ADANNA

LITERARY JOURNAL

Founder/Editor

CHRISTINE REDMAN-WALDEYER

Adanna accepts poetry, fiction, essays, and reviews. Please send a proposal for reviews. All submissions are electronically accepted in one file, preferably a word document file with a cover letter and a three to four-line bio.

Visit our website for further details: www.adannajournal.blogspot.com

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Credits

Front Cover Artist: Maeve Stemp

Front Cover Title: Slouched

Medium: Acrylic Paint and Acrylic Marker on Unstretched Canvas

Artist Statement

The body is consumed when it is viewed, when it curates itself to potential observation. In *Slouched*, a woman sits, uncovered, comfortable. All of the lines on the body, if extended, would intersect organically— there is an organic logic to the body and its layers of skin. The reversal of the light and dark tones mimic a negative of a photograph, unprocessed and unviewable, but evidence of existence nonetheless. A body can resist its consumption while experiencing its existence in a joyous way through a continuous and radical assertion of the naturalness of gravity and skin. A body should not be something we disconnect from, view from the third person. A body is unconsumable, it is natural, it is always worthy of joy.

— *Maeve Stemp,* Cover Artist

Adanna's Mission Statement

Adanna, a name of Nigerian origin, pronounced a-DAN-a, is defined as "her father's daughter." I chose to name this literary journal *Adanna* because women over the centuries have been defined by men in politics, through marriage, and most importantly, by the men who fathered them. In college, I was inspired by women such as Anne Hutchinson who had the opportunity to study under her father. Today women are still bound by complex roles in society, often needing to wear more than one hat or sacrifice one role so another may flourish. While this journal is dedicated to women, it is not exclusive, and it welcomes our counterparts and their thoughts about women today. I only ask that your submissions reflect women's issues or topics, celebrate womanhood, or shout out in passion.

— *Christine Redman-Waldeyer, Founder*

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Biographical Notes

Gabrielle Armer

"And I Tell Him, *Don't Worry. They're Happy Tears.*"

We are connected
at the root,
evergreen forest sprawled below
and above,
limbs entwined,
receptive
to the rain,
grasping, gasping,
dew-drunk & glowing in the dark.
I can't believe this is my life.
I kiss him on the cheek, the temple,
say, *You're going to be my husband*
and suddenly
I am the weeping willow
bent round the riverbend

joy full

Gabrielle Armer

“Echoes of Eve”

His sheep congregate to the fondue moon
horizon and hold requiem. Prayer,
a quaint cooling, the waves licking pontoon
starboard: I picture a darker pasture
lit by wingèd light, so quiet, so breathless,
containing divine peace, beyond idyllic.
I bathed in His blue isolation and was endless.

Eden sank, of course. Obsessive and septic.
Wanting Him ripped the stars from my gaze;
yearning dried summer creeks’ effervescence.
I’ve missed Him in fifty empty ways—
and yet, I’ve flourished alone ever since,
only occasionally whispering,
in my weakness, *Please. Come back. I’m sorry.*

Gabrielle Armer

"Hesitation"

I

A jet flew through the sky:
in the shadows, a flower bloomed.

My cousin (18) worked in the killing room
of the Tyson chicken processing plant

until his fiancee (also 18) got pregnant.
They got married at the courthouse,

then sent photos in the family group chat
with the announcement:

> He's going to pilot a fighter jet.
> He leaves for basic training next week.
>
> He won't be back in time
> to see his daughter be born.

His new wife, pregnant, sick, tired, alone—
a horror story I grew up dreading.

They're growing up fast
and hard. So *why* am I so *jealous*

of my cousin, of his wife, of the stretch of her belly
as she grows their new life inside her

II

Rain falls in Seattle; steamed buns,
bao, chopsticks, condensation on windows

Across from me, a little one
kicks his high chair with tiny white shoes.

I smile, send my husband a text, ache
as I watch the mother watch

her son. The baby clutches
a dumpling as big as his fist,

tries to shove it all in his mouth at once,
fails, the tries again,

then fails again.
His parents both laugh.

In that moment, the father leans forward,
cuts the bite in half. The Mandalorian

is on the father's T-shirt. The baby
has a stuffed Baby Yoda

tucked into his high chair,
and suddenly I ache everywhere

because there is a part of me that wants
that for us, and another

that can't help
but look away.

III

a rough seeding, then scraping
the core of myself, like a pumpkin left to rot

I am terrified
that in the moment of creation

between my husband and I
as we make a person to love

that an old wound will open inside,
bleed out, stain our marriage bed

into a blurry couch from years ago
and another boy's face, his tears

when he realized what he'd done
to me—the franticness

of swallowing contraceptives
& promising forgiveness.

I want to protect the daughter I don't have
from the memory of him.

Kristin Berkey-Abbott

Motherboard

I watch you solder the motherboard
of a computer you should have given
up on decades ago.
The backyard garden explodes in a profusion
of new blooms, but you do not notice.
I walk along a long trail, the carvings
in the land left behind
when the train trestles
were repurposed. I long for westward
expansion or a destiny that will seem manifest.

Our oldest son drifts in and out
of recovery. Feeling guilty, I prefer
the days when he is in whatever lotus land
has captured him to the days
when he develops yet another new
plan for sobriety,
the maps for getting to the grown up destinations.

I need to make a will, an appointment for a scan.
In my younger years I might have worried about radiation.
But this year, I already understand the implications
of what the sonogram will show.
I sew the hole in my heart with birdsong threads
and turn my face to the sun.

Some children want pets, but we have sourdough
starter. The youngest one, our only girl, tends
it and knows its moods. She decides
to churn her own butter. I assume
it will require new equipment, a clabber
and a receptacle made of clay and fired in a kiln.
She washes a jar retrieved from the recycling
bin and shakes the milk
into its new destiny. I proof
the yeast and think of parables of potent

power hidden in a powder, hidden
coins and the woman who lights
the lamps to find them.

Kristin Berkey-Abbott

Noah's Wife Gets to Work

Noah's wife decides
it's time to join the workforce.
She wants more for her life.
She can be the helper,
not the helpmate.

She finds a job
in the advising department
of the community college.
She helps students map
their college progress. She trains
them always to keep the end
goal in sight. She assists
students with a more practicable navigation.

Still the midwife to the dreams of others,
she stays ever alert to the twinkling
stars that might speak to her.
She expected God to speak
to her in her own dreams,
not through the yearnings of others.

Noah's wife goes to yoga class
every evening after work.
After bending herself into pretzel
shapes to please people,
she finds relief in the contracting
and expanding of her spine
and skeleton, releasing the coils of pain
always simmering below her surface.

Old white men and their metrics,
false gods and idols,
her boss babbles of the ARC,
just as her husband once did.
Her boss demands she force

extra classes on the students
to increase the Average Registered Credit.

Noah's weary wife adopts
the ancient practice of smile
and subversion, nodding, while keeping
her own counsel.
She asks the students about their stresses
and plans their schedules accordingly.

She waits to be burned
whether by stake or unemployment.
She updates her resume
and reconnects her networks.
She considers certifications.
Maybe she'll be a spiritual director or a chef.

On her days off, she scouts
locations. Some save
the world by retreating
to their arcs, and some are sure
of their money-making metrics.

Noah's wife returns to the wastelands
of the inner city laid bare
by predatory practices.
Her husband put his faith in floods
to wash away the blight.
She buys an empty warehouse.
Noah's wife gets to work.

Maya Bernstein

Can A Mother Be An Artist? Or: The Clumsy Bear's Ghazzal

In her poignant and imaginative new novel…Sheila Heti opens with an unusual concept: Humans are bears, fish or birds. Those who care most about their closest relationships are bears. People focused on the common good are fish. And those most preoccupied by beauty and aesthetics are birds. (NY Times "Sheila Heti Is Still Asking Questions," 2 February, 2022)

Dear Sheila Heti:

You might have heard that I'm a bird, but – here's the bare
truth: when I was born my mother uttered, *be a bear*!

My father said that I should be a fish. I'm schooled,
a flopping flipping drifting lost-at-sea bear.

Can't artists focus on the common good? Don't they
have close relationships? Aren't you a wee-bit bear?

Here's how I look: an osprey beak, a belly-
whale, a stubby tail, a she-bear.

Bear what? Bear children! Not shoulders! Bear
your husband's needs! Not your knees bare!

When salmon spawn they swim upstream. Grouse
glide past gravity. I'm a lumber-through-the-lea-bear.

I swipe my paws in streams. Can't grasp a pen
or type. Can hardly climb a tree. A clumsy, sleepy bear.

Weren't you told you could be anything,
just like the boys? A Birdy-Fishy-Bear?

(All three! Just like the holy trinity! As long

as there's a wife at home, and she, a cheery bear).

I wish to fluff my feathered plume! To soar
on windy air! But look at me. See? All bear!

What kind of bear am I? A Corduroy-with-a-missing-
button-bear. A Pooh-with-an-empty-pot-of-honey-bear.

I envy you: your wings, your song, your broken cage! May
a bird like you set me free? Yours, and most sincerely, Bear.

Maya Bernstein

For The Life of the Flesh Is In The Blood

(*Leviticus, 17)*

Now that I stopped getting my period I no longer have to worry about the bedding beneath me or the objects upon which I've sat or the garments I've worn becoming impure and I don't have to busy myself with seeking two young turtle doves or two young pigeons to slaughter as an offering for my own impurity and the impurity I inadvertently caused the bedding and the objects upon which I may have sat and the garments I wore, the chair, the underwear, my husband, *If, in fact, a man beds her, her menstruation shall be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days*, and I no longer have to submerge my body in water while being witnessed by a lady declaring *Kosher! Kosher! Kosher!* I no longer have to be witnessed naked with my elbows over my breasts making the blessingover the dunking, no more of that, *this is the teaching about the person with flow* which is all mixed up with impurity, so every month now instead of the blood and the dunking and the objects I lie on the table at the oncologist's office not making the table impure, and lower my jeans and underwear a few inches below my belly button, just above my hips, it feels kind of sexy, I lower them just enough to expose the flesh above my ovaries, not so sexy, the needle is so big – God, is it sexy again? – that the oncologist – not sexy – has to give a shot of anesthesia before the shot that suppresses the estrogen – not sexy – that's responsible for the flow and the blood and the eggs those sweet young turtle doves make in their nest – and since the life of the flesh is in the blood, I'm living a life now of the mind.

Damaris Castillo

Matriarch

My mother and my grandmother look alike, yet they epitomize a juxtaposition.

As I sat in front of them, I attempted to hint at my despair through the disguise of girl talk. It was something along the lines of a man's lack of focus that we discussed. My grandmother spoke through a fearful tongue- she said it was my job as a woman to keep my man's head on his shoulders. She said caring for him was my job, caring for our home was my responsibility, and most importantly looking good for him was vital. I looked at her in silence, simply nodding my head at her misogyny but understanding that this was all she knew. This was how she was taught to keep a man, and this was how she felt she could help me.

Suddenly, my dear mother butted in. She scoffed with a sly smile and said, "Oh, how convenient for him!" Her tone almost mocked my grandmother but enforced her own perspective. She told me to care for him as much as he cared for me. Then she said something that has stuck with me since. "Flama que no queme al santo, y ni tanto q no la alumbre." A flame must not burn a saint nor leave it in the dark.

My grandmother looked at her daughter with concerned eyes. "Ay mija, es que tienes tu corazoncito frio." With these words, I could see my mother's eyes soften for just one second as they locked eyes. There was an instance where I saw a mother and daughter connect with the shared pain they had once felt from a man.

"Well, that's how it has to be!" My mother shrugged it off.

We sat amongst each other not as daughters, but as women. It was a strange feeling to understand the fear in my grandmother's words as well as the coldness in my mother's. Their experience, their pain, and most importantly their love- lived through me. I felt like I was a cookie staring at the ingredients that made me.

My mother and my grandmother epitomized a juxtaposition, yet I couldn't have been more alike to both.

Maureen Clark

Domestic Tasks

I.

a girl learns to thread a needle
while her hands are still small birds

she eyes the hole
and slips the orange thread through

on the first try
this is her first domestication

inherited needles and threads
she learns to iron her father's handkerchiefs

and the pillowcases
sprinkles them with water

to soften and sizzle the wrinkles flat
she can barely reach the ironing board

but she learns fast
not to burn her fingers

or singe the shirts
she learns to make steam

to flatten collars and cuffs
to fold the hankie in half and in half again

into perfect rectangles
edges pressed no starch neat piles

II.

driving home
the reporter's voice

came over the radio
without emotion

said two little girls in India
were dead gang-raped

two and four-years-old
I could not

catch my breath
the announcer

was silent too long
before the next story

III.

the beads of water dance
the iron sizzles

as it glides
across the long rectangle

tablecloths earn 25 cents
grandma had

an old-fashioned wrangle
for squeezing water from clothes

one item at a time
shirt coveralls dresses

my mother
got a washing machine

and the delivery man
dressed up like Santa

wore black-rimmed glasses
and didn't fool anyone

IV.

acrid marigolds
stain the fingers of the girls

who string them one by one
blooms become garlands

girls become women
who will never shine as brightly

as they do among the marigolds
in this season

when their nimble fingers
are orange birds

sewing blossoms
into streamers

for the wedding party
their lives into pageantry

pain into expectations
their days planned

honey scented
sweet rose water for the tea

the bitter smell of marigolds
and all that they portend

Andrea Corsi

When the Cicadas Came

My words once cluttered the lines and climbed the margins of my writer's notebooks, pouring out of me, easy as air. I was limitless. My father loved to hear my writings. He told me to speak my stories out loud, set them into the world, and give them life. From his tattered armchair, his eyes closed, he listened as my stories of love and happy endings unfolded. He said my words were my gift; they gave me power, and I believed him. Until the summer the cicadas came, from the gray areas where they resided, and took all my words away.

There was a place beneath my bed behind the box of paper dolls, their notches bent, where I hid my journal. Different from my writer's notebooks, I saved those lines for truths; the color of tulips, their heads bent, the girl with the skin like milk and the gaggle of friends, and my first kiss, stolen in the corner of the cafeteria stairwell. In my journal was where I hid him. First, only a line. The note passed from the back of study hall. And then another line. His gaze as I boarded the bus on the last day of school, his cigarette smoke trailing in the breeze. And then, he was a paragraph. The summer night at the movies, his hand on top of mine, then fingers intertwined, and then resting on his lap.

I should have known what would happen.

Lying in bed with the blanket pulled to my chin, hidden fully clothed in the scratch of polyester and jeans, I listened for my father's footsteps to cross the hallway and fade. The night outside was black as ink, hung with the heavy waiting of late August, change creeping in the air with the scream of the cicadas. I slipped my shoes on in the dark, all fumbling hands on laces, clicking the window latch. He waited down the street, tail lights glowing red. The freedom of possibility made my head feel light echoed with the hopeful words in my journal. *It*'s *going to happen tonight*.

He pulled onto the highway, two lanes with the speed limit sign hung upside down. The momentum pressed me into the seat as I took a drag of his cigarette, held the smoke in my mouth, and choked down a cough as I exhaled. He pulled into the back of the movie theater and we crawled into the trunk of his Ford, the back seat discarded. A loose woven blanket spread across the floor. He laid me down and kissed my neck in the place that made my breath pause and the space between my legs feel warmer.

I felt him, pressing up against my skirt, my bare leg wrapped around his and I wanted to look like the cover of a grocery store romance novel. But it felt wrong. His fumbling, eager hands. Our unfamiliar bodies in knots and odd angles, not on a pristine beach, or in a gothic castle, or even in the silk sheets of a bed, but instead at the back of a deserted parking lot.

Wait, I said aloud. But did I really say it? Neither mattered, the word was already lost, the opportunity gone in the roar of the cicadas invisible in the brush. He moved with a force that made me gasp. My skirt pushed up around my waist, my underwear shifted to the side. Reality rose in sharp clarity as my world shifted, caught in a momentum I thought I couldn't stop, in a moment I thought I wanted. He buried his face in my hair as I stared up at the stapled fabric of the car ceiling.

I crawled back into my bedroom window, my underwear still damp, shoved at the bottom of my purse and my father, still asleep down the hall. Naked in front of my mirror, all dark skin and shadowed corners, I felt disjointed, like something was missing. I grazed my hands over the places he took up space then pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes. I wrote everything in my journal in bright red ink that bled through the back of the page and onto the pages after.

In the fall, I returned to school, and looked for him in the hallways but never found him. My English teacher flipped through my empty writer's notebook like a fan. Her brow furrowed. *What happened?* And the story that wasn't a story flew out of my mouth without warning, splattering on the wall. She listened wide-eyed, then narrowed, and drummed her fingernail hollow on the desk. *Why did I sneak out? What was I wearing? Did I say stop? Boys will be boys, after all.* And my words receded further, crawled underground with the cicadas gone silent.

Months later, I returned to my room and felt the air inside shifted. My empty writer's notebooks stacked on the desk, precise as I left them, but their new spines cracked, the empty pages shuffled and replaced with a careful hand. I reached under my bed, shoving aside the box of paper dolls, running my hand through the clouds of dust, looking for my journal, but not finding it.

My father and I sat on opposite ends of the dinner table, scraping forks filled the silence between us. I never asked him where my journal went and he never asked me where my stories had gone, because we both knew the answers. I felt hollow in the places where my words once took up space, the simple things that made my father lean back, close his eyes and smile. But I learned that year he was wrong. And I knew. I knew. I

knew. I knew then something essential, learned in the back of a Ford in a deserted parking lot and in the months that followed, that there was no power in words if no one was listening.

Benjamin Diamond

An Interview with Mallory McDuff

Mallory McDuff's quest for climate justice took her around the United States, where she met many different women with the same ideals. *Love Your Mother: 50 States, 50 Stories and 50 Women United for Climate Justice* is a collection of McDuff's escapades, but more importantly, how the fight against climate change spans the entire country.

McDuff gave the women she spoke to an avenue to share their voice and their experience in the fight. The journey McDuff set off on also gave her some relief. Through meeting the women from Maine to Hawaii, she found peace in not being alone in the fight for a brighter future.

Ben Diamond: In "Love Your Mother", you interview women throughout the United States who are advocating for climate justice. What do you hope will happen as readers engage with these women's stories?

Mallory McDuff: I set out on this one-year journey to gather examples of climate action from a diversity of women, and my goal was to share stories for my students and my daughters. So my initial idea of my readers reflected the young people with whom I spend all of my time. I teach environmental education at a small liberal arts college, Warren Wilson College, where students work on campus to run the school: they are the farmers, gardeners, auto mechanics, carpenters, mostly learning on the job when they arrive on campus. Our most popular major is Environmental Studies, so these are also students who are worried about their climate future and want to make a difference. Yet it can be overwhelming to know how to start, especially when we know 100 companies contribute to 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

As a mother of a 23 and 17-year-old who grew up on this campus, I also wanted to gather stories from diverse backgrounds, so I could point to someone in the book and say: "Look, she's a poet, and she's also integrating climate into her poetry." In the book, these women are scientists, students, farmers, politicians, policy analysts, community organizers and more. Half the women are BIPOC and six of those are

Indigenous. It was important to me that the book reflected many different stories from many different lenses.

So I hope readers will be able to see themselves in at least one of the stories–from Alaska to Alabama. In the introduction and conclusion, I also share my hope that readers will not only connect with a story but also find a way to join with others. The back of the book includes resources such as all the organizations mentioned in each woman's story as well as specific ways to engage. We don't have time to try and "convert" people–the urgency of the climate crisis is that we need to talk about it, connect around shared values, and engage.

BD: A lot of the women you spoke to to create this book said that their family had a large impact on their view of the world. You also used your children as one of your motivations to study climate change. But I am wondering, how did your parents influence your views on climate change?

MM: I actually wrote another book responding to that question: It's called OUR LAST BEST ACT: Planning for the End of Our Lives to Protect the People and Places We Love. The book is the story of my one-year journey (yes, another year of research!) to explore sustainable options for our bodies after we die–keeping climate, community, and cost in mind. It's essentially a love letter to my parents who raised their four children with a sense of environmental stewardship that integrated cost-cutting with their faith and time spent outdoors. Those are a lot of different values, but they were super connected in my childhood in Fairhope, Alabama, where we could canoe from our suburban house to the estuary of Mobile Bay.

Growing up, I watched as our family gave up trash for the forty days of Lent, for example, and this was before recycling! So we didn't buy any packaged foods or bought in bulk and purchased from local farmers. I'm not an example of this kind of discipline as a parent now, but their example made a difference to me. It wasn't the guilt trip of "individual sacrifice" but rather a way of life. One year, my dad gave up driving for Lent, and he worked 30 miles away and biked to and from work, changing into his suit in a custodial closet in the basement of the IBM office where he sold mainframe computers.

Both my parents died before their time. My mom was 58, about my age, and my dad was 63. They were killed two years apart in mirror-image cycling accidents, hit by teen drivers. After my mom's death, my dad shared with us his 2-page typed directives for his own final wishes: no embalming or vault, a pine casket, his gospel bluegrass band at the gravesite, family and friends to handle logistics, rather than a funeral home. He wanted a green burial before anyone was talking about that phrase. Likewise, in my childhood, we were living with climate in mind, although no one was using those words "climate change" at that point in coastal Alabama, at least not in my circles. The irony is that my hometown is ground zero for climate with increasingly severe hurricanes.

So we gave my father the burial he wanted when he was killed two years after my mom. My parents were in the best shape of their lives when they died: they'd hiked the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, nearly all the Continental Divide Trail. But they weren't "activists" as we imagine them…my mom was on the altar guild at our Episcopal Church; my dad sang in the choir. But they both did yoga, meditated, volunteered at a CSA for their food. They lived in community. So long story short, they had a big influence on me; I've written extensively about their lives and deaths. And I feel lucky to be able to name them as strong influences in my life and part of why I write is to share their story–and their impact on my life–with my daughters.

BD: In the book you spoke with women from different regions throughout the United States. What differences did you notice in each of the women's fight against climate change, based on the region they were from?

MM: I just wrote an essay about how women in the South upended stereotypes about Southern women to use those strengths to power climate momentum. I grew up around a lot of Southern women and the stereotypes that come to mind are that they're more likely to organize a potluck than a protest. What I found was that they are more likely to organize BOTH a potluck and a protest by drawing on their deep connections in community. I feel like I can speak to Southern traits since I was raised in the South. But I'm not sure I can make those same observations about other regions of the country, at least not from the

women I researched, probably because I can't play with stereotypes in the same way!

I can say that many of the stories–across the regions–impressed me with the women's connection to both people and places. I loved writing Terry Tempest Williams' story and her connection to Utah and especially the Great Salt Lake. I wrote it years after I heard her speak in Asheville. Or Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's lifelong commitment to the role of oceans in climate justice. I think more than regional differences what struck me about these women was the persistence and dedication to keep doing the next right thing and join with others.

BD: Today, college students use their voices to help push the agenda of a cause they believe heavily in. How does it make you feel that young people are picking up the fight that you have believed in for a long time?

MM: One of the women featured in the book, Katharine Haynoe, is a well-known climate scientist and climate communicator. She says she doesn't "believe" in climate change because climate science isn't like a religious belief that you can choose to believe or not: it's science. She's also an evangelical Christian who speaks widely on this issue.

So I don't see that I believed in climate justice before my students did. Rather I feel like we are walking the way together, trying to figure out how to best align our skills with the needs in our community, the country, the world. I'm learning from my students every day. They have far more concrete skills than I do as they are herbalists and farmers, musicians and fiber artists.

In 1992, when I was close to their age, I was working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Central African Republic as an environmental educator alongside a Central African counterpart in a rainforest reserve. At that time, we were doing climate work but we didn't use that terminology. Granted, the fossil fuel companies knew about climate change, and our government did. But as an environmental educator, I was just focused on working with kids and taking them on research trips into the rainforest to study the conservation of these protected lands.

Fast forward several decades, and my students and I are now working in local schools organizing field trips so kids can learn from the farm and

garden and forests here on our campus. So now we talk about climate change and it's connected to everything. And as Katharine Hayhoe says, the most important thing you can do about climate change is to talk about it. But in our work we are also trying to connect people to places in their own home region and to take children into these outdoor spaces and out of the classroom and away from their screens.

BD: You mention in the 'Looking Forward' at the end of your book, stating that it helps you move forward with your fight against climate change knowing that there are other women in the fight with you. What was the biggest takeaway that you got from speaking to each of the women?

MM: My biggest lesson learned from each of the stories in collective was that women are good at working together. I saw three Cs in each of their lives: communication, collaboration, and community. Yes, I'm a teacher so I think in alliteration! I know that one single story won't shift the climate movement, but I do believe that our stories in collective can generate momentum to make a difference.

Cat Dixon

Your Small House, too, in Ruin

Content Warning: Verbal abuse of a child and self-harm

My first memory

I stood in my bedroom crying as my mother raged. The reason as to why she was angry is lost. Perhaps I hadn't flushed the toilet, or I'd left the TV up too loud, or some other mistake that she could've dealt with maturely, but when a beast raises you, there's no calm chat in front of a fireplace or at the kitchen table. Sitcoms lied. Instead, she sucked down a cigarette in the kitchen (because the smoke wouldn't enter the other rooms of the trailer if she just kept lighting up in the kitchen), chugged a wine cooler, and then rushed to my room to have a go at me. She screamed adjectives: ungrateful, stupid, worthless, spoiled. She knocked over the trinkets and treasures on my dresser (pretty pastel lamb and Easter egg erasers I wouldn't use, an earring tree in the shape of a tiny bear, a Kermit the Frog toy from a McDonald's Happy Meal), and then she towered over me. She never hit me. Her words were the punches thrown; my kindergartener mind couldn't block or hit back. I sat there a pathetic puddle of tears and curly black hair. The climax: she rummaged in my closet, found the little red suitcase with the girl holding a sunflower and the white letters: *Goin' to Grandma's*, and threw it next to me, "Pack your shit and get the fuck out." She tossed rolled up socks from my drawer, she threw clothes from hangers, she grabbed my stuffed animals off the bed and launched them at my head. My reaction: sit and wait for the storm to pass. Later, I had to clean up the mess with tears and snot while she smoked again in the kitchen. Every fifteen or twenty minutes she'd return to the room to repeat the scene. The calm was the eye of the hurricane and this beast had dozens of eyes so the chaos would last through the night.

In the morning, she ignored me. Yes, the cereal and toast were placed on the coffee table and *Good Morning America* or the *Today Show* with their perky hosts chirped the morning news, and she sat—not in the living room but in the kitchen—smoking her cigarette and drinking orange juice. This was the tricky part. Should I speak or would that

provoke her? Should I stay quiet or would that give her reason to dig out the suitcase again?

Every night in bed I prayed she'd die, but I had no idea where I'd live if that that should happen. Who would take care of me? If she packed my stuff and made me leave the trailer, I knew that no one would want me. For I was unlovable. I was (am I still?) a hungry, whiny, stupid monster. How do I know that? Because my mother told me so. Now you're rolling your eyes. Now you're thinking I'm exaggerating. Why admit that my own mother didn't love me? Didn't even like me? I've run from that truth since I took my first steps.

My first home

The trailer was white with blue trim, and she decorated the gravel out front with a Madonna statue, little plastic bunnies from K-Mart, and a pink birdbath, and surrounding the area was a little white picket fence, only about a foot high. My bedroom window faced the driveway and the street. My second room, the toy room, had a window that faced our neighbor's trailer. The toy room—filled with a hundred Barbies and three Barbie houses, a Barbie salon, and a Barbie horse stable—was the escape. I played Barbies for hours and lost myself in imaginary families with imaginary drama. I mostly acted out scenes from sitcoms that showed me that family was warm and caring. Sitcoms lied.

I was embarrassed by the trailer. People on TV called someone like me "trailer trash." All my friends lived in normal houses with garages and basements. I wanted out, but there was nowhere to go. I wanted my mother to get us a house, or even an apartment, but instead QVC and Home Shopping Network packages filled with gaudy jewelry and Fabergé eggs arrived daily and they were piled up by the door until we got home. She dragged in wine bottles and cartons of cigarettes. At Christmas, the tree was surrounded by dozens of gifts—Barbie and her things—an airport that came with a female stewardess and a male pilot, a grocery store with a battery-operated conveyor belt and a little orange cart, a pink camper, a game show set with a spinning prize wheel. Santa had brought all of this to me because I was a "good girl," but if I was so good, why was she screaming at me all the time? Why did she hate me? When would I be good enough to stop her tantrums?

I was embarrassed by the Barbies. I had too much so the toy room's closet was filled with unopened playsets and dolls. I was reminded of the unused Barbies when she got drunk and popped in to have a go at me. I'd be setting up a picnic for Skipper and her friends or changing Barbie's outfit or brushing her hair—Casey Kasem was reading out a request and dedication on the top 40 show—and I'd have to turn off his soothing voice so she could remind me how stupid I was or how I was the most spoiled child on earth. *Look at all these toys you never play with, brat!* Whatever the insult, I was expected to sit in place, listen, and cry silently, and not talk back. I never talked back (and I still haven't) because I was trained like a dog. Sit, stay, wait. I was mute: she had cut out my tongue. Well, that's an exaggeration. Let me backtrack. I had a tongue. Yes, I could've said something, but when a beast has a hold of your leg, your first instinct is to pull it back, but the more you fight, the more gore, and the longer the attack lasts. The lesson: wait. The beast will tire itself out and leave you alone if you don't move or yell. Sadists want to see your tears, hear your screams of agony, taste your fear. Perhaps that was the first and most important lesson.

I need to back up

That trailer wasn't my first home. My first home was with my mother and father, but they divorced when I was young. I don't remember ever living with my father. I don't remember that first home, but my mother brought it up during her frenzies. The house, a small yellow square on Freeman Drive, was near the high school, only a couple miles away from the trailer court. The yellow house, my mother said, had to be sold because my father was a cheating bastard, and that's why we were stuck in this trailer. I hated my father for leaving me with this woman. He moved out of the Freeman Drive house and became a free man abandoning his only daughter. Did he know what my mother was like? Did he know what she was doing to me? At night in bed, after I prayed, I cried and scratched my face, pulled my hair, slapped and pinched my arms and legs, and hit my head against the wall. I'd rather the pain than my mother's tirades ringing in my ears. Since she wouldn't physically hurt me, I did it myself.

Where was my father? A few years after the divorce, the U.S. started Desert Storm and my enlisted father was sent to the Middle East. After that, he was stationed in Europe—Holland, Germany, and other

countries. He sent postcards and letters. I never told him about my home life. Her anger was a secret that I had to keep although I don't remember her ever telling me that. Perhaps I knew that if I said something, allowing him into my torture chamber, he'd shake his head, mutter some excuse, and leave me again with the beast. She'd be even more fueled with rage. She'd smirk and cackle,

"He don't care about you. Told you!" She'd win. It was better to pretend in my letters to my father, in my chats at school with classmates, in my Barbie room, alone or playing with a friend who was over for a sleepover, that I had a *normal* home life. Perhaps what I had was normal, and TV shows, with their two staircase houses and hugging and dinners at dining room tables, were the lie.

Lynn Domina

All I Ever Wanted

Heaving another bag of potatoes
up the cellar steps, I spotted
Randy's rusted traps
sunk into a heap of *Saturday Evening Post*s
mildewed now likely, the stories
forgotten mostly. But I don't need
to see his leavings to see
the boy he was, cocky and charming
and bashful all at once, his undershirt
half-tucked, half-out as he dangled a pair of jackrabbits
he'd caught out at his uncle's farm,
savoring the wild flavor
before he even bent to skin them, the scar
bordering his blond hairline so faint I half-believed
I imagined it. It's a wonder
more of him wasn't scarred,
the way the doctor dragged him out of me,
stitched me up in jerky thrusts and grunted
to his father to keep me
off my feet a week or two.

Come home from that Great dreadful War,
thirteen months fighting
cousins and uncles, he looked
every bit the same. When he stuttered out
how he stumbled across that German boy
already slit down the middle, his guts
tangled from his belly, the line of ants
marching along his jaw,
how he laid
his hand across that boy's eyes
before cocking his pistol and firing,
I finally knew
why he'd come back so quiet
he struck folks as rude.
But it was me, wasn't it, who couldn't be different.

It was me who hovered, fretted
that he wouldn't move forward,
didn't even seem to yearn for girls or good times,
nothing past his shift at the Pittsburgh Brewing Company
bottling soft drinks until all of America
decided to whoop it up again
come 1933. By then, of course, I'd learned to be glad
no grandson would toss a baseball
down the sidewalk to his buddy,
no girl would chalk hopscotch squares
up the driveway before swinging the screen door
open on his silent mess, no daughter-in-law's
fierce keening would startle
the neighbors from their flowerbeds as she knelt and swayed
over his bloody head, cradling him in her apron
as I did, spun back
to those bitter years when all I ever wanted
was one child
to rock in my chair summer evenings,
to hear my little rhymes, my whispers,
hush little baby, hush now.

Lynn Domina

During the Eulogy His Son Recalls Sartorial Advice

He'll never again hold up a blue tie with his right hand,
a green one with his left, asking which
matches his gray shirt. He'll never again
ignore your advice. He'll never see now
how you've mastered the Windsor, how you've almost
got the Prince Albert. He'll never say
a gentleman always carries a handkerchief, or a beard
is a decision not a default. He'll never say one double-breasted
jacket is enough. They're striking but inconvenient.
He'll never suggest that in this century
there's something untrustworthy
about a man who chooses suspenders. And tuxedos
are the only thing you should rent rather than buy.
He'll never again say you should never
refer to your sweaters or shoes by their brand.
Brogans can dress you up or down, he'll never observe, but wingtips
always dress you up. He'll never again say if you think
you might need a haircut next week, you probably
need one now. Straddling his shaving stool,
he'll never again inspect his chin, grin into his mirror,
declare, *It's Saturday night and by God your mother knows*
I'm not dead yet.

Lynn Domina

Ode to the Word *Haberdashery*

The man, a stranger in a hotel elevator, made the joke
we've all heard: floor three, shoes, purses,
men's haberdasheries. Why does no one
use the word *haberdashery* anymore, he asked of no one
in particular. I didn't
know what to say, having never said
haberdashery out loud in my life.
I say it now, *haberdashery*, I whisper it,
utter it like a guttural groan, sing it
like a carol. I love seasonal songs, as I love cascading
syllables, even the word *syllable*, and in *haberdashery*
five fast ones avalanche
onto the next line, more than *notions*
or *men's clothing* or even *accessories.*
Haberdashery could, all by itself, be
the first or last line of a sartorially splendid poet's
haiku—here, you can have it, as I
seldom write haiku and lounge about most days
wearing cat hair embellished sweatpants
and a flannel pajama top. I doubt that even
in previous lives, I traveled in elegant enough
circles to require shopping in haberdasheries.
What trend-setter could fall so thoroughly and unluckily
into the slovenly slouch I am now, writing
poems about pajamas and awkward men and old jokes?
Haberdasheries, he said, delighting my ear
with its almost inaudible internal rhyme, its plucky assonance,
hab and *dash* dashing along
like two tiny reindeer, ready to drop me off
at the only brick and mortar clothing store
left in my snowy town, where I find
belts and socks and faux-leather wallets, plastic eyeglasses
shaped like bells, neckties featuring Santa
or the Grinch, mustache combs, beard wax,
red stocking caps, green slippers, anything
the men in my life could ever need,

everything I could ever hope to find
on floor three: shoes, purses, haberdasheries

Jane Ebihara

Drought

5:42 A.M. Another dry Tuesday.

Outside,
a jay screams. Daybreak
brushes the failed summer buds of the dahlias,
the ruined bee balm, the dust and stones. A doe
rests beneath my window—
quiet as an unspoken thought.

If there's a story in this thirsty day it's a quiet one
with a tea cup in it, or perhaps an avocado—
something offered in an outstretched palm.

Inside,
the room grows dark and the fan overhead
ruffles the pages of Dylan Thomas
and last Sunday's unfinished crossword. My
untouched journal too opens and closes
in the rush of wind.

There's a sliver of light on the hallway floor.
Another jay scream. Today
I will plant asters next to the stump of the ash
that fell to borers last winter, deadhead the mums
and prune the catmint.

there are a hundred
words for *rain*—
none of them fall on the garden

Esther Fishman

Best Friends

"Barbie, I love you, I love you. Mmmmmmmm."

"Oh, Ken, I love you so much. Let's do it now. I can't wait...Mmmmmmm."

Mitzi and I were playing Barbie. Even though the dolls were stiff, and certain relevant parts absent, our imaginations were active. It was a longstanding game, and Mitzi and I loved it, but we knew enough that we only played it at her house, behind closed doors. Mitzi was an only child. She had her own room, her own record player, even her own phone. She almost never came to my house, said it was too crowded for her, too many rules. She loved everything Barbie, even had a Barbie clock that told me when I had to leave, because dinner was at six sharp. I never stayed for dinner with Mitzi because her mother didn't cook. They ate T.V. dinners most nights, from folding trays. It didn't seem right to be included, too, especially since Mitzi's dad was up by then, sitting in front of the television before leaving for his graveyard shift at the cement plant.

At school, Mitzi didn't really talk to any of the other girls. Since our town was so small, we had all known each other since kindergarten. By sixth grade, the groups were set in stone, and neither of us were very popular. She was considered weird, and me, well, let's just say that I was just awkward to be around.

"Mitzi is my best friend," I would say proudly whenever April and Colleen or Sarah asked me about her. Their disgust was my first taste of what it meant to be my own person, to think for myself.

It was obvious that Mitzi felt sorry for me. She would have been quite content to spend her time watching TV with her weird mother or listening to her records, but I would beg, "can I come over?" She was always doing me favors because she knew that I was captive to my family's silent expectations, that those afternoons with her were the only time I was truly free.

By the time we got to high school, Mitzi had started to bloom. She was at home in the adult world, and soon looked like the photographs in the glossy magazines her mother always had laying around. She wore makeup like Teflon and walked the halls like a queen. The boys at school were crazy for her, but she shooed them away. Even the captain of the football team, who I would have given anything to be

noticed by, got the heave-ho. Instead, a steady stream of older boys, men even, picked her up in their cars after school, and took her for mysterious "drives."

She wanted me to go with her, so I lied to my parents, making up a fictitious study buddy with a fake phone number. Supposedly that's where we were every afternoon. If they ever tried to call, I could just say that I had copied down the number wrong. After that was set up, we met boys everywhere: at the little park downtown; the drug store; on the bus. It was like they could smell Mitzi a mile away, and she them. Her face would light up, and her lips glisten. They would make up any excuse to talk to her, ask her for a cigarette, or if she wanted to go for a Coke. She would giggle, accept any line, no matter how lame, and walk with them.

If there were two, and the cute one had an ugly friend, face filled with pimples, or short, or just uncool in some indefinable way, he would try to talk to me, and we would follow behind, like ragged beggars trailing royalty. He would never have any money, and I would end up buying my own treat, while Mitzi slurped down soda after soda, and then dismissed her newfound paramour with giggles and excuses about having to meet her mother or being late for a dentist appointment. They would watch us as we walked away from them.

So somehow (probably in one of her mother's magazines), Mitzi found out about an amateur model search happening in the city, and decided we had to go. It was our chance to be famous. She would get us a ride, put together killer outfits, and do our hair and makeup with stuff she had shoplifted from the drugstore downtown. I told my parents a giant whopper--that we were going shopping in the city with Mitzi's parents and would be back late (after a fancy dinner). It would be easier if I just spent the night at Mitzi's house. I begged and begged until my mother gave way. She had never met Mitzi's parents.

We were supposed to get a ride from Eddie, one of Mitzi's older "friends," but at the last minute he decided it would be a drag to drive us all the way to the city "for nothing." I told Mitzi that we should just forget it. We didn't have enough money to take the bus, and I was too scared to hitchhike. Mitzi was about to ask her dad to drive us in exchange for cleaning out the garage or something. She seemed so determined, as if she had some inner knowledge that this would change our lives forever. I thought it might change hers. Nobody had ever been able to resist her; surely, she would win the contest and be whisked off to the life that she deserved, that she had been training for since birth. But what about me?

At the last minute, a friend of Eddie's named Charles agreed to take us. He had a reputation as a wild kid. His father had died in a messy car accident involving a big rig at night in the valley fog, and his mother couldn't control him after that. He had a Mustang, with racing stripes. His hair was so black it looked dyed, and it was always falling into his deep eyes. Mitzi had had a crush on him ever since the night when she and Eddie and Charles had stayed up drinking Cokes in her back yard on a night her parents were out at a party. When she told me about it the next day, how she had ducked in her bedroom window as her parents drove up, I was both thrilled and upset. She was my hero (two boys!) but wasn't she also being kind of a slut?

She had Charles pick us up downtown, so our parents wouldn't see us getting into a boy's car. We had our babysitting money for when he stopped for gas, and if we wanted a snack. I was trying to picture where we were going. It was somewhere out by the airport; one of those huge empty business hotels that could be anywhere. Mitzi had the address on our fancy invitations, but we really had no idea how to get there. Mitzi did not seem concerned as she sat in the front seat and fiddled with the radio dial. She and Charles were laughing about nothing, as I sat glumly in the tiny back seat, and looked out the window at the Main Street of our little town like it was the last time I was going to see it.

About halfway there we did stop for gas, and Charles pulled a map out of the glove compartment so he could figure out where we had to go. He smirked at our invitations, looked us up and down.

"What makes you think the judges are going to pay attention to two half-grown half-pints like you? Shoot, the both of you together wouldn't make a full meal, if you know what I mean." He moved closer to Mitzi. "Shit, this place is all the way over by the airport. It'll be at least another hour. You better hope we don't hit any traffic, little girl."

"Then we better get going." Mitzi tossed her hair at him. "I don't want to be late."

"Late. Shiiit! You'll be lucky if you make it at all."

He reached out so quickly I didn't even see him move, grabbing Mitzi by the hair and forcing her up against him. When he started kissing her, I could see the movement of his tongue trying to force her teeth apart. She broke away after a few seconds and slapped him.

"Now look what you've done! I'm going to have to do my makeup all over again."

We got back in the car. What else could we do? Mitzi sat up front. I could tell she was trying to keep him off her, not very successfully. It was like some switch had flipped in him, and suddenly he couldn't stop touching her. I sat in silence, hoping against hope that it would all blow over, that he would somehow relax back into the cool older friend, and deliver us to our unknown destination, and then take us safely home again.

Finally, we saw the airport, and the exit to the frontage road, just like the tiny map on the invitation showed. Charles dropped us off at the entrance, since we were already almost late, and said he was going to find a parking place that didn't cost an arm and a leg. We entered the hotel, into a solid wall of noise: the nervous chatter of girls; the snap of compact lids and lipstick cases; the blare of the people from the contest shouting for everyone to be quiet and stand in line. It was just too much, and I turned to leave, but Mitzi pushed me forward into the line.

"What are you doing?" I shouted at her. "There's no possible way anyone's going to notice us. Look at this crowd."

She laughed with contempt. "What crowd? All I see is a pack of overdressed, suburban girls, sweating in their mother's mascara. We're way prettier than any of them."

And as I looked around, I realized she was right. You could almost smell the other girls' nervousness. Only Mitzi was calm, unaffected by her surroundings. All I had to do was be like her.

"Thanks," I whispered, squeezing her hand.

Neither one of us saw Charles enter the hotel. A man with a light meter and camera around his neck emerged from a side room and started walking up the line of girls with a scowl on his tired face. He pointed at one, then another, and they were escorted into a side room. He walked closer. I felt for Mitzi's hand, but she was gone. Over the tops of all those heads, I saw Charles disappearing through the front doors. I almost broke out of line to run after him, but just then the photographer stopped right in front of me. Our eyes locked; I didn't know enough to look away.

"You're the one," he whispered.

The rest is history, I guess. They took a lot of pictures of me in different clothes, things I had only seen in Mitzi's magazines. They let me keep the Polaroids, so I will always remember that moment. When they found out I had no way home, an assistant was tasked with taking me. She chattered the whole way, retracing our earlier route, down to a brief stop at the place where Charles had first made his intentions clear.

I can't remember most of what she said--I really wasn't listening--a lot of stuff about how my life was going to be different now that I had been discovered. I looked out for a wrecked Mustang, or a bloody patch of grass, but there was nothing. As we got closer to the town where I lived, my thoughts drifted to school on Monday, and what to say about what had happened. The truth seemed perfectly unbelievable. It felt like all my clothes, every item in every drawer, couldn't possibly fit.

Jennifer L. Gauthier

Gerry's Turn

Geraldine held her breath against the pervasive odor of shit as she strode through the barn to Clint's office, her boots raising little clouds of red dust as they smacked the dirt. She chucked her helmet on his desk and shook out her copper curls. They glowed in the mid-afternoon sun.

"I quit."

"Come on now, doll, the crowds are here for you – they only want to ride the coaster if you're in the driver's seat." Her boss winked one of his bleary eyes at her.

"Clint, I didn't become the first female millipede coaster jockey in the universe to take orders from The Machine. And I'm not your doll."

"Hon, it'll be fine – The Machine knows what's best for you – its pairings are never wrong."

"I told you, Millipede #3 has been acting crazy all week. I think it's the full moons. Did you get the diagnostic team here?"

Geraldine took in Clint's sour look and switched gears. She licked her lips and unzipped her silver jumpsuit just enough to catch his eye.

"What if there's an accident? You don't want me to be laid up in recovery for weeks." She sat on the edge of the desk and leaned toward him. "Think of the lost revenue – not to mention the bad press. They'll be all over you and this outfit. Let me take #1."

Clint stood abruptly, "You know I can't override The Machine's decision."

Gerry walked to the window and gazed at the behemoth rising up through red dust in the distance. She held her tongue and her breath – waiting for Clint to change his mind. All she had worked for, all her mother had sacrificed to get her here. . . it all hinged on this moment, and this macho Martian.

He only sighed and shook his head, "Look Gerry, if you don't want this gig, I'll get someone else to do it. You're not the only millipede jockey on Mars."

"But you know I'm the best." Gerry shot him a playful grin as the loudspeakers began to hype the crowd for the next coaster departure: "YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS THIS ONE, FOLKS – GET YOUR TICKETS BEFORE THEY SELL OUT – MISS GERALDINE PRICE

WILL BE YOUR JOCKEY – OUR FIRST FEMALE MILLIPEDE COASTER DRIVER AND THE ONLY ONE IN THE UNIVERSE. SHE'S DYNAMITE!"

As the announcer's voice boomed, Geraldine grabbed her helmet and turned to Clint, eyebrows raised: "Well?"

He hesitated a moment, the clamor at the ticket windows pulsing outside his office. Geraldine could almost see the dollar signs in Clint's eyes as he nodded toward the door.

"Alright, you win. Take #1. I'll deal with The Machine."

That was it – all it took was the same perseverance and quick thinking that had brought her to this moment, that had allowed her to claim her place in Mars history. That and months of training on the millipedes, who were as unpredictable as the weather and reeked something awful. Her mom would be proud.

Nancy Gerber

Strangers

In the beginning
they're yours, skin
smooth as cream.
You bathe
tiny bodies, pack
PB&J, crusts trimmed
napkin folded just so.
.
One summer they shoot up,
no warning, like garden weeds.
Hair sprouting
across their chins,
voices wavering,
features hardening
eyes looking somewhere else.

Then a day comes
when the phone rings,
a man's voice
you swear you know
yet also strange --
announcing the child
who has left.

Deborah Gerrish

Still Life

— after Vincent Van Gogh's *Still Life Coffee Pot*, 1888, oil painting

Everything flows at the museum. Vincent's
canvas with enamel coffeepot in midnight gray,
a blue and white checkered jug—I recall
mother's earthenware and crimson bowls,

placed on an oil cloth table covering. She
serves wine grapes, watermelon, nectarines,
and braids of string cheese. Oh, strawberries
and ivy decorate mother's heirloom plates!

We pass sections of Valencia oranges
around the table, enlivens our talk like bee bread.
I love when my mother entertains. Last summer
before she passed, she offered brunch on the patio

for my two sisters and me. The elegant pitcher
in the Van Gogh takes me back to her sweet
tea, the warm lahmajun, a squeeze of lemon,
and the buttery paklova drizzled in honey.

For years the scene is engraved on the walls
like the hum of a hymn. After the funeral, I
rehearse brunch on that porch, bewildered.
July breeze enters through jalousie windows,

dove white sheers move like angelic beings.
Outside the louver windows is a hanging birdbath.
A trilogy of blue jays, posing,
as if for Audubon—they never fly

but say, look at me. Mother enters the painting
like a beautiful deer, exquisite still life.

Gail Ghai

A Watermelon Cut Open

When you contract polio,
crippling polio at six,
and you're caged in your room
for nine mind-numbing months,
with warm towels soaked in walnut water
to ease the hot white hurt,
think of young Frida Kahlo who wrote:
I am a caged hummingbird.

When your spine is crushed
your pelvis shattered,
your leg pulverized,
in a bus accident at eighteen:
bedridden, forced to wear
a plaster then steel corset,
with a metal bar attached to your spine,
and sizable doses of clear morphine
aren't enough to stop
the deep cardinal anguish,
think of Frida Kahlo
who attached a mirror to her canopy bed
so, she could paint her reflection,
the damaged body, thirty-one surgeries,
her slow, slow mending,
her love for gold-eyed Diego, their turbulent blue life.

And when your husband sleeps with your sister,
Cristina, the sister with green eyes,
two children, two legs,
Frida called it, *a double disgrace*
as if her heart was sliced in half,
then half again. Four quarters hemorrhaging
like the four children she miscarried,
but brushed back into life,
in disturbing blood-red paints.
crushed spine, black tubes snaking her skin,

an inside-out womb
and a heart shattered
into a thousand scarlet shards.
I'm a watermelon cut open, she said,
And when her leg turned gangrene,
think of Frida Kahlo's fearless words:
I have to paint before there is only one footprint.

Gail Ghai

Designs

Before I was conceived
that late May night
when my father, the flying instructor
was training pilots to rotate
and ready the advance
of their lines of flight
over the silver skies of Saskatchewan,

did my parents talk about creating me,
a third child in their fourth year
of marriage?
Or was I a random genetic drift?
A matter of moonlight?
An iridescent drop
of desire?

No, my father **wanted** a second son.
Another male to model him, to model
airplanes of glue, paper, and popsicle sticks.
He wanted Brian Neil. He got a girl child
who would watch her father and brother
level the wooden wings,
spin the plastic propeller to pitch forward
into a blur of white whirling wind.
Pin up the B52 posters
with their massive fuselages
shaped like sausages.

She would watch behind that gauged
blue-red instrument panel,
the one that navigates
the heart.

Gail Ghai

Zero Degrees

As we sail southward from Genovese in the Galápagos Islands
to cross that "imaginary line" on Earth,
Jorge, our naturalist, says: *Ecuador in Spanish means equator.*
And suddenly I think of Mr. McKenzie, my sixth-grade
geography teacher tracing the wide black band
on our blue classroom globe.
His yellow nicotine-stained finger
displayed the dark divide
between the north and south hemispheres.

He underlined the equa in equator and we all got it,
even Michael McDougal who was repeating sixth grade. Again.
Then Mr. McKenzie's hand slid across South America.
A peninsula, he instructed, *is land surrounded by water on three sides.*
But his outspread hand lingered over Brazil, and we all knew
he had a crush on our new art teacher, Ms. Sanchez from San Paulo.
Flamboyant and beautiful, we had all fallen in love with her
tropical smile, wind-chime laughter and silver bracelets
clanging us awake in the corridors of dark-cloaked nuns
whose knocking brown wooden rosaries signaled:
A nun's approaching.

He beckoned us closer; *Feel the brown ridges*
where Asia divides by stones.
These are the immense Himalayas.
Again, he spun our glossy globe, and we sat mesmerized
as black borders, pink archipelagos, green islands,
and blue, blue water whirled before our faces

How could we know what our planet would offer?
Where would our faith and fate take us?
Little did I guess that I would make my way into a world of words,
marry a man from another continent, cross into a culture
of saffron sacredness and golden curries,
give birth to two lights that would illuminate the Earth's shadows.

But back in Mr. McKenzie's class, we were innocent
sixth graders \
We had not yet sprouted out of our bodies,
nor broken the hushed shells of our dreams.
We were tight white cocoons.
We were like the equator—
starting at zero degrees.

Karen Levy-Guillén

The Pink Bike

The bike was pink, and it had a pink banana seat, and the little girl loved it, she just loved it, and she just loved riding it around the block (always on the sidewalk, of course) imagining the wind blowing her hair back, which never really happened because her hair was thick and kinky, and it pretty much moved as a solid mass if it did move at all. She'd seen beautiful ladies throw their heads back and seen the wind caress their hair. She loved that word – caress - and she wanted that kind of hair.

She rode around the block, singing *round and round, round and round, the wheels on the bike go round and round,* dreaming of her hair long and straight, maybe pink, to match her bike, and she barely missed a pile of dog poop, and then a car drove by, and a man yelled out the window "I wish that banana seat was my face."

The little girl speeded up her pedaling, go-go-go, *round and round,* like she had to pedal-fast and away from what the man said. But his words were already out, and they were meant for her and her beautiful bike, but no - she wasn't sure about – no, he didn't say he liked her bike or her banana seat, he said he wanted his face to be the banana seat.

She thought about the part of her that rested on the seat - her pretty part - the part she wiped after using the toilet or when she bathed.

She pedaled faster, *round and round, round and round*. She was sure this had to do with her pretty part – but why? and she covered it like Mommy taught her, but somehow, it was obvious to that man.

It was like he saw it.

She felt ashamed; she'd done something wrong.

She pedaled faster. *Round and round, round and round.* She couldn't wait to get home.

She threw down her bike on the sidewalk in front of the house and ran inside. The door was unlocked, and she rushed in and locked it behind her and looked out the window. Her bike lay sad and forgotten on the sidewalk. She wanted to go out and walk it gently around to the driveway and into the garage, but she was afraid that the man would return.

"Mommy!" the little girl called.

"Honeybun!" her mommy called back.

The little girl ran to her mommy and hugged herself to Mommy's thighs.

Mommy laughed. "How was your bike ride?"

"Good," the girl croaked into the space between her Mommy's legs.

"You put your bike away?"

"No," the girl said, resting her cheek against her mommy's thigh.

"Go, put your bike away, Honeybun. You have to take care of your bike. Good girl."

"Yes, Mommy." She wanted to be a good girl, but she was sure that she'd done something wrong.

She wanted to be a good girl, but she didn't want to put her bike away. She didn't want to open the front door and go outside, even though she loved her bike, her beautiful pink bike, and she'd been thinking about calling it Calypso, she loved that word– calypso – but if she hadn't been riding her bike, the man never would have yelled, "I wish my face was your banana seat."

So, it was her bike, her beautiful pink bike; and it wasn't her! and it wasn't her pretty part that the man wanted! And she hoped and prayed that when she got to the door, that when she opened the front door and went outside, that her bike, her beautiful pink bike, would be gone.

Jane Hertenstein

Keep Moving

She knew about being faithful; she knew about loyalty. She was a Hennenbacher for crying out loud. Stand by your man was the family motto. Margery credited it to her Christian upbringing. No one in her family had ever gotten divorced. They either died or went crazy first.

Perhaps it was the Hennenbacher in her, a name so long and unusual no wonder she and her siblings closed ranks.

Whenever she projected herself into the future, she could only imagine her and Joe as empty-nesters, one day retiring, visiting grandchildren, taking that planned trip to the Holy Land. Outside of her marriage and family, she didn't really have a life.

Margery was an assistant to the administrator at a non-profit where she was in charge of scheduling and general office paperwork. Also, unofficially, she served as the resident chaplain, a listening ear, someone who handed out the tissues and kept candy in a bowl on her desk. She never once thought that one day it might be she who would need a shoulder to cry on.

"He's a shit!" Margery's son didn't mince words. He was off at college and way too busy for his parent's drama. "Dad has a girlfriend," Bryce continued. She knew he didn't intend to hurt her; he was just stating the obvious.

Yet Margery didn't want to believe that just because her husband had taken up with a woman he'd met on a sales call that things were over between them. They had a shared history, thirty years under their expanding middle-aged belt. You just can't sweep all that under the rug.

Besides, how does one start over? It wasn't just an existential musing, but a real question. She sought the advice of a lawyer, an old family friend. She didn't want to start carving up alliances, but she needed an expert.

"He's a shit!" Rich said.

Margery sat with her hands in her lap. The words were beginning to sink in. Still, there must be a way to rescue a sinking ship, to resurrect this failed relationship. As a child, growing up, she'd read the column "Can this Marriage Be Saved" in her mother's Ladies Home Journal. There was hope for even the most entangled and troubled marriage. If only the woman would bend, wash a few shirts, and the husband perform

his manly duties, restore world order, etc. She was a bit vague on the specifics.

Even her pastor at church, after she'd scheduled an appointment to meet him in his study at the parsonage, said it was time to face facts. "He's not coming back."

By making lists, she got through the days and weeks after Joe left her.

"You have to get out!" Her son encouraged her.

Margery didn't know what he meant. She got out every day, on her bicycle, three times sometimes on the weekend. As with everything else in her life, she was faithful in exercising. Neither rain nor sleet nor snow (only the occasional migraine) kept her from going out on her bicycle, riding the rail-to-trail paths that crisscrossed the suburbs where they (she) lived. Margery strapped on her helmet and tucked her jeans into the cuff of her crew socks and pushed off down the driveway. She loved to feel the air brush over the hair on her arms, to see only what was directly in front of her. For that moment in time she only needed to find her way out and back, remember how to get home.

One Friday night she went out and didn't pull back into the driveway until way past dark. Biking along the randomly lit bike trail reminded her of the Christmas she received a purple bike assembled the night before by her father (he never let her forget that he had cut his hand between the thumb and forefinger when a screwdriver slipped.) She immediately wanted to sit on it and pedal, but Dad was busy recovering on the couch, so it was her mother who bundled up and went outside and taught her how to ride. Margery can still recall her mother running alongside her yelling "Steer, keep moving!" It wasn't long before young Margery was riding well beyond the driveway and sidewalk of her neighborhood. One time she crossed the highway and toodled around an apartment complex before the sky dimmed and street lights came on; she returned home way past dinnertime.

In the darkness Margery now pedaled toward the arc thrown off by fancy lamp posts recently installed along the bike path. She cycled from one circle of gnat-filled light to the next before winding up in the suburb north of her own. She turned around and did the same thing in reverse, guided by a distant glimmer. I will get through this, she told herself. "Just keep moving."

She locked her bicycle up in front of the Olive Garden. Rich, her lawyer, had given her the name of someone, a friend. "You need to meet this guy."

"I'm not ready," Margery tried to explain.

Rich, confused, backtracked. "He's a financial consultant. He will help you to separate your assets and set up your own account."

Margery thought that's what she was paying Rich to do. The whole thing was overwhelming. Couldn't it be simpler? Why did everything have to be like signing with a cable company? All the fine print, terms and conditions, and loopholes. But if it was easy then more people would be divorced. She stopped before going into the restaurant—*Why do people stay together?*

Besides the obvious: she'd stayed married to Joe because of the kids. But, one by one, they left home, seeking their own way in a new, adult world of cellphone contracts, apartment leases, and student debt. They didn't need her and Joe to be married anymore. In fact, her daughter had told her to put a profile up at one of those online dating sites. "Swipe right if interested or left if for no." The thought freaked Margery out. Is this how they do it these days? The idea that Sasha arranged to meet virtual strangers with the flick of her finger was frightening. "No thanks," Margery told her.

Yet here she was at the Olive Garden, perusing bread bowl options with a man she had never met before. Rich, her lawyer, after the initial confusion, explained that it wasn't a blind date, but a working lunch that he was setting up for her with Alfonso. How does this work, she thought, or might have said out loud.

Alfonso leaned over the top of his menu. "You get salad with the soup."

"I mean it's weird." Margery stuttered trying to explain.

Alf gave her a knowing smile. "It's completely redundant. Breadsticks and a bread bowl."

His comment warmed her heart. He seemed to have a sense of humor. She began to worry. Any man who used the word redundant on a first date . . . then she panicked. This isn't a date! Just a meeting–with food. Her heart twisted sideways. Did she or did she not want a first date? Could she, in fact, be ready? "Well, I, for one, am okay with breadsticks and a bread bowl. And, I'll probably order the tiramisu."

"I see you came on your bike."

Margery nodded. Would he think she didn't know how to drive? Might be a drunk and lost her license? Perhaps she should have thought this whole thing out. Except that it wasn't a date and she was technically still married to Joe.

After placing their order Alfonso continued with small talk. Distractedly, Margery wondered if she ought to consult him. “I’m thinking of signing up for a bike tour of Vermont?” she interjected.

Alfonso looked at her as if analyzing a column of numbers. He had a Van Gogh goatee that might have been annoying if he hadn’t been so handsome. And, were his eyes green or amber? That was the problem with hazel. The more you stare into them the more faceted they become. And when he moved his lips to speak, she caught a glimpse of strong teeth. Not wobbly wavers, tea-stained and flecked with tobacco or poppy seeds. Seedless.

She blustered forward. “It’s through a reputable company and is all-inclusive. I’m just worried.”

“I think it sounds like an excellent idea. I’ve seen offers in magazines and often dreamed of jumping out of life.” He sounded envious. “So what’s the problem?”

“I’m wondering about money. Do you think it’s too much?”

“Not in the least.” His voice was pitched, excited. “All your meals and accommodations are taken care of. You’ll have a guide to help with navigation and minor bike maintenance. How many miles a day?”

“The booklet said about 30 – 45 with some hills.” Margery bit her lip. “That’s why I’ve been riding more lately, to get in shape.

“Well, you have no problems there.” He stopped and rephrased. “I mean you look fine.” Again he paused. “I can look at your figure, figures,” he corrected himself. They both laughed. Soon their food arrived.

Often Margery traveled back in time in her mind to her mother, so mousy, so nondescript. Margery remembered: She had no life of her own. She was what they called a homemaker. With five kids there was very little time for introspection, privacy, opinions. Mom just was. In the background, at basketball games cheering, a Scout leader, Sunday School teacher, homework helper.

Margery knew she should be appreciative, but at the time it was something she scribbled about in her diary. It was through journaling that she could be a bit subversive, throw off the mantle of familial loyalty and reveal her true feelings. If she didn’t want to end up being just like her mother, then why did she follow in her footsteps? Marrying young, not finishing college, having three kids all in a row? Putting her life on hold. Until now.

Again, she attributed it to DNA, the Hennenbacher name, stodgy blood. She was born this way.

Before saying goodbye in the parking lot, hours later, Alfonso picked up as if he'd just left off. "You know maybe I will sign up too. Life is short and I'm not getting any younger." Margery reckoned he was her age, perhaps a year or two difference. "My wife passed away and, anyway." Margery touched his elbow, an expression of sympathy, with the tips of her fingers. "It'd be fun. Something I've always wanted to do." She promised to email him the cycle tour information.

She'd been with Joe through thick and thin, good times and bad. Isn't that what their vows required? Isn't that what partners do? Except it had been a bit one-sided.

When Joe had back surgery, she nursed him through weeks of rehabilitation, practically carrying him to the toilet, hoisting him up with his arms draped over her shoulder, walking him the few steps, waiting, cleaning him up, and helping him back to the day bed she'd fixed up in the living room. For years she'd been responsible for the laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, and kid watching. Even during her own health scare—the doctors thought they'd found something in one of her breasts and took a sample. (Thankfully it came back negative for cancer.)—she called him at work and his secretary said she'd give him a message. He wasn't to be disturbed.

Birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas gifts and cards were her domain. Anything that ever came from the two of them happened because she remembered and followed through. Joe's idea of a celebration was a meal at Outback Steakhouse. He loved their Bloomin' Onion. It's why she ended up sleeping on the couch some nights.

Which was another thing: Their love life was limp. Even before he left her, they'd grown cold toward each other. It took a coordinated effort to end up in bed together, at the same time. Usually he fell asleep soon after hanging up his coat from work. Reawakened to eat dinner and watch late-night TV.

Meanwhile Margery rode her bike.

She remembered her father, perhaps the same Christmas as the bike, where he let the kids in on a trick he planned to play on Mom. She'd asked for a new pocketbook and Dad simply took a purse from the back of their closet, wrapped it up, and presented it to her. "Re-gifting." He said and chuckled. Except it wasn't a gift, or funny. Yet, Margery and her siblings laughed dutifully when she opened it and tried not to recognize what she already owned. In retrospect, Margery should have given her credit for playing along, for making the holidays special despite all the work, the extra shopping, cooking, and baking. For all the

nameless, unnamed acts that made them *them*. That gave her and her brothers and sisters a sense of belonging and stability. An identity, however skewed. She never acknowledged all her mother had sacrificed in the name of dogged faithfulness to family.

And now it was too late. All she had now was memories and regrets. She kept circling back to the idea of loyalty and what it meant. There were times when it felt like a three-ply cord holding things together, while at other times it was a heavy chain binding her to a worthless cause.

Fourteen days until the proposed tour in Vermont. Margery was out hoping to buy bike shorts at the REI garage sale when her phone rang. It was Joe. At the moment she was contemplating what made a white chocolate-pomegranate CLIF bar different from a chocolate-cherry off-brand protein bar. Before she could say hey, he started. "I've made a colossal mistake." For a second she thought this was about nutrition, getting the right balance.

He proceeded to tell her that Bunny had left him, that his blood pressure was through the roof, that what he thought he'd wanted now wasn't. She was confused, shifting the phone between her ear and shoulder.

He'd made a huge mess of his life. Would she take him back? Margery weighed the two bars, one in each hand. There was no telling which would be right.

She and Alf had been taking training rides together, strapping the bikes onto his car and heading out to Michigan and Wisconsin on the weekends. It had started innocently—first Starbucks after a ride, then lunch. Then one evening because they were always hungry after a ride they bought meat at the market and grilled. Joe, as it turned out, hadn't wanted the backyard BBQ when they split. This phone call was coming at a very awkward time.

She loaded two of every bar on the shelf into her basket. "Joe, I just don't know. Now is not a good time. I thought you signed a lease."

"It was in her name." Bunny! What a name! She sounded like a hooker, but Margery tried not to judge. Either way, he couldn't stay with her. What he needed was someone to help him sort things out, a financial analyst, but not hers. Alfonso was already staying over two nights a week.

It had just sort of happened.

Then there was this: She wanted it to happen.

She was singing in the shower (Joe hated her voice; told her she sounded like a cat on fire) when, imagine her surprise!, Alf joined her.

Margery found that she was comfortable with Alfonso, something that seemed remarkable. After thirty-some odd years with Joe, she'd never gotten over a feeling of impending doom. It was almost impossible to relax around him. But with Alf she could talk for hours. They did a wine crawl and a run for charity together. All of this leading up to the bicycle tour, and the shared shower.

Which was why Joe couldn't come home. She'd moved on.

"And I've been falling."

"Falling?"

"Yeah, the doc thinks I might have MS."

Margery asked if she could call him back. They were bringing out new stock, and she needed time to think.

As Margery sat on the couch, making lists having to do with her upcoming trip, her mind shifted back to her phone call with Joe earlier that day. She put down her pen and tapped her finger against her lips in a gesture of pensiveness. Was this what they called Karma? A cosmic joke? A kind of retribution.

She'd just started to branch out. First it was the tattoo. A mother/daughter thing. Sasha had asked Margery to come along with her to the tattoo parlor. "Moral Support," she said. But, once there, Margery loved the butterfly on Sasha's PSIS—or above the crack, as the artist joked, her rear waistline. Margery dared herself and finally gave in to a smaller version on her wrist. The butterfly accentuated her thin bone structure she thought as well as representing new life. That's what she told Alf, at least.

Things were beginning to feel better, easier. A routine was setting in where she spent time with Alf, but also could withdraw and recharge on her own. She had rekindled her passion for poetry. First she visited her local bookstore run by a feminist slash lesbian slash socialist, a place she had never frequented before, but now discovered that she loved. The owner would recognize Margery and offer titles or follow-up books. There was an old sofa in the back where she could curl up with a coffee from the bar and a volume. One day the owner invited Margery to a reading, asking if she might want to contribute something of her own.

"Oh, no," Margery protested, but then thought she did have some material, ramblings in her old journals, plus some fresh musings. She invited Sasha and Alf to the reading, but on the night of the reading he begged off.

She read/performed a piece based upon cycling, trying to incorporate the rhythm and cadence typical of her nighttime rides, invoking the gypsy spirit she felt alone under the street lights.

Indeed, when she finished, she was out of breath. The crowd hushed, Margery waited in dread for a half-second before her fellow sisters (plus Sasha!) broke out into applause. She felt like a kindergartner at a school play, parents clapping—her father never showed up and it was only her mother slipping into the back row late, beaming. Margery had done the Hennenbachers proud.

Which led her back to Joe—what was she supposed to do? Here he was throwing her a lifeline, a way to recover the marriage. Start over.

Except she didn't want to.

Her breath came in staggered puffs; she was hyperventilating. Margery threw off the daytimer in her lap and ran to the bathroom and retched.

She tried calling Alfonso, but he didn't pick up. Next she dialed Rich. At the moment she didn't want to bring in the kids—especially as the news wasn't hers to tell in regards to the diagnosis.

If there was a time to be faithful and loyal it was now. She had taken an oath, a vow. "In sickness and in health." Here was the test of her commitment. Through good times and bad. That was what her mother had done after her father had fallen ill. So much so, that her own health was ruined. And, hadn't Margery already proven herself after Joe's surgery?

Yet, within months of getting back on his feet, Joe had taken up with Bunny.

Rich picked up the line, and after explaining her dilemma, Margery waited, for an answer. Perhaps this might have been something better left to her pastor—only she hadn't been back to church in months.

"Obviously, it is up to you, but you are under no obligation."

Duty-bound. Nose to the grindstone. It occurred to her that it wasn't about love.

Outside her window the western sky had turned gold, casting huge God-rays out across the horizon before subsiding into mauve and poppy-orange.

Before she let Rich go, she wanted to tell him about the upcoming trip, with Alfonso, and thank him for introducing them. The line was quiet for a minute. Finally Rich coughed as if to acknowledge her. "That wasn't really my intention."

"Nevertheless," she went on, "it's been good for me. It's as if I'm finding out who I am."

Rich coughed again, awkwardly. "Did he tell you about his wife?"

"Yes, that she passed away."

A long pause. "She's very much alive."

Fidgeting birds were beginning to bed down, yet she could still hear twitters, peeps from the wild berry thicket. Fireflies bleeped on and off as she swirled past. Out on her bike, the late summer evening humidity felt cool on her skin.

All those years of not quitting, of doing the right thing bore down on her. Maybe it was time to stop. She braked.

Suddenly everything was quiet, except for her racing heart.

There was so much she wanted, out there beyond her grasp; she strained forward, remembering that frosty morning, her mother prodding her to Keep Moving. Slowly she started up again. Over and over, Margery turned the pedals, flying down the black asphalt path as if riding into a tunnel. She imagined herself years into the future, riding back lanes, camping beside streams, eating at unfamiliar cafes. For a split-second in the darkness she was lost, before emerging into a kind of quasi world, streaming toward the soft wooly light. Tonight there would be no turning back.

Emma Jarman

Anywhere But Here

His penis is small. His entire body is small. Sharp, like the prickly white popcorn ceiling over his shoulder. His thin arms quiver under his own meager bodyweight as he shoves it arrhythmically into yours. Your attention drifts from his slightness to the ceiling over his acne-smattered shoulder to a pair of unremarkable brown slacks and navy polo shirt – also small – folded in a pile next to an unused coffee maker – also small.

Miniature. Compact. Trivial.

Silently brainstorming synonyms for "small," your hands move tepidly down his back, searching for an area absent of protruding bone, fleshy enough to sink your fingernails into. You think he might like that. Quickly though, they rest in defeat on the arc of his spine. His vertebrae shift beneath your palms, ribs grating yours like laundry down a washboard. You search for the late morning sky, cold and grey, through the glowing crack between an old, weary radiator and heavily drawn curtains. Wisps of icy air leak through, teasing you with elsewhereness.

Mustang Island, Phoenix, warm spots on midmorning carpets.

Most Tuesdays, you'd be anywhere but here. But this man asked to meet you today, for two hundred dollars, at eleven o'clock at the Crowne Plaza. You stepped through the back door of a once grand hotel exactly on time. Counting the sconces down the shadowy hall you thought little of turning around or finding a way back, even less of other ways to earn two hundred dollars. You twisted your shirt in a knot at your hip, pushed your straightened hair back and thought mostly of being tired, as you often do. When your mother's voice found its way in, you cleared your throat, gathered it up and smashed it down, as you often do.

The lock arm from inside his room jutted into the otherwise vacant hall, propping the door in welcome. You pushed inside and a diminutive man in his forties sat nervously on the bed. He looked like every man you never noticed. His pointed features read Eastern Europe. Hooded, blue-grey eyes, deeply set, bruised-looking. Prominent, beak-like nose. Thin, freshly licked lips. Adult male blonde, *rare*. The face of a man with a grandmother in a babushka making pierogi. A man who hated pierogi, but swallowed small bites smeared with runny sour cream anyway. He looked comically vulnerable, fully dressed on the edge of the bed, tapping his toes inside small, white socks.

Sad, pathetic, dinky.

Unbelievable in his attempts to appear self-assured, he moved toward you with the confidence of a man who's never had any. Careful. Diffident, like a gun-shy hunter facing his first buck, certain if he moved too quickly, you'd spook and run. He reached for your hand, socketed eyes pleading you to join him on the comforter. You smiled at the melancholy realization that the bed was far larger than either of you – separately or together – would need.

He spoke first. He's done this before. The last girl was lovely and kind, but graduated and moved on. His eyes moistened when he told you this. You told him, in truth, you'd never done this before. You told him, in truth, you were looking for an agreement with a man to care for, in exchange for care from him. You didn't say *sex for money*. You said compatibility was important – a lie. That it wasn't just about money – another. You said you were happy to have found him, to meet him, to be here.

Lie, lie, lie.

He didn't undress you without asking. He didn't undress you at all. He asked to watch. You noticed his erection pressing from behind his slacks, barely tenting the thin fabric. When he unzipped, unbuttoned and released it, it bounced a few times before settling, fully extended, barely a thumb from a short thatch of pin-straight, blonde pubic hair. He regarded it proudly.

He folded his clothes and placed them by the coffee maker, opened a condom and rolled it over his mingy arousal. Climbing on top of you, he began awkwardly maneuvering through a calculated series of unfamiliar positions – you suspect he researched them online, compiled a spreadsheet – spending little time in each.

He's sweating profusely. Beads of brackish perspiration roll off his beak nose onto your cheek and shoulder, coating you in effort. You turn your face from the pitiful, sweat-slicked man writhing on top of you toward the clean, cold strip of light beneath the window.

Costa Rica, Coastal Carolina, coasting down the freeway.

His orgasm is sudden, less a powerful expression of virile masculinity, more a feeble epileptic episode. He sounds like an injured bunny crying for its rabbit mother. The shifting of his vertebrae beneath your palm slows to a stop and he rolls to his back beside you, joining your inspection of the popcorn ceiling. He asks if you liked it. You'd have liked if he'd turned on the TV. You mention opening the window next time, that you like to look at the sky, imagine other places, go

somewhere without leaving, be anywhere you want and nowhere you don't. He says he likes to keep the outside out. He asks if you'd like to shower first. You decline.

As you prepare to leave, he hands you ten, crisp twenty-dollar bills in a paper envelope with the name you gave him printed neatly on its front. You slip it into your pocket and thank him.

You leave the small man with the small penis in the small room, gingerly at first, as if you move too quickly, he'll make chase. The soft *click* of the door behind you feels decibels too loud, unsettling the silence of the vacant hallway. With distance comes speed, which brings more speed, faster, you're sprinting, feet pounding the dusty carpet, arms pumping in rhythm toward the back entrance from which you came. Sweat rolls down your temple and you're not sure if it's his or yours but the roar of panting effort thundering between your ears is all your own. The envelope falls from your pocket, and you pause for a fraction of a second to snatch it up before continuing your tear. Your shirt, your hair, your two hundred dollars billow in the wind of your haste as you propel toward the awninged sidewalk, eyes streaming and fixated on the cold, grey sky.

Adele Kenny

Anything with Wings

The day I sold our family house, I
locked the door and never went back.
Never curious to see what the new owner
would do with the only home of my
childhood, I have no idea what

happened to it, no idea if anything was
left in some dark corner or on the hidden
staircase closed off in the emptiness
of my mother's closet. That life, as
I knew it, was gone long before

I let it go—a stippled history of secrets
and sadness. But more than just a
cinderblock sack of cracked walls
and high ceilings, it was where I began
a journey I didn't know I was taking.

Most of my dreams would never come
true but, back then, I believed in anything
with wings—angels, birds with feathers that
shone in the sun, and moths that fluttered
dust on my hands when I touched them.

In the woods across the street, my cousin
Eddie found a space where the stars' light
dropped through darkness and traced our
faces—a quarter moon cloud-ribbed high
above the trees. We didn't know how time

would change us or how we might remain
the same, the essence of us still there,
phantoms of the old house, apparitions
in whatever is left of the forest,
forever wandering the lost road home.

Adele Kenny

Before the Moon

Her's is the half world of a closed room
(striped curtains, scratched floorboards)
—something always missing, things
where they're not supposed to be. And now
summer—everything small against a wall

of heat—pine trees stooped at the garden's
edge. In this heat and this light (this trick
of light), finches fly from their unlikely nest
in the wreath above her door; dust burns
into breath. She doesn't know what to make

of herself, of anything broken. In these hot,
split days (stuck between spring and autumn),
she thinks about all that she can't hold,
what she can't keep—and how much more
she will have to let go. She thinks of the

moon (how, again and again, it thins and
fades), and she wonders how many ages
are left before it takes its last full turn
and rolls out of orbit, gone forever,
owing the world absolutely nothing.

Gertrude Evelyn Lampart

A Way

As a college student I didn't read the Carlos Castaneda books my friends were reading. Or the Ouspensky books about Gurdjieff and his work. Or deal with the Tarot Cards. I wouldn't have my horoscope read, or share my astrological sign. It was against my religion - one that I held onto with flimsy threads. A religion that I practiced, but loosely, and as it suited me. I was sentimental about the holidays and their seasons. I believed in *tzedakah*, charity. I tried to be honest. But secretly I broke the Sabbath with the cigarettes I smoked. I tore toilet paper and turned lights on and off. And I had sex. Three times.

My friends quoted from "Be Here Now" by the Jewish fellow Ram Dass. But I was obsessed with Dave. He was the reason I couldn't concentrate on any books that didn't have Cliff Notes, or enjoy the pleasure of free love. Dave was charismatic, but uncouth, symbolically orthodox with a yarmulke on his head and a kosher food habit, who rode a motorcycle and was cruel enough to remind me of my father.

My lapsed yeshiva student friends were experimenting and going with the flow of the times. I held back out of fear and cowardice. I had revealed that I was sexually taken advantage of as a girl.

And my friends understood. They didn't disturb the religious bridge I teetered on. But they were dismayed with my obsession of a twenty-year-old boy with long black hair under the yarmulke, and a long face like a wild horse let loose. He consumed me and he tolerated me when I pursued him and allowed me to type his term papers. I was reenacting the drama of having a sometimes kind and too often cruel father. My knowing was a bitter fruit.

I wasn't available to participate in the replacement therapies of the new age philosophies. Or LSD. Or mescaline. Even grass. I still lived in my parents' home, where Dave would appear without notice to take me for a fast ride on his bike. I clutched his middle, and as we leaned dangerously close to the ground as he took the turns, I was happy and hopeful.

When I joined my friends to eat out, I sat and drank coffee. Or ate tuna fish sandwiches, to keep a modicum of kosher. We were at our regular booth in *Sugar Bowl*, the off-campus coffee shop, four of us were squeezed in tight. Fran, Vivian, and Tehila were my friends. Fran and Tehila confided that they had slept with Dave. Vivian lit a cigarette. She

said she wouldn't let him touch her. Fran and Tehila didn't want to hurt me - it was a test. I didn't ask for who? I kept my three times sex secret to myself. He penetrated me. There was nothing to say. Seeing Dave, hearing from Dave, or even about him, was the drug I craved.

"Jerica, I want you to see a psychiatrist," Vivian said, and lit a cigarette.

"I have a class to go to."

I sat closest to the window and was hemmed in by Tehila. I couldn't get up.

"Really, Jerica?" It was going to be a struggle.

"Dave is a shit," Fran said. I knew that. My coffee was cold. I wanted to pee.

"You have to do something to help yourself," Tehila said quietly. "You're living on cigarettes and coffee. Too kosher, Jerica."

I told them that I knew.

"We know you know," Tehila said.

I wanted to tell them that I was trapped. They were making a lot of noise.

"He'd leave you in the gutter, and you'd be lucky if he didn't step on you if it was a question of you or dope," Vivian said. I was the dope. Even my mother cautioned me not to be a *shmateh*, a rag.

I have to pee. I tried to tell my friends, but my voice didn't carry.

Fran took a turn. She was the most capable of us all, the most American. Fran didn't carry the religious baggage Tehila and I did. She drove a green convertible. Her father was generous and gentle. She was a film student, and could imagine contradictory possibilities. She almost understood my suffering.

"Here. You look terrible, Jerica. You've got to get some rest. And eat." Fran reached into her shoulder bag, took out a small silver case, and extracted two pills. "This is all I'm going to give you."

They were Quaaludes. I was tempted. I stared at the pills. I was drinking vodka with orange juice at night from my father's liquor cabinet to help me fall asleep. I tried to wake up in the morning and make my class in Romantic Poetry on time. I hated walking in late, with a hangover, and wearing sunglasses. I hated romantic poetry. I hated them all: Fran, Vivian, and Tehila.

Somewhere a radio was playing the song that followed me that year:

Those were the days my friend
We thought they'd never end

We'd sing and dance forever and a day

The music was mournful. So Jewish. I wanted to cry. I wanted the music to stop.

"Jerica, are you listening?" Fran's voice. She was angry.

"I got these from Dave. He's a pill popper, Jerica. Not only does he drop acid, but he's started shooting up. He screws teeny boppers. He doesn't deserve an ounce of you." Her voice rose and blocked the radio playing.

"Look! Is this what you want?"

I shook my head. The Quaaludes were brown as mud. A dirty color. Fran shut her fist tight.

"Wake up. Wake up." Fran wrote the name of her psychiatrist on a napkin, and left for a class in psychology. Vivian and Tehila were going for ice cream, and was I coming. I stayed behind and overheard talk in the next booth was about Eastern philosophies, the Peace Corps, Jungian mandalas, how expensive text books were, and throwing the I Ching. I listened as the outsider. I wanted to join them. They looked wiser - like graduate students. The group rose as one, and left behind a book. I was cutting my Health Ed class so I leaned over to read the title. *Tao Te Ching.* By Lao-Tzu. A book I had never heard of. I began to read. And read some more. The passages were mystical – and at the same time reassuringly practical.

Having but not possessing
Acting but not expecting
The soft overcomes the hard
Gentle overcomes the rigid

The paradoxes were captivating. As I read and turned the pages, I felt sweeping optimism. The sentiments clarified my nature as being a part of, and yet being apart. Belonging, and not belonging. The nature of all living things. It was possible that I was waiting to do the right thing in my life.

Nothing to be done
And it would all be done

The simplicity of the stark observations about nature was a relief. A way to live. A formula that was no formula. I finished my coffee and shook my head from ear to ear to clear the spiderwebs. With my empty cup and the book, I went up to pay Andreas, our counterman, who had watched over generations of students as if from Mt. Olympus. I whispered to Andreas that I found this book and that it didn't belong to me. He accepted the book.

"You're a good girl," Andreas said, and switched on the radio that he kept near the cash register. I heard Joan Baez begin to sing, a lilt to her voice, and I left *Sugar Bowl* for the campus library to research the romantic poets for a paper that was overdue.

In my next Health Ed class the images of women giving birth were splashed across a screen for the class to study. I looked away. I wasn't prepared. I was frightened. The women participated with stories and anecdotes. They were lively; I sat in the back when I went to class. Often I cut. The curriculum had nothing to do with me. I wasn't going to get married. I wouldn't have children. I wasn't like the other young women. I was a girl with an obsession.

"Jerica Blum." The woman at the head of the classroom called on me.

Miss Alexander, who wore the shirtwaist dresses I wore as a twelve-year-old, looked like a spinster: never married, and would never marry.

"Miss Blum, what is one of the most critical problems a woman can face in our country?"

I thought that we had an implicit understanding. Miss Alexander could see I was damaged, and would leave me alone. Anyone could see. I didn't belong in a Health Ed class. I would slink out of the class with shame. I wasn't healthy.

"Jerica," Miss Alexander said. I had to look up. Her voice was soft.

"I don't know."

I was a love starved twenty-year-old who had never dated.

"Whether you the woman," and Miss Alexander looked around twenty odd young women and landed on me again, "are sexually active or not."

"Abortion," the woman seated at my left said. "Unwanted pregnancy."

There were more voices. First murmurs. Then strident voices. *Getting an abortion. Coat hangers. Bleach. Butchers. Hemorrhaging. Dying.*

In 1971 abortion was illegal. I was twenty-one with three disappointing sex episodes, and a recent fourth I didn't want to think about. Birth control was the next chapter in our textbook, and our final paper was on birth control. The pill. The diaphragm. Abstinence. Rape. The history of birth control, or lack of. And I had never used birth control.

I asked him. I called Dave on a Friday afternoon before *Shabbos* because he would be home. As I had to be home when my mother lit the candles and prayed for the welfare and peace of our family.

Dave's mother answered the phone.

Who was I?

"Jerica. My name is Jerica Blum. I'm one of Dave's friends." It was true. He was not my friend. I was his friend.

His mother called him to the phone.

"What would you do if I had a baby?" I asked.

"Your problem."

I hung up on Dave. He called back. I didn't pick up. Again. My mother took the call. It was over. I told my mother. No more. There was no more. I had read Dreiser's "An American Tragedy." A young woman. Pregnant. A young man. In a boat. And she drowns. Maybe that was why the light Miss Alexander was shining on me in our once-a-week class finally found reflection. I breathed again. And again. Letting go was a cleansing experience. I was serene. Calm, relaxed, alive. And I wasn't pregnant.

That Sunday morning I felt the urge to use my fingers and hands to create something. I wasn't going to be on the phone with Dave bragging about the girls who adored him. Or spend hours typing his papers, and correcting his mistakes. I looked for and found the needlepoint I had buried in a drawer to work on "some day" in my future. I began to needle and enjoyed the control I had filling in the minuscule spaces on the canvas with the image of a windmill. It was real, and I didn't have to hide. It was an interim project for an interim period. I knew good days were ahead without having my horoscope read.

Inspired, I could sit and be with myself. My hands were engaged and my mind healed, stitch by tiny stitch. No one taught me how. I figured it out. A windmill was my canvas because my grandfather's family had windmills in Poland and I romanticized him - not Yeats or Byron or Shelley.

I was safe with my needle and thread. It was honorable work. Matching space by space, running the needle through emptiness, and then picking it up again coming through on the other side. My fingers didn't want to stop stitching and building the reliable windmill under a florescent blue sky. I stashed the needlepoint in my tote bag and took it with me everywhere. Women came over when they saw me sewing and told me about the needle points they began and never finished. Or had never even begun.

Francesca Leader

Irrelevance

Never mind the stories you saved,
frail as butterflies,
in a drawer—

They're not about you.

What did you ever do?
Even once?

A grey-and-white woman
beside a black-and-white photograph.

Now, you are less than who you are,
bone mass lighter,

the substance of the bleached cross
above the aged-white bedspread
that needs no washing,

for women this sterile have
powder for sweat.

On hope, you fattened as a child,
as a pregnant wife.

From then on, you lived
only to suck away the luster
of your own flesh.

And soon, teeth collapsed
in the casket shell,
you will lack a beak, or so much as a nail,
to peck your way free.

Leslie Li

Shirley in The Bardo

Juan had begun having abdominal pains—slight ones—at a time when he was drinking heavily. Believing that his life was less chaotic, now that he'd finally sold his restaurant and returned to teaching, Shirley looked forward to more sobriety and more leisure time together. It was only when he saw that his stools were black that he began to take his "indigestion" seriously.

His physicians at Memorial Sloan Kettering told him that it wasn't an option to surgically remove the part of his stomach that was cancerous. There was, however, a new clinical trial that involved chemotherapy: delivering a drug cocktail in titrated doses via a catheter implanted subcutaneously and inserted into a large vein in one of his thighs. No need for frequent visits to the hospital for stronger doses of chemo and its more debilitating side effects. Juan couldn't sign up fast enough. A few days after the catheter was inserted and he received his first dose of chemo, Juan's limb swelled to twice its normal size. His body was rejecting the device. The catheter was removed.

Juan's physical suffering was amplified by his pride: the fear that people would find out that he had advanced cancer. People like his tennis buddies at the courts on the Lower East Side. People like Lethy, the Jamaican woman who cleaned his apartment and cooked his meals, whom he then let go. Like Lei-shi, his Chinese teacher's aide for the GED class he taught at Manhattan Community College, whom he retained. Shirley was the only person who knew about his condition. He was adamant that she remain the only one.

She began having accidents, or rather to be the cause of them. His doctors had given Juan a prescription for morphine. She was already in bed when he phoned her late one night and told her to take a taxi. She had to refill his prescription immediately, before the pharmacy near him closed. She dressed hurriedly, raced outside, and hailed a cab. She feared that the pharmacy would close before she arrived, and she had to go to Juan's apartment to get the prescription first. If this was a race, her heartbeat was winning.

The taxi pulled up at the curb in front of his building. Shirley opened the door and felt a jolt. She heard a crash. The cabbie cursed and spun around in the front seat. Outside, a young man lay writhing on the curb, grabbing one wrist with his other hand. He was grimacing, his eyes

squeezed shut in pain. The bicycle he'd been riding lay next to him, half on the sidewalk, half in the street, its back wheel still spinning, the bag of groceries still held in place with a bungee cord. Shirley stopped breathing and stared at him while he struggled to his feet still holding his wrist.

"Are you all right?" she asked, hoping for a positive response, terrified that he'd broken his wrist when his bike slammed into the taxi door. Her terror quickly turned into righteous anger. It was his own fault that he'd injured himself; he saw clearly that the taxi had stopped and that a passenger was getting out. Besides, she had no time to lose and he was making her waste a precious amount of it. Juan was waiting for her with the prescription. The pharmacy was about to close. When she paid the taxi driver, she realized she hadn't even waited for the delivery man to answer her. Before escaping into Juan's building, she caught a glimpse of his face. The delivery *boy's* face. A boy not much older than her daughter. His eyebrows were pinched together in pain. He bent down to right his fallen bicycle which, unlike him, was unscathed and, hunched over the handle bars, he rode slowly away. He couldn't be *that* hurt, she told herself.

The pharmacy was still open and she was the sole customer. The look in the pharmacist's eyes said: *It's your fault the delivery boy was injured.* To her relief, she realized that she had misread them when he said, apprehensively, "This is for morphine."

"Yes."

"A very strong dose." When he looked up at her again, his apprehension had turned to distrust.

"How long will it take for you to fill it?"

"Are you in a great hurry?"

"No, I just wanted to know." She tried to sound blithe, but she felt uneasy, a sense of foreboding.

"Not long." He looked down at the prescription again, then up at her. "Is this for you?" His distrust had become suspicion.

"No. For a friend." It was the truth. Then why did she feel she was lying?

Her heart was still beating fast—too fast, considering she'd arrived in plenty of time before the pharmacy closed—and only abated when she left, morphine in hand.

Shirley finally phoned a friend, a physician.

"He WHAT?!"

It was the first time she'd ever mentioned Juan to him. She told him about Juan's diagnosis, the failed implant, the visits to Memorial

Sloan Kettering, her being on constant call, that the tumor wasn't shrinking fast enough, that Juan wanted his condition kept a secret.

"He doesn't want me to tell anyone that he has cancer."

"That's TERRIBLE!" her friend bellowed.

At first, she thought he meant Juan's illness. Then she changed her mind and thought he was referring to her broken promise to keep the secret to herself.

"That's TERRIBLE," her friend repeated no less vehemently, even more so, "that he should want you to bear that secret alone, to be the sole person looking after him. That is so selfish. There are social service agencies that can help take care of him. He has no right to ask that of you. You're going to get sick. You're going to have a breakdown."

Only then did she think that she might be bearing up against psychological and physical strains that were too much for her. At the same time, her friend's mere acknowledgment that they were more than she could handle relieved her of a good portion of both.

"There's the Visiting Nurses," he suggested. "There are several other health and social service agencies that can help. This is not your job. Don't you have enough to do?"

Did she? A single mother who worked full time and had a teenaged daughter. A single mother who worked full time and had a teenaged daughter and a widowed mother who counted on her, her only daughter. There were plenty of women who had much more than Shirley's 'enough to do.' Did they question their responsibilities, or fulfill them?

On her next visit, she found Juan in a brighter mood. One of his tennis buddies had phoned him to ask why they no longer saw him down at the Lower East Side courts. Apparently, breaking his silence about his cancer diagnosis did for Juan what it had done for Shirley. Not only did he receive his friend's sympathy, he also received advice about what he should eat. Soup. Chinese medicinal soups that his tennis buddy, who was Chinese, would bring him from Chinatown. This served as Juan's cue to reveal that he had a girlfriend who was also Chinese—news which prompted the man to regale Juan with a story:

There was once a Chinese emperor who had many concubines. He fell deeply in love with the most recent, the youngest, and the most beautiful among them. The Son of Heaven began spending many hours with her—more time than was seemly, and more time than he spent with his ministers and advisers who grew worried that he was neglecting the affairs of state. Try as they might to convince him that his supreme

position, which certain rivals were trying to usurp, was in potential danger, and that matters of state, which demanded his undivided attention, astute strategizing, and wise decision-making, were not receiving their due, they were unable to wrest the emperor from the concubine's side. Not only was he blinded by his love for her, to their appeals he'd also been rendered deaf and dumb. They decided that this woman who had stolen both the emperor's heart and his mind was a threat to both the Son of Heaven—certainly to his faculties—and to his realm. Finding an interlude when the concubine was alone, they paid her a visit and told her what she must do.

When the emperor learned of her death, he was grief-stricken. Never had he loved a woman as he had loved her, and all the more so after he read the note she left before taking the fatal poison. In it she declared her love for him. She explained that it was because of that love that she decided to take her life that was taking him away from his imperial duties. After a period of mourning requisite for a concubine, his ministers were pleased to see the Son of Heaven return to his duties as supreme ruler of the Middle Kingdom, sovereign of the Center of the World.

Having come to the end of the story, Juan looked at Shirley through eyes glazed with tears.

"Such a beautiful story, isn't it…"

She stopped nodding her head, which she'd been doing every now and then, a gesture made by Chinese people that Westerners often mistook as signifying agreement when it simply meant that they were listening. Actively listening. That they were paying close attention. Which Shirley was. She pressed her lips together, lightly.

"…that the concubine loved him so much that she sacrificed herself for his sake."

Why should a story about a woman dying for a man, dying *because* of a man, be considered beautiful instead of tragic and unjust? Especially when she was innocent of any wrongdoing? Why did the ministers intimate/insist that she kill herself? Why couldn't they just have banished her to the ends of the empire, the fate that befell Shirley's own grandfather's concubine as orchestrated by his second wife once she learned that he'd fathered a son with the girl? But death? And death by her own hand, of course, which otherwise would have had to be carried out the ministers' henchmen, an act which might have left traces of wrongdoing requiring appropriate punishment.

She'd heard such stories when she was younger and never given them a second thought. She'd even thought that the sacrifice of a woman's life for a man was indeed a beautiful act, that a woman's tragic end was romantic, and fitting. Madama Butterfly, for example. Or Olan, in *The Good Earth*, who doesn't take her own life in one fell swoop but lets it trickle it away in dribs and drabs on her faithless husband and her squabbling family. A good woman not only followed her man to the ends of the earth but did so barefoot—like the actress Jean Peters in red-face, who played a squaw to blue-eyed Burt Lancaster's Injun brave, when he threw away her moccasins and forced her to walk on stones and climb over boulders, skinning her shins and elbows, bloodying her hands and feet, yes, to deter her, but also to test if she was *worthy* of following him to the ends of the earth. It struck Shirley that all three examples that came to mind were marginalized women. Japanese. Chinese. Native American.

…that the concubine loved him so much that she sacrificed herself for his sake. Is that what Juan, consciously or unconsciously, wanted of her? If he had to die, why should she continue to live? Was she expected to commit a form of suttee?

She recalled her friend's warning words. *That is terrible. That is TERRIBLE that he should want you to bear that secret alone, to be the sole person looking after him. You're going to get sick. You're going to have a breakdown.*

Juan wiped the tears from his eyes. "My Chinese friend said I was lucky, so lucky, to have a Chinese girlfriend."

Shirley nodded her head and smiled. Both gestures expressed agreement in one case and comprehension in the other—not with Juan, but with her friend the physician.

She was having trouble sleeping and concentrating. She began losing her balance—her physical balance along with her mental and emotional equilibrium. She became accident prone. Not only opening taxi doors for delivery boys on bicycles to slam into, but falling on stairs—not *down* stairs but *up* stairs. Missing curbs while walking became commonplace. She broke a toe. She sprained an ankle. When a distant cousin wasn't inhabiting it, on weekends she escaped to his hermit hideaway in upstate New York. There she found solace in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. She would walk up Mole Hill, then down towards home. One day, when she finally set aside her fear, she entered the small cemetery at the foot of the hill. Dusk had begun to fall. Expecting to be overwhelmed by sadness or desolation or even terror,

what she felt when she stepped onto hallowed ground and walked among the gravestones—some dating back to the Revolutionary War so that time had almost obliterated the names of the deceased, the dates of their birth and their death—was a calm, a peace, that she'd never before experienced, a stoppage of time passing in which she realized: *But of course, this is where we all go, every single one of us.* The acceptance of that reality, so obvious but one she'd never really entertained, accompanied and amplified as it was by the setting of the sun, put her mind at ease and her heart at rest.

Which, of course, was temporary. Still, she believed that she was able to retain a small vestige of that equanimity when she accompanied Juan to the hospital for his check-ups. He wanted her present when the oncologist examined him; when the physician declared whether the tumor had grown or had shrunken and by how much; when the oncologist said that he was cautiously optimistic; when she would then ask if there were any (more) current clinical trials that Juan was eligible for; when, as they were leaving the hospital and a man with a Tweedle-dee-dee paunch passed them, Juan, who had worked his abdominals long and hard to achieve the drum-tight midsection he wanted, said to her, "What I wouldn't do to trade my flat stomach for his beer belly. Funny how your priorities change when you learn you've got cancer."

"What's this? What's happening?" Juan said, baffled.

He and Shirley were sitting in the hospital cafeteria after they'd met with his oncologist. He'd begun to sweat. It was more than sweat. It was a sudden downpour, as if he were raining from inside, raining in sheets. In seconds, his clothes were soaked through. His face and head streamed water that flowed down his body, plastering his shirt to his torso. Juan looked around the room to see if anyone was noticing the deluge, then down at himself, mortified. Shirley found herself reaching for the paper napkin dispenser, pulling out one napkin after the other and handing them to him. Frantically, Juan wiped his face and neck with them. Almost immediately they were soaked through, even when applied in a bunch.

"Let's go find your doctor."

"No."

"We have to find him and tell him what's happening to you."

The thing is, she knew what was happening. Juan was dying. She knew he was dying because she'd been reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Not an easy read by any stretch of the imagination, but a much-needed companion, a balm for her and, she wished, for Juan, though she

knew he would never read a book about death, that it would only intensify his terror, his abhorrence, of his life ending. There was a section that described the dissolution of the body in the process of dying. The body was composed of four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—each one less material, less substantial, than the last. The heaviest element would be the first to go; the rest would follow, from most dense to least. Juan had already lost, and continued to lose, weight. The "earth" of his flesh was decomposing, dissolving. He had entered the next stage. Water was leaving his body in torrents, evaporating into the air, which would succeed it. It was terrible to witness, but less so now that it had been explained to her, now that she knew what to expect.

"Take me home. I want to go home," Juan implored, like a fretful child.

That was another quality that was leaving him: equanimity. He'd always prided himself on his self-control, his composure. His behavior was becoming erratic, unpredictable.

They left the hospital. She hailed a taxi.

"Where to?" The driver swiveled his head around to face the couple. He stared, wide-eyed, at Juan's expression of abject fear and helplessness. At very least, he'd stopped sweating.

"Home. I want to go home," Juan bleated.

Shirley told the driver the address and the taxi eased into the street.

"Can't you go any faster?" Juan shouted.

"The traffic…too many cars…not possible." The driver, foreign by his accent, small in stature, took one hand off the wheel and whirled it by way of explanation and apology.

"I want to get home. I need to get home." This, between a command and a supplication.

The driver glanced back briefly, his eyes almost as anxious as Juan's, his neck stiff, the set of his shoulders higher than when the two passengers entered his taxi.

"It won't be much longer before we're home," Shirley assured both Juan and driver. Herself most of all.

After that episode at the hospital, she couldn't wait to get back to her hermit haven. It was summer; she had vacation days; her daughter was at theater camp; she'd filled her mother's fridge. She tried not to think about Juan's next phone call requiring her to rush back to the city. Guessing when it would come. What he would say. Even in the country, she continued to fall up stairs, to trip over her own two feet. It was as if

her body had become misaligned, its weight (some of which she'd lost) imbalanced. Her body, like Juan's, was changing. It seemed to list to one side when she walked, as though the ground under the weight-bearing foot was giving way.

Besides being accident-prone, she continued to have trouble sleeping. She'd now broken her promise twice. Once with her friend the physician, and now with her mother, who tried to assuage any guilt Shirley felt that she wasn't at Juan's side 24/7 by reminding her that she wasn't his wife. She wasn't even a family member. "They should be the ones taking care of him, and you should be taking care of yourself." Shirley said nothing. Despite her mother's words, she felt guilty. Not only guilty, but cowardly as well. *Ignoble.* What family Juan possessed had passed away or were estranged from him. She'd never asked why.

In her hermit's hideaway, Shirley continued to read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Continued to walk for miles on gravel and dirt country roads, up and down Mole Hill. Continued to enter the tiny cemetery at its base to read the names and the dates of birth and death on the gravestones and notice how many of the husbands outlived their wives—most of whom were of childbearing age—by decades. Continued to dread returning to New York to see to Juan's needs, to witnessing his deterioration, to pretending she wasn't horrified and repelled by it, by how quickly, how inexorably, it was happening. She dreaded even phoning him to learn how he was, to hear the windiness of his speech, more aspirated air than spoken words, symptom of the third—the air—stage of life slipping away, of the body resolving back into its original elements.

One day, when she phoned Juan from upstate New York, he didn't answer. The next day, he phoned her. He was at Memorial Sloan Kettering. He told her that he was being well taken care of. He gave her his room number and his phone number. He asked her not to initiate any calls. He or the hospital staff would get in touch with her. The phone call was brief. Talking, he said, tired him.

Shirley phoned her mother. "Should I return to New York to be with him?"

"It's not your responsibility. It's not your obligation." Though she did not say it, Shirley knew that her mother thought: W*hat obligation, what responsibility, has Juan ever taken regarding you?* At first, she thought her mother's spoken words, by their clipped tightness, sounded unkind, ungenerous to Juan. But of course her mother was only being kind and generous to *her*. They were also what Shirley wanted to

hear. She didn't want to go to or be with Juan who was so afraid of death and so close to it that she felt rightly or wrongly, if she wasn't careful, he would take her with him, that he didn't want to go alone. She remembered the story about the Chinese emperor and the unfortunate concubine. It had struck a chord that vibrated still.

The next time she spoke with Juan, he was almost incapable of speech. Most of the sounds he made were involuntary. A combination of a whoop and a bark, and very, very loud, so that it foiled his attempts to make himself understood. She just wanted him to stop trying. She steeled herself and said as dispassionately as she could, "Do you want me to come to New York?"

She knew she had to ask. She hoped he'd say no. She didn't know what she would've done if he'd said yes. She would have had to go but she couldn't be sure she would have. What she did feel, when he was finally able to answer comprehensibly, was enormous relief. Relief that was greater than the guilt she was also feeling. Or perhaps she was simply numb, exhausted on all fronts: physically, mentally, emotionally. That night, after his reprieve, and for the first time in weeks, she slept like a baby.

A few days later, she received a phone call from a staff member—a woman, a social worker—who told her, gently, that Juan had passed away. She thanked Shirley for coming to the hospital during Juan's final days, how much it had meant to him, how her presence had succored him and allowed him to die peacefully.

For what seemed to her like a very long time, Shirley was unable to speak. When she found her voice again, she said, "I'm sorry, but I never came to the hospital after he was admitted."

A gasp, then, "You're not Lay-shur…?"

The word that followed was a common Chinese surname. Chan. Or Wong. Or Chu. It was a word Shirley was familiar with but which she immediately forgot. Lei-shi was the word she retained, the name that resounded. Juan used to mention Lei-shi now and then. She had been his teacher's aide. Whenever he wanted to abscond for an hour or so to play tennis, it was she who substituted for him. She had recently applied for her first teaching job and he'd written glowing letters of recommendation for her.

Lei-shi, pronounced "Lay-shur." The two syllables of Shirley's name, only in reverse. Identical yet opposed—like Lei-shi's presence at Juan's bedside was not only the obverse of Shirley's absence from it, but also neutralized it, exonerated her. Not only did she take my place, not

only did she substitute for me, Shirley realized, she was there *on my behalf.* Disequilibrium became balance. A sense of peace suffused her like a balm. She felt gratitude, humility, *forgiven.* Forgiven, and so able to forgive: both herself and Juan.

###

Sarah Lilius

Side Effects Include Collecting Cats

She's accustomed to fur
on every surface, varied hues keep
the furniture covered, black sweaters,
rugs, the dining room tablecloth never used,
duvet cover with furry roses, even her pillowcase.
She keeps every feline off the kitchen counters
where she divvies up her daily pills,
bupropion, always a color
she doesn't recognize.
Her life, singular in humans, rich in cats,
they bask in the sunlight but never
ask her to join.
She understands though, each unique song
is for her, the deep or shrill meows
season her day, her night.
The collection starts with one kitten,
a serotonin boost, soft as infant skin
made inside the mother.
She was pregnant once, when he was
still alive, the fetus left her, like its father.
She glares at the empty journal
she refuses to fill with words she doesn't mean.
Her syllables and sentences
wrap around cans of cat food,
water bowls to keep full.
Strays line up outside the glass door,
look inside and want warmth,
the exact service she provides
with cold hands holding a starting
dose, one hundred fifty milligrams,
to block sadness as another cat
jumps on the counter, ready
with a ballad just for her.

Marjorie Maddox

Girl and Rabbit

Mid-winter,
curled together on the old sofa,
they're dreaming of themselves in summer,
no walls or cage, no rules of where to run or when,
just fur and ears, braids and breeze
and the soft pad of feet and paws
loping over fields dotted with hope,
and a sky stretched so tight with calm
it almost wakes them.

Marjorie Maddox

Giving Away the Cats

Like bad parents, we cuddled close
the two cutest of twenty.
The fathers already gone—
down an alley, over a fence—
we "donated" the purring mama,
who birthed eleven;
abandoned the clawing matron,
who delivered nine.

What did we know of age and separation,
the aching breast, the rough tongue
unable to comfort the young,
the midnight dream of absence?

The others—patterned with Rorschach blotches—
we dropped at friends' and strangers',
who scratched and petted, oohed and aahed,
while the clueless kittens—adorable
in their innocence—cried sweetly,
asked for more.

What did we know of cruelty,
of turning away from the ones
who did not choose you?
Too much. Too much.

Marjorie Maddox

Persistence

> "It is impossible that a son
> of so many tears should be lost."
> -a bishop to Saint Monica about her son Saint Augustine

Seventeen years of tears
she almost drowned in.
Such a small boat, faith, to steer
blind through seventeen years of tears.
And yet she persevered. Each wave of fear
a chance to step across the sea to Him
whose tears kept her afloat for seventeen years.
Most faithful Monica—your tears God's pier
that saved a drowning son.

Kerry McKay

I Blame Peter Frampton

I. 1969-1979

Every Christmas morning, before we finished unwrapping our gifts, my best friend and next-door neighbor Ellen rang the doorbell, all smiles, dressed for church–a plaid dress, a long wool coat, and on those ruddy round cheeks of hers at least a thousand freckles, some even spilling onto her forehead and lips. I showed Ellen my Barbie accessories and my brother's Stretch Armstrong or G.I. Joe. My sister sulked because once again Santa hadn't brought her a Sno-Cone Machine. Our fake tree, decorated with homemade ornaments, tilted as my brother dug through discarded wrapping paper, fishing for possible undetected presents. On New Year's Eve, Ellen, her siblings, and I played in Ellen's basement until her mother beckoned her to the kitchen to prepare the manicotti her family would feast on at midnight. Flour, eggs, milk, olive oil, measuring cups, and whisks crowded the kitchen table. I loved the smell of sauteed garlic and onion and red sauce bubbling over on the stove. Even though I was two years younger than Ellen, luck was always on my side when I was with her. I won at Clue and Spit. I ran the fastest around the kickball bases. I finished puzzles first. I loved who I was with Ellen. That night, I took home loot–a handful of pennies, nickels, and dimes–after poker with Ellen's grandma and cousins.

II. Summer 1979

Our mothers told us we shouldn't have sex until we were married, but at seventeen Ellen's older sister Patty became pregnant from her first and only boyfriend. After their wedding, Patty and Kevin moved into Kevin's parents' basement apartment. Ellen was eleven, and I was nine when we were invited to sleep at Patty and Kevin's while they attended a Catholic retreat and their baby stayed upstairs with Kevin's parents. To prepare for the evening, when no one was looking, Ellen climbed onto her mother's kitchen counter and pilfered four SuzieQ's and a big bag of Lay's potato chips from the secret cabinet meant to prevent chubby Ellen from eating too much. Her mother said the treats were for her brother because he was a growing boy. Ellen stuffed them in her overnight bag.

Then we took the bus to KMart for sleepover supplies: blue eyeshadow, new polyester tank tops, and big combs for the back pocket of our jean shorts. At Patty and Kevin's, it smelled like dirty diapers and the carpet was covered in so much lint it seemed Patty had shaken the vacuum bag onto it. Patty gave us Spaghettios and Coke before she and Kevin left. Ellen laughed so hard a Spaghettio flew out of her nose. For two straight hours, my best friend and I danced and sang to the Village People's "Live and Sleazy".

III. Winter 1979-1980

Ellen didn't ring the doorbell as much. She was in seventh grade. I was in fifth. She came over Christmas morning in platform shoes but only stayed a few minutes, and I wasn't invited for manicotti New Year's Eve. A few weeks into the new year, I knocked on her front door. Her mother seemed amused to see me. "Ellen, Kerry's here," she called up the stairs. "Go on up." Now that Patty had moved out, Ellen had her own bedroom, which I burst into with an over-enthusiastic "surprise". Ellen and her junior-high friends Kathy and Marie shared a look. There was no room for me on Ellen's bed, so I sat on the shag carpet and looked up at these three girls who wore green eyeshadow, lip gloss, tight jeans, and tight sweaters. I knew bras were under those sweaters. Ellen had a record player and albums in her room! She cradled an album to her chest as she, Kathy, and Marie sang the lyrics to "Baby, I Love Your Way". I put out my hand, "Can I see?" Reluctantly, Ellen passed me the album embossed with Peter Frampton, a wild-haired bare-chested man that my Ellen seemed to love. I didn't stay long. I felt through the music's vibrations the girls' annoyance at me. At home, I tried on Ellen's hand-me-down bra. I stuck a tube sock in each cup, making fake lumpy boobs that, when I pulled my frilly flannel nightgown over them, looked real. I put my hands on my hips and pranced in front of the mirror. I sang my prayers that night. God, "Show me the waaaay" back to Ellen.

Mer Monson

I Sometimes Greet a Friend in the Park Behind My House—

sixty something, with mangled hair
and an anxious gait, leaning against
the back of an empty bench
smoking her next cigarette.
It is usually after sunset,
as she's trying to avoid all
the good people who want to save her.
If she could just keep a job,
they say, *or give up the drugs,*
let go of her dead son
and come back to church.
They are blind
to the warm bloom of her wit,
the fierceness of a heart that beats
louder than heavy metal, and
the resilience she wields
to stick to her story
that she's a goner
and not worth the donuts
I leave on her doorstep
every year for her birthday.
Even when she makes me laugh,
she cannot feel the angels

kissing the top of her head.

Vanessa Ogle

The Ducks

My mom once almost-cried at the beauty of the male duck. Why do they get everything, she said. I, too, am jealous of the ducks, who are home in the air and the water and the grass. The cattails that hide the females have exploded now, mid-May, fluff expanding outside of the tight casing, taupe pieces like feathers of the duck, or dogs shedding in this heat, and I spend all day scrolling, looking at houses and living inside the photos, me who has never had a home.

Eve Ottenberg

The Memorial

She did not see her father, the day he died. She was on the highway, en route to his hospital, driving dangerously fast. But the rush was pointless, he died without her. Though she had visited with him two days earlier, after his stroke, that seemed like a century ago and did little to compensate for the injury, she believed, of her absence in his final moments.

She went and stayed with her ancient mother in their townhouse on Pine Street. The live-in nurse greeted her with the warning that her sole remaining parent was in shock. Her brothers and sisters texted about a memorial, in two weeks, at the nearby art college and could she stay in town till then? No, the obligations of her job that had claimed her, required her to remain in Washington, D.C. as her father died, still stood. She had two days off, no more. She would have to leave, then return to Philadelphia in two weeks. She entered her parents' house, greeted her mother and the nurse, dropped off her bag, then got her assignment to go to the pharmacy and stepped back out.

Withered pansies and the denuded, beheaded stalks of other flowers – Lana could not remember what sort – lay desiccated in the window box. Sleet froze the front steps and the sidewalk on Pine Street, making the going treacherous. Slipping, staggering, she cautiously picked her way to the pharmacy, to purchase the necessities on the list the nurse had given her. Then she returned. With the weather, the whole operation took 45 minutes – and she had barely even greeted her mother, jolted rigid, gray and grieving, in her wheelchair. In the dim twilight chill, she teetered up the front steps again and could barely feel the icy brass knocker. Fortunately, the door creaked open quickly, as the nurse, who had been watching TV in the little front room off the foyer, ushered her into the shadows.

"Who's there?" Came the sad and querulous voice of old Ada Bloomfeld, seated in the living room. "And why have I been left in the dark?"

Lana brushed back her damp gray hair, handed the nurse the bag from the pharmacy and proceeded to her mother, explaining that the nurse had noted she was napping; then she flipped on the overhead light. Shadows sprang away, back into the haunted corners.

"That's better, Lana," her mother rasped. "I can always count on

you for light and reason. Do you have my Tylenol? The arthritis in my shoulder hurts like crazy."

The nurse approached and let Lana dispense the Tylenol, fetching a glass of water from the kitchen, dim from recessed lighting.

"I'm mad at Mark," her mother announced about her deceased husband.

Sudden alarm filled Lana: Was her mother so disoriented that she did not know Mark was dead?

"I'm mad at him because he went out," the old woman burst into tears, "and he's never coming back."

Lana came alongside the wheelchair, bent down and wrapped an arm around her mother's thin, frail, bony shoulders. "The memorial is in two weeks."

"I know, I know. Stay with me, Lana. Don't leave."

"I'll see what I can do."

The next day she phoned her rep at the federal employees' union, the same grumpy old man who'd told her she had to wait to put in for bereavement leave. This time she yelled at him. He relented, told her who to call.

It was a dark, foggy day. The city lay old, dismal and arthritic in the damp. Lana prepared toast with raspberry jam, orange juice and coffee for herself and her mother for breakfast. The nurse watched TV. Lana's boss called her back with news about her bereavement leave.

It was to begin at once.

***

Two weeks of dim days and maternal misery, of trips over ice-encrusted sidewalks to the pharmacy and the supermarket, sojourns that should not have taken anywhere near as long as they did now, because of frozen surfaces. And then there were the appalling nights, when Lana lay in a guest-room and listened to her ancient mother sobbing in her bed down the hall. Old Mrs. Bloomfeld did not want to be comforted, but Lana, terrified that these hysterics would cause a seizure, remained in her mother's bedroom, in the shadows that cloaked the furniture, sometimes for hours, until she managed to calm the distraught widow and shush her back to sleep.

The morning of the memorial, Lana's mother did not want breakfast. After much coaxing, she finally consented to eat half her toast with jelly. Then she announced she would not attend the memorial, to be

held at the art college two blocks away on Pine Street. The nurse, was shocked, but Lana was firm: her mother must attend, it was the only opportunity for friends and relatives to say good bye to Mark Bloomfeld – his widow wouldn't want to deprive them of that, would she?

The old woman gazed at her daughter sourly then relented, mumbling, "well, if you put it like that…"

Ada wheeled herself away from the table into the living room. Lana followed and attempted to push the chair, but received a soft slap on her hand for her efforts.

"I can do it myself," her mother snapped.

"What will you wear to the memorial?" Lana asked.

"How should I know? What kind of question is that?"

"I think maybe your black slacks and that beautiful black and purple sweater Dad gave you three years ago."

"Fine. Whatever you say. My wishes are clearly meaningless."

"Wear what YOU want."

"I don't want to go, so I don't care."

The nurse glanced questioningly at Lana, who sighed, brushing back her gray hair, then nodded to the nurse to help her mother upstairs to dress.

Lana sat on the couch alone for a moment of restorative solitude and gazed out the glass sliding doors at the little, vacant, frozen back patio. Two sparrows pecked at the ice on the bird-bath, then, after drinking, stood still and returned her gaze.

"Wretched day," Lana told the sparrows. They flew away.

She went upstairs. Her mother had decided on a brown silk blouse instead of the sweater. After Lana dressed, also in black pants and a dark blue shirt, she lovingly folded up the black and purple sweater and replaced it in a drawer, while the nurse maneuvered her mother downstairs, where they all then waited for one of Lana's older brothers to come in his Volvo station-wagon and fetch them.

"How is she?" He asked in an undertone, after settling his mother in the back seat and coming around the outside of the car to stand near Lana.

"Terrible," Lana said.

"She's been terrible for years, ever since she landed in that wheelchair."

"She's miserable. She can't help it," Lana told him.

"You're entitled to your opinion," he replied. "But since I'm the one who lives in Philly and sees her every day, I don't have to agree."

Cowed, Lana slid into the passenger seat. Then he drove them the two blocks to the art college. Her brother unpacked his mother and her wheelchair, and he, the nurse and Lana went into the reception room, where Lana, averse to throngs of people and almost always eager, when in an acquaintance's company, to get out of it as fast as possible, posted herself in a corner.

Black-clad friends and relatives crowded in. Ada managed to greet them and listened attentively to the testimonials. Then she turned to Lana and her older brother. "I'm cold. I want my sweater. The purple and black one that Mark gave me three years ago."

Lana's brother frowned. "I'll go get it," Lana told him. "It's a short walk." He handed her his key.

Up Pine Street she marched, relieved at the excuse to be by herself for a few minutes, shivering in her dark blue winter coat, appreciative of the municipal workers who had sanded the slick pavement. She climbed the few steps to the front door, inserted the frigid key in the lock, stepped into the warmth, quiet and solitary solace of her parents' house, and, surprisingly, into a presence, the definite sense of someone there, waiting for her. Without thinking, she called out, "Dad? Dad?" Something stirred on the second story. She raced upstairs into her mother's bedroom, where the heat had just kicked in and blew the heavy curtains noisily against the window.

The black and purple sweater lay on the bed. Lana knew very well it had not been there when they left.

"Dad?" She called, beseeched again.

But he wasn't there.

Madisen Phonnathong

Dancing

The lights flicker. Or is it just a strobe? Flashes of red-purple-blue-all combined with numerous shadows fog my sight. The people are unrecognizable, except for when they begin to stare at me. I feel their eyes lock onto my skin, and they peer at every angle of my body.

I then feel a glance from Jonathan: His gaze is slightly more considerate than the others. Whenever I look his way, he makes sure to never look towards mine. His eyes wander across the room, he begins to blush, and he seems almost embarrassed. Last week he came in on a slow Monday night. Just one other dancer was there, but he never looked at her, only me. From across the room I noticed a button on his coat had been fixed from the week before. Who fixed it? It seemed hand stitched. Was it his mom-his girlfriend...his wife? But I learned to not worry about it because it's not my problem. I don't actually know his name, but I gave him one. It makes me feel sort of loved.

Then there's Brennan: I gave him his name after my father. His horrid, rough face is unbearable to look at. His wrinkles are in all the wrong places. They are not smile lines. They are frown ones. The anger seeps from his pores, and even from across the room, I feel it sticking to me. His foul smell of beer and whiskey still gives me nightmares. He was here yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that one. He doesn't look away when I look at him, he just glares deeply into my soul. My eyes begin to go red and burn hot with just a single tear, but I choke back my dignity, and look away. I wish he would take his drunk ass somewhere else, away from my line of view. He makes me feel dirty, gross, disgusting. He is the kind of person that gives me… us... such a bad reputation. Strippers don't deserve what happens to us, but we have to do it anyway.

When I'm on the pole, in the center of the room, I cannot pull away, no matter who, what, why, or when. I stay here; my legs ache and quiver, my arms can barely hold me up any longer, but I must stay for the rest of the night. The dirty oil, from woman after woman, drips onto my skin, but I no longer even flinch. I keep spinning round and round. One leg goes up, the other comes down. More eyes grab at my ass, my thighs, my hips, and my dignity. And finally, I go numb.

The clock reaches three in the morning. On a busy night like now, I watch as the bouncers kick out the drunken men through the door

onto the curb. Some will sleep there all night until they come again tomorrow. I walk towards the back room, but my sore legs are not very happy. The lockers are covered in glitter and oil, and it reeks of sweat. Beside me are the other girls, already counting their money. They haven't even changed out of their thongs. I grab my things and head home in my 2008 Nissan Altima, which I got for a thousand dollars just a month ago, but while I walk out the door my manager stops me.

"I didn't see the sparkle tonight," he grunts with a straight face. He's leaning against the brick wall across from my car.

"The what?" The cold night air brushes the hairs on skin. The alley way is still lit up, even though the corner light keeps burning out.

"The sparkle. You seemed bored when you were dancing. You gotta put on a better show or imma replace you." He lights his cigarette and refuses to even make eye contact with me.

"Sorry sir. It won't happen again," I say as I walk towards my car.

"You bet it won't," he responds with a laugh.

The heat of my car doesn't work, but that's okay since sweat still cakes me from the long night. I stay under the speed limit because my gas is running low and one of my headlights is burnt out. Just a few miles I drive away from downtown to my apartment complex. It takes me less than five minutes to go from my car to inside the door; I really hate being alone at night, so I move quickly.

My apartment is clean, mostly because there is nothing in it, except for the picture of me and my mom. I walk up to it, give the frame a kiss, and hold it in my arms for a few minutes.

Now time stops, or it feels like it. The waves stop crashing, the clouds stop moving, and the rain stops falling. In just this moment, I can sit in silence. No worries of the world, of my job or of my mom, can get to me. So I sit here, and just rest.

All of a sudden I awake to my alarm at seven in the morning. The picture of me and my mother now has fingerprints and grease covering the surface, but I put it back down because I'll be able to clean it later. Since I fell asleep on my couch, I have to run to my room into the depths of my closet. Although it is quite small, almost everything I care about is tucked away under the piles of clothes. I don't have time to shower, but I slip on a pair of thrifted sweat pants and a long sleeve shirt that was left at the club once. I go back into my closet, and I slide my hand along the back wall until I find an opening. I reach in and pull out my plastic bag which is long worn. The smell of money fills my room.

Thousands of dollars, my whole life, is sitting right in my hands. I slip the bag into my purse, and grab my keys before I lodge myself out the door. But I stop right before I can leave. My hand is just barely grasping the handle and my foot has already kicked the door open. I walk to the drawer with the picture of me and my mom. I take it out once again, and give it another kiss. I take it with me this time, making sure to be more careful.

My mom was my best friend. She cared for me when I had no one; she worked multiple jobs day and night; she smelled of pizza and car oil when she would come home, but she still tucked me in and sang me to sleep. She made me a ham sandwich everyday for lunch, and even when she didn't have time to eat, she always made sure I did. She pushed me through high school, even when I was a screw up.

"Open this door right now Mykayla," my mom said one colder October night, many years ago.

I stayed silent, wishing she would just go away.

"MYKAYLA I SAID OPEN THIS DAMN DOOR." She shook the lock so hard it almost broke off. She pounded on the door until the hinges nearly gave way.

I slammed my phone onto the bed which actually shattered the screen. I had to find that out the next morning. I walked to the door and opened it.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to open the damn door when I tell you to open the damn door."

"Huh," I said with a disgusted grin on my face. Oh how naive I was. "How come you always want me to be all buddy-buddy with you if you're just gonna come to my door screaming every night?"

"You think I want to be screaming at you? DO YOU THINK I WANT TO BE SCREAMING AT MY DAUGHTER?"

I went silent.

"ANSWER ME CHILD."

"No."

"Yeah, that's right. I don't wanna be screaming at you. But wanna know why I am? Because I caught you smoking. That's why."

I stood there. Ashamed of myself. I figured she knew. But I didn't actually think about what would happen.

"ANSWER ME."

"Fine," I scoffed. "Sorry I screwed up." I was out of it for nearly most of the conversation. I just stared at the wall, then back at my feet,

then maybe towards the fridge.

"You mean that?" She's been crossing her arms this whole time. Staring at me with her dark brown eyes.

"Yeah. I do." I swayed back and forth a little on my feet. I looked into my room and saw the dirty muck I lived in. I instantly blamed my mom when I really should have blamed myself.

"I screwed up cause you're a lousy ass mom who wouldn't raise me right. Maybe if I didn't grow up in this ghetto ass neighborhood then I wouldn't be doing drugs." I slammed the door in her face.

"OPEN THIS DAMN DOOR."

Silence.

"Fine, know what Mykayla. Blame me for all your problems. Blame me for the shit you keep screwin up on." And that was it. She just walked away.

I did blame it all on her. I told her it was the shitty apartment she raised me in, and her fault for chasing my dad away. I resented every bit of her -- then she got sick. I hate her. I hate her so much. I would tell myself that every night. I had no other choice but to start bartending, but it wasn't paying enough. Bills after bills flooded our doorstep, and there was nothing I could do. My high school friend started stripping and told me about the amount of money she was making, so I tried it out. I hated it. But then I saw the bills starting to disappear. My mom was getting better, and one day she was allowed to come home.

But it all happened so quickly. Time stopped, and so did her heart. I would describe it if I could remember, but it was all just a blur. My mom was gone. My best friend. Everything I worked for. I hate her. I would scream again with tears uncontrollably streaming from my eyes. I hate her. I put myself in this shitty job for her. I didn't go to college because of her. I had a shitty life because of her. I stopped. I picked myself up and went to the bathroom. I didn't scream or cry. I just stood there. Looking at myself. I miss her. No more tears came after that, just nights at the club and aching pain.

I am still driving in my car through waves of traffic. I continuously honk my horn, until someone will let me in. Just a couple more miles. There it is. The hospital. I park in guest parking, grab the picture and my purse, and go inside. I am moving so fast I don't even know what's happening. My shaky hands walk up to the reception desk. A nice middle-aged woman is sitting down ready to greet me.

"Hello, how can I help you?" She doesn't make eye contact or even raise her voice; she just stares at her computer scream.

"Is the accounting office open today?" I can't look at her either, I just stare down at my feet.

"Yes ma'am, just make a left down the hall and take the elevator up to floor two. It should be just ahead of you then," She hands me a slip of paper to give me a pass into the office and continues on with her work.

I make my way to the elevator, but my brain has caught up to speed, and I can take a deep breath. I look around at the cold empty hallways and I finally take in the piercing smell of alcohol. I see mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents in the filled waiting room. Some are crying, some even praying, others are sleeping. I can not bear to be one of those people again, I can not even think about it. So I get in the elevator and wait the few seconds up to the second floor. For months, this is all I could think about, all I hoped for. I step into the office and hand the pass to an older woman with glasses.

"What are you here for today?" She talks so quickly I can barely understand her, but at least she makes eye contact.

"I am here to pay off the medical bills for Lorie Caddel. I am her daughter." My eyes are red now, but I choke back the rest of my emotion. I hand her my ID and the rest of the paperwork.

"Today is the big day, isn't it?" She smiles at me now and I feel a moment of relief. I remember her from a few times before, and it feels nice to know she remembers me.

"Yeah, the last one." I laugh a little bit, even though it's not funny. I hand her the plastic bag, and thousands of dollars in cash. I have been coming here every month paying off bills for about five years now, but just like that -- it's all over. I promised my mom before she passed that I would pay off her medical bills. After all she did for me, it was the least I could do.

We talk for a couple minutes more about life recently and her children. She hands me back my ID and paperwork and holds my hand. I thank her, and she even gets up from her desk to hug me. I take my time back to my car, reminiscing on what just happened. I think about my mom. I love her. I unlock my car and duck my head to get inside. For a minute, I put my head on the wheel and lay there. I relax my body and sigh in relief because it's over -- almost over. I drink from an old bottle of water from what I believe is from a few nights before. The cold water jerks me awake again, and I drive off out of the parking lot.

Hours have passed, and I have taken a nap most of the day. I still lay in my bed, but this time not dreading life as the night approaches. I slip into my favorite outfit: a dark red dress and black stiletto heels. I

even take my time in the bathroom getting ready. I curl my hair and pluck my eyebrows while I shave my legs. Time passes quicker than I expect, so my makeup has to be less dramatic than I hoped. I paint a darker maroonish colored lipstick onto my mouth while I stare at myself in the mirror. I give myself a little smile, something I have not felt in so long. I take my mom's picture with me again as I leave my apartment.

A few miles later I am at the club. A place usually of grief and sadness, has never seemed so beautiful. The bouncer lets me in and directs me to the back, but I wave him off and continue towards the bar. I see Jonathan again and next to him I see Brennan. The lights strobe and it brightens their faces in multiple rays of colors. This is the closest they have ever been to me, yet I don't even flinch. I just walk by, but I doubt they even recognize me with clothes on. At the bar is my manager who seems bothered.

"Why haven't you clocked in yet? You were supposed to start your shift ten minutes ago." He is barely paying attention. He seems to be occupied by the cigarette in his hand which is hanging on by a thread.

I respond back but he doesn't hear. The music is so loud, the girls are so distracting. These nights always feel like pure chaos.

"You need to repeat yourself sweetheart. And speak louder. That's why these men never listen to you." He lights another cigarette, but he struggles because he begins to laugh at his own stupid remark.

I begin to laugh now too. Not because he's right, but because he is such an idiot. He is such a shitty idiot.

"I quit." I am laughing so hard now I think he can't comprehend it. "What," he says, dropping just about everything he was doing.

"I quit."

Sameera Rachakonda

Lily

Lily's eyes had been steadily peering at mine the whole while the nurse was talking to her. It was the same look of naive curiosity she had when we were sitting in the waiting room, the look that led me to the impetuous assumption she was a hypocrite, silently judging me for making the same decision she had made. Finally, the nurse paused to catch her breath, and Lily spoke.

"Are you okay?"

I could taste the salt from the tear dripping down my cheek as I choked out a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

It was at that moment that I knew that the thirteen-year-old girl sitting across from me in our matching skimpy gowns and flimsy hospital slippers was eons braver than I could ever hope to be.

The part that hurt the most was the sharp pinch when the anesthesiologist put in my IV. For days afterward, the residue from the band aid clung to my skin, and I tallied the showers it took to scrub it off completely; six total. It probably would have been less, but every time I tried furiously scrubbing my arm in order to apply the necessary pressure to rub away the reminder of that day, I chickened out and ended up gently consoling the wound instead.

Actually, on second thought, the part that hurt the most was the waiting. That's what no one tells you about, how many hours you spend sitting alone with your thoughts, and how in this particular situation, your thoughts are your worst enemy. As my own thoughts raced, in an attempt to save my sanity, I kept refocusing them to the overwhelming surges of pride and admiration I felt as I watched other women trickle into the waiting room, knowing how they weathered the screams of "murderer" that were thrown at them as they walked through the door.

Waiting in the main room was the least tortuous of all the waiting periods I sat through. Having the distraction of other people, even if they did all look utterly miserable, helped tremendously. When I finally left the waiting room, I mindlessly followed a nurse into the back and laid in quiet trembles as they did my blood work. I had never known what my blood type was before, and I forgot it moments after they told me. However, what I didn't forget was when they told me that I was six weeks and four days.

The nurse directed me to another room I had to wait in alone. I had always been a sucker for cheesy, inspiring quotes and they laced the walls of this clinic. I fixated in particular on a Maya Angelou one that recited some maxim about how you can choose to not be reduced by the events that happen to you. I sat shivering, wondering if there was some medical reason the heat wasn't on, until another nurse walked in. I never thought I was an easy to read person before, but she could decipher how badly I wanted to get this day over with from the moment she walked in, and for that I was infinitely grateful. I repeated the same question to every nurse and doctor I met: “Will it hurt?” I was too scared to feel embarrassed for asking such a childlike question when I was on the brink of twenty-one.

The procedure didn't hurt, what did was talking to her, to Lily. I walked into the space that led into the surgery room and slipped on the pink gown, plastic blue slippers, and bonnet I had been given. For some reason, I envisioned it being a blue gown, the way I had seen in movies. I don't think the English language has yet to define a word to accurately describe the level of exposed and self-consciousness one feels in hospital attire. I sat and tried pathetically to cover up with the white blanket that was resting on my chair. I forced myself to ignore the mysterious dark stains that dotted the blanket. There was another girl waiting when I came in, but I didn't talk to her. Something about her gaze made me feel even more naked, and I quickly felt guilty for thinking so harshly of her, when I knew all too well what she was going through. Another girl came in minutes later, and then, Lily.

I'll never forget the look of utter disbelief and confusion when she found out that my mother didn't know. It was a look I envied. Here I was, envying a thirteen-year-old girl about to get an abortion all because her mother supported her. I had to forcibly choke back a twisted mix of tears and laughter when she told me how she was terrified to tell her mom, but her mom told her she'd love her no matter what, and that my mother would do the same.

“Do you have someone here with you?” she asked.

I nodded. “My boyfriend.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. I felt I was letting her down in some unfeminist way. There was this responsibility I had to let this young girl know that she shouldn't depend on something as fickle as boyfriends to help her through moments as tough as these. But, there wasn't any possible way I could explain this to her while also explaining just how lucky I had gotten with mine without sounding like a complete

hypocrite. I never imagined that I'd find myself in this situation of course, but if I did, I imagined it would be alongside some villainous character from an old fairytale. Instead, I found myself sitting next to the boy I loved as he drove across state lines and waited for hours, nervous and restless. I found myself with the boy I loved as he bought me chicken nuggets and a heating pad for the cramps that never came and sat through my favorite sitcom which he found painfully unfunny. I found myself with the boy who was there for me, months after, through all my worst moments. I found myself with the boy who loved me, and who I loved back. And no matter what would have happened that day, it wouldn't have changed that.

The part that hurt the most afterward was the way it was impossible to escape. From *New York Times* articles about the new laws in Texas, to seemingly harmless jokes between friends, to ClearBlue advertisements, memories and reminders straggled behind long after the fact. Actually, on second thought, the part that hurt the most afterward was the unexplainable sorrow. All the following nights blurred together into one restless haze. I spent all my energy reminding myself that I had made the best decision I could have, that it wasn't a sin, and that if any of the women in my life or even a perfect stranger had approached me with the same situation, I would have stayed up comforting them, assuring them that they did absolutely nothing wrong. And I pushed myself to swallow the bitter irony that I would have genuinely believed they did nothing wrong. But for some reason, echoing the same sentiment to myself felt phony, like I was grasping at straws, trying to convince myself in a last desperate attempt. And then, in the most unexpected moments, slowly but surely, the pangs of regret seeped in. At dinner with my boyfriend, doing homework alone at midnight, watching movies in my best friend’s basement—what ifs and should have beens flooded my mind. I paced, searching for some trauma to pin my sadness on; some easy way out to relieve the confusion behind my depression, the logic behind my guilt.

I knew it was the right choice, the only choice. The week and a half leading up to it were undoubtedly the hardest week and half of my life. Every step hurt like there was glass poking out from my crackling skin. My stomach was in shambles and kept emptying itself, even when I swore there was nothing left to empty. And there was an ever-present weight pushing down on me, a constant reminder of what had happened.

I understand how silly it must sound to anyone else, but I don't think I would have made it through that day if I hadn't met Lily. And I'm

not sure I would have made it through what followed. Now, sometimes on the nights when I can't sleep, when my mind's racing and my heart's pounding, I close my eyes and picture myself laying on a hospital bed years from now, embracing the one thing I swear I'm going to love more than anything else in this world. I'm sure and strong and most importantly, ready. The nurses look over at me and ask me for her name. And I say “Lily.”

Russell Rowland

That Dark Cloud Up There

Mother would close my bedroom door,
let the nightingale sing my lullaby.

As she left the room after informing me
My Spanker had been put down,
Mother just told me to have a good cry.

She said I would do great things,
and other women admire her for them.
I did small things, good things no one
noticed, that she got no credit for.

Girls might have married me but for her.

If I look in a still pool the brook makes,
my face blocks out the sky—

Mother doesn't like that: she is now
a dark cloud up there, expecting visibility.

While a boy just learning to predict,
had I said that someone who cut
my meat would betray me, she'd have said:
You better not mean me, Son.

Kelly R. Samuels

To Debbie

We rode imaginary horses in the field to the north of the elementary school. Chain link fence lacy—nothing binding, nothing keeping us from wild galloping except the bell. No matter. Ribbons gathered in our hands, ribbons in the manes. Ribbons and the unshod hoof. No saddle to oil, no bit. Just tender direction with gentle heel, stroke of neck. We were horse and rider—neighing sometimes, and then, cooing. You would say, *steady, steady*. Mine was glossy and black. Yours a chestnut. Once, one the color of straw. On a shelf in my bedroom, three molded. Saved for and bought. Nothing like what we were those late mornings before we took to leaning against walls or slouching in doorways, only our eyes grazing the green. From a girl you once knew—

Cathy Schieffelin

This Too Shall Pass

Every time I think I know the lay of the land, things change. Mountains rise in front of me where I'm not expecting them. I lean forward, pushing my heels into the earth and hike upwards. The things I thought would bother me don't seem so bad. The anticipated ick of chemo – no taste buds, bit of nausea, exhaustion, loss of more cranial peach fuzz – it seems okay… even, manageable. Truthfully, the anticipation of losing my hair was far worse than the actual head shaving experience. I'm getting used to things – sort of.

Then I lost feeling in my fingers – that's the neuropathy they warned me about. More numbness – not painful – just dull. After my first surgery, I have little to no feeling in my upper torso and back. I run into things all the time. My proprioception (word of the day) is impaired. Proprioception is one's body awareness in space. I don't quite understand it, as my vision isn't the problem. I just keep bumping into the sink, the wall, the table – and I don't know why. Numbness aside, I do feel the straining muscles in my stomach from the d-flap reconstruction surgery, as I hunch over.

During this trek up Kilimanjaro, (breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and recovery), I've been subjected to all manner of indignity. You think when you get breast cancer, you'll be cradled and cared for. Truthfully, most days, you are. Some days – well, let's just say, you're shocked how fast and low you can tumble. One minute you're hiking through montane evergreens, the next you're sputtering, gasping to catch your breath in the icy waters of a creek bed. The day prior to surgery, I met with the plastic surgeon. Had I known what I was in for during that appointment, I might have opted to take my chances with the cancer. (Not really). To cut right to it, I underwent a mortifying photo shoot – squeezing into teeny-weeny string bikini panties (blue, if you care) so they could develop a reconstruction plan, like This Old House. Glad Bob Vila was nowhere in sight. I should have screamed "NO!" but didn't. I stuffed myself into dental floss masking as "panties" and stood in front of the assistant as she photographed me… from every God-awful angle, revealing every flaw and roll of fat tumbling over ridiculously miniscule undies. The only other thing I was wearing were pink fuzzy socks they'd given me to keep my feet warm. So thoughtful...

I joked with the photographer relying on humor to help me through the horror of it. But if I'm honest, I shouldn't have been put in that position and know I should have refused to put on the damn panties. They could have offered various sizes or told me to wear simple briefs. Shoot, I'd have felt less exposed standing there buck naked. This is not the time to shame women when they're about to lose a vital part of their bodies.

My old breasts fed three children, despite the challenges of inverted nipples. Sorry folks if this is TMI. I struggled as a new mother to breastfeed. But I persevered, attached myself to a masochistic breast pump while watching endless episodes of Bonanza, to ensure my babies got the health benefits of my colostrum and sedating effects of the occasional glass of wine. When my third child finally latched on without much trouble, I remember the surge of joy and pure love as my infant son looked up into my eyes, smiling as he suckled. I miss those moments.

Breast-feeding nostalgia aside, the old boobs had to go. Standing in my baby blue dental floss, Dr. S. returned and took a bright blue sharpie to me, marking me like a Jackson Pollack canvas. He told me what he'd shave off, shape up and rebuild. I was a lump of clay and he, the sculptor. I felt like a blob of fat, not a piece of art.

Even after the surgery, I'm conflicted over this new body I'm walking around in. Sure, I look better. My belly fat was used to construct new breasts. Pretty ingenious, really. It's still me, and the cancer's gone. I know that's the most important thing. But could there have been a better way?

I'm grateful to be cancer free, but it's been a long road – a twisting, obstacle-filled road where things were thrown at me and I had to swerve to avoid crashing or running off the road all together. I found myself in the ditch a few times, but I met others there.

Now I'm dealing with the challenge of chemo. I'm retaining what feels like a camel's hump of fluid. My left hand and arm continue to swell from lymphedema. My fingers are puffy and pale, like the Pillsbury Doughboy. My face is splotchy with hints of teenage acne. Even my eyelids are swollen – really? Didn't know this was possible but I look like a character from a Tim Burton film. My appearance has changed so much my own iPhone doesn't recognize me. I have to punch in my passcode each time. I could go on – dry, itchy skin, acute sense of taste – everything's too salty or too sweet. And then the total loss of taste as the chemo kills off my taste buds. Daily gastric distress,

aching muscles.... And I know, this too shall pass, as my obstetrician reminded me years ago when my young children were fraying my last nerve.

This too shall pass. Just need to persevere a few more weeks, then a final round of chemo to ramp things up. But I'll be okay. Lots of people have been up this mountain and survived. I'll keep writing and processing this science experiment I've become. Each day brings a new experience – something new to examine. Is that the start of a camel's hump on my back? That must be where all the water's going. At least I'm a Dromedary and not a Bactrian.

I'm a shit show, but I'm still here. I'm surrounded by people who love me and keep me sane. They lie and tell me I look good. I know better but appreciate their kindness and generosity. Friends come by with magazines and goodie bags of puzzles and word games. Others get me up for walks – even short ones - to be sure I see the sun. My teenage children check on me, even abasing themselves to watch bad TV with me.

My husband cooks and cleans and walks our pack of mongrels. When I first came home after surgery, he took care of my multiple drains, emptying and logging the milliliters of fluid I continued to secrete. I felt like a voodoo high priestess donning shrunken heads, as they were looped on a piece of elastic around my neck, while I showered.

To say I wasn't always grateful for his gentle ministrations and patience is an understatement. I'm not a silent sufferer. I spit venom, claws out when I lose control over things – especially bodily things. It's difficult to feel grateful and loving when retching over the toilet or coming out of the shower with handfuls of hair. But my John – he smiles sweetly, makes a stupid joke and before I know it, I'm laughing – murderous thoughts and hatred gone. Or at least suppressed until the next degrading moment. And that's how we get by… one moment to the next.

Last weekend we came up to Clifford (our farmhouse named by our daughter because it's red and full of dogs). We bought the house a few months back and it needs work. We've been fixing things up, slowly. John decided we needed to mount the deer heads gifted to us by a friend, Sharon. Over the years I've used Sharon's hunting spoils as educational biofacts for wildlife talks I present at schools around the city. We have two large deer heads and it's time they hung in a place of honor. John and our son, Sam hung them – one over the fireplace

and another on an adjacent wall. Neither is centered or well-placed. The larger, more impressive buck is on a side wall, looking at you from wherever you are standing in the room. The smaller one – the one Sharon told me I could not hang in a place of prominence, due to its wonky antlers, is over the fireplace, off-center, looking somewhere left of center.

John stood back, admiring his handiwork and smiled to our son, nodding. He could see me cringing in the corner, fighting to keep my ungrateful heart and judgmental mouth shut. He put an arm over my shoulders, not meeting my eyes, pulling me back to get a good look at his artistry.

Hugging me close, he whispered, "Honey, some places have Feng Shui. We've got Fuck Shui."

I laughed so hard, tears poured from my eyes. I look at those deer heads with new appreciation. Yup, we've got Fuck Shui – something off kilter and out of balance. From my altered taste buds and newly shaven head to steroid driven cravings for eggs … nothing's quite right. And it isn't supposed to be. I still have rocky mountain roads ahead with another surgery around the corner after chemo. They'll likely make me wear those damn panties again. Maybe this time I'll say no. Right now, I feel particularly Fuck Shui – mentally and physically. It won't last forever, but for right now – that's where I am. And that's okay.

Sky Smith

Dress

“Do you like my dress?”

She’s melting off the window sill.
The mirror she wears reflects the colors of the night.

“I like it because no one sees me.”

The city’s red,
the fabric, once blue,
is now purple.

Her canary hair gets lost in the starless, black, slipstream.

I’d have thought her a ghost
if not for the champagne and sequins she left behind.

Sky Smith

For You

I dressed for you
in clothes that fit me
but lacked the room to carry my grief.

I thought you'd like it.

I thought it's what you wanted from me.

But the dress was too sheer to cover the harm already done-
too light to obscure the scar tissue and darkness.

I think it sickened you to see me like this,
but what can I do?
Try to anticipate your moods
and end up reviled all the same?

So, I remove the dress,
naked and mangled.

But at least should you crucify me,
you will crucify the true me

and not the "me" you thought I ought to be.

Sky Smith

Goodbye Josephine

She wrote of her death
in the language of a mother.
Still,
just like all ink, the black snake runs slow.
Her dusted sickness
clung in the creases of a letter.
Her hands shake,
but there's no baby this sound would wake.
So the silence speaks,

"Goodbye Josephine."

Sky Smith

Psychedelic

She's in there,
painted in a psychedelic kind of way.

A few long-haired cats laying around
dead or passed out.

Wordless talk.

Hippies playing guitars to Halloween costume rejects.

I don't know her name.
Beat-up jeans.
Dirty shirt.

Surrounded by junkies, she's unpolluted.

She stands tall and pale,
like some anemic magnolia.

And I know I'm saved when the angel speaks,
"Do you know yourself,"
"or is that why you met me?"

Brett Ann Stanciu

The Baby Clothes I Threw Out

When my husband and I contemplated a second child, my mother insisted, "I don't think that will happen for you." We were sitting in my mother's kitchen drinking jug red wine. My mother pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at me in her way that made me squirm, as if I had requested the possession of the moon as a birthday present.

My husband and I owned a maple sugaring business on a dirt road in northern Vermont. We were busy — who isn't busy with a little kid? Our imaginative five-year-old daughter was sparkly and curious, and I passed countless hours biking or exploring streams or building tiny houses of blankets. Unhappiness was what really crammed our lives. In those years, I was a drinker. My husband and I both believed, fervently, that if I quit drinking our lives would miraculously transform. We might even begin to resemble the kind of loving family in The Boxcar Children series our daughter devoured.

What we didn't see is my drinking was not so much the problem but the manifestation of our submerged stories of my misery and his depression. Put that much thwarted desire together, and it shouldn't be a surprise that one of us drank too much.

*

Before we conceived for the second time, I whispered over our pillows one night to my husband, "I'm going to need help second time around with a baby." We came to a kind of pact, which neither of us wrote down.

I quit drinking. Our daughter began kindergarten. The autumn was unseasonably warm. In early October, a friend and I swam in a lake in northern Vermont with our two children. That night, tidying the house after our daughter was in bed, I realized my period was late.

This was the second go-around with a home pregnancy test. I didn't mention anything to my husband. In fact, as a sign of our disheveled marriage, I didn't mention anything for a good long while.

*

Six months pregnant, the three of us traveled from Vermont to Santa Fe for my brother's wedding. It was New England February and cold and a snowstorm threatened. My sister's family had flown in a few days earlier. They had taken over my parents' suite at one end of the house. My parents, who apparently were feuding again, had divided and conquered the remaining beds. My father commandeered the guest room. My mother sequestered herself in her sewing room. That left a couch suitable for one in a hallway that was a pass-through to my father's study. My mother splurged on a Wal-Mart blow-up mattress for his study's tiled floor.

I took the mattress on the floor with our daughter; my husband slept on the couch. Early in this pregnancy, I had caught a cold at a rainy fall farmers market when I stood outside for six hours, selling maple syrup with my five-year-old. The cold had transformed into a persistent sinus infection. During the night, the mattress deflated. I woke with my aching hips buffeted by a piece of plastic on the tile floor.

That morning, I stood in my mother's kitchen drinking a cup of tea and admiring the snowy New Mexico landscape through the windows. She stared at my body and insisted that I didn't look pregnant. "Are you sure? No one looking at you would think you're pregnant."

I was nearing the final trimester of pregnancy. While traveling, strangers smiled at me and wished me well.

My mother reiterated that she didn't believe I was pregnant.

*

The first night we were there, my mother held a sixth birthday party for my daughter who was joyous with a peppermint-pink cake and a pile of presents. At the very last, a square Baby Gap box with a silver bow appeared on the table. I exhaled in relief and exclaimed, "For the baby." My daughter opened this final present. Inside was a preemie baby onesie embroidered with Little Prince. My mother insisted the clothing was for my daughter's babydoll. My daughter had named her doll Sabrina.

My frugal mother rarely bought new clothes. She must have wandered into the preemie section and chose blue clothing for a boy; she knew my daughter longed for a sister. In my pregnancy mind, I took this as a curse for a too-early delivery, for a baby who might arrive with a caul of suffering.

The outfit, of course, did not fit Sabrina.

When we returned home, I threw the Little Prince onesie in the kitchen garbage.

*

My daughter G was born on a warm May morning in the lilac and apple blossom season. I had a black fly bite on my belly. My brother drove over from New Hampshire for the day. A cell phone with a camera was a new thing in those days, but he forgot his phone and had no photo to send to our parents. He and my husband and our kindergartener went out to lunch. She ate French fries.

*

In the days after G's birth, my mother phoned and asked if my husband was disappointed. "All men want a son," she said.

"No one who sees this beautiful child could be disappointed," I replied.

Like G, I am the second child and second daughter. When I was girl and strangers asked my mother why they chose to have three children, she answered, "We wanted a son." Again, those pursed lips and intense eyes aimed at me as though I had naughtily chosen to be a girl.

When my sister and brother and I were children, my mother scolded us for what she called shenanigans, an allegation with no jovial undertones.

I was the mistake my brother's birth amended. His presence repaired my shenanigans.

*

In her eighties, my mother's memory faltered. As my youngest grew into young womanhood, my mother slipped back into childhood. After one hospitalization, my mother walked out of the bathroom and cheerfully pointed to the toilet behind her. "I'm supposed to do something but I don't know what it is." She had forgotten how to flush.

These were the pandemic years, and my youngest grew up. By then, her father and I had divorced. He had gone his way, and our daughters had come with me. We could point to specific things: my former drinking (I was now years into recovery) and his depression. Each of us — he with his hunger for heroism, me with my desire to write, and

the apparent impossibility of joining our needs — struggled. But it took me years to see that we were swept along in the riptide of our past, too. My parents and his parents had plenty in their lives they had not resolved, and those things boiled up in our lives. On a national level, the pandemic laid bare the nation's longstanding unsettled saga. White patriarchy. Slavery and embedded racism. The ravages of end-stage capitalism.

Our lives, of course, continued. G got a driver's license, a job, a bank account. My brother gave her a car. She plotted her path to college. My mother forgot this granddaughter's name, somehow vaguely thinking my daughter was perpetually in the middle childhood years of eight or nine or ten. Instead, my youngest was smoking weed and drinking beer and making out with the local boys. She dreamed of law school and a federal government career. She wanted to position herself smartly as the world around her crumbled.

My mother had sparsely shared snippets of her childhood. Her life — in my girlhood memory — seemed to have begun with her marriage. Sitting beside her in the hospital, her lungs heaving against COPD, I wheedled and picked at her. Nothing. As she slid inexorably into the grayness of very old age, I dragged a few things from my childhood memory. Her father was a Lutheran minister. Her mother played the church organ and hated being the minister's wife and despised cooking Sunday dinners. The minister hung a thin wooden switch over his study door and Sundays after church used it on his daughters' bare legs. "Oooo," I remembered her saying. "I hated that switch."

My mother was the middle child in a family of three daughters. No sons.

*

A few days before G's birth, I stood at the end of our long driveway. On the country dirt road, no one else was around in the early evening. Song sparrows sang in a white pine. In the distance, I heard a roar that grew louder and louder. Then a column of four-wheelers, two dozen or more, raced by in a cacophonous rush.

In my belly, my unborn child lurched against my ribs as though woken from dreamy intrauterine sleep. As the ATVs disappeared around the road's curve and the brown dust settled, I spoke quietly to this babe, my hands on my round belly to calm her.

Although she had not yet swallowed her first breath of air, my daughter was already part of this world. As her body grew from zygote to baby in my warm womb, fed by kale and eggs and butter, she had already traveled from backroads Vermont to my mother's New Mexico house where I was miserable. I had yet to sweep my fingertips over this baby's chin and cheeks, know her gender, suckle and comfort her against my milk-swollen breasts, but I mark that moment with the choking dust and the roaring machinery as the first time I met this child.

When I was a first-time starry-eyed young mother, I fervently trusted the might of love and good will. From my well of enthusiasm and joy I would rock motherhood. Six years later, second pregnancy, I contemplated that dirt road and the great unstoppable forces that rushed towards us.

Unborn, her story — and my story and my mother's story — was already surrounding and shaping her. Her great-grandfather's wooden switch. The secret of her conception I kept from her father. The Little Prince suit. The birth order imprint of second daughter. Through flesh and fluid and sac, my hands cradled my daughter. How much I wanted to see her tiny face, to begin to know this person, as she makes her way in this world.

Maeve Stemp

Elegy for Female Friendships

You and I cry in the corner of the kitchen the way we watch movies:

Interlaced, we fit into the horrible *I know what it's like*s of each other, the awful *I am here too*s, the necessity of the *I will hear you*s and the fact that love is based on survival.

I will beg them not to let you into the taxis and for her not to pick up the phone again, and you will tell me to look both ways when I leave the house, and she

Will tell me that she has made dinner, I

Will tell you I can be over in five minutes, and that she is on her way faster.

We will walk around the block of your house so we can talk for a while longer.

Love is about survival, but our survival is about joy:

Interlaced, we fit into the wonder-filled *I have a plan for tonight*s, the childhood *I have something to tell you*s, the happy, happy *I love you*s on your way out the door, on her way up the stairs, as she leaves the living room, before I fall asleep.

We will know the worst of it. We were born that way. But we will all sit on my bed that creaks under the load, and as I clutch the pillow to my chest, you will say:

I know what that is like. I am here too.

And for everything in the world, I wish you did not know. But if we are to stand alone in the darkness, it is nice to have a hand to reach out, and to hold.

Dawn Stoltzfus

Pregnancy Dreams

I imagine most women
have them, at some point:
sweeping, nocturnal night-mists
dreams of immaculate conceptions,
unexpected children,
strange news from a doctor or a friend.

When I was young, they were
frightening, pulsing panics
who? when? how on Earth
will I care for
this howling little life?

Sometimes they were mini monsters,
David-Lynch-Eraserhead chickens.
Sometimes they were dragons.
Sometimes they were fully grown
and had been here all along,
already part of the family,
taller than me, in fact -- I'd just forgotten.

In my thirties, when I longed for a child,
pregnancy dreams delivered joy, excitement --
sunrise disappointment.

What does it mean now
as I approach a half-century
to conjure such dark surprise?

In the dream, I told her, *the test can't be right,*
I just have the flu.

How can this be? My body can't do this.
Will the child be sound? Safe?
Complete?

There are no answers
just a waking, disquiet, discomfort
four days before fifty.

And now the meaning is different
when a raging country steals decisions
about babies to choose, or not to choose.

The teenage panic surges back,
catching in my throat then
washing my body like a storm.

Erin Stoodley

At a Space Goth Party, Playing House

In the kitchen, bodies pressed wet, dented
in foil. Viral heads, hair spiked

with gel. Your friend, face bound
by fishnets, gapes a hole at the mouth

for eating. There is nothing graceful
in our inebriation.

Shoved into the dim foyer, we lurch
to "Gasolina," the ricocheted opening.

I raise my arms
to elicit your touch, sway

so the sweat-dusted light dissolves between us.
Then your hands, slipping

from my waist. I do not have to lift my gaze
to know you've left.

Following the glowsticks to the basement,
I duck my head but still

I hit the pool noodle
protecting the pipes. I imagine this house

a body. My body, a cordoned room.
What's left of night I've found

in its pulsing ceiling.
On the floor, an undressed mannequin

painted black. You stroke its abdomen,
sheathed in a slip of moonlight.

I can feel every hand
I have ever let touch me.

Christie Tate

Three Caskets in Plano, Texas

On a mid-spring Thursday night in Plano, in an affluent suburb outside of Dallas—after dark, after the late-night talk shows had begun—a 19-year-old man, who was really a kid, dialed 911 and confessed to the dispatcher that he'd "killed them," referring to his mother and his sixteen-year-old brother. The man-kid died at the hospital about an hour later from a self-inflicted stab wound. This murder-suicide took place in 2016, and one year before Texas was ranked 34th in the nation for affordable access to healthcare[1]; and five years before Plano was named "the safest city in Texas."[2]

I feel queasy writing about this because I wonder if it's my story to tell. When I weigh my connection to these events, there's a seizing under my ribs that I associate with shame. Do I have any right to tell this story? I know the grandmother of the man-kid. Her name is Lana, and she and my mom have been best friends since their twenties. It was at one of Lana's parties that my parents met. I knew Lana's daughter Stacy, the slain mother, but I never met Stacy's sons. Growing up, on Christmas morning, our families would visit, usually at Lana's house in Plano because it was a spacious "new build" with plenty of room for us kids to romp around. For the first few minutes of our annual reunion, Stacy and I would circle each other shyly, wondering: *Are we still friendly? Did anything change from last year that made you not want to hang out with me?* Stacy was two years older than I was, so she wore a bra, make-up, and earrings before I did. She also had her own bathroom with giant mirrors and a little stool to sit on. Once we warmed up, we'd disappear into her bathroom, where she'd curl my hair and apply colorful make-up to my eager face. At the end of each visit, Lana would hand me a bag of Stacy's hand-me-down clothes that smelled floral and clean, just like their house. When Lana divorced Stacy's dad, our Christmas visits stopped. I hadn't seen her in decades when my Dad called to tell me she'd been killed by her son. "Where'd he get the gun?" I asked, and my Dad said, "No gun. A knife." I forced myself to think, not of Stacy's mauled body, but of Lana's anguish, all of her losses: daughter and two

[1] https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/state/TX?edition-year=2017

[2] https://localprofile.com/2021/10/13/plano-named-safest-city-in-texas-2021/

grandsons. “Where’s Mom?” I asked Dad. “She’s at Lana’s.” My breath shallowed as my body absorbed the magnitude of this tragedy.

The young man-kid had used a kitchen knife to end his life and the lives of his mother and younger brother. Stacy’s brother had been notified about the deaths first, and he told the police that he wanted to be the one to tell Lana. In the early predawn light, Lana watched her son, somber as a convict, walking up the steps and knew, as mothers’ hearts know: Something terrible had happened.

One hour after my Dad called with the news, I showed up for my regularly scheduled group therapy appointment. Breathless, I told the story of Lana, Stacy, and her sons. I talked too fast; no one could keep the story straight. “Your mom was friends with Stacy?” “No, Lana. Stacy was her daughter.” We kept getting tangled in the names and relationships. One guy in my group sighed in frustration. “Why are we talking about these people we don’t know?” I lost my temper and blew up. “I did know these people! I wore Stacy’s jeans in fifth grade! Lana took care of me when my Mom went to the hospital to have my little sister! This is a story about real people!” Cowed, the annoyed group member apologized. “I guess this is a big deal.”

The night after I heard the news, I dove into the national favorite pastime of the anxious: surfing the internet. Like everyone who Googles late at night, I was on the hunt for definitive answers, informational comfort. What had happened in their apartment that night? What makes a 19-year-old turn on his mother and his little brother? I wanted a fat file of research: *This is why; these were the warning signs; this is how you prevent it from ever happening to you.* The man-kid had been a popular high school basketball player just the year before. But during his senior year, he suffered two concussions, one from playing basketball and one from horsing around after school. Family and friends reported that, following the head injuries, he was never the same. He’d turned moody, though no one read it as murderous. He wasn’t himself, but no one could foresee the extent of his mental alteration. My Dad told me that Lana was supposed to accompany Stacy and her sick son to a neurology appointment scheduled a few days after their deaths. They’d waited months for that appointment.

I found a picture of the now-deceased brothers on a Dallas news website. They stand on a rocky shore, both wearing baseball caps backwards and staring at the camera with blazing brown eyes. They have Stacy’s perfect teeth. You can tell they’re athletic from their ropey arms and defined shoulders. You can imagine them playing a pick-up game in

the park or talking brotherly trash-talk, witty and harmless. You cannot see violence or tragedy shadowing these two young faces. They are boys I would have likely had a crush on had they turned their high-beam smiles on me during English class or passing through the cafeteria.

I know from my mom that Stacy's ex, the boys' father, was laxed about sending child support. Their father had burner cell phones, was hard to reach. As a single mom with the kind of blond, natural beauty revered in Texas, Stacy scraped by financially as a food critic and home chef who appeared on local TV stations showing viewers how to cook on a budget. She should know; she'd learned to feed her sons with staples she procured at the food bank when money was tight. Her spirited segments earned her the nickname "Dallas' favorite foodie." Local cooking fame was entertaining and all, but it didn't cover the bills, and when her son suffered from one brain injury and then another, she scrambled to find neurologists and other traumatic brain injury specialists. The co-pays were astronomical; the waiting time for appointments was interminable. Still, in every cooking segment she smiled and whipped up family-friendly fare, no hints that her older son's dark moods were growing ever darker.

As for warning signs, the Dallas newspapers wanted to root them out as well. In an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, one of Stacy's neighbors recounted that, sometimes, Stacy would ask for help looking for her son because he "would run off," spurring a group of concerned neighbors to spread out and search for him. One friend of Stacy's sons told reporters that two days before the murder-suicide, Stacy's troubled son tweeted that he would "be the next to die," but no one noticed the ominous message until it was too late. His dark moods were well known, but they had that neurology appointment scheduled.

The funeral was broadcast on a live feed, and I watched it on my phone from Chicago. I saw my Mom and Dad file into a pew toward the front just behind the family. As I watched, I walked along a sparse stretch of Lake Michigan south of McCormick Place Convention Center where no one would see me crying. The funeral service celebrated all three of their lives, Stacy and her two sons—there was no separating the sick son from his brother and mother. They would be memorialized and buried together, as Stacy would have wanted. Toward the end of the service, Lana stood behind a podium, wearing her younger grandson's letter jacket. She addressed the rows of grieving students, friends of her grandson's, trying to make sense of these three losses. She honored

Stacy's life—her mothering, her donations to the Dallas food bank that once fed her family, her generous too-short life, and the lives of her sons.

Last March, after Stacy had been gone five years, Lana came over to my parents' house while I was visiting with my family. She fawned over my children. She sported the same million-watt smile I recognized in Stacy and her grandsons. She showed my daughter her sparkly green nail polish in celebration of St. Patrick's Day. She mentioned Stacy a few times, in passing. Like *Stacy loved nail polish too* or *Stacy knew how to cook butterscotch cookies.* She also said that when she'd lost her phone at the beach a month earlier, she retraced her steps and miraculously found it half-buried in the sand. "Thank you, Stacy," she'd said, looking upward, as if Stacy, now an angel, had been the one to guide her to her lost phone.

I've tried not to write about Stacy and her sons for five years. *It's not your place. This doesn't belong to you. Mind your own business.* And yet here are these paragraphs that won't stay put inside me—they sneak out in writing workshops, journal entries, responses to prompts. *Write about a time a news story touched your life. Write about a knife. Write about mercy*. I've diagnosed my interest as partly survivor's guilt—I idolized Stacy back in her bathroom on those Christmas mornings. She was everything I wanted to be: peppy, friendly, great with make-up. What I wouldn't have given for her mega-watt smile and Lip Smackers strawberry-flavored lip gloss. How did she perish in a violent act that I can hardly imagine? And what about the food pantry days? Stacy had been hungry, and I hadn't even known until I watched a tribute segment on YouTube after her death. As distant as we'd grown, shouldn't I have been part of the safety net that caught her and her sons before the sharp blade of poverty nicked their bodies?

I also have a sporty son; baseball's his game. Last summer, he came home from a tournament with an angry red welt on his cheek. "A grounder bounced off my glove and hit me in the face." I fished a bag of peas out of the freezer and held it to his cheek. In the back of my mind, I pushed away the thought that what happened to Stacy's family could happen to mine, that what I know of my son—his sweetness, humor, and ability to connect with others—could be snuffed out by a ball or a bat, a fall or a hit.

It could absolutely happen to anyone. So partly my interest is in keeping my eyes open, standing guard against anything that might scramble my son's brain and put us all in danger.

The haunting question is whether writing about Stacy's death honors her or exploits her or her son's illness. Is it enough to hope that these handful of paragraphs expose something ill in our culture, not just in the body of one troubled young man in Texas? In service of exposing something broken in our system, have I unfairly linked her to her sensational death? Is there a way to direct your attention to those three caskets—the family buried together in an extraordinary act of mercy—without telling you the more gruesome parts? Can we really reckon with the cost of shitty healthcare and failing social systems if we don't look directly at the knife, the missed child support, the food bank, the far-off neurology appointment? Is there a way to do this that doesn't dirty all hands?

Shelly Reed Thieman

In Place of Pomp

There must be something
I can meditate upon besides sixty.
I'm *that* today with little to do
in this sideshow of ice and snow
but warm the ramen, feed the fire
and stoke the cat, whose speckled
paws flutter with slumber.

Beneath this wedge of winter sky
darkened like a damaged pear,
quaking aspens dream blinding gold,
the maples, bonfire orange.

In the hallway mirror I study
the astrology of my face.
Tattered pinwheels of fading stars
blink back and I remember silhouettes
of brief epiphanies folding
and unfolding like paper fans…

a heart skipping
the mystery of a mouth
the reverence of breath.

I am Aquarius, an air sign,
a homonym, an heir of hymn
born with a burning flame
on my tongue and in my hands.
I rouse the woodstove with birch.

Shelly Reed Thieman

Parade Wave for my Father

Forever clean-shaven, you whistled
when you worked, while you flipped
our Saturday morning pancakes
and passed the Sunday offering plate.

At the annual Drake Relays parade
you wolf-whistled festival queens
while they *elbow/elbow-wrist/wrist*
waved to you atop always blue

Catalina convertibles. Mother elbowed
you in the ribs every time, still wearing
her colossal Runway Red, lip-sticked smile
and always, softened leather gloves.

She dreamed her own daughters
would have cause to master this British
royal oscillation of the hand from the wrist
with minimal input from elbow or shoulder.

None of us garnered that distinguished title
nor princess status, but as we stood ankle-deep
in Thanksgiving snow, graveside, we saluted
your casket with our impeccable parade waves.

Decades later it turns the corner
again, like a marching band or a lopsided
float—November—with its gimp stagger
and rations of Cover Girl tears.

Shelly Reed Thieman

The Truth About the 1968 Block Party

You send us on our way to the Jansen's house
with picnic basket, lawn chairs, plastic place
settings for four, and your scalloped corn
casserole. *See you after work*, you chortle.

We relish the summer afternoon, Dad
with his Old Milwaukee six-pack, Sister,
me and the neighbor kids flinging neon
frisbees that glow like UFOs.

Grownups lounge in collapsible chairs
in the middle of the street—men talk Mustangs
and lawn mowers, women tear recipes
from magazines like husks from sweet corn.

We kids fill and fire our squirt guns, giddy
with relief from the heat when we're hit.
You arrive late afternoon from your modeling
job at Cownie Furs, still in runway makeup,

your long, chestnut hair dyed auburn
and cut like Twiggy's, pixie style.
Dad sees red all right, takes you aside
by the arm while words pass between

you, inaudible thunder simmering.
We leave him buzzed at the block party,
head home with our toys and empty basket
despite protests that we haven't eaten yet.

You instruct us to *get in the car, McDonald's
for dinner, even fries and apple pies tonight*.
Backing down the drive, you glance
at us in the rearview mirror, then

Don't ever let a man tell you

how to wear your hair, Girls.

Saadia Van Winkle

Bodies of Water I Saw During My Marriage's Demise

We didn't mean to live in the woods. An old fishing cabin that served as our tiny escape from the city with a dorm fridge and no insulation from the brutal upstate winter winds had suddenly become home. First for a few months, then a couple seasons, then the vaccines came and we thought we could finally get back to our old lives. But no, here it comes again. Somehow, another year gone.

K and I are solid throughout, sanctimoniously congratulating ourselves for not having children to educate and entertain during these endless days. We take edibles and bob in our pandemic-purchased hot tub and cook elaborate meals and open the good wine. Eating and drinking and lounging have always been our thing, so we are happy to ride it out in these 400 square feet.

Then, the dog gets sick. She is not just any dog; she is a magical dog. She is pure and wise and sparkly. A chihuahua mixed with some kind of scruffy terrier, she is impossibly charming — helping our friend get laid at a Brooklyn dive bar on Christmas Eve by drawing in a handsome stranger. People stop us on the street, begging to pet her and delighting in the way her fluff of top hair easily molds into a mohawk.

But partway through the pandemic, the sweet dog's ribs begin to protrude against her milky skin. I tell K for months there is something wrong with her, but he assures me I am mistaken. When she is suddenly half her weight, he finally agrees there is a problem.

We do what it takes to try and save her – the $2,500 MRI, the nonstop emergency visits, the twice-weekly rehab the vet insists are worth it even though there are no muscles left on her fragile bones that creak and crack. She cries in pain, staring at me with frightened eyes as the therapist wills her tiny legs where they do not want to go. I imagine running out of there with what's left of her three-pound body, but I'm assured this is the process, trust the process, as I hand over another $500 for a new block of sessions to torture my dearest friend.

The stress of it all is so much. As women in straight relationships almost always do, I make the appointments and buy the medications and research the specialists and file the bills with the insurance adjusters, whose premiums I pay with my salary, which has ballooned to eight times what K's is, one of many things we avoid talking about these days. K drives us to the vet sometimes. He loves the sparkly dog too, but he

doesn't willingly partake in things he finds inconvenient. We fight over what to feed her, which turns into a knock-down-drag-out litigation of the same argument we've had for the dozen years of our marriage: why, without fail, am I always doing the heavy lifting?

Early one January morning the magic dog soils herself, and we clamor to hose her off in the shower. Suddenly, we realize her defecation is mixed with blood. My throat feels like it's closing as I search to find my phone to call the vet who is not yet there anyway. K stops me. "It's too late."

We hold each other close for a while, our grief a glue. But then he moves on, and I sob openly in my office between meetings and quietly into my pillow at night after he's already fallen asleep. I realize I haven't slept well in months, and resent K's heavy breathing and compartmentalized mind.

The world starts to open back up, events resume. We are invited to the wedding of his dead sister's husband, his new bride a bubbly schoolteacher who everyone agrees is very unlikely to drink herself to death in front of the children like the last one. The wedding is not only in the town we got married in, but nearly the same location. Ours, a humble community pool house. Theirs, a beautiful glass building with panoramic views of the Chesapeake Bay. But we say our vows in the same sand, nearly 13 years apart. I think about how young 29 feels now that I'm middle-aged like K was when we got married.

At this wedding, his brother gets drunk on dark glasses of Dewar's and soda. He is an arrogant, chain-smoking, monologizing boor. At our wedding he gives a toast, at his insistence. *We don't really know her, but we DO know she's a woman. And thank God, since all these years we were worried he was gay!* A musician who scrapes together a living covering folk classics at dockside restaurants, we ask him to play a love song to ensure he feels included. We suggest something in his wheel house of Lite FM glory, maybe John Hiatt's Have a Little Faith in Me. His selection? A Horse with No Name.

A year before this latest wedding, he says the n-word during a family beach trip. The table of white relatives make vague sounds of discomfort, shaking the melting ice in their G&Ts. It is just me, the only melanated one there, who opens my mouth. K grabs my hand, but the amount of pressure he exerts lets me know it's a gesture meant to elicit silence, not express support.

As soon as we are on the road back home the next afternoon, our ankles still dusted with sand, I tell K this can't happen again. That he

must speak to his brother, explain to him that times are different and he must evolve past his neanderthal ways. K says he understands.

Yet a year later, the conversation has been ignored and the brother remains on brand. He has self-published an 800-page memoir about a sailing trip he took three decades ago on the Amazon, and announces to the new wife's book club that they're fortunate to be in the presence of two real-life authors. Himself, *obviously*. And his daughter, whose high school paper has just published her book report about Kosovo. A little buzzed off the free Veuve, I remind him that I, too, am a published writer.

He pretends not to hear me and instead attempts to convince the elderly women at the table that Playboy really does have some great articles. All the years of resentment begin to uncoil from my center, the burning tendrils animating my tongue. K, sensing an impending disaster, hurriedly suggests I walk with him to the beach we got married on. We sit on the dock, our feet dangling above the cloudy water. Merely bland from afar, it's so ugly up close. K meets my gaze and inquires, "what's your fucking problem?"

Nothing good comes from this, just an unloading of a decade and a half's worth of acrimony, which continues the next day on the six-hour drive home. K lets out a monkey screech and pounds the steering wheel furiously as he lets free the effects of hiding 53 years of unresolved trauma about his alcoholic dad and a resulting personality defined mainly by conflict avoidance. "THIS IS WHO I AM!!! Deal with it or don't, but I'm not changing," he howls. I dab at my tears with a rough napkin from Taco Bell as we cross over the Delaware Memorial Bridge, mentally calculating whether I would die or just be paralyzed if I jumped from its pinnacle.

Our fighting continues when we get back upstate, resulting in K refusing to speak to me any further and retreating to the single bed in my office across the yard to sleep. The decision to avoid high NYC rent and instead stay in this isolated, tiny space feels excruciatingly ill-advised now that our big feelings are out in the open.

I search online for couples counseling, but he flatly refuses to take part. I ask him how he can possibly throw our relationship away without a fight. He tells me does not like arguing, can't do it. Childhood memories, drunk daddy, too much yelling. I say, maybe this is a reason to get counseling. *Why? I already know what's wrong.* I stare at him, stunned by how utterly unbothered he is by it all. I know I am not allowed to compare trauma, so I swallow what I really want to say —

that if I survived a childhood of abuse so dramatic it led to a legal case that changed the laws of the entire country and still manage to function, maybe he could try a little harder to get it together?

Desperate to salvage my quickly-vanishing relationship, without questioning whether that drive stems from desire or obligation, I ask K what he needs ahead of our long-planned journey to live in New Orleans for the summer.

"Space," he announces. He lets me know he will not be joining me on our trip for at least several weeks as he "works on his own shit." I am stunned, we have never been apart for longer than a few weeks at a time, and have never separated. He dismisses my fears of distance, my pleas that it is dangerous to be thousands of miles apart at the worst point in our marriage. He promises it will be good for us, that we will check in often, that we'll both have time to think and grow.

I pack up my things and leave, wondering if we have just spent our last night sleeping in the same bed. K does not keep his promise — any attempt I make at communication is ignored. When he finally agrees to speak a week later, his avoidance has metastasized into cruelty. He is cold, hard, stoic. I spin out, begging for reassurance that he's still in this, that the last 15 years dedicated to this person weren't an epic waste. I ask him if he still loves me, given he's been acting like the opposite lately. He refuses to answer, instead admonishing that "it's the bad part" of me asking that question. He likes the power in this new dynamic, him in charge and me hunting for crumbs. I am crestfallen, silently wondering if it's healthy to believe I'm bad.

He doubles down on his disinterest in my pain and says he'll "consider" my non-negotiable of marriage counseling. He tells me not to contact him for a week. I know this is not how it should be, that I should have some say in the matter. But I am desperate, and with a time zone between us, I have no leverage in the situation. He has made sure I cannot confront him — a man so averse to conflict he'll force it onto a plane to be rid of it.

I arrive alone in the swampy June heat and wander the length of my shotgun rental, feeling like a ghost of myself. How can a life change so quickly?

I wake up two days later feeling as though I've swallowed razors and immediately know that, after two years of borrowed time, COVID has finally caught up with me. A test confirms it, and K is the first person I want to tell. I know I am breaking the rules, but surely your partner falling seriously ill a country away transcends the stubbornness of a bad

fight? He maintains his distant demeanor, but at least responds to my text. Ravaged by fever, I fantasize he is getting in the car to drive the 21 hours to be with me. Once the ibuprofen kicks in, I understand how stupid this hope is — he hasn't even cared enough to ask the address.

Despite my delirious state, I keep a consultation with a marriage counselor I've found through our health insurance's byzantine website. She is brusque and self-aggrandizing, but beggars can't be choosers and I have never felt so ready to fall to my knees. I ask her if we can start sessions immediately and she explains she's reached out to K, but he has not responded to her texts or email. I break down in the back room of the dark apartment, wet with fever and tears.

Sweaty, salty, sticky, burning sadness.

I clutch the tiny whiskey bottle holding some of the magic dog's ashes to my chest like a sloppy cosplay of a drunk Victorian. The tiny pieces left of her look like coarse sand. She was terrified of the ocean, trying desperately to avoid the waves the single time we tried walking her along the Long Island shore.

Lonely and ill, I've been thinking about my mother, how her wild temper pushed away everyone close to her so there's no one to call when her poor health routinely sends her to the emergency room.

What a terrible fate, to become the thing we most fear.

I cry for my lost best friend (the dog, not the husband), for all the years I've put into a relationship with someone who's turned into a stranger in just a few weeks, for the aching loneliness of being wildly sick and desperately unhappy.

I bemoan my stupidity in thinking my marriage made it through the pandemic unscathed, for believing that even at our worst, we were happier than most couples stressed with kids to raise and mortgages to pay on big houses in which to keep those kids. K is behaving selfishly, but he is bound by a sense of obligation and I can't imagine a world in which he would've left me if we had a child. I think of all my friends with kids, the ones who've been the most shocked by my sudden reversal of fortune — perhaps worried their husbands could also decide to become different people overnight. Or maybe coming to the realization that the kids are what keep them from doing so, the duty stronger than the love.

With no such complicating commitment, K's love has been revealed as superficial, my presence in his life easily disposable. In the once-weekly video call he's granted me, he explains the conditions to regaining his affections are that I stop being so damn angry all the time,

and refrain from saying crazy things like his brother is a racist and a homophobe.

I'd like to stop being so angry, but I recognize this is not the problem. The real issue that has caused K to exile me is that I refuse to stop telling the truth. I think about K's uncomfortability with my anger. He is not wrong — rage courses through my veins in equal measure to blood these days. At him, at other men like him, at our hideously misogynistic political system that allows religious zealots to control our lives. Why are these men not infuriated on our behalf? Perhaps it is their lack of anger and their unassailable privilege to not have strong emotions that makes women so fucking enraged. To exist in America as a woman, particularly a woman of color, is to live in a constant state of fury.

I contemplate K's underlying offer to love me again — if I trade in my unfiltered honesty and exorcise my rage, I can win back the partner who's decided stepping into his power can only happen through my annihilation. I'm healthy again now, no fever to burn away my sense. I see the bad deal for what it is, and reject it.

Instead, I attempt to convince him I am lovable as I am. After weeks of searching I find an older, white male couples counselor and K finally agrees to marriage counseling. Following the second session, the distracted but kind hippie therapist sends me an email stating that based on K's "non-committal attitude and avoidant behavior, you would best consider terminating the marriage." K agrees with the assessment, telling me he just doesn't have it in him to try. He despises fulfilling the hour meeting he's promised me per week, as long as I continue to pay all the bills. I hate myself for looking forward to seeing his unsmiling face on the zoom each Saturday afternoon. I put on makeup even though I always cry off my mascara.

Understanding that two contradicting things can be true at the same time is maybe the greatest lesson I've learned in adulthood.

When I inform K of my intentions to start dating now that we're officially separated and on the road to divorce, he says *like guys are really pushing the door down to go out with you?* So I go on a date, to prove him wrong and show myself there is a still a world beyond the crumbling walls of my marriage. The man smells like BO and wears a stretched out t-shirt shoved into stained denim cutoffs. He is two inches shorter than he said on his profile and tells me without shame, as I rail against the Roe v. Wade decision anyone with an internet connection knows is coming the next morning, that he doesn't understand what the Supreme Court does. *I just tune that stuff out, lol.* I swallow hard and pet

his fat dog, the primary reason I swiped right on his profile. Frustrated about the $40 I've already spent on a Lyft and round of drinks I insisted on paying for to show him I'm not interested — and knowing I am bigger than him if things get weird — I accept his offer to drive me back to my rental.

But he changes the rules once I'm in the car, claims he'd like to drop his dog off at his house first. It's in the opposite direction, across a canal with a drawbridge that mercilessly lowers its flashing red arms just as we approach its midsection. As if trained to do so, the dog lays its head sweetly on my knees and opens its belly to its owner, who happily obliges. For the next 20 minutes, he vigorously strokes the dog's stomach, casually letting his fingers fall onto my upper thigh. I push as close to the door as possible and stare straight ahead at the shrimp boat chugging through the dark water. If I got a running start, I could probably land on its stern. I'd emancipate the dog, cradling his plump body in my arms and waving up at his pervert owner, blowing him the kiss he wants so badly.

Instead, I have the creep drop me off a few blocks from my apartment. The tears begin falling as soon as I exit his sour-smelling truck and make my way down the darkened street, the prickly palm bushes that have managed to push through the pavement lashing my bare legs. The date texts me 15 minutes later, telling me what a great time he had. I stare at my phone and wonder how two people can experience the same thing so differently. When I do not respond to his initial message, the Cat Person living inside all straight men to varying degrees begins to emerge at 1:12 a.m. *Well, hopefully it wasn't too bad at least, you did get me to give you a free ride across the city lol.*

When I relay the evening to a seemingly more evolved date a few weeks later, he announces immediately that, if he had been in the same situation, he would've told the guy off and exited the car immediately. What he leaves unsaid is that in not doing so, I brought the unwanted groping upon myself and should just shut up about it already. *Have you ever been scared a date might hurt you?* I ask pointedly of this strapping man, who didn't lie about his height of 6'4." He rolls his eyes at my absurd question and orders another bottle of wine.

The next day, I'm invited to a lush Garden District estate owned by a wealthy friend-of-a-friend who spends hurricane season at her West Coast compound and is happy to know there's a weekly girls night making use of her empty mansion. Over wine and dinner, I explain the remnants of my life to the attentive women, eager to hear a stranger's

relationship woes. I relay the story of the smelly man who stroked my thigh, pre-emptively defending myself by explaining I was worried to get out of the truck because it was dark and desolate and I had my festive purple pepper spray in my bag if things really went south. They nod their heads knowingly and murmur a collective *of course*.

I tell them how I sobbed for an hour following the date, how upset I am with K for putting me in the position to have to be looking for a new person. Mad and sad is my new state of being, the evil twin emotions that keep me from sleeping more than two hours a night and make every bite of food taste like cardboard.

A doctor with sad eyes who helps the dying transition considers me thoughtfully as I explain that my normally kind husband has become a troll in the last month.

"Do you believe he can become kind again?" she asks.

"Yes," I say without hesitation. "But I'm just not sure that's enough anymore."

After dinner, we clear the plates and fill our glasses with cold white wine. We change into our swimsuits and step into the sauna-like heat of New Orleans in June, even at 10:30 at night. The pool water is illuminated and ripples gently, sending waves of light across the expansive patio.

I step in, and swim.

I return to New York, at once terrified and energized to determine whether the last 15 years of my life have been wasted on the wrong partner. It quickly becomes clear I was incorrect back in New Orleans, he is not capable of becoming kind again.

"I've realized I never loved you deeply," he says off-handedly from the corner of the bed in my office, where he has relocated after a refusal to leave the cabin upon my return. His thin lips are pressed firm, slicing a straight line through his sagging face. "If I did, then I wouldn't want a divorce."

I attempt to co-exist with him for a week, too exhausted to fight any longer. My newly-prescribed antidepressants have allowed me the gift of sleep, but the trade-off to not sobbing through the night is a foggy dullness that blunts my ability to do anything more than the bare minimum to not be fired by my clients.

Even through my medicated haze, my fury eventually finds its way through. I attempt to get answers out of him: *why did you never tell me you were unhappy until it was too late, how are you so sure this is the right choice, why won't you see a therapist*. He busies himself with

chopping up kale and carrots for the smoothie he drinks every morning, convinced it offsets the thick stack of gingersnaps he eats alongside it.

I open my mouth to ask another inane question he will not answer but he gestures to the blender and shrugs as he flips it on. He cranks it to full speed for a solid five minutes to avoid speaking to me. He stops when I'm sure it must be verging on the Vitamix's hot soup function, and I breathe deeply, trying to collect myself.

He realizes I'm about to speak again and hands me an empty glass. "Fill that with water," He instructs loudly. I've become more obedient these days, so I turn and run the tap. It's a gravity-fed well, apparently a very rare and valuable phenomenon. I don't pretend to be any geology expert, but the way I understand it is this: even though you can't see it, the force of what's happening underground is so powerful, all it needs is the right catalyst to explode in a new direction.

After two weeks, I'm certain I will soon lose my mind if he doesn't leave. Since he's been expressing the desire for a trad wife lately, I lean into the hysterical nature he has projected onto me. He tries to avoid me, but instead of matching his energy as I so desperately want to, I deliberately make things awkward. "If you don't want to talk to me then you should leave like you made me do for two months," I say.

He claims he cannot possibly afford to leave now that he's solely reliant on his own paycheck. I ask him to name his price, desperate to be free from this hellish reality tv plot of sharing a tiny house with a horrible ex. He balks, and it becomes clear he's staying because he's been told he must outfox me, make me leave the property so he can keep it. I find this exasperating on so many levels, namely — this is not how anything works, but the truth is no match if his brother found a reddit thread about it.

Something clicks — my brain finally registers it's over. It should be devastating, but instead I feel liberated. I morph into the physical manifestation of hell hath no fury like a (stubborn) woman scorned. He may be able to lock out emotions in a way that makes me ache with envy, but I know I try at everything — from saving our marriage to ending it — harder than him. He's out by the weekend.

We start virtual mediation, which turns out to be a very expensive way for us to scream at each other. It is clear no agreement will be had if we're left to figure it out for ourselves, which would require some modicum of good will for the other. In its absence, we are monsters tapped into our purest forms. Him, a hapless whiner. He pouts into the camera, hound dog eyes cartoonishly popping. "Look, I'm a reasonable

guy, I really am. But what she's offering me, this would have me living on the streets." He's a real Jimmy Stewart, if Mary Bailey went all career-woman and he was forced to leave her.

My essence is the opposite: the relentless bitch. "I think it's important to note the grotesque privilege here," I say, thinking of how cool it would be if my eyes could laser him in half through the screen. "I am offering him a six-figure settlement, four times what he contributed to our assets. My work is focused on helping people in poverty, and it's deeply offensive to me that this able-bodied, straight, white man is claiming he's going to be destitute living on the $125K he got from his much younger, Brown immigrant wife." His mouth drops open, and I force myself to contain a giggle. He realizes his good guy act has not seen the formidable foe that is my social justice schtick. He tries to protest, but the brilliance in what I've said is that it's all true.

"Well, maybe I want alimony after all," cornered, he's short-circuiting, going back on the one promise we made each other before starting these conversations. Another broken vow from him on top of the thought of paying him thousands of dollars every month for the next several years coats me in a dripping fury. It's so potent it's calm — hot lava pulsing in a slow but unstoppable current.

I am a panther stalking my prey. For the first time in months, I feel invigorated. "You come after alimony and mediation is over, I'm getting a lawyer," I narrow my eyes to adjust to the jungle's darkness.

"Oh dear, no, we don't want that," the mediator chirps, hoping her positive energy will diffuse onto us. "I mean, that will be at least $100,000."

Hearing the figure, K's face goes ashen. I'm surprised to realize he hasn't figured out yet that I'd most likely have to pay for his lawyer. For once, his apathy — first toward me, and now toward researching the divorce laws of New York state — feels like a gift.

I lean toward the glowing green circle of my laptop camera. "I will absolutely get a lawyer, and I will drag you to court, and I don't care how long it takes because at that point it will be about the principle of it, and we both know that's a fight I will always win. So make it $200,000. Because I'll earn every penny of that back, and you never will."

We are all stunned by my venom, not least of all me. My heart feels like it will pound right out of my chest, not used to so much aliveness after half a year of atrophy. I start to feel guilty but the last 15 years, the memory of the excruciating loneliness that comes from lying next to the wrong person, reminds me that I have my reasons.

We end up meeting in the middle of the half he demands and the 15 percent I think is more than fair — the ideal negotiation where both parties leave feeling screwed. We are not rich by any means (and by *we* I mean *me*, because now that I'm divorced I don't have to pretend like there was an equal amount of effort), but I get to keep the cabin and am able to scrape together enough to write K a check to go away.

My corporate lawyer friend, who has always been a romantic skeptic despite attracting and dismissing men who are literal MacArthur Geniuses, is drunk with glee at my retelling of the mediation fight. "MAKE IT $200K!!!" He squeals, writhing across his couch and onto the floor in fake death. I demur, but the aliveness has been sticking around for longer lately and whispers to me that yeah, that was pretty badass.

I leave my friend's Long Island City apartment and its postcard view of this glorious city I've been navigating successfully on my own for the past three months, something K insisted was impossible before scampering back to suburban Maryland to live on his brother's couch. I cross the East River, the afternoon winter light flaming the tops of barge wakes. I head up the FDR and across the George Washington Bridge, the route I once agonized over driving solo now second nature as I pass slow cars and flip on a corny podcast about living better through self-love.

I haven't made it that far quite yet, but I've been more earnest about taking part in the process of healing up my tender spots on my own lately, realizing it to be infinitely better than my former approach of pressing on them in front of strangers and hoping maybe one may try their hand at fixing them for me.

My back aches from the long drive. I struggle with the heavy top of the hot tub, it's not meant for one person to do alone, but it can be done — I have the bruises to prove it. The water closes its warm grip around me as I lower myself in and lay back.

I float.

Florence Weinberger

Senior Housing

There's another house in me, not the shelter where my books line up,
where I percolate and hang my clothes,
a perfect rectangle, jazzy fireplace, light pouring down through skylights,
and out the windows bird tracks and sun tricks so beguiling
they hazard my fingers when I'm unlatching bivalves.
Nearby a traditional market: artichokes, cabbages, blue-dyed tulips.

But a house of traps: high shelves, four steps, rugs that need mooring.
Miles from my nearest child.
Its foundation is faith I will wake the next morning.
Its shifts are the fear an indifferent gravity will drag me out the front
door, down those stairs, to a house with clamorous roommates
smelling of pills and piss.

They won't be curious about me,
they'll be paying attention to their feet and their past.
It won't be all bad, someone will knock on my door to see if I'm
breathing and wanting.
And this may not be the last house.
There could be others, some with green-painted walls, taut white sheets.

Or even another, surely the last, and
after I've reached that final place, I'll be tired. I might say, with a sigh,
about that last house, at last, a last house, one built with
good wood, with sturdy sides and a nailed-down roof. I can
finally get rid of books I'm never going to read. I won't need clothes.
I'll never have to move again.

Geraldine Kloos Weltman

You Clean the Kitchen Before Going to Bed

Remains of dinner in a pot,
lettuce leaves wilting in the salad bowl.
Don't obsess about the kitchen tonight,
he says. *It's late.* His tone critical,
as if a clean kitchen carried no moral weight.
So you don't stop yourself, you get huffy,
stove-top slicked with oil, counter flecked
with crumbs, fridge like a crime scene
with all those fingerprints.
You grab the pink sponge,
squeeze every last drop out of it,
swipe the sink-top as if to eliminate
every trace of -- *Save it for tomorrow,*
he says. But you're in a whirl,
sudsy in the sink with the scouring pad,
spraying soapy food particles into the strainer,
action of your arm somehow connected
to an easing at the back of your neck.
And when you raise your eyes,
the plates and pots line up
in their proper dishwasher racks,
the forks, knives, and spoons rest
in their proper dishwasher grooves,
all facing the same way.
The counter top positively shines,
trim, tidy, harmonious. And you know
he's right, you are just a bit obsessive,
but you're sure you'll sleep just fine tonight.
You're calm and clean
down to the bone.

Geraldine Kloos Weltman

Scientists Name New Species of Green Alga After Poet Amanda Gorman

We wanted to rejoice.
We knew we had discovered something
the world had never seen before.

We found it by accident –
could so easily have missed it,
ignored it, thrown it away.
But we were lucky to be paying attention
when we saw it growing
in our Petri dishes.

When we tried to name it,
brainstorming led us nowhere.
Millions were dying of the virus;
rioters had attacked the Capitol.
By comparison, our work
seemed meaningless
and we despaired.

But we watched the inauguration,
saw her alight there on the podium
like a golden, red-crested bird,
heard the song of her poem—
how we must *be* the light.
We thought of the green alga,
how it absorbs the light of the sun,
transforms carbon dioxide
into sugar for its own nourishment,
and oxygen to give us breath.
And we named it *Gormaniella terricola,*
for Amanda,
earthling.

Kelley White

A Lethal Condition

Daughter, when you lost your first
I couldn't tell you
of the child I'd carried
and wished away

'Each generation loses
a child or two, it's a lucky woman loses
none' say the grandmothers
and we know they're wise

Martha's son brought his child
home from the hospital, abnormal
She's small, she's lived a week, it's awful
finding how little I have to tell them
these parents, this grandmother
grasping at hope, any sign of a future:

the hospital said she'd beaten the odds:
5% chance of surviving a year
they've decorated a room
set up a crib, a car seat,
a playpen; the diagnosis was
completely unexpected, despite blood tests
ultrasounds, fetal monitors

this grandmother trusts me
to help them, and I am praying, daughter
I am far away and
your due date's growing near

Beth Oast Williams

Pinball

How thin the window
and yet a man only pretends
to listen to his wife
while playing with his own
reflection. (Insert here
the voice your dead mom
left in your head.)
How the doctor cut her open
to find mixed up lines
of nursery rhymes. You say
the soul never evolves,
it's only the eyes that age
and feed arcade machines
one coin at a time to make them
talk. You hit the pinball flipper
as if you have any control
over blood flow. Play
another game. You know
all our dead mothers
are alive in our veins.

Beth Oast Williams

Reaching For Forgiveness

I throw out
seeds
for birds intent at pecking
near my door

I have nothing
more

I've told you all I can
about
forgiveness

how a wife wipes
down
the kitchen counter

crumbs continue to appear

out the window
is a birdhouse full
of wanting

listen for the whistle.

Biographical Notes

Gabrielle Armer (she/they) is a recent graduate from the University of Central Arkansas, where she studied creative writing and served as Editor-in-Chief of *Vortex Magazine*. She is currently pursuing a career in entertainment law and plans to work in the publishing industry after acquiring her J.D. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the Conway Public Poetry Project, *The Global Poemic*, *Elephant Ladder*, and elsewhere.

After earning a Ph.D. in English, **Kristin Berkey-Abbott** has published a wide variety of creative work, along with theological/spiritual essays. She has spent decades in higher ed, as a teacher and an administrator, and now she is experiencing higher ed as an MDiv student at Wesley Theological Seminary, while continuing to teach college level English classes.

Maya Bernstein's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Allium*, *By the Seawall*, *the Cider Press Review*, *Ghost City Review*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Tablet Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is on faculty at Georgetown University and Yeshivat Maharat, and is pursuing an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Her first collection is *There Is No Place Without You* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2022). You can read more of her work at mayabernstein.com.

Damaris Castillo is a young Mexican American student pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. She has published on the Visions' school newspaper while she held the position of Editor-in-Chief. She hopes to share her perspective on the Latina experience through her writing and one day reach the minds of alike women.

Maureen Clark is retired from the University of Utah. She was the president of Writers @ Work 1999-2001, and the director of the University Writing Center. Her poems have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Alaska Review*, *The Southeast Review*, and *Gettysburg Review* among others. Her first book *This Insatiable August* is forthcoming from Signature Books in Spring 2024.

Andrea Corsi is a writer living in southern New Jersey with her husband and two daughters. She studied psychology and creative writing at The College of New Jersey and earned a graduate degree in school psychology from Rowan University. Andrea is an avid traveler, Jersey

shore beach runner, and lifelong reader and fiction writer who lives for a good book, a cup of coffee, and a lazy cat in her lap.

Benjamin Diamond is a senior at SUNY Oswego who majors in Journalism with a minor in Creative Writing. He is a part of the school's student run newspaper organization, *The Oswegonian*, who was also voted to be the Editor-in-Chief for the 2023-2024 academic year. This interview is Diamond's first published work.

Cat Dixon's newest poetry collection, *What Happens in Nebraska*, was released from Stephen F. Austin University Press last year. Cat is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review*. She is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee and has been published in numerous literary magazines including recently in *Rise Up Review, SWWIM Every Day, Coffin Bell Journal,* and *Potomac Review.*

Lynn Domina is the author of several books, including three collections of poetry, *Corporal Works, Framed in Silence,* and *Inland Sea.* Her recent work appears in *The Gettysburg Review, About Place, Ninth Letter, Lake Effect,* and many other periodicals. She teaches English at Northern Michigan University and serves as Creative Writing Editor of *The Other Journal.* She lives in Marquette, Michigan, along the beautiful shores of Lake Superior.

Jane Ebihara is the author of three poetry chapbooks, the latest of which is,*This Edge of Rain, (Kelsay Press).* Her work has appeared in several journals and anthologies, and she has been a volunteer author for New Jersey Norwescap's Senior Life Stories Project. She is currently Associate Editor of *The Stillwater Review.* Jane can be contacted on her website janeebihara.com or on Facebook at Jane Ebihara Poetry.

Esther Fishman is a longtime resident of San Francisco. Her poetry has appeared online and in *Deep Overstock*, a journal focused on the work of current or former booksellers. Her play, *Outside/Inside* received its first public reading in 2022.

Jennifer L. Gauthier is professor of media and culture at Randolph College in Virginia. Her poems and media commentary appear in both print and online journals. Her 2011 chapbook *naked: poems inspired by remarkable women* was published by Finishing Line Press. Her short

story, "Cooper's Run" appears in *Draw Down the Moon* (Propertius Press, 2022). Instagram: @jengauthierthinks

Nancy Gerber lives in Connecticut. Her most recent book is *Burnt Toast: A Memoir of My Immigrant Grandmother* (Apprentice House, 2023).

Deborah Gerrish is the author of four collections of poems, *Indeed Jasmine (*2022), *Light in Light (2017), The Language of Paisley (2012)***,** and chapbook, *The Language of Rain (2008)*. Her poems have appeared in various journals and anthologies.

Gail Ghai is a poet, Pushcart Prize nominee and author of three chapbooks of poetry. Her poems, vignettes and translations have appeared in *Poet Lore, JAMA, Visions International, Descant, Minerva Rising, and Shot Glass Journal.* She is the workshop leader for the Ringling Poets in Sarasota, FL

Karen Levy-Guillén is a writer and storyteller. Her work appears in The *Caribbean Writer, Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and her novel, *The Story You Choose to Tell*, was shorted-listed for the Virginia Prize and the Longleaf First Novel Contest. She lives in Miami and the Dominican Republic.

Jane Hertenstein is the author of over 90 published stories both macro and micro: fiction, creative non-fiction, and blurred genre. In addition, she has published a YA novel, *Beyond Paradise* and a non-fiction project, *Orphan Girl: The Memoir of a Chicago Bag Lady*, which garnered national reviews. Jane is the recipient of a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Her writing has been featured in the New York Times. She teaches a workshop on Flash Memoir and can be found blogging at http://memoirouswrite.blogspot.com/.

Emma Jarman is an emerging creative writer enjoying short fiction and memoir. A mother of one, Ohio native and recovering journalist, she currently teaches special education English at a small public school in Oklahoma, and bakes something every Saturday. Emma's work can be found in the *Ocotillo Review*, the *Downtime Review* and *Fireworks*. Instagram: @illwritealready

Adele Kenny is the author of 25 books (poetry and nonfiction). Widely published in the U.S. and abroad, she has received first prize in the 2021 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Awards, NJ State Arts Council fellowships, and Kean University's Distinguished Alumni Award. She is poetry editor of *Tiferet* and founding director of the Carriage House Poetry Series.

Gertrude Evelyn Lampart is a clinical social worker, retired from her day job with public housing in New York City. She leads art workshops in a mental health clinic as a volunteer. In addition, Evelyn writes, paints, and enjoys needlework. Her writing is published in *pacificREVIEW*, *The Quotable*, *Citron Review*, *Rozlyn*, *Wildflower Muse*, *Poetica*, *Solidago*, and more and forthcoming in *Pilgrimage Press*. She is a native New Yorker, and a lifelong resident and defender of Brooklyn.

Francesca Leader is a self-taught, Pushcart-nominated writer originally from Western Montanna. She has poetry published or forthcoming in the *Sho Poetry Journal, Frost Meadow Review, Door is a Jar, Stanchion, Nixe's Mate, Streetcake, Bullshit Lit, Cutbow Quarterly,* and elsewhere. Learn more about her work at: inabucketthebook.wordpress.com.

Leslie Li the author of the novel *Bittersweet* (Tuttle Publishing), the culinary memoir *Daughter of Heaven* (Arcade Publishing), and *Just Us Girls* (Four Seasons Press), the official companion book to her forthcoming feature-length documentary, *The Kim Loo Sisters*, currently in post-production. Her personal essays and feature articles have appeared in T*he New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, Gourmet, Saveur, Garden Design, Travel & Leisure, Modern Maturity,* and, and most recently, the online women's magazine *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*.

Sarah Lilius is the author of the full-length poetry collection, *Dirty Words* (Indie Blu(e) Publishing 2021) and six chapbooks. Some of her publication credits include *Fourteen Hills, Boulevard, Massachusetts Review and New South*. She lives in Virginia with her husband and two sons. Her website is sarahlilius.com.

Marjorie Maddox is a Professor of English at Lock Haven University and assistant editor of *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*. She has published 14 poetry collections—most recently *Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation, Begin with a Question* (Winner International Book

Awards: Winner Illumination Book Award, Third Place CMA Book Awards), and the ekphrastic collaborations *Heart Speaks, Is Spoken For (*with Karen Elias) and *In the Museum of My Daughter's Mind* (both Shanti Arts), with her artist daughter Anna Lee Hafer (www.hafer.work). For more on her work see: www.majoriemaddox.com.

Kerry McKay is teacher and freelance writer. Her work has appeared in Harvard's *Education Next*, *Your Teen Magazine*, and other publications. She is at work on a novel set in Staten Island.

Mer Monson fell in love with writing during an adventure with cancer. She is the author of *Reality Bathed in Hope* and one of the authors featured in *Stories from the Muses.* Her work has also been published in *Shark Reef, Exponent II Blog* and E*xponent II Magazine*. She lives with her husband and three sons in the Rocky Mountains of Springville, Utah. Find her at www.mermonson.com.

Vanessa Ogle is a poet, writer, and educator. Her essays have most recently appeared in the *New York Times* and *The Nation*. She received her MFA from Hunter College in 2020. Originally from Michigan, she now lives in New York.

Eve Ottenberg has published 25 novels and two collections of short stories. Her stories have been published in many literary journals. She is also a journalist, who writes weekly political articles for *CounterPunch* and book reviews for the *Washington City Paper*. She has written a weekly political column for *The Village Voice* and covered the criminal courts for the *Voice*. She has published in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *USA Today*, *The Nation*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New Yorker*'s "Briefly Noted" section, *The Washington Post*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Truthout*, *The American Prospect* and many other magazines and newspapers.

Madisen Phonnathong is a teenager who loves to read and write in her free time. She spends most of her days doing schoolwork and hanging out with friends. She hopes to write a novel some day in the near future. A lot of Madisen's writings stem from her advocacy of women's rights.

Sameera Rachakonda is a female writer based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is 22 years old and graduated from Temple University

with a degree in Computer Science and is currently a freelance writer. This is her first publication.

Seven-time Pushcart Prize nominee **Russell Rowland** writes from New Hampshire's Lakes Region, where he has judged high-school Poetry Out Loud competitions. His work appears in Except for Love: New England Poets Inspired by Donald Hall (Encircle Publications), and Covid Spring, Vol. 2 (Hobblebush Books). His latest poetry book, Magnificat, is available from Encircle Publications.

Kelly R. Samuels is the author of the full-length collection *All the Time in the World* (Kelsay Books) and three chapbooks: *To Marie Antoinette, from*, *Words Some of Us Rarely Use* and *Zeena/Zenobia Speaks*. She is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee with work appearing in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Court Green, SWWIM, River Styx,* and *RHINO*. She lives in the Upper Midwest.

Cathy Schieffelin is an avid reader and writer. Years of adventure and travel contribute to her daily writing life. This piece is about her recent struggle through the trials of breast cancer. She lives in New Orleans with her husband, children and pack of mongrels.

Sky Smith was born and raised in the heart of Oklahoma. She began her foray into poetry in 2022 and has contributed work to The Aster Review. Her poems touch on loss, beauty, and the ephemeral moments that connect the two.

Brett Ann Stanciu is the author of *Unstitched: My Journey to Understand Opioid Addiction and How People and Communities Can Heal* (Steerforth Press, 2021) and *Hidden View* (Green Writers Press, 2015). A recipient of a 2020 Vermont Arts Council Creation Grant, Stanciu's essays and fiction have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Taproot*, *Vermont Literary Review*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *The Long Story*, and *Green Mountains Review*, among other publications. She lives in a small village in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont in a 100-year-old house surrounded by yellow flowers and blogs at stonysoilvermont.com.

Maeve Stemp is a fourth year English Literature and Education student at Queen's University, writing from Kingston, Ontario. She is passionate

about storytelling through writing and painting, connecting with nature, and walking her dog Suzie. She has previously had her work published in the *Main Street Rag Magazine*.

Dawn Stoltzfus' poems have appeared in *Lullwater Review* and in two self-published, letterpress chapbooks: *The Language of Rain* and *Quartet*. She is a communications professional and advocate who has spent her career advancing environmental, public health, and social justice issues. She lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with her husband, son, rescue hound dog, and pet fish.

Erin Stoodley is an artist residing in Urbana, Illinois, where she is pursuing her MFA in poetry at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and reading as an editorial assistant for *Ninth Letter*. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and can be found in such journals as *The Adroit Journal*, *After Happy Hour Review*, and *Empty House Review*.

Christie Tate is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Group*, which was a Reese's Book Club Pick, and B.F.F.-- *A Memoir of Friendship Lost & Found*. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New Ohio Review*, *Carve Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in Chicago with her husband and two kids.

Shelly Reed Thieman writes to connect with the wounded. She is messenger of imagery, a mistress of montage. Recent work appears in *Modern Haiku 54:2*, and *Humana Obscura, v6*. Forthcoming work will appear in *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, and *Lyrical Iowa 2023*. Shelly is a 2020 and 2022 Pushcart nominee.

Saadia Van Winkle is a New York-based writer who advises several organizations in the economic policy space on communications strategy. Her prior advocacy work includes positions in immigrant rights, global health and at the UN Refugee Agency. She is a former tv reporter, most recently covering economic news for national and international audiences at Bloomberg News. Her writing has been featured in outlets such as *Ms*. and *TIME Magazine*, and she's currently writing a memoir about her family's experience immigrating from Pakistan and the related domestic violence case that changed the U.S.'s spousal rape laws.

Florence Weinberger is the author of six collections of poetry, the most recent *These Days of Simple Mooring*, winner of the 2022 Blue Light Book Award. Five times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and Best of the Net, her poetry has appeared in a numerous literary magazines and anthologies.

Geraldine Kloos Weltman is a retired New Jersey government researcher and manager. She now lives in Chicago, Illinois, after living many years in Central New Jersey. Her work has appeared in *Adanna*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and *Paterson Literary Review.*

Pediatrician **Kelley White** has worked in inner city Philadelphia and rural New Hampshire. Her poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse, Rattle* and *JAMA.* Her most recent collection is *NO. HOPE STREET* (Kelsay Books). She received a 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant.

Beth Oast Williams is the author of the chapbook, *Riding Horses in the Harbor* (Finishing Line Press, 2020). Her poetry has been accepted for publication in *Leon Literary Review*, *SWWIM*, *One Art*, *Fjords Review*, *Dialogi*st, *Invisible City* and *Rattle's Poets Respond*, among others, and nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize.