

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

Adanna Literary Journal
P.O. Box 547
Manasquan, New Jersey 08736 USA

Credits

Front Cover Artist: Janina Aza Karpinska

Front Cover Title: Model Woman

Medium: Photograph

Copyright © 2024. All rights reserved by *Adanna Literary Journal*.

Artist Statement

My daily creative practice as a multidisciplinary Artist-Poet is to be on the alert for material, ideas and inspiration wherever I go; always seeking the poetry of visual images as seen through the lens of eye or camera. I am predominantly drawn to colour and pattern; visual narratives and anecdotes. Finding beauty and something of value in the mundane details of every day life enriches every occasion, every journey taken, and creates memories to revisit and treasure long after. Creativity is a life-saver; sanity-restorer, and great pleasure. I am fortunate to have discovered a lifelong resource, and do all I can to share it with others.

—*Janina Aza Karpinska, 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*

Contents

Angela Abbott	8
Mona Anderson	9
Pamela Annas	15
Barrie Ashby.....	16
Cynthia Benson	18
Norma Ketzis Bernstock.....	23
Ann Birch	26
V. Bray	29
Becca Bullen.....	30
Sabine Chishty.....	32
Leslie Clark	34
Savannah Cooper.....	38
Jane Mary Curran	41
Laurie Didesch	45
Lisa Egle.....	47
Keriann Eklund.....	53
Sara Femenella	55
Katrina Irene Gould.....	56
Rachel Griffin.....	58
K.D. Hance	60
Jillian Hanson	66
Alison Louise Harney.....	68
HR Harper	71
Lois Marie Harrod	73
Gabrielle Israelievitch	77
Cynthia Knorr.....	80
Elaine Koplow	82
Chelsie Kreitzman	85
Linda Laderman.....	88
Lisa Lahey	89
Susanna Lang	95
Marie Lavendier	96
Joanne Mallari	98
Margaret S. Marangione.....	99
Grace T. McCarthy.....	104
Barri McGougan.....	107
Tara Menon	108
Kathy Nelson.....	110

Eve Ottenberg.....	114
Olivia Partamian.....	118
Naomi Pliskow	121
J.B. Polk	122
Andrea Potos	129
Eveline Pye.....	133
Ivy Raff.....	134
Laura Sobbott Ross.....	136
Kasey Butcher Santana.....	137
Maureen Sherbondy.....	140
Shoshauna Shy	144
Dianne Silvestri	146
Karen Regen Tuero.....	147
Liz Weir.....	149
Geraldine Kloos Weltman	150
Kelley White.....	151
Victoria Wisell-Mabe	152
Sarah Zietlow	155
Biographies.....	156



—Janina Aza Karpinska, *Candid Café: Red Corner* (photograph)

Angela Abbott

Baby's Breath

I'm looking at the baby's breath currently taking up space on my table.
It lives in the vase I purchased some months ago at the farmer's market.

The baby's breath is fine.
Not the most beautiful flower.
Each little head a tiny cotton-like bulb
intertwined with each other's broken limbs.

I bought these flowers for some hopeful reason that
if I had baby's breath in a vase in my home,
it would somehow make me fertile.
That in some witchy, crazy, cuckoo way
it would cause me to one day have the baby
I longed for.

This stupid baby's breath.
My beacon of hope.

I should remove it from the vase—from my table—from this home--
But there's something calming about the beauty of broken hope.
And flowers that look alive, obstructing my view.

Mona Anderson

Ask No Forgiveness

I squirm in the front pew of the sanctuary --
where else would the minister's daughter
sit during Sunday School class --
kick the boy beside me
with my black patent leather shoes.

Mrs. Johnston chides me through her white cat-eye glasses,
hand fluttering the billows of her orange skirt as she reads
of Jonah in the whale from a Golden Classic storybook,
voice buzzing, as if the words struggle to free themselves
from her pinched lips.

Her droning voice begins the ending prayer.
I kick Kevin harder. Before Amen
I jump to avoid his returning punch, feel her nails
dig into my shoulder like Jonah might have felt if the big fish
had crunched down instead of swallowing him whole.

As they wait to be dismissed, the kids snicker.
The preacher's kid got in trouble today
again, they'll tell their parents.
My cheeks consume my face,
red like forbidden fruit.

I see the scuff on my shiny patent leather shoes,
the fire and brimstone of her orange skirt.
Not for the last time in this long life,
I fear my skeleton is showing,
but I can't promise to be good.

Mona Anderson

Birthing

"I terminated the pregnancy, voluntarily and without ambivalence." Maggie Doherty, The Yale Review, "The Abortion Stories We Tell."

I seldom think about the two
I didn't birth but the gynecologist
asked how many pregnancies I'd had.

"Four. Two abortions, two live births,"
as though reporting I'd had eggs
for breakfast. All choices, I wanted to add

but she didn't ask. Later, in the garden shed,
a robin's egg lay shattered in the dirt,
the contents of its blue fragments

gone, likely in the belly of the same
raccoon who ravages our compost.
Had mother robin tossed it out?

I read they do that sometimes.
I climbed to the nest wedged
between the roof and lattice wall

to see two more eggs, unconcerned
their potential sister or brother
had disappeared. In the garden

the sun beat its predictable heat
on my back while I planted lettuce seeds
and wondered about our potentials.

Mine. The robin's. Does she mourn
the broken egg or rejoice in birthing
the others? I remember only relief

and, years later, birthing joy.

Mona Anderson

Her Words

I can't find them anywhere. I search under the bed,
find only used tissues and half-used rolls of mints.
I rummage through each color-coordinated drawer,
no words with the pink tops, none with the yellows or purples,
not stuffed between hangers in the jam-packed closet
nor tucked inside her forty-three shoe boxes.
No words jumbled with her piles of necklaces and earrings
nor strewn on her desk with bills and birthday cards.
None hidden in her oven, crusty with chocolate from her last bake.

She told me she once went to a potluck where for three hours
she smiled and murmured *uh-huh hmm oh? really*
because she thought she had no words, at least none worthwhile
since she hadn't been to college. She didn't share her own words
but read others' books wedged into bulging bookshelves.
I examine each before placing it in a box and find her words
everywhere, written in the margins, scribbled on scraps of paper,
and in her food and jewels, in her perfectly matched outfits.

Mona Anderson

Leaving

He runs after me
as I drive down our long driveway
his baby blue cotton shorts
reach the top of his cowboy boots
that clatter on the gravel.
Chubby arms outstretched
he screams “Mommy no go!
Mommy no go!”

I drive slowly
not to torture him
nor to keep the August dust
from kicking up
not to make him run
and run and run
but to torture me
now blinded.

I see him stop
just stop
still for a moment
face fractured
surrendered.
Tiny fists
rub his eyes.
He sits.

I want to stop
rewind the film
cowboy boots
running backwards
tears erased
with giggles
into the warmth
of just baked raspberry muffins.
But I keep going

with one last
backward look
I imagine me years from now
standing in that same spot as still
as the great heron by the pond
one hand raised as if in salute
watching my son
 now grown
 now going
 driving down the long driveway.

Pamela Annas

Usable Scraps

My grandmother said don't
throw anything away,
it'll come in useful some day:
the color of rain in October
the red velvet texture of birth
a taste of pomegranate
each seed bursting separately sour
against the tongue
your hands on my shoulders, back,
your voice: "the blessing of bones,
the sacrament of skin."

Look for fragments of memory:
silk, silence, joy, denim, pain.
Look in the attic, through drawers,
at the bottom of trunks,
in cupboards scented with lavender sachet.

A woman, her long hair falling past her face,
lays the pieces out on the floor, regards
a riot of color, mute and bright,
moves a bit of velvet here,
a sun-soaked summer afternoon there
picks up her needle,
pieces together a poem
a life
wraps it around her.

Barrie Ashby

From my Mother,

I have been far
for many years,
now closer.

We joke we live
toppled on each other.

But soon I will be far
again.
In Massachusetts,
I will live where
all the transcendentalists died.
I'll learn why they wrote,
why they never left New England.

Piecing tales of my own together,
trying to get published
enough for the fame-filled genre switch
to infiltrate the masses.

I will be where Sylvia Plath lived
before London took her,
and she found out about ovens-
and what happens when you shut them.

And maybe,
when she is further from me than ever,
I won't become a mother.
Maybe the meaning will all change
and I will have to find
Something else to live for.

Barrie Ashby

Manatees

As he tells me about the manatee he saw today,
I wish for the first and only time that I was in Florida.

Normally I would never dream of church after church and gator after
gator.
But right now Florida possesses two things I love:
Michael and manatees.

He tells me it is tropical.
I tell him I want my daughter to have rights.
He does not respond.

Either way,

I love him.
I love him when I am in Oregon
Deep in the fog.
I love him as I make small talk
with the professionals getting coffee in the hotel lobby.

I love him as I wonder how airplanes work.
I love him as I call him at five in the morning
to discuss bigfoot and the waterfalls.

Cynthia Benson

Steel My Heart



(Collage by Cindy Smith Shih)

Lana screwed on her leg like a carpenter who'd been screwing all his life. She'd once written that as the humorous opening line for her dating app profile and gotten 30 unwanted kink fans in her mailbox within an hour.

She still remembered the first reply: “I bet I could screw you better, baby! Uh, I mean *it*...I’m a leg man!”

Lana shook when she read them. She could have stroked her long hair nervously, as many women did, but instead she interlaced her gentle fingers and squeezed them hard. An E.R. aide had taught her to do that to center herself again.

Lana had followed her friend Roux’s advice so carefully. “Post a picture with your gorgeous, winning smile. Open with your unique, quirky humor.”

She had chosen her most genuine. Not the photos with her arms raised, at her ski wins, but the one on that morning, before that last competition. Just she and Yolo lounging on that craggy cliff in the sun, his furry snout lying in her lap, them both gazing out at the mountains. Her big, gleeful grin.

She had put her best self out there, and this is what she had gotten, this spray of emotional bullets. Lana punched the power button then, shot it all down, and stared into the black screen.

This so disturbed her that the next morning she scheduled an appointment with a male therapist, determined that his firsthand look into the male psyche would help her fathom the masculine mind. When she saw him, her words were courageous. “It triggers my fear that I’ll forever be rejected for my altered looks. Or they’ll always just make a fetish of my artificial leg.”

The middle-aged bald man in the oversized red velvet chair wrinkled his eyes in bemusement. “It’s true that research shows that women prioritize security and men prioritize looks. What if you learned to be kinky and enjoy the admiration of a prosthetics lover? He’d probably make you feel much more secure,” he offered casually.

Lana slammed the lid on that one, too. Quietly. Which means that she thanked him politely and never went back again. She was sickened by the research and hoped that it was just dated or faulty, but she feared too much that it was true.

It was then that Lana decided she was done with men forever. But she regretted that she was an unalterable, pretty traditional heterosexual, since that left her with no options.

These past celibate years, she has been trying to figure out how to substitute her need for a love partner with something else, but she still hadn’t found the magic bullet. It was probably just a drip-by-drip process, she mused. Like the slow acceptance of losing her leg at the end of that exhilarating ski jump into cool Alpine air. A memory flooded her

mind then, the taste of bitter snow as she stared frozen, her right appendage in a pool of red before her, a twisted lover's knot.

The accepting of the emptiness there was the hardest. Losing such a big part of your heart couldn't be much different, could it?

But the ugly, cold mechanical substitute they gave her was no treat, either, that hideous design from the knee down that made her washing machine look like a Ferrari. It was that contraption that had driven Lana to replace her skiing with welding. Artistic welding, that is. At least some said so.

Lana credited it all to her true inspiration. She'd been browsing art and design videos on the internet and fell upon a sexy, black-clad nymph, pirouetting like a ballerina across the screen to Queen's "We are the Champions." You see, this dancer also had a prosthetic leg, but it was made of steel, with a tip like a sword. She posed like a crane upon it and spun in circles. It was the most beautiful leg Lana had ever seen.

This dancer had many beauties. One covered in rhinestones. One with skulls and crossbones. Some etched like African masks or Alaskan totem poles. Or those painted with intense orange-pink sunsets or pastel rainbows.

It's funny how a dancer—or an unexpected human or moment--can inspire and spark in one again some lost piece of hope. Though Lana's newly welded metal legs were not yet that imaginative, it kept her getting up, driven to create and complete the next one, and sleeping well each night. Which was more progress than she'd made in years.

She had jumped out of bed this morning, determined to make the beautiful one she craved. She started without Roux.

On the other side of town, the garbage truck acted as Roux's alarm. The banging bins and beeping backup rudely awakened him. He sprung up straight in bed and spread the long graceful fingers of his right hand, combing it through his thick hair. Roux's gender was all straight, but he had the perfectly coifed hair of a Parisian hairdresser. Despite those many faults he knew he should make better--like never being on time--he thought his heart was perfect, too. At least for Lana's.

He had to meet her at 9am. He wondered which of her legs they'd work on today. He had been acting as her assistant ever since they met in welding class. She was better at welding, but he was expert at jewelry-making. God, how he loved that girl.

Lana had thought he was gay. Lana told him he fit all the attributes of the quintessential gay sidekick movie stereotype--the perfectly groomed angel-man looks, the supportive soul in all seasons,

the rapier wit. But he didn't tick the gossip box. Roux never spoke ill of anyone. "That shit will boomerang back on you!" he always said.

If only she weren't so closed off. Probably with good reason, though, he thought. When he told her he wasn't gay, he thought he might have a chance. But she just seemed to pull in even more. Maybe because it came as a shock. Or perhaps she now viewed him as a threat? It had been three years now, but he could not pry open even a crack in her carefully alarmed psychological door. Roux hoped his surprise might help Lana unlatch at least one chain.

When he arrived, Lana was sweating over the new one, boning up the bones. Roux lowered the needle on the first of his most recent vinyl finds, as was their usual ritual. Slow, soothing melodies to balance her morning energy. He was saving his surprise for later.

Roux had trouble waiting until the evening, but then he put it on. Ray Charles' "Unchain My Heart." A sultry, pulse-stimulating blues song might be just the right recipe.

Then he opened his blue velvet bag. He revealed them one at a time. "I made this for you last October. When we soaked ourselves to the skin at that Halloween party, diving for those apples. Remember?"

Lana dangled it by its chain in the light, and the little silver pumpkin orb swung, a tiny apple-shaped clapper making a soft clunk. "It's wonderful. ... We'll attach it somewhere. Where will it make the most sound when I walk?" She bends over the leg immediately, experimenting.

Roux pulled out the second. It was a thick thread of gold coiled with a silver one, like a spiral staircase.

"What on earth is it?" Lana stared wide-eyed as she twirled it and it gleamed above her.

"A compassion gene. Remember how when Yolo passed, you quoted that research to me about how dogs could be domesticated 'cause they had a kindness gene. How everyone should have one? A dog *and* a kindness gene, that is."

"Roux...you remember that from so long ago?" There were tears forming in her eyes, so she turned to the leg again, looking for a place for it.

"It was so worth remembering." He smiled. ... "There's one more."

Lana turned back to him, full attention but looking wary, as if it couldn't be better, had to disappoint.

Roux held up the shiny silver heart wrapped in tiny chains. "It's your heart, Lana. I'm hoping someday you'll do as Ray says.... You'll unchain it...and let me in."

She shrank away from him then. Just stared off to the right of him, as if she were trying to hide behind an invisible curtain. "Roux, you know I can't do that. I can't even fashion myself a decent leg. Everything is always imperfect. If I can't manage a good replacement for this monstrosity, how can I ever restart a broken heart?"

"Can't you just help me, Roux? ...The ornaments are beautiful. ...Let's just be quiet and take them in. We'll figure out the perfect balance of sounds." She squeezed her hands then. Then strode over and plucked the needle from Ray's voice.

The silence weighed heavily as he listened with her for every vibration. This was imperfect to her; that was imperfect to her. By 9pm, they were both exhausted. She suggested he go home and get some sleep. Perhaps they could try again later this week.

Roux exited her door tired and quiet, waving a quick goodbye. The wooden staircase seemed much longer than before, each step unsteady as he slowly descended.

But almost at the bottom he paused. He heard a faint tinkling.

Roux turned and gazed at her. Lana had her elbows on the banister, leaning over. Her eyes were soft, but sparkling, and her grin was huge.

"What?" he whispered, as wary as she had been that it wouldn't be good.

"I opened the window when you left, to let in the cool night air. And the moonlight...well...it hit in just a certain way...and the glimmer on my metal, the shimmer on your jewelry, and that sweet music it played when I walked...Roux, I realized it's never going to be a perfect leg. But...It's just so damn beautiful!"

"And Roux, it's you who helped me see that...What you always give to me. Who you are. You're the only one who touches my leg...and my soul...like they're still real."

He froze in grateful silence, hoping it was not just a dream.

"Watch me, Roux!" Lana shouted as she pirouetted, clumsily, the baubles on her new leg jangling musically, before she fell softly to the floor, laughing.

Roux ran up the stairs to lie beside her. He laughed so hard next to her that he cried. No symphony had ever sounded so soaring to his heart.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock

After the Funeral

Six plastic bags bulge
with my sister's clothes.
She would cringe if she saw—
always concerned about creasing.
Tops, pants and jackets
hung neatly in her closets—
color-coordinated.

The grandkids are here,
wishing to salvage
a token of remembrance.
Hand-painted tea pots, crystal,
decorative bird houses, sculpture—

It's painful — impossible!

Stepping over cartons and bags
my niece opens a small box,
places a glass heart
into the palm of my hand,
asks if it's something I'd like.

Swirls of shiny ribbon, slivers
of gold and silver catch the light.
I accept the gift.

My sister knew my heart,
when it ached,
when to offer help.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock

Journey

I remember a black and white
photo of my five-year old self,
hair in the Buster Brown style
of the early 50's, posing
beside a white wooden sign
that read: *North Pole*.

I need to revisit
the North Pole,
find that little girl
who fed the reindeer
and wished for Santa
to visit her Jewish home,
the 5-year-old who played
Candyland for hours,
thought cotton and clouds
should be shades of pink,

the child from strictly kosher
and Sabbath candles,
Sunday morning lox and bagels,
mamaliga with cream cheese on top,
a mother's house coats,
Mah-jong once a week,
a father's cigars,
bowling and pinochle,
a babysitter at thirteen
who read sex scenes in paperbacks
while babies slept,
tap lessons and Hebrew school,
basement party sweet sixteens
and a wish for a life not like her parents'—
no more *eat what I cook*,
date Jewish boys and nice girls
never leave home on their own
before marriage.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock

The Model Speaks

It was my idea to pose.
I 'd been naked
for others—
strangers,
acquaintances,
lovers.

But this time I ask you,
my husband,
to hold the palette and brush,
force you to see
how shadows shape curves
you caress.

Once you said
you would know me
even from the back—
my slender neck,
the sweep of my hair.

Mark this flesh
that you love,
despise
desire.

See me,
see every scar—
the soft
and not so soft.

Look closely,
see the woman
you say you love—

Paint me.

Ann Birch

Coals of Fire

Jim embezzled. He never had reason to say the word aloud, but when he thought of it, the soft buzz of the double “z” and the final, slurred “l” made the crime sound like a simple, little peccadillo. Barely significant, and hardly enough to make up for the indignation he felt whenever he saw his late wife’s precise, modest numbers in the church’s financial books. Where had her goodness gotten her, he wondered, after he retired from the electric company and took over her jobs in the Trinity Presbyterian office? She had been secretary, treasurer, and much more in a church with more roles than it had people able to fill them. Cancer and a grave, that’s where her dear life got her.

He didn’t need the money. He used it for poker, and he thought of it as his offering to the goddess of chance, the only real player in any game. He never took much. Just enough to thumb his nose at anybody who might ever notice, and apparently nobody did.

This latest minister was young, just a girl really. She came to work as usual this morning, chattering to the ancient spaniel who always trailed her, and of course, carrying things, usually including things to eat. This time it was sandwiches from the only fast-food place in town.

“No, come on, *take it*,” she growled when he shied away when she held out the white-wrapped bundle that smelled of cold cuts and cheese. “Jersey hero, and I don’t mean you.”

“I’ll pay you back,” he grumbled.

“What’d I tell you before?” she asked. “The church pays us out of the same pot.” She laid the sandwich down and waved at the treasurer’s notebook on his desk.

She was naïve about money pots. They all were, these ministers who were sheltered from the hurley-burley of fiscal concerns by finicky, old customs. They were never allowed to know which members contributed what amounts, or who didn’t give at all. They presided over congregational meetings but were excused from the room whenever their salaries were up for discussion. This girl was new, but the clergy were all irritatingly pure.

“You’ll earn your lunch, anyway,” she said between bites of her Philly steak sandwich. “I got the pulpit chair in the back of the truck. When we’re done, you’re going to help me lug it in.”

“Don’t we have a janitor for that?”

“Not one that works every day.”

Jim knew she had taken the shabby antique home so that she and the girl she was married to could strip the wood and refinish it and add new upholstery. The minister called her wife her “partner,” an egalitarian choice, he was sure, though it made them sound as if they were in serious business together. Babes in the woods, the two of them, he thought, but they were handy and also good in the kitchen. He had been growing fond of this latest one, in spite of himself.

“But first,” she continued, chewing with her mouth open. “I’m going to pick your brains.” She told him that Paul said we should do good to those who do us harm and that would make them feel as if we were heaping coals of fire on their heads.

Jim nodded. They all called old, dead Paul by his first name and lavished attention on him as if he were the problem-cousin they all had in common.

“I thought you people didn’t like him,” Jim said.

She sighed. “Paul poses a problem for women,” she said, “but *we people* will lay that aside for the moment. I think he’s asking us to be mean to people in a way that would be kind of passive aggressive, which is bad, right?”

Jim shrugged and took another bite of the Jersey hero. “How passive is it to put hot coals on somebody’s head? Seems active to me.”

“Exactly! And what I want to know is, who stands still for that? I mean, how do you pile hot coals on anybody’s head, right? They’d run away, or something. So, what does it all mean?”

“Above my pay grade,” he answered.

Her mouth was full, but she laughed and nodded and pointed to herself. She would worry this trivial bone all afternoon, Jim knew.

After they had dragged the pulpit chair in, splendid in its refurbished state, she said, “We’ve been thinking the seats on your porch rockers need re-caned.” It would do no good to answer her or turn away the implied offer. For months, she had pestered him to replace a missing hubcap on his old Toyota. She kept telling him he could find the right one for next to nothing on the internet. Finally, one day he came out of the house and saw the fourth hubcap in place and knew how it had gotten there.

The little library next to the main office was where she retreated when she was working on something. He heard only occasional sighs and thumps as she searched the kind of books that ministers search when they are wasting time on the kind of mysteries that they waste time on.

He was working on the Sunday bulletin when he heard her say, “Old man, your sins have found you out!” He felt his body turn cold. His mind spun, searching for what to say, what to do. How vain, he thought, never to have worked out what he would do in case he was caught, and to be caught by someone like her had been beyond his imagining. He felt as if he might faint. But she had spoken in such a strangely fond tone of voice. That made it worse, and he hoped for syncope to rescue him.

She appeared in the doorway, barefoot, with two dripping socks in her hand and a look of disgust on her face. The old dog shuffled, belatedly, toward the outside door. His head drooped.

Jim caught his breath. “Well, if you know Ruffian is incontinent, why don’t you keep your shoes on?”

She let the dog out and waited for him to come back in. “The thing about the heaping hot coals on somebody’s head,” she continued, distractedly. “I still don’t get it.”

“The hell you don’t,” Jim thought. After she had returned to her studies, he planned how to straighten out the books and the money itself. It wouldn’t be hard. He had been only a half-hearted thief.

Time passed. Jim pattered with the newsletter, and she continued to flip pages and sigh. “Well, this answer is almost worse than no answer at all.” He heard her say it from the cubbyhole in a way that he knew meant that she would come out and engage him in more conversation about today’s barely relevant ethical mystery.

“Get this!” she commanded, as she strolled back into their common office. She read aloud from a book that described an ancient Egyptian custom in which a penitent person would carry a pan of hot coals on his own head. “The person would do this weird, painful thing to themselves,” she marveled. “Can you explain that to me?”

He had gotten to know her well enough that he recognized this as a rhetorical question and also to know that he could never explain it to her. For the second time that day, he shrugged. Of course, this was beyond her understanding. But Jim knew, and he understood.

V. Bray

conquered

my breasts have been divided

conquered in sections

cut by digital waves

sonographed as if

deep sea chasms

they are recreated in vector points and swept

into granulated peaks

solidified kernels

even a thick rock

where a single vein pulses

heart beat within

evidence of alien life

where no new life

should grow

Becca Bullen

Self Care

No matter how long I pour water from the pitcher
My cup never fills
It never overflows
My cup is empty

I wake up before the sun
I never snooze my alarm
One multivitamin, something for my allergies
12 ounces of water, one scoop of greens powder

I cover my skin with serums and potions
I paint my lips pink
And my eyelashes black
A little something to slim the nose

I make my bed
Put on my new outfit and curl my hair
I get to work on time
I compliment my peers

I write emails with smiley faces and apologies
“I’m not sure if this makes sense but...”
No worries! Anytime! It’s totally fine!
I am good I am good I am good

I eat meals I prepared at the beginning of the week
Carb, fat, protein
I drink 92 ounces of water
That's enough coffee for today.

I go to a hot yoga class
I can stretch just a little bit further
How many calories did I burn?
Push, pull, push, pull

I take a hot shower

Exfoliate my skin
Lather on a hair mask
Scrub, scrub, scrub

My cup is empty
It never overflows
My cup never fills
No matter how long I pour water from the pitcher

Sabine Chishty

Scale

0. At eight, she held her breath at Ms. Dean's pop-up book that cut right down the middle of a Woman's Body, laying her insides across its spine.

1. The first time she bled, she curled into herself and reread *Sweet Valley High* books from the library. She knew to *grin and bear it* because pain is the price of having a body so powerful it can make bodies. She envied the Wakefield twins, who were never set back by aches, stains, dark matter they couldn't dam.

2. At twenty-two, the feeling is familiar. She has thick black dresses for the worst days, when it's right to stay in the dark.

3. She buys a heating pad, a cloth half-moon to breathe lavender into her skin. She hesitates to toss the old one, a felt tongue her mother gave her years ago. The sentimentality is absurd; her mother is alive, loving, and has gifted her plenty of better keepsakes. And yet—she stows it under her mattress.

4. Medications are a language unto themselves. She's fluent in over-the-counter, knows what comforts, what soothes but at too high of a price, what has that Exceptional Talent her boss calls *able to thrive in a fast-paced environment*. Manufactured bullshit, but it rips through you to get results. At checkout, a woman with bright nails says *oh, I know how this goes, good luck to you. Thank you*, our girl says, meaning it.

5. Reluctantly, she takes a sick day. *Good for you*, says her boyfriend, patting her head like a dog. Not faking wellness is a relief, but the claws raking through her are only so much better.

6. Her heels chafe in the stirrup as the in-network guy arrives. Later, she'll try to remember his face, but all that comes to her is a splotch of white hair and long pale cheeks. She leaves two hundred dollars poorer, with nothing to show but *sometimes there's pain*.

7. The spotting is a record of pain so loud she sees stars, an odd phrase for tipping into darkness. The heating pad cuts an equator along her swollen belly.

8. Back to the doctor, this time at the encouragement of a different (better) man and better insurance. This time, her heels smooth in warm stirrups when the doctor issues her indictment. *There's something here*, she says. *We'll find it together*.

9. In bed, his fingers draw warm circles on her stomach . *Thank you*, she says, grateful for pressure against the swarms of plaque they now know are crusting over her organs. She imagines them as the mold that creeps over wilting greens in the fridge, toxic and soft.

10. The operating room is the white of bleached flour. As our girl counts back from ten, eager to wake with the dead cut out of her, she doesn't mind when the doc says *there's a good girl*.

Leslie Clark

Whacking

Whacking at those crumbling house walls was gratifying. Dave, the guy I was seeing at the time, was in the process of remodeling an old house. We'd hoist sledge hammers and pound away, plaster flying, with rock music blaring, our hammers providing syncopation along with the bass. What we found inside the walls was both disgusting and fascinating—hair, ancient mouse nests, and crumpled newspapers from decades ago. None of it was effective in protecting the house from the piercing wind gusts of a Virginia winter, especially since the house was about a block from the often-stormy bay. Dave's goal was to get rid of all the old plaster and insulate the walls, then sheetrock them.

Fortunately, he knew what he was doing, since he worked construction to finance his college education. I was a complete novice, being a high school English teacher and grad student, and much more accustomed to hitting the books than walls.

At that point, Dave and I were about a year into our relationship. We had met in an Al-Anon group, both of us attempting to deal with issues we developed while growing up with alcoholic parents—his father and my mother. Dave had never been married, and my marriage, straight out of college, had disintegrated after three years. At that point, in my late twenties, I had been in delicious, delirious love twice in my life. Neither Dave nor my ex-husband was in that category. There were lots of things I liked about Dave, though. He was overtly affectionate, easy-going, intelligent, and physically very much my type—tall, muscular, blond and blue-eyed.

Sex was an issue—I liked it a lot more than he did, rather a rarity judging by my previous relationships. I attributed it to Dave's strict Catholic upbringing—his alcoholic father once attended seminary with the goal of becoming a priest. Then he met Dave's mother, and that was the end of that, though his rigid Catholic standards, and his fondness for wine lingered. He frequently told Dave he shouldn't be dating me because I was divorced.

Dave had been on a search for an appropriate old house to remodel for several months before he settled on this faded gray, wood-shingled house that resembled a tall, skinny old man. I accompanied him on his house search frequently, and did my best to steer him away from the ones that caused the tiny hairs on my arms to stand up straight and

triggered a feeling like a pine cone rolling down my neck and spine—there were lots of houses with the reputation of hauntings in that part of Virginia. Fortunately, the house he chose was benign—I felt no disgruntled spirits lingering. That was a good thing, because if there had been, I’m sure they would have registered their protests as we attacked those walls.

Remodeling efforts had taken over most of our weekends. I didn’t mind that, since it was such a departure from the strictly cerebral occupations of my weekdays. Whack! Aimed in my mind at some troublesome students. Whack! At their unhelpful parents. Whack! At the smug face of my less-than-intellectual principal. Whack! At the contentious peers and demanding professors in my graduate school program.

One Saturday during that frigid February is particularly memorable. Dave was in one of his critical modes—another characteristic I attributed to his upbringing, where everyone in the family seemed to have a favorite person to pick on. Since Dave had moved away from his family, and saw them rarely, his critical side sometimes spilled over on me. I never put up with much from him, since fighting back and stubborn defiance was a major part of my own family dynamic.

Anyway, on that day Dave was in a particularly contentious mood. It seemed like every two seconds he found fault with something I was doing. Since I definitely was not an expert at the remodeling business, I listened to him—to a point.

But when he shouted, for the fourth time, “No, Jenny, don’t swing the hammer at an angle, but straight at the wall.”

I fired back, “What the hell is the difference? The wall is coming down, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but...”

“But, nothing! If you want my help, shut the fuck up and let me do it my way.”

Dave’s mouth set in a grim line, and he redoubled his efforts with his hammer. After a while, he started to laugh.

Still furious, I demanded, “What’s so damn funny?”

He laughed harder. “Y—you!” he finally got out. “You’re hardheaded and feisty; I’ll say that for you. You are the damndest woman I ever came across.”

Somewhat mollified, I muttered, “Yeah, and don’t you forget it.”

For the rest of that day, we worked side by side in relative peace. When Dave made a suggestion to me, he was careful to keep his critical

tone in check. We got quite a bit accomplished. By the time afternoon light faded and the bitter wind started to chill the room through the denuded walls, we had most of the living room cleared of its plaster and lath.

Dave stepped back to admire our handiwork. “Okay, enough for today,” he announced. Let’s retreat to our apartments to clean up. I’ll pick up a pizza and come over to your place about 6:00—okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I trudged out to my car, muscles protesting the heavy labor, and drove the few blocks to my apartment. I stood in my shower, letting the hot water beat on my sore back and arms for at least half an hour. Reluctantly, I finally climbed out, pulled on a clean sweater and jeans, poured myself one of two glasses of wine I allowed myself on weekends, and collapsed on my leather sofa. As often, I admired what I had done to this first place where I had ever lived on my own, furnished completely to my taste. It was tiny, but warm and inviting. It always made me smile to come home.

I was almost asleep when Dave knocked. I roused myself to open the door, and welcomed in the fragrance of cheese and pepperoni, along with a sweet-smelling man. We settled at my two-seater dining table, which was in a corner of the living room, and enjoyed our slices. Dave looked askance at my glass of wine. Unlike me, the lessons of his family made him a complete teetotaler.

“Don’t even say anything,” I told him. “You know I keep it under strict control.”

He nodded and sipped at his Coke. We finished the meal and cleaned up together, then settled on the sofa. Dave put his arm around me and I snuggled in.

“You know,” he said, “sometimes I can envision the house all finished and decorated, you and me married, our kids upstairs. Wouldn’t that be great after all our hard work on the place?”

I pulled away. “Dave,” I said. “We’ve discussed this before. Marriage is not on my agenda for quite some time, if ever. And kids are not on my agenda at all. I never wanted to be anybody’s mother. I know I’d be crappy at it. After all, look at my role model.”

“Jenny, you’re nothing like your mother. Anyway, I know you’ll change your mind someday. It’s unnatural for a woman not to want children.”

“UNNATURAL?”

Dave held up his hands. “Okay, okay, don’t go ballistic on me. Look, we’re both tired. I’ve got my guitar in the car. What do you say we have a peaceful musical night?”

Without waiting for my reply, he headed for the door.

“Leave the door unlocked, please. I’m not getting up off this sofa any time soon.”

Why is it, I wondered wearily, that every man I meet believes that my greatest ambition should be to complete grad school only to trash my career and dedicate myself to changing diapers and wiping snotty noses?

A few minutes later, Dave reappeared, guitar case in hand. “It’s getting really cold out there,” he said. “We’re going to have to wait for it to warm up tomorrow before we go back to the house, or we’ll freeze our butts off.”

He spent a few minutes tuning his guitar, and then launched into one of his favorites, “Norwegian Wood”. *I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me...*

I relaxed against the sofa cushions and smiled as I listened to Dave’s mellow voice. I knew that he’d stay the night, and we’d make love (or not) and snuggle together in our sleep. I knew that we’d get up in the late morning, have a leisurely breakfast, and read the paper together before going to whack at more walls. But I also knew that in the not-so-distant future, I’d become that *once had* girl for Dave.

Savannah Cooper

Domestic

I like to think of myself as feral—
 bog witch, strutting she-wolf,
 fox flashing through trees.

But I am tame—housecat startled
 by loud noises, dog watching
 the world from a sofa.

You have to take me as I am—
 love me, feed me, lay
 a reassuring hand on my head.
Call me home when I wander too far.

Circumscribe the boundaries—
 of yard, of house, of carefully
 plotted walking trail. And if I go
 missing, run the streets
 in whatever shoes are near,
 call my name in a voice
 thick with panic.

I will hear you, I'll come running.

Savannah Cooper

Little House

I would be delighted to carve / a space in my days / for you // to whittle a
nook / into which you might / just fit / snug and warm // I'd buy you
picture frames / hardcovers / throw pillows // make sure there are enough
/ windows to see out of / to feel the sunlight // and curtains / so that you
may choose / what you see / and how much / and for how long // so that
you may hide / the light if you grow tired / of its gaze //so that you may
embrace / the light if the darkness / grows too heavy // maybe you'll
bring home / a cat small and soft / dark-furred // it will nestle against you
/ as you read / or sit / on the window ledge / basking in sunlight // maybe
its paws / will knead you awake / its purrs sing you to sleep

Savannah Cooper

Retrograde

astrology isn't real, but I am already exhausted
day one, worn out as every online tarot reader
promised. & this my season too, wry & earthy,
cooling to a slow-baked cinnamon scent in the air.

I look at stars sometimes like I can read them,
what few I can see. I don't even live in a metropolis
& still the glow strips the older light from the sky.
light burning out light, fire upon fire.

astrology isn't real, I say as I check my horoscope,
try to attach meaning to maybes. Sometimes I fear
I've traded one religion for another, symbols for signs.
I specialize in detachment, a casket for feeling.

it's all just a game anyway, saints & sorcerers, magical thinking.
still looking heavenward for answers, still afraid of what lies below.

Jane Mary Curran

Death of Jephthah's Daughter

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, "Give me victory over the Ammonites and whoever comes first to meet me shall be a burnt offering." His daughter came out to meet him. Jephthah said, "My daughter! I cannot take back my vow." She said, "Do to me according to what you said. Grant me two months, that I may wander on the mountains."

—Judges 11. 30, 31, 34-37, 39

that I may walk barefoot on soft grasses
sit upon an outcrop of rock
wrapped in a cloak against the desert chill
sleep beside the river
soothed by water's constancy

two months
to hover between heartbeats
between ground and sky
summer's vision to autumn's shadows
wandering their edges
a scrim of puzzlement
turning inward
toward sorrow
and fear
the moon
a white cup filled with night
dripping cool darkness onto
poppies black iris willow gentians
their pods fat with next year's colors
bending on withered stalks
drawing life into themselves
before the quieting
the song changing

*After two months, Jephthah's daughter returned
and her father did according to his vow.*

Jane Mary Curran

First Woman

in the darkness
 a portent stirs

starry spirals spin
 sowing cosmic dust
 across fields of new-made suns

Woman straightens her back from the curve of bone,
her hair, a silken river of flame,
skin lustrous as moonlight, a white star on her brow.
Clouds of sparrows swirl at her feet.
In the silvered light of Eden
Woman opens her wings.

Jane Mary Curran

Ruth Took Naomi's Hand

and said, I will not leave you.

In your sorrow do not stare at the dusty earth.
Tilt your head. Look up at the hills,
at the red in the terebinths.
The stir of air tickling the colors
is the same breeze freshening your skin.

Open your hands to the angled sun.
Look at the olive trees,
how old they are. How fruitful.

Death will come soon enough, beloved,
but today is too soon to die.

Here.
Catch this falling leaf.
Here.

Jane Mary Curran

The Exile of Eve

I was sent into exile from apple trees,
the tart fruit, sharp in my mouth.
Only in memory will I breathe
the scents of cypress,
palms heavy with dates,
field after field of ripening wheat.

No more the shade of cedars.

No more the cattle, their soft noses ringed in whiskers.
They nibbled clover from my hand.

No more the river.
In the mornings we swam there,
evenings we rested on the bank,
sipping dark wine laced with honey,
listening to thunder in the mountains.

My sentence is to travel east,
fleeing the Terror that guards the gate.
I breathe dust and pray in grit.
A dry wind bites and tastes of rock.

Where now are the long sweet days,
the soft fur of tigers,
the midnight sleep?

Where are the fields,
where is the rain?

Laurie Didesch

Costume Jewelry

My mom and I rummage through a box of costume jewelry that belonged to her mother who died long ago. My mom herself has

begun to forget things. The stash includes vintage earrings, pins, necklaces and rings. I like best the latter. They consist of colors

like emerald green, purple amethyst, and coral pink. Once a middle-class luxury, these items to us are precious despite the faux gemstones.

I relish seeing my mom smile as we take turns as models. She likes most the pieces with rhinestones so I let her keep them. We come

across her nametag from when she was a saleslady. She worked at a famous department store for much of my childhood. Back then,

she did not have time like this to play dress up. Her income was needed to supplement my dad's paychecks as a teacher. I ask her

if I can have the nametag as a keepsake. She hesitates at first. I am sure she is proud of her many years of service embodied

in this small object. In the end she relents. Perhaps she knows I will remember this moment when she is gone and I happen

upon this memento sometime in the future. The heart of the little girl in me leaps joyously for the time spent with her mom,

even at my age. I imagine my grandma adorned with her baubles, which will now add flair to my wardrobe. The jewelry makes

a statement but I prefer the nametag. It serves to remind me that a mother loves in many ways and throughout life's seasons.

.

Lisa Egle

Roses in the Courtyard

It's not quite dawn, and several birds, perched near light pink roses, have begun their morning songs in the courtyard below and here on the rooftop where I sit. Hundreds of other birds are singing similar melodies from the rooftops of nearby riads—traditional Moroccan houses with peaceful interior gardens, many converted into hotels. They seem to be serenading and welcoming a new day in the medina, the old walled city of Marrakesh.

Momentary peace and mindfulness wash over me as I enjoy the interconnectedness with the birdsongs and recall the Buddhist concepts of the impermanence of life and the importance of living in the present moment. The words of Thich Nhat Hanh—the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, known for his teachings on mindfulness, compassion and peace—echo in my mind:

"Life is available only in the present moment."

The quote resonates, but it is only fleeting. Tears fill my eyes as the familiar grip of grief returns. I'm thinking about my mom, who passed away nearly one year ago, and all of the birds, mostly ceramic figurines and wooden carvings, that my brother and I discovered in her house. She'd even drawn and painted her own versions of them. Seeing birds now, full of life, evokes both peace and pain.

I've been away for three weeks, with a certain goal in mind: to drink, bike and shop. Maybe heal, too. Using travel as an escape from reality—a way to live a different life for a few weeks and find a geographical cure along the way—has usually worked in the past. *Would it work this time?*

*

My 3.5-week trip was structured like a sandwich: solo at the beginning and end, with couple time in the middle. My journey began in Edinburgh, Scotland. After several days there, I moved on to the Western Balkans, where I met up with my partner Don and two of his friends, Gillian and Duke, for a bike trip through several countries that were part of the former Yugoslavia. My final destination was Morocco.

In Edinburgh, I was a tourist living in a non-tourist neighborhood for several days. I immersed myself in tales of kings and queens and Mary, Queen of Scots, of course. Lots of intrigue and drama to escape into. I thought of my mom, a natural storyteller, who would have been happy to hear me retell the stories I encountered while on tours, sometimes told by actors reenacting the past in full costume.

By night, I was also part wanderer and part tourist, walking through local neighborhoods and visiting pubs. While I don't typically drink whisky at home, it became appealing in the rainy weather that was even chillier than I'd imagined possible in early July. After going on a walking tour, in my rain gear, I found a pub with a friendly vibe and sat at the bar.

"First time in Edinburgh?" the bartender asked, wiping down the counter.

I nodded and smiled. "That obvious, is it?"

He chuckled. "Aye! Fancy a quick intro to Scotch?"

"Yes, please," I replied.

"Right then, I'll set you up with a flight, 3 samples, for a quick tour of Scotland's whisky styles."

He poured the first glass. "This is Glenfarclas from Speyside—rich, sherried and family-owned."

He moved to the second. "Next, Auchentoshan from the Lowlands. Triple-distilled, so it's lighter and sweeter."

For the last, he grabbed a bottle from the shelf. "Kilchoman from Islay—newer distillery, but proper smoky."

He slid the flight over. "Take your time. Let them breathe."

"Cheers," I said.

"Aye, *slàinte mhath!*" he grinned, wishing me good health. "Enjoy!"

After the whisky warmed me up, I ordered a beer and wrote in my journal, lingering at the bar. I soon connected with British Navy officers—in uniform—who said they'd met King Charles III that day at the Holyrood Palace, at the bottom of the Royal Mile, during Holyrood Week. They asked me about American politics and recent controversies. I did my best to answer. Then, we moved on to another pub. Connecting with people in a friendly city was quick and easy, especially via the pub circuit.

While in Edinburgh, I did my best to be in the moment, but I was certainly looking forward to the bike trip Don and I had planned, even with its physical challenges. It would involve at least 30 miles of biking

per day (me on an ebike) on rolling hills, sometimes steep and in the July heat.

After Scotland, I moved on to the second leg of the trip: the Western Balkans. Solo for a few days in Dubrovnik, Croatia, I strolled the medieval walls early in the morning to avoid the cruise ship crowds and to bask in the soft morning light. I also spent some time cooling off in the Adriatic Sea at a pebbly beach. The brief pause before the bike trip was exactly what I needed.

Cycling through mountainous areas and busy towns and cities of Bosnia, Montenegro and Albania turned out to be somewhat demanding; it certainly required focus. This meant there wasn't a lot of time for grief to pull me in all the way.

It was only when I was in the Adriatic, a second time and with Don, that my thoughts drifted to my mom. She used to tell me about her near-drowning experiences as a teenager, stories filled with fear and panic.

"I never liked the water after that," she would say, her voice trembling just a bit, even after all those years. "I still see the waves pulling me under whenever I'm near the ocean."

I thought about that as I floated in the crystal-clear water, shimmering turquoise with hints of dark emerald. She might have liked this particular spot—so still and peaceful.

Yet despite the calm around me, a well of sorrow began to rise within. It came out of nowhere, a sudden rush of sadness that caught me off guard. Tears welled up in my eyes and soon spilled over.

"I can't stop," I gasped, trying to explain to Don the emotions that had no words.

"It's okay," he said softly, pulling me into a hug. "Let it out."

I wept uncontrollably, clinging to him, feeling the comfort of his arms around me. I didn't realize how much I needed that hug and the catharsis it brought about until I was in it.

After the bike trip, Don and his friends flew home and I returned to solo status and the final leg of the trip: Morocco. That's when the grief kicked in a bit harder. Although I've come to enjoy my solitude, saying goodbye and being alone again could have been the trigger.

Morocco's major cities each have their own distinct color, and Marrakesh is known as the "Red City." The ancient reddish-ochre sandstone walls contrast with the bright azure sky, but both radiate the intense North African heat and seem to magnify the city's chaotic energy. Street vendors shout to each other and customers, locals on

minibikes zig-zag through the crowds and car horns seem to honk nonstop as they make their way through busy streets and impossibly small alleys.

Winding through the narrow medina streets, my luggage in a wagon lugged by a porter, I finally made it to the riad. Staff welcomed me with tea and sesame cookies in the courtyard, where I admired the colors—the deep Marrakesh red paired with muted teal—everything in perfect feng shui, with colors, corners, and spaces in flawless harmony. Entering my room, I paused in the doorway, taking in what would be my home for the next five days. Hand-carved tiles in warm reds and whites spread across the floor in symmetrical patterns, while intricate lanterns cast shadows on the walls. It was the most beautiful room I'd ever seen, something out of a dream.

My mother, who always longed to pursue interior design, might have found her muse in the riad and in my room. The vibrant colors. The flowing spaces. The antique fabrics. I could picture her face, that look of wonder when something beautiful caught her eye or she wanted to buy decorative art or furniture. She would have spent hours studying the colors and designs, then making it all her own.

I longed to show her pictures of my room. To tell about the shopkeepers and the ridiculous attempts they would make to charm me into buying something. And to see her face when I showed her the rug I eventually picked out—with red, teal and pink, exactly what she'd have chosen. But I would never get that chance.

One night, I had a dream about her and a psychic I wanted to see and how I needed to borrow money to pay for the reading. She wrote me a check, and I was angry, telling her that the psychic wouldn't accept it. I needed cash. We argued, and then I woke up, feeling the same anxiety I would have felt had the experience been real. I knew this dream was related to a time in my mom's life when I began to notice her becoming more challenging to deal with.

This was the first dream I've had about her since her passing that was not positive. The others portrayed her at a different phase of her life—when she was in her mid-40s and perhaps at her best. In those dreams, I felt like she and I had reconnected somehow via some astral plane. This dream, however, was more like an unpleasant memory.

It plunged me into a deeper sadness, one that would last several hours and haunted me several times.

But the next day, the magic I needed arrived—as it often does when I travel.

At a co-op market in Marrakesh, I met a Berber instrument maker whose workshop was filled with drums and string instruments and, on the wall, black-and-white photos of his father who had also been in the business and taught him. He noticed me admiring a *darbouka*, a small goblet-shaped drum, and gestured toward it.

He tapped it and pointed to me, asking with his eyes: "Do you play?"

"*Shwiya*," I replied, using my limited Arabic for "a little."

He nodded and handed it to me. I began tapping out a rhythm, and his face lit up. He joined in on another drum, a larger one, and we had our own jam.

We communicated through gestures and the few words we shared—him in Tamazight, the Berber language, and me using Arabic from a translation app.

When I chose a pink *darbouka*, he touched his heart in approval. "*Zwin*," he said, meaning "beautiful" in Moroccan Arabic.

Pink had been Mom's favorite color, which I hadn't appreciated before. But now, holding this drum, I was beginning to see its charm.

The next day, the serendipity continued.

While at the Saadian Tombs, a royal necropolis that has stood since the 16th century, I noticed two black women—one younger than me and the other, older—struggling to take a selfie in the intense midday heat. Something about them pulled me in and led me to offer to take the photo for them. Maybe it was the way the younger sister naturally leaned into the older one's shoulder as they posed, or how they laughed together afterward.

After the photo session, over lunch in a shaded courtyard, I learned their story. They were sisters with a 24-year age gap. The same father, different mothers. The older sister had helped raise the younger one, and I could see their love in their interactions, especially the secret language only close siblings speak with each other.

"It was just the two of us after Dad passed," the older sister said quietly, stirring her mint tea. The afternoon heat was settling around us, but in our corner, it felt like time had slowed.

"I still miss him every day." The younger sister's eyes went distant. "He raised me," she glanced at her sister with a small smile, "but so did she."

"I don't know how I'd have managed without you," she added.

Maybe it was the setting, or maybe just one of those magical travel moments, but I found myself opening up too. "I lost my mother not

too long ago," I told them. "It's hard, isn't it? How the grief never really goes away but kind of... softens?"

They both nodded—that deep nod people give when they really get it.

"We all carry it," the older sister said, her eyes sad. "It just changes shape over time."

Sitting there, near ancient tombs where centuries of loss and celebration had occurred, our shared grief felt a little lighter. Three women, strangers, enjoying a moment of connection and gratitude.

*

It's my final day in Marrakesh. The sun has risen, but it is still morning. Most of the birds have moved on, with just a few still singing. In a few hours, I'll be leaving the riad, breaking free from what has come to feel like a womb, tucked into a tiny alley, and stepping back out into the world. My final two stops: a Berber village in the Atlas Mountains and then, a windy beach town where the shopping is supposed to be good. Then, back home.

Drink, bike, shop...and heal. Maybe it was that after all. With a Buddhist twist.

I think of another passage by Thich Nhat Hanh in which he recounts the profound realization he had after the passing of his mother. Through a dream and a moment of clarity while walking outside, he understood that his mother's presence was not truly lost, but lived on within him and in everything around him, leading to a deep sense of connection and comfort.

"From that moment on," wrote Hanh, "the idea that I had lost my mother no longer existed. All I had to do was look at the palm of my hand, feel the breeze on my face, or the earth under my feet to remember that my mother is always with me, available at any time."

I'd copied that quote into my journal months ago when the grief was heaviest. Reading it again now, I feel a little closer to a place of peace and healing. Perhaps my mother has been with me on this journey and has seen and experienced it with me somehow. If so, then she has taken, with me, the journey of a lifetime.

Keriann Eklund

Her Sweetheart Dance

My daughter's jumpsuit hangs by the open window
like a calyx of the future woman she will be.

Subtle in color
but not in meaning: a maturing
magnolia with cap-sleeve petals
of loose linen longing for her frame.
The pant legs sway to a song, a refrain
too sinuous too soon,
to kiss
her girlhood room
goodbye.

She will not suit up smart nor will she dress up dreamy
to be
romanticized, fantasized, sexualized – stop
this conversation and listen. Lift her up
to be.

She will simply pluck her look
from the plastic hanger, step in
one leg then the other, one arm then the other.
She will not mind the binding smocked bodice,
corset of ancestors clinging close.
Her makeup suits her:
dirty Chuck Taylors, a bracelet charmed by soccer balls,
a smile reflected back in the pane of glass
bright from February's sun.
She is glorious in light, galvanized
and girl girl girl
to be the pistil of herself.

Who cares if she
wants to be a grand, pink flora?
She will not be
fulfilling a rooted stereotype

like the pollinated
 pattern of freckles
fixed down
her porcelain skin.

She will go with girlfriends, giggle and jump,
bunched together on the dance floor.

And after, I will hang it up
to behold the wrinkled linen licked by her sweat.

Sara Femenella

My Name Is Sonia

I am both a particle and a wave

I am a field of flowers

When my mother asked the world
to wait for my name it answered with a particle
and a wave

I am a language of words that do not exist

My name is a future vanishing in my mother's blood

In the language of fields where my words will
never exist I have
no name no future I am unflowered

I heal what she can't

My name is Sonia
I name myself

My name refracts across the rare dream
where I visit my mother dressed in milk and blood

and she holds me

I won't let her heal from me

We cast no shadow
just light bending the edges of time

I ask my mother has the world stopped waiting for me?

Her answer is full of flowers
rare dreams and no way to heal

Katrina Irene Gould

The Drink

Other young men in their writing class turned toward her, but she turned toward him instead. When he invited her to a cheesy motel restaurant near campus at the beginning of summer, she accepted. They sat in the lounge and ordered drinks.

The drink helped her. It helped to gloss over the facts: he wasn't lighthearted; he had an ax to grind about his father; he didn't seem sold on her. The drink made her interested in standing beside their bicycles before riding home and allowing him to kiss her, his tiny mustache rough against her upper lip. When he pressed the length of his body against hers, it felt like validation. Surely the drink helped with that as well.

He'd handed back her short stories with big x's through entire paragraphs. "Needs more punch," he wrote for every one of them. She hadn't enjoyed his stories either, but the drink helped her overlook this.

His stories were brilliant, actually, if distasteful - especially the one about the circus. "Round and perfect were the oranges Hans juggled. How he found such ones for every show Lena didn't know." She remembered those oranges, and also how every one of his characters was detached and petty, mean, even. Halfway through the drink, she stopped wondering what this might say about him.

The first night they met at the lounge, his freshly washed hair was still damp. He wore his usual tattered jeans, but also a snowy white button-down shirt, the kind she associated with men who used dry cleaners rather than washing their own clothes. These touches made her wonder. Perhaps he wasn't as indifferent as he seemed.

The drink definitely made him *appear* less indifferent.

Night after night they had two strong drinks, maybe three, and kissed beside their bicycles when it was time to leave. Under other circumstances, she wouldn't have stood in such a public place and allowed a young man to move against her in this way. But it was dark, and summertime.

One evening, he asked, "Want to come to my place?"

There was a certain inevitability to this step. They couldn't keep meeting at the motel lounge for large drinks that, oddly, were always the color of grenadine. So she said, "Sure." He had purchased many drinks over the last few weeks.

The 2:00 a.m. sky was a soft, smudged charcoal. The air lifted the hair on her forearms as they biked, a delicious, shivery sensation. After twenty minutes, they reached a shabby ranch-style house in a residential neighborhood.

"I'm not sure who'll be home," he said, and for the first time she understood that, like her, he had roommates. They wheeled their bikes to the backyard and entered through the kitchen. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling and glared over the grimy counters. Crusty dishes and pots filled both sinks. A young man stood at the open refrigerator. She was not introduced.

His bedroom was spare, the only decoration a poster that said "God is dead -" He lay her on top of the bedspread and they kissed. He drew her shirt over her head.

She looked down at her body, naked on top, jeans on the bottom. Maybe the wind on the bike ride had blown the drink out of her. Maybe it was the state of the kitchen, which didn't instill confidence about the bathroom she'd have to use at some point. Maybe it was the roommate, who now knew some nameless girl was in his room. Maybe it was the Nietzsche quote.

"You know," she said, "I think I'll go home." She reached for her shirt behind her on the bed.

His eyes narrowed. The drink did not cover the disdain in his voice when he asked, "Why? Are there three words you need to hear first?"

Possibly the drink didn't hide her disdain either. She pulled her shirt over her head and said, "No. Thanks for the drink."

She bicycled hard, pumping her legs, elated with the burn in her thighs. The evening could have taken a different turn, the drink, his bed, her state of undress. As it was, she'd said no, and he'd allow that "no" to stand.

The deserted streets were hers. She flew down hills, the warm air on her skin, her face, and for a moment, she forgot to be afraid.

Rachel Griffin

Raw

He wants it raw
It feels *good* to be skin to skin
To feel the motion
For the emptiness to disappear and in its place the perfect puzzle piece
If I give in this time, it's forever.
There are the pills, the lotions, the lubricants, the birth control based on
the moon or
Just hope.

If it's raw, we are closer
We are connected
At least, to him.

They want it raw too
They want poems that slice like papercuts
They don't want to hear about my first puppy, lounging in the ocean
The smell of mom's spaghetti,
Or how I feel in a field of sunflowers,
It's cliché, it's corny,
It's overdone.

No, they want the white-hot pain
They want the metal gun tapping my head
The dead mother stories
The slurp of drinking a martini alone
The cuts along thighs and wrists
Or the way I grab my stomach in the shower.

They want it *raw*.

The connection, the sharing of pain.
The un-aloneness.
It really *speaks* to them.

Be more raw, they tell me.
Share what's really in your heart.

That is the job of an artist.

So I will and I do.

I have (to).

We are connected.

It's giving giving giving

And hoping

One day, it will only feel raw to you.

K.D. Hance

My Genevieve

Dust has settled on the shelves lining my sitting room, the surfaces holding my memories neglected in my old age. It's been a while since I've felt the urge to clean and tidy the room I feel most comfortable in. In the afternoon, when the light shines through the windows, dust particles sparkle as they float through the warm air. I'm curled up in my armchair, which has faded from a vibrant red to a softer shade of magenta over time. The dip in the cushion fits me perfectly, for it is my bottom that has carved the perfect seat. This afternoon is overcast, and the dust isn't glittering in the light as usual. I groan as I stand and stretch, my ligaments and bones popping and snapping in creaky protest.

"I'd better make myself useful," I mumble to myself as I hobble into my kitchen and peer beneath the kitchen sink where I keep my cleaning supplies. An old bottle of Pledge, also discolored with age, still stands out amongst the greens and blues. I grab the yellow bottle and a clean rag from the wicker basket in the corner. I've made up my mind; I'm going to tackle my sitting room today.

Cleaning this room is always a struggle for me. As I wipe away the layers of dust, memories become exposed and it's easy for me to spiral back to the past where I'd rather not be. I sigh as I hobble back into the room, my eyes darting from surface to surface, wondering where I should start. My eyes catch on a small silver jewelry box sitting on a shelf near the window. Despite the cloudy day, the light coming in from the window reflects off the tarnished surface of the box and the sight immediately transports me back in time.

Many Years Ago...

They're shouting again, their raised voices echo down the long hallway and filter through my closed door, which does nothing to block the words I shouldn't hear. They're arguing over me again. My father is always angry with me, but tonight he's angry with my mother because of me.

"She just needs—"

"WHAT SHE NEEDS IS—"

I'm curled up on the floor of my bedroom, on the threadbare carpet that's from the seventies when brown shag was popular. I try to block out the words that come so clearly from the other room. I don't want to hear what my father believes I need. I've heard it before – a beating, a pillow over my face, to get dropped off at the fire station down the street.

I swallow the emotions that seem to be choking me and I open the small jewelry box I had been playing with moments before the fighting started. A small, hand-carved ballerina twirls to the tinkling music that starts whenever the lid is lifted.

“John, listen. We've got another appointment next week—”

It's always about me, the fighting. About how I'm weird and different and am the biggest disappointment to a parent. I'm not what they wanted – but specifically what *he* wanted. He wanted a normal child that enjoys playing outside, that doesn't cry at the feel of the grass on her feet. That doesn't spin in circles for hours, or who can communicate with words spoken aloud. He wanted a child who could eat whatever was put in front of them, could bear the feel of cheap polyester clothing on their skin, could be in the room with more than one person and the television at the same time.

But that's not what he got. He got me.

The ballerina stopped spinning as the yelling outside grew louder. I went to turn the box over so I could wind the box again, but a sudden movement stayed my hand. I squinted, trying to find the source of the movement. Had it just been my reflection in the small mirror behind the ballerina? I was about to give up my search when the ballerina itself moved. From the spring it was positioned on, the small wooden figure hopped down onto the lip of the jewelry box. The painted pinks of the ballerina's dress, shoes, and cheeks shone brightly in the lamplight beside me. She looked up at me, smiled, and began to dance. The little figure used what surface she had to spin and jump, her wooden self stretching with a grace I'd never be able to emulate. Her movements made me forget completely the chaos of my home. I could hear the tinkling beat of music she danced to, her wooden shoes tapping lightly against the silver of the box. I watched her, completely transfixed, and the action helped me to calm down.

That night, she danced endlessly as my parents fought. Her kindness wasn't something I knew I needed, but its warmth eventually led me to fall asleep there on the scratchy carpet of my small bedroom.

I learned to leave the lid open on my jewelry box, so when the fighting would inevitably begin again, I could just look over at it and get lost in sparkling moves of my small wooden friend. The music of that jewelry box became the backdrop of my childhood. Each night, the music would drown out the fighting of my parents, and eventually the abuse that made it to my room where I cowered.

Genevieve, I called her, naming her after a character in a book I'd read years ago. It was a name I'd always loved and it felt fitting to give it to the little wooden person that helped me through the darkness.

The sharp slap of my father's hand across my face was dulled by the presence of Genevieve. The hands gripping my shoulders as I was shaken, the action meant to imbue some sort of sense I wasn't gifted with at birth. The tinkling music filtered through his harsh words and grounded me. I could survive if I just listened, if I just watched my friend's performance. We would lock eyes across the room and I would disappear into Genevieve's world. It never ceased to bring me hope in those scary times.

*

My father wasn't the only monster Genevieve helped me to withstand. After years of abuse at my father's hands, I learned that outside really was a sanctuary after all. My little silver jewelry box and I would walk the streets of my neighborhood, sometimes long after the sun dipped below the horizon. It was a quiet area, the houses far enough apart to where nobody really bothered one another. I didn't feel safe outside, but it was safer than being in the place I had to call home. Having my friend with me made my moonlit walks a little more bearable.

I would whisper to her sometimes. Words I had trouble getting out with other people seemed to come easily for Genevieve. I would tell her stories I had made up in my mind – she especially liked the ones involving horses. One of the neighbors down our street had a small, fenced paddock where a little white and brown horse would wander. We stopped to watch it sometimes, the horse's attention also on us. In my stories, the horse would grow wings and fly us to a land far away, where there was no screaming or hitting. Genevieve always encouraged me to come up with more stories to occupy my mind.

One night in April, the moon especially bright, I stumbled upon a boy not much older than me sitting on the paddock fence.

“Hey,” he said when he saw me. I noticed his eyes flicker from my head to my sandaled feet, and then back up to the silver box I held in my hands. “What’s up? You’re that Bowen girl that lives over there, right?”

He gestured behind me in the general area of my house. I nodded and took a step back, not wanting to interact with him any longer. I had just wanted to see the horse.

“Wait,” he said as I turned and began walking away. “Why don’t you go to my school?”

I said nothing, the words locked inside. Why didn’t I go to his school? Because I’m a freak, my inner voice reminded me. Abnormal. I didn’t belong with the regular kids.

The concrete sidewalk was cool underfoot and I hastily walked past the paddock and the boy, turning my head so he couldn’t see the tears welling in my eyes. Genevieve’s box was digging into my stomach as I clenched her to me, fear of him chasing me speeding me along.

“You go to the retard school, don’t you?” He called from the fence, already knowing the answer.

I squeezed my eyes shut and continued down the familiar path I walked every night. The word he’d used wasn’t one I hadn’t heard before. Many times, from the lips of my own father, I’d feel that burning slice of contempt as he threw it at me.

When I was far enough away, I opened my jewelry box and Genevieve was there, waiting for me. She began a slow dance, her arms still extended gracefully above her head. I slowed my walk and watched her move, her now familiar movements bringing me the calm I needed.

*

I thought I was safe from ever seeing the boy again when I didn’t run into him over the next week, but my luck eventually ran out. One night, Genevieve and I were on our walk and he popped out from behind a tree a little ways down the road. I gasped, clutching my jewelry box to my chest as I stared at him with wide eyes.

“Why do you always walk at night?” He asked, his face barely lit by the moon overhead.

I just shook my head and looked at the ground, wanting nothing more than for him to disappear. I squeezed my eyes shut and listened as he took a step toward me.

“It’s not safe for a girl to be outside at this hour.” He was directly in front of me now. I could smell the sweaty stench of a teenage boy, hear his breathing.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“What’s in here?”

I opened my eyes to see him touching the rim of my jewelry box. A sound like a groan escaped my throat and I jerked away from him. I took off down the sidewalk, hoping once again that he wouldn’t follow me. But, I wasn’t as lucky this time. The weight of the boy tackled me to the ground and I cried out as the jewelry box bounced off the grass beneath the tree. I desperately looked around, hoping somebody would’ve heard the clatter and come outside, but they didn’t.

I was dragged by my kicking legs into the woods a few feet from the sidewalk. Sticks and leaves poked at my raw back, scratching the delicate skin there. The boy was saying something to me, but his words were making no sense. I opened my mouth and tried to scream, but nothing came out.

A soft melody broke through the chaos and caught my attention. I turned my head, looking away from the expression on the boy’s face, and my eyes snagged on the small pink figure of Genevieve. The music played on and she danced, her painted-on eyes locked on mine. I found solace in the artistry of her movements, the warmth she wrapped around me that protected me from the horrors of what I was really experiencing. I didn’t dare look away from her, from the promises in her eyes that told me I would be okay.

I learned two things that night. One, outside was not my sanctuary afterall. And two, Genevieve would be there for me no matter what.

Present Time:

A tear slipped down my cheek as I stared at my old jewelry box. The silver was tarnished now, the edges a darkened gray. I opened the lid and there was my old friend, my Genevieve. She twirled on her spring, the paint on her little wooden body now barely visible.

“Hi, Gen,” I whispered to her, amazed that after all this time, she was still the only thing I could ever manage to talk to. A pain radiated through my chest as I stared at the only thing that had gotten me through some very hard times.

I carried my jewelry box over to the armchair and I sat. I could see my wrinkled complexion in the mirror behind her. My eyes were as gray as my hair, I realized. It had been a while since I've looked in a mirror and my reflection somewhat surprised me. I could feel my heart begin to race as I took in the old woman I had become.

Despite the horrors of my childhood, I had managed to make a pretty good life for myself. Genevieve had encouraged me to write my stories down, and that influence had started me on my writing journey. The few books I'd published when I was younger have managed to sustain my simple life here in the country.

I ran a shaking, wrinkled finger across Genevieve's head, her bun still perfectly in place. Another pain tore through my chest, causing me to gasp. I nearly dropped the jewelry box with the hurt, but somehow managed to hang onto it.

Something's wrong, a voice in my head said and fear blossomed in my aching chest. I looked across the room at the telephone hanging on the wall, wondering if I could make it there in time.

Another stabbing throb, another strangled gasp. I looked down and saw Genevieve slipping off her spring. The music began and then she started to dance.

Jillian Hanson

High Wall

you spoon-fed me rice cereal
sewed tiny dresses
propped me up
for wide-eye
photos

you let me eat
black olives
off my fingers
pushed me out
the back door
to hide
between blades
absorb the
wormy mysteries
of dirt

you showed me
how to do
woman things:
 bake
 sew
 diet
 dress
 type without
 looking
 look good
 no matter how
 I felt
 take all
 the blame
you made yourself
into a high wall
to push off from
so that I

could become

myself
a different kind of
kinder mother

thank you

Alison Louise Harney

409 Grace Street, Apartment A

What winds today! The panes rattling
in their ancient frames. *What soup these days!*
I read in a poem this morning,
and how I wish for broth now: a kitchen simmering,
bubbling drowning boom and bang, bare feet
shifting salt across the linoleum.

What soup! What soup?

What fear rising when the wind blasts
this hard, swinging the stop lights—two green
pendants on Grace's namesake necklace—
and I am alone and afraid, my minutes dripping
into dirty bowls. If the old oak cracks, the ceiling
beams snap—no one here to see a desire to live,
now pulled out, assuredly,
from some girlhood box—the ballerina
spinning in her gale, yearning to be held
by a hand a little gentler than God's.

Alison Louise Harney

Late Season

All the sadness I bury in the soil. It is best
when the ground is hard, requiring

the hack of a spade. It is good to yank weeds,
better if they break, roots toiled

from the underworld—jointed, hairy snakes
replacing with the mind's mistakes,

mis-wantings. The earth
will grow something new

be it chive, cilantro, or mint, its fruits
infinite, its failures never tallied.

I let the child help, even when her help
is hurt, even when she pours dirt on my scalp

and down the sweaty v-neck of my shirt.
Even when she sprays me, clenching the lever

of the hose nozzle with both hands, stance casual
and cocked, fabric clinging to my belly and buttocks

as if I have been shrink-wrapped, and she has risen
powerful and comedic. Wet, dirty, defeated,

I thank her, silently, wringing the bottom
of my shirt into these late-season sprouts.

Alison Louise Harney

Let the Temples Burn

Let the temples burn, it is the flame
that stills us. Let the elders find their graves

comfortable and cold. Let love fly its course,
that zig-zag, shocked wing.

Let us know no right or wrong
in the heart's bending river.

There are billions of galaxies, filled
with billions of stars—some just now delivering

light though they boomed and faded
long ago. Have you read Basho?

Of course you have. No,
I don't want to join that Facebook group,

I quit that mailing list. Stop saying
stevia and agave, upgrades and updates,

omega-3s and chia seeds. I am tired of articles
that ask: "Does poetry matter?"

Do houseplants?
Elders responsible for a plant

die at half the rate of those with nothing
to tend. Someone

fund a study. I am tired of "looking"
followed by "for." Let us be

unknown. Let us watch the ashes billow.
Let us talk about the wind.

HR Harper

She Walks Out to Twist the Plot

for Layne

You'd walked out this door
so many times. This last time
your walking made the dusk transparent. You walked
out barely catching light; I did not notice.

As always you were dressed
in rocket ships and perfect colors.
A lampshade on your head.
A purpose in your step.
A husband in tow in the passenger seat.

The night before your laughter was unfettered,
and your eyes confirmed your confidence
in unfinished stories. Before you snoozed,
leaning on your human helpmeet,
we watched bad TV,
you anthropomorphized our dogs,
and then snored softly on your way
out of our lives.

Dogs, cats, llamas and Yo La Tengo in the safe box
of your carefully written stories.
You shoved those stories in your pocket
with each mortal step. I did not notice.

Stories of barriers beaten down, artful struggles
of a righteous woman, though more comptroller
than complement in marriage, friendship, and business.

For the last time again, this time firm
and numinous and finally happy in your maturity—
you walked from one continent to another.
You walked with new steps,
exactly the person you thought you'd be.
And you took the incompleteness, the glorious incompleteness

away forever. A raft of stories
floating in your secrets, floating in the space ahead.
Unfolding in the pages you will never write.

You walked out to twist the plot.
But with every possible glorious story
left open-ended for us. Notable stories only possible
in the space of your bright absence.

A woman's substance fading with each step.
An absence measuring what's left of us.
Yet no presence speaks as eloquently as your absence.
No music so haunting as the sound of your steps
walking out the door, on the gravel, around the corner.

I did not hear that you were walking away.

Lois Marie Harrod

Eventually the Old Codger

reminded me
of a kingfisher—

the dagger-billed nose
the lululemon belt bag

slung loosely
at his hips.

But first I thought
rat—

one more
rodent-faced creep

sniffing round
my middens—

then I noticed
his spiky punk toupee

and his bright eyes
beading in my direction.

Was he really
sizzling on

about New Jersey law?
Seems women over sibilant 70

no longer need
a fishing license.

Lois Marie Harrod

I do not say I love you

more than the earth,
for what would that say of me—

burdock
sticking to my sock,

pollen coating
my chin?

Haven't I scrubbed
you from my throat,

plucked you from my skin
and here you are again—

with your sticky hedge parsley,
beggar's lice

catchweed bedstraw
enchanter's nightshade

hiding your houndstongue,
in the sandbur weed.

Who notices
the itch but me?

Lois Marie Harrod

Happy Marriage

Of course, we were always imaging how it would end
with that flight to India when we were 102 or 108—

sudden loss of oxygen and drop to sea—
passing out before the death plunge

and years later when the seas would rise again
into dry lands, divers would find us

in Seats 21 A and B, still curled together, clutching hands.
And though you often said

in your dying months, we had lived through the best
of times, and true—our world was mostly kind,

though we did not ask as much as many,
kept our cars until there was no fixing,

and that clothes dryer spun 47 years without the now-necessary array
of dials and degrees in this little track-house, mid-entry shack

as imperfect as us, walls once infested with yellow jackets,
and a driveway growing uneven as we bumbled across.

And, yes, sometimes I think about those spoons you used
to get your gobs of peanut butter and the knives and forks

you left on the counter and wished you would just once take them
to the dishwasher, which we replaced twice, but of course

you were thinking of something else, and I should have known
so much more than I did after our 57 years, should have

realized you were telling me that you thought you were dying
all those months when you were saying, *we've had a good run*—
those months long before the problem

was detected. *The future will be better tomorrow—*

who believes that? Even our neighbors who after all these
years now acknowledge the climate

is changing. “I never talk politics,” they still say,
but the whole dying earth is political—as your death

was political—overworked doctors, quick assumptions,
stroke, heart attack, spine damage, episodic ataxia, finally

the cause, an undetected massive staph infection,
oh I am continuing, but you have no idea

how I miss your little lapses, all your not noticing
I was the one who scrubbed the sink, the counter,

washed the clothes, folded your baggy briefs.

Gabrielle Israelievitch

Dolls and Flowers,
on living and mothering at once

Not long after my husband Yves died, our son Noah went to California and then fell silent. It's now been some years. I haven't understood the reason, but he assured me in a long-ago phone call that it's not personal. In a later missive he said love was never in question. These words only make it marginally easier. I get so scared for him in the middle of all my missing. I create stories to give it a shape. I sit in each story in the straight back chair of a room I've created and see what it feels like to inhabit. In the end, I know little of solace and much of distraction. I look for my own rooms.

Between aging and the pandemic, I lost a sense of time—except for the Hallmark markers that Noah, blessedly, acknowledged—but sometimes in the years of isolation when others were perfecting sourdough bread, I removed my vestigial childhood toys from their storage box. Those few I decided to keep, I stuffed onto my library shelves so that I'd be forced to confront their relevance when I stood before them.

The library, situated in the middle of my ground floor, is a room most people would use for dining. Its walls surround me with certain comforts of the past—an abundance of books of all sorts, a few from my childhood, more from the childrens', and hundreds of others, floor to ceiling, eight shelves high with the top two layers now given over to ceramic teapots. The books have been culled significantly since the children left and Yves died, but they remain categorized by genre. I've added some random objects to the mix, including a few childhood dolls. I keep one of my mother's as well, a small Shirley Temple doll she tells me she once played with. I can't imagine my mother playing, but it's sort of an historical thread. I don't have family photos lining the staircase or anything. This is it. My library. The container of stories.

On a first of May, I was perusing these walls in search of something to read, and paused at the teddy bear from my infancy, something I'd once found comfort in. I'd rammed him into a corner with the poetry books. His once pink, pimpled cloth body was held together with white surgical tape. He had no more eyes, one ear, and half an eyelash. I decided that this would be his last day to grace my shelf. I

removed him to the kitchen's black stone counter to take his picture, a way of holding onto what I'm letting go of. I shot him from many angles, cradling his head for his last photo, the way I'd held infant Noah's for his first passport picture. Then I hugged him—crunchy as he was—and gently, even a bit wistfully, put him in the kitchen garbage where soon he was covered by a cassava chip bag, an oily rectangle of parchment paper, and wads of hair I'd cleaned out of my brush.

It was a sumptuous spring, the kind of season ee cummings wrote about with such glee, a season of balloon men. Every day a new bud opened, and a tree whose complicated and multiple branches looked all the long winter like arteries into the sky, suddenly burst into a green flame of leaves overnight. I had noticed more than ever during the pandemic years that linearity is only one way to consider time. Ram Dass pointed out that one could consider it as the relation between two moments.

The next 'moment' that first week of May fell on what would have been Yves' birthday. There was a pounding on the front door. I rushed to see a masked delivery person leaving behind a bountiful bouquet. As it happened, my attention fixed on the yellow Gerber daisies, the flowers only my silent son knows I love. My chest squeezed my heart into my neck. Noah? I opened the card.

No. They were from Natalie, a friend who keeps track of Yves' milestones. I was so stirred at the almost, it was hard to feel the depth of appreciation I generally feel in response to her kind gestures. I set the flowers on the kitchen table, unable to process her gift now, needing to remind my heart where to go. Sometime later, I separated the bouquet into three individual vases and with only half enthusiasm, placed them around the house. My pleasure at the gift was diffused by having gone to that place of possibility.

I can't remember what book I'd chosen to reread, but I finished it and returned to the library for another. There sat Raggedy Ann, softly squished against the thermostat. Scanning the shelves, my eyes then landed on Jennifer, my favorite childhood doll. She stood perched between art books. Unlike every other doll I'd had—from Barbie and Chatty Cathy to Poor Pitiful Pearl—she'd arrived in my life nameless, and I gave her the name I knew had originally been chosen for me: Jennifer. The name my mom's mom had objected to because she knew someone she didn't like named Jenny. My parents gifted this doll to me, brilliantly, because she, like me, had a left thumb that fit perfectly in her

mouth. She offered solidarity to a lonely and maligned thumb sucker. I'd carried her around, both of us with thumbs in place. We were a team.

There'd been an afternoon when I was four or five. My father and I were sitting at the white Formica-topped oak table in front of the back window of our four-room house in Iowa. Mom must have been out with my brother. Dad was engaged in paperwork, and I occupied myself with my lovely new pair of scissors that suddenly found purpose in cutting Jennifer's hair. When he looked up and saw what I was doing, he was so mad he didn't know what to do with himself. He did holler but I'm not sure to what end. She still carries the memory of this haircut.

I suppose I mention my dolls because they are somehow connected to my youthful fantasizing about being a mother. I invested them with a kind of caring I yearned to feel invested in me. Chatty Cathy had even told me she loved me, but it was mechanical and I didn't believe her. Had I kept Jennifer, especially, to hold onto a child's romantic idea of motherlove? I wonder as she sits before me now. Following Yves' death, I had begun a round of deaccessioning—of which there've been many—deciding what mattered to hang onto. I noticed that stuff isn't affected by one's clinging and dreaming on it, the way children are.

I suddenly felt the nuttiness of holding onto Jennifer. I took her mugshots as I'd done with Teddy, but instead of an unceremonious burial in the trash, I removed her clothes, put feathers in her hair, and took her outside. I set her up climbing a tree. She was a wild woman. She was free.

It would be so much easier to be a metaphor than to live the life.

Cynthia Knorr

...and a daughter

Why was I rifling through my mother's top dresser drawer?
I haven't lived in this house for thirty years

but I am drawn to secrets and this drawer held them,
things she meant to put somewhere else but forgot:

consequential letters, curious keys, and, in this case,
her obituary. How thoughtful.

Approaching old age with a serious illness, she wanted
to lessen the burden on her son and daughter when she died.

Since she was still alive, the obituary's presence jarred me.
I had to read it, of course, although I knew better.

Even the most innocent-looking paper scrap can drag me
through the rusty nail bed of our relationship.

As expected, trouble awaited, in the *survived by* section,
which included a description of her devoted son Steven

but nothing about her daughter, except the words
and a daughter. Period. Not even a name. Hmm.

Do you think I'm making too much of a draft obituary
written on a note pad from Carl's Garden Center?

Maybe, but I sniff out evidence of my mother's ambivalence
toward me like a carcass-hunting buzzard.

I once had an argument with a friend about whether
all mothers love their children. It's a given, she said,

but I suspect it isn't. The reason I'd bet my mother
didn't love me is because I know my father did.
Parental love is a tangible substance.

When you feel air where the heart of it is, be alarmed.

To the world, Mom and I had a normal enough relationship.
She tried. I tried. But sometimes, in private we snarled

like animals; hurt each other in a million ways.
Amazing how humans make adjustments

to bleak circumstances and carry on.
It takes determination and a little make-believe.

Mom pretended she didn't find me off-putting
and I refused to wonder why she did.

Elaine Koplou

Anita at Ninety

When she could no longer pedal the roads,
she biked her retirement village—
threading the literary cul-de-sacs of her complex,
looping short streets that led nowhere—
down Hawthorne, up Twain,
around Melville, down Poe.
When she could no longer navigate these,
she walked—
winding through narrow, circular paths,
resting on benches between assisted living,
continuing care, nursing.
When she could no longer walk,
for the pain in her legs,
she swam—
cramped laps in a crowded pool.
When her arms became as weak as her legs,
she read—
abridged versions, large print.
When her eyes gave out, seeing little around her,
she listened to tapes.

Like the grass
that finds its way insistently, stubbornly
reaching through cracks
in the pavement, refusing
to be crushed, trampled,
or mowed—

she was the grass.

Elaine Koplou

Circles

With my left hand I am holding tightly
to the Dogwood tree in the front yard,
my arm outstretched stiffly at an unnatural
angle, my feet imploring the pedals
to keep turning—my first time
without training wheels.

I am still
in my school clothes, skirt flaring in circles
around me with my efforts, the small blue
flowers floating with the rise and fall
of my knees.

Around the tree
I go, inching over its roots, guiding
the shiny two wheels over grass
and rocks—my right hand clutching
the handlebars, eyes intently focused
on the ground.

From the doorway my father watches,
takes his pipe from his mouth. *Let go!*
he calls sharply, *Let go!* well knowing
his daughter was not made
for circles.

Elaine Koplou

How Do You Know?

How do you know, she asks
one night as we leave after dinner
and drinks, dessert, and coffee.
A night of laughter—good friends.
Talking work and weather, politics
and car repairs. Joking about kids
and dogs and marriages. The occasional
tension leaking out between
them, quickly wiped up
like a coffee spill.

They looked to us—older,
together for decades, and still
hanging in. Always looking to us—
as though age brought answers.

This time by the door,
she takes a quick glance back
into the room, pulls me aside
and holds my arm for a moment,
her eyes coming up from down under.
How do you know, she asks,
when an argument is just
an argument? How do you know
when you're safe?

Chelsie Kreitzman

Ducks

The winter I am lost
between hurt and healing,
I wander along a thawed pond,
watch a pair of Mallard ducks
peck and preen, chatter
like lovers do. After a while they settle
onshore, breasts fluffed, bodies touching,
one green and one brown head tucked back,
beaks buried beneath feather blankets
like an old married couple
nestled in for a Sunday snooze.
I adore them

until I go home,
do the laundry, wash the dinner dishes,
change the diapers, and sing
my children to sleep. Restless
in my half-empty bed, I stare
into a small rectangle of light,
read about ducks on the internet,
learn they are only monogamous
for a short season until the male leaves
the female to raise the brood.
I hate them, then,
for being too much like humans.

Chelsie Kreitzman

Mama, How Do You Make a Beautiful Heart?

He asks as he thrusts a page full of drawings
into my hands. Rainbows, turtles, butterflies.

Six Christmases earlier, the cold white
wand of the home fetal doppler skates
through a smudge of gel on my stomach
until I find it – the fast
WHOOSH-whoosh, WHOOSH-whoosh
of pulsing blood, his body's first secret song.

Come Valentine's Day I am inconsolable,
a grown woman weeping
in my childhood bedroom, wrecked
and left by a man I only thought I knew.
I want to die, but I promise myself
if that tiny heart dares to beat, mine will too.

*I don't know, I tell him now.
I think you just have to keep trying.*

I take the paper and make a crude sketch
of that visceral instrument that anchors us here.
I pass the pen from my left hand to his, watch
concentration furrow my own brow in miniature,
the familial planes of cheeks and nose.
He makes a carbon copy.

Chelsie Kreitzman

The Value of an Omniscient God

Tear-stained cheeks. Low light in the coffee
shop. My bloodshot eyes meet the stone
wall of his glare. If he could, I think he'd vaporize
me like steam from his latte,
disappear me into thin air.

Accustomed to invisibility, I startle
when a woman pauses beside me, offers
a tender, knowing look, nudges
a tissue into my hand. She recedes,
leaves me to wipe my eyes, whisper thanks.

Back home, I try to make amends –
for what, I don't know.
I'm absolved with no explanation,
only a mumbled pseudo-apology, a warning
not to hold this over his head. I know better
than to ask questions, so instead I let him
draw me close, cover my sins,
my mouth, my body with his, fool
me into thinking everything is okay again
and again and again.

Awake in the night, I ruminate
on that stranger's act of compassion,
what it means to be seen.
Maybe I could welcome being watched
by someone who weeps
at injustice, recognizes
when a lie is planted
bold as a kiss on the face of love.

Linda Laderman

Hunger

I wear a lavender leotard and tutu, flushed and happy
I've gotten through the dance recital. Wisps of hair curl
around my face. Sweat beads on my fleshy pubescent thighs.
Any envy I have towards the other dancers, their coltish legs,
blonde ponytails, or two parent families, is hidden behind
a look I gleaned from watching my cohorts carry themselves,
voices pitched like finely tuned keys, postures straight
as unbent trees. Over time, I train my body to ignore hunger
and whittle my waist small. My hazel eyes and full lips
contrast my mother's brown eyes and thin lips, lined from her
smoking and perpetual scowl. She casts an eye when
I move near a sweets table, so I turn in the other direction.
Still, I fear myself most, certain my control will fade like the pictures
tucked into my diary, hidden in a drawer with a stash of forbidden food.

Lisa Lahey

The Reaper

At Willy's Tavern, in the Deep South, the men gathered after a hot day's work on Mr. Bruckner's cotton farm and downed a pitcher of ale. It was the height of the Depression, and everyone was hungry and poor. Men all over the country took what they could carry, left their families behind, and rode box cars across the country looking for work.

Louisiana had always been a poor agricultural state, and now the cost of cotton dropped lower than ever. Still, some cotton farms hung by a thread, and one of them belonged to Mr. Bruckner. He hired only two men at a time to plant and harvest his crops. His son, Jonah Bruckner, was one of his workers.

Once a week, in Willy's Tavern, the men put their coins together and split two beers among them. Jonah wasn't liked by any of the men, but he joined them anyway.

Talk turned to the young Black girl a few counties away, who'd been violently raped and killed by a white man. Word had come up from the Mississippi River about her, and how her family was seeking justice. It would never happen; Black girls were raped all the time, but this one sent ripples through the community because of her murder.

Jonah wiped his hand through the air. "Who can prove what happened to that negress? Besides, you can't rape a negress."

"Why do you say that?" Big Pete asked.

Big Pete was a tall, heavy white man who kept a beer belly even though he was as hungry as the rest of the men. He was built like a bull, but for all that, he was a kindly man who looked out for his friends.

"Are you kiddin' me? They'll spread their legs faster than they'll ask for work."

The men stared hard at Jonah Bruckner, and, for a moment, they went quiet. Gulping his beer, Jonah noticed the silence and looked up at them.

"What y'all lookin' at?" his eyes narrowed.

Finally, Big Pete said, "Ain't none of my business. Best to stay out of it."

Jonah nodded at him. "Sounds like a smart thing to do, Big Pete."

"Jonah, is it true your daddy might be cuttin' our wages?" Frank asked. That mattered more to him than a Black girl who was murdered.

Frank looked and acted like a weasel. He was a slight, white man with small eyes and dark hair that he kept slicked back on his head. He'd steal the underwear off a man if he wasn't looking.

"Can't say as I know. Daddy doesn't tell me much about the jobs."

"I ain't lookin' forward to riding the rails again, Jonah," Frank griped. "It ain't fun for a man to go hungry til' he finds work."

"One thing I'll say, we gotta get them cotton weevils under control or they'll be the death of Daddy. Damned Mexicans bring em' up with em'. Should shoot every Mexican this side of the border."

The men were thinking that someone at this table should be shot, but they wouldn't say it out loud.

*

Samuel Hoboken, an elderly Black man who'd just arrived in the county, found himself at Mr. Bruckner's sprawling farm. He'd gone from farm to farm where he'd find work then leave again when he didn't find the man he was looking for. News travelled fast in the South, and what he'd learned had brought him to Mr. Bruckner's farm.

He knocked on Mr. Bruckner's door, removing his straw hat and wiping the beads of sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

Mr. Bruckner opened the door.

"What you want, boy?"

"Sir, I'm looking for work."

Mr. Bruckner looked Samuel over. He was old, easily in his sixties, but he was a large, broad-chested man with arms like tree trunks.

"Don't usually hire Blacks. You people are slippery as thieves, but you do look strong. I already have me three men, but I guess I could find you some work," Mr. Bruckner replied. "I don't pay the Blacks the same as I pay the whites. I pay them eighty cents a day and you'll get less."

Samuel held his straw hat in his hands, "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Bruckner shouted loudly, "Jonah! Where you at, Son?"

"Here, Daddy!"

Jonah trotted from the field over to where his father stood. He looked Samuel up and down the same way his father had.

"Who's this Black fella?"

"This here is Samuel. I've hired him to work in the field. Give him the hard work."

“Yes Daddy. I was going to anyway.”

Jonah started walking and Samuel followed him. “I’ll show you your sleeping quarters. The men share a small loft in the horse’s stable. There’s straw for bedding and I’ll give you a blanket.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Jonah. My daddy is ‘sir.’”

Jonah put Samuel to work with the other men. They nodded their hellos and worked until noon when they stopped for lunch. Mr. Bruckner fed them Hoover Stew, a concoction of vegetables, food scraps, and onions. Samuel gulped down every drop.

When Samuel’s head hit the straw in the loft that night he was out before he could pray to the Lord. The workers had no chance to talk to him, but they’d figured him out and had taken a liking to him.

Samuel fixed fences, picked cotton, irrigated, planted cotton seeds, and picked them when they burst open. He and Big Pete slung cotton bales onto Mr. Bruckner’s wagon to be brought to a mill in town. It was hard work under a blistering sun, but at least he had a job.

The men invited Samuel to join them at Willy’s Tavern to split their wages on their weekly beer.

“How’re you liking work on the farm?” Big Pete asked Samuel.

Jonah looked at Samuel, his eyes narrowed. He didn’t want Blacks working on his daddy’s farm, but he had no say.

“Grateful for it.”

“Yeah, ain’t we all?” Big Pete replied.

The men sipped their beer and said nothing else. Samuel made a mental note to store as much of his wages as he could. He’d pitch in for ale with the men, but he wouldn’t waste a nickel on anything else. He’d need the money for more important things one day— of that, he was certain.

*

Samuel and Big Pete slung cotton bales onto Mr. Bruckner’s wagon to bring to a mill in town. Cotton processing was slow, and it could take a month before Mr. Bruckner saw any profit. The men received their wages when the profit came back from the town and not before then.

It was the end of another hard week of labour and the men were headed to Willy’s Tavern again. This time, they chose a different night and made sure Jonah had no idea they were going. They had their reasons.

Samuel stayed behind for a bucket bath outside the barn, pouring chilly water over his body and his aching muscles. He climbed into the loft to find Jonah sitting on a hay bale, chewing on a piece of straw.

"The men have gone to Willy's, Samuel."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. Don't know what their problem is with me. What do you think it is, Samuel?"

"Don't know."

"Ah, they're jealous of my daddy's farm. It'll be mine one day." Jonah lay back and put his feet up on another hay bale.

"Reckon so." Samuel dressed himself.

"Samuel, what do you think about the negress who was raped that we were talkin' about?"

"What about her?"

"White men get away with that sorta thing, you reckon?"

"Don't know," Samuel replied.

"Now I'm not sayin' it's okay. It's never okay to kill someone, even a Black girl," Jonah stated.

Samuel reached into the straw and picked something up.

"All I'm sayin' is white men don't hang for it."

Samuel's eyes narrowed at Jonah. "Thing is, Jonah, my own grandchild was raped not too long ago."

"Is that so? Sorry to hear it," Jonah spit a piece of straw onto the floor, and kept chewing. "Well, that's a shame now. He nibbled on another piece of straw. 'I'll tell you what, Samuel. Since I can trust you. I don't need the police knocking on my door.'"

"Got it."

"I'm the one who killed that girl. I didn't want to, Samuel, but after I raped her, I had to shut her up. She was all squealing and crying about running to her daddy."

"I know who that girl was."

Jonah sat up and looked at Samuel. "Who was it?"

"Hoboken. Rita Hoboken. You killed my granddaughter, Jonah."

Samuel swung the hammer he'd taken from the straw high into the air and brought it down on Jonah's head. Jonah's eyes rolled up into his skull, and he made a gurgling noise deep in his throat. Samuel swung the hammer again and again. He spoke to Jonah's corpse.

"You were wrong, Jonah. Even a white man can die for killin' a Black girl."

Samuel wrapped everything he owned in his gunny sack and slung it over his shoulder, then set off down the road towards town. He needed to hitch a ride and quick. Mr. Bruckner would find Jonah soon, and he'd realize Samuel was gone. They'd be out looking for him—set the dogs after him and track him down.

Samuel reached into his pocket and pulled out Rita's picture. He kissed it for the last time and laid it beside Jonah's corpse.

He would get to the nearest railroad crossing and hop aboard a box car. He could sleep a full night or two if he felt like it. His body was aging. His muscles were sore, and his heart was broken. He needed rest after working for three weeks on Mr. Bruckner's farm and killing his son.

When the men came home from Willy's Tavern they found Jonah Bruckner in the loft with a claw hammer in his head. They looked around for Samuel, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. It didn't take a genius to figure out who killed Jonah, and they knew too well why.

Mr. Bruckner yelled orders at the men to search every damned cotton row on their hands and knees to find Samuel Hoboken. The men went out into the fields and took their time looking.

*

Five days later, in Willy's Tavern, the men gathered to drink their beer at the end of a long, hot day of work on Mr. Bruckner's cotton farm. It was there that Sheriff Martin tracked them down. He pulled up a chair beside them and accepted a gulp of beer.

"I'm looking into the murder of Jonah Bruckner, boys. Mr. Bruckner wants to know about a Black fella who worked on his farm for three weeks. A man named Samuel Hoboken."

Frank said, "never met a man named Samuel Hoboken."

"Me neither. Never worked with a black man on Mr. Bruckner's farm," Big Pete replied.

The sheriff looked from one man to the other.

"You're sure about this? Y'all can go to jail for lyin'. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Sheriff. We're sure." Frank answered.

Sheriff Martin looked at Frank and Big Pete, who stared him down.

The sheriff nodded. "Alright, then. I'll take your word. I'll be back if I need more information."

The two men turned back to their beer to discuss the day's work and wages, and if they might be let go.

"Mr. Bruckner might be cutting our wages, what with two less farmhands to get the work done, now," Big Pete said.

"Might, might not." Frank shrugged and drained his beer.

"Let's buy another glass, Frank," Big Pete suggested. "Why not celebrate a good week's work on the farm?"

Frank nodded and reached into his pocket. "Yeah, why not? It's as good a night as any."

Susanna Lang

Stopping By

Etel Adnan, Untitled, 2012

Inside the small canvas, there is sunlight.

Blocks of thick paint, moss green, white,
two shades of yellow, a narrow brown band;

orange like the fruit and orange
with a little white in it; the only shape without angles

a black circle, upper left. That's all,
plus the sunlight.

Untitled. She is not telling you a story
but opening the door so you can walk in.

Sit down. Take a breath. Close your eyes,
feel the warmth on your eyelids.

And when you are ready to walk out again,

into the rain that is almost mist, you carry
that sunlight with you even as rain collects

on your shoulders, even as you wonder
should you open your umbrella and decide

no, her sunlight is enough.

Marie Lavendier

A Sunday Afternoon

"Love is the greatest force of the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos." – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This scrawny red-faced
creature, your new baby,
keeps you awake long nights
suckling your sore nipples.
Exhausted, you clutch
the sleeve of your husband's suit
as he leaves the two of you
alone for the first time.
Overcome by the voracious
maw of your tiny charge,
you forgive your mother
all her past mistakes.

Three months later
on a Sunday afternoon,
your husband's lanky body
sprawls across the couch dozing
while your infant son— rosebud lips
and soft little curves—sleeps
on the rise and fall
of his father's chest.

Relief floods your heart
as you lean over father and child
with your milk-swollen breasts
while the blue, white, and green marbled
planet we call home rotates
slowly on its axis, wobbling
now and then, vulnerable,
yet open to the greater forces
of the universe,
like you.

Life is fleeting, precious. Love is all.
Stay for this lesson
you have come here to learn

Joanne Mallari

Langit

In triangle pose, the yogi tells me
to look up past my fingertips

to the sky. In Tagalog, the word is *langit*,
which more often refers to heaven.

Na sa langit na, my mother says
of my sister who would be thirty-five

in two days. In her piece of sky,
do birds perch like music notes

on staff paper? Does the light peak
at midday? Is heaven as cyclical

as the seasons here? And how
do we even define heaven—

is it a place or a state of being?
Drawing on Eastern wisdom

Christians divorced long ago,
a friend tells me that heaven

is not the absence of suffering
but a place where suffering

breeds compassion. When I inhale
back to standing, I see leaves falling

like angels into our piece of sky.

Margaret S. Marangione

Mother's Day

The Page County Boys have a short shelf life. Yet, if they survived till 23, they usually had a good run until their mid-fifties when diabetes or cancer slowly took them out. Sometimes, in between the wholesome activities of bluegrass jams and backyard barbeques, or the more lethal ones like trespassing to go frog giggin, taking deer out of season, fishing in the bacteria-filled Shenandoah River, exploding ketamine in Susan's field, and working all night in Keith's chicken houses, tragedy struck early.

Susan's son was soon to be 22. On Saturday night, when her son should have been running with the Page County Boys, he sat on her bed sobbing. His words were garbled between gulps of air.

"Arlo and his brother are dead."

"What happened?" She sat herself up straighter in bed, having been reading while waiting for her Tylenol PM to kick in; sleeping was now less easy after a car accident three months ago, but if she was honest with herself, she had stopped sleeping once she married her children's father.

"I don't know, why the fuck does that matter? I swear...what the fuck mom? Why would you ask that? They don't know, nobody knows...Alyssa called me when I was out with Michelle."

Susan inhaled deeply, preparing herself for a long night with Dylan as she reminded herself to not talk too much because anything she said could, and would, be used against her.

"Alyssa?"

Dylan's face darkened. "You know, *Alyssa*." He motioned his head as if his ex-high school girlfriend was in the next room; "She said there had been an accident on the river, so I called Arlo's old lady cause he never answers his phone, and asked her what was up, and she said, 'Haven't you heard? Arlo and Hunter drowned this morning.'" Dylan convulsed in sobs.

"They grew up on the river." Susan was clueless as to how this could have happened.

"How can you say that? Who cares? They're dead and Arlo has a baby coming and he was so excited and was straightening out and we just went mushroom hunting on Tuesday. His family are such good people. He just built a room on to the house for the baby." Dylan put his

head in his hands as his shoulders shook and his wails filled Susan's small bedroom, the house and traveled over Page County. The dogs hid in the closet.

With horror, Susan realized tomorrow was Mother's Day. She thought of Arlo's mother. She thought about how fragile and tender the bond was between mother and child, how you try to keep them from dancing too close to the cliff, how it all starts by holding them on your breast as you smell their sweet downy soft hair. Her sadness was compounded by confusion as she tried to piece Dylan's news with her hazy memory. It was one more trauma in the long list of Susan's life. Susan wondered why she often remembered her compound traumas, but she seemed to float away from her body when she tried to recall moments when life was good, when she had agency. Closing her eyes, she was hiking again across the high Atlas Mountains in Morocco with a Bedouin man who trained U.S Army soldiers. For a brief moment she could feel the fur of a baby goat he had placed in her arms, the tang of artemisia laced tea she drank, the walls of a burnt orange cave where they slept, the flute he played at night to the stars. With a jolt that made her body jump, she was back in her bedroom.

Susan wrangled her mind back to the present as she searched for memories of Arlo, the blond-haired boy that spent so much time in her house. Blank. Her brain was as blank as a computer screen without power. Nothing. But what she could imagine was that no amount of physical pain could compare to the breath-stopping heart death of losing a child. Susan knew physical pain from black eyes to a fractured back, and she knew heart death, when her children told lies about her to the court, encouraged and coerced by their father. But she could not imagine living in a world where one of her children was not alive and she still drew breath.

"Oh, my dear son, I'm so sorry this has happened to Arlo. I'm so sorry you have to experience this. What can I do?" There were no consoling words for this tragedy. She moved to embrace Dylan, but he jerked away, jumped off her bed, and slammed her door. The house echoed with the final bang of his bedroom door. Susan felt as if she were a dead dense weight in the bed, her body heavy as she added Arlo's name to the growing deaths that surrounded her; she thought about the deaths of her parents five years ago, her sister a long time ago and, and her fiancé three years this July. The death of her marriage, the death of hope, the death of who she was before her marriage. The person she was

now she wished would die and that a phoenix would rise from her ashes and in its feathers would be the best of who she was.

She had old mouse-chewed photos of her jumping a horse across a four-foot jump without fear, riding a motorcycle, graduating with two Masters Degrees. Yet, when she looked at the photos, it was like she was looking at pictures in a magazine of a stranger; the images made no sense; it was her doppelganger. What she wished would die was her endless searching for her inadequacies and culpability in all of it. She was somehow to blame for being broken, for all the karmic arrows splatting around her, the deaths, the failures and now what she felt was her only ability left, surviving. There was no resolution or solace. When those thoughts revealed themselves to be bottomless, she shifted to thinking about Arlo's mother and how it could have been herself, at any moment, in any instant; it could be any mother in Page County. Mother's Day. What does it mean to raise boys here? thought Susan. There but for the grace of God goes me, for the deputy could be pulling up to my door. How could this woman live through Mother's Day on Sunday? Did this woman have Mother's Day memories of her sons bringing her flowers or were her experiences like Susan's own, flowerless, cardless and alone?

How did she live through it when her oldest son chose to take his mother-in-law out to brunch and not her? This first-born son who she strapped to her chest as a baby, sang lullabies to in Polish, took walks in the woods holding his hand and blowing bubbles on his stomach as they played games on the floor. Her daughter always dutifully called; her daughter, eight hundred miles away, whom she talked to daily, yet had picked up to live with Susan's ex-husband when she was 15, sneaking out in the middle of the night, her father waiting at the end of the driveway like a lover.

Dylan, well she never expected anything from him though he was the child of her soul and the most like her out of all three of them. She remembered Dylan at 15, taking her kayak down a tricky class III rapid for her because she was too afraid to navigate past the undercut in the cliff and the steep drop. He came with her to yoga classes, sound healing gong baths, and music festivals. She remembered them saddling up their horses to go riding in a snowstorm, Dylan looking like Jeremiah Johnson as they both rode into the white. And the calls to school where she fought for him and his learning disabilities, helped and did his school work, so he would graduate because she knew he would never get his GED; the drives to the hospital when he impaled himself climbing

twenty-five feet up a tree, stuck a knife in his leg skinning a deer, broke his shoulder from a fight at a party...the long days and nights where she continued to love him, more than she ever had for herself. She still had Dylan, but memories were all Arlo's mother possessed now because her sons decided to go fishing after a big rain that had swelled the Shenandoah.

As Susan's Tylenol PM brought some softness to the space between her eyes, her thoughts turned to Saturday morning, that very morning, only twelve hours ago, which was cold and gray, a typical early spring day in the mountains. While Susan made coffee, when the world still held Arlo and Hunter, Dylan hadn't come home or had come home and gone out again. As Susan sipped her coffee, other people in Page County were headed to the co-op, dump, and Dollar Store as the brothers decided to go on the wave-capped Shenandoah River to fish. She knew they would have stayed warm in their Carharts; she could see them in her mind's eye, exuberant and laughing until a swell sent the canoe spinning and another swell broadsided the boat, sending the boys off balance. It was seconds, a split second, when fear took them as they plunged into the icy cold river... a river so cold that it took their breath away and each brother felt their heart stop before they began flailing frantically to stay afloat. The Carharts absorbed water like sponges. The boys kicked frantically to keep their heads above the billowing waves but they took in mouthfuls of the river despite their best efforts. Oh, they were tired as they desperately kicked to keep the pull of the river from dragging them over the dam, but the water, stomachs full of water, cold in their limbs, and their heavy heavy clothes pulled them down and down and down and dead.

As she learned later, their bodies were found by the rescue crew within a few hours. The first responders called to the scene worked diligently, grimly and with determination as family members stood wailing and pacing the riverbank, praying the prayers of the doomed and desperate. Spring sucked back its welcome, as it should have, and all the town was left melancholy and questioning. Dylan had already lost friends to country deaths and just plain ole death. Falling out the back of a pickup, hunting accident, DWIs, opioids, kidney replacement rejection, bad luck. Now, Arlo, forever 22. Hunter, always 19, thought Susan as she sunk into sleep.

Sunday, Mother's Day, and Susan drove to Arlo's mother's house with a heart so hollow it echoed. She boxed-breathed all the way up Dovel Hollow trying to quell her anxiety. As she pulled up the steep

incline and into the yard, she saw the house was filled with neighbors, family, children running around in the yard and the ricochet of emptiness bouncing off the brother's trucks, deer stand, car parts, hunting rifles, shoes on the porch, hound dogs barking at the edge of their chain; they had not been fed because Arlo and Hunter were still dead. The boys had gone to a place unfixable and the hound dog's wails echoed that. No one in the crowd mentioned heaven.

Arlo's mom was sitting in a big brown recliner, smiling at someone chatting by her side, exhibiting the stoicism of the marginalized. She looked older than her 40 years and her eyes were red rimmed. Susan walked slowly, determinedly and with purpose but she could feel tears welling in her eyes until she knelt down and reached for the woman's hand.

"I'm Susan, Dylan's mom, we have never met but your son Arlo spent a lot of time at my house."

Time seemed to stand still as the women looked into each other's eyes like long lost sweethearts, adrift from themselves, yet, they could see their reflections in each other's eyes.

"I know who you are, honey," said Tracey, grabbing Susan's hand tightly. Susan's tears ran down her face in two gently flowing unstoppable rivers.

Tracey pulled Susan to her chest, cradling Susan's head on her breast whispering, "I know who you are."

Susan started to say, "I'm so sor..." but Tracey just told her, "Shhhhhh, we love our sons, don't we?"

Grace T. McCarthy

Confessions of an Astronaut's Wife

At three in the morning she wakes, greeted by the A.C. unit humming it's one note song.

At three-oh-five she rises. She makes the bed even though it's a motel. Best laid practices and all that. It's nice to keep some things the same.

From three ten to three fifteen she showers and dresses and does her best not to think about hydrogen and kerosene, about the sky breaking into shards like a mirror.

She pulls on her nylon stockings with steady hands, teases her hair skyward, fumbles with the clasp on her pearl necklace. She practices her TV smile in the bathroom mirror (tight lipped, firm but not assertive, reliable, patriotic.)

At four, the A.C. unit coughs, sputters, kicks.

At four-oh-two it gives out, and the muggy Orlando heat settles like a blanket. The headache returns then, dull and vining up the back of her neck, tendrils wrapping tight around the base of her skull.

At four thirty she zips her suitcase closed. She says a prayer, perfunctory and distracted, and beginning to sweat.

She puts four dimes and a nickel into the machine in the lobby and they make a hollow ka-chunk when they land in some deep recess of the machine. It spits out a cup of coffee, dilute and burnt to all hell, looking like rocket fuel. They will have better coffee, she reminds herself, at the KSC. Benny always puts on a pot for the wives on launch days.

The kids are at home with their grandmother. They'll be seeing it on the television set later when Jim goes up. That's what the other wives called it, anyway. Going *up*. And them boys at NASA all laughed at that, rolled their eyes over their wire rimmed spectacles. Thick fingers always twitching toward some heaping ashtray, and then, *would you get that for me darling?*

She had given the idea of Jim over to them in a lot of ways. Their math, his survival. Her life, her husband's life.

That headache again. She takes an aspirin.

By five thirty she is on the road. She stops only once, at a gas station, to purchase a coca cola to wash away the taste of aspirin. Out there, surrounded by nothing but towering southern oaks and the parked car, she smokes a cigarette. She exhales white and says another prayer, this time to the Marlboro man, patron saint of sustained chemical reaction, angel of combustion.

For a moment some nameless desire in her is satisfied, but it will return, begging to be sedated with something stronger, (alcohol, valium.)

She stamps the smoldering end out in the dewy grass.

Back on the road by six in the morning. She sees more cars now, a good deal of them on their way to the same place as she. Like Mecca for non believers.

At six thirty she wonders if science is a merciful god or an indifferent one.

Cape Kennedy comes into focus at around seven. Benny ushers her up the stairs and he insists on walking behind her, so she tugs the fabric of her dress down and focuses on climbing the next step,

Up,

Up,

Up,

Until she's in the funny little lounge where they squirrel the astro-families away from the public eye until showtime. Buzz's wife Joan is there already, drinking up the coffee and taking sips from the flask she thinks nobody knows about. She has the kids with her, holding signs that read "PROUD, THRILLED, HAPPY"

Benny is bringing more people in and talking loudly about the Russians. Joan wrings her hands together, freckled and nimble. She could have been a pianist with fingers like those. All of them might have been

something, she thinks, before they had gotten pulled into the orbit of all this. Pointless to entertain that notion, though. They were PROUD, THRILLED, HAPPY.

In another lifetime, she'd like to be the one to go. See if the moon is as lonely as Earth.

At eleven the launch goes off without a hitch, in a burst of flame, and Jim goes *up*.

She watches, dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of the fire and the man in her life, gritting her teeth through the shockwaves and rooting for him.

Barri McGougan

Knock Knock, Open Up

One thing is for certain: the past cannot be locked in a trunk. It beats at the cedar planks, tearing and splintering the wood as shards get caught in fingers and under nails. The past yearns to be let out, to see the light of day, to air the dirty laundry that settles within the trunk, the faint smell of mothballs and mildew lingers. It lingers around like the feeling of hands on my body after I repeatedly said no. Lingers like the smell of Marlboro light cigarettes on my mom's breath when she told me we were moving to West Virginia. Or like bruises permanently marked on my body, some made by hands, a belt, or a switch. It lingers like my longing for summertime and to be back in South Carolina, paddling around in the pond. Like the nagging thought in my head that maybe I'll never be good enough to be an author. Or like the hole in my chest I had after my mom spat, "Your Dad doesn't fucking love you."

If I lock it all up, no one will see the heap of confusion trapped inside.

No matter how long the trunk has been locked, or if the key is tucked safely away, or even if it's been thrown into the ocean, supposedly lost forever; the past perpetually creeps out. Shrinking itself down to seep between seemingly airtight boards and back into lives that have done everything to keep their secrets far away.

Tara Menon

Copacabana Beach

She is so unlike his disciplined sisters,
taking her time crossing a street in Rio de Janeiro.
Don't walk as slowly as an elephant, the husband admonishes.
His young wife stops in the middle of the traffic
and refuses to budge since he compared her to a pachyderm.
In 1954, a lady in the attire of a sari in Brazil is a rarity.
This almost amounts to a carnival sight:
a sari-clad woman turned into a statue while vehicles flow.
Pedestrians gape, drivers shout.
Livid, he steers her across the street.

Theirs is a happy marriage
not without discordant moments.

There was the other time
captured in a snapshot of my parents.
They are in white.
The breeze lifts the tail end
of her sari, playing with it as if it were a flag.
Lightweight, she is almost ready to fly with happiness.
He looks slightly plump but handsome in his shorts.
Her rosy lips and his generous lips curve upward
as they stand beside the ice-cream cart
and contemplate the treat the vendor prepares.
Behind them, Copacabana beach glitters.

If I could time-travel, I would talk to the couple,
not spill the secret about my identity,
but how could I not?

Tara Menon

Mama

Mama bubbles
from the brooks of infancy and toddlerhood.
Mama is a murmuring stream,
a chant of confidence.

The most delicious word is mama,
a confection that rises with everlasting joy
and turns into bitterness if your child's
lips are sealed forever.

You want the sound to ring and ring.
The same syllables chime like a church bell
that announces the time,
except *Mama* denotes your presence is desired.

Mama is muttered on the battlefield.
Last words spoken with open or closed eyes.

Kathy Nelson

Another Story My Mother Didn't Want to Tell

This is a school I do not know yet.

—Terrance Hayes

When I am so young Mama's hand around my wrist
can pluck me out of bed, out of dream, but old enough
to follow her orders, we interrogate the night for
the open-air bar where Daddy has gone with his whore.

In the dark of the car, her grip on the steering wheel
a command, we float among pines under a moon
so cool I shiver. This is a school I do not know yet.
But the tires' rumble over the shell-strewn road

means I am for once Mama's best girl, her star pupil.
She calls him Blue Eyes. Mama drives toward a line
of music and outdoor lights punctuated by dancing.
When I slow down, put your head out the window,

yell that name loud as you can. Make him hear you.
After, Mama promises me candy and a new dress.

Kathy Nelson

Because Family is Twenty Hours West, 1958

Between 5 a.m. and Nashville,
my mother is a pale moon
in the front seat beside my father,
horizon leaching pink into pearl sky.

My head on a pillow in my backseat bed.
Rooftops, billboards, steeples rouse

from sleep. A festoon of telephone wires
dips and rises pole to pole
like frosting looping a cake, an endless
rhythm I can almost hear.

The quilt my only protection against impact.

Through a haze of starlight my father
had carried me to the car, tucked
me safely in. I am my father's
and I believe I will always have him.

Memphis, Little Rock, Texarkana,
west with the sun along state roads,
one small town to the next for gas,
a map, to clear the windshield of insects.

Among wild daisies, a roadside table.
We unpack crackers, Vienna sausages,
spit seeds from a salted slice
of watermelon. My father can name
tobacco, potatoes, every crop, every field
along every two-lane highway. The sun

sinks, my Etch-a-Sketch gives up
on the castle, the tent I've built
from the quilt collapses, my crayons sleep
somewhere in the tangle, and my moon

mother runs her hand through her hair
as I listen to the telephone wires singing.

Kathy Nelson

Pilgrimage

I unfold the map of my mother's absence
and look for landmarks—
the house on Whitehall where her cool closet

polished cottons peplums pockets pumps
called to me, the next house
where in the dank basement she pinned

to corkboard her dusty blue ribbons
floribunda grandiflora heirloom damask.
My if-I-had-your-hair-and-you-had-a-feather-

up-your-nose-then-we'd-both-be-tickled
mother. My you're-the-good-one-I'm-
the-bad-one mother. My mother

holding my hand as we buried her second
husband forty feet forty years
from my father, my mother knocking

on my door at 6 am two broken arms
(tripped in flip flops hoisted herself alone
imagine two broken arms off the pavement),

my mother like Rocky raising in triumph
her two plastered arms. My mother's
bowing arm wrist chin against the chin rest,

my frightened mother lost in the devastated
landscape of her body, my I-don't-want-to-go-
and-leave-you-here-alone mother.

Eve Ottenberg

A Proposal

She prepared the zucchini and onion omelet expertly. She could do it in her sleep, because it was her father's favorite breakfast, and she had moved into this townhouse with him 20 years earlier. Since then, Daphne had cooked lots of omelets for the very elderly, retired lawyer, who waited for his meal in a wingback armchair in the living room, reading the *New York Times* or the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Sometimes he read *Philadelphia Magazine* or one of her literary journals. She had once had literary ambitions, long ago, before everything became so solitary and confusing. Luckily – if that could be said of misfortune – her father became partly disabled and needed her help, so she had an excellent reason to move in with him. Otherwise, she would have been at such loose ends, she would have unraveled. But there was no danger of that now. She tended her aged parent and took her Xanax. Both kept her from keeling over from fright at her disorganized, desultory and fruitless life.

As she beat the eggs in a bowl, her dark hair, streaked with silver, flopped forward. One long black hair landed in the mixture, and she fished it out, dripping with yolk. “Can’t have that,” Daphne muttered. Her father had complained more than once about her hair in his food. “Maybe you should shave your head,” he suggested.

Outside summer heat suffocated the nearby avenue, whence came sounds of the trolley clattering by. It was already September, and she did not think she could recall another year when Germantown had been so stifling this late in the season. Clack, clack, the trolley rattled. Clack, clack, the years stumbled by. She was 60. Clack, clack, her father was 87. What had she done with her life? Rats, another hair in the egg. Nothing, she’d done nothing with her life – it had been nothing but work in a library and a bout of mental illness. She had never even finished college. She had missed out on children. Her brothers, except for weird, unmarried Nate, expected her to transfer her maternal instincts to her nieces and nephews. But Daphne had other plans. She had transferred them to her gray-haired, sharp-eyed, shriveled parent, ancient Paul Sonderzweig.

“I want onions and zucchini in it, no mushrooms,” her father called from the living room.

“Got it,” she shouted back.

“And no hair! I want a hairless omelet, completely bald.”

Daphne did not deign to respond to this. Instead, she mixed the ingredients, while answering her cell phone. It was Larry Lender, two years her junior, but desperately smitten, or so she had concluded from his incessant calling. She was sorry she couldn't talk long, but yes, she could meet him at the little nearby salad place for lunch. She ended the call, humming.

"Who was that?" Old Mr. Sonderzweig asked crisply, coming into the dining room with silent footsteps – this room, like the entire house except kitchen and bathrooms, sported beige, wall-to-wall carpeting – sitting at the table and directing his penetrating gaze at his daughter through the open space into the kitchen.

"Larry. We're meeting for lunch."

"Who'll cook me hairy omelets, if you marry Lender the Loser?"

"He's not a loser, Dad."

"Humph. He should've proposed by now."

"So you approve of him?" Daphne brought in the plates with omelets and sat across the gleaming wooden stretch of table from her fussy parent. He twiddled with one of his prominent ears, then rubbed his equally prominent nose.

"I approve of you getting married...to anybody, even that bozo Lender."

"I don't know why you always...scorn him."

"Because he makes me unhappy. I'm thinking about my life with a full-time nurse instead of you. Maybe I'll marry the nurse."

"Shut up and eat, Dad."

Later at lunch, in the little restaurant on Germantown Avenue, Larry ordered a zucchini and onion omelet. Daphne listened to this order in amazement.

"What a coincidence," she murmured.

"Now where was I?" Larry asked, running his fingers through his thick gray hair. He was exactly Daphne's height and undistinguished in any way except for his enormous, red, very mobile ears. When he ate, his ears twitched constantly, and only with the greatest effort at politeness could Daphne even tear her gaze away from them. "Oh yes," Larry continued, ears as big as balloons. "Us."

Daphne smiled, trying not to look worried about those huge, wiggling ears. They looked, she thought, ready to launch right at her across the elegant, small, marble-topped table. This was not the first time such concerns had beset her. "What if they detach and attack me?" She

had fretted the two times their faces had come close, when Larry kissed her. “What about us?” She asked.

“Our future,” he said, then paused and let the pregnant silence hang in the air.

“Maybe he could have plastic surgery and have his ears shrunk,” Daphne thought. “Then we might have a future.” Aloud she said: “I’m afraid my future involves taking care of my invalid father.”

“I’ll help. We’ll get married and all three live together.”

She gaped at him in horror. The thought of senescent, critical Paul Sonderzweig, sharing regular meals with Larry Lender of the elephant ears and not insulting him, not calling him a nitwit to his face, seemed most unlikely. She imagined this pair in a horrible verbal tussle, their four big ears and two salient noses angry red, herself in the kitchen shedding hairs into the omelet mix. It was not how she wanted to envisage her future.

“I’m not sure, Larry.”

He ignored this, as he did much of what she said. “Daphne – will you marry me?”

She stared at his humongous, wriggling ears, half expecting them to flap away through the restaurant – he seemed supported by those ears, he could probably hear a mouse hiccough two blocks away – as he smiled as engagingly as he could at her. “I don’t think so,” she said.

To her shock, within two months of this rejection, Larry Lender married someone else. The same day Daphne heard this news, her father did not get out of bed. He lay there, complaining and irritable. Fortunately, an old family friend, a retired internist who lived in their townhouse complex, came by and diagnosed a new and fatal advance in her father’s congestive heart failure.

Daphne phoned her brothers, and soon they filled the house, along with wives and children. Old Mr. Sonderzweig couldn’t stand it. But he gritted his teeth and endured these tearful visits, all the while casting accusing glances at his daughter.

“He’s leaving you the townhouse,” Nate said, as they sat in the living room’s wingback armchairs, while relatives fussed over the dying attorney upstairs.

“Yes,” Daphne replied. “But he’s splitting all his investments between us. And that’s a lot of money. You’ll be able to move out of that dingy studio in North Philly and get a bigger apartment in a nicer neighborhood.”

“Maybe I could move in with you,” Nate suggested. “And you could make me omelets for breakfast.”

“Maybe,” she said. “How would you commute to the computer store?”

“Dad’s car.”

“Oh.” The conversation stalled, as Daphne considered life with a strange, crotchety, old brother, who did nothing besides work and play video games, a most unlikely pastime for a 64-year-old, but there it was.

Her brother shifted his scrawny frame in the chair that dwarfed him. His bushy white hair stood out in all directions, but could not conceal his oversized ears. Daphne wondered what was going on with abnormally large ears and the men in her life. Nate’s ears were too big, Larry’s were grotesque, her father’s, elfin, practically framed his entire head. But she’d never held that against her antiquated legal-counselor parent – she’d been too busy fending off his barbed remarks.

Within the week, the decrepit attorney was dead. After the funeral, Daphne had several quiet days at the little townhouse. Though she had worried about the solitude, her quick adaptation to it pleasantly surprised her. It wasn’t so bad having the small domicile to herself, though soon boredom and loneliness threatened to fray the worn weave of her sanity. By the sixth day alone, she thought she was going bats, and took an extra Xanax. Evenings were the worst. That was when she and her father had always sat together in the living room and discussed the day’s news. Now, in the cool, autumnal dusk, she sat there alone, not knowing what to do with herself, wondering whether or not she should turn on the heat or maybe the TV; until one agonizingly quiet, prematurely wintry twilight, when the doorbell rang and there, on the threshold, stood short, wiry, wild Nate, clutching an X-box, his white hair, as always, sticking out every which way. And he had brought all his luggage.

Olivia Partamian

Things “I” Think Are True

I am a composition of atoms. Some special formula of elements that at one point probably also belonged to the cosmos, but now, by some chance belong to me. Within me I contain a history that is completely detached from who “I” am. This is true in the physical and metaphorical sense. On one hand, I am physically composed of borrowed building blocks that will one day be returned and recycled. Simultaneously, I am the product of histories that are not mine but somehow also are. Genetic material is not the only thing our parents gift us, but also their stories and their parents' stories and their parents' stories going much farther back than the bible would have us believe is possible. Encoded within each person is the chemical makeup of the features that have defined their family's history but also their own future. I am a by product of conquest, colonization, and diaspora, the remnants of which are present in my hair, skin, and nails. They are an inheritance and they have placed me into a tax bracket that I cannot alter, change, or depart from because it houses who “I” am. My physicality does not feel like it belongs to me because it does not. It belongs to the atmosphere who has leant me oxygen, ancestors I cannot name, and even strangers who can perceive my being in 3D while I will always have to settle for a reflection. “I” was born with no knowledge of how my form fits into a larger context or discussion or argument - but “I” was certainly educated on the matter. “I” will most likely spend more time with my body than any other person on this planet and yet “I” will never know it as intimately as “I” have been told others do. It is others that know what size is best or what fits best or what looks best. The point seems moot because from what “I” can gather we not only move in orbit, but we think in one too. I will be in and out of fashion during not just my lifetime but probably that of whoever comes after me and for that “I” apologize in advance.

“I” am a chemical reaction. The entirety of my invisible being is stored between neurons. Who “I” am is apart from who I am but neither can exist without the other. The “I” is educated on what I already knows. My form is not new to this planet, she is made of it and is armor I borrow from those I resemble. She is part of a discussion that has been going on for as long as people could talk. She is the reason why people can form opinions on me before they even know who “I” am. It is not her fault or

really anybody's that she fits into a context that "I" was not born knowing. She will spend the rest of her life making up for all of her shortcomings even if "I" do not ask her to.

Sometimes it feels as though there are thousands of years worth of space and time between my internal and external selves - because there are. While my internal self is learning that there even is a scaffolding of cultural implications surrounding it, it experiences the consequences of how my external being fits into it. My internal self is new to the world, but she will be treated like she had a say in forming it. My external self also never consented to the rules she is subject to - they are just not new to her. I suppose it is a blessing that at least one of my selves is not on display. Maybe that is just naive thinking though. The selves bleed into one another, informing and shaping one another. It is just nice to think that there is some corner of self that is untouched though. At least one small piece that is preserved from the grubby hands of indoctrination - although Hobbes might disagree about the implications of that. Maybe it is less about genuinely having a piece of untouched self and more about feeling like there is any part of the self that is one's own. The external inherently does not feel like my own, so all that is left is some part of the internal that does not feel like it has been dictated by the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the unnameable someone else. Even though nameable people like my parents have left impressions on my being, their imparted knowledge does not belong to them. Rather, we are playing one large game of telephone and they have simply passed along the message that they think they heard right.

Sometimes "I" and I forget that they are not one. Perhaps this is the goal, for the two selves to be so united that there is simply one you. Or maybe, this is a loss and we should hold a funeral because this means that "I" gave into the rules of I's world. The jury's still out, but "I" suppose it is fine for now to not know because just in case it is the second one, at least this is still a discussion. Whenever "I" get scared that my selves are now one, "I" picture myself as "I" imagine others are able to. "I" can see what "I" can only imagine is my face and my neck and my shoulders, but "I" always have trouble when it gets to my hands. My hands in real life look like my hands, but when "I" am scared they are no longer mine. They look like they belong to somebody else, maybe the hands of all of the unnameable others. There are few things more intimate to the selves than hands. "I" can only see a reflection of what I look like in a mirror or photo, but with my hands, "I" can feel the contours and realness of my features. When "I" get scared that "I" am

lost, “I” just remind myself that “I” am an arm’s length away from myself.

Naomi Pliskow

Soaring with My Granddaughter

In spring
my skirt flaps
around my grinding latticed bones,
and in my mud-brown basket
chipped fossils, musket balls, old newspapers.
My skin drips down my arms like candlewax.

In my hand, a smaller one, soft and sunscreen-slick
keeps me tethered to this earth
or sometimes lets me, kite-like, soar,
and in her pink and perfect backpack
a feather, an opalescent seashell.

When her hand slips from mine
she skips and swoops
toward the mysterious and luminous possible.

She sings.
She wants to know.

J.B. Polk

Birds

Since retiring nearly three years ago, Flora has walked her old Cocker Spaniels, Salt and Pepper, twice a day, seven days a week, regardless of the weather. Once before breakfast and once before lunchtime. For exactly fifteen minutes each time. There's a reason for this: she needs to get back home quickly to prepare Mama Louise's morning hot porridge and lunchtime pumpkin soup with croutons.

Mama's appetite has undoubtedly changed over the years. Gone are the days when she could devour an XL Burger King meal and wash it down with a sizeable vanilla milkshake. When Flora worked full-time, she would prepare a plate of ham and cheese sandwiches, a thermos of iced tea, and some nutritious snacks for Mama to enjoy throughout the day. Now that she is retired, Mama Louise expects her daughter to cook the meals from scratch.

"Soup and porridge—they're easy to swallow with my dentures," she comments with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

Flora has always enjoyed intellectual activities, such as reading and engaging in philosophical discussions, and walking the dogs allows her to combine physical activity with mental stimulation. She likes to challenge her mind with new concepts, and when she looks at simple things such as trees, houses, or even paving blocks, she wonders about their deeper meanings, and her mind becomes a vibrant tapestry of thoughts. The cumulus in the sky reminds her of the fluffy cotton candy she loved as a child. And the white picket fences remind her of how, in early spring, she used to run barefoot through neighborhood gardens brimming with daffodils and snowdrops, in stark contrast to the concrete jungle the area is now turning into.

They are not particularly fond memories because Mama Louise strongly disapproved of Flora's sweet indulgences, while the flowers always triggered her sneezing fits.

"Sugar gives you an awful rush and rots your teeth. And with your asthma, the doctor's bills are really straining our finances," Mama Louise would scold, her mouth tightly pressed together in disapproval.

Flora lets the dogs roam but never off the leash because of her neighbor's dangerous-looking Cane Corso, who pees and poops all over the front yards whenever he is allowed out. As they sniff around, her thoughts get caught up by the remarkable balance of nature, where plants

and animals coexist in a seamless ecosystem—the birds chirp, the insects buzz, the squirrels scurry up and down tree branches, and the flowers contribute to the tapestry of life she finds intriguing.

Flora Daisy Meadows' mother has always been an outdoor enthusiast, instilling in her daughter a profound love for the natural world and for what she referred to as "communication with the environment." However, the name she selected for her only child was quite a challenge, as the other children in the neighborhood teased her incessantly.

"Here comes Margarine Oopsy Daisy," they would exclaim when she emerged to join in the fun on infrequent occasions.

Margarine, thanks to Flora, the popular plant-based spread...

For a while, she thought she could drop the surname when she nearly married Hank Lafferty. But her mother hated Hank almost as much as, if not more than, cotton candy.

"He is such a wastrel, Flora—a penniless bank clerk who will never achieve anything," Mama warned.

"You have a bright future ahead of you. At such a young age, marriage might not be the best decision. You ought to concentrate on your studies and job rather than getting married so early."

So Flora did, and after a short wait, Hank decided to tie the knot with a woman whose name had no connection to the natural world and who most certainly didn't have a mother who despised him. And Flora remained single, with a name that invited ridicule even from adults.

Flora thinks about things as she strolls around today. Things that make her heart swell with joy and things that weigh heavy on her mind. Like missed opportunities and lost loved ones... She thinks about more than just the clouds above her or the absence of flowers in the gardens. Right now, her thoughts focus on birds because she's always been mesmerized by the world of avian species—their graceful flight patterns, their beautiful plumage, and the songs they sing. She finds solace in observing their freedom, and she wonders what it would be like to soar through the sky with them, leaving all worries behind.

She often fantasizes about the far-off places they migrate to and the scenery they pass through while traveling. She daydreams about standing atop old ruins, savoring exotic dishes, and immersing herself in foreign cultures—desires that remain firmly anchored in her imagination. In real life, she is limited by responsibilities and obligations that prevent her from going too far. But to be honest, she stays because Mama Louise despises travel and prefers the comfort and familiarity of their own house.

"There's no place like home," Mama once said, her voice reminiscent of Dorothy's from *The Wizard of Oz*. She delicately sipped her unsweetened Oolong tea as she nibbled on a shortbread or a vanilla wafer. Instead of ruby slippers, she opted for her worn-out carpet skidders, which had clearly seen better times. Flora noticed that her fingernails were long and a bit dirty, and she knew it was time to clip them, a task she hated because Mama always complained that Flora was not gentle enough.

During her teenage years, Mama Louise objected to her daughter spending too much time away from home. She always cautioned her about the risks of mixing with the wrong crowd. So, instead of contradicting her, Flora immersed herself in books and eagerly absorbed new knowledge, ultimately ascending to the title of Queen of Trivia despite always playing the game alone since she had no friends. She was well-versed in countless irrelevant details, like the identity of Fred Astaire's on-screen companion and the frequency at which Americans accessed their refrigerators. The answer to the latter was twenty-two.

As she grew older, her focus shifted to facts about birds. She knows there are 10,906 bird species in the world, of which 2,400 live in the continental United States. She is aware that while many birds gather in flocks, ravens do so in groups known as "unkindness" or "conspiracy"! She also knows that, although turbulence-related aircraft accidents are uncommon, over the past three decades, more than 200 lives have been lost in aerial collisions between planes and birds.

But it is the sheer number of birds that soar above us that gets to her! For example, the gray sparrow, the most common species, numbers almost 1.6 billion individuals! Yet, one rarely finds dead birds on the streets or even in the countryside. So the question is, where on earth do all the dead birds go?

Is there a natural process that quickly disposes of the deceased creatures, preventing them from being seen? Maybe they have a secluded spot where they can meet their demise, hidden from prying eyes. Or perhaps there exists a clandestine ritual within the avian community where the young and healthy ones purposefully eliminate their elderly and discreetly conceal their remains to evade the attention of predators. It's been known among humans, so why not among birds?

"I wouldn't be surprised by the predatory eagles and frightening-looking owls, but what about the lovely, colorful robins and hummingbirds?" Flora thinks.

Yet she has never seen a dead robin either, so perhaps... Appearances can be deceptive, and in real life, robins might, in fact, be feathery psychopaths who hide their true nature beneath their attractive exterior.

Take Mama Louise, for example. She has always looked as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but she's actually a skilled manipulator who knows how to get what she wants. And her "spare the rod and spoil the child" philosophy has left a lasting impact on Flora, who, until today, has been a little afraid of her mother's seemingly sweet demeanor.

While browsing for trivia, Flora came across an intriguing ancient Sardinian custom known as senicide, or altruistic suicide, in which elderly or sick individuals would choose to leave their community and relocate to a designated area to pass away peacefully. In the past, thalaikoothal, a practice in certain regions of India, involved giving the elderly a calming oil bath before they succumbed to dehydration, starvation, or poisoning.

It is amusing to explore the potential of deliberate murder among birds as a technique to guarantee the survival of the fittest. Flora recently learned that when birds feel threatened, they leave their nests, sacrificing the current brood to boost the chances of future successful reproduction. So, why not sacrifice the old and, let's face it, useless?

Flora wonders if her mother had ever pondered the idea of an altruistic suicide for a greater cause, in other words, Flora's, given that she has always been a staunch supporter of animal welfare and the preservation of natural harmony. But she doubts it.

When Flora was five years old, a tornado ravaged their hometown, forcing them to relocate to Omaha. She had a pet at the time, a golden-furred Pekingese named Ginger, because she usually names her dogs after condiments. After him came Cinnamon, Mustard, Pesto, and before Salt and Pepper, Wasabi. The little puppy got lost during the storm, much like Dorothy's Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*. When they finally found him, his spine was broken. Despite the vet's efforts, Ginger's hind legs were paralyzed.

"Honey," Mama Louise said, "you understand we can't take the poor animal with us to Omaha. He has endured enough, and putting him in a cage and transporting him 200 kilometers would be cruel. It kills me to watch him in pain. I believe it would be more compassionate to put him out of his misery."

So they did, or rather, Mama Louise did—her Glock G43 spat out two bullets into Ginger's head right in front of Flora, forever changing her perspective on euthanasia and the ethical implications of intentional death. That is also the reason Flora understands why people sometimes refer to the brain as "gray matter."

The Spaniels are sniffing at something nasty-looking on the ground, and Flora tugs on the leashes.

"Come on! Leave it alone," she calls out, but the dogs ignore her.

She knows that if she does not hurry up and divert the dogs from whatever they are investigating, she is going to have a run-in with Mama. The watch reminds her that it's almost two o'clock. She seems to be taking more time than usual. Her mother, who is 85 and nearly deaf and blind but as demanding as ever, is waiting for her pumpkin soup, which is ready but missing the croutons.

Her heart skips a beat as she bends down to shorten the leashes. She notices some feathers in Salt's mouth and realizes that the dogs have found a lifeless bird—but not just any bird! It's a red robin! Talk about coincidences! Mind over matter...

She takes the mangled body from the Spaniel's mouth and looks for a suitable place to lay it to rest, hoping Mama won't be too upset by the unexpected detour. By now, she is likely pacing around the kitchen in her slow, hesitant gait, poking at the curtain with her walking stick, and calling out for her.

Flora is aware of the urgency of releasing the robin and making a swift departure, as Mama's fury has the potential to intensify rapidly. She delicately holds it in her palm, a wave of sorrow washing over her as she tries to find the perfect spot for the bird's eternal slumber.

Her eyes well up when she realizes the poor robin will never fly again. It will never return to Alaska in the summer or sing its beautiful tunes in the morning.

She feels a peculiar connection to the lifeless animal.

"I am the robin! I am dead!" she suddenly exclaims, feeling an overwhelming sense of sorrow for herself.

"But while the bird traveled and saw things and places, I've been stuck in the same routine for years. Not for years! Forever!" She reflects on her stagnant existence, feeling a deep longing for change and adventure.

"And why? Because Mama has always told me I should be content with what I have. She's never let me soar! She clipped my wings! She killed Ginger!" The last one is a primal scream in her head.

"Staying grounded was never my choice! It was Mama's, and I just did what she wanted me to! If it weren't for her, I could have been Mrs. Hank Lafferty and not stupid Flora Daisy Meadows! And candy floss doesn't make one's teeth rot!"

She gently places the bird on the grass and releases the two leashes, hoping that the Cane Corso doesn't need to poop urgently at this moment. She starts to dig in the dirt using only her bare hands. It's remarkably easy. After she has finished scraping, she places the tiny corpse in the hole and covers it with the loose soil. Salt and Pepper are trying to dig it out once more, but she urges them to leave it alone.

She gets up, pain throbbing in her knees, covered in a layer of dust. She gathers the leashes and brings the dogs under control. They refuse, but she remains firm. They're going back to their place. Not because Mama Louise will be angry, but because Flora suddenly realizes she isn't dead! She's still alive! Barely, but still alive. She is simply trapped in a cage, and the key is in Mama Louise's hands. Those gnarled, ugly veined hands that used to strike Flora with a stick when she didn't play the piano exercises in time with the metronome's annoying tick-tock.

Smack! Tick-tock... Smack! Tick-Tock...

"Listen - smack- to the rhythm, Flora... Will you just smack-listen to the smack-damn rhythm?"

And it isn't even a gilded cage, but a cheap wire one with rusty bars that dig into Flora's ribs whenever she tries to squeeze through. But not today. Today, she is going to open the door and fly out because she will get the key—even if she has to pry it from Mama's ugly, veined hands! And she will go to Alaska! She will skinny-dip in icy waters, howl at the northern lights, and dance with wild wolves under the midnight sun!

She knows that her mother will not yield easily. She is not an elderly Sardinian who would voluntarily disappear for the greater good. Because Mama Louise is selfish. She has always put her needs above anyone else's, including Flora's. She'll need a little nudge to release the key and let Flora, the red-breasted robin, out. Finally, out...

So, to speed things up, rather than Sardinian selflessness, Flora will try the Indian *thalaikoothal*. Some lavender-scented bath oils will help Mama Louise relax. When Mama relaxes, she always falls asleep. And while sleeping, she is completely unaware of her surroundings.

"You realize, Mama, that I can't take you to Alaska with me. You are old, and you have endured enough. It kills me to watch you in pain

every day. I believe it would be more compassionate to put you out of your misery."

Flora rehearses what she'll say to Mama.

And then she will get the Glock.

Andrea Potos

Another Airport Goodbye

One more embrace before
the security line swallows her

and you step back, the thread
unwinding, another

unspooling has begun, though by now
you know the thread as also

stem—sturdy, thick, rooting
you both to ground,

something beyond the umbilical—a cord
that holds and weaves through every absence.

Andrea Potos

Another Clothesline Poem

I still see my yaya, her apron pockets
bulging with wooden pegs, her strong arms reaching
to peg on the line another round of sheets
and kitchen towels, blouses and cotton underthings,
trousers and seersucker playsuits— even the names
arriving from long ago, when work was a patient
and slow tending to, like love; press of fabrics
between the pegs, the earthly sea of air that waved
and flapped and flickered under sky to give us
such fragrant dreams of our days.

Andrea Potos

Love at First Sight

I felt myself halted
on the cobblestone walkway,

at the lane's end
through the curved panes

of the shop window—
the summer dress

as if ready to exhale a promise
of June breezes around me,

let flow the waters from a long
and nourishing rain—

a dress with eyelets that looked
deep into the marrow of beauty.

Andrea Potos

When Asked What Are Poems, Really?

I might say they are the coins, tossed
and sunk, shining on the floor of a Roman fountain;

the scattered afterlives of dandelions released to the wind—
they bear our every wish.

Sometimes they are seeds, carried in the bills
of the raucous blackbirds,

or fallen from the bowed heads of sunflowers who know
how to follow the arc of the light.

Eveline Pye

Peggy

She is beside me on this ghost-train,
her head, a comforting weight
on my shoulder. My hair tumbles into hers;
auburn and grey curl together.

Outside, the world is full of pine trees;
lumberjacks and trucks span
straight roads. Dead ends tease tomorrow
with wooden words, evergreen promises.

For this last journey, she is here again:
a faint trace of lily of the valley,
fragile bones encased in cashmere,
the taste of Rowan jelly, licked

from a tiny apostle teaspoon. I watch
a red squirrel dart up an ash tree
and hear her singing *Fever*
as if she were another Peggy Lee.

Ivy Raff

Ancient, Stoic Tenderness

after Reuben Jackson

I never knew it. That cord,
cut in 1950s Brooklyn, commenced
its fray at that 20th Century's opening call
when, at the back of a Leeds sweatshop my immigrant
great grandmother entered labor and
died on the floor. They say that woman,
blood of my mother's mother's blood,
smuggled herself into England and probably
I'll never know what that looked like,
what it felt like in her dark, crunched-down
spine, but when I hear the word *smuggled*
I imagine a large box, brass-rivered, leather-
bound – treasure buried. *Smuggled*. She tried to
abort the baby herself – recovered
from massive infection on the family
bed in the tenement, where her sister
brought bowls of boiled water for Rachel
to inhale herb-laced steam, keep
breathing, breathe again. The baby lived.
Rachel didn't. My mother said her mother
said *I wanted to be a good mother to you,*
for I never had one. I think of how,
in whipped frenzy, our greatest desires'
storms, we capsize our gilded ships.
We drown the whole natural fleet.
An ancient, stoic tenderness: all
I've ever wanted: I have skin, just touch
it. But the wood salt air-warps, rusts
copper. The Long Island Sound
a narrow vessel for the wounds my women
brought from Europe. I've never been
to Latvia, where Rachel was born.
The very word labors the tongue,
sounds like sickly desserts thick
with poppy seed paste I'd pass

on the Shabbat table in favor of
Betty Crocker mix brownies,
Pillsbury chocolate chip cookies
you could break into neat orbs of dough.
Ancient, stoic tenderness –
I can hardly imagine.

Laura Sobbott Ross

Galaxy Wall in the Nursery

You peel stars from your fingers
and splay them, sticky and at random,
across a wall I painted black.
From the height of the ladder,
the floor looks sea swept,
tumbled in the whimsical refuse of toys.

The moon is tricky to adhere,
too big to be cornered and round as a tray—
the kind a waitress shoulders,
balancing glasses of floating ice.
Ours is a party of three—
you and me and the baby
from whose hair you untangle stars,
before you lift her to run
her fingers across the surface

of the moon. She is too young
to ask me later where you've gone,
or if I noticed the stars
have an otherworldly glow.
Your aura lingers in the spot
where you stood weeks before—
shiny fragments midair.
Your hands have left constellations
still visible in daylight, paper-thin
enough to be torn from the sky.

Kasey Butcher Santana

Crossing the Stream

“It’s Instagram,” Julio quipped as we approached a triptych covering most of a gallery wall in the Musee Fin-De-Siecle in Brussels.

The painting froze our wandering through the museum. We stared, heads cocked, mouths gaping. At first unsure of what we saw, as the horde of naked babies came into focus, we drifted closer, as if in a trance. The strangeness was repulsive, but also mesmerizing.

Léon Frédéric’s *The Stream* is composed of three related scenes. The central panel depicts a river running through the woods, over rapids surrounded by Birch trees. Only, the river is full of nude babies, running toward the foreground, as if they could burst from the frame. Some twist away from the viewer. Some grasp at other babies—dancing or fighting, it’s hard to know which. The ruddy skin of individual children melds into a faceless mass of flesh as the perspective deepens into the forest. The left panel, “The Glacier,” features mountains of ice covered in babies and older children, sliding down the glacier, creating a pile of wrinkly pink bottoms. The right panel, “Standing Water,” displays a similar landscape, but with the addition of swans. The children sleep—or are they dead?

Like photos of children on social media, *The Stream* is divisive. Some think it is a masterpiece; others do not want to see it. Dedicated to Beethoven to illustrate his *Pastoral Symphony*, the uncanny triptych causes some viewers to recoil. In a review of *1900: Art at the Crossroads*, an exhibit at the Guggenheim featuring the painting, Robert Hughes wrote, “This condommaker’s nightmare took 10 years to paint (no wonder, with all that dimpled piglet flesh) and was regarded not only as Frédéric’s masterpiece but also as an utterance of deep, deep depth.”¹ Lisa Liebmann called it “the acid test of critical tolerance.”² It’s technically excellent but inexplicably grotesque.

“What was *that*?” Julio and I shrugged, moving on.

Months later, a miscarriage started us on a slow path through infertility. Just over a year into our marriage, we had intended to wait to have children, but the emotional whiplash of losing a pregnancy right as

¹ “The Stuff Modernism Overthrew.” *Time Magazine*. May 2, 2000.

² “Lisa Liebmann.” *The Free Library* 01 December 2000. 28 May 2023
<[https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lisa Liebmann.-a068697131](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lisa+Liebmann.-a068697131)>.

we started to feel excited about it changed our plans. Still grieving and confused, I struggled to get pregnant.

There were no swans in sight, but my social media feeds included a steady enough stream of baby showers and gender reveals, pregnant bellies and baby dimples that opening Instagram felt emotionally risky. The smartest approach would have been to log off, but I was a chronically online person at a time just before researchers and whistleblowers revealed the intentionally addictive design of social media apps, with manipulative algorithms and cavalier attitudes towards privacy. It was a time to build a personal brand™, curate my feed, and showcase how okay I was.

The following year, since we did not have a baby, we took another trip. The cheapest path to Madrid from Denver included an overnight train from Lisbon to Madrid. The train smelled like onions and feces. I suspected that I was pregnant. Exhausted, I fidgeted in an uncomfortable seat, a protective hand on my belly, willing my daughter to take root there. If she ever came, we wanted to name her Veronica.

Once we could rinse off the stench of the train, we visited the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Although the massive, chaotic presence of Picasso's *Guernica* stirred my jetlagged imagination, my were eyes drawn to the portraits of Saint Veronica scattered through the galleries, tattered veils held in outstretched hands. "Please, be a sign," I begged them.

The following day, at the Bullfighting Museum, the gallery displayed portraits of different Veronicas—bullfighters making *pases* away from bulls with their capes. Feeling conflicted and nauseated by the beauty of the art and the brutality of the sport, I excused myself to wander down empty halls encircling the arena where the fights were held. There, in an ancient bathroom, I saw another infuriating flash of red.

Hours later, I forced a smile, posing with a big glass of wine at the Mercado de San Miguel, and posted travel photos. Confident that a baby would eventually come, Julio wanted to enjoy this time together, just us, while we had it. I studied the Spanish foods for sale, willing myself to be present. Julio was right; we were fortunate to have this time and experience. I locked eyes with a widemouthed fish chilling on a bed of ice, transfixed by its shimmery, grotesque face. Turning, I asked, "Remember that baby painting?" to make my husband laugh. We had thirty-four more months with just the two of us.

When I was fourteen, my parents took me to Chicago to see an exhibit of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin's paintings from the Studio of the South. Two versions of *The Starry Night* hung side by side in an alcove, inviting comparison. The first, *The Starry Night over the Rhone*, is more serene than the iconic *The Starry Night*, which Van Gogh painted the following year. I studied the two paintings, considering the development of the stars and the different emotional states in which Van Gogh worked. Young and romantic, I knew I was seeing something that I would always remember. I felt tempted then to describe it as a transformative experience, but it was not—except that art has a way of getting under the skin and living there until the memory of it is needed.

I saw *The Starry Night over the Rhone* again with Julio, in Paris on our honeymoon, and felt the gentle tug of that day when I was first so moved by experiencing an artist's work. A week later, I saw *The Stream* and it got under my skin, too. Just as the memory of observing the *Starry Nights* occasionally filters to the top of my mind, that bizarre tangle of naked babies haunts me. Sometimes the memory triggers nostalgia for the simpler time when I scoffed at a flood of babies, not yet wanting one of my own. More often, I take it as a reminder to step out of the stream and put down my phone, allowing the strangeness of more mundane things to engross me just the same.

Now that we are parents and travel less, Julio and I still daydream about our honeymoon—the food, the walks, the architecture of Paris, and our bike rides in Belgium—and then, it hits me. “Remember the baby painting?” I ask.

Maureen Sherbondy

China

Linda's husband slumped into the yellow and blue floral couch, his fingers rubbing the velvet fabric for comfort. She watched Stanley's hands, freakishly large for such a short man or what was considered short anyway. Funny how she hadn't noticed this when they'd first met twenty years earlier.

Though she watched the motion of his hands, Linda could not look at his cloudy eyes. She'd had enough of his sadness and pleading. Whatever she thought might happen when she finally confronted him, Linda never imagined Stanley would turn into a crying toddler whose toy had been taken away. He'd spent ten long hours begging her to reconsider.

Her friend Tina had suggested that she just deliver the information straightforwardly, in a business-like manner—as if she had bad news to deliver about the rejection of an insurance claim. Tina always used analogies related to her own claims adjuster job.

“Or like the buyers didn't accept the low offer,” Linda had suggested, something she could relate to.

“Exactly. And don't give an inch. I know you can be a softy. Remember that guy Junior year at Rutgers who followed you around for a month like a lost puppy because you couldn't get out the words?”

“He'd had a hard life. Remember—his grandmother had just stroked out. And he didn't have a father.”

“That's what I mean. Always making excuses for people. Come on, Linda, you've been telling me for eight years how miserable you are. Just rip off that bandage. Honestly, I never understood why you settled for him in the first place.”

Linda had been the last of her college friends to marry. She knew who she was even then—the plainest girl in the room. The one overlooked even though she was smart and kind. But guys at that age wanted pretty and sexy. Only Stanley had made her feel special. By the time she'd been dating Stanley for a year, and pushing thirty-two, marriage to Stanley seemed her best option.

“Okay, okay. I'm telling him tonight. Even made a list of apartments to help him out.”

That phone call with Tina had taken place yesterday. Or was it the day before? Loud sobbing pulled her out of trying to remember the

timeframe. “So, Stanley, I’ll take half the china—since there’s sixteen. This way we both get a set of eight.” She wasn’t sure why she’d started with kitchen items. Her growling stomach clued her in to that choice. Tina’s voice echoed in her head, *Business like. Stick to numbers and the distribution of items and money.*

Stanley spoke through his sobs, then began hiccupping. Now his entire body was reclining on the couch. His stomach puffed out as far as the blue throw pillow. “You think I’m gonna throw a dinner party! For God’s sake, Linda. One. Just leave me one damn plate.”

Guilt seeped in with the humid July air. While she was delivering her news last night, the air conditioner had also died. Though all the living room windows were open, sweat dripped from her forehead and her dark hair frizzed and curled up so much that it would appear neck-length by the end of the day. What day was it? Sunday? Monday? Who even knew. Glancing at the bird calendar stuck to the refrigerator, she looked at her blue scribbles inside rectangles. With the exception of real estate meetings and outings with her friends, little else was written. Had they ever gone on “dates” as a couple? She recalls some early movies, a few parties, but as soon as they said their vows, Stanley had gotten comfortable. Stopped courting her. What had she ever seen in him? It was as if the first part of their marriage had slipped away. Like an island that sinks further and further beneath the ocean each year. Eventually, it looks like the island was never even there.

Biting her lip, Linda pressed on. “I’ll give you the couch that you seem to like so much and the matching blue recliner. I just need the desk for work.”

Stanley rolled off the couch and lifted himself up by pressing on the cushion much like she imagined a child learning to walk might do. She had witnessed her nephew doing this, anyway. At least with no children, the divorce would be easier. Or should be anyway. The divorce horror stories she’d heard about at the yearly Realtor Conference in Atlantic City always seemed to involve complications caused by custody of children.

When Linda had first met Stanley, she’d wanted children. Nothing happened. Two years in, he confessed his relief that it had worked out this way. Stanley had too many fears of his own to parent a child: spiders, snakes, thunder storms, ocean waves. Who would kill the creepy spider in a toddler’s room? Or remove the dangerous snake from the garage when a child was near? She couldn’t picture Stanley swimming in the ocean with a careful eye on an eight-year-old son. On

top of these fears, he was perpetually late, not waking when his alarm went off. She couldn't see Stanley readying a son or daughter for school and then arriving before the first bell. In fact, his slow-to-rise mornings had already cost him three respectable jobs. He now sold cars, a job he wanted because his hours coincided with her weekend and evening realtor hours, or so he said. Linda was convinced the true reason was that it was the kind of job that didn't demand early morning hours. Despite his sleeping in, he wasn't successful as a car salesman either. The word slacker came to mind when considering his work ethic. On the other hand, her career was taking off—she had recently been put in charge of all out-of-state referrals for several big companies and was raking it in.

Stanley moved to the window and watched a yellow finch perched on the feeder. "I'll be like him. Eating alone every night."

"You can have the cherry wood dining table as well."

Another larger bird arrived and pushed the smaller bird off the feeder. A feather drifted into the overgrown grass. Another chore Stanley had promised to do a week earlier, but had not.

Linda looked around her house. It seemed lifeless. No plants or children. Not even a cat or dog. Only the fabric on the couch contained flowers. Her surroundings reflected how she'd felt for a very long time. Dead.

Stanley burst out, "You take it all. I don't want anything. Just go already. Stop talking about the inventory of our life."

"What?"

"Take the money, too. I won't need any of it." Stanley stared at the dirt outside. The yellow feather had been devoured by the too-long grass.

Was this another ploy? A way to get her to stay? Hinting at suicide? How would he even do this? Ropes terrified him, he didn't own a manual razor blade, and he was against guns. She remembered being a student counselor at Rutgers, a peer-counselor. There'd been months of training about what to listen for when a needy student called the hotline late at night. She tried to recall the list of warning signs of suicide.

"You don't need the money because you what? Won the lottery last night and didn't tell me?"

This line didn't even invoke a smile on Stanley's round face. He turned around and eyed the carpet as if searching for answers.

"If you mean to kill yourself, Stanley, then I'll drive you to the hospital so you can get some help."

Stanley stood right in front of his wife. He looked at her face as if seeing it for the first time. “Have you always been so cold? What did you do—practice for your exit? Tell me the real reason you’re leaving.” Stanley rubbed his mustache like he did when trying to figure something out.

Linda stepped back. Suddenly she was so tired that it was a struggle to stand. In fact, it was hard to even keep her eyes open. How many times did she have to explain that she wasn’t in love with him?

“It’s another guy, isn’t it? That Italian realtor in the Princeton office. I saw you two talking at the holiday party. Don’t think I haven’t noticed things. You lost weight, started jogging again. The new clothes. Eating salad and tofu all the time.”

Shaking her head, Linda flopped down onto the blue chair. “There’s no one else. I tried to be nice when I told you, but you’re pushing me. I would rather spend the rest of my life alone than spend another second with you, Stanley. I don’t love you anymore!”

There was nothing else to say. Stanley walked to the kitchen and took his one plate, then left through the back door.

Linda watched her husband leave the yard, then noticed the bird feeder was empty.

Shoshauna Shy

Leather & Sand

My dad will love Mom no matter what, I believed. That's how marriages work. Couples argue and get mad; they might even sleep apart and stew for a week, but then they make up and make things go back to how they were.

So, my dad is boarding a private plane for a working vacation in Puerto Rico, and I'm ten years old standing with Mom on the tarmac bidding him good-bye. She's terrified this little plane won't make it out of Chicago, much less make it back. I misconstrue the sanctity of what I hear her blurt out to me. She is only trying to help herself feel better in the face of the unknown, but I don't understand that.

"If something happens to him, I'll find somebody else; I'll be OK," Mom murmurs aloud, as if in a trance. Overwhelmed by her fear, she either had forgotten I was there, or was intentionally confiding in me, her only daughter. I never find out which, but I hear relief as she imagines herself a widowed mother. Fear shrouds me, though. What might life be like without Dad?

As it works out, my brother and I do not become lost in the briar patch of bad fortune. Our father comes back safe and sound; we resume our dinner meals at the kitchen table every evening. Cushioned by the comfortable sameness of family routine, I look at him playfully over my pork chop and polenta.

"Wanna know what Mom said when you got on that plane?" I ask, figuring I can share her confession and wash away former anxieties by giving all of us a good laugh.

"Sure. What did she say?" Dad tilts his head in a friendly way.

Somebody kicks me under the table. Hard. I freeze. Mom's eyes are knives raking my cheeks. Consonants and vowels commit suicide in my lungs.

"Salad, hon?" she thrusts the tongs at him. "Got your favorite green olives this time! Ones with pimentos."

A look of hurt and confusion forms upon my father's face as he helps himself to the frilly lettuce. No one speaks. I listen—like those wounded in combat listen to the continuing artillery, a sound different than before.

Sharp edges separate each of us. Dinner tastes like leather and sand.

What have I done?

Dianne Silvestri

Poem for My Namesake

I'm spreading sunscreen on the thigh
of my nearly six-year-old granddaughter,
when she apologizes *My fat legs!*

I choke to myself, immediately wonder
who it was who implanted this lie?
Maybe my very thin daughter-in-law?

Or some young friend with careless words?
No, Maggie, they're not fat, I counter,
They are good soccer legs.

I've watched her pass the ball to teammates,
score goals, a smart brown-eyed player,
aggressive, but with a bright smile.

My mind rehearses my mother's voice:
You have the Ring family legs,
which means I inherited heavy thighs,

short calves—her own source of shame.
It cost me decades to overcome
her label, amid my full mirror of flaws.

I run the brush through my granddaughter's hair,
loop the pink band for a ponytail,
try to think of a way I might spare her.

Karen Regen Tuero

Fifty Years of This

The pink bunny-ear napkin rings, Easter tablecloth and Mikasa bone china was a distant memory as Kate approached her assigned seat at her mother-in-law's unfinished table. Several trips to the kitchen filled gaps in glassware and salad bowls, missing salt and pepper shakers and a liter-sized bottle of soda. Returning to her spot, Kate greeted the new guest across from her. The redhead clasped hands with her husband's newly divorced cousin. Kate fought the urge to explain that the presentation shouldn't be held against their host, Angie, who was known for a lifetime of spectacular tables.

Angie, once a dark-haired beauty, was standing behind the guest when Kate's father-in-law rose at the head of the table and came over. Face to face, he sparred with her over no Canada Dry Ginger Ale, just Sprite. Angie struck back with sarcasm, causing him to lash out with an affront about her faculties. She insulted him back.

Kate's stomach clenched. Though she was used to it, the presence of the guest made her see today's scene through new eyes. Her in-laws' undisguised hatred for each other reminded Kate of her father's treatment of her mother while Kate was young, though, unlike Angie, Kate's mother chose silence. Those unendurable scenes, though not public like today's, set expectations for marriage: people who love each other fight and, at best, tolerate each other, accepting that joy will be a rare visitor. Remarkably, her parents' marriage passed through the long ugly stage that lasted most of their relationship, and landed in a truce in old age, the couple caring for each other before death offered an escape from sixty years of bondage.

Kate's husband sat down beside her, then filled his wineglass, drinking the Cabernet with audible pleasure without filling hers or passing the bottle until she asked for it. She sipped the wine, then, as a test, set her hand on the table, inching it over, unsurprised when he didn't take it. She thought of how her friends said she was crazy for staying with him these twenty-five years. Longingly she looked across the table at the new couple with their genuine affection for each other as the cousin attentively filled his date's glass.

Her in-laws fought on. Kate poured herself more wine. She knew that when the couple wasn't arguing, at most they endured each other. Little gestures of affection - pet names like Cookie and Boo or a hand

brushed against a cheek before a cup of Lipton tea was served - were ancient history. And a truce like her parents' was nowhere in sight.

Shortly, the cousin whispered something into his date's ear and, wondering what that might be, Kate briefly met the stranger's eye in embarrassment.

When Kate's father-in-law returned to the head of the table, Angie took her seat adjacent to him, pouring him a Sprite that he immediately handed off to her to have. She snarled and leaned away.

Turning to his date, the cousin boasted that his aunt and uncle had been married fifty years.

"*Fifty* years!" the woman said with admiration echoed by everyone around the table, glasses raised to their host and her other half.

Fifty years of this, Kate thought.

Why did everyone think the ability to withstand life without love was a virtue?

Sipping more wine, she considered her own life. Had she really learned nothing from her mother's marriage? If not, couldn't she learn something from Angie's? she thought as she had her husband pass her a paper napkin from the stack of everyday ones thrown down on the edge of the table.

The End

Liz Weir

Reading J. M. Barrie's, *Peter Pan*

Red-bound book in hand, she read to us, seated
on my brother's bed, dark hair clipped to one side.
A natural actor, her voice became Peter's high alto,
a rumble for Captain Hook and the tick-tock crocodile,
Tinker Bell, a silvery "tink" and, for Wendy,
our mum's everyday voice. I wanted to be Wendy,
needle and thread in hand, stitching Peter's
shadow to his heels, longed to flutter
through our bedroom window, fairy dust-sprinkled,
and fly with Peter Pan to Never-Land—second turn
to the right and straight on till morning.

Now, grown with children of my own, I open
the book that Mum's mother had read to her,
its spine, gone, covers worn, and begin to read—
find a hair, dark and straight, my mother's!
Between finger and thumb, I roll its round strength,
recall her voice as a gust billows bedroom curtains
and from me, her hair flutters. . . .

Geraldine Kloos Weltman

Visiting the Wildlife Park with My Father

Homosassa Springs, Florida - March, 2011

We have floated up Pepper Creek
past the cabbage palm trees;
we have viewed alligators
and manatees,
the panther and the river otter;
and now we stand here
watching red wolves move
around their enclosure.
Your hand on the back of my neck
reminds me that
we used to walk like this years ago--
a girl and her dad,
some sort of pact between them.

The wolves, at first glance,
look just like a pack of dogs,
all noses, ears,
and wagging tails. So it's a surprise
to notice the enormous
distances in their eyes We want
to linger here, near this
living link between familiar
and unknown.

But your hand leans heavily
on my shoulder, and I fear
our excursion has tired you.

We rest on a bench and you
hold my hand as if hanging on.

But the look in your eyes
tells me you are preparing
to traverse the wild spaces.

Kelley White

First Birth (What Really Happened)

I was going to be an obstetrician. Really. Convinced it was my calling, that women needed me. I'd be understanding. Helpful. Thoughtful. Kind. So when there was a chance to deliver a baby I was happy with the rule that a student must stay with a woman through her labor before we'd be allowed into the delivery room. Mine was a lovely patient, patient with me, patient with her labor. A second child. And the first had been the New Year's Baby for all Boston in 1976! So perhaps this baby would be a bit disappointed at his lack of distinguished birth. The labor went well. The mother was glad of company. And when the moment came we rushed to the delivery room. I scrubbed. Gowned. Gloved. And got my hands on the baby just as he crowned. And then my pants slipped down to my ankles. Onto the bloody floor. Yes, another distinguished birth. I went into pediatrics.

Victoria Wisell-Mabe

Died Here

she could have died here,
bras and bones and broken glass
strewn across the floor

she could have lived here,
breath and love and want
growing from the floor

she could have stayed
the same here, a tree never
becomes a stone, a stone never
becomes a heart

she could have thought and
fought and collapsed and caved
and withered and wasted and
waited and waned

she could have

instead, she stood
and slipped through
the door,
leaving her absence to
create a space,
leaving the world
to spin on
without her

Victoria Wisell-Mabe

The Other Woman

It never occurred to me
until
she slid my name over her lips,
over iced coffee and lukewarm rumors
on a sunny day at a café on Boylston,
as though it was hers to say,
that,
an idea of me,
made up and make-believe,
a version
owned by and known to
almost everyone,
existed

a rendering so powerful,
it survived for months as a moth
held against the light,
as a map scrutinized and scoured,
as a plastic doll, posed and
positioned

she was busy, I was told, this other me,
swimming endless laps in
the murky eyes of her beholders,
feeding fodder around
coolers of water, and
starring in conversations when
drinks clinked at the office's favorite
bar

I would have cried, then,
when I learned of her,
this trollop,
this traitor,
dropped fat tears
into my iced coffee,

if I hadn't recognized
her for the water
that she was,
the lifeblood poured
to feed gossip's
insatiable need

Sarah Zietlow

How to File for Divorce

After the wedding, and
barely an hour into the reception,
consider the gravity of your
delusion—that good enough is good
enough. A future over-
filled with gardens, gas ranges and
garbage disposals rarely a
happy homemaker makes.
In a champagne fountain, drown your doubts
just enough to preemptively
kiss nine years of misery and
loathing goodbye—or feign its absence, at least.

Money can't buy happiness is
not such an accurate adage
once you hoard some savings to
pay the overpriced lawyer, sign the
quit-claim on the house you paid for, and
run. Pack your baggage in trash bags and
slip off for a while in a shitty, blue Civic to a
tiny, cut-rate apartment on the edge of town
until with relief, you delightfully
vomit away last decade's champagne.
With the pen finally in your hand,
"X" beckons its whetted tip to the line where
you sign away everything to find that a balance of
zero—alone—is better than good enough.

Biographical Notes



—Janina Aza Karpinska, *Sovereign* (collage)

Angela Abbott is an English and creative writing professor, as well as a book editor. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her husband, son, daughter, and three dogs. Her work can be seen in *Atticus Review*, *HelloGiggles*, *Multiply Magazine*, *Thought Catalog* and elsewhere.

Mona Anderson has lived in the New Hampshire countryside for 45 years where she and her husband built a stone house and raised two boys and dozens of cats. They produce much of their own electricity and food. Mona co-authored *The Art of Building a House of Stone*. Her work has appeared in *Constellations*, *Northern New England Review*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Smoky Quartz*, and others.

Pamela Annas grew up in the Navy, lived for two years in a village in Turkey and graduated from high school in Yokohama, Japan. She is Professor Emerita of English at UMass/Boston where she taught working-class literature, modern and contemporary poetry and writing, coached UMB's ballroom dance team and directed its English MA Program. She is a member of the editorial collective and poetry editor at *Radical Teacher*, and has published books and articles on poetry, literature, and pedagogy, and poems in various journals and anthologies. Her chapbook *Mud Season* was published by Cervena Barva Press.

Barrie Ashby is always moving: most recently, from Pennsylvania to a cramped dorm room at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Whether reading, writing, or talking to her mother, she drifts between the library, her bedroom, coffee shops, and garden grass. When stagnant, she learns and talks about books. She has been published in *Blaze Vox* and *YouThink Magazine*.

Cynthia Benson's book *All Visions of Blind Love* won for anthology at the 2016 San Francisco Book Festival. More stories appeared in *Confrontation*, *Flash Fiction Forum*, *The Call: An Anthology of Women's Writing*, *The Banyan Review*, and others. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, IPPY, and Micro awards.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock is a full-time writer and artist whose poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies both online and in print. During the Pandemic, she was honored to be one of three poets featured on the cable TV show, *Philly Loves Poetry*. Her poems have been

featured online at *Your Daily Poem* and read on WJFF Catskill Radio. A recipient of a Pushcart Prize nomination, she has one published chapbook with a second one debuting in the spring of 2025.

Ann Birch lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her recent work has appeared in *Grim & Gilded*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *Half and One*, *Change Seven*, and *Funicular*.

V. Bray has been a writer since childhood and still has a box filled with her first “books,” usually illustrated with markers and bound with yarn. She writes in many genres, from speculative and historical fiction to poetry. Her work has been published in *About Place Journal*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Multiplicity Magazine*, and *The Writer* magazine. Learn more at authorvbray.com.

Becca Bullen, a writer and environmentalist from Colorado, discovered her love for writing at a young age. She honed her craft during her undergraduate studies at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, graduating in May 2023. Currently, she works at an environmental nonprofit and spends her free time writing about the world as she observes it. Her poetry and nonfiction work can be found at *The Elpis Pages*, *The Viewpoint*, and *The Glacial Hills Review*.

Sabine Chishty is a Bangladeshi American writer and educator based in Harlem, New York. She teaches graduate industrial and organizational psychology at Brooklyn College, and consults with various organizations on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Her stories have been published in *The Margins* and *Beyond Words Magazine*.

Leslie Clark’s writing has been published in various journals and anthologies, and she is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Cardiac Alert* and *Ward Off the Night* (Finishing Line Press).

Savannah Cooper (she/her) is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet, bisexual mess, and self-taught photographer. Her work has been previously published in more than 40 journals, including *Parentheses Journal*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *Mud Season Review*. Her debut poetry collection *Mother Viper* is due August 12, 2025 from Unsolicited Press.

Jane Mary Curran lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She is retired from a college professorship in piano and her second career as a hospice chaplain and spiritual director. She is the author of *Indiana Girl, Poems* (2019), *Midwives of the Spirit: Thoughts on Caregiving* (2002) and numerous poems in regional and international journals.

Laurie Didesch's work appears or is forthcoming in *The Comstock Review*, *The White Pelican Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *California Quarterly*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Rambunctious Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, *The Ravens Perch*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, *Bronze Bird Review*, and more. Her work has appeared in anthologies on Memory and Writing, among others. Her awards include being chosen to attend a juried workshop given by Marge Piercy. Additionally, Laurie has been on the editorial staff of various literary journals. She lives in Illinois with her husband Alan and their three cats. She is currently working on her first book.

Lisa Egle has been teaching English Language Skills at Passaic County Community College for over 20 years. When not in the classroom, she finds inspiration in off-the-beaten-path travels, often discovering a spiritual connection to the places she visits and the people she meets. This journey is captured in her book, *Magic Carpet Seduction*, which shares her unique experiences across nine countries. As the founder of the travel blog *chickybus*, Lisa encourages others to embrace adventure and explore the world around them.

Keriann Eklund is a high school English teacher. She is currently earning her Masters in Creative Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She has been teaching literature and writing poetry with her students for over 15 years. She lives in Randolph, NJ with her husband, two children, and her goldendoodle.

Sara Femenella's poems have been published in *Pleiades*, *The Journal*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Salamander*, *The Shore and Seventh Wave*, among others. Her forthcoming book, *Elegies for One Small Future*, was a semifinalist for Autumn House Press' Poetry Prize, a finalist for Write Bloody Publishing's Jack McCarthy Book Prize and a finalist for The Waywiser Press Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and son.

Katrina Irene Gould writes in hopes that, by examining our complicated and sometimes troubling human experiences, we can create more compassion for our struggles. She has spent thirty fulfilling years as a psychotherapist in Portland, Oregon but her deepest love is still writing. So far this year she has published in *Hot Pot Magazine*, *Glacial Hills Review*, *Literally Stories*, and *Writing in a Woman's Voice*.

Rachel Griffin is a writer based out of the Washington, DC area. She writes a variety of fictional works based on her experiences and enjoys experimenting with genre. Her work has appeared in *The Black Hare Press*, *American Literature Magazine*, *Elbow Room*, and others.

K.D. Hance is a writer living in Cypress, TX with her family and many pets. Writing has been a passion of hers since she was a little girl. She is currently finishing up her first novel.

Jillian Hanson's poems and collages have appeared in *Terrain*, *Unbroken*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *ctrl + v journal*, *The Stonecoast Review*, and *The Portland Press Herald*, among others. Her first collection, "Everything More Wild, More Humble" is forthcoming from Blue Sky Press. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Main/Stonecoast.

Alison Louise Harney lives in Atlanta and earned an MFA in poetry from UNC-Wilmington. Her poems have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Iowa Review*, and other journals. She is an award-winning PEN Prison Writing mentor and created Writing Room ATL where she leads small online writing groups for women.

HR Harper is a writer living in the redwoods above Santa Cruz, California. A student of meditation and kenotic traditions, they write to understand the nature of human consciousness in a natural world humans seem to be ignoring and destroying. They began to publish in 2021. Many of their recently published poems and stories may be found at: <https://brusheswiththedarklaw.blogspot.com>

Lois Marie Harrod's *Spat* was published by Finishing Line Press in May 2021, and her 17th collection *Woman* was published by Blue Lyra in February 2020. *Nightmares of the Minor Poet* appeared in June 2016 from Five Oaks; her chapbook *And She Took the Heart* appeared in

January 2016; *Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis* (Cherry Grove Press) and the chapbook *How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth* (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. A Dodge poet, life-long educator and writer, she is published in literary journals and online ezines from *American Poetry Review* to *Tar River* to *Zone 3 Links* to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org

Gabrielle Israelievitch is an artist and child psychologist, a teacher, an author, and a person with many family roles. *Dolls and Flowers* is an excerpt from her forthcoming memoir *Slow Ride to Mother*.

Janina Aza Karpinska is a multidisciplinary artist-poet, with an eye for visual poetry and narrative-anecdotes. She has exhibited artwork and photography in Oxford; Leicester, Sheffield, and Brighton, with several pieces published as front covers of magazines. She lives on the south coast of England.

Cynthia Knorr is the author of *A Vessel of Furious Resolve* (Finishing Line Press, 2019). Her poems have appeared in *Hole in the Head Review*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Comstock Review*, *Chiron Review*, and many others. After a career as a medical writer in New York City, she relocated to rural New Hampshire. Recently, she was a finalist in the New Hampshire Poetry Society's tribute to Charles Simic and has served on the editorial staff of *The Poet's Touchstone*.

Elaine Koplow, retired English teacher and union organizer, is Director of the Sussex County Writers' Roundtable and Associate Editor of *The Stillwater Review*. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems appear in several anthologies and journals including *Spillway*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Adanna*, *Exit 13 Magazine*, *U.S.1 Worksheets*, *Tiferet*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Lips*, and elsewhere. She is the author of two books of poetry: *Sketch Pad* and *The Way the Light Comes Through*.

Chelsie Kreitzman is a native of Michigan living and writing in Lexington, Kentucky. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary publications, including *Yearling*, *Pegasus*, *The Heartland Review*, *Bluegrass Accolade*, and *Superpresent*.

Linda Laderman is a Michigan poet and writer. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals, including the *Scapegoat Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *SWWIM*, *Rust & Moth*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, and others. She is the 2023 recipient of Harbor Review's Jewish Women's Prize and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Find her at lindaladerman.com.

Lisa Lahey's short stories and poetry have been published in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Spaceports and Spidersilk*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Spadina Literary Review*, *Vita Poetica*, *Ariel Chart Review*, *Altered Reality*, *Suddenly*, *And Without Warning*, *Why Vandalism*, *VerbalArt Journal*, *Bindweed Anthology*, *Roi Fointenant*, *The Pink Hydra*, *Truth, Beauty and Imagination*, and *Creepy Podcast*. She will soon be published in *Epater Magazine*, *Small City World*, *Adelaide Review*, *Siren Call Publications*, *Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *Blood and Bourbon Magazine*, *Engstand Magazine*, *West Avenue Publishing*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, and *Propagate Fruits from the Garden*.

Susanna Lang divides her time between Chicago and Uzès, France. The 2024 winner of the Marvin Bell Memorial Poetry Prize from *December Magazine*, her most recent chapbook, *Like This*, was released in 2023 (Unsolicited Books), along with her translations of poems by Souad Labbize, *My Soul Has No Corners* (Diálogos Books). Her third full-length collection of poems, *Travel Notes from the River Styx*, was published in 2017 by Terrapin Books. Her poems, translations and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as *The Common*, *Asymptote*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Rhino Reviews*, *Mayday* and *The Slowdown*. Her translations of poetry by Yves Bonnefoy include *Words in Stone* and *The Origin of Language*, and she is now working with Souad Labbize and Hélène Dorion on new translations. More information available at www.susannalang.com.

Marie Lavendier's poems have appeared in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Gaia Magazine*, *Crone Magazine* and *SageWoman*. Also, a nonfiction writer, she won Hartford Magazine's 2018 writing contest "The Lioness and the King" based on the relationship between Mark Twain and Isabel Lyon. From 2005-2015, she taught English and Humanities at Tunxis Community College in Connecticut.

Joanne Mallari (she/her) is a Reno-based, Filipino-American poet. She believes in making arts education more accessible, because she discovered her love of language through public programs like the Southern Nevada Writing Project. Her debut chapbook, *Daughter Tongue*, was published by Kelsay Books.

Margaret S. Marangione is a Professor of writing at the University of Virginia and Blue Ridge Community College. Her novel, *Across the Blue Ridge Mountains*, was under consideration for the Weatherford Award, Pen Faulkner award and was featured on National Public Radio. Additionally, her short stories, essays and poetry have been published in *Appalachian Journal*, *The Upper New Review*, *Lumina Journal*, *Sixty and Me*, *Enchanted Living*, *We'moon* and *Sagewoman* magazine.

Grace T. McCarthy is a writer and poet from New York, currently pursuing her undergraduate in Southern Florida. She is working on her first novel.

Barri McGougan is a poet attending Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. She is earning a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing as well as Literary Studies. She plans to attend an MFA program next fall, but is still undecided.

Tara Menon is an Indian-American writer based in Lexington, Massachusetts. More than seventy of her poems have been published in magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. Menon was a finalist for the Willow Run Poetry Book Award 2023/2024. Some of her latest poems have appeared in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Cider Press Review*, *Global South*, *Calliope on the Web*, *Raven's Perch*, and *Wink: Writers in the Know*.

Kathy Nelson, James Dickey Prize winner, MFA graduate of the Warren Wilson Program for Writers, and Nevada Arts Council Fellow, is author of *The Ledger of Mistakes* (Terrapin Books, 2023). Her work appears in *About Place*; *Five Points, a Journal of Literature and Art*; *Jacar One*; *New Ohio Review*; *Pedestal Magazine*; *Tar River Poetry*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*; *Verse Daily* and elsewhere.

Eve Ottenberg has published 28 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.

Olivia Partamian is a student at Stanford University studying Biology and its applications in Archaeology. She is enamored by the natural and metaphysical aspects of our world and seeks to understand them both in the lab and through writing. Specifically, she is drawn to the ways in which material culture can be used to better understand the complexities of the human condition. When she is not on site or doing research, she can be found curled up with a good book and a hot tea.

Naomi Pliskow has been writing poetry since childhood, but only recently has begun to share it with others. She has spent much of her working life as a writer for the medical communications industry. Her agented book *Ungrowth: An Affectionate Look at How Our Bodies Change as We Age* has yet to be published.

J.B. Polk is Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. First story short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 100 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.

Andrea Potos is the author of seven full-length poetry collections, most recently *Her Joy Becomes* from Fernwood Press, *Marrow of Summer* and *Mothershell*, both from Kelsay Books. A new collection from Fernwood entitled *Belonging Songs* will be published in 2025. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Eveline Pye lives in Clydebank, Scotland and recently retired as a university lecturer in Statistics and Mathematics. She is an established poet with three chapbooks: *Smoke That Thunders*, Mariscat Press (2015);

STEAM, Red Squirrel Press (2022); *Reaching the Light*, Seahorse Publications (2024).

Ivy Raff is the author of the bilingual poetry collection *What Remains* (Editorial DALYA, forthcoming 2025), winner of the Alberola International Poetry Prize, and *Rooted and Reduced to Dust* (Finishing Line Press, 2024). She serves artist communities as MacDowell's Senior Systems Project Manager and as a member of *Seventh Wave Magazine's* editorial team, and sits on the board of Houston's Colectiva Feminista Colibri.

Christine Redman-Waldeyer has been in education for over twenty years, eighteen spent at Passaic County Community College where she teaches writing. She began *Adanna* shortly after having her third child finding a need to connect with other writers on women's topics. Her poetry has been published widely including *Lips*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *The Seventh Quarry*, *The Texas Review*, among others. She is co-editor of *Writing after Retirement: Tips from Successful Retired Writers*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Laura Sobbott Ross has worked as a teacher and a writing coach for Lake County Schools in Central Florida and was named Lake County's poet laureate. Her poems have been featured on Verse Daily and have appeared in *Meridian*, *32 Poems*, *Blackbird*, *Main Street Rag*, *National Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist for the Art & Letters Poetry Prize and won the Southern Humanities Auburn Witness Poetry Prize. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks and three full-length poetry books.

Kasey Butcher Santana is a writer and caretaker of a small alpaca farm where she and her husband also raise chickens, bees, and their daughter. Recently, her work appeared or is forthcoming in *Split Lip Magazine*, *Write or Die*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Superstition Review*, and *The Hopper*. She is a Nonfiction Editor for *Kitchen Table Quarterly*, and you can follow her on Instagram @solhomestead or at *Life Among the Alpacas* on Substack.

Maureen Sherbondy's work has appeared in *Feminist Studies*, *Calyx*, *Stone Canoe*, among others. Her forthcoming poetry book is *The Body*

Remembers. Maureen lives in Durham, N.C. To learn more about her work go to: www.maureensherbondy.com.

Cindy Smith Shih is a collage artist whose works have been exhibited in New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., Honolulu, and San Francisco, Palo Alto and Los Altos in California. Her works also hang in various private collections throughout the United States. She describes her work as a juxtaposition of surrealism and realism, reflecting imagined and experienced realities, creating meaning from contrast.

Shoshauna Shy is the author of five collections of poetry; her flash fiction and micro-memoir has recently appeared in the public arena courtesy of *Cranked Anvil*, *Five Minutes*, *Literally Stories* and *Flash Boulevard*. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Dianne Silvestri is author of *But I Still Have Fingerprints* (CavanKerry Press, 2022) and the chapbook *Necessary Sentiments* (Finishing Line, 2015). A past Pushcart nominee, she has been published widely, including *Evening Street Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Main Street Rag*, *Naugatuck River Review*, and *Poetry South*. A retired physician, she lives in Massachusetts with her husband. For more, find her at www.diannesilvestri.com.

Karen Regen Tuero is a Pushcart-nominated writer whose work has been published lately in *Potomac Review*, *New World Writing*, *The Summerset Review*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York.

Elizabeth Weir's *High on Table Mountain*, was nominated for the 2017 Midwest Poetry Book Award. Kelsay Books published her second book, *When Our World Was Whole*. Her poetry has been published in many journals, most recently in *The Redwing Arts Poet and Artist Collaborative*, *Comstock Review*, *Turtle Island Quarterly* and in *Adanna*.

Geraldine Kloos Weltman is a retired New Jersey government researcher and manager. She now lives in Chicago, Illinois, after living for many years in Central New Jersey. Her work has appeared in *Adanna Literary Journal*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and *Paterson Literary Review*.

Pediatrician **Kelley White** has worked in Philadelphia and New Hampshire. Her poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Rattle*, and *JAMA*. Her most recent chapbook is *A Field Guide to Northern Tattoos* (Main Street Rag Press.) Recipient of 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant she is Poet in Residence at Drexel's Medical School. Her newest collection, *NO. HOPE STREET*, was recently published by Kelsay Books.

Victoria Wisell-Mabe VA lives outside Seattle, WA, with her human and animal family. Her work has appeared in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Ignatian Literary Magazine*, *The Anna*, *Hominum Journal*, *Lumina Journal*, and *Panoplyzine Magazine* as the Editors' Poem of Choice, *The Basilisk Tree*, and *Figwort*. She has work forthcoming in *Crab Creek Review* and *Spry Literary Magazine*. You can find her on Instagram at @vawiswell and www.vawiswell.com.

Sarah Zietlow is an aspiring poet from a small town in northeast Ohio where she currently teaches language arts to 7th and 8th-grade students. She holds a BA in Education from the University of Akron, an MA in English from Bowling Green State University, and is currently working on an MFA in creative writing in the Bluegrass Writers Studio at Eastern Kentucky University. In her free time, Sarah enjoys sitting by campfires while simultaneously staring at the stars and contemplating how best to sell off all she owns in an effort to find herself any place other than Cleveland.