

ADANNA

LITERARY JOURNAL

Founder/Editor
CHRISTINE REDMAN-WALDEYER

Issue No. 9

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: Toti O'Brien

Front Cover Title: Night Stand, page 8 - Acrylic/Paper - 20"x16"- 1996

About our Cover Art

Night Stand is an artist book bound in soft fabric, part of a larger installation titled *Somnia*. The book's large pages show woman clothes, some meticulously painted, some lightly sketched. They are the wardrobe of a doll that is not included. I have loved paper dolls since early childhood—their fragility and lightness, the contrast of undressed body and bodiless dress. Clothes and accessories need to be accurately positioned and to perfectly match the silhouette they will cover—unlike the clothes of a tridimensional doll, they create an emptiness so defined, an absence so strong it becomes an eerie, disquieting and magical presence.

— *Toti O'Brien, 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 issue or topics, celebrate womanhood, or shout out in passion.

— *Christine Redman-Waldeyer, Founder*

Contents

POETRY

Jan Ball.....	9
Micki Blenkush.....	10
Donna Burton.....	13
Judith Camann.....	14
Wendy Taylor Carlisle.....	17
Ann Cefola.....	18
Sarah Cooper.....	19
Julie Cyr.....	21
Christopher de Vinck.....	23
Juditha Dowd.....	24
Morrow Dowdle.....	25
Sarah Evans.....	27
Nancy Gerber.....	28
Deborah Gerrish.....	30
Cleo Griffith.....	31
Maryanne Hannan.....	32
Lois Marie Harrod.....	33
Louisa Howerow.....	34
Melody C. Johnson.....	35
Sandra Kacher.....	37
Sandra Kohler.....	38
Elaine Koplrow.....	41
Betsy Littrell.....	43
Jennifer Lothrigel.....	45
Maria Masington.....	46
Illene Millman.....	47
Giavanna Munafo.....	49
Teddy Norris.....	50
Edwin Romond.....	51
Janna Schledorn.....	52
Carla Schwartz.....	54
Caroline N. Simpson.....	55
Tori Grant Welhouse.....	58
Karen Wolf.....	60
Kuo Zhang.....	61

FICTION

Amber Cook.....65
Brandon French.....70
Kristi Gedeon.....75
Ewa Mazierska.....79
Rudy Ravindra.....83
Terry Sanville.....88
Teresa Sweeney.....93

ESSAY

Laura English.....101
Stacey Hohman McClain.....106

BOOK REVIEW

Ashely M. Diaz.....113
John C. Mannone.....115

INTERVIEW

Carol Smallwood.....123

Biographical Notes

P

POETRY

Jan Ball

Equinox Ladies Locker Room

A young bare-breasted woman
blow-dries her long blond hair,
just a towel wrapped around
her waist, not that I am trying
to look (it's not my thing),
only a casual observance
as my eyes flit around the room,
those perky breasts—beautiful
to men and women alike as Natalie
Angier observes in her classic book:
Woman, an Intimate Geography.

My breasts sadly droop,
but being small, don't sag
as much as Cs or Ds I've seen.
Mine did nurse two infants
for a few months in Australia
but it was before breast pumps
so I had to stop *feeding*,
as Australians say, when I went
back to work; still, I never looked
as good as that.

I ask the woman in the lacy
Victoria's Secret bra changing
next to me: "How do they dress
for the sauna here?" As she
pulls a colorful dress over
her head she replies, "Some wear
towels but it's not necessary."
She asks me to zip her dress
behind her neck and I do.

Micki Blenkush

A Woman's Weight

In this mid-life metabolism
every half-donut near the copier at work
matters in a whole new way.
Pants purchased two years ago
threaten now to no longer fit.
Though when I shake them out
and bend and squat, trying
to stretch back in, I can still evoke
the knife-edge lure of hip-bones
verified for months upon waking.
This is one kind of insulation.
The other arrives in creeps and hefts.
Sour cream pancakes, caramel French toast,
every common indulgence.
My mouth becomes a suckerfish
cleaning along the bottom edge
until I grow once more thick as a mattress
and tiresome with inventory
of all that has and may be eaten.
It took forty pounds heavier than this,
back at the age of twenty,
before I could perceive numbers on a scale
and admit to something other
than the shrinking conspiracy of my clothes.
If I push against failure hard enough,
I can form my cells into wanting nothing
but the can't and the won't.
At the age of twenty-two,
thirty pounds lighter than now,
I passed mirrors dismayed to still detect
the outline of my legs
floating the bag of my jeans.
Who might I be
without the pulling in
and pushing away?
The pendulum is slowing.
It has taken decades to rest

inside my skin. Some mornings
I lie still and awake
before billowing my hopes
upon the sail.

Micki Blenkush

Map Not to Scale

When she leaves, she takes:
bike helmet, watch,
and sometimes
a tied-shut backpack.

I could not tell you her routes
only that she returns
to hear me run my words
up and down
every surface of our home.

No, don't push back that door.
Don't bang and jump
or smear your hands
along the hall.

The smart snap
of Rubbermaid container
in the palm of her hand.
Vases she makes from jars
to hold the feathers she gathers
from capacious fields.

I watch her stand in the leaking
cold light of the fridge
without telling her to close the door
the way you'd wait for a deer
to cross a meadow.

Donna Burton

Radiant

When I was four,
I watched my brothers run shirtless
under the wild Texas sun
while I played nearby with my chest covered
by conventions no one could explain.

This and other parts of being female
made me feel something less,
and I boiled at the injustice.

Over time,
as girls turning women do,
I came to embrace
the fullness blooming there.

At twenty-nine and in love with an artist,
I posed while he rendered them in pastel.

Even at fifty, before the knife, my breasts
were firm, shapely, soft rounds of pleasure.

Now they are gone.
At times, strangers search for some sign of them
and for a moment I again feel diminished,

but if people could stand the scars
surely I would run shirtless,
free and equal under a radiant sun.

Judith Camann

35 Years Later I Still Stutter When I Hear Pachelbel's Canon In D Major

for Brooks

I eat breakfast standing
at the porcelain sink. White
toast with butter melts crust to fingers
to the mottled green Formica countertop,
pooling next to a black coffee stain.

I eat breakfast listening.
The phone machine beep beep beeps
while the red-light winks.
The cord spirals a #2 pencil.
A crumpled recall notice lay in the recycle bin.
Errant popcorn kernels sit
behind the flour can is ter
can ister can sister can sitter
can sit her can't sit her can't sit here
can't stay here can't stay can't say her

can't wait behind the flour canister
on the mottled green Formica counter
next to a black coffee stain.

I eat breakfast alone
knowing the ring was safe
in your best man's pocket, the organist
playing a blind repetition.

Judith Camann

My Drishti is a Spinning Top *for Flower*

I am not a yogi except three hours a week.

Flower, the 20-something top bun blonde yogi, balances a subtle energy clearing. Her soft belly, arms, legs & fingers are festooned with butterflies, purple swirls, lotus blossoms, streams of green and blue.

She naps in downward dog.

Except 3 hours a week I create lists reference one-bus-away apps coordinate volunteer schedules with work schedules with my husband's ride schedules. I schedule others on weekend nature walks and arrange carpools so everyone arrives to work on time to school with homework to violin lessons strumming notes that taste like bobbing for sour green apples. I teach the necessities of time & place plans & goals manners & grades.

Flower teaches inversions. Her feet above her heart, a supported shoulder stand with legs straight, toes towards her forehead. Her throat & tongue soft, brings harmony to body and mind. Flower's chaturaṅga & supta virasana, open heart & crow's pose are a perfect balance of holding and letting go. I let go in child's pose.

I am scheduled to leave before shvasana.

Except 3 hours a week I am a force of nature. Not the red rose blooming sweet nectar snacks for hummingbirds along the white picket fence nature; not the pale green inchworm crawling on the blade of forest green grass nature, but rather one that rips through a community, unsettles trees by roots, upheaves landfills to send waifs of rotten fish, spoiled beef, hamster cage shavings through the lower atmosphere to cast thunderous hope on town meetings, family discussions, city ordinances, dry neighborhood swimming pools.

Except 3 hours a week *I'm the one who will get it done*, as written in my high school year book when my daughter asks for home baked whoppie

pies for tomorrow's bake sale, my son needs his sports physical, yesterday, my husband only wants me to stop to linger, compliment him for something, something specific to show the respect a male craves after he's mowed the lawn, explained the political climate, remembered to tell me he thought of me as he drove past the florist on his way to somewhere. He wants me to compliment him after I have a chance to *look into the details of the upcoming men's golf tournament advertised at the club.*

Flower lights a bird shaped beeswax candle with a slight jasmine scent; the flame murmurs a cool heat resonance.

क्रोधात् भवति संमोह

From Anger comes Delusion

संमोहात् स्मृतिविभ्रम

From Delusion loss of Memory

स्मृतिभ्रंशात् बुद्धिनाशो

From loss of Memory the destruction
of Discrimination

बुद्धिनाशात् प्रणश्यति

From the destruction of
Discrimination, one Perishes

like fruit I whisper back, perishes like fruit.

But I'm a yogi. In tadasana I root four corners of each foot to earth. I elongate my spine, tuck my chin ever so slightly and turn my palms forward while I pull my shoulders down my back. In that balance of push & pull I realize I have confused perish with ripen. I whisper from my mountain *ripens like fruit.*

Flower flows from mountain to eagle turns airplane to tree. A small well in the bird flickers the flame.

Wendy Taylor Carlisle

I Run into My English Instructor

It was the Sixties. I knew him slightly,
knew about him.

He was older and had lost his son.
I was twenty-one.

I held my babies close.
I preened. He did a handstand.

The beach cartwheeled.
The moment passed. It wasn't much

but I remember—
the waves, the wind, beach sand,

a ragged pile of seaweed
dragged up by the lifeguard's Jeep.

Ann Cefola

Prayer to Her Girlfriends

Eyes open to nothing, her hand still clasps mine.

I ask them *to come get her*.

Gal pals Peg, Joanne, and of course, Betty, who introduced her to *the right people*.

Neighbors Dora, Nora, Jamie, Mimi; even Sybil whose gray colonial with the white picket fence my mother bought without a real estate agent.

Think hard. Junior Leaguers. Beautiful Pamela. Faithful Janet, who took my mother to hospital where I was born.

Bridge group: PJ and Sis. Woman's Club: Karen, Earlene, and Corrine. Heiress Barbara, who angered me once wishing her elderly maid *would fade back down south*.

Their cocktail parties and luncheons. Housework and child weary, desperate by day's end, as Betty told me, *to put on some lipstick and talk to anyone*.

Riding in a car with some, when I asked how they could all talk at once and hear each other, they howled. They used that a lot. *We just howled*, they would say. No support groups, just *Borrow a cup of sugar? Pick up my kids from school?* And *We're having bridge—why don't you come?*

Two days earlier my mother said, *Don't tell anyone I'm in the hospital*. But these girlfriends already see something gold pulsing.

There are so many, I can't hear what they're saying. I pray it's *C'mon, darling, get in*.

Sarah Cooper

Pantoum for Departing

If you're still living, consider:
who will autograph your tombstone?
What human will wait 'til you're lowered
and chisel you a love letter in granite?

Who will autograph your tombstone
she asked me lying in her death bed.
Then, chiseled letters of love with granite teeth
and bit her lips, chewed cheeks.

She asked me, lying in her death bed
if I *had a poem that rhymed*
and bit her lips, chewed tattered cheeks.
She said she needed *something to focus on*.

If you had a poem that rhymed
I'd remain respectfully fascinated,
she said. We needed something to focus on.
Needed syncopated sounds.

I'd remain respectfully fascinated
on the rhythm and repetition
of our need for syncopated sounds.
She knows she can't, do this alone.

On rhythm and repetition
what human will wait 'til you're lowered?
She knows she can't do this, alone.
If you're still living, consider.

Sarah Cooper

Performing Basic Instinct

Our eyes peer across
 library books shelved
 and staggered with encyclopedia volumes.

Then knuckle brushes
 in lunch lines, fingers collide
 to pluck forks, knives, napkins.

And knee bumps under desks
 not to signal the other
 to read a passage aloud.

Years before I'd bleed:
 blotch white underwear in biology lab,
 I would feel your hand muffle my gasps.

Between sleeping bag zippers
 you grip my wrists, hover
 and press pubic bone to mine.

I never came. Did you?
 We were doing preparatory work,
 right? Practicing, yes?

We knew better
 than to seek refuge
 in sheets warm from daylight.

We knew better
 than to touch gently the body
 that resembled our own.

Julie Cyr

As Above, So Below

If I had a daughter, her name
would be Sequoia, with roots
that drive into the earth.
She'd sip up ground water, ancient elixir
that holds the secrets of the Mother.
Feet embedded in soil like ancient trees,
my girl wouldn't shy from weather.
She'd stare down hurricanes.
Her arms would reach up
to heaven, each needle on her branch
an enlightened sliver. The wind would listen
as she whispered on the breeze,
for she would be wiser than her years.
Sages from India would ask her advice.
I could claim her as my own, my girl,
a creation with the fortitude of trees.

Julie Cyr

Gram's Garden

Grammy taught me to deadhead
petunias by pulling off the expired
brown flower to make way
for a fresh bud to bloom.
The term *deadhead* seemed
wrong for a path to rebirth.

Every spring Gram planted those leggy girls
vying for attention. She edged
the garden with them, each flower
trying to have the most colorful face
applying baby oil in the 70's
with a hand raised saying,
look at me, look at me.

Five years ago I was deadheaded.
I shed my wilted, sun-damaged skin
to begin again. I would have passed
on the attention, far from being a girl,
and besides, I burn easily.
Now I kneel on the edge of my flower
garden and plant petunias for Gram
and my girls always turn their faces
up for her to see.

Christopher de Vinck

Question About Women

"Why are women a fraction more than us?"
Robert Lowell

The moisture on the tiles after a shower,
The clasp of a necklace,
The shade of red in a kimono,
The salmon in Chu-Fu River,
Edna St. Vincent Millay,
Honey on the tongue,
The sound of a bronze bell at dusk,
Cinnamon,
The space inside a purple iris,
Under the shadow of the thorn-tree,
The aroma of fresh wood,
The tip of the calligrapher's brush,
The paper cups at the fountain,
The luminescence of a chandelier.

Juditha Dowd

#SheFiguresItOut (60)

It was the waxy white gardenia
It was her mother's sealskin coat
 the train station
 the Buick's big back seat

It was the stairs
 It was the stars

 the undershirt
 the thumb

The scent of the gardenia
 her sealskin coat

Morrow Dowdle

The Name

“Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children.”

– William Makepeace Thackeray

She makes the pilgrimage
from her bedroom,
through the long kitchen,
to the study.

She stands before the door,
paused by the shaft
of tepid light
splitting the threshold.

Her small feet are bare,
and she wears a shirt
but no pants, half-wrapped
in a baby blanket,

a mendicant, meager
despite plentiful feeding.
She tries to catch sight of me
before I detect her presence.

I let her be, each of us
pretending that we are invisible
to the other for that instant.
Then, she speaks my name.

If I am at the desk
with my notebook, the words
become worthless marks.

If I am meditating on my mat,
my focus clarifies at last
with the bell of her voice,

which makes *Mama*
synonymous with *God*,
a mantle I get to share
for an everlasting moment.

Sarah Evans

All the words

Afterwards, they sit in fallen dark,
listening to the clanking, creaking night,
wishing thoughts might settle. *What do you feel?*
They flounder, failed by words,
longing to rewind to a familiar world.

*I've something to tell you, their son said.
I need you to try and understand.
D'you think I'd do this if I didn't have to?*
She remembers back, the first question
everyone asks about your newborn,

boy or girl? Congratulations cards
come coded pink or blue. Naming, playthings,
rocket and rosebud motifs: sex is there
right from the beginning.
Has he properly thought it through?

Can he really know?
Crossdresser, drag-queen, transgender,
non-binary, two-spirit, gender-queer.
All the words to unstitch.
I didn't just wake up and decide.

*I've known this since forever.
I'm starting to transition.*
Tomorrow their child, their former son,
will emerge with sleep-dazed, mascara eyes,
lipstick yawning above *Get Over It* shirt,

ponytail hair shaken loose,
repitched voice and hip-sway stride.
Son, man, male. He, him, his, himself.
All the words they have to unlearn.
We always wanted a daughter, she says.

Nancy Gerber

The Lost Children

Speaking of the six million --
the number nullifying,
a symbol engraved in our memories
like the names chiseled
on our parents' gravestones.

That number, 6,000,000 --
a procession of zeroes trailing
off into nothingness,
obliterating faces
names
favorite colors,
songs. Swallowed,
the foggy smoke
of annihilation.

Rosa, Werner, Meyer, Gerda
Helga, Jozef, Judith, Mendel
Eva, Bruno, Natan, Rosa
Petranker, Kusmirek, Szuster
Klein, Matasovski, Frank
Rapaport, Weiss, Katzenstein

gone

gone

gone

gone

And what of the children?
The ones who died
in their mothers' arms?
And the ones never born?
Never to know the crunch of earth
beneath their feet

or the taste of apples.
All those children
link arms in the blue blue sky
I hear their voices, thin
as reeds on the wind
In dem lidl mayn kind,
Lign fil nevues
Az du vest amol
zayn tsezeyt oyf der velt.

*Translation: “In that song, my child, / lie many wonders, / when you
will at some time /be scattered throughout the world,” from *Rozhinkes
mit Mandlen*, a popular Yiddish lullaby.

Deborah Gerrish

Solar Eclipse

Tommy Friedlander stalked me on the playground
every day at lunchtime at John Greenleaf Whittier
School when the sun with its corona gold lit up

the sky, he'd begin his cosmic dance. Draconian
looking boy chasing this starry-eyed sixth grade
classmate. Like a solar eclipse, his black cloak

flying with its crystal-shell button hooked about
his thin neck, he'd dart the field like a bat in daytime.
The mahogany cane, with his grandfather's initials,

TJF, III— like electric clicking the black-top
outside the entrance to the upper grade corridor.
His chestnut shiny hair, cowlick, moon face,

his cellophane bag of silver-wrapped candies
—chocolate kisses like diamonds
he'd spill at my feet, all over my Keds.

Cleo Griffith

Old and Older

Out by the old orchard and older barn
I find the discards, and count the decades
of your life.

This rubber ducky reminds me of the baths
I used to give you in the sink,
tho' this duck, dressed as a San Jose Shark,
is from a bit later when I feared
you would end up toothless by twenty.

The cracked and dry boxing glove...only one...
when I feared you would also end up brain-damaged
from too many knockout punches.

The boogie board and samurai sword seem
an awkward pair yet graced your room simultaneously,
then the lava lamp sent graceful swirls of color
across the poster-covered walls and the statue of Ganesh
given to you by a melodramatic girl-friend.

That old round waffle iron is all that remains of the union,
emotions as painful as burns. You rarely left
the area after that, became an old bachelor,
that phase captured here...your bowling ball from
your effort to socialize more, company team,
then dismay at your inability to conquer the game.
So now you are an old man who has
tossed his life into the trash,
and you are older than I, who raised you.

Maryanne Hannan

Chasing Mystery

I'm afraid I'll run out of books to read,
said my middle school self, demanding my mother
soothe yet another *ex-nihilo* problem.

Don't worry. Go to the library
and look at all the books.
But they didn't seem that many to me,

not at the rate of two books a week
for the rest of my life— 50 more years.
Nancy Drew, third time around.

Cherry Ames, I didn't want to be a nurse.
Jo's Boys' trifling, next to *Little Women*.
Beth can only die once.

But then I stumbled on Anna at the railway station,
Emma at the window,
Catherine on the moors,
Sethe in the woodshed.

How many decades after that I couldn't say
(too late to let my mother know),
I found Bounty, drafting in the air.

Lois Marie Harrod

Winter Blizzard

We prepared:
beans and bacon
shovels and salt
the last loaf of bread
from the supermarket shelf.
We were ready as scouts.
prepared as wise virgins
for the arrival
of the bridegroom
in his white silk tuxedo,
three feet of snow,
the lover descending
in his white chariot.
But like love, like resurrection,
we settle
for a few inches of ash.

Louisa Howerow

Keeping Watch

Hospice, KL, 2018

Sometimes a woman
will wait sees her husband
isn't ready to give in
Sometimes a woman
still wants to have him turn to her

and besides if she says it's time to let go
who's to say he'll believe
it isn't because he's a wound
she wants closed
a rotten apple to discard

in this room trying so hard
to be more than a dying room
with its silk flowers, pastoral prints
in this room where they're waiting
as if they're not alone in the universe

Melody C. Johnson

Even Though You Didn't Ask

I don't want to tell this story
But this story wants to tell me

You know those things
You want to forget?
They keep speaking
Long after the event

Examine the palm lines
Of the hand that slapped the ringing in your ears
Or the cadence of the voice
And its timber
As it intones your utter worthlessness
Because in the sound of that voice is father
Though in the words of the voice is pain
Because this story can't
not be spoken.
To tell it. That is how you remain sane
And though the telling always hurts
These words are how you heal
One memory day by day

Melody C. Johnson

Rocks, Ground, Memory

It was the rocks cutting teeth
In the park river

They have been there since before I was born
They will be there long after I am gone

The park trails remember
The feet of my father
My feet smaller than my palms are now

Stones that did not comminute to sand
As he pinched the back of my neck sharply
Critiqued my geeky stride
It's a damn shame. Walk right.

He contorts his body to mock my tiny stride
Look at this, you like this? You like how this look?
Stop all that crying.

The park is a favorite with pedestrians
Dog walkers, running enthusiasts

And the water calls me
But the earth holds memory

And it is enough for the ground to remember.
I will not return.

Sandra Kacher

Never Not Broken

(Akhilandesvara is a Hindu deity who accompanies us in the broken times. She attends us in times of grief and dissolution, and we learn that brokenness is both unavoidable and shines a light on wholeness. Things are always falling apart and something new is knitted from the pieces.)

This lily at high summer noon
Tiger orange, fire orange, sunset orange
Perfect confluence of year and day and light
Blazes
Against the fading
Background of August and augurs
The going away times.

Attuned from birth to brokenness
I see shards and splinters everywhere

My dark insights unwelcome at public events
Advised to shut up and dance
I do my best to sway silently like an August lily.

But Akhilandesvara
The goddess Never Not Broken is
My saint. She tells me not
To fight the falling to pieces of everything
Now or eventually
Though she recommends discretion
At baptisms and weddings
Even at funerals if the message is
Final reunion and not heartbroken farewell.

Don't get me wrong
I love blazing
But I know ashes, too.

Sandra Kohler

Amulet

Tomorrow is my granddaughter's first day of kindergarten. I want to give her some kind of token, amulet to take with her.

In my purse this morning I find the pigeon feathers she gave me as we're leaving Castle Island yesterday to keep safe, the crumpled

black-eyed Susans she picked; a flower-embroidered handkerchief that belonged to her great-grandmother, also a Katie.

The handkerchief will be her amulet. Talking about tomorrow, I tell her that she'll have a wonderful time and she asks

"How do you know?" A valid question. I say because I've seen many children go to kindergarten for the first time; she's

satisfied. I remember her father's first day of kindergarten, walking home from Merion School after leaving him in

his classroom. An old man, tall, bent, white-haired, whom I've never seen before walks towards me, stops and

asks if I'm all right. I tell him where I've been, what I was doing. He remembers taking his son to the first day of school

fifty years ago, he says; that it was joy, grief. I walk home tasting both, bathed in layers of recursion, time's fee, its gift.

Sandra Kohler

What Katie, Not Yet Two, Teaches Me

Order

She puts us in our places: Grammy, Granpa; tells us which chairs to sit in in the living room – the velvet rocker, the carved oak swivel chair – moves one of us to the couch when she decides she wants to sit in a chair. It's she who puts the fragile knick-knacks from the coffee table away on a high shelf, who fastens the child-proofing locks on the kitchen cabinet. In the kitchen, at her toddler-size table, she orders Grammy to sit on one of the tiny chairs. Out in the backyard, she rules that Granpa must throw the big round blue ball to Grammy, Grammy to Katie, Katie to Granpa, the pattern unchanging. Empress of order, she rules the world by whim, as we each do briefly.

Matter

Katie moves
the Obama button
from my husband's
nightstand
to mine, puts it
next to mine,
a pair now,
together.
Do I move it
back or not?
Do I want
to teach her
the world
will yield to her
interventions
or that it
will resist
them?

Katie and the Breast

Katie's forgotten how to nurse. Weaned six months ago, she wants the breast her infant brother sucks, but can't latch on anymore. When her mother expresses some milk, offers it, she won't drink it, "milk's for Sam," she wants "num nums," breasts. She steals up on Sam's cradle, swipes pacifiers, sucks them, though, an infant, she refused them. When she hears Sam cry as he's going to sleep, she pulls her baby doll to her chest, her hand cradling Baby's bottom the way her mother's cradles Sam's, swaying, pops a pacifier into Baby's mouth, delighted with herself. Wouldn't we all be both sucking infant, nursing mother?

The Words

Her father tells me
that looking for a certain
book, Katie keeps
saying, over and over,
"I need the words."
When she finds it,
"These are the words."
In my dream last night,
I am asking a sage woman
what I need to learn
about how to live.
"To be awake"
she says. In this
mysterious world
of grandparenting,
are these
the words?

Elaine Koplou

The Bra on the Mountain

At the top of the hill
on the grassy side of the road
lies a bra—
once passion pink and lacy,
now torn and rain-soaked,
almost hidden among tall green stalks.

It could have been young lovers
coming home from a date,
parked on the side of the road,
a moonless night on County Rt 10.
In a moment of passion,
secure in the deepening darkness,
she gives in—or *he* gives in.
They'll debate this for years to come
in the heat of many summers
in the tangle of sweaty sheets,
trying to replicate the first time.

It's only a mile to her house but they stop.
They have to, heedless of passing neighbors,
heedless of it all.
One thing leads to another
and out the window goes the bra.

Tomorrow she'll tell her mom
she misplaced it at the slumber party
at Patty's house last weekend—
maybe she can track it down,
find out who took it,
but in the meantime can she buy another?
And she'll drift off, remembering,
dreaming, feeling his hands on her once again.

Or perhaps a married couple
on their way home from the movies,
heading back to the bills and the babysitter,

talking about performances and plot.
Yawning, they stop for a moment
at the crest of the road to admire the sunset,
colors filling the sky,
barely illuminating the ridges in the distance,
streaks of gold and purple,
so late in the evening this time of year.
They hold hands, remembering the first time.
On this quiet, country road
windows open, embraced by the scent of summer,
they don't even put on their flashers
just pull over, turn off the engine, and kiss.

It's almost dark, so she lifts her sweater
and he does the rest;
he aims for the glove compartment,
but misses and the bra goes out the passenger side
onto the grass.

For the first time she is thinking more about him
than her migraines, and for the first time
he is looking more at her than the sunset.

As they continue to fumble on the bench seat
of the parked pick-up,
they look into each other's eyes
with eager interest for the first time
in a long time.

Betsy Littrell

Don't Send Me Flowers

He surprised me with 17
red roses, my first flowers,
and all I could think about
was the cider beer
on his breath. I kissed him,
drunk on his spit, and I hung
the thorny stems
upside down on the wall,
draped over thumb tacks,
scarlet with crinkled brown edges
forever. Weighing myself on his mother's
bathroom scale, I was pleased with
the 95 the needle settled on. I
starved myself for him.
The next time, I was
20, the white roses matching
the uniform he wore the day
he was commissioned
in the Navy, chest bare
of medals, just a black name tag
and a golden anchor
on his hat. The blossoms reeked
of purity and innocence, though
we would face many wars
in the homes we moved in
and out of. A decade later, pregnant
with sadness and baby number
three, my dad died. The lilies, cocky
with their star-shaped petals and
yellow-tinged centers wildly exposed,
nauseated me, and all I could think about
was how I went from sitting on Daddy's lap
in his beat up beige La-Z-Boy to
hoping he wouldn't pick up
the phone when I called. If I close my eyes,
I can still smell the funeral home
and picture the plaque on his grave

that I never visit.

Jennifer Lothrigel

Hymn to Inari Ōkami – The Fertile Rice Creatrix

You whisper the temptation
into each blade of grass
to split open her body,
and reveal her flowers to the wind.

You orchestrate self-contained oneness
in moist green fields,
producing tiny gratifying seeds.

Your gift of rice, born of pleasure,
born of mud,
sticky on tongue
a cycle of life unto herself.

Maria Masington

Mouth Like a Sailor

The type of girl who would steal your wallet,
then help you look for it. Her own parents warned him,
she was not the marrying kind.

Sentenced to a lifetime of apologizing for her when she
drank too much, talked too loud – the over-processed hair,
too short skirts, every word a curse, or a lie.

But time proved him right. His love softened her edges,
taught her to listen. She took vows, kept them,
rose to every occasion,

feathered their nest with classic books and throw pillows,
firewood, cotton-scented candles, and quick-mix cornbread.
Wife, mother, confidant, champion, lover, coach

through decades of in-laws, baby showers, office parties,
late night conversations, surgeries, covered dishes, unemployment,
childbirth, home improvements, midlife crisis, cancer scares.

Men wanted what he had. They both knew that-
but sometimes she caught him staring at her,
when he thought she was asleep.

A look of sadness she understood, because he missed the
filthy mouth and dirty mind, the girl, never ladylike,
always late, who never apologized,

who would tell him to shove his career, his family,
their pain-in-the-ass kids. Screw the civic association,
grandparent day, retirement parties, living wills,

get right in his face, shove her finger into the core
of his chest, and say, “Listen you son of a bitch!
Don’t you think I miss her too?”

Ilene Millman

Every Woman *Alive* Wants Chanel # 5

Coco said it should smell
not like a bouquet
but like a “composition”—
like the soft music
that underlies the playing of a love scene—
not like a rose, but a woman.
This part’s tricky.
What makes for a womanly
eau de toilette—
yeasty, musky, metallic,
fish?

Sitting in the dentist’s office
I’m thumbing pages in Kodachrome magazines—
anatomically impossible women
whisper, sometime flash: Hey you. Lady.
Look. He doesn’t want
your wrinkles, scars
imperfections
in your skin.
He doesn’t want your scent in heat—
skin outloud—
two bodies
in a simple tangle of flesh
conversing with flesh—

What is my man’s Desire then?
PillowPout plumped lips
Bronze Vibe smoky eyes
LegLust Perfecting Shine.
My Pink Grapefruit Body Butter-ed body
splayed
on sheets sprayed with
Secret Aphrodisiac and Febreezed
to a new car-digan smell—
an ample-breasted chassis
bottomed out with PooPouri

Stink-Free Foot Spray
and freshened up before
hand
with Sweet-Spot
On the Go Wipes—
Chanel behind my knees
where I generate heat?
A disheveled rose
in a small square of sunlight?

**All products named are currently advertised and sold for women.*

**Guanine is the name listed on lipstick ingredient labels for the crystalline substance made from fish scales.*

Giavanna Munafò

The Train Passed Prostitutes Working Roadside in their Slippers

Tracks lead through the olive grove
where worn gypsies leave pillows,
even in the storm. They speak every
language, at least the words for *teeth*,
for *night*, for *never*. You and I, we ignore
the doorways between the trees, finger
one another's knees. Their weary slippers
induce our tenderness, remind us of soap,
our coats and handy backpacks, pencils,
the clock back home, the television
we never watch -- how what they do not
have is in our bones. I thumbtack photos
shot through the train window to my windowsill,
stack jars of fat capers we smuggled back.

Teddy Norris

My Mother Visits Another Country

Grown up, twice married before I left familiar soil
I fell hard for the charms of different lands. Discovery
was delicious, time and money my only constraints.
Travel still tempts me, though I'm more cautious now –
the comforts of the known have their own Siren call.

My mother never ventured far from where she was born,
never traveled by train or boat or plane. But after more than
ninety years, she's taken up traveling. As if to make up for
lost time, now she's scarcely ever at home.

Her trips take little time – no tiresome waits in airports,
no traffic jams – she's there before you know she's gone.
Even my most exotic trips cannot compare to hers: friends
she visits have been gone for years. Not bound by calendars
or clocks, these people and their places remain strangely

unchanged. My mother never owned a bike, and yet she claims
today she covered sixty miles on her Harley, insists my dad
was along for the ride. Mom clearly enjoys her adventures,
though I am often at a loss to follow her itinerary. Tomorrow
she'll be off again, bright-eyed and brave, visiting places
I have yet to see.

Edwin Romond

Love Poem

She had the face of youth,
eyes as brown as earth
in April when life leaps
with hope and promise.
I thought about the beautiful
“always-ness” of good marriages
as I watched her young husband
lean over and kiss her before
wheeling his paralyzed wife
up the ramp into the van
equipped with what she needed
that day and every day
after the drunk driver
ran the light, crushed her car,
and made Fate ask her husband,
“Do you still take this woman
as your lawfully wedded wife
in good times and in bad,
to love and to cherish
in sickness and in health
till death do you part?” and
he looked at his spouse,
motionless as a frozen rose,
and whispered, “I do and I will.”

Janna Schledorn

Hagar the Handmaid Wants a Do-Over

Should've told Sarah, "No,
I will not lie down in the tent of your husband."

Should've never entered his desert.

Because there goes Ishmael
on a plane to New York City, no job, no girl,

his old Chevy on the curb, fender busted,
trunk full of empty whiskey bottles, broken
dreams. And here I am bent over the floor

of his wrecked car, filthy life sifting through
handfuls of change, generations of sin.

Oh, should've, should've, should've!

Because where is the beautiful boy,
the sweet brow, the red mouth, his swagger laugh?

Where is the god who sees and brings cool water
in the wilderness of Shur?

Janna Schledorn

What Really Happens When You Leave Your Baby with Me in the Church Nursery

We're sitting in this rocking chair—
well, a regular school chair, and I'm pretend-rocking
your screaming 20-pound baby, no relation to me.

Her dark, curly hair taped to her forehead
with that sticky sweat babies get from crying,
stranger anxiety glopping out her nose.

Her dangling limbs tell she is tired.
Calm, a surprise, I tempt her trust
with a soft, stuffed Minnie Mouse,

but she knows a phony. Hum a mother's
only desperate truth *Jesus loves me this I know*.
Still she whimpers, and by that time

I am trying not to cry because I want my mother, too—

I want her to be the mother she never was.
I want to be the mother I never could be.
Both of us worn-out runaways,

not knowing anything but stories.
Oh, just to read them again, touch our babies
one more time, hear them breathe, whisper.

So, I press this baby to my chest and this baby,
your baby, resurrects a prayer for all the grace
and pain to come. For her, for you and finally,

such sweet rest.

Carla Schwartz

The Marches

The most standout photo is of you
holding up the cardboard — *Fermez la Bush*,
your winter coat, bulked on your shoulders,
your hair, died something like half-lead, half-copper
penny. The crowd surrounds you, like more jacket.
You, my mother, are the center, you and your poster.

So many marches since '68, and now, 50 years.
But there would be more wars, more marches, tears, disappointment —
you would have plenty to protest. You might tweet
your heart out, hashtags would replace your beloved soaps,
and you would organize a busload to Washington.

These days, we use that jacket out on the boat, to keep warm on a cold
night.

You should feel good, safe, having finally answered your own question,
What country should we move to now?

Caroline N. Simpson

Luminal

She crossed yards
to introduce herself.
I was on break
from catching butterflies,
about to call her stepbrother
for another game
of Sonic the Hedgehog.

Kori was the same age as me,
a neighbor's stepsister
visiting for the summer
from exotic Tucson.

She was beautiful— green eyes
and tan skin of the southwest.
She wore Pump Air Jordans,
asked if I had a boyfriend,
told me about the two
she was choosing between.

She giggled while we wrote
with fireflies on sidewalks.
I showed her the tent
in my basement
where I trained my budgie
to say "Pretty Bird,"
even let her watch me
gather a specimen
for my entomology kit.

Between sweaty games
of Capture the Flag
with neighborhood boys,
we took turns reading aloud
her dog-eared pages
of Judy Blume's *Forever*.
The air-conditioned room

couldn't cool me down
from what I learned:

When Katherine lost
her virginity to Michael,
Judy Blume taught me
what it felt like to have sex
with someone you loved:
*when you give yourself
both mentally and physically...
well, you're completely vulnerable.*

The summer ended.
Kori returned home.
We wrote letters
where I glimpsed
the world that left
with her copy of *Forever*.

That fall, I dated Jeff.
As our exchanges
by lockers lengthened
and the school dance neared,
I broke up with him—
Forever taught me
that *once you're there,
you can't go back.*

His best friend called
to change my mind—
*He wants to hold your hand
at the dance,
and he likes the way
your butt looks
in the jeans you wore today—*
I knew that just talking
couldn't go on forever.

So when a letter from Tucson
arrived in the Autumn air—
and Kori reminisced

about the bright orange
of caterpillar tongues
and collecting worms
in late afternoon downpours—
I grabbed my net,
to possess— even briefly—
the one or two butterflies
still holding on.

Tori Grant Welhouse

Where There's Smoke

"Girls, get up," says father.

The urgent way he heads down the hall with his rooster comb of dark hair, swish of cotton pajama bottoms. My sisters and I sleep-stumble after him, wondering what in the night awoke him, drawing us out of our brooding beds.

"Do you smell smoke? Help me find the smoke."

Mother's nest on the couch in the quiet living room is not long vacated. Cotton blanket left behind in a swung dash for words already said. Mother has trouble sleeping. Depression is the sinking part she can't get out of.

Father is on all fours sniffing the carpet, uncomfortable chairs. We mimic him like a litter of sightless pups. He yanks off the couch cushions. We push down the muslin covering the serpentine springs. Inside the stuffing a small ember smolders.

We help him carry the couch out the front door in a bulky push-pull procession. He pours pitchers of faucet water into the couch, hoping to snuff out the spark. We hold our noses at the sharp odor of wet smoke and expensive tapestry. Our street is empty with only a few porch lights left on. Sprinklers turn on and off.

Father watches water seep out the bottom, running like a stream into the cracks of the front walk. He catches his breath, rooster comb teetering to one side.

"That should do it." He ushers us back to bed.

We wake in the early dawn to an inferno in our front yard, plumes of fire and smoke renting the suburban sky.

Mother, minimal in her sleeveless nightgown, watches her designer couch burn, leaning against father, who waits for the fire truck.

Our neighbors glance over, understanding that love can exist in the same house as disaster.

Karen Wolf

Her trowel

loosened garden soil no
longer brings cleansing
breaths of air. Without her
footsteps crushing the grass, the river
path disappears covering
her dedication to flowing change. The sun
unable to find her shadow wrapped
in its warmth, glides over green
or snow ground. Air
particles and currents
cease to dance. Stars
shine without her
observations, as the empty bird
feeder sways in the midnight

breeze. Mourners fill the country
church with wild chicory,
songs, while her beloved
cats languish in the shelter,
refusing to eat.

Kuo Zhang

Intimacy

My husband doesn't believe
his parents have ever had sex,
because they're always like
revolutionary comrades
in Chairman Mao's times.

His mother always calls his father
his family name + given name.
I think that's too formal
and weird
even in China.

When they visit our home,
we must be cautious:
No touch, No hug, No kiss, No flirting——
all disrespectful and disgusting!

We stop calling each other
husband and *wife*,
only given names are acceptable.
Or sometimes I call him *Daddy*
(of our son), and he calls me *Mommy*.

When my two-year-old boy was
clinging to my chest,
gently pressing his cherry lips
onto my right cheek,
That's ugly. Grandma said.

My boy shrank, hesitated,
finally climbed down, ran
to his swarms of toy cars.

Kuo Zhang

Upon Returning to the U.S. to Pursue a Doctoral Degree as Trump Got Elected President

The second year after my return to Georgia, I became a mother, a first-time international student mother.

My son was born on Trump's inauguration day.
He also had an immigrant mother.

On Skype, Mom shouts "Our Little Trump! He'll be president someday!"
"Or he may be banned," I say, "birthed to an immigrant mother."

We give him an American name, Edgar for Edgar Allan Poe. "How to say?" "爱打嗝ai da ge (love hiccup)!" I explained to his grandmother.

徽言 Huiyan, as his Chinese middle name,
beautiful words from Confucius, chosen by his mother.

Edgar Huiyan Xue (E.H.X.), always a middle initial included. It's not okay to be "EX," although a son's an ex-lover, in the past life, to his mother.

F

FICTION

Mint

“Turn left on Jenkins and it's the third house on the left. Blue shutters. The front door is open. I'll be here waiting.”

Dani returned the phone to her pocket and looked down at the table beside her. A glass bowl that had once been perched upon it lay overturned in the floor. Peppermints formed a candy-striped swirl on the carpet, interspersed with a few empty wrappers thrown in from laziness. The scene was a leftover from the day the paramedics found her mother's body lying in a stiff heap beside it, her fingers gnarled from arthritis and the early stages of rigor mortis. She had been cold at least nine hours before the emergency call came in.

A sigh came up as the enormity of the situation washed over her. In some ways, the task had been forced into her hands. Of her four siblings, she was the only one willing enough to step in and see it through, or at least the only one too nice to say no. The others had swept the place earlier that day, taking for themselves whatever they thought worthy enough to spare from the donation bins. When they were done, they shoved the keys into her hand, wished her luck and tore out of the driveway like thieves from the scene of a robbery. She didn't blame them. Spending any more time than necessary in the house was punishment. The energy in the place was like a vice, squeezing the air from her lungs. It had been the same when her mother was alive and, somehow, removing her stifling presence had changed nothing. Dani took a few steps forward, heading for the hallway.

To her right, a crack skittered down the length of the wall, running from the ceiling to the floor as thin as a fallen hair. Mildew grew in the corner. It grew on the furniture too, turning golden oak to a mossy green. On top of it, a thick film of dust formed a blanket that warmed every inch of exposed surface. She knew her mother had all but given up in her final months, but to see it with her own eyes made it more real than she could have prepared herself for. Once, the woman had prided herself on her housekeeping - dishes in the cabinet, spotless all around.

Appearances were important, after all, and necessary for her existence. Somewhere along the way, a change had happened. Keeping up the charade had grown too hard for her to manage. The home had died right along beside her, suffering slow and steady in its own state of disrepair.

Inching closer to the back of the house, Dani heard the hallway boards squeak beneath her feet. As a teenager, she had used the noise as a warning beacon. It meant her mother was stalking just outside her door, her ear pressed against it, waiting to hear something that might prove useful against her daughter in the future. Her old room was still there, though gutted of every personal belonging she had ever known, most of the items sold or donated before she could reclaim them. In the present, the room was filled to the brim with her mother's things, littered with items that hadn't been useful in decades. It made sense. The woman's nature had always been that of a collector – things, people, information – whoever or whatever could serve her had always found a square pegged place in her life. Until they stopped serving, of course.

“You're one of the lucky ones,” her brother had whispered in her ear at the funeral. “You made it out intact. I have the number of a good therapist if you need it, though.”

He was right. Others hadn't been so fortunate. They were left clinging to her, aware of their unfortunate position, but unable to cut the cord that left them tethered to her existence. Dani had always been a little stronger, a little more resilient. The wall blocking her mother's toxicity had been built during childhood and the bricks saved her from the soul sucking side effect of the woman's so-called mothering. Maybe God had given her the resources to overcome. Maybe she had just been made different from the rest. If the years had taught her anything, it was that luck had nothing to do with her survival.

Dani leaned forward and glanced further into the room. A pair of brown loafers sat on top of a cluttered dresser. She reached across a stack of yellowed magazines and ran her fingers across the leather. They sat waiting, the toes creased and worn from years of walks back and forth to the mailbox and to whatever destination her mother had directed. Her father's feet hadn't been in them in over five years. Still, they were kept where they had been left on their last use, as if he might walk back through the door and slip them on one more time, ready and willing to do her bidding.

The old man had been one of the less fortunate, her last line of refuge and the final proponent of her sanity. He had remained the one constant in the stream of traitors that had filtered themselves from her life as they were burned one by one at the touch of her narcissistic flame. Still, his years of devotion had been met without appreciation and in the end he failed her, just like the rest. Death for her father had come as a sweet, sudden release. He had never been the type of man to walk away in life. The reaper did that job for him.

Dani didn't blame him, not really. Close contact with her mother had a way of making a person question their own sanity and forty years of it could, without question, leave a person confused by even their own thoughts. He was a victim, but so was everyone else. The difference was in the willingness to admit it. Those who saw beneath the mask, the ones who threatened to expose her, they were the ones crucified the most. Maybe, deep down, he had just been afraid.

A shiver ran down her spine. The gray darkness wrapped around her like a cloak, blocking out what little light the curtain covered windows allowed inside. It had been a fitting tomb for a woman that had been dead inside far longer than her body had been cold. Sometimes, Dani thought she deserved it. Other times, the guilt settled in. Did she go too long between visits? Could she have suffered through the dreadful conversations and called her more often? Deep down, the answer was no. Too much would never have been enough. She was undeserving of her, the same as everyone else who didn't live up to expectations. Disrespectful, her mother always complained. Simply disrespectful.

The calendar on the wall hung crooked, still turned to October. It was four months behind. She counted back in her head, adding up the time since her last visit.

“Eight,” she muttered out loud. “It went by quick.”

It had been eight months since the last time she stepped through the front door. Two months since her last phone call. Four days since they tossed the dirt aside and placed her mother six feet below ground and at least two days since the flowers on her grave had begun to wilt. It was a relief to know it was over. All of it. The service had been quick, modest and to the point. Something more extravagant would have been her mother's preference, but with only twelve people in attendance, anything extra seemed like a waste. The flowers on the casket lid had been the one splurge she saw fit to allow. They had both been returned to the earth to rot.

Dani stepped back out into the hallway, taking a few more squeaking steps. A few pictures still covered the walls, displaying well-dressed children and decorated holidays. At one time, the grandchildren had been scattered here and there, one or two displayed in more prominent positions than others – just as they were in life. Some, it seemed, were more worthy of her attention than others. Others, she couldn't even call by name. Those images had been picked over by Dani's siblings. What was left were the ones with her own face in them, or random snapshots that hadn't been worth saving. They had always

been a hanging facade, there to provide the illusion of a perfect family. Appearances, after all – they had to be maintained.

Her mother hadn't been all bad, of course. Rays of clarity had shown through in the past, brightening the overcast of the narcissistic cloud. Some days, when she managed enough warmth to seem caring, Dani loved her, feeling nothing but pity for the bed she had forced herself to lie in. Other days, she thought of her as more monster than mother. She never told her that, though. The pleasure of stinging others with hurtful words was lost on her. She didn't share the same bone for inflicting pain, a small miracle considering her upbringing. As a child, she had been schooled that monsters came in all shapes and forms. Some were picture book copies with gnashing teeth and blood-soaked fingers. Others came wrapped in Christmas sweaters, petal pink nail polish and department store perfume. If life had taught her anything, those were the ones you had to watch out for. At least the other brand made their motives known up front.

Something moved in her peripheral and she stopped to glance through the bathroom window – a curtain swayed back and forth next door. It was one of them, the church friend with access to her mother's emergency call list. She had been the one to ring Dani's phone at two in the afternoon to provide the death notice. For some reason, her number had always been the one at the top of the page.

“The paramedics believe it was a heart attack,” the old woman had choked out over the static filled call. “I hope you're happy. It was a broken heart. I just know it.”

Dani chuckled. You had to have a heart in order for it to break. For years, she had been the only one - the only one willing to make a run for it. Most of them didn't see it – not siblings, not neighbors, not doctors, not even the ladies with Bibles in their hands and gossip on their tongues. Poor Maggie, they would say, to have such an ungrateful child. Poor Maggie. She tried defense a few times, but the words had fallen on deaf ears. After all, her mother's faults had never been the problem. The blame had always fallen elsewhere, just outside of the realm of her own accountability.

“You're a liar, Dani,” her leering voice replayed in her head, “making up those stories. You always had trouble telling the truth. Everyone says so.”

Everyone said a lot of things.

“Anyone home?” a voice called from the front of the house. “Truck's here!”

Relief flooded her. Another body, another voice – she wasn't alone anymore. Dani made her way back to the living room where a tattooed man stood beside a dolly, his eyes taking in the mess of spilled candy on the floor.

“So,” he asked, “is there anything you want us to leave? Anything you want to keep?”

Dani shook her head. Reaching down, she picked a peppermint up from the floor and peeled back the wrapper, tossing it down onto the carpet. “No, get it all out. Just remember to lock the place up when you're done.”

Tossing the candy into her mouth, she stepped out onto the concrete stoop and let the glass door slam shut behind her.

Brandon French

Mother's Day

It was Mother's Day again and Antonia Lauder missed her mother terribly, or if not exactly *her* mother, the *idea* of mother, which was why she had invited her former mother-in-law Lucky out for brunch. It would be good, moreover, for Sara, her nine-year-old daughter, to spend time with her surviving grandmother, even though Lucky wasn't much of a grandparent. She wasn't much of a mother, either, if Sara's father Howie was any evidence. But Lucky was the closest thing to a mother that Antonia had at this point in her life.

She had suggested they meet at a little eatery in West Hollywood called Butterfield's, whose outdoor patio looked like the sunny cafes of Toulouse in the south of France. Antonia already knew what she was going to order for lunch. The wild mushroom bisque with sherry, and the roasted garlic chicken. Sara would probably have macaroni and cheese. And no matter what Lucky ordered, she would spend the entire brunch looking around enviously at other people's food, certain that every selection was more delicious than hers.

Traffic was unusually heavy this day, with mothers being feted from Santa Monica to Mt. Washington, and the café's parking lot was nearly full by the time Antonia and Sara arrived. Looking around anxiously, Antonia fretted that her mother-in-law would blame her if she couldn't find a parking space. Oh lord, she would need a half-bottle of chardonnay at the very least to survive this brunch. One glass was definitely not going to suffice.

Trudging up the steps, they spotted Lucky perched at the top like a turkey hawk. She was wearing one of her May Company end-of-the-month-sale pantsuits, in navy blue polyester, her mouth a gash of fire-engine red.

"Hi, grandma," Sara called, climbing ahead of her mother, who was already a little breathless.

"Hi there," Lucky called back, the corners of her mouth pointing south. Antonia assumed the frown was a reproach and was about to apologize for being late when Lucky called out to her. "Toni! You look so faaat." She had a high shriek of a voice that raked people's eardrums with its serrated edge.

Antonia lost her footing and nearly crumbled onto the step she was about to climb. Sara was caught in the middle between her grandmother and her mother and hesitated for a moment before running

back down to Antonia, who was now sitting cross-legged on the steps in tears.

“What’s the matter?” Lucky called down cheerfully, as if she had tossed a basket of rose petals at her former daughter-in-law rather than a Molotov cocktail.

“You’re not fat, mommy,” Sara whispered. “Grandma’s crazy.”

“Yes, I know,” Antonia conceded.

“What did I saay?” Lucky cried out, affronted by Antonia’s tears. She looked around with embarrassment at a gaggle of customers who pushed past her as they left the restaurant. “I was giving her a compliment,” she told them, laughing a little. “It was a compliment,” she shouted down the steps. “You look healthy,” she added. “That’s all I meant.”

Antonia knew that she looked bloated; she had been drinking too much wine and vodka since the divorce a year earlier. But who in her right mind would tell a woman she looked fat on Mother’s Day and think it was a compliment? Especially in Los Angeles, the anorexic capital of America.

Sara began to pull gently on her mother’s hand as the exiting celebrants struggled to get past her. “You should get up, mommy,” she said. “Do you want to go home?”

Antonia continued to sit. “I don’t know what I want to do, sweetheart. I feel just awful.”

“I know you do, mommy. It’s okay if we go home.”

Antonia took Sara’s hand and struggled to her feet, her legs still unsteady. “Listen -- we’re already here. Let’s just get it over with.”

Lucky, seeing that they had resumed climbing the steps, called out, “I’ll go get our table.” She wished she had never agreed to have brunch with her former daughter-in-law. She had never been fond of her, but then the baby came along and Howie married her so she had tried to make peace with the girl. Lucky preferred Howie’s new girlfriend Abbie and would much rather have had brunch with *them*, but Howie never made any plans until the last minute and by then Lucky had already said yes to Toni. Abbie would never have mistaken a compliment for an insult, Lucky mused. She was a sensible girl. And slender, too.

A waiter seated Lucky at a small outside table for four, which Antonia had reserved a week earlier.

“There’s only three of us,” Lucky said. “My granddaughter and my former daughter-in-law. My son didn’t come because they’re divorced.”

The waiter nodded with a tight professional smile at this gratuitous personal information and removed the fourth place setting.

Lucky sat down with a sigh and surveyed the surrounding guests. She gave the other mothers a conspiratorial little smile, assuming that they, like she, were trying to make the best of a bad situation. She wished she could enjoy herself, she really wanted to have a good time, but the brunch already felt doomed. It puzzled her why so many occasions in her life became spoiled, like milk turning sour even though you checked the sell-by date and kept it cold in the refrigerator.

“Mother’s Day,” she said, with a shrug and a little laugh to the people at the next table. “What an ordeal!”

But then she reminded herself that she almost never went out to eat anymore since her husband Lenny had died. And restaurants had become so expensive that a retired person could hardly afford them. And after all, the weather was sunny, and there was a pleasant little breeze that smelled of roses. Wasn’t this better than sitting alone in her gloomy Hollywood apartment like she did every other day?

Bolstered by her little pep talk, Lucky sat up straighter in her chair and adjusted the jacket of her pants suit, which had hiked up a little in the shoulders. Then she forced a smile, determined to get into the spirit of the holiday.

“Hi, grandma,” Sara said, sitting down at the table.

“Where’s your mother?” Lucky asked, caught off guard by her granddaughter’s sudden appearance.

“She’s in the ladies room washing her face,” Sara said, carefully placing her napkin in her lap and smoothing it with the palms of her hands. She wanted to caution her grandmother not to upset her mother further, but she feared that saying anything would just make matters worse.

“This is my granddaughter,” Lucky announced to the people at the next table. “She looks just like her father.”

Sara smiled at the strangers although she felt mortified. They made the obligatory little sounds of admiration before returning to their brunch.

Lucky craned her neck to see what they had ordered, perusing the menu for the corresponding items and noting their prices with a clucking tongue.

“Is that salad you’re eating any good?” she inquired of the older woman, who was carefully cutting each shrimp with a knife. “I get so disappointed when I order something expensive and it turns out to be awful. Don’t you?”

“Grandma,” Sara whispered, “you’re not supposed to talk to people at other tables.”

“Well, Miss Manners, *you’re* not supposed to tell your elders how to behave,” Lucky retorted. “Oh, waiter?” she called out loudly. “We want to go ahead and order now.”

“What about mommy?”

“I’m hungry,” Lucky said. “Aren’t you hungry? It’s already 12:30.”

“I can wait.”

“Well, I can’t. I have things to do this afternoon. I have to get home.” She turned to the waiter and pointed to the next table. “How many shrimp do they put in that salad?”

The waiter looked over to check. “Six.”

“Are they fresh?”

“Yes, madam,” he said, no doubt hoping that the old lady wouldn’t be the one leaving the tip.

Lucky still wasn’t convinced. “If I was your mother, what would you tell me to order?” she persisted.

Sara turned her head away and tried to hide her smile. She imagined the waiter thinking, *If you were my mother, I’d kill myself.*

“My mother would order the chicken salad,” he answered.

“If I wanted chicken salad, I could have stayed home and made it myself,” Lucky said. “I’ll take the shrimp.”

“And you, miss?”

Sara looked to see if her mother was finally coming to join them. “Could you just bring me a lemonade?” she said, determined to wait.

“I hope it’s fresh,” Lucky said.

“Everything here is fresh, madam,” the waiter said flatly.

“Including you,” Lucky snapped. She pushed her chair back noisily and stood up. “Let’s get out of here,” she told Sara. “Go tell your mother we’re leaving.”

“Please, madam, I meant no offense,” the waiter said, but Lucky pushed past him, her bright red pocketbook nearly striking him in the hip.

Antonia emerged from the ladies’ room just as Lucky was heading toward the door.

“Lucky, where are you going?”

“I don’t want to eat here,” she said without stopping.

“What happened?” Antonia asked Sara.

Sara shrugged. “Just let her go.”

“They’re very rude here,” Lucky announced to a small party of new diners entering the restaurant. “And there’s only six shrimp in the shrimp salad.”

“We can’t just let her walk out like that,” Antonia said to her daughter.

Sara took hold of her mother’s arm. “Let her go,” she said firmly, as if she had suddenly become the adult.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” the maître d’ chirped as Lucky walked past his podium. He seemed pleased that, on this busy holiday morning, tables were freeing up so quickly. He must not have noticed the stormy expression on the old woman’s face, nor her trembling hands.

“I wouldn’t know, young man,” Lucky said, turning on him like a bull that has reached the pinnacle of its torment. “Maybe it’s a happy day for *your* mother,” she said, her eyes overflowing with tears. “Maybe you’re a good son who cares about his mother,” she said, little missiles of saliva launching from her lips. “But my son doesn’t give a shit about me,” she said. Lucky had never allowed herself to admit this until that moment, and the words shocked her. Her mouth snapped shut like the clasp of an old-fashioned change purse and she burst open the heavy wooden door to the parking lot using both arms.

Sunlight strobed the darkness like a flare, temporarily blinding her with its whiteness. And the restaurant, alive with chatter, ringing phones, and the clatter of glassware and china, suddenly grew as silent as an empty church.

Kristi Gedeon

Side Effects

A pall settles over our Impala as we pull up to the house on Tanglely Street. It's a little gray house surrounded by a white fence. My father's palor is gray too. As the engine rattles, Mom just gives him the look. Here we go again, she doesn't say, but I know she's thinking that. I don't like coming here either but mum's my word. My little sister Jo Ann doesn't have a lot to say about this either. We both know how this visit will go and we'll take it like the troopers mom told us we were. We'll speak when we're spoken to, and we'll know what to say because we have it recited by now. Dad calls us his sidekicks. Mom calls us his side effects.

“What we do at home is our business,” dad has said, “and we tell people about it on a need to know basis. And nobody needs to know anything.” His eyebrows always go up when he repeats himself. “Am I clear?”

Oh yes you are, I think and nod.

Inside the little gray house, there are a too many Bibles and other boring books. There are walls of crosses, a family coat of arms that's so meaningful says papa, we're just too young to understand. Pinned to the wall are two faded Shriner hats that he won't let us put on. It smells like old cheese. There is one pretty couch and a pair of matching chairs but they're covered in this horrible yellow plastic covering. The floors are covered with plastic too, guides, I guess, for staying on the right path because my grandparents can't see anything anymore.

We haven't been to see my Dad's mother in a couple of weeks so there'll be all sorts of hell to pay. Whoops, dad's driving over the curb now. Maybe he can't see either.

“She's not sick,” mom says again. It's already getting hot in the car and dad just turned the engine off.

“She's just pretending.”

“I don't want to hear it anymore,” dad says. “Hush.”

She squints, looking ahead. She has checked herself in her compact mirror five times, adjusting lipstick, wiping eyeliner. I don't know why she bothers. Grandma never looks at her anyway. Dad's working up his good son image, he slides his pack of cigarettes beneath the front seat, sucks on another mint. Jo Anne stumbles out of the car, drops her doll in the dirt and proceeds to scream. “She's ruined! Her dress is ripped! I hate this place!”

She gets shushed, then a crack across her fanny, which only makes her scream more. Within minutes she'll develop hives like she always does here, Mom will give her a swig of cough syrup, and she'll pass out on the overstuffed chair in grandma's darkened bedroom. The curtains by the front door move. Papa, the Baptist preacher. He waits behind the front door for us, never out on the porch like our other grandparents. Just waiting. Weirdo.

Mom with her packages, another new housecoat that Grandma probably won't like anyway. She's got her mad on for Dad, it's always this way, whether he does something wrong or not. I only hope that if and when I have kids, they don't feel this way about coming to see me.

I go in first. Mom's trying to scratch the rest of the dirt off Jo Ann's doll's head and Dad's bringing up the rear, crunching another mint. Papa hugs me like I've got leprosy. He has, in my mom's words, the personality of a piece of cardboard paper. If we're good, which means quiet, we'll get to have pieces of Dentyne gum and tiny glasses of ginger ale from papa like we've earned it as a reward.

"What's wrong, Mama?" Dad's already leaning over my grandmother to feel her forehead. Apparently, according to Papa, she has been sick for so long now that there's no way she'll get well.

"My heart," she's grabbing at her boob and for a minute I'm thinking, uh-oh, she's going to pull it over the top of her nightie. Didn't he realize she'd nearly died? She was always nearly dying. We were used to it.

Mom is sitting on the arm of chair. She has learned how to stay in the background. She knows the routine. She will look all over the room but never at my grandmother. I watch her look at an old photo of three-year-old me in the mud brown shore along Galveston. "My, how things have changed," she whispers.

This is what my dad and his mother have to go through when they haven't seen each other in a little while. Papa has wandered into my grandmother's room from his bedroom after peeping at the golfers on his small television set. He mutters something about a five iron, but he doesn't want to seem uncaring though we both know he stopped with the caring years ago, what good does it do? Grandmother says that papa is better than a dumbwaiter because he's always available. Aspirin? Coming dear. More tissues, a glass of water? Coming dear.

We all watch as dad listens to her heart. Over next to her bed she lifts and shakes her various bottles of pills, she's running low. Dad looks at mom, who looks at dad, then away. Then dad digs around in his bag for the special prescription pad. He writes out four or five

prescriptions, which she hands to papa. He's off to find his hat for the drive to the pharmacy while we're stuck waiting.

We're listening for the loud sound of papa pulled into the driveway. Grandmother is giddy. Mom's doing her thing now, yanking out the housecoat for grandmother's inspection, she loves the scooped neck, the snap buttons, but the material, the material feels real scratchy according to my grandmother, do they have anything a little softer? They most certainly don't, mom begins but dad gives her the look, she sighs, says, I'll check. I hear her mumble about the fact that Neiman's isn't going to accept any more of her returns. They look at me funny at the store, she said to dad as she looked at the robe on the way over here. They think I can't make up my mind. He didn't say anything, but she looked at him and I heard her whisper the word *bastard* under her breath.

At last here comes papa, acting like he's been to the Sahara and back, puffing, pulling his goofy golf hat off, handing over the package. We have to wait until she accounts for every one of the pills. While she counts, Dad goes over the side effects with Papa. What to watch for. Like we haven't heard this a thousand times. Dizziness, nausea, blah, blah, blah. What he doesn't say. The fact that she'll probably take too many, then wander around, probably fall into something and knock her head on a piece of furniture. Last time it happened, she ended up at the emergency room. Dad, embarrassed by his mom laying there on the gurney, grabbing at imaginary bugs in the air. What meds was she on the nurse wanted to know. The list went on and on. A doctor came in and said that she had overdosed. Still, Dad pretends like he didn't hear that so he has started worrying about her. There are real side effects, dad repeats, and Papa pretends like he's going to be on the lookout for them.

In the meantime, mom makes ready to go. She has, I can tell, had it. I've been waiting to go since we got here. I am ordered to go out to the car with her purse and dad's crocodile doctor bag. Back I come in for the box with the housecoat in it and Jo Ann's ugly doll that now has a dirt gash across its face. Jo Ann is flung across the back of my grandmother's chair. Too many tablespoons out of Mom's cough syrup. Dad's eyeing her now. She's not getting any lighter.

There now. All pills counted. Grandma closes her eyes, smiles so I see where her teeth are missing and she's so still that she almost looks gray and dead. Papa wonders what she'll be wanting for supper. I kiss them both goodbye. It's hard for me to believe we're related to these people. They're just two old people we kind of know. Bye bye, see you next week.

Before he closes the front door, papa wants to make sure he'll see us in church tomorrow. Of course, of course, dad says. Well, we didn't last weekend, papa says in his we're-all-going-to-hell voice.

"Terrible stomach bug," Dad says.

"You're a doctor," Papa says. "You ought to know how to heal yourself."

He smiles at my dad but it's not a real smile, it's more like he's checking his teeth in a mirror.

We don't mention the icepack mom and dad kept passing back and forth earlier in the morning on our way over here. We don't mention that dad lost his temper last night and stuck his hand through one of our kitchen cabinets, and we sure don't mention that my mom yelled, just before she threw up last night, that she would never go to his parents' house and be treated like that again. But today is a new day so Mom and I put on our fib faces and nod our heads vigorously. Awful stuff, mom says, glad you didn't get it. Papa rubs his poochy stomach, says that he could well have a stomach bug too, now that we came over. Dad apologizes but papa walks toward his front porch whistling like he's calling a dog.

In the car, mom says "Thank God." My dad's jaw moves back and forth but he keeps his thoughts to himself. "That woman," she says. Now she's in her purse, digging around, I hear the castanet sound of more pills. It's a big pill but she swallows it dry. She'll be better soon, she says.

A turn here, a turn there, a few bumps and stop signs and we're home. Dad lugs Jo Ann inside and deposits her on the couch. She'll come to in a few hours, just in time for dinner.

Ewa Mazierska

Beautiful Couples

Georgina was sitting on the train and looking at a young couple in front of her. He, with his hair slicked backwards, thick eyebrows, which changed direction in the middle and three, barely perceptible wrinkles adorning his forehead, reminded her of old movie stars James Dean or Alan Delon. She, with her crow-black hair and dark make-up on porcelain skin, which rendered her a bit other-worldly, also looked like a movie star, although Georgina wasn't able to pinpoint her to specific character or film. They were a beautiful couple. However, the way the young woman tried to draw his attention to her, while he was immersed in his mobile phone, suggested that their relationship would not last. Georgina knew such situations from her own past, when she was craving male attention, while he was preoccupied with something else: himself, basically. Gadgets had changed, mobiles replaced PCs, but men remained the same, at least the seemingly attractive men, on whom she wasted her best years.

After a while she got bored with observing the couple and started to read a short story, randomly chosen from a thick volume by Vladimir Nabokov. This was a book recommended to her by her friend Tony, on the account of creating a very precise, tactile universe, making one feel a part of its world. Maybe it was true, but so far she was rather bored with the long descriptions of nature and the life of aristocrats in pre-revolutionary Russia or Berlin, where these people later settled. This was not because the stories were bad, but because she lacked a literary education. The alternative was *Game of Thrones*, which her son was devouring or *40 Shades of Grey*, which her friend Lucy described as 'so bad that it makes even a shop assistant feel like a literary critic,' but she felt these books were not for her either, being somewhat too crude. She would have to ask Tony for more suggestions, to point her to a kind of contemporary Nabokov, writing about the England of today and without descriptions of nature. She was sure he knew at least a handful of such writers.

Georgina had known Tony for over twenty years. She was one year older than him, but they had the same PhD supervisor and they started their academic careers about the same time. However, he progressed quickly and became the youngest professor in his discipline, getting this title when he was only thirty-four, while she was slowed down by three children, two divorces and what looked like a lack of

focus or ambition. But she also got her chair eventually, just before her fiftieth birthday. Tony and Georgina rarely discussed personal matters, but she felt close to him and she liked talking to him at conferences or when they visited each other's institutions. Apart from being a true expert in his field, he seemed to know many things about literature, music, food, wine, sport - everything really which eluded her. She saw him as somebody belonging to by-gone times: the last bon vivant in a world where there was no space left for autonomous pursuits. Because she liked him so much, it made her sad to think that he was unsuccessful in his personal life, being single and childless. Of course, there are people, especially academics, who are fulfilled precisely because they do not carry the burden of family, and can devote themselves entirely to their studies, but he was not this type. He was yearning for family life, indeed more than she ever did. This was detectable in the way he told her about his nephews, whom he took for holidays, even when they were small. This also made Georgina sad because neither of her ex-husbands or other men in her life were such 'new men'. They all regarded her career of secondary importance to theirs, and left her with the bulk of the housework.

She was thinking about this on her way to Tony's university, where she was supposed to examine one of his PhD students. It might have looked like a favour to a friend, but the thesis was excellent, as everything Tony did, be it writing academic papers, teaching or supervising students, so she was sure her professional integrity would not suffer. In the meantime, the beautiful couple got off the train and it was getting darker. Georgina caught her own reflection in the window. She still looked attractive and relatively young, despite not doing much to improve her appearance, as proved by the fact that in her forties she had some lovers who were younger than her. But now all of them had left and it occurred to her that she might give Tony a chance. Speaking objectively, he was the least attractive man in her life, being overweight, having the puffy face of an overgrown baby and clothes belonging to a different decade. But these things could be taken care of and ultimately were not that important. Perhaps she would ask Tony if he wanted to accompany her and her youngest son on a vacation to Crete. Given that he liked children so much and was not blessed with any of his own, it should be a pleasure for him. Once on holiday together, things would take the right course. Georgina was congratulating herself for her cunning plan, regretting only that never before did she treat Tony as a potential match. She was thinking about the supper she would have this evening with Tony and the internal examiner. Normally such pre-viva

meals were tedious, therefore sometimes she arrived late to avoid them, but this time she felt excited, thinking about the casual way she would propose to Tony this ‘family trip’.

In the hotel Georgina changed her clothes, putting on a black dress with a red scarf and sprinkling herself with her recent discovery, which was a perfume named ‘Death Decay’. She thought that its lily of the valley smell rendered her slightly goth, proving that there was a certain seductive mystery to her. She stood in front of the large mirror to make sure she looked good. She did, even better than some months before, thanks to losing weight and changing her hairstyle.

Georgina arrived in the restaurant ten minutes late to make sure that the other men were waiting for her. But there was only the other examiner, Sam, who explained that Tony would arrive a bit late. This was not like Tony and disappointed Georgina a bit. And then he came with a young woman. He hugged Georgina and said to her, ‘let me introduce you to my fiancée Becky,’ and to Becky, ‘this is my oldest academic friend; we did our PhDs at the same university. You were probably a toddler then.’

Georgina smiled, but was uncomfortable. It felt like in one stroke she had lost a chance for romance and was reduced to an old hag. Becky, indeed, looked almost like a teenager, although it transpired later that she was the mother of a six-year old daughter. In a tight purple dress with a silver pattern, long curly hair dyed in three different colours and dark make-up, not unlike the young woman on the train, she looked like a cross between a bride and a goth, rendering Georgina’s attempt at goth-ising herself invisible. It occurred to Georgina that Becky was in transition between her previous identity of a rebel and a bourgeois wife. Tony was also somewhat in transition, being dressed in his usual old-fashioned white shirt and grey tie, but wearing trendier shoes. Although the turn of events took Georgina aback, she was playing it well, being as entertaining as she was capable of, given her limited general knowledge. Luckily Becky’s knowledge about wines, sport and literature was even more limited, so it went quite well. At one point Becky confessed that Georgina’s life was for her an inspiration, as she’d achieved a lot despite adverse circumstances. Becky also hoped for that, recently embarking on a postgraduate course. She did not conceal the fact that Tony was also part of her plan to improve her life: ‘I was doing shitty jobs all my life, never had enough money to go on holiday and struggled as a single mum. Tony’s promised me this life is over.’ And then, turning to Tony, she said, ‘you are my treasure.’

Tony smiled, maybe embarrassed by Becky's openness, but also seemed happy. After all, better to be loved for willing to take a girl out of misery than not be loved at all. He took Becky's hand and said: 'You are my treasure too,' and looked deep into her eyes. Georgina, who sat next to Tony, managed to see his reflection in Becky's eye and it seemed that it was a different Tony: with a longer face and larger eyes.

The next day was the exam, which went smoothly, as expected. Georgina decided not to stay for lunch, only going for a coffee with the PhD candidate and Sam, who later took her to the departmental office, where the secretary scanned her train ticket and taxi receipt to claim travel expenses. The secretary was an oldish woman, whom Georgina met couple of times before. She was always chatty, rightly assuming that Georgina was not a random visitor, but Tony's old friend. After complaining about the weather she asked if she'd met Tony's fiancée. When Georgina said 'yes,' she asked in the manner of a rhetorical question:

'Are they not a beautiful couple?'

'Yes, they are,' replied Georgina, as obviously there was no other way to respond.

The following weekend she met Lucy and told her about her academic friend with a girlfriend over twenty years his junior.

'Old guys with young chicks make me sick and for more reasons than one. Firstly, this is pure exploitation. Secondly, this is such a cliché,' Lucy said.

'She did not feel exploited, this young woman,' replied Georgina. 'At worst, she felt well paid for her effort. Being with somebody your age is even more of a cliché and does not guarantee any success in love. Look at us. We were romantic, went for men our age and ended up screwed over time and again.'

That evening Georgina returned to Nabokov, as she forgot to ask Tony about Nabokov's contemporary equivalents. She chose 'Russian Beauty'. It was better than some of his short stories she was trying to read on the train, as it had no poetic elaborations of sun reflections in puddles or magical shapes caused by melting icicles, but rather factual description of a Russian émigré woman living in Berlin. The woman was unhappy in love, but eventually married a decent older man and died in childbirth. The ending was in fact not too tragic, given that at the time being a poor spinster was worse than death. Still, Georgina was thinking that it was so much better to read about love and childbirth than experiencing them first hand. And then she moved onto another story.

Rudy Ravindra

Bewildered Belle

Quite honestly, when Bob proposed, I wasn't in love with him. I married him because I knew he would pamper me and take special pride in his stunningly gorgeous wife. Bob was (and still is) bewitched by my bouncy boobs, amazing abs, tight tush, long legs and shining blonde locks down to my shapely shoulders. Since his brain more than made up for his lack of looks and brawn, I ignored his puny stature and his pot belly. Yes, I could have settled for any one of those handsome hunks who were keen on sampling my wares. But, most hunks are either broke or too vain or prone to dip their proboscis into different honeypots, like bees that flit from flower to flower. I didn't want a man with a roving eye. Overall, Bob seemed a safe bet. Thanks to my foresight, I now enjoy this lovely mansion in the leafy suburbs of Raleigh, and my red roadster and my Pomeranian pooch. And I buy the best clothes, best shoes and go to the best beautician.

I answer the phone and make appointments at a dentist's office. The pay is okay, enough for little luxuries. If I didn't marry Bob, I'd have continued to live in that dingy apartment complex with all those Indian and Chinese students, stinking up the place with their spices and sauces.

I try my best to be a good wife. Still, I'm annoyed at Bob's attitude to almost everything. There is a long list of things he doesn't care for—shopping, travel, theater, concerts, crowds. He loves to spend his evenings streaming murder mysteries on Acorn TV. For him the British writers, actors, and directors are the best. He feels that American TV is worse than mediocre, fit only for the ignorant plebeian populace. For him, an intellectual snob, the raucous comedy shows, and the vulgar reality shows are an anathema.

I love to go shopping, browse and sometimes purchase stuff I don't really need. Shopping gives me the opioid rush. One less drug addict in the country, ha, ha. In those early days, Bob used to reluctantly accompany me on my shopping expeditions. But, I didn't like that he constantly looked at his wristwatch as if something important awaited him at home. Eventually, he stayed home while I went shopping. Now, sadly, with the advent of Amazon Prime and free shipping both ways, even I stopped frequenting the brick and mortar venues. These online purchases suck the joy out of the real thing.

For Bob the best way to travel is to watch PBS. Let Rick Steves and his ilk show us the world. Let them go around the globe. Let them shiver in cold climes and sweat in hot and humid locales.

I wish Bob is spontaneous. A man who waves tickets to Bora Bora or Tahiti and fly off to the Pacific paradise. And loll around the coconut groves and observe the natives go about their placid lives. Drink Hinano beer while sitting on the beach of our private *motu*, watch the sunset before enjoying the most delicious dishes cooked in those unique underground pits. Alas, my man is not that type. He believes in the five ‘P’s—Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. He has to plan everything ahead, at least three months prior to departure, to the tiniest detail—airline tickets and seats and hotels, and local sightseeing. That is, if on those rare occasions when he acquiesces to my relentless pleading to get out of town.

I don’t like his regimental habits. Get up at the crack of dawn, jog five miles, eat cereal and toast with orange marmalade (imported from Dundee, Scotland), go to work, return home, eat dinner, watch TV, make love to me and sleep. Even on weekends he doesn’t sleep in. He has to get his opioid rush, pounding the pavement. If only he knows that there are other ways to achieve that end, like grabbing yours truly and pounding her you know what. I’m always horny first thing in the morning, and many a time I hint at my moist state. But he’s too obtuse and always immersed in his projects.

Though he’s a clean freak—he has two showers daily, his scalp smells. So, I gave him a bottle of eue de cologne. But he hardly uses it as he is allergic to it. So, when he kisses me or makes love to me, I grit my teeth and put up with the odor. If that’s not bad enough, there’s another thing that’s even worse. He’s obsessed with oral sex. He thinks it is his duty to first kiss me *there* and then proceed to the next item on his agenda (even here, in our bedroom, the five ‘P’s prevail). The pleasure I get is ruined by the pain I suffer due to yeast infection. *It* burns and burns and I have to swallow pills and soothe *it* in a pail of warm water.

I’m frustrated with his puny pecker and his poor performance; so much for the five ‘P’s, ha, ha. Nevertheless, my sensual moans, guttural groans and my writhing body and my loud screams spur him to ecstatically spurt his seed. So much so I’m now an expert at faking it. C’mon, all you frigid broads, lemme teach you a few tricks.

I know, I know, dear reader, you might ask the burning question, “You knew about *that* department before you married Bob, right? So, why complain now?”

Yes, yes, I don't deny it. Right from the start I'm aware of the inadequacy—both length and girth. But, I convinced myself that, in the long run, shekels are more important than sex.

But, now after a few years, I realize my error. A woman has her needs and I can't help my carnal cravings. Now, I badly need a good lover, mind you nothing permanent, an occasional fling, to feel like a real woman. A lusty woman like me can't survive on vibrators and dildos alone. I need a well-hung man to poke me, pound me, pulverize me and take me to the proverbial paradise.

*

Rita, my bosom buddy from high school, shakes her head at my sad saga. "You never did listen to me, sugar. Like I said then, you should have gone to college, ah, like me, get a good job, um, to hell with husbands." She sipped her dry martini. "I'm a free bird, I sniff them, sample them, and send them off. Okay, enough about me, let's see," she peered at her iPhone, "Yeah, yeah, let's have a small party, ah, next Friday. Oh, tell Bob that you'll be at a sleepover with the girls, okay?"

I drive to Rita's posh condo near the Southpoint mall. After the guests leave, only Rita, me, David and Mark remain. Pretty soon Rita and David are kissing and making out on the couch. Then Mark starts to kiss me. And we adjourn to our bedroom.

The guys leave early in the morning, and then we sleep until noon.

Rita sips her coffee. "So, how is Mark? Did he meet your expectations?"

I smile and show two thumbs up.

Back home, I'm in a daze all day. With a blissful smile, I stretch my arms languorously and run my tongue over my sore lips. I keep thinking about Mark. His strong hands dallied delicately around my erogenous zones. He said, "Your feet are sexy." And took each of my pedicured toes into his magical fingers and massaged them and kissed them. It was a first and wildly erotic and my subterranean sensuality surfaced. It was an exhilarating experience to be with a strong and sensuous, passionate and playful, and most importantly, a caring and considerate man. Yes, I'd love to see Mark a few more times. Since he's also married, we both need to be very careful.

*

When I missed my period, I didn't think much of it. But when I missed the next one, I made an appointment with my gynecologist, Cheryl. She is also a good friend—we meet at the gym almost every evening.

Cheryl hugs me, “Hi, Mandy, what brings you here today? I see from your chart that we did all the fun stuff—pap smear, pelvic exam and mammogram only a few months back, everything is normal. So what's the problem?”

“I missed two periods.”

“Well, there must be a very simple explanation. The most obvious one is, you are probably pregnant. Let's do an hCG test. Lemme get my nurse. I'll see you in a bit.”

The nurse collects my urine sample and disappears into the lab. Bob and I will be deliriously happy if I'm pregnant. We have been trying for a baby for the past couple of years.

Cheryl is back, “Congratulations! Mandy. You are pregnant.”

*

My belly grows bigger and bigger and the ultrasound reveals twins—two boys. Bob and I plan the nursery and buy baby clothes.

Nine months go by fast.

When my water breaks, Bob drives me to Chapel Hill hospital.

After a prolonged labor I pop them out, one after the other.

When the boys are brought to me, I'm shocked. One boy has blonde hair and the other one has black, crinkly hair and a distinctive African-American nose. Thank god Bob, unable to bear my blood curdling screams, stepped out before the boys came out.

Cheryl sends the nurses out of the room and closes the door.

“Tell me, did you sleep with a black guy?”

I reply in a weak voice, “Yes, off and on, a few times, but he always used a condom.”

She sighs deeply. “Condoms aren't always foolproof. In this case, a condom might have been defective, and his sperm fertilized one of your eggs. And then, when you slept with Bob, his sperm fertilized another one of your eggs. This is a case of fraternal twins with different fathers, very rare.”

“What do I do now, Cheryl, please you gotta help me, please, I screwed up big time.” All the pain and joy of childbirth disappears and I'm now in a most untenable position.

Cheryl strokes my head. “Don’t worry, kiddo, you are young, ah, been a bit indiscreet. But, this is not the end of the world. Let’s talk to Bob. He loves you.”

Terry Sanville

The Japanese Wife

Minako liked the way Harry dressed. Her husband wore brown tweed suits, white shirts with cufflinks, and dark Florsheim wingtips. But before he slipped on his suit coat, he'd pull a polished holster from a locked drawer, strap it to his shoulders and slide his S&W .38 Special into the pouch. It made a small bulge under his coat. It made her feel safe, protected – at least in the beginning.

After a quiet breakfast with Harry and his departure to the Santa Barbara Police Department, Minako crept down the hall to her son's room and woke him. She had less than an hour to get Robby ready for the bus and his trip to school.

“Morning, Mama,” he said and smiled.

“Good morning, Robby. The bus is coming. We must hurry.”

“I will, Mama. I will.”

“It is so pretty outside. No need for a jacket today.”

Minako took him to the toilet and left him to do his business. She helped him button his shirt, combed his straight brown hair, cleared the wax from his small ears, and kissed his forehead. At eight years old, Robby had attended Alpha School for three years and could speak, dress himself with a little help, and take care of his bathroom needs. She felt proud, knowing that other mentally retarded children were not as capable.

Robby loved eating breakfast. He was “Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs,” although Minako never used that word in front of him. They sat in their kitchen at the rear of the house, tucked up against a hillside covered in oaks. Cars roared down Calle Poniente, taking working class fathers to their jobs. Then a steady stream of children walked or rode bicycles downhill to Harding Elementary or the Catholic School further on. Minako marveled at how most families had more than two children, with more on the way – but none like Robby.

A stubby little bus pulled in front of their house and beeped its horn. She opened the front door and Robby lumbered down the steps, across the front lawn to the street, and climbed aboard. She waved to him and he smiled, then joined the other flat-faced children in gazing at the world around them. Minako dabbed at her eyes with a hankie and turned inside for a morning of housekeeping for her husband and sweet sweet boy. Then it was off to Saint Francis Hospital for hours of cleaning rooms and patients.

Minako had met Harry in Tokyo after Japan's surrender in August 1945. He was part of the Eighth Army's occupation force, an MP helping to keep order among the soldiers and sailors. She worked as a nurse in a hospital where injured or sick military men received treatment. Their courtship lasted a year, Harry being a reserved man wanting to respect Minako's proud but poor family. The couple married, left Japan in 1950 and settled in Santa Barbara's Westside neighborhood. Then Robby was born and everything changed.

Minako got home from work just before the bus returned with her son. He looked excited, eager to take up his station on their front lawn and play with his favorite pair of socks. Every day he greeted the children coming home from school. At first, Minako worried that they'd pester him, make fun of the way he looked and talked. And they did. But as time passed, Robby became a neighborhood fixture and Paul, the slender boy from up the street, would sometimes stop and talk to him.

Robby memorized the names of a lot of the children. "Hi, Paul. Hi Johnny. Hi Becky, Hi Larry," he called out in his thick voice.

"Nice socks you got there," Paul called back and grinned.

Except on rainy days, Robby sat on the lawn until supper, slowly rocking back and forth and fingering a pair of argyles. Over time, he wore a bare patch in the grass.

By the time Harry got home from work, Robby had eaten dinner along with Minako, then holed up in his room and watched TV. Harry had started drinking early. Minako found receipts from Mariette's Liquor Store in his coat pocket along with a half-empty pint of Old Crow.

She'd fixed him steak and mashed potatoes with corn and didn't serve him the rice she'd steamed for herself and Robby. She left Harry at the kitchen table, reading the evening paper and cursing to himself, and joined her son watching TV. After she put him to bed, she found Harry flopped on the living room sofa, still wearing his white shirt, loosened tie and shoulder holster. The half-empty bottle of booze stood on an end table. He sucked on a can of beer. Three empties littered the carpet.

"Must you drink so much?" she scolded.

"Yeah, I sure do. Where the hell have you been?"

"With Robby, watching TV. I just put him to bed."

"Why are ya always doting over that...that retard?"

Minako sat in an armchair, facing her husband. "Do not call him that. I love Robby; he is such a sweet boy."

"And what am I, chopped liver?" Harry crunched the empty beer can in his fist and tossed it onto the floor.

Minako shuddered. She watched her husband closely. He seemed drunker than usual and ready to pick a fight. She struggled to decide how far to push it, whether to tell him what caused the pain in her heart and the shame she felt.

Finally, Minako blurted, “You...you do not want me anymore. You never come to me at night, ever since...”

Harry pushed himself to his feet, his body swaying. “Damn straight,” he yelled. “I wanted a son I could be proud of. And what did *you* give me?” He pointed down the hallway toward Robby’s room.

Minako bowed her head. “We could not help it. But we can have more—”

“Are you crazy? We could end up with two of ’em.”

“The doctors say that it is—”

“Screw those idiot doctors. I wanted a boy to, ya know, take to ballgames, go camping, teach him how to fish, ride a bicycle, throw a football. You know damn well that’ll never happen.”

“You can still do much of that with Robby.”

“You don’t get it. You know what people think about mongoloids...and they’ll look at me and think it’s my fault.”

“Nobody knows that.”

“Well, that’s how I feel. I wanted a child that would grow, do things better than me. I sure the hell don’t want a permanent four-year-old who plays with socks.”

Harry grabbed the bottle of booze, gulped it down, choking, then staggered backward, slamming against the fireplace. A framed wedding picture of Minako and Harry fell from the mantel. He kicked at the glass shards and swore, stood with eyes closed, swaying.

“You have had too much to drink, Harry. Let me help you.”

“Just...just stay away from me.”

He put a hand on the mantel to steady himself. The sound of his hoarse breathing filled the room. As the minutes ticked past, he quieted, opened his bloodshot eyes and stared at Minako. “Ya know, when...when an animal’s born and somethin’s wrong, they put it out of its misery.”

From down the hall came a grunting sound. Robby stood in his doorway, dressed in Hopalong Cassidy PJs, wide-eyed, mouth open. Harry took a step toward him, stumbled and fell to the floor. Minako ran to help but he pushed her away. Pulling himself up on an armchair, he yanked his revolver from its holster and staggered toward Robby, the pistol held down at his side, finger on the trigger.

“No...Harry...no!” Minako pushed past him and ran to her son, shielding him from any assault.

Harry waved his arms. “Get...get outta the way...get outta the...” His slurred voice trailed off, knees buckled, and he fell face-first onto the carpet, groaning.

Minako clutched Robby and brushed away her tears.

“What wrong with Daddy?”

“He...he just got real mad. But he is better now.”

She held onto her son, felt his heart beating with a strong rhythm, even with its defect. She stood and ushered Robby back inside his room and into bed. Returning to the living room, she picked up the revolver from the floor. After some effort, she opened its cylinder and removed the bullets. She dug into Harry’s pocket and found his keys, unlocked the gun drawer, and took out the box of cartridges.

Pushing through the rear screen door off the kitchen, she walked into the damp night, under the pungent smelling oaks. With an angry cry she hurled the bullets into the dense undergrowth of poison oak. She lowered herself onto a patio chair and wept, shaking from the cold and from sorrow. A light clicked on at the rear of the adjacent house, a door opened, then footsteps sounded on the other side of the fence.

“Are you all right, Minako?” Mrs. Sanders asked. “Do you want me or Richard to come over?”

“No...no. I will be fine, Elaine.”

“Your...your husband didn’t hurt you or Robby, did he?”

“No. We are both fine.”

“We heard breaking glass. We could hear you...you two arguing. I can’t believe what he said. I’m so sorry, Minako.”

Minako’s face burned with embarrassment. “Things will be fine, Elaine. Harry had too much to drink. Hard day I guess.”

“Well, if you need anything, just holler. Okay?”

“Yes...thank you.”

The quiet night returned, cold but somehow comforting. With a shudder, Minako rose and went inside. She carefully swept up the broken glass near the fireplace then straightened her husband’s snoring body on the carpet and slid the unloaded pistol into its holster. From the hall closet she retrieved a blanket and spread it over him, slipped a sofa cushion under his head.

From the same closet she took down a huge suitcase and filled it with Harry’s clothes, toilet articles, framed photographs of him from his Army days. She lugged the suitcase into the living room next to where

Harry lay and left a note tucked under its handle, "Please leave, and do not come back. We do not want you anymore."

She entered Robby's room, shut the door and slid a dresser in front of it. Minako lay on the carpet next to his bed, her mind reeling but determined. The sound of Robby's steady breathing finally put her to sleep.

In the decades that followed, petite Minako and lumbering Robby became a West Side phenomenon: pushing their shopping cart to the grocery store; riding the bus downtown; pulling weeds in their flower garden bordering the front lawn. They seemed happy, always smiling, envied by the other mothers on Calle Poniente for the simplicity of their love. It took years after mother and child finally moved away for the bare patch in their lawn to disappear.

Teresa Sweeney

The Other Side of the Door

My father stepped towards me, his small TV blaring the evening news behind him. He hit me hard across the face and I fell back onto the old armchair, the one he wouldn't let me get rid of.

Before he had a chance to corner me and throw another punch, I jumped up and ran upstairs into the bathroom. Locking the door, I sat on the ragged brown floor mat, feeling a throb beginning under my eye.

He moved slowly.

I could hear him take the first step on the stairs, pictured him pulling himself onto the next using the banister. How was it, that despite all his confusion, he still knew where to find me?

He started chanting, 'Lesley, come out, Lesley.'

His voice was a wheezy, low toned rhyme. Singing off words I knew from my childhood. I hoped he'd fall back, cascade down the steps and break his neck. Then I thought of my mother before she died. Lying sick and skeleton-like in the hospice bed.

'Promise me you'll take care of your father. Promise it.'

Despite her frailty, her white bony fingers held my hand in a grasp so tight that my knuckles were crushed together.

I said yes, because I knew she'd fight her every excruciating moment, every gasping dying breath until I did. She would have extended her suffering, just so I would promise for him to have less.

The banging on the bathroom door started.

'Lesley, come out, Lesley.'

I put my hands over my ears. Wanting to block the sound of him, but only managing to muffle the words. I realised that this was exactly how I had sat, on this very floor, when I was seven years old. How had over thirty years managed to bring me right back to the place, the moments, that terrified me the most?

He started to kick the door.

'Come out, Lesley. Lesley, Lesley, Lesley.'

I knew if I just waited ten, maybe thirty, minutes, this episode would pass. His medication would take effect. Exhaustion would prevail. It's what the doctors said would happen.

'Lesley,' he roared this time.

I imagined the neighbours. Prayed they wouldn't call the Guards again.

My mother died, eventually, of cancer. That's what the diagnosis was. I disagreed. She died because of him. His years of taunting, terrifying us.

As her sickness started, his demise kicked in.

Before the hospice, she called me early one morning. It was a Saturday, and I was asleep, Conor beside me. That was when Conor was still making promises.

'Lesley, come over quick. It's your father.'

She was whispering. I felt a panic in my chest. Had she finally fought back? I pictured him on the kitchen floor. Her bread knife protruding from his chest. An expanding pool of blood soaking into the corners of the tiny room, where the lino curled up.

I'd have to replace the flooring.

'He's at the front door, talking nonsense,' she said.

'Oh.'

It was hard to hide the disappointment from my voice.

'He's outside then?' I asked.

Conor stirred beside me. 'For fuck sake, Lesley,' he said.

I got out of bed and went to the hall. It was so narrow I nearly filled the entire width. I loved that house. Conor and I had made it our first home together.

'No, Lesley. Sure what would he be doing *outside*? It's not even six in the morning yet.'

I sighed. There was no point in asking her anything. I just had to wait for her to finish. It was how this always worked, these conversations with her.

'It must have been two o'clock this morning when I woke, it was pitch dark anyway,' she went on, 'there was a clatter downstairs. Thought them gypsies from the site up the road got in. God knows they've tried often enough.'

They had never tried.

My father and mother had their own tirade of hatred against a halting site being built four miles from the house, twenty years before. And they carried out their campaign against the Travellers.

'Anyway?' I said.

'Anyway, I went downstairs, your father's old shotgun with me. He keeps it in the wardrobe, you know.'

'Jesus,' I said.

'Jesus had nothing to do with it, I can tell you that for sure.'

‘What’s he doing with the shotgun in the house at all? For fuck sake, Mam. Do I have to remind you of what he’s like when he’s drunk or angry? Or worse, both?’

‘There’s no need to be getting into all that now. Let me tell you what he was at downstairs.’

‘Go on,’ I said, despair starting to take over. I just wanted to go back to bed, and to Conor.

‘Well, it was banging I could hear. Like someone trying to break down the door or something. And you won’t believe what I saw then.’

There was a pause. A silence on the phone and I leaned back against the cream painted wall. A framed picture of Conor and me on holidays in Malta last year gently scraped paint as my head rested against the glass.

‘What, Mother?’ I asked, as she was waiting for me to ask.

‘There was your father, my old pink fluffy dressing gown, the one you got me last Christmas? Do you remember it? I never knew what you bought the thing for. As if I’d be going around the house in a dressing gown for all in sundry to see.’

‘You’ve said.’

‘Well, your father is getting great wear out of it now. He was there with that bright pink dressing gown on him, tied at the waist with a big bow and all, banging the window frame in the sitting room with a hammer. Well, not actually a hammer, it is that thing I have for pounding the meat. To tenderise it, you know?’

‘I know.’

‘Well there he was, pounding the window frame with that thing like someone demented. And I said to him, *What are you doing, Roger?* And do you know what he said to me? He said, *I’m barricading the windows, Joan. Barricading us in.*’

‘What was he doing that for?’ I asked, relieved to have almost gotten to the end of her monologue.

‘He wasn’t actually doing that, Lesley. Have you no sense at all? He only thought he was.’

‘Right.’

‘Anyway, the reason I’m ringing you now is he’s at the door. He managed to wrestle the shotgun off me. I’ve him locked in, but the way he’s going now he’ll get the key from me too. He’s saying he’s going to sort out them gypsies.’

‘Oh Jesus, Mam. Did you ring the police?’

‘Of course I didn’t ring the police. Haven’t we had enough of them in our lives already? Come over quick, will you? He might listen to you.’

Four months after that first incident, and mother was dead.

It was me who took her place at two in the morning, waking to hear him moving downstairs. Me who now hid again in rooms and locking doors to get away from him.

Conor hated my father because I had told Conor the truth about the friendly, proud man who greeted him every time. The fraud behind the door.

‘I don’t want you going over there,’ Conor had said.

‘I’ve no choice. And it’s easy to pop in after work. It’s on the way home from the school.’

‘And what if he hits you again? What if he’s violent?’

Conor didn’t understand that violent or not, I had a duty. He was my father. I had made a promise to my dying mother, one she knew I wouldn’t break. What choice had I?

It didn’t take long before I was staying over night there. My old bedroom still with yellow curtains and children’s books on the shelves. Fanatical stories that had offered some escape him and that house.

My father came between Conor and I like a sledge hammer. Or maybe I allowed that to happen. Our peaceful, loving home became intoxicated with rows and arguments when I stayed at my father’s house. It felt like I was cheating.

When I was growing up my father was a violent bastard, and he was still a violent bastard now. Only worse. This time he didn’t care who saw him, who heard the rumours that he got a thrill out of beating hard on women. Because now he didn’t know they were there to hear.

He had stopped kicking the door, just quietly now calling my name.

‘Lesley, Lesley come out.’

He was running out of steam. The relaxants finally swimming through his system, tiring out his muscles and silencing his mind.

He started to cry.

‘Lesley, help me. Are you in there?’

His sobbing was pathetic. I thought of all the times I had heard my mother sob, times that I had sobbed, the bloody noses and crushed bones. The bruises on us both.

‘Let me in, Lesley. I don’t want to be out here on my own. I’m scared.’

It had come around full circle. I let him wait there, alone, crying to silence and nothing but ghosts of memories.

I waited until I heard him shuffle on the carpet, his old man walk to his bedroom. The door closed gently, as if there was still any gentleness left inside him.

Getting up, I turned the key as silently as I could. All the time pulling the door towards me so it would not make a sound as it unlocked.

On the other side of the door, the wood was splintered, frayed in places where his foot kicked and kicked. I wondered if he had broken his toes again.

Creeping downstairs, I catch my breath at every creak.

E

ESSAY

Laura English

Of Rotors and Finches

I write to this nineteen-year-old guy, athletic, funny and smart; once the infant whose height I measured from my elbow to fingertips. Closing the e-mail, I type, “Miss you so much.” The cursor seems to hesitate. I don’t want my son to think I’ve been stealing into his empty room since he’s gone, touching a trophy he’s left behind, a yearbook, half a bottle of contact solution, some matchless socks. But against my will, I find myself wandering into the space that he owned. I delete the words.

When Isaiah was born many Junes ago, the roses were blooming, and I wondered which would be his flower. Poor and single, I imagined I would raise him to be so content that I could take him to work with me, saving the expense of daycare. He would be self-contained, the quiet baby strapped to my back, the toddler who could occupy himself by drawing quietly with crayons in the corner. I had read that early coddling cured later dependency, so I learned to lash his tiny body to mine with cloth. He rode on my hip while I checked for mail or hung up laundry, the heat of our skin mingling. He slept in my bed. The only time I let him out of my arms was this trip to hospital I had to make in the middle of the night...

Even with all the holding, I still needed babysitters I couldn’t afford. Despite constant security, he was colicky. If I put him down to change his diaper, he wailed. When I met my future husband two years later, I described my dark-haired boy as “a pit of neediness.”

Then, at age five, he vanished into his own keeping. He preferred to slip outside and play in the sandbox or chat with the neighbor on her porch. I looked out the window one day, saw him alone in the driveway, and I knew it. He was no longer mine. At fifteen he stayed out with friends, never telling me where he was going, calling only if there was a blizzard to say, “I’m not dead, and I’ll stay here tonight.” Where was “here”? It wasn’t the space next to me in a moby wrap, yet it held safety.

Helicopter parents have been around since at least 1969 when the term was coined. Most psychologists warned of disaster as the trend grew in the 1990s. Parents who made decisions for their children and followed them like stalkers robbed their autonomy. Then, in 2019, the *New York Times* came out with a headline claiming it was best for children to have such parents. But the experts referenced in the article based their conclusion on test results. Those children with high scores self-reported that their parents were “intensive.” As if a high-test score

reflects a child's inner confidence. As if "intensive" necessarily means "hovering." During a conference, the teacher of my youngest, who has taught for thirty years, lowers her voice and leans close to my husband and me: "Helicopter parents damage their children. Oh, the implications are terrible."

Terrible, *those* parents. But maybe I was secretly one of them except my hands were always tied -- first because of poverty and then because four children were too many for me. Twain desires strained against each other, the need to nurture and protect and the need to be practical. What character it built that Isaiah walked to school when he was eleven in the brutal cold. I didn't give him a ride because I had an infant to wake and dress, two boys to rouse and a windshield to scrape. So, he trudged the mile and a half to school, the big boy in his orange coat, a lone figure becoming smaller as I watched from the window.

"Don't worry, Mom, we're going to lose anyway," he would say when I thought of coming to his high school volleyball games, wondering how to entertain his brothers in the bleachers and not wanting to part with the admission for five of us. So, my face was rarely in the crowd, no voice to cheer him on. When I could make it, I tried to follow the action. How many games did they play? What was the number of points they needed to win? There was another dark-skinned kid on the team, and I mistook him for Isaiah. Some parents were busy running the concession stand. I never volunteered, but sent in brownies, asking Isaiah to carry them in the large, plastic container, awkward with a bike.

On the bare branch outside my window, color lights in the form of a purple finch, which isn't really purple, but in someone's imagination its breast was an unnameable red. Purple-red, like a faint breeze and the feel of June petals, a finger-stroke along fragility. The finch is gone in a flash, as if it has not flown but vanished into thin air.

My brother-in-law Brad watches cable TV after work and drinks red wine by the box. Purple-red, like a wound, like the sound of one's own blood rushing with no other noise to meet it. "You don't realize how quiet it gets, and how it will drive you crazy."

His only son Marcus has been gone seven years, and never bothers to stop by, or call on Father's Day. When Brad gets on the phone, already drunk by 6 p.m., he refers to him as "that f*ckhead."

Once he called him "Marky" and "The Boy Wonder."
"I'm getting Marky his first rifle. Me and Marky are going out together on the first day of deer season."

In northern Pennsylvania, there are no helicopter parents, no comparing test scores, no going to counselors if one's child isn't working

up to potential. Anyone who gets further education does it through the Army. A few boys sign up, the ones who don't want to work at Walmart for the rest of their lives. But the unspoken rule is to make children in your image, keep them close.

"I'll have to trade in the motorbike and get Marky a four-wheeler."

A four-wheeler is made to stay on the land. It never makes it out to Route 81, out of the county, out of sight.

Brad's ex-wife squeezed money from him and hung onto her custody until Marcus entered high school. By that time my brother-in-law owned a trailer painted the blue of a robin's egg, a bedroom for him and one for Marky, a bathroom for each of them. There was a plush bed in the corner of the living room for the boy's golden retriever named Butters.

All the fights with Brad's ex, the court visits and lawyer fees were over. He had his son now. And then he did not. The rants on how Marcus had better finish school and not f*ck off. A father who had barely graduated himself, who got so drunk, he'd pass out in the dog's bed.

When Isaiah learned to drive, it took him approximately four days on a standard. He instinctively understood how traffic worked, never committing those errors of student drivers – freezing in the middle of an intersection or forgetting a turn signal. He did his own taxes – the occasional, "Mom, should I check this box?" We lived abroad one summer while he stayed at the house, mowed the lawn and took care of the cat. He went to work and cooked his suppers, looking up recipes on the Internet for chicken Parmesan.

When he comes home for holidays, I linger outside his bedroom in the late morning and listen for his breathing. Once I stood over him when he was five days old, wondering if I could leave to take a shower.

"You can still get an abortion."

"I didn't think I wanted to do that."

The resident with the strange accent and curly blonde hair stares at me. His warm demeanor has cooled since he's asked, "Do you have a husband?"

Most of us are single mothers in the waiting room. Most are black. We have three things in common: medical assistance, the vial of

urine we each hold, and a guardedness -- because no one speaks to us with any civility.

“Well, if you don’t want the abortion, you’ll need a sonogram to date the fetus. Then they’ll be able to check for birth defects at the right time.”

I know what he fears – that the medication I had been taking might cause spina bifida and holes in the heart valves.

Years later, my voice finds itself. I fire the words through time and space though the man can’t hear me now. “You idiot! You scared the hell out of me! Whatever you read in a textbook in med school, you repeated like a parrot!”

The kindly geneticists wrote me a letter after the first ultrasound. “There is a one in one thousand chance...” But doubt doesn’t wash out of a mind easily, and all the way to the end of the pregnancy, I carried fears that my baby would not be normal, would die for whatever reason, the cord wrapped around his neck or some freak accident.

I have more than one imaginary defense.

To the orderly who scolds me for expressing milk into the hospital sink: “I just had to wean my baby overnight, you realize!”

Without my medication, I got very sick. I didn’t start taking my pills again after the healthy boy was born because I wanted to breastfeed. They must have done a good job at Waverly Center, where I went for free childbirth classes. They bombarded us low-income women with the benefits of nursing, videos with black celebrities endorsing it. Monica, who was carrying twins, the skinny one with HIV, always lamented, “They won’t let me nurse my babies.”

In the ER, my mother tells the nurses, “She’s been off her medication for almost a year!” *Help her*. She waits for doctors to take her daughter away.

Later the counselor in the partial program inflates herself with false wisdom. “I think you *wanted* there to be something wrong with your baby.”

I respond as if she’s in front of me again, those dark, unfeeling eyes, “I was struggling, that’s all! You don’t know what it’s like to lie awake all night, every night. Or to run outside barefoot on the verge of hallucination. I never asked to have this condition. It’s not my fault!”

Brad nearly lost Marcus after the divorce. He moved in with his parents so he could afford child support, never missing a payment. When he got his son on the weekend, he changed diapers, gave bottles and baths, refusing help from the grandparents, stitching himself to his son’s shadow.

My father held baby Isaiah up to the window of the wing where no child visitors are allowed. He lifted the boy's tiny arm and caused it to wave to me. The image of my infant behind the glass burned into my retina, into my brain, and ruined forever the scene in Disney's *Dumbo* in which the mother elephant is locked away in the train car.

I hear stories. A mom stands at the bus stop on her child's first day of kindergarten, tears streaming down her cheeks. This was never me; my leaking breasts were catharsis the night I left my son so I could heal.

Brad gets the news from his son's girlfriend. The little boy in the Facebook photos with Marcus – Marcus fixing his truck, Marcus sitting on the porch – is Brad's grandson.

He speaks with a lilt I haven't heard for years. "I'm going to spoil the sh*t out of that little boy!"

My finch is on the branch again, and ... why do I call it mine?

Reference:

Druckerman, Pamela, "The Bad News About Helicopter Parenting: It Works," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 2019.

Bib Number 545

"I'm not a runner," I told my husband as I looked over his shoulder at the computer screen, on which was the very fancy, very expensive, very-much-for-runners jogging stroller he wanted to purchase for my first Mother's Day. My mind jumped to the expense of our son's upcoming first birthday party and summer Romp n' Roll classes and compared it to my teacher's salary. "Why do we need to spend hundreds of dollars on an aluminum alloy frame and elastomer core shock absorbers so I can take Owen for walks in the park while I'm on summer break? I'm not a runner-mom; I'm just a regular mom. "

Andy, ever the pragmatic: "Any of those cheap ones you were looking at would last you six months, tops. We get this one and we never have to buy another stroller. It'll probably save us money in the end." He clicked on the demo video, and I watched as a fit woman dressed in tight running capris and a halter performance top effortlessly clipped her toddler into the stroller and then proceeded to run smoothly along a wooded trail, commandingly navigating the curves in the path and the rugged terrain. The final shot of the video was a close-up of the stroller's tires and her brightly-colored running shoes kicking up leaves as she put the trail behind her. *That* was a runner-mom. And suddenly, I wanted to be her.

The very fancy, very expensive stroller with the aluminum alloy frame and elastomer core shock absorbers arrived at our door a few days later, and I pored over all its elaborate features, giddily practicing the two-step fold and unfold ("See how easy it is!" I exclaimed to Andy) and pushing it through the house ("So smooth!"). This regular mom was going to be a runner-mom in no time.

As it turns out, running is hard. Yes, even with a top-of-the-line, tricked-out, ride-as-smooth-as-butter jogging stroller. You know what's even harder than running? Running while pushing a twenty-five pound toddler in that fancy jogging stroller. No matter how rugged the tires on those high-impact polymer wheels, nothing could change the fact that transporting the weight of another human being at a faster pace than my usual mosey left my lungs screaming, my muscles cramping, and my joints aching. It was kind of like being pregnant all over again.

I spent that summer heaving Owen through a park near my house in the stroller, answering the demands of a running app that increased the number of minutes I had to run before walking again just when I was

starting to get comfortable with the current number of minutes I had to run. There were times I got so hot I swore that the universe's source of light and heat was emanating directly from my core instead of millions of miles away in space. I spent most runs silently (except for my hefty breathing) begging the merciless app to tell me it was time to walk again. When the summer ended and the park closed earlier, I started running in my neighborhood. Now, instead of ovenlike heat and tree roots to contend with, I was navigating sidewalks, cars, and hills. THE HILLS. There was one big one at the back of the loop that was my usual route, and I had to lock my elbows in front of me to brace myself against the weight of my son in his stroller, put my head down, and watch my feet push the sidewalk away from me, just to remind me it was happening. There was at least one point during every single run when I thought, *This is it. This is the run I don't finish.* Who was I to think I could be a runner-mom? My days had always been full of lesson plans and grading and picking Owen up from the sitter and playing with toy cars and shopping consignment. I was nothing like those Lulu Lemon-clad women who easily loped past me on the sidewalk, whose breath wasn't even audible over the music thrumming from their earbuds. I was not a runner.

Except, somewhere between nearly vomiting after a particularly tough run and accidentally ending up running with the cross-country team from the nearby university (they came from behind like a herd of gazelle and engulfed me amoeba-style before they passed me), I did finish all those runs. My body hurt less and less after each one, and I graduated from the app telling me my running goals (run for ten minutes!) to creating my own goals (Let's see if I can do four miles today! Can I do two loops without walking?). My breathing stopped resembling an asthmatic goat enough to be able to ask my son what sound a puppy makes when we passed someone walking a dog, and I became coordinated enough to reach forward and grab his hand when he reached up for mine. He yelled "Go Mom, go!" when I transitioned from my warmup walk to those first tentative strides. At the end of every run, I would come around from behind the stroller and unlock the front wheel from its running setting and tell Owen what a good run we'd had. Sometimes he would give me a high-five with his chubby toddler hand. We were a little team: he was my running buddy, and I was a runner.

Great cheerleader though he was, he was Still. So. Heavy. And, despite his usual compliance with his new role as my own personal running support system, he didn't always love being strapped into his super high-tech running stroller for thirty minutes when he could be

darting around our front yard or stacking his blocks in the living room. Also, sometimes he took off his shoes and threw them, or kicked off his blanket, or reached up and pushed the stroller's canopy back and then fussed because the sun was in his eyes. I hated myself for it, but I started to resent my son's presence on our runs. *Can't I just have this one thing? Can't it just be about me for once?*

I signed up for a 5K that December, and, since I would be doing it solo, I added an Owen-free run to my schedule. I was free! So light! So agile! I could easily hop on and off the sidewalks, the hill that turned me into Sisyphus became nothing more than a mild challenge, and I could think about anything I wanted without being interrupted by his impatient protests or trying to figure out what street we were on when he chucked his mitten. My runs had finally become *mine*.

The morning of the 5K was cold and dreary. "You guys should stay at home," I told Andy as I stuffed my gloves and earmuffs into the pockets of my thermal performance vest. "There's no point to you standing around in the rain and cold just to see me finish. Stay home and keep O out of the weather." And so, I headed to the race on my own.

I had run more than the 5k's 3.1 miles multiple times, but I could feel my palms starting to sweat and the fluttering of nerves in my gut as I clumsily pinned on my bib-number 545—and made my solitary way through the drizzle and down a muddy hill to the start line. I passed clusters of light-hearted runners chatting together as they stretched their hamstrings and ran their warm ups. I had never run in the rain before, never been timed, never had to pace myself against other runners. What if I came in last? What if I couldn't even finish? I took my place near the back of the crowd of people dressed in festive holiday costumes befitting the time of year, and, in the midst of wondering how in the world one runs 3.1 miles with a Christmas wreath strapped to their chest, the front of the crowd started bobbing forward, I watched my own feet cross over the start line, and suddenly I was running a 5K.

Lots of people passed me. I had a momentary freak-out in the first ninety seconds when I looked behind me and noticed how few people were there compared to how many were in front of me. I resisted the panicked urge to go faster to try to keep up, remembering that I had anticipated this, my tendency to go balls-out at the beginning of a run and then lose steam somewhere in the middle.

I kept a steady pace and reached the bliss of the "comfortable" part of the run, where the adrenaline evens out and my legs have reconciled the fact that, yes, they're going faster than a walk to the kitchen and, no, they're not stopping anytime soon, so they might as well

quit complaining and settle in. My breathing naturally regulated itself, and I was able to smile at other runners and even offer an encouraging word or two as I passed some of them.

I was about halfway through the run when I realized I was going to finish. *Of course*, I was going to finish. Not only had I run this distance many times before, but I had done so on rocky, curvy park trails marbled with tree roots and up steep hills while avoiding distracted drivers, all while *pushing another human being in front of me*. Hell, I had grown and carried that human being inside me for nine months and then delivered him into this world. I had taken care of his every need on minimal sleep while recovering from a c-section; had planned his meals and checked that his bath water wasn't too hot and made sure he had his favorite blanket at bedtime; I happily wore plastic bowls on my head and made farm animal noises over and over again just to make him smile. I was raising a happy, healthy child, all while holding down a full-time job and maintaining a marriage. I was a runner-mom, but the real badass was the regular mom. So yeah. This little 5K? It was in the bag.

The drizzle let up and I reached a nice, straight stretch of sidewalk that ran along a busy road. I grinned when the cars beeped their horns in encouragement as they passed. I thought of Owen in his stroller in front of me on all my runs, reaching his little hand back to hold mine, and I wished one of those cars could have been Andy's so he and Owen could see me achieving my goal. Maybe, I thought, I would run the next 5K with my little running buddy cheering me on from the stroller.

I sprinted the last few meters to the finish, heard a voice call out my time, and, before I had even slowed to a walk, some attentive, wonderful race volunteer handed me a bottle of water. I moved to the side, took a few deep breaths and long sips, and double-checked my time. I had finished the race in twenty-nine minutes and ten seconds, but I didn't really care much about that. I was just proud that I *had* a finishing time.

I made my way back up the hill towards the snack tents, and I was in the middle of a well-deserved chocolate-covered doughnut when I turned and saw Andy with Owen in his arms, both bundled up against the cold, both smiling proudly, walking towards me. They had been there the whole time.

B

BOOK REVIEW

The Human Half by Deborah Brown: A Book Review

By Ashely M. Diaz

The Human Half (BOA Editions LTD, 2019) by Deborah Brown is a full-length collection of poetry. Deborah Brown's first book, *Walking the Dog's Shadow* (BOA, 2009) won the A. Poulin Jr. Poetry Prize and a New Hampshire Literature Award. With Maxine Kumin and Aniiie Finch, she edited *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetics* (Univ. of Arkansas Press, 2005). With Richard Jackson and Susan Thomas, she translated the poems in *Last Voyage: Selected Poems* of Giovanni Pascoli (Red Hen Press, 2010). She lives in Warner, NH.

The Human Half by Deborah Brown is a collection of in-depth poetry that dives into self discovery when facing grief through a navigational and artistic lens. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance," "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." Brown does exactly this with the use of celestial metaphor and animating imagery.

What is a human half? Brown reveals how circumstances are a vital piece in being whole, but wholeness is always in progress. In her poem, *The Human Half*, she shares that her father referred to her as *Half-baked/...half in a state of nature, the yeast still rising*. This metaphor is a catalyst to the overarching theme of this book. To be half-baked is to still search for meaning of self. In the search there will be many obstacles that guide the discovery.

Brown's use of famous artwork creates a unique form and flow of imagery that further shed light on the obstacles present. *A Woman Holds a Balance in Jan Vermeer's Painting*, brings Vermeer's "A girl with a pearl earring" into scene as she explains the wonder for alternative life and the afflictions of a deranged mind inherited by the world. The use of this painting gave the actual artwork more meaning as it did for the poem. This form of imagery captivates the reader to look deep within the blank facial expressions of "I'm fine."

In addition to the use of renown artwork, Brown's use of celestial elements add depth to the emotions expressed within her poetry. In *What I Know About the Night Sky*, Brown paints the landscape of the night sky while her brother receives shock therapy. *You sometimes see fireballs flash,/and through the night,/newly-bare branches reach*

towards the sky/while my brother has electric shock therapy,/convulsions he won't remember. The beginning of the poem gave a peaceful tone which was then disrupted by the harsh fact that her brother was depressed. This very disruption allowed the reader to gain peace and lose it with Brown.

In her poem, *A New Geography*, Brown expresses the grief of losing her sister through the metaphor of the scientific process to use shadows to calculate the earth's circumference. The earth's circumference is the full length of the earth's sphere. Brown created an image where her sister would be the shadow that would determine who Brown really was. With her sister gone, Brown lacked the knowledge of who she really was.

Brown's poetic structure further captivated the reader. By adding stanza breaks Brown created suspense with certain poems. In *Not at Rest*, Brown uses numbers to separate stanzas almost as a pause to add emphasis to the unaddressed anger within her. Along with the stanza breaks, Brown occasionally provides quotes that give insight to the theme of the poem.

But the question still strikes, what does it mean to be half human and what will take to be fully human? In *The Human Half*, Brown uses the metaphor of conception to explain the state of the half human. *It begins/with the sperm's wild dash/to the egg.* The sperm and egg symbolize half of what it means to be human. With the two joined, wholeness occurs. When combining the necessities to life—wholeness is possible. In perspective, the poetry within the book engaged a discussion of what it means to be a whole woman.

To be half human is to live, but to be whole is to feel. In *After the Beginning, Before the End*, it is shown that the state of feeling grants full life. *My life is in the story of love/that leaves me between this and that./How can I know/what is on the other side/of this story until I walk/toward the edge?* Brown reveals wholeness won't be obtainable until a leap of faith is taken to feel.

Beauty Bound by Marsha Matthews: A Book Review and Commentary on Beauty

by John C. Mannone

Beauty Bound (Main Street Rag, 2019) by Marsha Matthews is a full-length collection of 41 poems (nearly 60% previously published) reveals what women from many cultures will do to attract a mate. Though it is a cliché to say *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*, it is nevertheless the truth. Or is it? One article explains why we should never say that cliché because it actually demeans beauty to mere opinion, total relativism. Even though the article is about beauty in architecture, it also applies to music, art, or even the human body

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-you-should-never-say-beauty-lies-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/>].

But what is beauty? The effective story as told through Matthews' poetry attempts to answer what is behind the appeal of women to men (or men to women, or any permutation for that matter)—it is the physical attributes and/or physical adornment. That which speaks of wealth, status in the community, family standing, health, etc., constitutes beauty in many cultures, which may differ radically from some Western perceptions. It is through these things that physical beauty is seen and appreciated. And this sentiment is captured by the prefacing poem to the collection, which is a Nigerian adage that basically states a non-concern for missing sheep or goats (which ironically have great value in that society), *but if a plump rounded beauty/with jutting backside is missing in your homestead*, there should be alarm because such a woman is highly valued.

The poems are arranged consecutively, i.e., no section breaks, but each one paves the way for the next in a “daisy-chain” fashion via a word, thought, or theme. Also, each poem has an epigraph stating the location in the world and the year, which may provide some additional context.

As an example of daisy-chaining, the opening poem ends with the narrator (a voluptuous woman) saying, *Over here!* <white space> *In the radish red blouse/and too-tight skirt that/when I turn from you, says/white space> Vamos*. The following poem's playful title (“Headturner”) seems to answer it.

The cover art was done by Singapore photographer Julien De Salaberry who depicts one of the “Giraffe Women,” who “stretch” their

necks with heavy gold rings from early childhood. A poem by that name in the collection epitomizes the extent of what women will do to display cultural and societal stature, while at the same time the poem illuminates irony with respect to Western sensibilities.

Will these aspects of beauty in women be considered misogynistic? Some will believe it does. However, isn't there also a similar imposition concerning male beauty, not only by women, but also by men themselves? In my opinion, the real culprit is not one gender or another, but society and our own sense of self-pride. The world drives what the perception of beauty is. In particular, the entertainment industry (not just Hollywood, but movie makers in India and other countries); the fashion industry, which has the pulse of society's pocketbook; the cosmetic industry—a billion dollar annual effort that promotes beautification products—for both women and men; health and diet industries that promote slimness (sometimes to anorexic levels), ironically as healthy; and the advertising industry, in particular in sales of clothing, cars, actually, any type of sale. I'm sure there are others I have left out.

Social media pressures aggravate this, not because they are necessarily part of any particular industry mentioned above, but because many of us compare ourselves to someone else with respect to just about anything: success, relationships, ability...and of course beauty, intelligence, popularity... It is too easy (and arguably not wise) to compare and measure ourselves against an arbitrary standard, whether imposed by us or someone else.

Self-image should not be dependent on any of these, yet they often are. For example, concerning women's self-image, a particular study of women in different cultures (The Dove Global Beauty and Confidence Report, 2017) based on interviews of 10,500 women in 13 countries concluded that "female body confidence" has been falling globally and points especially to social media pressure as a root cause. Japan ranked lowest in women who feel confident in their bodies (8%), followed by UK and Canada (20%), the USA (24%), and South Africa, the highest (64%). In a poem set in Egypt ("Early Church Fathers Warn"), there's this advice: *Women who adorn the body/adore the body,/flatten grace.*

There are at least a couple of experiments where the "ideal" female body is photo-shopped by representative people (mostly women!) in various countries to indicate their idea of an ideal body. China and Italy seemed to prefer women with very thin legs and arms, whereas

Colombia, Mexico and Peru prefer voluptuous beauty standards (tiny waists, large breasts and curvy hips)

[See <https://onlinedoctor.superdrug.com/perceptions-of-perfection/> and https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-the-ideal-womans-body-looks-like-in-18-countries_n_55ccd2a6e4b064d5910ac3b0].

These cultures emulate the Western world, at least in part, for their concept of female beauty, but others, as depicted in *Beauty Bound*, deviate significantly. The perception of a perfect body, whatever culture, may be unrealistic or promote a distorted self-image and can lead to emotional stress, eating disorders and depression. I have already noted the influence of social media. It is my hope that awareness of those pressures might help alleviate them. Gene Roddenberry, creator of the original *Star Trek* series, had already visualized that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” with wildly different alien races and extraterrestrial cultures. Matthews’ collection increases awareness too.

The opening poem (“Latina Beauty”) sets a defiant tone to the perception of Western world beauty in women: *I am not the woman in magazines/thank God. I am not the woman on the screen.*

The language in many of these poems is fresh, though typifying the reactions of some men, at least as a stereotype, like *His eyes weigh my breasts* (“Museum of the Maya”) and in the following poem, *security officers race to/enfold her//unclothe her layer by layer/down to the metal-boned new-millennium corset//holding all that tired loose skin* (“Raquel Welch: Charms and Alarms”). Even with simple words, but effective line breaks, lines like *He stuck his finger in* (“Bahamian Straw Dolls”) conveys a disturbing image. It is unfair to claim all men, or even most, objectify women, just as it is myopic and absurd to classify all women as the “weaker sex” or that blonds lack intellect. Stereotypes are clichés, and just as the latter should be purged from our poetry, so too should stereotypes be eliminated from intelligent conversation, especially on any sensitive issue. (I’m a strong man because of a very strong woman in my early life—my mother, and now, many others.)

Time is no respecter of youthful beauty, but beauty is no respecter of time, either. Matthews writes what certain Namibian tribal women do instead of bathe—they apply a body mask of butter, rotten animal fat and red dye: *The skin of the Himba women drinks the ooze, every flaw gulped...no matter their ages, these women are sculpted beauties.* (“Red Women”). The collection sports a mixture of forms, including prose poems like the one just mentioned, as well as others including poetic prose: (“Bus Ride to the City,” “American Women Converse on Middle Ages Flab,” “Body Shop,” and “Metatah”).

Poet Matthews maintains a level of tension in much of her work, and this tension whether through line breaks or simply excellent storytelling techniques, often leads to insightful revelations. Often, there is at least a subliminal comparison with the previous poem. In this case (“Red Women”), the color red is important and is also a key symbol in the poem that follows (“Grasshopper”). And yet again to follow (“Nightshade”), a color that speaks of vanity, this time violet and black and deadly—those eyes of a *femme fatale*.

Matthews is a storyteller in short verse using very effective line breaks. This is worth repeating. There’s much more to be said about the individual poems addressing a multitude of specific topics. A selection follows: (1) Customs are cleverly portrayed in a military piece (“Strategic Survival,” which incidentally was published by the U.S. Air Force’s literary journal), (2) A series of poems on women’s feet highlight the evolution of changing attitudes from sensuous to seductive to for-profit in human trafficking (“Binding Threads,” “For the Love of Little Lotus Feet,” “All Lure”), (3) There is great beauty in fat women (“Gavage”), (4) Two of the poems could easily be title poems—one because of the cover image (“Giraffe Women”) and the other because of more general content (“Tribal Beauty”) and epitomizes the theme of the collection, (4) The poetic prose piece about the chiseling and sharpening of teeth (“Metatah”) is important not because it merely depicts differences in culture of what might constitute beauty, but much more importantly, the sacrifice and strength of women in the family and in community, (5) In a hybrid piece that mixes poetry and prose, there’s a wide awakening (“Tribal Court in the Bush”), (6) The art of matchmaking is not restricted to the Western world (“A Regiment of Grandmothers, Covert Operation”) as Lebanese grandmothers scout wives for their grandsons, (7) There’s an irony in the ritualistic use of lead and copper compounds (“Turning 35”), and (8) The powerful closing poem (“Preparation”) shows the real beauty of an old lady with these moving lines: *We carry her to her bath.//Lifting her is like lifting lavender.*

In reviewing this excellent collection, I am honored, as a poet and as a man, to intercalate commentary with review on such a sensitive subject. I must be truthful and confess that some aspect of physical beauty attracts me to a lady. And I believe the attraction is far more complicated than visual appearance, that it involves chemistry in the literal sense of the word—pheromones, to name one. And perhaps something subliminal is a contributing factor, like the tenor of her/his voice reminding us of our mother/father. Regardless of the initial

attractor, it is what's inside the person, her/his spirit that is the ultimate draw—qualities that transcend physical beauty, which are the ultimate levelers of differing physical appearances. Those qualities are what one sacred text calls the “fruits of the spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I want to add character, intelligence, and a generosity with smiles. They will render the plain to look beautiful; physical imperfections to be unnoticed.

I highly recommend *Beauty Bound*.

I

INTERVIEW

An Interview with Mary Jo Doig

By Carol Smallwood



A life-long lover of reading and writing, Mary Jo has for nearly twenty years been a Story Circle Network member, serving as an editor, a book reviewer, and a women's writing circle facilitator. Most recently she has been a three-time Program Chair for the National Conference, Stories from the Heart, a board member, and facilitates workshops and a women's life-writing circle. Her stories have appeared in anthologies, and "I Can't Breathe" is in, *Inside and Out: Women's Truths, Women's Stories*. Mary Jo's degree is in Secondary English Education/Educational Psychology; her work appears in varied blogs and periodicals, on her blog <http://maryjod.wordpress.com> Facebook, and Twitter.

Smallwood:

When and how did you become interested in women's writing?

Doig:

In some visceral sense, I always knew I'd write a book one day. I thought it would be a mystery, until, during my fourth decade, life brought a profound event that changed my life. I immersed myself into intense,

diversified personal work for several years in order to process the roots of that mysterious incident. Then my children were grown and I ached to recreate my life. In 2000, I moved 500 miles to a small cabin in the woods of the Blue Ridge Mountains to live in solitude and started writing some of my life stories. Soon after, my love of mysteries linked me to author Susan Wittig Albert, who also founded the Story Circle Network five years earlier, an international organization dedicated to women wanting to “document their lives and explore their personal stories through journaling, memoir, autobiography,...” and more. I joined two online writing circles, which brought me together with women all over the country also writing their life stories. There, in cyberspace, I discovered the power of writing, sharing, and hearing others’ stories. My human services profession became my day job and I became a writer with a passion to support other women writers.

Smallwood:

How has living a country life in Virginia’s Central Shenandoah Valley helped your writing?

Doig:

I pared my life down to simple here and have thrived. This place of gorgeous mountains, streams, woods, and meadows, as well as the birds and animals who reside with me in our peace-filled solitude is an ever-nurturing springboard for touching the deeper parts of my soul. Rarely do I have trouble finding meaningful topics to write about. If that happens, I go for a walk.

Smallwood:

Have you seen changes in the opportunities for women as far as being writers and poets?

Doig:

I love the word better. When I pull a few weeds from my garden, or do any small task, I say, “Better.” Opportunities for women writers are better now than I’ve ever seen and my heart sings when I see the growth of our diversity. I’m happy to be present in this time of significant change for women.

Smallwood:

Please tell us about the release of your memoir, Patchwork: A Memoir of Love and Loss:

https://www.amazon.com/Patchwork-Memoir-Mary-Jo-Doig-ebook/dp/B0798K4GSZ/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1521914482&sr=1-1&keywords=mary+jo+doig

Doig:

My memoir has been developing through several revisions in the last sixteen years, evolving from a personal healing journey into a story I wanted to leave to my children to better know their history. My decision to publish followed slowly and now, close to that goal, I am grateful for that decision. Writing the book profoundly changed my life and now publication continues to further a process I can describe best as a remarkable journey.

Smallwood:

It was exciting to learn you share my interest in quilting. When did it begin?

Doig:

I loved sewing from the time I watched my mother make a dress for my first day of school. Then I learned to sew in 7th grade and loved the art.

Later, in my mid-twenties, a city girl, I married a country boy and we settled on his small dairy farm in a tiny Catskill Mountain community. There, women still canned food and quilted as they had through the centuries. My first friend taught me how to quilt. I was enchanted. We went on to facilitate a town quilt that hangs today in the Bovina Town Museum, still a tangible, tactile portrait of our way of life in the 70s.

Those were the sweet beginnings of a rich attachment to quilting and my community. Forty years later I can never forget that circle of women sitting around the antique quilt frame, quilting our tiny stitches and sharing stories about our lives.

Smallwood:

Who are your favorite writers?

Doig:

All my life I've loved mysteries, from Nancy Drew on to Agatha Christie. I was unaware of the scarcity of women authors until suddenly there they were: Amanda Cross (Carolyn Heilbrun,) P.D. James, Sara Paretsky, Charlotte McLeod, Patricia Wentworth, and Sue Grafton. How I wish I knew how Grafton planned to end the Kinsey Millhone series!

I can't pass by a new book by Elizabeth George, Jacqueline Winspear, Louise Penny, Susan Wittig Albert, Julia Spencer Fleming, Nevada Barr, and J.A. Jance, to name just a few.

Then I fell in love with memoir and have so many favorite authors: Alice Koller, Pat Harmon, Sue Monk Kidd, Nancy Mairs, Natalie Goldberg, Terry Tempest Williams, Christina Baldwin, Ann Patchett, and more.

Smallwood:

Tell us about your Women's Life-Writing and Older Women's Legacy workshops:

Doig:

Older Women's Legacy workshops were developed through a grant to Story Circle Network several years ago. Experienced teachers wrote an excellent facilitator guide and corresponding workbook for a five-week workshop. When complete, each woman takes home a notebook of her legacy stories.

When I teach a Women's Life-Writing workshop, I use Susan Wittig Albert's *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story* as the basis of the six-week workshop, a book she wrote after years of teaching life-writing.

One of the greatest honors I've had in my workshops is witnessing how many women start out feeling their stories are ordinary and unimportant. As each week passes, with mindful listening and positive feedback given to the stories, a nurturing connection deepens. As women have done for

centuries, we learn that we are not alone, that our stories are not just our stories, but they connect with each other's stories. Ultimately, we realize that our stories are really every woman's story.

Smallwood:

What's your favorite quotation?

Doig:

Goethe's words are taped to my monitor:

Whatever you think you can do, Or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace, and power in it.

I collect kindness quotations. Two of my favorites are:

My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness. ~the Dalai Lama

Find out what makes you kinder, what opens you up and brings out the most loving, generous, and unafraid version of you—and go after those things as if nothing else matters. Because, actually, nothing else does.

~ George Sanders – a college commencement address

Smallwood:

What advice would you give struggling authors?

Doig:

Write every day if only for 20 minutes: in a journal, a blog, a letter to a friend or relative, on a computer or with pen and paper. Find writing peers and make friends. Read voraciously, especially books in your genre of interest. Study good writers. Feel free to let your words rest, then return to them. Stay with it. You will find your way.

Souder: A Collection of Poems by Catherine Keller: Interview

By Carol Smallwood



Souder: A Collection of Poems (No Frills Buffalo, June 17, 2018) by Catherine Keller is a 102-page paperback collection (ISBN-10: 0999620894). Catherine was born in Buffalo, New York and has had poetry published in literary magazines such as: Wilderness House Literary Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, Epigraph Press, The Stray Branch, Hooligan Magazine; she interned for Buffalo News, and Esperanza. The writing of this 22-year-old displays amazing talent, sharp observations in capturing life growing up in contemporary American culture.

Smallwood:

Your book of fifty-five poems has an epigraph: “the realization that each random individual is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.” Please share with readers what you mean:

Keller:

The book encapsulates the human condition by observing and reflecting on personal and perceived experiences in an attempt to better understand the value behind each life we come in contact with.

Smallwood:

Your book also has a warning that it may have triggers for “...people with histories of self-harm, rape, bullying, drug abuse, eating disorders, and other mental health problems.” What other issues do you advise we should have an open mind?

Keller:

Aside from mental health, readers should be mindful of the sociological inequalities that many people face every day and how we can cooperate to lessen the burdens and oppression of others.

Smallwood:

What is your educational background? Is poetry your favorite genre as a writer?

Keller:

I went to a public school in the suburbs of New York, then acquired a Bachelor's Degree from the College at Brockport in Communications & Sociology. Poetry is one of my favorite genres, but honestly, when I was younger I did not expect to become a poet. I was more focused on fiction, mystery and short stories, then poetry kind of snuck up on me. I also enjoy spiritual self-help books, in addition to psychology and philosophy. I have a very eclectic taste in books.

Smallwood:

Please expand on the concluding line of the poem, Have No Fear: “and yet the only thing I’m afraid of is myself.”

Keller:

As someone who struggles with mental health problems, trusting oneself is a huge component to recovery. I doubt every decision and sometimes subconsciously self-sabotage certain situations, so coming to terms with what I am capable of and learning to honor myself first are some of the baby-steps to becoming less afraid of my actions.

Smallwood:

Please expand on your early background:

Keller:

I started submitting poems to literary magazines at 18 and was published in nine literary magazines by the time I was 22. I had started the publishing process for *Sonder: A Collection of Poems* when I was in my last semester at Brockport, around September 2017, and had started submitting my manuscript to a bunch of places, eventually choosing No Frills Buffalo after doing research on local publishers. I don't have an agent, no one scouted me or pushed me to publish it; this was all something I was willing to work towards with minimal help from others. This is the first project I have officially published, and initially when I was writing it whilst in college, I had no intention of compiling all of the poems into a chapbook. I went to college for communications and sociology, so while I wasn't studying old English literature, I was still writing quite a bit and continued creatively on the side. My education focused more on the rhetoric, logistics of the media and social inequalities, so I like to incorporate some of those subjects into my work.

Smallwood:

How did you arrive at the title of your book? What could be your next book?

Keller:

I came across this list of about 40 emotions that people feel but can't explain, so 'Sonder' was one of the words on that list and I felt it suited the theme perfectly. I'm probably going to use that list to title a few other

forthcoming books. My next book is (probably) going to be a short story collection, which topics revolve around spirituality, freedom and unconventional lifestyles.

Smallwood:

What advice can you give writers just starting out?

Keller:

Consider yourself a sponge and soak up as much experience as you can, because you can't write about what you don't know. Also, branch out from your every-day bookshelves and expand your literary horizons. Try to write every day, even if it's only for 10 minutes. Try not to get anxious about the word count, and don't compare yourself to other writers, even your favorites.

Smallwood:

Where may readers find you in social media?

Keller:

Instagram: @catiekeller

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BIOGRAPHICAL
NOTES

303 of **Jan Ball**'s poems have been published in journals such as: Calyx, Main Street Rag and Phoebe. Her two chapbooks: accompanying spouse and Chapter of Faults and her first full-length book: I Wanted to Dance With My Father, have been published by Finishing Line Press. When not writing or traveling, Jan and her husband like to cook for friends.

Micki Blenkush lives in St. Cloud, MN. She was selected as a 2017-2018 Loft Literary Center's Mentor Series fellow in poetry and was a 2015 recipient of a Central MN Arts Board Emerging Artist Grant. Her writing has recently appeared in: Cagibi, Typishly, and Crab Creek Review.

Donna Burton began waiting tables at 16, worked 33 years as an educator in various states and the British Virgin Islands, and spent one wild year as a lifestyle reporter for *The Panama City News Herald*. Her poems have appeared in *Artemis* and *World Order*. She has retired to the Blue Ridge where she enjoys painting, gardening, and catering to her grandson's whims.

Judith Camann is a poet, counselor and teacher. She has been featured in *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of Kurt Vonnegut*, *Eyedrum* Periodically, *Main Street Rag* and others. She can be found reading regularly in and around Seattle.

Wendy Taylor Carlisle lives and writes in the Arkansas Ozarks. She is the author of five chapbooks and three books, the latest is *The Mercy of Traffic*, 2019. Her work is widely available in print and on line. For more information check her website at www.wendytaylorcarlisle.com.

Ann Cefola is author of *Free Ferry* (Upper Hand Press, 2017), and *Face Painting in the Dark* (Dos Madres Press, 2014); translator of *Alparegho, like nothing else* (The Operating System, 2019), *The Hero* (Chax Press, 2018), and *Hence this cradle* (Seismicity Editions, 2007); and recipient of the Robert Penn Warren Award judged by John Ashbery.

Amber Cook has spent nearly two decades writing. She is the author of numerous published works, with appearances in publications such as *Literary Mama*, *Deep South Magazine* and *Crack the Spine*, among others. In 2009, her short story 'Little Mother' was included in *Dzanc*

Books' Best of the Web series. A native to the south, she currently lives, writes and raises her children in Tennessee.

Sarah Cooper is a native of South Carolina. She earned her MA from Purdue University and MFA from Converse College where she was mentored by Denise Duhamel. Her poems have appeared in anthologies and journals including *Room*, *Sling Magazine* and *Pilgrimage*. Currently, she teaches at Clemson University, lives with an orange cat and writes poems on front porches.

Julie Cyr has been published by *Blood and Thunder Journal*, *Broad River Review*, *Pink Panther Magazine*, and Lost Horse Press in the *Nasty Women Poets Anthology*, among others. She was awarded 2014 Best of Poetry by *Blood and Thunder Journal*, a finalist in the 2016 Rash Awards for Poetry, and awarded a scholarship from Murphy Writing of Stockton University in 2018. Julie holds an MFA in creative writing from Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She works as an editorial assistant for Lily Poetry Review and facilitates women's writing workshops. Julie lives in Sharon, NH with her husband and two sons.

Christopher de Vinck is the author of 12 non-fiction books. His next book, his first novel, will be published by HarperCollins. His poems have appeared in *The American Scholar*, *The Kentucky Poetry Review*, and in *America*. He was awarded a grant for his poems from the New Jersey Council of the Arts, and has a syndicated column with the A.H Belo Corporation and the Dallas Morning News.

Ashely Marie Diaz, is a poet, and college student pursuing her interest in Environmental Studies which she sees as synonymous with the arts. She taps into nature and her spirituality to inform her writing life. She is currently a PTK and Honors member at Passaic County Community College and holds the position of Editor-in-Chief of the college newspaper.

Juditha Dowd is the author of a full-length collection, *Mango in Winter*, three poetry chapbooks, short fiction and lyric essays. She's contributed work to *Poet Lore*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rock & Sling*, *The Florida Review*, *Spillway*, *Leaping Clear* and elsewhere. Her verse biography of Lucy Bakewell Audubon, "Audubon's Sparrow," is forthcoming from Rose Metal Press. www.judithadowd.org

Morrow Dowdle's most recent publication credits include *River and South Review*, *Dandelion Review*, *Poetry South*, and *NonBinary Review*. She was a Pushcart Prize nominee in 2018. In addition to poetry, she has written a graphic novel, *An Unlikely Refugee*, now part of a permanent exhibit at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. She previously attended Emerson College's MFA program in creative writing and currently works as a physician assistant in mental health.

In addition to writing poetry, **Laura English** posts a daily blog called *Eat More Life* (<https://eatmorelife.weebly.com>), a healing space for women living with anorexia. On Sunday afternoons, she teaches writing to people from all walks of life. Work has appeared in dozens of magazines including *minnesota review*, *Sow's Ear*, *Cider Press Review*, *Adanna*, and *Straylight*. A chapbook, *Graves Too Small to Be Red* (Finishing Line Press) was published last year.

Sarah Evans has had many short stories published in anthologies, literary journals and online. She has been shortlisted by the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and been awarded prizes by, amongst others: Words and Women, Stratford Literary Festival and the Bridport Prize. Her work is also included in several Unthology volumes, Best New Writing and Shooter Magazine. Writing poetry is a more recent venture, with work appearing in several charity anthologies and HCE literary magazine.

Brandon French has been everything from a Yale English professor to a psychoanalyst. Seventy of her stories have been accepted for publication, she's been nominated twice for a Pushcart, and her short story collection, "If One of Us Should Die, I'll Move to Paris," will be available in September 2019.

After receiving an MFA in Fiction and Literature at Bennington College, **Kristi Gedeon** fell in love with characters and what they reveal, especially when they're trying to conceal a perceived secret. Her writing career began with a story that appeared in the Carolina Quarterly. Other pieces have appeared in the Bennington Review, City Lights literary magazine, the Georgetown Review, and the Bellingham Review. Her latest story was just released in the 60th anniversary issue of 34TH Parallel literary magazine in Paris.

Nancy Gerber received a Ph.D. in English from Rutgers University and completed psychoanalytic training at the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis. Her most recent book is *The Dancing Clock: Reflections on Family, Love, and Loss* (Shanti Arts, 2019). Visit her on the web at nancygerber.net.

Deborah Gerrish is the author of three collections of poems, *Light in Light* (2017), *The Language of Paisley*, and her chapbook, *The Language of Rain*. She teaches poetry workshops at Fairleigh Dickinson University and organizes readings for *Visiting Poets*. Visit deborahgerrish.com for more information.

Cleo Griffith lives in the California Central Valley among orchards, farms, and a plethora of poets. Widely published, she finds much inspiration from her surroundings, her husband, and their cat Amber.

Maryanne Hannan has published poetry in numerous journals and anthologies, including Oxford Review, Gargoyle, and Presence. Her first book, *Rocking Like It's All Intermezzo: 21st Century Psalm Responsorials*, is forthcoming from Resource Publications. www.mhannan.com

Lois Marie Harrod's 16th and most recent collection *Nightmares of the Minor Poet* appeared in June 2016 from Five Oaks. Her chapbook *And She Took the Heart* appeared in January 2016, and *Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis* (Cherry Grove Press) and the chapbook *How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth* (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. *The Only Is* won the 2012 Tennessee Chapbook Contest (Poems & Plays), and *Brief Term*, a collection of poems about teachers and teaching was published by Black Buzzard Press, 2011. *Cosmogony* won the 2010 Hazel Lipa Chapbook (Iowa State). Links to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org

Louisa Howerow's latest poems have appeared in *Inscape* and in the Canadian journals *Arc*, *Grain*, and *Event*. They are also found in the following anthologies: *Gush: Menstrual Manifestos for Our Times* (Frontenac House, 2018), and *Another Dysfunctional Cancer Poem Anthology* (Mansfield Press, 2018).

Melody C. Johnson received her BA in Creative Writing from Bowie State University. Her work has been published in *The Torch*; *Field Notes: Interpretations of Nature, Volume 1*; and *The Ear*.

Sandra Kacher is a Minnesota poet. She is a psychotherapist who has worked primarily with women and is attuned to women's lives and concerns. She is an Enneagram Type 4 so can't help but be aware of the brokenness of things, thus her love of Akhilandeshvara. She has been published in Dime Show Review, MartinLake Journal, and We were So Small.

Sandra Kohler's three collections of poems are */Improbable Music/(Word Press)*, */The Ceremonies of Longing/ (U of Pittsburgh Press)* and */The Country of Women/ (Calyx Books)*. Her poems have appeared over the past 45 years in journals including Tar River Poetry, The Beloit Poetry Journal, Prairie Schooner, and many others.

Elaine Koplow, retired English teacher and union organizer, is Director of the Sussex County Writers' Roundtable, Assistant Copy Editor of *The Stillwater Review*, and Associate Editor of The Paulinskill Poetry Project. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems appear in the anthology *Voices From Here* Volumes 1&2, *Tiferet*, *Spillway*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Wawayanda Review*, *Exit 13 Magazine*, *U.S.1 Worksheets*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, and elsewhere.

Betsy Littrell is a whimsical soccer mom, poet and sometimes a fiction writer. She is also a journalist at the ABC affiliate in San Diego, all while working on her MFA at San Diego State University. Her work has recently appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Prometheus Dreaming* and *The Road Not Taken*. She is also a reader for the *L.A. Review*.

Jennifer Lothrigel is a poet and artist in the San Francisco Bay area. She is the author of a chapbook titled 'Pneuma,' published last year by Liquid Light Press. Her work has also been published in *Arcturus*, *Rag Queen Periodical*, *Bitter Zoet*, *Dash Literary Journal* and *We'Moon* amongst others. Find her on twitter @JLothrigel and instagram @PartingMists.

John C. Mannone has poetry in *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Baltimore Review* and others. He won the coveted Appalachian Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) and served as celebrity

judge (National Federation of State Poetry Societies, 2018). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and others. He's a retired physics professor living in East Tennessee. <http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>

Maria Masington is a poet, author, and spoken word artist from Wilmington, Delaware. Her poetry has appeared in over a dozen publications including *The Fox Chase Review*, *The News Journal*, *Red River Review*, and *Earth's Daughters*. She has had four short stories published in anthologies through Smart Rhino Publications and Cat & Mouse Press. Maria is a member of the Written Remains Writers Guild and an emcee and featured poet on the local art scene. She has been a guest on WVUD ArtSounds and a three-time Delaware Division of the Arts fellow for poetry and prose retreats.

Ewa Mazierska is historian of film and popular music, who writes short stories in her spare time. She published over thirty of them in 'The Longshot Island', 'The Adelaide Magazine', 'The Fiction Pool', 'Literally Stories', 'Ragazine', 'BlazeVox', 'Red Fez', 'Away', 'The Bangalore Review', 'Shark Reef' and 'Mystery Tribune', among others. In 2019 she published her first collection of short stories, 'Neighbours and Tourists' (New York, Adelaide Books). Ewa is a Pushcart nominee and her stories were shortlisted in several competitions. She was born in Poland, but lives in Lancashire, UK.

Stacey Hohman McClain is a writer and teacher who lives in Charlotte, NC, with her husband and son. Her work has appeared in *Away: Experiments in Travel & Telling* and in *Literary Mama*, and she has a forthcoming essay in *Mothers Always Write*. She holds degrees from The College of William & Mary and Hollins University.

Illene Millman is a speech/language therapist living and working in New Jersey. Her work has been published in a number of print journals including *Adanna*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *Paterson Review*, the *Sow's Ear*, *Earth's Daughters*, *PoemMemoirStory* and anthologized in *Forgotten Women (Grayson)* and others. Her first poetry collection *Adjust Speed to Weather* was published in 2018.

Giavanna Munafa's poems have appeared in *E.Ratio*, *Redheaded Stepchild*, *Slab*, *Talking Writing*, *The New Virginia Review*, *Bloodroot Literary Magazine*, *The Nearest Poem Anthology* (Ed. Sofia Starnes), and *Glint*. She holds a BA and PhD from the University of Virginia and

an MFA from the University of Iowa. Giavanna does consulting work focused on diversity and equity and is an English and Social Studies teacher in her local parent-child center's high school completion program. She lives in Norwich, Vermont.

Teddy Norris is a retired college English professor. Her poetry has appeared in *Switchgrass Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Flying South*, *Kakalak*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Pillars of Salt* was published by Finishing Line Press. She lives in St. Charles, Missouri, with her husband and two very self-aware cats. More info at teddynorris.com.

Toti O'Brien's mixed media have been exhibited in group and solo shows, in Europe and the US, since 1995. She has illustrated several children books and two memoirs. Her artwork is on the cover of several books and it was most recently featured in *Scriptic*, *Rappahannock*, *Arkana*, and *Rogue Agent*.

Rudy Ravindra lives in Wilmington, NC. His fiction has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Canyon Voices*, *New Mexico Review*, and others. More at: <http://rudyravindra.wix.com/rudy>

Christine Redman-Waldeyer is a poet and Associate Professor of English at Passaic County Community College, N.J. She earned her doctorate from Drew University with a focus in creative writing. She has published three poetry collections, *Frame by Frame*, *Gravel*, and *Eve Asks* (Muse-Pie Press), co-edited *Writing after Retirement: Tips from Successful Retired Writers* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers) and is the founder of *Adanna*. Her poetry has been published in numerous journals.

Edwin Romond's most recent publication is *Home Team: Poems about Baseball* (Grayson Books.) He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the New Jersey and Pennsylvania State Arts Councils. Romond won the 2013 New Jersey Poetry Prize for his poem, "Champion."

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). His short stories have been accepted more than 350 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The Potomac Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated twice for *Pushcart*

Prizes and once for inclusion in *Best of the Net* anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Janna Schledorn has poems in *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*, *Revelry*, *Time of Singing: A Journal of Christian Poetry*, *Cadence*, and *Utmost Christian Writers*. She is a co-winner of the 2016 Thomas Burnett Swann Poetry Prize from the Gwendolyn Brooks Writers Association of Florida. She teaches English at Eastern Florida State College.

Filmmaker and photographer **Carla Schwartz**' poems have been widely published and anthologized, including in *The Practicing Poet* (Diane Lockward, Ed), and in her second collection, *Intimacy with the Wind*, (Finishing Line, 2017). Her poem, *Anthem*, won the May 2019 Lunch Ticket Twitter Poetry Contest. Her [CB99videos youtube channel](#) has 2,000,000+ views. In summers she lives on a solar-powered houseboat. Learn more -- [carlapoet.com](#), [wakewiththesun.blogspot.com](#), or find her [@cb99videos](#).

Caroline N. Simpson's chapbook, *Choose Your Own Adventures and Other Poems*, was published by Finishing Line Press in October 2018. She has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, both in poetry and nonfiction, and in 2013, a collection of her poetry won Honorable Mention in Hot Street's Emerging Writers Contest. She teaches high school English at the Tatnall School in Wilmington, DE, and has taught English literature at international high schools in Turkey and Spain. You can follow her at [carolinensimpson.com](#).

Carol Smallwood, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, and interviewer; her background includes librarianship and teaching. Hundreds of her stories, essays, poems, reviews have appeared in RHINO, World Literature Today, and others. A multi-Pushcart nominee, she's founded humane societies. A recent poetry collection is *Patterns: Moments in Time* (Word Poetry, 2019).

Teresa Sweeney is from Ireland. Her first short story collection, *STARS IN THE GROUND*, is available on Amazon.co.uk and her website is <http://www.teresasweeney.com>.

Tori Grant Welhouse's poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Conclave Journal*, *Stirring*, and *New Poetry from the Midwest*. She published a chapbook *Canned* with Finishing Line Press (2014) and independently published *Stashed: A Primer in Lunch Poems* (2019). She is an active volunteer with Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and lives in Green Bay. More at www.torigrantwelhouse.com

Karen Wolf has been published in *Smokey Blue Literary and Art Magazine*, *The Wagon Magazine*, *Oasis Journal*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Drunken Llama*, *Blynkt*, *Raw Dog Press*, *Street Light Press*, *Lady Blue Literary Arts Journal*, *Ripcord Magazine* and many others. Her chapbook, *THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2018.

Kuo Zhang is a Ph.D. candidate in TESOL & World Language Education at the University of Georgia. She has a book of poetry in both Chinese and English, *Broadleaves* (Shenyang Press). She serves as poetry & arts editor for the *Journal of Language & Literacy Education* and also one of the judges for 2015 & 2016 SHA Poetry Competition.