and forth, back and forth.

When Raymond’s mother awakened him, he struggled to his feet still clutching his favorite stuffed animal, a beaten-up (by him) old rabbit. The family piled into the used station wagon his father had bought to replace the old pick-up, Raymond and his brother prone in the very back, his sister stuck, as usual, next to her grandmother in the back seat, his parents in the front. Raymond didn’t fully awaken until his father had guided the car to Sepulveda Boulevard, the main route to the Valley. Raymond’s first awake thought was of Ronny, whose house wasn’t being stolen by the freeway. Raymond’s mother stood alongside him before Ronny’s front door as they said goodbye. He felt sad to leave his best friend, but didn’t fully understand that this was really goodbye, that he would only see Ronny once more in his life. So the goodbye was brief, and the sadness brief, too, for now he was too wrapped up in looking forward to focus on backward.
Raymond’s second awake thought was of his stomach falling out of his body. The car had reached the winding part of the road, and fell into deep dips every few minutes. Raymond and his brother pulled the blanket their mother had put over them at the beginning of the trip over their heads and, whenever the car went over an indentation, yelled “Dip!,” delighting in the momentary loss of gravity. After they tired of this game, Raymond tried not to think about getting carsick and instead focused on the creaking of the station wagon. He liked the sounds the car’s aging joints made; they comforted him with their music. He was beginning to be lulled to sleep when he heard his father say, “There’s the Valley.” The whole family sat up as high as they could, and, from the top of the hill, saw the plain spread out below. They watched intently as the car made the slow, winding descent into the basin, passing the hilltop homes of the wealthy and lowering finally into the flat, comparatively featureless Valley floor.

When the car finally pulled onto the family’s new street, with a cul-de-sac at one end bordering what was left of a ranch ringed with the tallest oak trees Raymond had ever seen or imagined, finally pulled into the driveway of the family’s new home, Raymond felt lighter somehow. Some unknown burden was lifting from him, not completely but enough to recognize it happening. Raymond didn’t know what that burden was, but he didn’t miss it.

As the family piled out of the car and stretched their legs, Raymond surveyed his new domain. All the houses looked exactly the same; in fact, they were exactly the same. The Valley was a place where a person could go to anyone’s house and find the bathroom without asking directions. The front lawn was mostly dirt; his father looked forward to battling the desert floor in the eternal war of lawn versus nature that takes up so much energy in desert places. The end of the block, where the oak trees shrouded the small ranch that hadn’t yet been subdivided, was all dirt covered intermittently by piles of fallen, dried-out oak tree parts.
His father took the family around to survey the back yard. Instead of the ugly incinerator crumbling away, a lemon tree stood against one fence loaded down with fruit, and an orange tree brimming with perfectly round navel oranges dominated the center of the large yard. The ground here was basically dirt, too; the former owner had obviously lost the war.

Raymond looked up from beneath the orange tree’s overhanging branches at the brown sky, and the sparse white clouds floating across it. The sun, unfiltered here by the cool ocean breezes, burned down on his bare arms, already turning brown. Raymond had gone from dirt to dirt, but he didn’t fear this dirt. He didn’t know why, and he didn’t care. To him, this dirt was a better class of dirt, cleaner, purer. He felt ready to go inside the house and see whether this house, too, would be dark, or let in such light of the sun as forced its course through the dirty sky.
Geese
by Vincent Zepp
Name-Dropping

It took a global pandemic
For him to realize
He should cross the street
When he sees me coming.

And a liberal White man from a place of faith called me stupid
For calling myself White
And rejected Bell and Crenshaw
Called them stupid
Without knowing their names
Because what they had to say
Made him mad
So mad he yelled
And took up all the space
And we had to go silent
Because that’s the great White way
And this is how George Floyd dies

And I robbed Peter to pay Paul
Because I couldn’t just tell them both
That we’re all wrong
And we all need each other
Because Peter doesn’t trust Paul
And Paul doesn’t trust Peter
And I can’t tell them apart
And this is how Amy Cooper attempts murder

Can’t keep that dog on a leash
Because we can take her dog and fire her all in the same day
And we must, we must do this
I need to know that you will take away my dog
And you will take away my job
When I pledge money to a candidate who wouldn’t protect you either
When I vote for a man I wanted to make the prototype
But would still try to kill you
And it will take months to arrest the men
Protected by their other men
By the boys in blue and the boys in the cross and the boys in the hood
And this is how Breonna Taylor dies

And this is how Ahmaud Arbury dies
Because we run the miles and take the pictures
And write the essays
And I write this poem
And I still teach the Boston Massacre
As a noble resistance to tyranny
But call this all a riot
I call it looting
I still teach the Boston Tea Party
Whiting my way past the indigenous appropriation
The indigenous endangerment
The way White men AND WOMEN will take what they want
To keep their money in their pocket
To yell and name-call and intimidate
To cry and point fingers that look like guns and move the circle
To be inside it
The tea parties get their own chapter in the text
And Crispus Attucks. . .well, at least his name is in bold print, I guess
And we call this looting
And the president says they start looting we start shooting
And it’s just another tweet

Just another chirp

The tea was so strong that it
Drank me
While I drank it

And interest convergence makes my brain
Explode in fury
Explode in roars
Until I remember that I didn’t know about
Matsuda I didn’t know about Delgado
I didn’t know about DuBois
Until my White interest converged
Until my desire to be a doctor to be an expert
Opened my wallet
And exposed my ignorance
I am no different.
And this is how a woman became Sara Baartman became Hottentot Venus
And I bought tickets
And called it a celebration of culture
And tipped during the lapdance
And reached for more than was offered
I, too, sing just another tweet

And the birdsong doesn’t reflect
That pandemic will one day be a footnote
Where do I put my money now?
Where do I put my mask now?
Where do I put my money now?

The governor said we are open
My feed can’t make sense of itself
Am I happily posting photos?
Am I happily joining movie and music challenges?
Am I happily linking to a song
That may or may not have a hidden message?
Am I sincerely sharing words that show my rage?
Am I sincerely sharing images that show my solidarity?
Am I sincerely sharing links to events that feel like action?

We cannot call ourselves antiracist
Just because the word exists
We cannot call ourselves antiracist
When one among us screams and shouts
And stomps and calls the cops
And cries and holds no space
For anyone but themselves
We cannot call ourselves antiracist
Because we want to be
But we don’t move
We don’t put Peter and Paul in the room together
We cannot call ourselves antiracist
Because we recognize
The birdshit
As a diversionary tactic
But we don’t know that this is not a new word

And this is how I work through
My complicity
This is how they die
This is how I made the call
This is how I stood by
And filmed because I didn’t want to choke, too
This is how I wore a uniform
With the best of intentions
But taught my own
Supremacy anyway

I drank a tea so strong
It drank me while
I drank it

by Cara Jeanne
I am waiting for a terrible sentence to begin

I am waiting for a terrible sentence to begin
I am waiting for permission
I am waiting for the world to empty
his war chest of ammunition
I am waiting for him to be shoved
naked onto the streets
tonguing a solitary gold tooth for Quixotic-reassurance
I am waiting for bars to fill with traders
speculating on his future
I am waiting for forest and field to reject him
for canopy and tallest corn to consent to the drones
I am waiting for no respite from silent superveillance
I am waiting for ladders to actualize and stilt-walk away
to loiter across alley-mouts like wooden gangs
all leg and tooth and grin
I am waiting for rash to rise from the brand on his buttock
waiting for a shingles belt to lick his haunch like Sticky-Fingered-Hot-Lip
I am waiting for witches
to ascend from stony riverbeds casting reparation spells
I am waiting for the lesson to dawn
to bubble up in passers-by and flood
through social mediums like body-snatcher plagues

I am waiting for this anger to form
something more than outrage

I am waiving my consent

by Conor Mc Donnell
Grieving Mother With Lantern
by Henry G Stanton
Irregular Concentrics

Samantha became so mad
when she found out Michael
was sleeping with Brittany
that she got drunk & drove
straight into another man’s wife,

and when the cops arrived
she blew a one-point-nine
& offered to blow the cop
to get off with a warning,

not knowing

that she had killed a mother
& daughter coming home
from a ballet recital.

Samantha was only seventeen
and would spend the rest of her life
blaming Brittany
for the incident.

Funny thing is,
Brittany didn’t really enjoy sex yet,
she just liked the attention,

& in two weeks time would blow
off Michael to give Peter a handjob
in the skatepark, even though
all the kids were watching,
but that didn’t matter—

by all accounts
Peter was a much better catch,
plus his parents had money.
Time would prove that irrelevant, as Peter discovered the vicious joy of heroin,

and would be dead before twenty.

A month earlier, Michael told Chris at a party how he was fucking two girls without consequence,

& Chris, angel that he is, tried to remember the word *hubris* between bong rips

but couldn’t,

& was later found naked passed out in the garage, hugging a Hustler like a blankie.

Chris owned up to it, told everyone he knew his urges, & that he would do it again in a heartbeat.

Chris was a pretty cool kid, & had an older brother that could buy cigarettes, so he was forgiven quickly.

Chris was with Grayson, like always, when he found out about Samantha, & Grayson wanted to fuck her so bad he vowed right then & there that this would be only a minor inconvenience.
Grayson got his wish six years later
in his car
behind a Dairy Queen,

but he had to pay her
thirty dollars.

Grayson thought it was worth it,
but Samantha didn’t remember him,
in fact was back with Michael,
kind of,

had had two kids with him,

& although they lived in the same apartment,
neither was home
often,

& both had been so numb
for so long
that they thought little of it.

That night Samantha was coming home
from buying diapers,
when Brittany,
coming home from a party,
hit her head on going fifty
through an intersection.

Two days later
Michael would shoot up
and shoot himself
without leaving a note.

That weekend
three funeral processions
circled the same graveyard
in varying intervals—
the irregular concentric’s of
starving sharks.

& although
all their friends
came out to mourn,
not one was able
to dig up

any semblance of a moral
from it.

by C. M. Tollefson
The Funny Gang Rape at the Whorehouse

At a gentlemen’s club behind Slots-O-Fun, my friend Joey turned 21 (really 17 with a fake I.D.). As he approached the stage, his pals yelled, “Virgin! Virgin! Virgin!” Joey was not deterred.

He was handcuffed to the stripper’s pole, hands behind his back, seated on a barstool. The lap dancers pulled his jeans down to his ankles, naked except for his boxers, then a dozen or so dancers went to work.

One spry lady jumped off of his lap, startled.

All the women backed away, laughing.

The whole audience laughing at a hard-on – poking – from his boxers, bent to the left, and terribly thin. He went flaccid, started crying.

The DJ said, “Do you want the show to go on, birthday boy?”
He nodded his head yes.  
“Hell, yes!” he hollered, and all the titillated sinners felt desire: *Viva! Las Vegas!*

by Dana Stamps
Fuck Poem
(after Gertrude Stein)

I’m more fucked
than a fucked fucker getting fucked fuckingly
to fuckyestnessness …

oh, fuck, I’m fucked in such a fucked way
that fuck fucks fuck

by getting fucked by a fucker
who fucks so fuckingly that fuck no longer fucks to fuck
but gets fucked
by some fuck
fucking fuck back; now that’s fucked
… fuckingly!

The rest is euphemism.

by Dana Stamps
The Reckoning

If I must die,
how rude of people to live without me.
I expect the suicide
of all humanity as a protest against
my natural disaster.
I don’t like that there should be
a universe at all
after me. You might think that I jest
when I soon plan on capturing an unlucky angel,
not the archangel Gabriel;
he would no doubt be too tricky
when a lesser angel will do.

Oblivion instead of hell after my prayers
are answered: Send me an angel!

A doohickey that I invented
(but I must keep secret, even from myself)
makes possible the kidnapping and transporting
of the angel into a black hole.

In suicide bomber style,
an explosion will obliterate him, wings and all,
shooting holy light from his wounds,
and a spatiotemporal flux
will ignite the universe – crunching it,
destroyed, to my delight.

by Dana Stamps
Stardust Marina Spring Morning
by J. Ross Peters
If I Was A Bird

does like chimes
clanging
in the breeze
in my diseased
mind and
I’m on a
beach laying
in the sand
listening
to the waves
rushing in.

and in the crystal
sky I watch
a flock of birds
twisting and rolling
and one
breaks
away and flys
into the
fiery
white hot sun
and I think:

if I was a bird
that would be
me.

by Jon Carter
Just Relax

Nothing real is named
nor do we find it with our eyes
our hands cannot hold real things
and they have no taste
no sound
nothing real will comfort you
nothing real dances on the wind
or purrs beside you on your couch
demanding love with sharp claws
as the world pummels everyone
and the charade spins on forever
and we blink on and off
like Christmas lights
on a plastic tree
rescued for a while
from a dark, unknowable
attic

by Jeff Weddle
After Heartbreak

The infinite echo of emptiness lingers
Hanging black lichen is frozen in time
Snow falls and blankets the ashen remains

Chipmunks emerge, too cautious to frolick
The sky’s pierced by hawks, circling wide
The infinite echo of emptiness lingers

Ground cover blooms, and ferns unwind
Nests are assembled from charred broken vines
Hanging black lichen is frozen in time

Saplings reach up from pebbles of cones
Bucks battle hard then mount their does
Snow falls and blankets the ashen remains

By Josephine Pino
The alleyway near the downtown library
by Alan Bern
	every day twice walking

Photo previously published by “Unearthed – An ESF Literary & Arts Magazine”
the same one-block alley back to work
The alleyway near the downtown library

Part I

“. . . through a thousand blind alleys.
You want to bring me to You through stone walls.”

– Thomas Merton

I’m not certain about my cap. Why I wear it. When. The air is different in here, where I spend my best hours, often cooler. And the light, in this alley, there’s much less of it, always by slices, even when the old sun is right overhead and blazing down.

Ok, I just have to stop reading too much into tone of voice, when my colleague at the library asks me for something and then pauses and says my name, I don’t need to ask myself if he is making some clever joke about my name, maybe he just likes the sound of my name and makes a point of calling me Max. He might like me telling him how my folks named me Maddux, which is another spelling for the Welsh name Maddox, the son of Madoc, which means “Fortunate.” Oh well. Maybe not. I should be glad to
be Max and lucky not to be called Maddux. I already got teased enough when I was little; sure, Maddux is mostly a boy’s name, but odd names were as bad as women’s names for a boy . . .

• • •

Most people who see me in the alley staring straight ahead— as I often am, in a sort of deep trance— and not as clean as I would rather be— do not think of me as a person . . . exactly, but rather as a type, representative of a cluster— sound crystal— one to be pitied . . . with a sympathy that lets them look at me from as far away as they can manage to imagine themselves . . . even when they are physically quite close to me.

• • •

Yes, Maddux wasn’t such a popular name then, but now that Brangelina – no, I think it was just Angelina herself – named her adopted kid Maddox, then I guess that changed. Sometimes I wish I’d been named Frank, but I know my parents would have chosen Francis instead. Maybe that wouldn’t have been so bad either. I was skimming in a book of poems the other day, and I found this one:
San Francesco, as you are sky

cool morning, again –
Brother & Sister Horse share hay,
trading places, chewing

two brindled ducks
approach the horses
then squawk off to the pond again

climbing this morning,
the path divides in two –
who goes up or down this steep hill?

So in Italy Francesco isn’t confusing because the girl’s name is
Francesca.

I want to talk about my dog. She is the sweetest one, a pit bull, but
a sweeter dog you will never know. Her name is Cannella because
of her pure cinnamon color. I think of her as a wolf though she
would never eat me . . . or would she? I know that, with her strength of jaw, she could terminate me in minutes . . . and then eat me? If she were hungry enough she would, I guess.

... 

What I can’t help thinking is, *Mom, Dad! you named me after that Southern storm trooper, Lester Garfield Maddox! How did that happen? Why would you do that?* Was it the middle name *Garfield* that pushed them over the top? I often felt myself in the middle. I did end up going to Garfield Junior High School: that is fact.

... 

I am not homeless, and no hobo, since I have found my house-replacement in this alleyway, where I spend most of my day. I can move around inside the alley, depending on the weather. When it is hot, I do prefer the shady sectors, but not always. If I have had a cold night, I often keep on a lot of clothes – maybe it’s aging, but I tend to take longer to warm up, and, no, I am no alcoholic with thinning blood, nothing like that. Also, I have a lot of gear to store, and dressing in more clothes makes that easier, yes it does. Nights
are different, more fearful, and I will sometimes sleep in bushes nearby or in a shelter or in a church; rarely do I sleep in my alleyway . . . except when I nap in the daytime. Nod. I come in the day as if I were coming to work, it is a job, on the whole, undefined.

• • •

“I saw the wolf in winter watching on a raw hill . . .” That, if I remember right, is from a poem by W.S. Merwin, one favorite poet of mine. Maybe I’ll go to the library and get a copy to check out. Cannella looks at the world the way a wolf might if she were alone on a lone hill . . . in the instant before she begins to howl straight up. I wonder if she once was a cadaver dog. Her sense of smell is excellent, excellent. I know she could have been a great one.

• • •

I am a reference librarian, one of several, in a smallish city library. I say smallish, but my city is actually way too big for its britches because it has a major research university within it. Actually, that is not quite accurate: when I say within, I refer to most of the university. Parts of it are, in fact, in different cities and even in
other counties. This university is one big deal. Talking about britches, this is one high mark for higher learning . . . no, no, no, that is a joke from a different era. The kids still get high, but they also want to make money, make deals, and sign up for one of the myriad corporations that seem to own and run the universities in this dreadful age we continue to call entrepreneurial.

• • •

I have stared at the side of that building till I squint. I sit in front of the wall in the morning when the sun hits direct on the wall, but softer – still I must shade my eyes. In the afternoon I stand with Cannella and peer with eyes shaded toward the wall and into the sun as it creeps down behind the back of the buildings. Guess ghost sign is the right term since I can never quite make out anything but the “W” and “L” – other letters have too few shapes for me to read them into words and the spaces between words and lines are even vaguer. It could have been any of these: there was a WOLF ST. nearby back when, and there was a WOLF PAPER COMPANY not so long ago, too. And there is space at top and bottom that could have words. As for the HOUSE OF WOLF, a local I talked to who grew up in town remembers hearing about that restaurant from his good friend’s grandparents. But who says
it is even WOLF spelled out. Perhaps the word was WALL or the name WOLL? Ghost signs are everywhere in alleys. Over time, building owners have changed, over and over. And what remains.

• • •

I want to go into the library. I have questions, too. They might have some answers . . . and if they do not, well, I still might use the bathroom like the others do . . . we have a bathroom near City Hall, but that’s the only other one open and only for a few daytime hours . . . the restaurants, the boutiques, they will not stand for us in their bathrooms, not at all.

• • •

Now, when I went to school, protestors ruled the day, almost every day, in fact. The football players didn’t protest much, maybe a few of them did, but no more than that. I was interested, but not quite, in the protests most of the time. It just didn’t seem right, and I was so engrossed in my classes, my homework, and, then, later at night when I was done studying, thinking about her, what she would feel like.
The smokers in the alley twenty feet from entrances around the corner – clerks and business district workers, city staff, too – then, a man in short pants, plain t-shirt, black or grey, at least once a day, strides the alley back and forth, left hand often holding a cell and right hand waving, talking not loudly, but with emphases, for his full 15-minute break. The call always ends with a low sound I imagine to be a declaration of affection, but it could just as easily be an acknowledgement of defeat. Who has he been talking to? Why is he scratching like that? Makes me start to itch. My nose.


I wanted to work in a library once upon a time. I could have figured that all out. Really.

My own older brother was in the war, Vietnam. Thank God he was wounded and got out before he came home in a bag, a box. But it
took it all out of him. He used to come into the library and try to talk to me at the desk, but he wasn’t making sense, any sense. Then he’d get loud, and I’d have to tell him to get quieter or he’d have to leave. He couldn’t. I didn’t even have to call the guard: they’d just come and escort him out. Oh yeah, what the city psychiatrist said: “Schizophrenia is no excuse for bad behavior.” My brother though, he had PTSD, and he seemed like he was seeing things sometimes . . . maybe he was. It must have been just horrible. He liked dogs . . . when we were growing up we had a mutt. He loved her. I scratched that dog’s ear in the alley today. Later, when I finished my break, I washed my hands. Twice.

• • •

The other day a young man in dungarees seemed to be studying the letters of the ghost sign and talking— maybe to himself, maybe to a mouthpiece, I could not see clearly— I believe he wants to restore the words— how can he know them?— I think I heard him call it “aging,” but “artificial” I name it.

• • •
Out at my break, walking, getting some air, and the damned phone rang. Mom again with some confusion about tonight. I didn’t want to answer, but I did. “Mom, I’ll bring dinner to you, and we can watch the show you like, *Dancing with the Stars*. Oh, you want to go out; well, we can do that and then come back to the apartment for the show. OK?” I know I start talking loud as usual with her, but she isn’t actually hard of hearing and tells me to talk a bit quieter, and then I try.

• • •

My bag is new shiny. Odd, that shiny when I am dusty. Covered. I carry it with me over one shoulder. Where I found it? Thrown in a free pile blocks away from the alley. Now I have it with me. Filled.

• • •

I do piss in the alley sometimes. I can’t hold it. They think I don’t smell it. Of course, I can. Nasty business, but it has to get done. Doesn’t it now? Where?

• • •


On a slow day, I let my mind drift back to my desk at home, and I can almost keep working on what I have been calling *versions.* The Buddhists seem to say, “It is just a story” and, then, follow with “Everything changes.” I do not now doubt that, but I have to ask myself, are all these *versions* truly, equally valid. C’mon now! I sit at the Reference Desk all day and hear the most remarkable, even deranged, questions. Boring ones, too; and repeated rantings. All with equal validity? With any?


And where is she now? I worked hard at that job, and we had times after my workday . . . I know why she left . . . no, it wasn’t drugs, I wasn’t on drugs . . . then . . . I haven’t touched anything in weeks, years, months. Nothing. I think she just got tired of me . . .
repeating myself. I still do I suppose, but in own my head so only I hear, am aware. She was a beautiful woman. That was a long time ago, but I know I’d still find her, find her . . . I say the thing I loved the most was her calling . . . just before, “Here, here, here,” three times just like that and then a grab. Oh sure, I grabbed back with all I had.

• • •

If I close both my eyes and then put my palms over both lids, I can see the flat grey rocks of the high country where we hiked, it seems just weeks past, John and I together, friends, only foes if we spatted or went fast in a contest. Any race. My hard metacarpals . . . my eyes, lids down. Rest. The rocks were hot on bare feet if we left our shoes behind for a time . . . we sat and talked, I told him he was no nice guy that time . . . and, all of a sudden, the crickets stop in mid-chirp, all of them at once . . . how could they do that . . . a rattler slithers at the bottom of the rock we are sitting on, and we both shiver and do not move even one muscle.

• • •
I am torn: of course, homelessness is a major problem. How can we assume that homeless people can manage? Without a home, a place to rest and stay? If there is justice, this is not an example. Seriously. On the other hand, how can people without homes refuse help to have one? If I were in that state – and, yes, *There but for the grace of God, go I* – I would welcome all help . . . this I believe from my current position, my stool here at the library Reference Desk. Perhaps. Who can truly put himself in another’s place? Or herself? And homeless kids . . . I almost begin to weep aloud thinking this possible and, indeed, factual. I wonder sometimes if I could do more, I know I could. Those faded signs on the walls stick in my head. I looked it up recently: it’s an old term, “wall dogs” for the men who painted them by hand all with just a brush. It’s still a way to make a living up on a suspended platform, mostly by themselves, sometimes with another painter. Women do it, too, now. They still call themselves “wall dogs,” maybe because of the safety harnesses they wear. A man called today and asked about Saint Francis, San Francesco – he wanted a poem, not a prayer book – and I was lucky. When I searched the catalogue, a recent poem came up as part of a collection; when I read it to him, he asked me to put the book aside for him:
several stations in recounting the
Leggenda di San Francesco d’Assisi by Giotto di Bondone

the sky-hand of God
two-fingered sign to the raised
prayer hands of Francis

shall never forget
that moment and the poorman –
so my cape over the ground for him too

I cannot believe
that I exist without flames
running down my back

unless timepieces crack
the human father dies first
leaving the child
alone on a short porch looking
out over a rich, deep valley

though Francesco points
over his angry Father's head
Assisi now recalls
the Saint’s parents in cold bronze,
broken chain in Mother’s hands

green bird Francesco
fly up to your perch in air
uncaged throne of wood

this is what scared me most
the disappearance of my heart
and that no one knew the difference

I remember the trips, the vacations. I had money then. Always to Italy. My people come from Calabria. We never travelled there, but I believe it is beautiful country, filled with hills and flat plateaus . . . and such mushrooms . . . so large and deep-colored brown, one porcino, huge and, when we’d buy them at the local market, delicious to cook. In hot oil . . . salt . . . peppers, pepper.
I pace off the length and breadth of my alley, not often, but it is hard for me to remind the numbers enough for them to stay with me or where I wrote them down . . . my alley’s width is more than twice my height and the length . . . so much depends on what is left inside here. No straight lines.

The alleyway near the downtown library

*Part II*
What I welcome most, wait for, is my lunch break. Many days I snack lightly and then walk, aerate my brain and body for a full hour. I love it most when it is breezy, not cold, but cool . . . in the warm, not hot, sun – what I call *warm but cool*.

• • •

No no no, I am not nuts. It is the wind that vibrates. My head spins in and out. Dry winds. Soft hands in mine, too. That was ago.

Long. A man in the corner . . . not me. No, please not me.

• • •

Sometimes I play a game, game a play. Words and words and. It’s only reasonable. And Cannella knows that, too. Every day I can, when I find the *Daily*, I read all the obits $\Box \Pi \quad obit$ turn $\text{bito}$. *bima* runs to *iamb*, *bema* becomes *beam* easy, but also reshuffles to *mabe*, a cultured pearl. Here it all is in my dictionary I carry along with me. Old one, but good one, heavy one and falling off the binding, too bad glue. Cannella is such the good listener. I told her all about Paul Revere, all his songs, and now he’s dead. I have my
dictionary with me all the time; sorry, this page is torn and all marked up:

**Full Definition of BITO**

- a small scrubby tree (*Balanites aegyptiaca*) that grows in dry regions of tropical Africa and Asia and has bark that yields a fish poison and seeds that yield a medicinal oil—called also *desert date*—see *balanites*

**Variants of BITO**

*bi-to* or *bito* tree

**Origin of BITO** origin unknown

**Mauri Yambo** - Works at University of Nairobi - 123 followers

Babiito = "Children of the Bito Tree". History shows that the Babito were the founders of the Bito royal lineage associated with the founding of Bunyoro-Kitara empire in the western region of present-day Uganda.

...
My dog Cannella, she’s my fine companion accommodation. I take her with me everywhichwhere, it helps me get all around. She’s no funny rat on my shoulder hiding in my shirt or anything like that, no long snake around my neck, but it’s people I don’t like very much. But I am lonely too, and sometimes people will talk to Cannella, even to me when she’s around. Sometimes some. I am that shy.

• • •

I cannot believe the smell in that alley – so much urine you’d think the walls would have changed color. Lighter. Even bleached. Out.

• • •

The kids play in my alley. Several reasons. None of logic really. If a ball is kicked away, it is retrieved, but they mostly find it in the several steep, small garbage heaps. When a ball is thrown against one side, the bounces can rebound from side-to-side, almost always at pretty crazy angles. And almost every wall is pocked with edges and holes. The ball seems to have a nose and finds them all. These loud guttersnipes, these alley urchins, all want to be
stars, so they play day and night, losing track of time until it is almost too late to go home. But they go. Go.

• • •

My supervisor was just impossible today; usually he’s pretty reasonable. I think it’s too much pressure from the top. I felt it today. He took it all out on his staff, which includes me. I started to snap back at him, but, fortunately, I held back. I have been reading in Dante. I can’t read the Italian, it’s pretty hard, but sometimes a line makes me stand up from my chair. I could crow like a damned bird. Like this one Dante repeats in two Cantos, X & XI of Paradise, why who knows:

“U’ ben s’impingua, se non si vaneggia.” [Dante, Paradiso X, 96 and Paradiso XI, 139]

Longfellow translates: “Where well one fattens if he strayeth not.” That’s St. Thomas telling the Dominicans not to wander and, then, they’ll prosper. I always imagine myself wandering my agnostic self, but, hell, who doesn’t want to prosper?

• • •
Sometimes I disappear . . . for a time . . . even for days . . . does anyone notice . . . I suspect they see me in the alley or standing tall nearby . . . even if I’m not there. Where do I go? I do not want to say . . . cannot always say . . . there is a song in my head I have it right now, it won’t go away . . . won’t leave me. I must have heard it on a car radio driving by, but when exactly I can’t remember: “She was just seventeen, if you know what I mean,” that is one old song. Maybe the rhyme is stuck in there . . . I don’t know. I like that song . . . I liked it fine back when, but “Twist and Shout,” that was my favorite song way back. I know those funny Beatles lads sang these both songs, but I liked my Isley Bros singing “Twist and Shout,” over and over and over and over and over . . .

Where have I gone where? Sometimes for days. Have I disappeared? What disappears? Me? I? I insist and predict. That much I can know and do. I cannot tell how much I need this help. Really. I need someone to help me, and sometimes I don’t tell the whole story, but this time, really to myself, am I?
It has always been this way for me. In every job I have never quite fit in. My old friend nailed it for me years ago when he told me that was the problem: “Do you ever feel comfortable there?” I could not answer yes then (or now either) though I cannot tell you how much I wanted to. Of course, if I really wanted to . . . Usually I can get close enough to the boss, but then I start to worry, worry about my fellow employees, but then none of them quite gets me either. Betwixt. Between. I wonder about my writings, too, is it also a problem to create versions; are these stories simply separated from me too much?

• • •

This is identity? There were two pairs of the same-size same shoe in the free box. I must have taken— I must have mixed up – the pairs. My feet are not so different. Are different! My feet. Do they know which ways to walk? Separately... together. These shoes are large large, I must have two of the same foot. I can walk. Okay.

• • •
Now I follow the short, curved trail of lumps of dog turd down the straight street, evenly spaced. Stepping wide. Away. I heard talk once of *strunzi*, little dog shits, but they were in gutter and, hmm, were they long and thin like a dog might crouch and, then, leave, shit hanging. But, hey, these littler oval lumps, dogs leave them, too, wobbling along and shitting them as they walk. Pieces of shit. Pieces of shit.

• • •

I can be two. That one man sees me entering the 1st floor from the stairway. In the library. But then I see him, he’s walking down the street minutes later and there I am again.

• • •

Oh for God’s sake, even the greatest ones repeat themselves! Respect themselves. That Hegel thought it all circled around the dialectic: even when he made no sense, that’s what he meant. Norman Mailer wrote a lot of books, but mostly he just wanted to get laid. Or wanted everyone to think that’s what he wanted. Whatever good it did her, Plath told her Daddy off. Sometimes over and over. So why shouldn’t I repeat? Sometimes I have a lot
to say so repetitions do crop up. R-r-r: I mean, for the sake of my own dog, I always tell her I love her and pat her behind the head – she likes that very fine. I want to write and rewrite my thoughts, but they won’t always stay on the walls – those funny kids will wash them away or cover them over if they don’t wash off. I was walking downtown yesterday, or some other day, which I cannot recall now, but there it was a sign I must agree with: HAVE A BLESSED DAY, but I must argue too, what does BLESSED mean, I know what it means to me, food for me to bite and chew, for God’s sake, we all need it, and why was that guy in his encampment tent at the post office scream screaming –ing – ing – inginging. Like a crazy man. Poor fellow –low . . . –low, I mean. Meant. Way, way too loud.

• • •

I had to clean up shit today; one of our regulars could not hold it and sprayed diarrhea all over himself and onto the floor. I guess he wasn’t wearing any underwear. My goodness what a mess. Good thing I had that training last week. I sure want to avoid anything pathogenic. What was odd wasn’t the diarrhea, that happens. To all of us. What shocked me was looking up from the mess to see— out the window— someone watching me clean up.
I could see his eyes, deep dark blue, lock down into mine. Just for a minute. It kinda scared me. And he looked disarrayed that fellow, a jumble.


Water. I am thinking again about leaving. No, I won’t. Not yet. Yet. After going in the library, it was loud in there. Someone asked if she could help me. First I thought she meant *Leave*, but she really asked me. Rain will be. And earlier today I was walking by the library. Not sure why I stopped. And looked in the window. He was on the floor cleaning up something, maybe somebody’s accident— that’s what I saw— and he looked up from it and right at me.
Evan
by Blair Treuer
He had the answer ready
to the question asked.

He slides out of the MRI machine.
Two women peer down, looking gravely concerned.
“How old are you?” they ask.
“86,” he says.

They pause.
He waits at the other end of the pause for grave news.
“Why do you look as young as you do?”

“My wife,” he says. No hesitation.

Now in the kitchen,
he takes her hand, still calls her kid.
She knows and treats him no differently.

They just want it to be as before,
before the cancer began eating him.

by Robert Minicucci
(previously published in Rat’s Ass Review)
hide and seek

i.
yesterday you found me clutching my pillow
with a kaleidoscope cocktail of color on my lips
and there i sat still among little daisy pills
with everything inside leaked out

ii.
tonight you’ll find me hugging the bathtub
when you open the door and steam whispers out
and there i will lay in a daffodil haze
with a bouquet of yarrow in hand

iii.
tomorrow you’ll find me smelling the roses
as you pull out the bindweed and dig up my roots
and i’ll cradle my heart as the dahlia depart
with a magnolia tree for a spine

iv.
and right now you’ll find me swimming through light
with the lilium drained through my eyes
and you’ll restock my veins with heliotrope chains
and wisteria locks through my core

v.
but maybe you’ll find me holding my crown
with a swan neck that bends to the right
and the foxglove will fray and there i will sway
with a moonflower wreath on my neck

by Sophie Gullett
Portrait of a Poet as a Five-Spotted Hawk Moth

She was never afraid
of herself but ashamed of who
she couldn’t become. Her body
less than golden-spotted. Often mistaken
for a hummingbird. She was
never afraid to be
held, but only under the pretense
of freedom in the future.
Lured to poison nectar;
adicted to erratic
flight patterns, unexpected
vectors. It doesn’t matter
where she’s going,
only that she’s going
in the dark.

by Lindsey Medina
This print, courtesy of Doug Pearsall, is one of a series which portrays the black migration to find jobs during the great depression.

That Familiar Comfort

The river at Port Chicago
was pink in the dawn glare,
strangely like that night
they fled for their lives,

biplanes spotlit by burning buildings,
kerosene bombs bursting on the roofs,
clubs and rifles,
white boys and their fathers,
beasts hunting little Africa
for black runners.
Do you know this story,
the Tulsa pogrom of 1921,
six thousand black people jailed,
no whites, the Greenwood ghetto
burned to the ground,
no insurance ever paid,
no crime ever charged,
the dead uncounted.

I never knew it
till today: I bear that shame,
small price for my privilege.
From this day I forswear
that familiar comfort,
the cowardice of forgetting.

by Donald Krieger
Not My Nightmare

October 30, 2018, three of eleven killed at The Tree of Life Synagogue were buried. One of the three was husband to my co-worker and friend.

I saw *The Pawnbroker* in college, a family picnic in a spotless German wood, the growl and squeal of engines and brakes, soldiers climbing from the trucks, the father led in chains through a warehouse,

a glimpse of his nude wife on a gurney, men pointing and haggling, the son on another, more men with him, the daughters calling out and screaming.

I have lived that in a dream since, and since I was a child, the same trucks at the same curb, the same growls and the same screams.

I see in khaki as I sleep a smashed door on a Baghdad alley, a father dragged away, tortured, then set to work in a prison bathroom --

another dream but this time in halftones, a frightened cop at the wrong door, another black man shot dead --

yet another dream so common I hardly notice, women indentured to their husbands.
or sold outright for breeding,  
or assaulted at the slightest whim.

I've always feared  
that even here in America  
the trucks will come some day for me. 
I never noticed that anywhere in the world  
if you're not white, they come any day,  
and if you're not male, every day.

by Donald Krieger
To Save a Life Is to Save the World

Early in the 2016 football season, players began to kneel during America’s national anthem to protest police brutality.

An A student and all-state, you went cheap to Nevada where you shined. On the block again four years later you brought top dollar to go pro.

To the fans now, you're ingrate or hero, gifted, beautiful in your tight pants and plastic armor, ripe for the blow that will break your neck.

When we stand for the anthem, you kneel beneath the yoke and cry out: No more!

If the field announcer called us to remember the dead as you do,

one at a time,

would we kneel with you, we who count murders on a scoreboard,

would we remember the dead as you do,

one at a time,
each a mighty blow
which moves the world.

by Donald Krieger
SIGNS OF LIFE AMONG THE DEBRIS

After witnessing a small plane crash in a storm from the shore of a private beach in the Hamptons, Long Island

Signs of life among the debris:
the injustice is the injustice of the Moon.

The paleness is the lunar coast freed by a recalcitrant tugboat.
Night pools are studded with stars,

the rapping is the rapping of a plover on silt and sea salt
waving from the Saint Lawrence River to New Brunswick.

They need not exist. It is their staged backdrop,
where Piping Plovers comb for meaning.

The sun stayed out longer than it should –
past the long curtsey of stars.

Two lineages, Plovers and Sanderlings, Logic and the Imagination,
consolidated with the unfamiliar.

A white tip shimmied. They are gone now.
Their anonymity fallen out the sky

like swans chasing baseballs Mid-August
down to what was searing, undefined.

Their injustice is the injustice of the moon
atop thorny vegetation, a contemplative vicar rocky retreat.

He who believes in something can be baptized by it
while all everything else is consumed by ghosts.
We saw no Piping Plovers that day – only a Cape Cod Cutter skimming the ocean for signs of life among the debris.

by Jonathan Andrew Perez
THE BIRTH OF BLUES

When you come, as you will,
determinate,
audible,
iron-blue.

When the sun is mere fire,
& the flycatcher nets
a Silvery Blue.

When the gummy tree exhales,
& the chorus rebuilds deep shale,
pry away the last of the places,
unattended,
come late,
vetch.

In steel Appalachia,
drunk in bog, Okefenokee,
bacteria-laden beer cups
in the French Quarter,
chunk sweat, 4am, Spanish Harlem dance shadows dance.

All that is Blue is glister & burnt
like an indeterminate shade
braced on stung, swinging wild onion.

by Jonathan Andrew Perez
Graffiti Alley
by George L. Stein
From the upstairs flat

I can actually hear him peeing
    like a horse
or someone emptying a bucket
from a great height
    above my head
It must go through the pipes
Bathrooms always act as amplifiers

Sometimes it’s the only sound
    I hear in the night
Sometimes we do it together
synchronised across the concrete divide
    my ceiling
    his floor
an unpleasant sort of intimacy

    And sometimes
it is a type of private
    language
in the dark
like the tapping
    between two
    prison cells

by Sarah Rice
“octopus in the room”

the diagnosis is like gravity falling
you slide your weight against the hospital wall
it feels exactly like that bout of sunstroke
how you keeled over, arms flailing,
waking to snow blindness and avalanche burial

well, this is a shitty turn of events
the self-talk is a distancing device
salty language and toilet humour are precursors to double-fisted road rage
Jesus, what are we going to do?

oh, boy, there’s another hazard in the water
what you said after learning you couldn’t have children
what you will say, sort of, in the last stage of his sickness
when he becomes both child and umbilical cord
Jesus, what am i going to do?

later, his wound opens like an evil flower
he conjugates pornographic locutions
to describe an imaginary other in perfect parallel structure – grinding, contorting, licking

how he never gave you the real skinny

but you’ve taken your vaccinations
you know he resents your perfect brain
trundles out tall tales of revenge porn
for his pseudonymous writers group of one
launches knives and arrows and darts
practices the black arts of near impalement

you catch as catch can as carnival queen
and suicide care-giver
busk your grief like a puppeteered prop
regale passersby with sobbing and convulsing
a hundred year rain event become
an all-seasonal affective disorder
your mouth a hat for ducats and gratuities
your body a caterpillar of advancing muscular sorrow

and you creep into the bedroom
like a dead thing or a battered woman
make a crucible and tomb of the rutting place
and compress beneath your weight the piles
of student papers you have neatly arranged there

of course, if you were sensible to human suffering
you might see the similarity between yourself
as de facto narrator of your own Greek goat song
and that greedily smoking, blood-letting heroine of
*By Grand Central Station I Lay Down and Wept*

but your lover has taken an octopus brain for his consort
lobes of mimicry, reflexive intimidation and inky camouflage
and you suffer blows as slow-motion oxidizer for vacuum bombs
multiple aerosol clouds of shrieking shrapnel that penetrate the
the risibly soft conduits of memory and hope

to see it any other way would be *dementia*

by Dean Gessie
“one big loud thing unheard”

I want to tell my wife I love her but
I have a red ball in my mouth
and fear correction
you can disambiguate the path of a red ball
spit or swallow
but the larynx is always out of its depth
never left the sea

I want to extract all those
teeth like shorn ewes in the Song of Solomon
replace them with faux sexy bridges
to elder care
I want to whack those singsong scrolls hung
like winking dirty laundry
until all the Hebrew consonants fall
thrust vowels
like candle-talk and hugs from behind
into the ghost red vellum of lamb
capillaries still bleating like stigmata
but my clam is a jealous clam
with a foot in the mud and
kidneys, a mouth, a stomach and an anus
not all made for festive performance and ode
Christ and his church we are not

I want to tell my wife I love her
with a shank of cryptocrystalline flint
carve a hole in her abdomen
the size of Lake Texococo
retract the steaming guts
navigate a serrated edge
to the pumping station
and excavate my heart

from her
I want to worship
offal like an Aztec priest
use the pulmonary artery
like a shower head
sniff the adrenal glands
like a truffle hog
mulch the pancreas
like the Memphis king a hunka hunka
fried peanut butter bacon banana on rye
and then I want to launch
my heart like a comet
into the house of Smoking Mirror
where I, it, my wife and Pablo Neruda
will atone for walking like jaguars
and pounce on the
deadgod carrion
at the bottom
of the temple
steps

Or, I could poach synonyms for love
from a boneyard of vertebrates freshly dead
(no one’s more earnest than a serial killer
with his trophies)
engineer my own Anthropocene Creed
from repurposed strands of genocide
I eastern cougar you
I tule shrew you
all I would need is a news feed algorithm
from Facebook
or an animal departures board
from Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta
and appetite enough for wife, metaphor and
self-loathing

I want to wash my hands of
big flaming bags
of door-to-door butt farce
(the joke about your sister’s arm fat
and the flabby folds of the bony-eared assfish)
(the fart at the job interview
I didn’t want)
(the colour of my underwear
at the cancer biopsy)
and promote another vowel:
my tongue in your mouth
at the parent-teacher interview
you, a tongue wag of your own,
“So, how the heck did any son of his get a C in French?”

I want to vouchsafe my longsword is Jell-O
that I am an impotent chevalier beneath
the zero shadow of fresh wars on terror
that I cannot parry
a Shengzhou silk tie, an Eton dress shirt
and an explosive belt
that hellfire is an evangelical trope
or a wedding ring in Dante’s Inferno
not a missile in Peshawar or Mogadishu
and that active shooter and live situation
are the new lexicon
of the Old Farmer’s Almanac
horsemen as rapture-ready Kool-Aid
all blinkers and backstretch and in the money

from whither whence
when love is a blue egg
in winter soot?

I am absolutely disconsolate
in these moments of death porn immolation
(you’ll be sorry when) parentheses
of hubris and remorse
because I have played heartsick next of kin
come to claim my own estranged remains
entertained worship that does not include her
and confectioned zombie climate models
from firestorms of bad faith

it is always the one big loud thing unheard
and unforgiven

by Dean Gessie
“Gram Bonkers Makes a Wireless Connection”

Gram Bonkers had a stroke and never spoke another note
Doctors said she might remember come April, June or November
But she was mum as wood

Because sunny Rosie-Faye loved her gram like Fruit Loops jam
She couldn’t say she was happy come what may
So, sunny Rosie-Faye gave her gram an iPad Pro

Gram Bonkers was over the moon to unpack and dabble
Such that she forgot to Choose Language on her Apple
Instead, she let her finger make the rounds
of animals only she could hear on Amazon Animal Sounds

By April, Gram Bonkers had learned
to quack, croak and ruck like the Pink-headed Duck
and to hoot, chuckle, mew and coo like the Laughing Owl

By June, Gram Bonkers had learned
to grunt, honk and bellow like the Nigerian Pygmy Hippopotamus
and to screech and scratch like the Philippine Fruit Bat

And by November, Gram Bonkers had learned
to whuff-whuff and whistle like the Pig-footed Bandicoot
and to hiss and squeak like the Long-tailed Hopping Mouse

Gram Bonkers had a stroke and never spoke a human note
But she was esophageal-abled and Bluetooth enabled
And she would quack, hoot, honk, screech, whistle and squeak
So all the murdered animals would have their say on Google Play

And yet, sunny Rosie-Faye couldn’t say she was happy come what may
Since Gram Bonkers learned a new language every day.

by Dean Gessie
Stuck-Shadows in The Shapes We Create.Pages
by Lucy Wilkinson
stuck-shadows inside the shapes that we created

I saw a shadow made from the light that came from the window and the wires that thread through the house of the passing place. The passing place where the clouds never moved, compartmentalised on top of their own mountain peak.

I saw the man imagine the shadow of two chairs that reminded him that he was a shadow made from the light that came from the window and the wires that thread through the house of the passing place.

The shadows of the two chairs were made from the grey suspended-still ripples that divided where he stood from the town across the stream.

I saw the man imagine the shadow of two chairs that reminded him that he was a shadow made from the light that came from the window and the wires that thread through the house of the passing place.

The shadows of the two chairs were made from the grey suspended-still ripples that divided where he stood from the town across the stream.

Where shadows cross the grey suspended ripples, where shadows-clouds-never move, all from the house of the passing place:

I'm going for a walk.

by Lucy Wilkinson
Just Like That

That evening I took a fifteen-minute shower. When I came down into the kitchen, I asked my son-in-law what happened while I was gone. A lot, he said.

Another galaxy swam through the universe
And is trailing along next to us, just like that.
Course, it’s affected our gravity and all of us
Will have a better sense of humor starting now.
Other things too just becoming evident.

I looked outside in the gloaming, my vocabulary changed for the better, and locked eyes with a wild turkey perched in the tree behind the garage.

A grizzly stood on its hind legs to the west, beckoning me never worry I’m on your side. And a wolf raised a protective paw.

The moon dropped low and clucked to the turkey, who ran across the yard, showing off his fine legs. Crimson clouds turned cartwheels in the yard. Try a cartwheel, they whispered. It’s not too late.

The grass stroked my ankles with small green hands and tossed me in the air, where the cedars reached over and murmured courage, courage

by Karen Mandell
Yard Sale

Useless, I could tell instantly.
Baby toys in plastic orange and red, grimy fry pans,
bent hollowware burning in the sun.
I walk in past the woman and the baby sitting on the concrete stoop.
I’m on my way out before I see the books piled on the grass,
their pages soft with age, the damp dried out of them.
*The Sun Also Rises*, the striped Scribner edition.
Do I have this one at home?
I crouch down and turn limp pages, not reading, brushing off dust,
unwinding a tendril of cobwebs from my finger.
The odor of paper stored in boxes too long.
This one’s not worth it, broken spine, even for a quarter.
I put fusty Hemingway down.
The baby cries, his voice quavering and scratchy.
The woman picks him up and says it’s time for a nap,
you’re ready aren’t you, you’ll lie down for a little while.
I stand up, the sun hot on my hair.
I want to lie down, a baby, in a darkened room with only a thin cover.
An opened window with a fan going somewhere.
I’d close my eyes even if I didn’t really want to
because there’s not much fight left in me right now.
The baby whimpers.
I forget what city I’m in,
whether it’s Minneapolis or Boston before that or
Chicago back even further.
I’m a burnished nub, everything rubbed out of me,
clarified. Even so, I have to get back to the car,
do the things that make it go,
add on to myself the crumbled pieces
that fell off and lie there, in the grass.

by Karen Mandell
Knitting

Instead of words, stitches,
my needles clack instead of my teeth.
Careless knitting, like I used to speak:
holes in my scarf, wounds, from betrayal.

Can’t go back over everything, I figure.
Can’t take all the knobble wobble stitches and fix them.
Got to have a plan, a system.
Got to make these slip knots a sock.

I press forward, mind—shackled soldier, bound
to the little enemy, a lover snagged by my hands.
I shake him, he dances a weak saraband.
My daughter walks by, she peers at my work.

She doesn’t try to be nice.
She scoffs, looks like a dishrag.
Not fair, for me there’s no price tag:
I squeezed out these clots, work of my loins.

There’s feeling between us, has to be—
I’ve gone over his body stitch by stitch;
I’m creating, it’s growing, my silent triptych,
right front, left front, back: no longer a sock—

He’s become a vest, oh, he’s slippery, this one.
I force the needles in and out, unexpected pleasure.
I work in haste, in hate, but I’ll repent at leisure.
My girl walks by, still a dishrag she says.
I look down and see my fingers knitted into the scarf.
I’ll be good, I’ll be good I swear: from the scarf no sound.
Too late, too late for a turnaround.
On my lap my afghan, my afterbirth.

by Karen Mandell
State of a City

depth within its walls...beneath the trenches
lies the horror story of a city

burping venomous liquid
onto the streets of Flint...into its homes

a city carved out...sliced away...set aside from Michigan's Pure future
its people lined up along the river's edge
unwittingly engaged in a dangerous game of drink or swim

never thought I would live to see the day...
or maybe I am slowly dying...

from the banks of the river young mothers fill bottles
to nurse...bathe their young
as the elders wash away history...golden memories of a past era

drink of it they said...it cannot hurt you much
for it harms only humans...not those who do not count as such

a duty to build the good...play the role
being sacrificed to eliminate useless inanimate things
three-fifths humanity at their core
dragging down the whole

never thought I would live to see the day...
or maybe I am slowly dying...

watch the bodies float down the river
entangled with other polluted trash

state of the state praises you...brilliant you
as you slowly gentrify...genocide me

drink of it they said...it cannot hurt you much...

by Faye Turner-Johnson
Taking the Prize

We all knew how it would end
yet we still rolled up our sleeves
still tried our best
brushed hair, teeth, pets
parsed our time
with small talk, laughter,
benign complaints.
When we checked the news,
we knew it was just gossip,
who was fighting who,
who looked the best,
who was walking in or out,
who was having sex,
so we turned it off
and more and more
we kept to ourselves
holding hands loosely
but sometimes like padlocks
around certain silences.
We liked each other best
chuckling over private jokes
in the living room
but mostly we slept,
only to wake up
sweaty knots
of blankets and flesh;
how we could talk then
if it weren’t so late,
honest syllables
staccato notes
in the grainy darkness,
admitting
what we knew all along
that this is what we’d get
no use crying,
but maybe also
pondering,
did we ask for this?
did we ever get
the chance to say no
in the first place?
Who knows--we certainly can’t
remember back that far
now that we’ve passed
the mile marker of halfway.
But maybe staying hopeful is the way
we will realize even at the end
when it’s still not too late
that every part of this hike
every last inch has the opportunity
for consolation
and that’s what we must learn
to grab and thrust in the air
with victorious fists.

by Monique Gagnon German
Leant to

Carrying two too many shopping bags
He walks through the uncrowded corner park
And takes in blooming and the woman
Who lies back on a bench as if in bed
And leans slightly right, eyes closed
In a great coat in the cold bright
Legs tucked under her bench to keep them warm
Her long fingers held and her relaxed face
Olive dark with umber hair surround
A look of finitude in the late sun
On her eyelids and looking closer
She looks softer as he passes, but also
Much older, and he imagines them
Joining their lips lightly, her mouth opens
Still her face has run skeletal as she suns
On this bench of wood, her sex is smoothed
And his sex aroused, for a slow beat
In day’s dream. He older than he knew

by Alan Bern
Big Ridge State Park Empty
by J. Ross Peters
THE BEGINNING

the best way to start is in the pouring rain
with rotten love and forgotten luck and
the bats flying away from the bell tower.

the best way to start is unemployed
on the streets of Dubai without care
or concern for hollowed out bodies.

the best way to start is in a tiny room
with your heart shredded and mangled
like a torn up love note and solitude
dazzling like gypsy jewelry.

the best way to start is late at night
with delirium pumping into your
arteries and amphibious derision
clawing through the musky air.

the best way to start is from town to town
and state to state from nowhere to nowhere
with smudged colors of loneliness freewheeling
through the dim light of your roach-infested
spirituality.

the best way to start is in the driveway of your
childhood home with the remembrance of a
dream you had of your mother dying as you
walk through the rows of tombstones.

the best way to start is when you’re not ready
with a lack of intelligence and unphilosophical
methods and to carry on doggedly w/out eminence.

the best way to start writing is with feeling—
whether your gypped or short-changed
in the aura of probability or fluttering
like butterfly throughout forever.

I have found poetry on the
battlegrounds of bloodshed,
in between couch cushions,
in the drab of your artwork,
in broken factory windows
discovery can be a savior
and it has kept me safe
from myself,
from time,
from trouble,
and tonight
it’s just the poem & I
while the hearts
are palpitating
in the nightmares
of tomorrow

I have found my release
with appeasing effects
and reducing discomfort
as the bull meets its matador
as the innocent sits on death row
as the orphanage burns to the ground
as the garage mechanic busts his knuckle
as the Jewish gravestones are spray painted
with signs of hatred
as decades of love are lost over a few moments
of dispute and abhorrence
just for one night
I’d like to end a poem
without trying to figure
out the best way to start it

*by Patrick Moore*
SELF DOUBT

the quality of their lives ascends
into glamorous proclivity
whereas my own life declines
in a pitfall of desolation
but that’s okay,
the wild feast on the domesticated
and self-doubt betrays
my creative process
while I’m here
with that feeling
like an itch on the top
of my hands and feet
and my mind tells me to
give up,
give in,
get out,
you’re no good
your poems and
writing are shit,
you’re unoriginal,
you’re repetitive
your poems are more
like a rant and rave
of dull and boring
intrusion than a
poem itself
you had it for a while
but you lost it
and now you’re trying
to hold onto it
go back to the factories
go back to the plants
obey the commands
and do as you’re told
Baudelaire, Spinoza, Voltaire
would look down
laughing and spitting
upon you if they knew
what you were up to
but nobody cares, nobody’s proud
you just do it for yourself
because no ones good at anything
anyhow
it’s all an illusion
just like their quality of life
it doesn’t get better
they just get better at hiding the pain
and if you take the “f” out of life
what you’ve got is a lie.
now with knowing that,
you can leap forward and
sink your whittled down teeth
into self-doubt and carry it
in your mouth
like a dead rabbit
in the dawn.

by Patrick Moore
DOWN THE DEADLY STREETS OF PERFECT LAWNS AND EARLY BEDTIMES

I drive down the deadly streets of perfect lawns and early bedtimes and turned the surf music down low.

I can’t help but to think about the streets lined with pre-fabricated houses like mausoleums of the living dead.

inside them resides the Lacoste polos and flowered sundresses with immaculate credit scores, mortgage payments and college degree required jobs.

they send their kids off to private school or lacrosse practice or piano recitals.

and their relatives (who live on streets just like theirs) come over for celebration out on their patio sets.

gala nights coerced with tiki torches, magic shows, balloon animals, slip n slides, snow cone machines, potluck dishes and brisket on the grill.
a luxury motor vehicle in every garage
an in-ground pool in every backyard
complete with a row of beach chairs
the lawn is cut diagonally both ways
closets lined with dry-cleaned suits
their brooding emotions enfolded
with xanax and valium

not a suicide, murder, robbery in sight
the bums don’t stagger their sidewalks
the maniacs don’t trundle their streets
there’s not even a dog turd to pick up

eye them officials into office, have affairs
with each other’s wives out of boredom,
play frisbee golf, do yoga, drink light beer
and overpriced coffee,
they smoke expensive cigars
and tuck their shirts into their cargo shorts

eye’s given up, sold out
the body bag awaits
them all with
time as the only
contributing factor
but when the corpses
are disemboweled
death will be disappointed
that they’ll leave
nothing behind
no soul
no juice
no spine
to collect

to live an ordinary life
costs an extraordinary
price.

one can only endure so much as I drove towards the end of the cul-de-sac and turned around fast and reached the stop sign.

I cranked the surf music up, put on my blinker, broke left

and got the hell away from that zombie graveyard

some folks call

“suburban living.”

by Patrick Moore
The New Flesh Pompeii
by William Brown
Hush, Memory

No need to remember your father getting caught shoplifting when you were thirteen which would have made him forty.
No need to remember your own thieving years —
beer and smokes at seventeen while supermarket stock boy
company car at eighteen while newspaper copy boy,
cash at nineteen cheating pals playing poker,
no need to remember your indelicate delinquent days, no need at all.

No need to remember playing with matches at age nine
burning weedy-junky-trashy urban lot
watching winking flames & stone-faced firefighters do their jobs
no need to remember getting molested at fourteen on the subway
no need to remember confused conflicted feelings
toward unpopular boy in your all-boys Catholic high school
no need to remember failing to protect younger brother from bullies.

No need to remember flunking tryouts for school ball teams
or your adolescent acne looking like moldy strawberry fields forever
no need to remember dead-eyed teen neighbor who teed off
slapping you silly & years later your mother telling you she saw
whole thing from kitchen window but stayed mum
no need to remember leaving one lover cold — snap — just like that
another leaving you pathetic you boo-hoo you blubbering.

No need to excavate deep-buried memories
as if you’re a miner laboring in dark dank tunnels of your mind
no need to ask your memory to speak
— you’re no Nabokov writing celebrated sophisticated memoir
your memory requires no request no urging
your manic memory never stops digging discovering
hush memory — your memory needs to hush
your memory needs to shut the fuck up.
by Robert Eugene Rubino
Chapter 1: Childhood

Too small, too weak, too shy, too ... well ... childish, believing in Santa & Jesus & Pledge of Allegiance & professional rasslin’ on TV far too much for far too long.

Chapter 2: Adolescence

Teeth full of braces, face full of zits, plump, pointy, puss-filled pizza-face zits. Too skinny, too tall, too lazy, too cowardly to fend off bullies, to express sexuality. Too conflicted, too, attracted to philosophies of the pope & Playboy magazine.

Chapter 3: Adulthood

Able to pass for normal at last, future is now, what’s past is past. Teeth straight, complexion clear, muscles toned, weight in sync with height, shyness out, hedonism in, sexuality expressed alas & alack, careless & faithless.

Chapter 4: Golden years and beyond

Bald scalp, blurred vision, turkey neck, prune face, achy hips, slower streams of piss, arteries hardening, erections softening, heartburn, heartache, irritable bowel, irritable soul.
Epilogue

Oh vanity so foul, oh vanity unfair
& still whining after all these years.

*by Robert Eugene Rubino*
Maddy
by Blair Treue
**Rooftop Junkie**

Until death do us pardoning, I will be high swinging UP from the balconies all through the night as the elements liberate, mix a new rush, and build wonderful alchemies. “Welcome!” I call to the stars as I drift through the halves of me. All of the yearning city lights comprehend what will pass yet they still try to shield the inevitable push of their synesthetic atrophy, burning to last.

“You again? Off with you! You cannot be here now!” Burning a glare, you officiate reality, beaming a grin. With my sanity cuffed to you, down I go, captured in glass, to be going where tragedy crowds and is flashing to see where you’re dragging me now to be worn-off and lost.

*by Samuel Armen*
Intercom

I almost beat that fighting game, with one life left, on the next-to-last level, down-stairs, relatively calm, until my pop called me up quick on our intercom. Up in our kitchen, pop and mom were watching me. “Continue” pop urged. Mom said, ‘I want to kill your father.” Pop was watching as if to say: “She’s sick you see! Ungrounded. Mom would never Say such things like this!” I crawled down-stairs, continued fighting, sitting still. An ill-fated figure quaked against the screen as haunting tears began to fall. A four-armed monster levelled me below the stage. My blood spilled further down.

by Samuel Armen
“Look at my wedding ring! Nice? Ain’t it?” Ada cried, as her body, eyes and lips were changing roles. The boy she held and cherished years ago was right behind her, telling all his jokes. Our young new waitress blushed, gave him free drinks, and looked as if this wouldn’t be her first sip taken secretly tonight. I saw them hide and whisper cameos of truths. “Congratulations! Wow!” I vowed to say, uncertain how I just became her crowd. Her features kept their fighting roles, until the waitress pronounced his name. Solemn, Ada asked me, “Wanna get out of here?” I said I do. One sees such strange sights at charity nights.

by Samuel Armen
Close the Book

It’s the time to close
the book of negativity
Stop flipping over the
pages of wasted years
and stand in front of
-waves of confidence
It’s the time to close
the book of remorse
Start creating a place
for satisfaction above
-some dark thoughts
of attempting suicides
It’s the time to close
the book of long isolation
I want to feel like I am loved
to my country, back to my life
Smile again without wearing an
emotional smile that lasts forever

by Ahmad Al-Khatat
World Trade Center
by George L. Stein
Don’t Leave Your Dead Father Here

You said
Let the dead bury the dead
and followme
but after you leave
the dead decay,
the dead stink,
the dead attract flies, rats and buzzards,
the dead are a health hazard.
The dead don’t bury the dead.
Despite your words
that carry the weight of scripture
like a club,
the living must deal with putrefaction.
We bury the bodies you leave.
We’re not the dead who bury the dead;
we’re the living.
Yes...we all die
just like the flies, the rats and the buzzards
that will swarm
to your father’s festering flesh and bones and guts.
We don’t want to see your dead fathers rot.
We want to keep the children safe.

By J. Alan Nelson
Hired Hand

Listen you little twerp, I don’t need any of your saucy backtalk, I was working this land before you were pooping yellow and now you want to tell me what to do? Two days on the job and you’ve got this thing figured out, do ya? Don’t give me your generation X/Y/Z crap-hole fulla wisdom. Mr. Generation Lazy, pull yourself up by the short and curlies, get your ass out there and do your frickin’ job.

by Andrew McLean
It's Raining Outside

It's a slippery fuckin slope isn't it
The sidewalk comes zooming to your face
   Shit smell of sewer water
Yet her garden is always maintained,
   But i don't trust you anymore
And the lemon tree is getting big now
   We should pick some lemons
      Avoid the thorns
And now my teeth are rotting
   Don't know what this slope is
      But i totally fell
This shit makes good grass
   Serves no purpose
It's a slippery fuckin slope isn't it.

by Brandon Nava
Blown Everything Energies

The what-reality tumbled
for obscured river yearning,
stage-brushed merciless accomplishment
that responded different,
again blowing drugs;
a reactor of resilience cultivated
a glowing lot, the tumor

Future onetime unsure self
abandoned his companion;
her psychonaut mounted
one crack construction,
a practiced time miracle
ending with continuum

Sustained but spidery,
they snakelike maneuvered
with the practice-Cocteau,
found reason to live in
free waterside neon

And in particular receptivity
they owned it way fresh,
and again would back notebook plasticity use

Forget the all-companies,
hex the movies;
lower the epidemic
at dive and discipline,

For oldtimers turned her
from getting daddy’s
no-love traditional eye
about change where open,
bouncing gathered alongside
grandfather, long understood
being conscious;

And curse the sisters,
old-equaling the least
benevolent existence physical,
his hex of energies
powering the music,
the blown everything

by James McCallister
The Living Echo

The school hallway
and the hospital wing
echo in parallel pentameter.
Same hardened materials
applied to same hardened structures.
Bureaucratically applauded
at the cut of a ribbon,
maniacally mopped with Pinesol,
then replaced with the newest textile that can hide its history
for under a dollar a square foot.

Sitting in both,
screaming out in both
hearing yourself screaming back to yourself
in both.
The echo struggles its intensifying voice onward,
and inward,
dampened by the soft tissue
of the eager to learn
and the eager to live.

The pleasures of the sterile touch
dominated by
the impurities
of the noisome-hearted neighbor.

The innocent laughter
dominated by
the mechanized machine
vomiting its bullet bully vitriol.
Burying deep in the young,
the idea,
which is just as consequential
as hot lead under the skin of the undone.

The hall of the learned
should fill with something
able and bulletproof;

hope.

An ether able to absorb in a dichotomous way
giving back more than it takes,
its selfishness disguised as selfishness
so the thieves won’t bother.

The school hallway
and the hospital wing,
Can they separate to weep themselves dry?
In their own space
and their own time?
In their own interim
dancing with a rhythm of hope
instead of a fight filled with frenzied loss?

Let the echo dull,
suppressed by life's majesty,
replaced with the reoccurring hum
of a muzzled oblivion.

by Joe Manu
Elias

by Blair Treue
Love Story

She didn’t leave when the truck sat for over a year. Nor when he bought something else off a used lot.

No research. Just a test drive too many cigarettes mugs of black oily coffee brewed heavy and strong.

He didn’t leave during three all nighters killing bed bugs. Nor when she was too tired to find

His lips.

Mounted debts strangling against the red hotness that thrashed through their constant

Raw

Recurrence.

She filled rooms with the soon to be buried.

Accelerating digits for board room messiahs.

He sweated under grass barrels drenched to the bone by sun.

Their ways

Untold,

though, there

beneath train whistles,

Fat bursting clouds

cressing
their
sleepy midnight
clutching’s.

by Korey Wallace
In Sympathy, Unaddressed

you asked me one morning between bell rings if I would cry when you die

because you cry so much I learned that tears are molecularly related to their parent emotions
that psychic tears are protein-packed and work like natural painkillers
and you’re drugged now you shed DNA

there are images of dried tears under a microscope
that reveal distinct landscapes that look like an aerial view of heartland
I feel like you developed these on a rainy day in your past life
while I was studying dead love languages and there was no immersion only dark

there’s a language of asymmetric facial expressions
that now scans as a warning sign for a mini-stroke
but beyond river bend-rushed smiles there are contortions like the half-smirk
half-grimace and the hybrid wide eye and wink that could turn your skin
half-blush half-blank and our skins are still elastic
you can fold them across their midlines and see the profile of two poles mid-kiss

there’s a language of echoes that has survived in repetition
and it sounds like circling back too much when a phone call cuts out
if two people repeat each other for long enough soon enough they have the same last words
lodged in separate throats

there is a language without subordinate clauses
that cuts the while pacing like a zoo cat impatient for home after using a parking ticket as an excuse to litter
within your plans to become a nomad before senior year although my missing person poster for you would say
last seen on a bench waiting for visions of a bridge collapsing and gets straight to the girl
who sleeps through the night and just enough suffering that this is a completed action

there’s a language where one set of eyes can guide another to a central point
so that they are reading or watching or squinting together instead of resting on each other
like rock on rock until they are ground to sand and it stings and we’ve shared nothing
we are forever adjusting the amount of light we let in
so why not let our respective darkesses dilate and be sensitive when there is nothing to burn us

I don’t know which language best writes an epitaph it would take days to decide and then translate
if I cried reflex tears I would be drained of you waiting dry-eyed for your return behind a blink

by Julia Feinberg
Gag-Order

Like a naked mouth
Salivating to speak
My tongue is trapped between my teeth
and my lips
are barriers which part
for nonsense and
wine-colored outpourings

I drain swill down that passage
To loosen up the secrets that
I swear are kept from daylight

I surface empty,
Drunk,
Still curious down to the diaphragm
with a passing survey of my heart;
A hot heart yearning,
Burning hot, a heart my own.

I feel the beat behind my ribs
It is caged, too, my heart
Behind the rafters of bones
That keep a standing order for the body
When I only want to
lay on the filthy ground
And become part it

What words are enough
What could my mouth form
To ease my stomach
So that it does not
vomit up
the toils of the day

Life is to be a long time sick,
I and that old
pig-faced philosopher
think
Better to have never been, maybe,
but until death,
one lives;
after all -
no one is forced to keep breathing.

by Leonard Coseive
Secret
by George L. Stein
BIOs

Ahmad Al-Khatat was born in Baghdad, Iraq. His work has appeared in print and online journals globally and has poems translated into several languages. He has been nominated for Best of the Net 2018. He is the author of The Bleeding Heart Poet, Love On The War’s Frontline, Gas Chamber, Wounds from Iraq, Roofs of Dreams, The Grey Revolution, and Noemi & Lips of Sweetness. He lives in Montreal, Canada.

Samuel Armen was born in Gyumri, Armenia just prior to the historic earthquake that claimed 25,000+ lives. He was adopted by an Armenian-American family in New York, earned his BA in English Literature from Saint John’s University, and completed his M.Ed. at CUNY: Hunter College. He currently teaches and manages education programs in Brooklyn and across rural Armenia.

Beth Balousek's poetry and shorts have been published by BlazeVox books, RAR and several other online and print publications.

Gary Beaumier has a degree in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He has been a finalist for the Luminaire Award for his poem titled “Ten Cents” as well as a finalist for Joy Bale Boone Award for my poem “The Migratory Habits of Dreams in Late Autumn”. His chapbook “From My Family to Yours” has been published by Finishing Line Press. His poem "The Rio Grande" was nominated for the “Best of the Net” award and he won first prize for Streetlight Magazine for his poem "Night Train to Paris". He was a finalist for the New Millenium Writings for my poem “From Certain Distances in Space I Still See My Brother”. He was recently shortlisted for the Charles Bukowski contest from Raw Arts Review for my poem “Ghosting”. He was a finalist for Wingless Dreamers contest for the poem “The Complete History of Our First Kiss”. He won the the Love Poetry contest for his poem Night Forest as well as the Button poetry contest for Flying Ketchup Press and was a finalist for my poem “Places I Have Known” for The Raw Arts Review. He has been a teacher, a bookstore manager and a gandydancer for one summer a long time ago. He used to build wooden sailboats. He once taught poetry in a woman's prison.
Alan Bern is a recently retired Children’s Librarian from the Berkeley Public Library. He worked in public libraries in the San Francisco Bay Area for over 25 years in a variety of jobs. He is a poet, storyteller, and photographer and has two books of poetry published by Fithian Press: No no the saddest (2004) and Waterwalking in Berkeley (2007). A third book of poetry, greater distance and other poems (2015), was published by his own press, Lines & Faces, a press and publisher specializing in illustrated poetry broadsides, collaborating with the artist Robert Woods, linesandfaces.com. Alan won a medal from SouthWest Writers for his story "The Return of the Very Fierce Wolf of Gubbio to Assisi, 1943 CE [and now, 2013 CE]." He was also a finalist in the NCWN’s 2019 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize; he won the Littoral Press Poetry Prize in 2015; and he was a semi-finalist in the 2016 Center for the Book Arts Poetry Chapbook Competition. Among recent publications of his photos: https://unearthedesf.com/alan-bern/. Alan has poems, stories, and photos published in a wide variety of online and print publications, from which his work has also been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. Alan is also a performer working with the dancer Lucinda Weaver as PACES: dance & poetry fit to the space and with musicians from Composing Together, http://composingtogether.org/index.php/programs/ http://composingtogether.org/index.php/sample-poetry-from-our-musical-storytime-performances/

Richard Birken is a recipient of the American Independent Writers’ Prize for Short Fiction. His work has been honored by Whiskey Island Magazine and published in The Adirondack Review.

Terry Hall Bodine is a graduate of the College of William & Mary in Virginia. Recent publication credits include Common Ground Review, Lucky Jefferson, and Heirlock. Terry lives in Lynchburg with her husband, Bill, and works with student life at the University of Lynchburg.

Gary Boelhower walks his black dog every day who follows his nose around the neighborhood. He tries to write every day like that, attentive to the scent, walking in words. He has published two recent poetry
collections: Naming Rites (2017) and Marrow, Muscle, Flight (2011) which won the Midwest Book Award.

Mads Bohan hails from a small town in Virginia called Halfway, a place notable mostly for its approximate distance from two other small towns. He spends his days mostly sleeping of late, and his nights scribbling and reading the news. It is unsustainable. Mads currently hold the position of Curator at Silas Plum Art, and more of his work can be found in the latest issues of Night Picnic.

Born in El Paso, TX, Karen Bowden moved an average of every 2 years from birth to age 27 and lived in many states and England. She mostly worked as a writer, editor, and desktop publisher, but also in occupations ranging from forklift driver to legal secretary, finding forklift driving by far the more fulfilling. She received her “higher” education at Arizona State University, with a major in English literature and a minor in psychology. For many years, she coordinated the Divergent Arts Poetry Series, which included works by visual artists, musicians, dancers, and “any other artistic expression that knocked on the door.” After years of living in a home filled with art, having many friends who are artists, and visiting museums in several American, European, and Chinese cities, she started painting with watercolors in 2006, and says, “What I love about it are the feel of the brush as paint goes on paper and how paper, paint, water, and light play with and against each other. More than any other art form I engage, watercolor opens a sense of oneness that some call losing themselves and others call bliss, both accurate descriptions.” The Peoria Arts Commission 2006 Juried Celebration of Artists accepted one of her early efforts as did the Glendale Arts Council Juried Fine Arts Competition in 2007. This is the first time her watercolor work has appeared in a literary arts journal. She is “very pleased and appreciative.”

William Brown left graduate school in psychology to become a photographer in the early 1970s. After receiving an MFA from the University of Florida, he helped found the Contemporary Art Center and the studio program at Emory University where he taught for over 40 years. His work merges conventions from photography, film, sculpture, and painting. Mr. Brown has an extensive international and national
showing history primarily in video. His current project, Paintings for a Robot, uses film editing techniques to randomly generate merged images intended for future rendering by robotic painting devices. His work can be viewed at his website: https://wiliiam-brown-bzhc.squarespace.com

Jon Carter is a writer from Lufkin Texas. After being medically discharged from the ARMY after a short while, he settled in College Station, Texas, where he began his education in Psychology at Sam Houston State University. After a couple of years, he dropped out, choosing to focus on writing. His poetry focuses on the blank periods between major life events: marriage, divorce, jobs, arrests and substance abuse.

Leonard Coseive is a poet from Athens, Georgia. He drives forklifts, checks his mail irregularly, and writes poetry.

Weatherall Crump-Kean is a sophomore currently attending the University of Texas at Austin High School. Her first book, artificial affection, was recently published and she is looking for more opportunities to be heard.

Leon Fedolfi is an aspiring poet. Much of his current work wrestles with dissembling and reassembling identity-relational frameworks in a format he likes to think of as a pre-poem. He does not know yet precisely what that means. Leon was awarded the 2020 Doug Draime Prize for Poetry sponsored by The Raw Art Review, and has published in Prometheus Dreaming, The Write Launch, High Shelf Press and others. He has a book of poetry, The UnInvented Ear, coming out with UnCollected Press this fall.

Julia K. Feinberg is playwright, screenwriter, and poet whose poetry can be found in the Bookends Review, Prometheus Dreaming, Typishly, and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards' archives. She is an editor and founder of the online literary journal Ephimiliar. She will continue to pursue creative writing at Stanford University as a freshman in the fall.

Debbie Fox’ publications include: CREATIVE NON-FICTION
Debbie lives in Toronto with two horses, one dog and one husband.

Monique Gagnon German lives in Tucson, AZ with her husband, children, and trio of dogs. If you poke around a little, you can find her poetry in over 40 journals and anthologies including: Rosebud, California Quarterly, Tampa Review, Off the Coast, and The Wayfarer. Her flash-fiction and short stories have been featured in:Typishly, The MacGuffin, Adelaide Literary Review, and Running Wild Press’s 2019 Anthology of Short Stories. Monique is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee.

Dean Gessie is an author and poet who has won multiple international prizes. Dean won the Angelo Natoli Short Story Award in Australia and the Half and One Literary Prize in India. Dean also won the Bacopa Literary Review Short Story Competition in Florida and the Enizagam Poetry Contest in Oakland, California. Elsewhere, Dean won the short story contest at the Eden Mills Writers Festival in Canada and he was selected for inclusion in The Sixty Four Best Poets of 2018 by Black Mountain Press in North Carolina. In addition, Dean won second prize (of 2000+ submissions) in the Short Story Project New Beginnings competition in New York and his short story made the shortlist (of 2800+ submissions) for the Alpine Fellowship Prize in Stockholm, Sweden.

Sophie Gullett currently lives in Denver, Colorado, where she is pursuing her graduate studies in research methods and working as a data analyst. She has previously been published in The Broken City, HOOT, and Colorado’s Best Emerging Poets 2019: An Anthology.

Susan Gundlach’s poems have appeared in Stories in Images and Words: An Exhibition of Art and Poetry, Reflections: Light and Dark, and in such journals as After Hours, Enough, and *82 Review. Her poems are included in the poetry tutorials The Crafty Poet II and The Practicing Poet, and etched in the walkway of the Evanston Public Library. She is co-editor of the anthology, In Plein Air, and is a judge for state poetry
contests. Her poems, paired with works by artists in various media, have been featured in exhibits in and around the Chicago area. Sue lives in Evanston, Illinois, with her family, human and canine.

My name is Stefen Holtrey, I live and work in Traverse City, Michigan.

Marcella Hunyadi was born and raised in Budapest, Hungary where she wrote for the country's first online literary magazine, the INteRNeTTTo. She started doodling poems in fourth grade and planned to become a philosopher; however, when her freshman essay, in which she set out to prove the existence of God, had failed, she abandoned both God and philosophy and became a director. In the States, she studied screenwriting and filmmaking with Oscar nominee Sam Brown, and she finished directing Death of a Salesman seven months pregnant. In 2017, Marcella’s novel-in-progress was nominated for the Kirkwood Prize.

Sarah Hussein is an Egyptian painter and photographer. She earned a Bachelor of Science in 2015. Sarah has been awarded the Arab prize in fine arts in 2018 for her artwork, the Egyptian farmers. She has been awarded the sponsorship award in the xiv INTERNATIONAL EX LIBRIS COMPETITION "EX LIBRIS - EX LITTER' in Ruse (2018) for her artwork the carrier pigeon and in the International Art and Design competition 2019 (Italy) for her artwork men in the desert, and in the Women in the Arts competition 2019 (Florida) for her artwork, the difference. Sarah has participated in many local exhibitions, such as in the Youth Salon for Art in the Egyptian Opera house, at its 29th session in 2018 with her painting freedom; as well as internationally with her artwork the dancers at the Art Revolution Taipei Fair (Taiwan) 2019 and in the Venice Land Art Prize contemporary art fair (Italy) 2019. Sarah's artworks have been featured in some books and magazines.

Cara Jeanne lives in Baltimore where she is pursuing her PhD in Educational Leadership. In addition to writing, she spends her time as an elementary school teacher, vocalist, and vacation planner.

Elizabeth Kirschner is a writer and Master Gardener. WHAT IT IS LIKE TO LIVE is from her short story collection, ONLY THE DEAD SUFFER BUTTER. If she could, she'd enclose a peony or two, but since this isn't quite possible, let it suffice that Kirschner's published six collections of poetry and an award-winning memoir, WAKING THE BONES. She lives in Maine.

Don Krieger is a biomedical researcher. His full-length collection, "Discovery," is forthcoming from Cyberwit. He is a 2020 Creative Nonfiction Foundation Science-as-Story Fellow. His work has appeared in Hanging Loose, Neurology, Live Mag!, The Raw Art Review, Seneca Review, The Blue Nib, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and The Asahi Shim bun, Entropy, Vox Populi Sphere, Dissident Voice, and others, and has appeared in several anthologies in both English and Farsi.

AB Mambo is a lawyer, writer, speaker, avid traveler and the Founder and Creative Director of MamaTokTok, a media platform with a global outlook. She hosts the podcast, MamaTokTok’s A Different Take. The Cameroonian-American won the Newman Prize for short fiction and her short stories have appeared in Farafina, The Kalahari Review and African Roar. Her poetry was recently published in Wards and antilang. She’s also penned lifestyle pieces for African Vibes magazine and currently lives in beautiful Singapore.

For Karen Mandell, living in three different chunks of the country—Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis—has made me think about the meaning of home and its importance to me. I’ve taught literature and writing in Minneapolis and Boston and learned to read and write in Chicago, my original hometown. My short story Goddess of Mercy is forthcoming.
from Notre Dame Review, and I’m writing interconnected short stories based in the near future. Karen Mandell karenmandell6@gmail.com

Joe Manus is a lifetime resident of the South. He was educated in the public schools of rural Georgia, receiving his high school diploma in 1992. Joe is an award winning furniture designer. He believes in living the best and the worst of the human experience and writing about it. This year he has been published by Yale University's The Perch, Crack The Spine Year End Anthology, Coffin Bell Journal, Watershed Review, and Ringling College's Shift.

Doug May has been treated for ADD, behavioral issues and depression. As a child he received a great deal of academic tutoring geared to his abilities (including piano lessons), and eventually earned a GED and went on to college. He has worked many entry level and unskilled jobs—everything from proofreading children’s books and data bases to stocking shelves, driving a delivery truck, moving furniture, selling music, emptying bedpans and performing at NCO clubs in a rock and roll cover band. He is currently retired and working on a memoir about his experiences as a differently abled American.

James D. McCallister is the author of seven novels—KING’S HIGHWAY (2007), FELLOW TRAVELER (2012), LET THE GLORY PASS AWAY (2017), DOGS OF PARSONS HOLLOW (2018), and DIXIANA, DOWN IN DIXIANA and DIXIANA DARLING (2019)—as well as a short story collection, THE YEAR THEY CANCELED CHRISTMAS (2017). His published work also includes creative nonfiction, magazine features, a newspaper column, poetry and scholarly articles. A past winner or finalist for awards from the South Carolina Writer’s Association, SC Fiction Project, Pearl Magazine, the Faulkner Society, the Saturday Evening Post, The Raw Art Review and The Jasper Project, in 2014 McCallister’s papers relating to FELLOW TRAVELER were requested by McHenry Library at the University of California-Santa Cruz as part of the academic Grateful Dead Archive. For ten years McCallister has taught creative writing at Midlands Technical College in Columbia, South Carolina where he lives with his wife Jenn and their beloved brood of cats, muses all.
Conor Mc Donnell is a physician and poet who lives in Toronto, Canada. He has published two chapbooks, The Book of Retaliations (Anstruther Press), and Safe Spaces (Frog Hollow Press). He received Honourable Mention for The Fiddlehead’s 2018 Ralph Gustafson Poetry Prize, was shortlisted for The Raw Art Review’s 2019 Charles Bukowski Prize, and was runner-up for the 2019 Vallum Poetry Prize. His work has featured in many journals and his debut collection, Recovery Community, is forthcoming in Fall 2020.

Born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, Lindsey J. Medina graduated from Kansas State University with a Bachelor’s Degree in English. Simultaneously, she was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Air Force. Her work often explores themes of family, religion, desire, and love, all tied together by what it means to forgive and be forgiven. She lives in Wichita, KS, with her wife, Ne’mat, and two dogs, Grover and Wilson.

Robert Minicucci lives near Exeter, New Hampshire, with his wife, two of his three children, and a brindle rescue hound named Josie. He came back to poetry after reading “One of Us Is Lost” by Robert Dunn (a local Portsmouth poet), and “Bright Dead Things” by Ada Limon, whom he met at a UNH reading in 2018. He’s had work published in the NH-based poetry zine "Good Fat,” and the online journal “Spank the Carp.” Another online journal, “Rat’s Ass Review,” initially published “86” in its Winter 2018 issue. He is on twitter (@robertminicucci) when not working on his chapbook.

Brandon Nava is currently serving in the military as a medic. His Instagram is viking_incamo

J. Alan Nelson, a poet and an actor, has works published or forthcoming in numerous journals. He played the lead in the viral video “Gay Cake” and the verbose “Silent Al” in the Emmy and Golden Lion winning SXSWestworld.

Joe Nolan is a Nashville, TN-based artist and writer. My "Pankration Abecedarium: A Dirt Sheet Elegy in Four Parts" was recently serialized in the SALT WEEKLY art journal.

J. Ross Peters' poems have appeared or will soon appear in TERMINUS, BIRMINGHAM POETRY REVIEW, BROAD RIVER REVIEW, AETHLON, THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF POETRY, TWYCKENHAM NOTES, and BROAD STREET. His first collection of poems is entitled, THE FLOOD IS NOT THE RIVER. Additionally, he contributed the foreword and the photography for SACRED VIEWS OF ST. FRANCIS: THE SACRO MONTE Di ORTA (upcoming from Punctum Press) about a Franciscan pilgrimage site in Italy's piedmont region. He lives in Memphis, TN.

Josephine Pino was a child in Albuquerque, a young adult in many places, and currently resides near Portland, Oregon. She is a scientist by diploma, educator by heart, and writer by nature. She enjoys the intersections between all things that intersect. She has published poems

**Tamra Plotnick**’s poetry and prose works have been published in a variety of journals and anthologies, including: *Serving House Journal; The Waiting Room Reader*, edited by Rachel Hadas; *Tribes #8, Stickman Review, LiveMag, BigCityLit; Atlantic Review; Lurch; Burrow; The Midwest Review; Hunger Enough* and *Global City Review: International Edition*. Her memoir excerpt “Barbie and Gandhi Sitting in a Tree” appeared in *The Coachella Review*. After ranking as a semifinalist in a variety of contests, her poetry collection *In the Zero of Sky* will be published by Assure Press. She lives in New York City, where she teaches high school.

**Sarah Rice** is a Canberra-based poet. Her full-length poetry collection *Fingertip of the Tongue* (UWAP 2017) was shortlisted in the ACT Publishing Awards. Sarah won the inaugural Ron Pretty poetry award, the Bruce Dawe poetry prize, co-won the Writing Ventures, and Gwen Harwood poetry prizes, and was shortlisted in the Montreal, Tom Howard, Drake-Brockman, CJ Dennis, New Millennium, Fish, Axel Clark, Michael Thwaites and Overland poetry awards, amongst others. Publications include the Global Poetry Anthology, Award Winning Australian Writing, Best Australian Poetry, Island, ABR, Southerly, Aesthetica, The New Guard, and Australian Poetry Journal.

Since retiring from daily journalism in 2013, **Robert Eugene Rubino** has published poetry and prose in various online and print literary journals, including Hippocampus, The Esthetic Apostle, The Write Launch, Haunted Waters Press, Forbidden Peak Press, Cagibi, Cathexis Northwest, High Shelf Press, Raw Art Review, MacQueen's Quinterly and Gravitas, and in the anthologies Poetic Bond IX, Earth Hymn, Poets' Choice and Poems from the Lockdown. Before the coronavirus, on most Wednesday evenings he would be found at Sacred Grounds Cafe in San Francisco, participating in the West Coast's longest-running poetry open mic. Now each week he participates online. He lives in Palo Alto, California.
Dale Shank lives near Portland, Oregon. He founded the fiction journal "Black Ice" in the 1980s. His poetry and fiction have been published in: Exquisite Corpse, Akros Review, Before the Sun, Croton Review, Joint Endeavor, Powder Magazine, and University of Portland Review.

Kim McNealy Sosin is a Professor Emerita of Economics at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Sosin is interested in writing and photography/art photography, and is a member of the Nebraska Writers’ Guild and Omaha Artists, Inc. Her poems and photographs have appeared in publications including Raw Art Review, Fine Lines, Failed Haiku, Voices from the Plains, Landscape Magazine, The Heron’s Nest, Wanderlust Journal, Ekphrastic Review, and Sandcutters.

Dana Stamps, II. has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Cal State University of San Bernardino, and has worked as a fast food server, a postal clerk, a security guard, and a group home worker with troubled boys. Poetry chapbooks “For Those Who Will Burn” and “Drape This Chapbook in Blue” were published by Partisan Press, and “Sandbox Blues” by Evening Street Press.


George L Stein is a writer and photographer in the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area. Interest in monochrome, film and digital photography and urban decay/architectural subject matter. His work has been published in Midwest Gothic, NUNUM, Montana Mouthful,
Pamela Sumners’ work has been published or recognized by over 30 journals or publishing houses in 2018-20. She was a 2018 Pushcart nominee and was selected by Halcyone/Black Mountain Press for inclusion in 64 Best Poets of 2018 and 2019. Her first chapbook, Finding Helen, a winner in the Rane Arroyo Series of Seven Kitchens Press, will be published in July 2020. Her first full collection, Ragpicking Ezekiel’s Bones, is forthcoming from UnC ollected Press in fall 2020. Sumners is well known for her constitutional and civil rights legal work, including cases opposing Jay Sekulow, Ten Commandments Judge Roy Moore, Supreme Court wannabe Bill Pryor, and an Alabama governor who argued that the Bill of Rights doesn’t apply to Alabama. She now lives in St. Louis with her wife, son, and rescue dogs.

C. M. Tollefson is a poet and musician from Portland, Oregon. Co-founder and editor of Cathexis Northwest Press and High Shelf Press, C. M. Tollefson is most at home at home away from all the hubbub.

Blair Treuer is a storyteller who paints with fabric and draws with thread. She is an emerging Textile Artist from rural Minnesota. Her work explores the role Ojibwe traditional cultural and beliefs plays in shaping the way her family sees itself collectively, the role it takes in shaping the personal identities of her husband, her nine children, and the influences or effect it’s had on my own personal identity. As a white woman, the only non-native person in her immediate family, her work is about her reflections as an outsider and about the emotional rollercoaster she often rides as she stands fixed on the outside, but privileged enough to look in. It's about the pieces of Ojibwe culture she has been allowed to see and what it’s allowed her to see within herself, and even to recognize what cannot be found there.

Faye Turner-Johnson always expressed she wanted to be a singer whenever anyone asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. The
problem with that dream is that she never learned to sing; it was just not one of her talents! So she channeled her energies into directing plays, acting, writing, and teaching. She is a graduate of UM-Flint with degrees in Theater and Elementary Education. Her work has appeared in Sky Island Journal, Kissing Dynamite, Whirlwind Magazine, Dime Show Review, Digital Papercut and other publications. She received an honorable mention for a poem entered in the 2018 Rochester Writers' Summer Writing Contest.

**Korey Wallace's** poem "Leftovers" won a literary award from MusePaper magazine. His poem "Something Akin To Knowing" was nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. He divides his time between pretending to be a butcher, writing, mowing lawns, and eating food wrapped with bacon.

**Lucy Wilkinson** runs a small publishing press, death of workers whilst building skyscrapers. Her first publication of prose was published in 2018, *blues not worth bad skin* and her second publication, a collection of poetry and essays, *Civil War I: “SO FAR-IT-HAPPENED”* is due to be released in July, 2020. She is also researching small press publishing, inadequacy and affect, working towards her doctorate in creative writing at the University of Glasgow.

**Diana Woodcock** is the author of seven chapbooks and three poetry collections, most recently Tread Softly (FutureCycle Press, 2018) and Near the Arctic Circle (Tiger’s Eye Press, 2018). Recipient of the 2011 Vernice Quebodeaux Pathways Poetry Prize for Women for her debut collection, Swaying on the Elephant’s Shoulders, her work appears in Best New Poets 2008 and has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. Her grand prize-winning poem, “Music as Scripture,” was performed live onstage in Lincoln Park, San Francisco at Artists Embassy International’s 21st Dancing Poetry Festival. Currently teaching in Qatar at Virginia Commonwealth University’s branch campus, she previously worked for nearly eight years in Tibet, Macau and on the Thai/Cambodian border. Widely published in literary journals and anthologies, she holds a PhD in English/Creative Writing from Lancaster University, where her research was an inquiry into into the role of poetry in the search for an enviromental ethic.
Vincent Zepp: Arriving at the time in history (including literary history) when I did. I was blessed to have such a rich tradition of poetry, art, music, and culture available to me. This continues to allow my poetry to flourish in a rich loam of influences. The work I believe is representative of the best thoughts and intuitions of my generation of writers whose challenge is to move forward with the gifts given to us from previous generation of artists. From Ferlinghetti who opened my eyes to Pound and Eliot through the various significant literary and art movements of the 20th century. Then there was the haiku master Basho who showed us frogs leaping into the pond of our mind. John Berryman said our poetry should be something no one else could do. I've tried to focus on that idea.