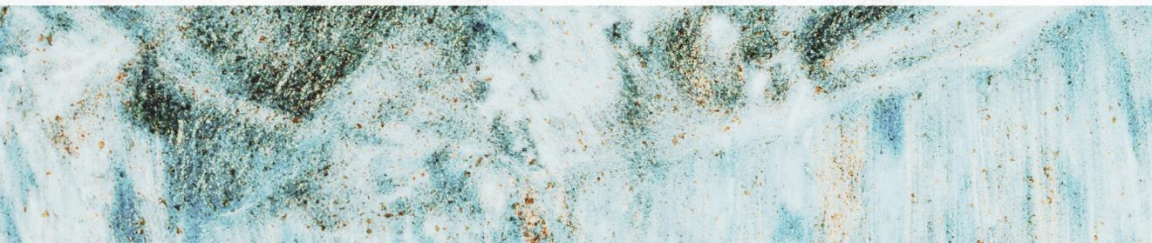


 PICTURA
JOURNAL

August 2024



Pictura Journal

August 2024

Pictura Journal, August 2024
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Editor's Note

The idea for *Pictura Journal* came about in a dim midwestern kitchen during tornado season. It took a few years to get here, but I'm incredibly proud to present an inaugural issue full of diverse perspectives and vibrant storytelling. The response to our first call for submissions was surprising, humbling, and beyond anything I could've hoped for. Thank you to all the editors, contributors, and readers who made this possible.

Alicia Wright

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Donna Vitucci
Sediment



Donna Vitucci
Flourish

Thomas Molitor
The Last Wasp

You crawl across the unsealed cells of a hexagonal hive that's mounted in the corner beneath the roof like an outdoor speaker. You move your smooth, sleek, shiny tripartite body from chamber to chamber conducting a final crib check in a collapsing colony. This is your last crawl. Do you know that? Early spring I watched your mated queen put up her pendant throne as she awaited the birth of her winged workers. In late summer her majesty wielded absolute vespide power over an ever expanding catacomb queendom. But now it is winter. The queen is gone. You are the lone drone, the noble one, the one that didn't fly away and leave the queen regnant behind—smoky black wings and multiple stings—the last courtier crawling over a masticated monarchy. This is your last crawl. Do you know that? The winter is your guillotine. I am here to catch your loyal head.

“Martin Ramirez (1895-1968) is simply one of the greatest artists of the 20th century.”
New York Times / 2007

Thomas Molitor

The Mute

They said he was a catatonic schizophrenic, a mute.

He made his own paint by melting crayons on a hot furnace and blending them with crushed color pencils, mixing them together with his own incarcerated spit.

He was a Mexican immigrant searching for work opportunities in California to support his family back in Jalisco and what he found was 32 years in a state psychiatric hospital.

His dense and intense drawings invited the mind's eye inside a proscenium of rhythmic and pulsating lines framing mounted caballeros, trundling locomotives, and levitating Madonnas.

They called his self-taught scavenger drawings and collages outsider art as in art created outside the boundaries of accepted definitions of art at the time.

Just recently, sixty years after his death in DeWitt State Mental Hospital, Auburn, California, one of his drawings sold for three-hundred thousand dollars at auction in Paris.

Molitor

They said he was a catatonic schizophrenic, a mute, never giving credence to the notion that perhaps he believed his art would speak for itself.

Susan R. Morritt

Beautiful Bill

Windsor Raceway, 1973

Cinnamon sprinkled, red and brown
right down to the stubble, right down
to the nicotine-stained fingers, retrieving the butt
from between those lips, square cowboy teeth.

“Get off my foot, you little shit.”

Nonchalant, so Marlon Brando, James Dean.
A rebel with a torn running shoe,
and a skinny girl with glasses
in the tinder-dry grass, one grazing horse.

S. Abdulwasi'h Olaitan

*prayer I: III _my mother who teaches me to change the
pedals of piano-keys into the language of heaven
"Arabic"*

on the flashcards:

lion = (l) *watermelon* = (w) / "alif & baa"

about prayer, about the music
lost & found, the dying lyrics in my mother's tongue
unwear itself... / in arabic/
her left fingers, wedged
sensitively on the black crane zither
telegraphing/...
her right hand held the pick of water as
i sit in front of what i remember as the first passage of heaven
pray. she says:... in the language of paradise
& i sing to the portrait of
a flag held by lion, ferrying an arabic letter " ا " alif
in the left. watermelon seen, dancing to my lyrics of " ب " baa
repeat after me, she says; on three

1, 2, 3...

alif < a-lif " ا "
baa < b-aa " ب "
taa < t-aa " ت "

she conjoins me with the meters of paradise glinting in her body
at every end of the lyrics—
my tongue touches her tongue's sweet prayer.

Richard Jordan
On Mother's Day

It's been nearly fifty years but standing
at the grassy shore of Clarkson Pond

as sun sets fuchsia above still-budding maples,
I can hear you calling whip-poor-will

over and over. It was our ritual, though
there was never a response. I don't think

you expected one. Those birds
from your childhood became silent ghosts

haunting Water's Edge Apartments
on the opposite bank, that supposed proof

of prosperity in our town back then. But
this spring evening, there are seven cygnets

paddling behind their parents, and redear
sunfish snapping at whatever buzzes

the surface. The apartments have been
razed. There's even talk of a preserve

since a young girl found a Blanding's turtle
burrowed in the mud. I reach into

Jordan

my coat pocket, rub the flat, smooth stone
I carry with me. Mother, there's a secret

I never told you: if I should ever muster
eight skips in a row, you'd get your answer.

Richard Jordan

Evenings with Marsupial

I'm drinking my second Sam Adams Summer Ale with a possum who's in the lilac shrub eating peanut butter I've spread thick on the branches just for her. I say her, but I don't really know. She looks like she could be a mother someday. This ritual began when one night I saw her tumble from my garage roof. I thought she may be sick, in need of nursing. My eco-neighbor with the approximate dreads said probably nuts or something would be a good bet. Every now and then the possum grunts a little. It could be a burp, if possums burp. An expression of marsupial satiation, I want to believe. As dusk rolls in and I sip my beer I'm thinking not only of possum dietary needs, but also ashes—my father's, even though he's not dead yet. The point is he will be, and he's fixated on cremation, wants to drift slowly down the Squannacook some early April morning when the water's cooler than the air and mist is rising. There's a special spot where Ted Williams, yes, the Splendid Splinter, used to battle fish. The perfect place for ashes to settle, according to my father. He's adamant that his voyage should transpire as baseball season starts and hungry trout begin to poke up through the surface. The problem is: where will I keep

the ashes if, God forbid, he passes early? Or maybe I should say late. I mean, for example, May, the worst-case scenario logistically. Should ashes be in plain sight or a basement corner? Possums don't have brain cells wired to ponder afterlives or worship long-gone batting champs. The humid air's turned dense with moths and mosquitoes. The possum doesn't mind. At first, she used to hiss at me when I flicked my Bic to set curly citronella sticks smoking. Not anymore. She simply keeps licking the lilac branches, small eyes glowing brightly in the now dark night. I like that.

Richard Hartwell

Nancy Sinatra, Vietnam, '66-'67

Looking down the length of a hospital bed,
Coming out of anesthesia, a Carnaby Street
Angel appears as a mod-clad apparition in
High-heeled, knee-length Walking Boots of
White plastic, balanced by a wide white belt
Cinched between a red velvet miniskirt and
Some sort of short-waisted toreador jacket.

Bleached-blonde, ratted hair framing her face;
Frosted lips, slightly parted in a coyish smile;
Dark-mascara tears running down her cheeks;
She is an every-soldier's untouchable dream:
Sister, friend, lover, wife: girlish vision of home.

What does the mind's eye see of the warp and
Twist of recollection, with its multi-layered
Memory marked by fractures of forgetfulness,
As seen through the kaleidoscope of time?

Peter Mladinic

Hills

The way you take the side of a lead
pencil and shade something in
is the way the river came at me,
whether looking out second floor glass
or standing on a bank, the river shape
was part curve, part zigzag, as a hand
with a pencil-on-paper horizontal.

By contrast, the human-made cascade,
shelved, tiered zines at Cakers came down,
a waterfall of Life, Look, Mad, Motor-Trend
Dude, Nugget, Better Homes and Gardens.
It was before they separated the dirty ones
from ones pure as Reader's Digest.
My back to them, at the fountain I nursed

a vanilla egg cream, looked at Mr or Mrs
Caker. Behind him or her a wall mirror.
Their corner confectionary sat at the top
and the river at the bottom of my world.
Between them, Voorhis Ave, tree-lined,
winded to woods that sloped to the river.
Stepping back to look at the whole thing,

I see lots of trees and hills. Voorhis, flat,
winds like a snake. No sharp turns but lots
of gracious curves, it leads to a plateau,
a sudden drop to slopes of woods then,

eureka, the winding river I don't ever want
to be thrown in. It's polluted. I watch myself
stuff Mad into my windbreaker as if I were

Mr Caker. I catch myself stealing. At least
it's not one of those dirty zines. Alfred E.
Neuman grins from Mad. He wears a tie,
Mr Caker an open collar and apron. Bobby
Parker comes in. A black pompadour spills
over his forehead. Cascades like the tiers
of glossies. Mr Caker says, Put it back.

Megan Wildhood

Oso Means Bear In Another Language

*of the Oso Landslide in WA State in 2014, still the deadliest in US History
as of 2022*

hillside slides cribwalled in medics and pills
and coached-up hope that latest land lost under water weight
will be the last, and digging from both lawyers and engineers
will ensure it, will be truth-making but

nothing is too fixed to shake

who gets permission for truth-taking
from the penumbral digging in insecure light
around hills' sides sheared by what? gravity?
engineer failure? act of God?

which question unlocks the answer that raises the dead?

Matt Dube

R BOYZ ELECTRIC?

The animal stink of hormones
sucked into cells, the churn
of drop d chords. Differential
equations govern the slush
of punching and tears. I'm alone.
So no, more chemistry than Galvin's
frog legs jumping from charged
posts to pole position. Whole
choruses lost to reverb and distortion.
I can think for myself. But still
something leaps. The friend I'd left
in the hallway. Less shock than
direction marshalled. Force applied
via the shove on a shoulder, a knee
pivot, pushing off (white lies)
mobilizes bodies, faces them
in the same direction, charged
with intention. The pit a series of nested
shells, bodies whizzing by, waiting
to leap to the next level. A candle shadow
on the wall near the bed. Against such,
what is resistance—a boy who sits
out, a girl even— electron, amber spark
vaults over gaps to find fellows
ready to move.

Matt Dube

Debt as a Path Toward Immortality

This farmwife brooded over
a nest of past due bills just like any other
penitent, stamp-to-tongue communion

her prayer to St Christopher, patron of crossroads,
to hasten paper in motion, Deus Aeturnus. Debt
built basilicae in Rome, added miles to Hadrian's Wall

through centuries, one stone on stone
raised up the high school where my nephew
pitches a pigskin paid for through local taxes.

After his fourth quarter Hail Mary, they chanted
his name like novenas. His glory days,
my sister's sure of it. The mill, the levy

what we'll all owe when the bill comes:
the market in bonds and bacon, both
self-perpetuating, spherical motion
unending. Even then my colleague's voice, shared
unselfconscious with anyone who spent
the afternoon in the office, working off

what we owed the place. She dialed
for dollars, directing Siri to call alumnae
to donate in her memory, a bench to bring

pilgrims who'll kneel to read her name. No one answers
her pleas for posterity. Her voicemail lives
in ones and zeroes, credits and debits only

she recalls.

Matt Dube

YOUR NAME HERE

If asked nicely, would you relive your worst day
because some stranger thinks that because
it happened to you it's different, and also,
you owe us, that crystal scene we're already
screened, living as we do, at the bottom
of the sea, in the shadow of schools
pulverized by bombs, in waiting rooms
waiting through the commercials to hear

The worst. We've lived it more than
you, more times at least, trooping on high
holy days and days less holy to your stoop,
to fix the bleached bones of your story,
more citizen journalist than citizen. So please,
step right up, speak clearly. We know your story
but are so hungry to hear it from you.

Imagine it, the altar call that brings forward
the twisted, inside and out, the forces like hands—
debt, accident, drinking and just the mirror,
the real one above the bathroom sink and that
other mirror, the one that reflects who we meant to be
before those forces— those hands that pushed us,
who knock with spirit hands from some other place. Answer
that call, their knock on the blooded door or the clean,
the ring in the night that confirms what we whispered
about your life. Live through that and answer,
what it costs and how you'd pay.

Marina Ramil

Death Knell

I give you permission to crack my ribs
if ever comes the day I stop breathing.
There you will find a velveteen rabbit,
a small recreation of the long-dead lizard,
and my son, covered in wheaten fur,
glad for a night of sleep someplace warm.

If, in the process, you erroneously press
on the greying slabs of my former lungs,
I'll sing out a final note for you alone.
G5 and you may join along now, at last,
for I am dead and gone and no longer
able to monopolize time and attention.

With the rib bones make potaje colorado
or whichever was your favorite, I forget,
and with the body embrace. Please...
It will be a gesture toward the illusory
nature of goodbyes and, if ever we see
one another again, I will have remembered.

Like my namesake, let me go unengraved
except for on the surface of sheet gold
circling a chubby infant ankle roll.
Instead, I will float on Atlantic waves
all the way home and back again, over
the natural course of years, miles still.

I am remembered by the children I raised.
I am remembered by the cruelties I spat.
I am remembered by the glass I soldered.
I am remembered by the flowers I plucked.
I am remembered by the hands I held.
I am remembered by the words I—

M.S. Rooney
Caldor Fire, 2021

On the car radio, I hear
an update on the Caldor Fire,
but instead of images
of exploding trees, melting cars,
lives and homes destroyed,
my mind sees a childhood path,
a wooded bank on the South Fork
of the American River, a forest
alive with deer, squirrels,
snakes, jays, trout-filled pools,
cousins in jeans and sneakers
and memories of
The first pine tree!
My mother invented a game
to keep me and my sister and brothers
from picking at each other
as we rode crammed in the back seat
during an afternoon drive to the Sierras.
She told us whoever saw the first pine tree
was to shout out *I see the first pine tree!*
but not to say a word until then.
The game kept us quiet for quite a while
as there was a long stretch of road
between Sacramento and Kyburz
before pines began to appear.
Although there was no prize,
I can still taste the glee of winning,
of being first, of being for a minute safe,
untouchable.

LeeAnn Pickrell
Sweet Things

... there are, on this planet alone, something like two million naturally occurring sweet things ...

Ross Gay, "Sorrow Is Not My Name"

Sometime during our year of lockdown
I stopped dancing, those graceful graceless
steps across the living room at night
on fuzzy slippers toed for an audience of one
until the world had become so small
I could no longer spread my arms and spin.

Surrounded by fog and smoke, I forgot
the two million sweet things: vanilla ice cream bars
encased in dark chocolate melting onto my hand,
how sipping a late cappuccino from that orange cup
brings me back to a trip where we ate squash blossoms
at breakfast, coffee cherry buns hot from a wood oven,
stopping at roadside stands to eat fresh papaya,
walking through the water to that secret alcove
in front of the boarded hotel we joked about
refurbishing for ourselves, the relief of coming home.
My friend showing up one day
with a hand-crafted writing desk just because,
watching the girl down the street grow into herself,
the toddler who insists on playing in our rocks,
grabbing them up, letting them rain down
knocking on our front window, the joy
of having neighbors, walking out in stockings

feet to say hello, waking to see the coffee
you've placed beside the bed, the weight
of the cat on top of me when I sleep. A video
of my mother's delight, twirling her napkin
in the air as the waiters hew-hawed her 90th birthday.

Is it wrong to cherish these things when
there's so much suffering? Or is it worse
to forget and not let the sweet things in?

Leah Mueller
Conflagration

It burns away eventually—
projects we spend our lifetimes building,

downtown edifices that once
stood vigilant for patrons,
their heavy doors flung open for the last time,
then closed again.

Inferno erupts through rooftops,
long past midnight, when
shopkeepers forget to pay attention.

Too late now.

Down the block, another structure
scorched beyond recognition.
Was it a house or a trailer?
Beams blackened, charred bone.

In front of the wreckage,
more wreckage.

An ancient station wagon,
windows and doors seared to cinders.
Even metal evaporates into flames.

Why is my town suddenly burning?
Does the blaze know something
no person understands?

Meanwhile, restless hands
keep trying to build and build.
Construction blooms like steel weeds
from the ruins, cranes dangling
in mute defiance.

Everybody thinks
their foundation is solid,
and nobody expects flames,

but sooner or later,
the fire will get it all anyway.

Leah Mueller

Lunch and the World's Problems

Inside the Heartland Café
and General Store, REM's

"Country Feedback"
plays on the jukebox.
Each note settles into my bones.

Old-fashioned cash register,
50-pound sacks of flour, postcards
of Malcolm X and Che Guevera.
Revolutionaries for sale.

Chicago, 1994.

The land of my birth,
but not my son's. At four,
he asks too many questions:

"Does everyone die of AIDS?"

"Is Bill Gates evil, or a genius?"

"Is toxic waste killing our planet?"

I could answer yes to everything,
but I order a stir-fry instead.

Inside the jukebox,
one record replaces another,
lifting plastic discs
with mantid arms, and I

decide that none of it matters,
at least for now. My son,
hunched over his hot chocolate,

plates spread before us,
stacked piles of cornbread and butter.

Outside, the world
and its endless cache

of plastic army men,
turning this way and that,
with no resolution.

Kevin Henry

The Fires of 2020 and Other Signs and Wonders

It started as rioting. And right from the beginning you knew this was real. . . because it wasn't on the TV anymore. It was in the street outside. It was coming through your windows. It was a virus, an infection. You didn't need a doctor to tell you that. It was the blood. — Selena, '28 Days Later'

I

In the beginning

This unholy light—reds
And oranges mostly with a simple touch of rust

Like Mars—the morning star, indeed the god
Herself fell through the eucalyptus trees,

My sense of wonder
Blunted by smoke. The first night.

II

A genuine act of God you called it.
Only this thing made Paradise

Look like just your average
Wildfire. This thing was dark

And hazy and she hovered
Over our half-burned structures and piles of ash

Like a hummingbird-moth emerging,
Spinning from her chrysalis

And scattering her violets
And her greenish hues out into space.

Then she flew away . . .

III

I am born
Between commercials—"Saigon falls

Or Elvis dies" spun like a broken record on TV
Or we might watch the game

Or Billy Graham, or whatever the hell else
Folks watched 'til Carson started

And then we turned off all the lights
And then we went to bed. When we woke

We did the same damn thing again
And again and again

Period. End of story. Amen . . .
The hollowed honeysuckle shrub

Still oscillating up and down

IV

Some nights later I buy a star

Online. I called the thing *The Ghost
Of Jesus Christ*

But I couldn't see her through the light
Pollution plus the name was taken

So I chose *The Ghost*
Of a Caterpillar instead

V

The next morning she appears to me
In the form of the Cone Nebula—
The cover of a calendar I also buy—

One momentary glow in all that darkness
And then the fever starts

And I begin

VI

A poem I'll never get to finish
Early Signs and Symptoms
The authority of God—
My daughters voice, whatever—

It stops me dead in my tracks.
So now I'm standing here

Straining to hear it when suddenly I see it
Growing dark outside and inside

The news is on and I'm trying not to notice
Just to focus. I turn

The volume down—and the goddamn lights
Because by now the headache's splitting—

And I hear it again. "Kevin!"
I think she actually called me by name

Henry

And I am loving it, but I can barely hear her
Because by now the room is spinning

And now she's screaming.
And I have no idea why.

And then I see her—those deep blue eyes
She gets from me—

I lift her up and offer her
The same white lie I heard when I was young

*The sun shines just for you my love
For you and no one else—*

And as I faint, I bite my lip
And get the momentary taste

Of my own blood

Katrina Kaye
In the Wake of War

The wildflowers will not survive.

A mumble and murmur stomping
the surface of the earth has displaced
their fragile roots.

The smoke will rise,
scatter, stumble in the wind.

The gentle opening of petals to sun
will be smothered by air clouded over
by a thick explosion of bravado.

The wildflowers will not survive,
but they might return.

Once the dust settles,
a few seeds may scatter in the wind
in search of new bed to lay
their roots, to rebuild.

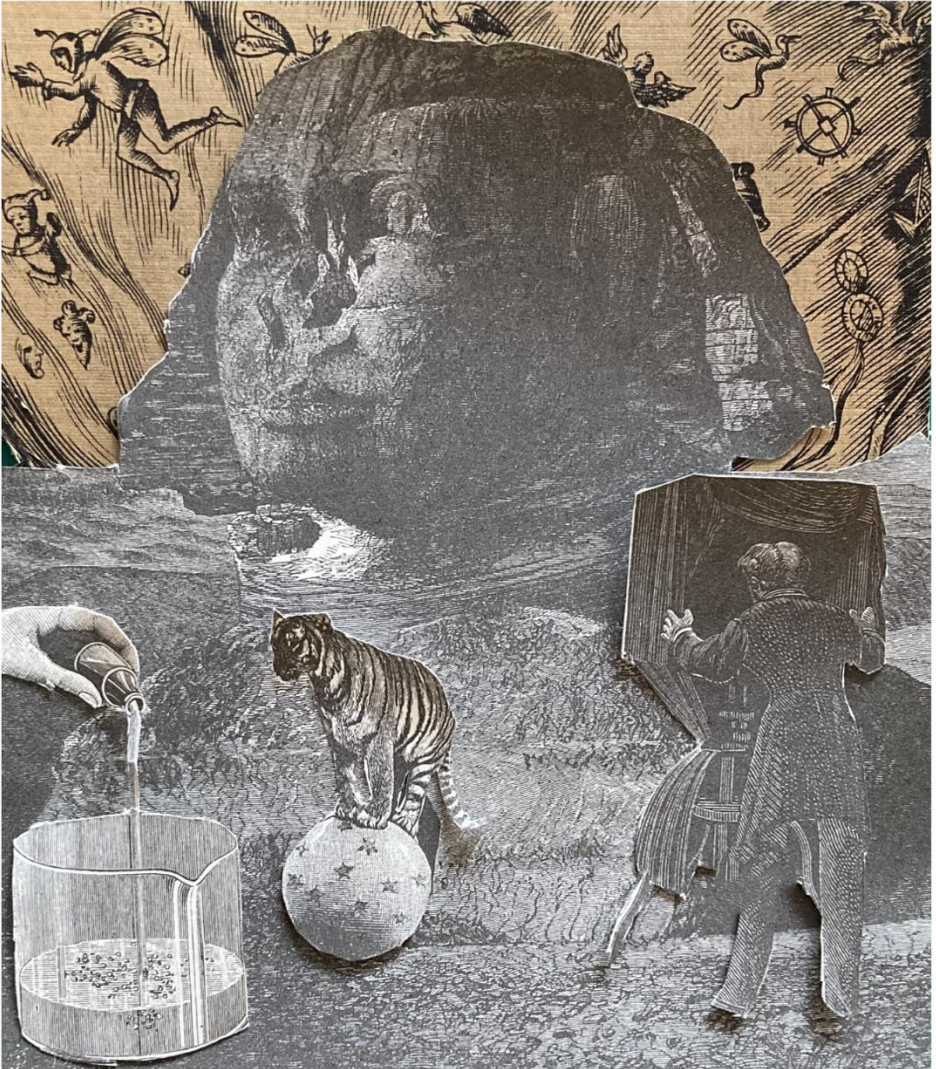
In time:

the rain will return,
as will the wind.
as will the flowers;

just as surely as war,
and explosion and the uprooting
of innocent life
will return.

Kaye

We forget, in our windowsills
 and sunshine,
even if we were planted in this spot for generations
a glorious tragedy is always close by.



Howie Good

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Worms

Tommy Cheis

Dikobe

“White-Painted Woman let Lightning drop Rain in her vagina. After a while Child-of-Water was born.”

Four *dikobe*, or Horse Holders, seated at the cardinal directions around a mesquite fire, snigger. No doubt old Eddie chuckled too when he learned about our primary cultural hero. This trip, which we run every year to initiate our boys into manhood, has been *nbzoo*—good. I didn’t know if Eddie could handle the physical rigors of the deep Gila Wilderness, but now, teaching four boys ranging from twelve to fourteen who they are and what’s expected of them, he’s in his element.

“One day, when Child-of-Water was your age, he wanted to go out. But it was raining. Lightning crashed. His mother said stay in the wickiup because it was too dangerous.” On this cold night, under a blanket of stars, in a place as it was at the beginning of time, he’ll talk to these boys until sunrise. “But Child-of-Water told his mother, ‘I’m the Son of Lighting! Lemme out, goddamn—god bless me!’ So White-Painted-Woman shouted, ‘Hey Lightning! This here’s your son!’”

Over the last three days across a sweep of Wilderness, Eddie and I, in white linen trousers and breechcloths, trade-cloth shirts, leather vests, moccasins that turn up at the toes, eagle-feathered caps and bandanas, led our apprentices on horseback to sacred sites. We taught them to find water and food. To tolerate hunger and thirst. To make and interpret old hand-signs, speak in battle-code, wrestle, run, use weapons. They learned discipline and followed orders.

“Bull...Baloney!” Eddie says, imitating Lightning, “but tell you what, Lady. I’ll give him a test only my son can pass.’ So Lightning made Child-of-Water stand to the east and smacked him with a bolt of black lightning. *BAM!*”

Nothing happened to Child-of-Water. Same thing from the south with blue lighting. *CRASH!* Nothing! Same from the west with yellow. *POW!* Zilch. Then from the north with white lightning, *BOOM!* Bupkis! Child-of-Water stood there better than before holding bags of cash. I'm kidding. So Lightning admits, 'OK, well, I guess he is my son since he survived and shit like that.

"So then Child-of-Water wraps himself in deer intestines and goes hunting. This was when giant animals roamed the earth and I was your age. His mother doesn't want him to go but he's persistent. Child-of-Water finds this nest of eagles terrorizing the whole fucking neighborhood. Stealing meat, scaring everyone. So he takes this big war club and kills them, then plucks the youngest like a chicken and eats him."

The *dikobe* are dozing. Eddie howls like a rabid coyote, jolting the apprentices to attention. They laugh so loudly they're heard in Albuquerque. "I'll cut to the chase, sleepyheads," he says. "Tomorrow's your big day."

On the fourth day, *dikobe* learn the most frightening skill of all—to be alone and self-reliant.

"Child-of-Water is scared but picks up a bow and arrows," Eddie recounts. "He's offed Eagle. Next, through trickery and a little help from his friends—lizards, gophers, shit like that—he kills Buffalo, Antelope, Giant. That's why no monsters are left and his mother's safe and you can all eat meat in peace. Now you know why after a battle everyone sings and dances. It all happened right under your asses."

Eddie waves the apprentices away an hour short of dawn. The boys untie their horses then climb in their sleeping bags, lead ropes in hands, ready to awaken and mount the instant danger comes. Within four minutes, they're snoring.

Then Eddie and I hold vigil by the dying fire. Nothing ill will befall our *dikobe*.

Stuti Sinha

Sepia Summers in Beldih

I don't know what childhoods are supposed to smell like. Mine smells sharp and clean, like chlorine pool water.

I race from the gates of Beldih down the long and dusty driveway to the pool side. My shoes pick up gravelly dust from the road which transfers onto the wet tiles of locker rooms. The floor is a maze of snake-like trails, stamped by dirty shoes, where patches of white gleam through. I wriggle into a turquoise swimsuit with a delicate lace frill around the arm and neck. A random adult in the changing room assists me by inflating my pillar-box red floaties and attaching one to each arm as my patience hisses out of me. I want to fast-forward these moments. What a waste of time! I care less about the flooding bathrooms, drains clogged from the hair of other swimmers, than I do about the extra thirty seconds the pre-swim shower drags out moments before I can enter the pool.

The urgency settles as I jump in and begin to paddle, kick and flick away the young green stems and flame-orange flowers that fall from the giant Gulmohar overhead. I've been doing this long before my memories started to take shape. The lifeguard isn't here yet, with his conical fishing basket tied to the end of a long blue rod as he dutifully sweeps the fallen parts of the tree out of the water.

Not that I believe this is his real job:

I am certain his real job is to make sure that children are not afforded too much fun.

Like swimming across the breadth of the pool so we can break the focused rhythm of lap swimmers or taking up water acreage to play Marco Polo. It always feels like forever before it is my turn to take the role of the blind swimmer again. Too much fun also looks like standing at the edge of the pool and taking repeated leaps into the shallow end, because children aren't

allowed to step foot on the diving boards without adult supervision. We retaliate by using our little arms to create big ripples on the water surface while riding piggy-backed on friends. Fun looks like doing everything inventive that a five-year old's brain can conjure up as pool activities, excluding swimming. We do this all season; every day, with the thrill and enthusiasm of a first timer, until the approaching sounds of bells tinkle furiously.

It *is* the lifeguard.

Now I'm certain, his *only* job is to make sure that children aren't afforded too much fun.

I duck below the surface, praying and believing that the sparkling water, which otherwise reveals every chip and crack of the blue-tiled pool floor, will somehow hide me. The lifeguard is smarter; he just waits patiently. He knows that my breaths underwater are numbered. As my head springs back above the water, he motions with his hands, and I am forced to surrender to his authority. Reluctantly, I drag my feet on the cold steel bars of the pool steps and climb out.

Ickiness crawls over my wet pores at the sight of the slurry mess of dirty shoes leading to the showers. The gravelly dust that my feet picked up off the concrete as I trudged towards the showers magnifies the crudiness. Even after washing it off in mucky bathrooms, the trace of dirt remains.

Safiyya Bintali

This Little Bit'a Life

They are all suspended in the past, road trip stops. They're the places with a soft hum in the ceiling and chrome seats, with skill cranes that nobody changed the prices on, with regulars and the best damn butter pecan ice cream you'll never taste again. They exist only in a plane filled with afterwards, with back-thens and do-you-remembers. From the moment we walk in 'til the moment we leave, we know it'll be left behind forever. It's the only true forever in the world, really—a waning memory that grows dim in the exhaust of a retreating rental car. In each city, they're something more. They're places where all the high school kids have their first dates. Where families eat at on every special occasion. Where people have pictures at and paychecks from. But for us, they are a stop-off. Nothing more.

Some exist on two planes instead of one, though. They cross the afterwards with nows and you find yourself thinking in past-words—with *is* and sentences ending with “-ing” cutting in here and there. In these places, you don't think about how much longer you've got to drive or how close the nearest motel is.

You just live.

There's a place like that along the roads of Virginia, among scattered trees and a strip of lawn, a place of maybe stopping and definite leaving. It's a Denny's, a road trip Denny's, one where you eat cheap and buy souvenirs as a courtesy for someone back home and send the annoying pocketful of change in your friend's pants down an arcade machine with prizes you don't have a chance in hell at getting. A yawning arch separates the restaurant from the rest; if you enter from the Denny's side, you'd flow into sleepy light and murmured conversation, then pour into fluorescent glare washing halls colorless, drowning softly in the thrumming of vending machines.

There were just two tables of customers the day we stopped by. There was an old couple in a window booth, and some bikers in denim at a table too big for just them. Then there was us, five at a table for six, college kids in their first summer away from home. As we waited for our dinners, some of us talked about nothings we'd forget one day, stupid things that didn't matter much to anyone who didn't need to fill time. The rest of us let our eyes wander aimlessly from the brick bar to the bright little window that just barely peered into the kitchen. Eventually, we found ourselves on the drink menu advertising fruity cocktails for the Fourth, even though none of us were old enough to try. It wasn't long before we all saw it, though, our eyes breaking the contact in conversation with other things.

It's on the wall—a map of the States built up with license plates, all colorful, some scenic. Every plate's there for somebody, in this wall of somewhere-else. We traverse the map with our eyes. Some of our table thinks of the *Grand Canyon State* and some of us reminisce *Life Elevated* and one of us thinks of *Home Means Nevada* and the girl there that he loves. As I look at it, it makes the scratched-up whitewood parts of the table under my palms all the more soft, the shaded light above my head all the more bright, the me at that road trip Denny's in Virginia all the more there.

I wonder where the others lie among the map's magazine-clipping alphabet. The bikers—perhaps they miss roaring across *The Spirit of America*, their hogs hot beneath them. If they've been away long, the people who drive down their usual route must wonder where they've gone, a brief pang of curiosity on their commute to work that's small enough to disappear but sharp enough to make them think about how all things end someday. And perhaps the old couple off by the window packs away their leftovers so they can drive back to *First in Flight*. When they get back to their house that's vacation-dark and smelling stale, they might put their takeout box in the fridge and ring their children on the landline that they're home and yes, they'll be there for dinner on Thursday night. We are puzzle-pieced strangers at different tables, and still, we all end up wanting home.

The air sharpens when a clatter comes from the kitchen. Home is away from here. Maybe it's a few hours down the map or maybe it's across the country, but home isn't here. Here, we're all stoppers and we'll all eventually be goers.

I see the waitress coming with part of our dinner. She's wearing a rainbow face mask dotted all over with sequins, but even though we can't see her mouth she has that forever smile pinching the corners of her eyes. There's a flash of the cook behind the swinging kitchen door. She is gone, but we hear her voice ringing sharp above the whoosh-clatter-whistle of appliances. Two dishes on hot plates are shoved past the kitchen window and James says he thinks one's his fish fritters. All our senses buzz, unmuffled by the now. Our tastebuds leap with gravy and salt and our ears ring with kitchen-talk.

Every few minutes, the busser slides by our table, no more than sixteen and the youngest of the three-person crew. He's hoisting containers of dishes into the white glare of the kitchen, then materializing by abandoned tables, still dusted with crumbs, scrubbing silently until it's an image of the restaurant's opening day. I'd like to imagine it that way, slick and sparkling, a wooden portal to some time far away. In between bites of breaded chicken, I wonder, when he's on break or the place is dead, if the busser hacks away at homework. Trig, maybe. Or something equally unpleasant.

The busser, you know—he's not a stopper or a goer. He's the waitress and he's the cook, the three who look at the license plate map not feeling much of anything when it makes people like us hurt for places that are days of driving away. They don't look at it to search. They don't look at it to miss. Their eyes always stop on the sliver of Virginia is for Lovers because that's what's on the back of their cars. Maybe when the busser's shift is over, he eases into his car that he can finally drive all by himself, the car that still smells like childhood a little bit. It's a decade of driving-smell and cheap cologne and smoke that will never go away, smoke left by Someone's cig burns on underparts of the seats, underparts that Someone thought were hidden but that the busser runs fingers over from time to time. And once the car starts up with its tired rumble, he goes off down the lonely road watched over on both sides by forest, the one person going home among the travelers.

It doesn't take long before forks scrape plates instead of meat and we discuss if we should get milkshakes or if it's just too much for right now.

"Damn, they gave us one bill. Well, it's Will's turn to pay for something."

"I don't think I had something that good all week. Man, how'd we live on that gas station crap the past couple'a days?"

"Ma'am, ma'am? Can we split this five ways instead? Oh—thanks."

The after-dinner mush of talk. Our pants rustle as we search for wallets and cards and cash. Lee's twenty tears and he damns everything to hell, but as soon as the waitress comes back to collect, he's all smiles.

Our hair is warm under the Denny's lights, then turns harsh in the hallway. Outside, we're brushed with summer-night darkness.

We all climbed into Will's van, where our backpacks and duffel bags are piled up in the trunk, stuffed with clothes in need of ironing if we want to show ourselves in them again. After James pulled the crushed-up map out of the dash and convinced us the tear isn't all that bad, that we just need to hold the pieces close and we'll get to the next place just fine, we looked at it to see how far we can make it before we need to find a Motel 6. Then Will turned the key and started up the van after threatening it—for good luck, he always said, and so that it'll work—then asked everyone if they're all set.

"Give me a sec."

When my friends looked back, they saw that one of the van's doors was still open.

Night flows in. Crickets and highway cars and the distant crinkle of a radio that has bad signal. I'm sitting there with my legs dangling out, disposable camera up to my eye to take a quick photo of the Denny's. In the viewfinder, it's all blurred with misplaced light.

I feel eyes on my back and neck and I feel them all burn. The burning, sure, maybe it's summer. But I don't think summer judges you as much as the people you love.

Bintali

“For the memories, guys,” I say in defense before shutting the door.
“For the memories.”

Even though we won’t need it.

Lisa McKay

1962

We wake early on these humid August mornings, our sweaty arms and legs embraced by damp sheets, a hot yellow sun already intruding through the slats in the closed blinds. Our mothers have to convince us to eat the breakfasts they've made for us, a cup of coffee that is more milk than coffee, some buttered toast, a banana. We wash our faces and get dressed, shorts, t-shirts, and battered Keds our summer uniform. We don't tell our mothers where we're going this day, nor do they ask. They assume that we'll be home when we get tired enough at the earliest or by dinner time at the latest and in spite of the fact that we wear no wristwatches, we will be home on time. We carry no wallets, no identification, no water bottles, no snacks. The only warnings our parents ever give us involve not talking to strangers, and we mostly, but not always, follow this instruction. We carry no house keys with us because we know that whenever we decide to go back home, our mothers will be there, waiting but not waiting. Their lives do not revolve around our comings and goings. The door will always be open.

We eat hurriedly and then rush off, running our bikes down asphalt driveways already hot to the touch at this early hour, and as the bikes pick up speed, we fling our legs over the seats and rush off down the hill out of our neighborhood, past our friends' fathers leaving for work, past their mothers hanging out the day's first load of laundry. Our fathers make adequate livings working on factory floors or in the trades, and our mothers keep house. Summers stretch out before us, hot and lazy and pointless. There are no summer camps, no enrichment programs to distract us from our idleness. Our homes are not air-conditioned, so on a hot day like this one it's better to be outdoors, where at least the breeze is cooling, and the shade of a tree is a comfort. Our fathers like to call this "Nature's air conditioner" and then laugh, and we don't get the joke, but we know that it feels good to be under a tree on a hot August day.

Down the hill we coast, the wind blowing our hair back from our bare heads, and then up a short hill on the other side, the sweat starting now as we pedal, sweat pouring down our foreheads, down our backs, between the buds on our chests that have not quite turned to breasts, down into the waistbands of our shorts. We turn left at the top of the hill and pedal hard out of town, across the bridge that spans the small river that runs between our town and the next one over, and on into farmland, where we stop finally to look at some cows in the farmer's field. We are fascinated because farm life is so close and yet so different from how we live. The smell here is pungent and because we are young, we make jokes but secretly we are thrilled by it too, enthralled by the damp animal smells and the sight of their smooth brown hides and their liquid eyes. They chew incessantly as they gaze over the fence at us, tails swatting away the persistent flies and eventually we tire of watching them and move on.

We ride into another suburban neighborhood not unlike our own, but we don't know any of the kids here. Like ours, their neighborhood is made of houses all alike on neat, postage-stamp lots, the houses mostly differentiated by how well or poorly the owners have landscaped. The kids here go to a different school in a different town, and yet their lives are very much like our own. Here, too, mothers are hanging laundry on clotheslines and shaking mops out the back door and waiting but not waiting for their children to return home.

A car pulls up alongside us and we glance at the driver. He's not as old as our fathers, but older than our big brothers and we eye him warily, at once cautious and also interested. He slows the car to keep pace with our leisurely pedaling and smiles at us. The smile is friendly and also sharklike, disquieting, and we want to talk to him and also we want him to go away. He tries to talk to us, and we remember our mothers' warnings, but he is handsome and we are wary but we are also interested.

"Hey," he says, slowing the car a bit more and leaning out the window. "Where you goin'?"

"Home," we say, not wanting to look at him while turning our heads to look at him.

“You wanna ride? I could put the bikes in the back.” We glance sideways at each other but not at him and we are suddenly fearful, like feral cats drawn by the promise of a meal but wary of being trapped.

“No!” we yell, and we pedal faster, and then fast enough to make our hearts race. We are picking up speed. Behind us he laughs to himself, and we’re relieved when he turns onto a side street. We slow our pedaling a little to give our hearts a chance to beat less loudly. We are afraid to look behind us, but we look sideways at each other, eyes wide.

We ride through this neighborhood and then the next, each one different and yet also the same, and then we turn eastward again and come down on the other side of the hill toward home. In the process of completing our great circle, we ride past yards edged with honeysuckle and forsythia, we pass the occasional sweet scent of a rose bush, we listen to the crickets and the bees and the cicadas making their summer noises as we ride past, coasting now, the houses and faces looking familiar again, looking like home.

It is well past lunch time when we finally reach our street, but we know there will be a snack for us when we get home. Our mothers are there when we fling open the back door. Things feel the same, and they also feel different.

“Did you have a good day?” they ask, without looking up from the laundry they are folding on the kitchen table. We pour a cold glass of milk from the refrigerator and reach for a couple of the freshly baked cookies cooling on the counter. We consider the question while we chew a cookie and brush the crumbs from our lips.

“Yes,” we answer. “We did.”

Irina Cristache-Taylor

Server: A Day on the Restaurant Floor

Canterbury is a picturesque place. The Tudor and Victorian buildings line the cobblestone High Street where students and tourists meander soaking in the sunlight. Elegant silver-haired ladies wheel trolleys between shops passing by chatty couples who inhabit the terraces of the coffee shops. But there is another side to this almost Tolkienian universe. There're the dirty rooms above takeaway shops, the cash-in-hand jobs, the sketchy neon-lit restaurants and the immigrant communities. This is *your* Canterbury. You are an outsider holding on to the hope that one day this will feel like home so you close your eyes, hold your breath and push through each day with an exaggerated sense of purpose, lying to yourself that there is meaning in struggle, that it will all be worth it in the end and if it isn't at least you know you've tried.

Despite the lump in your throat and the pain in your stomach you walk into the restaurant taking a few steps across the empty dining area and there, standing behind the bar, you see him: tall, bald, overweight, breathing heavily over a notebook. He fixates you with a hateful gaze but you tell yourself it doesn't intimidate you because you've seen it before. You approach to fetch your apron, he grabs your arm, twists it slightly and tells you to listen to him. He says that you are late and even though you know you are ten minutes early you nod and apologize, know better than to confront him. Then the morning takes its usual course. You make coffee for the staff, clean the bathrooms, vacuum, wipe the floors. You are on your knees scrubbing dirt with your nails to remove it from the crevices of the white ceramic tiles and the manager stands in front of you twisting a knife between his fingers telling you everything you've done wrong the night before, calls you names and the usual threats ensue. He says he'll fire you, make sure no one else in the city will ever employ you, nothing you haven't heard before so you continue unbothered. This annoys him so he kicks the bucket of water splashing the hot chlorine mixture

over your hands and the only set of work clothes you have. He calms down and says you need a new shirt, maybe something with a little more cleavage, laughs, tells you to lighten up.

The restaurant fills with diners and the collective murmur of the crowd overtakes the music—tambours and corded instruments that earlier dominated the restaurant roaring from the speakers have been reduced to a faint hum in the background. You operate almost on autopilot, responding to customers who wave you down to ask for more sauce or drinks or an extra plate, monitoring newcomers to take their order as soon as they set the menus down, making sure glasses are always full, that tables are cleaned as soon as they become empty, that you send dirty plates to the kitchen promptly and that you always have polished cutlery and glasses available. Working a double shift you hope for some half-eaten plates to nibble from, but lunch customers are often more frugal, ordering small plates that they wipe clean. When you eventually find an untouched piece of meat on a plate or an uneaten flatbread you stuff it in your mouth quickly before any other waiter can get to it.

Lunch melds into dinner, your feet burn, and your back aches but you push through. You are called to take an order from the kitchen. A sick cook tells you something in a language you don't understand, signals you to wait and keeps coughing in a blood-stained handkerchief. While upstairs the dominant sounds are chatter and music, in the kitchen, it's the incessant clanging of metal pots, the almost continuous running of water and the rapid exchange of instructions among the crew. She hands you a hot platter decorated with orange bulgur, yellow rice, green falafel and an assortment of grilled meats. The other dish you pick up comes on a copper plate with a lid covering the slow-cooked lamb shank which sits on a bed of mashed potatoes with peas and mint. You go back upstairs, acknowledge a customer who is asking for more water, set the plates down at a table of six, go down to pick up the rest of the food and serve it to the severely intoxicated girls in the window booth. One of them is wearing a sash and a balloon is floating over her head and she is leaning against the window with her eyes closed. Her friends are calling her name, 'Bethany!' They are yelling while shaking her but she is motionless until her head drops, jolting her awake, whispers some guy's name, falls back asleep.

Your boss asks you to take a bottle of wine to table nineteen, tells you the women sitting there are prostitutes he slept with and that the man is their pimp. You don't believe him at first but you know that he orders escorts to his house from a website and paradoxically you feel both pity and envy for the girls because they are sitting down, eating, wear pretty clothes, and you are hungry, tired and wear a cheap outfit that reeks of stew and bleach. You haven't quite mastered the skill of uncorking bottles yet and can already tell you've started out wrong. The screw goes in sideways, the cork only comes out one-third of the way and you try to pull it out with your hands while the manager yells profanities over the radio into the headphones, saying how incompetent you are, how he is going to stick the tip of pointy shoes inside your anal cavity with such force that you will fly through the wall and half amused, half scared you turn and squeeze the bottle between your legs and push the cork inside. The customers seem unfazed, talking among themselves and you wonder if they even noticed or care that you botched their forty-pound bottle of Shiraz. It would appear not, so you thank God for pimps and self-absorbed individuals and start pouring the wine, praying they don't see the cork floating inside the bottle.

Every minute customers leave and new ones come in, you clean tables, take orders, mix drinks, send empty plates down, you hear mains away over the radio non-stop and run down to get platters of meat, bowls of hummus, baba ghanoush, salads, fried cheese rolls, baklavas, bowls of rice. The drunk girls leave and they are quickly replaced by a family of six. Downstairs at the grill the fire is blazing, large skewers of meat come out, you take them to their respective tables, come back for more. You see Mustafa the restaurant owner coming in with his wife, adult children and eight other people. The manager courteously attends to their every need, serving their drinks, appetizers, and main courses personally. The owner's son pulls you aside, says that his niece spilt rice and asks you to clean it up. Despite hearing the call for mains-away in the headset you temporarily ignore it, following the instructions and crawling under the table to pick up the rice while the manager makes angry faces, asking why you haven't picked up the orders yet. When you eventually bring the food up, the owner tells you that the table next to theirs has been vacant and uncleaned for ten whole minutes, deeming it unacceptable and

insisting that you attend to it immediately. You start by collecting the dirty glasses, placing them on a tray, but as you pick it up your foot slips, you fall, the glasses shatter. The loud crash silences the restaurant and everyone stares at you. The owner whispers, 'You idiot,' and the manager drags you away from the crowd by the neck, whispering obscenities and threats into your ear, then slaps your butt, making everyone laugh, then you start cleaning the shattered glass through teary eyes.

Eventually, the tables you clean no longer get filled up with newcomers, a sign that the night is winding down. The manager announces you've made record profits, that the owner will be happy. At the end of the shift you sit down with the manager and the kitchen staff picking at leftovers from the owner's table. Everyone relaxes and is in better spirits now that the night is over, jokes and laughs. It's the end of the week so you get paid twenty-five pounds for each of the seven shifts you've worked the past week, each of them being seven hours or more. The total of one hundred seventy-five pounds paid in notes of fives and tens feels heavy in your hand and you are proud of every penny.

Clayton Shirk

Snowfall

As he crosses the street to the church, carrying with him an aluminum baseball bat and the remaining beers in the 15 pack (maybe there's 10 left, maybe there's five, he does not know), as his foot crosses the curb that separates the road and the church's parking lot, one snowflake flutters down from the night sky and lands on his nose. The cold touch stops him in his tracks, and his eyes cross to look at the snowflake. It's November. Last winter it hadn't snowed anything worth a damn. It dawns on him that it may've been two whole years since he saw snow.

Somewhere inside of him, this upset his inner child.

The snowflake melts into water, and he wipes it away with his bare arm.

I don't need another drunk in my life, she'd said.

The church parking lot was large, four laps around it would equal a mile and some change. It sloped downhill, and he walked down the lot in an uneven ramble, not completely steady on his feet, but not at risk of falling.

One night two months ago, while walking home from work and taking a shortcut through this very parking lot, a Dodge Challenger approached him from the darkness, headlights off, and did donuts around him, leaving behind $\frac{3}{4}$ of a circle made of skidmarks. Walking down the parking lot now, he sees the skid marks are still there. His eyes linger on them as he walks towards them, over them, past them.

I don't need another immature adult to take care of, she'd said.

At the bottom of the parking lot is a concrete basketball court. Six poles stick out from the ground, each one meant to be a basketball pole. Back when the church had doubled as a school, this court was taken care of, cleaned, the cracks in it paved over, any broken net or backboard repaired or replaced.

The school has been closed for close to 12 years now. The only pole that still functions as a basketball net is one at the top of the court. The rest of them are bent out of shape, missing rims, missing backboards entirely. Weeds stick out of the cracks that fracture across the court like lightning in the night sky. A metal trash can is tipped over, garbage spread over the grass.

The snow has really begun now.

You know I hate drunk people, she'd said.

The bottom of the parking lot turns a sharp right, into a narrow road that leads to the back of the church. This road has its own cracks and potholes. Really, to call most of them potholes is being too polite. Some of these pits go down at least a foot. When it rains, an unaware passerby could mistake these canyons for small puddles. Won't they be surprised when they're suddenly face down on the asphalt, missing a tooth, bleeding from their nose, their ankle twisted, shin deep in water.

Do what you want, honestly, but don't talk to me while you do it, she'd said.

At the end of the narrow road, taking another right, he arrives at the back parking lot of the church. This too has fallen into a state of disrepair. More weeds sticking out of cracks, more potholes. The grass has begun to have its tips frosted.

This is his destination. Not the parking lot exactly, but further down it. The dumpsters.

Above the dumpsters, sitting high above it all on the brick wall of the church, is a light. A mostly useless light. It does not send down a steady stream of illumination. Instead, it flickers between three states: bright, dim, and off. Each stage lasts less than a minute. The off stage lasts the longest.

This is okay, though. He does not need artificial light. The falling snow reflects the moonlight, an all-encompassing pale blue that leaves no shadow. It too fills the air with a sound, a soft hissing as the flakes reach the ground. The weight they carry absorbs all sounds around it.

He has become very aware of his footsteps. Of his breathing. Of the weight of the beers, of the baseball bat.

Shirk

Just, like, leave me alone. You can't fuck that up, she'd said.

He has arrived at the dumpsters. He drops the pack of beer on the ground. He readies the bat, takes a few practice swings. He stretches his shoulders, cracks his neck.

He reaches into the pack and removes a can of beer. He tests the weight of it in his hand. The snow lands on his arms, melts off from his body heat. He realizes he is only wearing basketball shorts and a black polo shirt. He'll catch a cold.

He readies himself. He tosses the beer can in the air. It rises into the ether, pushing the snow upwards. It begins its descent back down to earth. The light above is at its most bright.

He's brought the bat up above his head, in the stance he's had ingrained in him from years of little league, from varsity baseball.

You make it so hard to love you, she'd said.

In one clean motion, he thwacks the can of beer with the might of God, and the can might as well have joined the Lord, for our man loses track of it as soon as it makes contact with the bat. He looks around himself. In front, in back. Side to side. The thing is gone. Lost into the snowfall ether. The light above goes off.

He twirls the bat around, stretching his back. He reaches into the pack of beers, removes another one.

He weighs it. He tosses it.

I'll quit for you, he'd told her.

Thwack.

I'll believe it when I see it, she'd replied.

He squints into the sky, into where he feels it must have gone. But there is nothing but flakes.

It has joined the Lord.

This is it. This is quitting, he thinks.

Shirk

Grab, weigh.

I'm many things.

Toss.

But I am not a liar.

Thwack.

And maybe she'll finally realize that.

The Lord.

Rinse and repeat until all he has left is a damp cardboard box. He flattens it and tosses it into the recyclables dumpster. He breathes out, and he sees his breath. The vapor floats into the air. It vanishes. And, for a reason he cannot explain, this brings him peace. This tells him he's doing alright. That's all he needed to hear.

Bianca Matthews

Baby Blue

Ellie's tracks lassoed the dayroom as she dashed in from the rain. Her mother sat by the windowsill, tending to a handful of her house plants. She had a ceramic mug for watering, and a plastic spoon to dig out pests. There were hardly ever any, but she thought it was a nice precaution. Ellie pulled up a chair beside her, cradling her backpack. She fidgeted with the zippers, and swept her hair to the side.

"How are they?" She asked, her feet slowly swinging above the floor.

Her mother leaned back. "Well," she sighed, rubbing her forehead. "They could be worse." She pointed to a bluebonnet that was in the early stages of wilting. "I think Baby Blue's on her last leg." Ellie frowned- Baby Blue was her favorite. Her parents had gotten it as a gift after she was adopted. Her Dad named it after an old song he liked, but also after Ellie's own vibrant eyes. She still missed him, especially when she was bored.

"The aloe is coming in, at least," her mother added, pointing to the plant on the far right, which Ellie always thought looked like a mass of green tentacles emerging from a brown sea. "If you get burned, you can break off a bit and rub the oil on your skin." Ellie nodded, making a mental note and placing it between schoolwork and cartoons. Turning her backpack over, she rhythmically tapped on the edges. She looked up, accidentally meeting her mother's eyes.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" She set her mug down, and turned towards Ellie. Hefting the backpack upright, Ellie slowly unzipped it. A stone grew in her throat. Without saying anything, she removed a piece of paper and held it out. Her mother looked silently and, after a moment, took it. As her mother read, Ellie tried to focus on the rain's tapping.

"Oh, Elizabeth," her mother said. Her voice was just above a whisper.

“It wasn’t my fault-” Ellie blurted out. Tears began welling up, a few escaping down her cheeks. “He kept calling you a boy!”

Ellie’s mother buried her face in her palms, and the sheet drifted to the floor. Slowly, she brought her hands down to her thighs. “Sweetie,” she choked. “It’s not your job to protect me.”

“He also said Dad was a homo,” Ellie pleaded. “He was asking for it, Mom. He wanted a fight.”

“I’ve been dealing with people like that all my life,” her mother said shakily, swallowing a sob. “I need you to go to your room. I need to think.”

Ellie did so. As she walked away, she heard her mother begin to cry.

When Ellie woke up it was half past six, and her cheeks were streaked with tears. There was a tap at the door, then it cracked open.

“Can I come in?” Her mother asked. “I brought dinner.”

Ellie didn’t say anything. The door opened further. In one hand, her mother held a plate of food. In the other, she had a chair from the dining room. She placed the food on Ellie’s nightstand, and the chair beside her bed. She sat, putting her elbows on her thighs.

“You know Daddy wouldn’t have wanted you to hit him, right?” She asked, trying to be soothing.

Ellie shrugged, shifted in her bed, then nodded.

“I don’t want you to, either,” she continued. “It will always be my job to watch out for us. I don’t want it to ever be yours.”

Slowly, Ellie sat up. She took the plate off the nightstand and put it on her lap. “Why do you have to watch out for yourself?”

Her mother sighed, and rubbed her palms together. “I—” She said, then paused. She looked down, then back up. “I wasn’t always a mother.”

Ellie gave her a look. “Every mother wasn’t always one.”

“No, that’s—” her mother smiled, and let out a laugh. “When I was born, Grandma and Grandpa named me William.”

Ellie chewed her chicken. “That’s not a girl’s name.”

“I wasn’t a girl then.”

Ellie stared blankly.

“I wasn’t a girl, but your daddy loved me so much he used his magic to help me become one.”

“He had magic?” Ellie looked awed.

“Sometimes, in his own way.”

“I miss him.”

Her mother hesitated, rubbing her ring finger. “Yeah,” she finally said, meeting Ellie’s eyes. “I do too, kiddo.”

“Where are Grandma and Grandpa?”

Her mother’s smile slowly faded. “Probably off on an adventure. Maybe you’ll see them someday.”

Ellie looked down at her plate. “Okay,” she said, nonchalantly.

“Okay.”

They were silent. Ellie ate.

“Well, tomorrow we’ll talk more about what happened at school,” her mother said. “But for tonight – I just want you to know I love you. I have enough love for both of us.”

“Yeah,” Ellie said, preoccupied with her rice. She put a scoop in her mouth. “Love you too.”

Her mother stood, picked up the chair, and dimmed Ellie’s Lamp. “Finish your food, Baby Blue. I’ll get the plate after you’re asleep.” Then she left, closing the door but making sure to leave a small crack of light. She always liked when her mom did that.

Darren's last voicemail was only 10 seconds long. "Hey.. I'll be working late tonight with a new client talk to you later loveyoubye". June often tried to delete it and move on. She had yet to succeed. She played it one more time before putting her phone on the charger and wiping her eyes. At least the kitchen was finally clean, she thought. All the dishes were put away except for Ellie's.

Rain was still slapping against the window, and there had been a flash flood warning on TV. But there wasn't any thunder to wake Ellie. Thank God. Girl becomes inconsolable. Christ, she thought. What am I going to do with her? She loved her. Goddamn, she loved her. But Christ. Darren would know what to do. He'd say his magic words; they could calm a hurricane. He'd know how to handle her suspension.

June wiped condensation off the window and crouched beside her plants. Darren had suggested pressing Baby Blue into a scrapbook once it died. She had always wanted to bury it outside, where a few more bluebonnets could sprout if she was lucky. Now, she thought about bringing Ellie and burying it with him. Maybe plant it with the life it had left. But for now she knew what she wanted to do with it.

June saw that Ellie had closed her door after their conversation. Slowly, silently, June opened it. Ellie was gently snoring, her back turned towards the door frame. The lamp was off, replaced by a blue night light across from her bed. Her empty plate was on the bedside table. She crept in, picked it up, and put Baby Blue in its place. Then she left, closing Ellie's door for the night.

Annette L. Brown

A Moment at Memorial Field

Along the third base foul line, the boys embrace in a one-arm hug for a post-game pic. One wears a toothy grin, full of satisfaction at having pulled off a photo caper: shifting just as the pic is taken to squeeze the shorter boy to his shoulder. The squashed boy suffers the prank with a smirk.

Grade school buddies grown to high school friends, they are outfitted in the rival uniforms of their respective schools, purple and gold vs. blue and white. Cap bills shade their eyes from the stadium lights of a night game, the opening game of the annual baseball tournament. Their hearts are light, measuring happily ever after in a win/loss record and a batting average.

But measures change.

In five years, one will struggle with addiction. It will drive him to steal, most often from his own family, but once, he'll attempt theft at his friend's: a rodeo buckle, sterling and shiny, resting on a porch table. Guilt pricks the fingers reaching for it. He tells himself he wants to examine the intricate etchings, but then he's tucking it into his sweatshirt, the buckle hook catching the pocket edge as his friend rounds the corner. Bloodshot and shamed, he peers into eyes gaining clarity. He hears, "Get out, you f***ing drug addict!" Other things make this truth undeniable.

He stumbles three steps down from the porch to the earth, the distance becoming a chasm too wide for the friendship to traverse.

The addict struggles with more thefts and lies, overdoses and rehabs. The other boy thrives—junior college, including baseball, later moving out of state with his parents to start a calf ranch.

In two more years, that boy will take a turn on a country road too fast, and the friendship will never have the chance to heal, even though the addict will crawl from hell, hands coated in muck, knees scared but eyes clear, to wish

he could make it right with his friend—pose for a pic, embrace in a guy hug. He can never say, “I’m sorry. Let’s go hunting. I’ll drive.”

The mom of the lost son will never stop loving the other boy, encouraging him, hoping. At her son’s memorial, she embraces the addict’s mother and whispers, “Squeeze that boy, every day. You just don’t know.” The women wrap their resolve around one another, hold, as if palms pressed to backs could bind splintered hearts.

I hardly remember these boys posed in Memorial Field. One deceased, one clinging to light stolen from his eyes when he disappeared beneath addiction, the drugs like snow scraping a soft-angled ridge, slow moving snow, gathering everything visible, gaining momentum, an avalanche burying us.

At times during those years, the weight of my fear smothered hope. My strangled breathing triggered moments I wished it would end. Not me. I didn’t want to end. I wanted the pain ripping through me, my own avalanche, to end. But how would it end? Did I want my son to die? Of course, not. Shame hollows me when I think of how at times despair rushed over me so suddenly, I could not protect myself from it. Mothers are supposed to be strong. But I am small compared to an avalanche.

A last look at this pic from Memorial Field before I tuck it away—I admire how crisp my steady hand rendered our boys of summer when they were still boys. The joy of that moment lived in a different lifetime, but only now do I discern what a camera could not.

Our boys were every boy, every set of friends who measured a good day in line drives and diving catches, who imagined wearing a professional uniform, who daydreamed of girls with long, tan legs. They were every boy ripe with innocence and potential in such abundance neither could be contained—saturating photo frames, spilling over trimmed spring grasses of an outfield, around base paths, into dugouts, up into bleachers, their possibility a restorative, like a cool gust received with a sigh, lifted chin and closed eyes.



JC Alfier

Prière nocturne — Night prayer



JC Alfier

Forêt d'ombre — Shadow-forest

Joshua St. Claire
Spring Haiku

let's just leave
this where it is
cowbird chick

what lies beneath
the press of petrichor
fiddleheads

mansard roof
northern mockingbirds
tessellate

ingenue
a cabbage white passing over
violet pansies

not never but also not common adderstongue

now repeat after me
rhododendron

spring dream
narcissi bursting
from every pore

Rigel setting
behind the blue ridge
bird's-eye veronica

St. Claire

Sir Galahad
the Chaste Moon
among the snowdrops

white noise skittering across the asphalt spring rain

John Dorroh

Eclipse

When the moon passed between your face & the sun, I shadowed myself under pebbles along the creek where fish shadowed sand grains that shadowed things smaller than themselves. It wasn't meant as a contest which leaves its victims listless, unable to hook beauty in the eye & marvel graciously at an invisible star 93,000,000 miles away. Who came up with that number in the first place? Archimedes with his Greek savvy for solving complex math problems without as much a calculator? Einstein, his wild hair, his immigrant status from a country too blind to recognize his gift? 4 ½ minutes of surreal existence offering me a crisp perspective, that I won't be here forever, nor the sun or the moon, or the stars that sparkled like jewels in the azure heavens, that brilliant corona that tempted me to look, just for a second or two, so I could receive validation that, as far as the big picture is concerned, I'm as insignificant as a solitary electron in the shell of a helium atom. I didn't look the corona in the face, nor try to talk to God while the confused rooster crowed in the background over the ridge where the second sunrise of the day appeared like a dream. Instead, I wallowed in goosebumps, sat as quietly as a church mouse, wondering about the shadows that I cast upon my own precious planet.

John Dorroh
Deadwood

I hug you, big tree, scratchy bark peeling off
into my palms,

empty, lifeless, I feel no sap in your core,
your dead leaves hanging on

for another season
of slow growth, excruciating
to live such a fruitless life, haunting the landscape

only to be counted in some useless census

Jane Rosenberg LaForge
Fracture Mechanics

The failure of brittle materials was first explained during World War I, soon after my grandmother sailed the Atlantic, and her little brother was put to work in dryland farming, a favored practice on the Canadian prairie as frail soils were manipulated by the hands of orphans. Once all moisture had been dispensed, the family decamped for permanent drought conditions in Los Angeles. My grandfather followed, though he did not prosper in the beginning as he planned but instead clung to his new and more successful in-laws. The women sewed ties for a nickel a piece so long as they could keep the men ignorant; the matriarch, my great grandmother, collected hair for wigs assembled for her co-religionists. Stresses in small objects are more likely to result in breakage, compared to the vast gatherings of gossamer fibers molded into wings and fuselages; just consider the failure of lungs or a single pancreas, overwhelmed by their duties, becoming impervious to air and the demands

of citrus, grown a continent away, then
transported by rail to the Southland.
Where else could the principles of fracture
mechanics be so amply demonstrated
than in the body of the patriarch, his
insides so desiccated by sugars and smog
he shattered like so much ceramic,
an accumulation of clay sculpted
and fired for a moment's awe or
convenience, its pieces ultimately
scattered in the dirt, like something
enigmatic, ancient, or useless.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge

Run

In high school we went on grunion runs: an hour's drive on Pacific Coast Highway at abominable speeds to be on time to see fish flinging themselves ashore in a fit of procreative instinct. You were supposed to bring a bucket to collect the unlucky souls who could not quite complete the evolutionary imperative; next to be gutted and plunged into a mix of egg and breadcrumbs and boiling oil, to be feasted upon by the apex predators. But we always forgot the buckets, though not the blankets for making out afterwards; and I never once saw a grunion, but the boys avidly pointed them out on the spawning grounds, sand flying as sleek bodies twitched like the first boy to ever throw his arm around me, at a Halloween gathering. I was thirteen and we watched with the adults the Martian invasion of New Jersey while other kids smoked oregano and played tag in the darkness. The next day at school, the girls crowded around me, warning I'd be raped if this secret ever got out. During the grunion runs you had to yield your vision to faith, trust in your companions that the grunion were out there, pulsing like light in the waves like the demonstration of blood flowing within the giant plastic circulatory system at the Museum of Science and Industry.

Or like listening to the Christian girls as they talked about the resurrection at lunch; or how the neighborhood bullies performed their rites of passage upon my body, humiliations that had to give them a sense of control over their unruly fixations as they pulled down my pants, made me drink mud, or made me talk to the day laborers working in the neighbors' yards because they said the workers were in love with me, wanted to run away and get married, have children, buy me diamonds. They insisted I had to give the itinerants a chance, since who else was there for them, and I did, in another act of unrefined witness, either to be castigated for my beliefs, or ridiculed for my skepticism.

James Owens

Ancient Photograph

They are preparing to flee the city.
It is the fifth year of the war, and she is three.
A stiff pose, held. A tiny white dress.
Mended lace foams at her throat.
Her father scowls through his beard
And grips her against his chest
Like a valise full of her mother's bones.

DS Maolalai

Darkness on the river. Two swans

glide, necks arched, curling downward
like worms on hooks. these are not
stately symbols – these are
animals, coursing a winter of water.
cans stud the surface like gems
on engagement rings, slinking
through glistens of oil. a man
on the quayside stops and looks
down for a moment. he's on his way
somewhere; has a beer, wears
a coat with a hand in the left hand-
side pocket. life flows by
slowly, in cars and on bicycles
past him. below are the birds,
and around him the rainwater
shines off the road, reflective as skin
on a blackberry. a tree's bald
and straggling pubic hair
hangs over darkness.
shadows behind it give
shape to the edge of the light.

David Cameron

Muscadines

Yellowjackets hover over muscadines
split and fermenting in warm summer grass.

I pick and pop a purple orb into my cool
child's mouth well versed in the rural art

of taking sustenance when and where it is
offered with bounty overflowing.

I bite and break the leather-tough skin tasting
grape essence and spitting seeds that fall to ground

to be eaten by sparrows and dropped from heights to
fertile soil below. There they will grow and twine

ripening in summer seasons hence to enlarge the hearts
of children yet unborn with undeserved abundance.

Cliff Saunders

Mirror in the Desert

Dancing across the desert
with a slender ballerina,
I hear a voice whisper
sister. The ballerina slips
from my embrace and vanishes

into a mirror half-buried
in sand and cactus flowers.
I try to follow, breaking
the mirror with my first step.
Its glass bleeds like skin.

Brother. I hold my breath.
Wind blows a fine sand
across the broken shards.
I drop to my knees,
cutting them on the glass.

I hear a voice whisper
brother. I raise my head.
The hand of the ballerina
extends from the mirror,
trying to caress my face.

Christine Potter

Eighty-four degrees, Late April

It's weird as Halloween: storm-dirty clouds that haven't thundered yet, sun boring through like an ember landing on something you wouldn't think flammable. Humid air you'd shrug at in July, but exotic now. And so I'm remembering my mother's mother and her thick, black hair—not a strand of it silver or white until her seventies, but even so a true nana: silky floral dresses, the tender, talcum-pale flesh at the top of her arms. It was impossible to know when she was actually angry. So often she was—and how she worried! Loved us, but believed mostly in medicine: in her migraine injections, in a codeine-laced cough syrup our doctor prescribed me for bronchitis the same summer the family left for Cape Cod and had me stay with her because I'd flunked the Trig Regents and needed to make it up. She insisted I swallow a double dose on my way to retake the exam. I was seventeen, lacking the heart

and courage to refuse. Today is like that: drugged,
fevered, hot and rank as the gym crowded with kids

from three towns around, seated in sweaty rows,
whispering formulas to themselves like prayers, as

fans blew papers off desks. I'm back there today, in
this odd quiet. I'm writing down just enough to pass.

Christine Potter

Voting

is a form of prayer, I think. You write down what you want and put it in someone else's hands. If enough other people want it, it happens. So God

becomes counting it all up, becomes everybody speaking at once. Yesterday afternoon I watched young men reel in a dozen striped bass easy—fish

big as my arm—from the Hudson River. Young men, silver and black prizes held high in plastic bags, walking to their cars grinning, past a line of us out

on Piermont Pier watching. You're only supposed to eat a half pound of bass from the Hudson per month, but people don't seem to care. The clouds

were a worn-out gray—sky and river duller than the bass—and today's about the same, except for this cold, steady rain. I went out to vote today.

I was thinking of those young men and their fish. Were they still fishing, black hoodies pulled up over their heads, fat raindrops pocking the river? Were

they casting their lines, casting their ballots, all that bass taking their hooks? I always want to remind them about the PCP's and know they'd only laugh.

It's a fat paycheck, no damn deductions. The stripers are running: free dinner! The cold air's spiced with changing tides and woodsmoke. Everybody's happy.

Christine Potter

My House Sits Right on the Road

Things are bad but my fingers keep working.
The day's torrents keep ebbing and flowing.
Come stand next to me and you'll hear surf
discussing two beaches at once. It echoes at

the bottom of the hill we all climb with each
day's close, when I pick up the olive oil in its
heavy flask to drizzle in a pan, or when I mix
biscuits with my fingers, wedding ring slid

into my pocket. I make salad, easing in salt
and vinegar bare-handed, lifting the leaves
of butter lettuce like pages of an ancient book.
This stings my cuticles. So I'm not surprised

someone wants to shut me up. When I put out
a Vote For Joe sign last time, little stars and
stripes attached to it with packing tape, my
neighbors smashed it, flags and all. I'm old.

I could tell you what happened before, which
hurts me pretty much every day. I think the
U.S. Capitol dome is beautiful as any named
full moon. I poke the chicken breast to see if

it's done, wash my hands, peer out my kitchen
window. My house, older than this country,
sits right on the road. So far, it's a quiet night.
Things are bad but my fingers keep working.

Chris Bernstorff
Doing This

The needle punctuated the air,
a relentless gavel handing down
sentences, the craft-store-bought
fate punching white nylon futures
through the presser foot and into dead
canvas my mother'd scrapped
from old projects gone wrong.
This was her first attempt
at the sewing machine after the doctors
finally cauterized the last retinal bleeds
and she'd begun to learn braille, walk
with a cane, find passing cars by ear.
She insisted that 20/1240 vision
didn't mean she couldn't
sew, so my father resigned himself
to hovering, wavering on his heels
in attempted help. *I can do this, Allen,*
met my father's hands and every word
he spoke, her back hunched like the edge
of a waterfall. I could see my father
work his frustration like a glass blower,
the liquid fire descending down into the mold
of his stomach to set. In his eyes, ghastly
potentialities—severed digits, pulpy flesh—
shaped themselves silently, but my mother
only leaned more over the machine. I don't
remember why she lifted the presser foot,
the blood when the needle passed through

her finger, or whether we went to the hospital,
but I can see my father that night, cradling
her thumb in an ice pack on the sofa,
my mother's tears carrying all the fear
of losing her life as a nurse, failing
as a mother and a wife, down into the soft plaid
of his shirt, the one that always
smells of pine. He whispered over and over,
You don't have to see.

Chris Bernstorff

Windows

My pastor believed the most beautiful stained glass
wasn't glass but rather a free Happy Meal and a Number 3

no mayo in the hands of an out-of-work mother
and her autistic son. He preferred liturgies include conversations

about the weather and the Phillies with strangers on the subway
and in bars—the Body brought to the proverbial tax collectors

and lepers. For my sister, the most beautiful stained glass
was water, frozen in its own prostration, cascading

down the cliffsides of Rt. 15, runoff falling
into righteousness. Her favorite minister was the praying

mantis, his wordless sermons uniting peace and brimstone, silence
preaching stillness before God louder than a televangelist.

Here, panes kaleidoscope, hymnal-thick, light passing through umber
and ruby, violet and blue, soft gold, bathing

the small chapel of a Pennsylvania monastery in the joyful shades
of blood. The building bows in prayer, the patient breathing

of the vents fading like echoes of stones in ponds. If
the universe is a cathedral, everything is glass.

Cassandra Caverhill

Circlet

Each filament of shed hair seeks coupling,
and I can't blame what leaves my body when
I want more than what I'm given. Mom says
I'm a low-maintenance woman, not a
no-maintenance woman. I buy myself
bouquets; sunlight reveals a strand in spokes
of verbena. I unravel its grip,
a scarf slipping from an elegant neck.
To collect each thread: lengths of time
strayed from scalp, and sew a hemline
of horizon. To wrap fiber around my
finger; ring of constancy, solemn oath
of natural progression. This tourniquet
stems the loss I've inherited through living.

Casey Aimer

Cyberpunk Romance

Let's reinvent digital love, eliminate names
from our histories until we can't search
for anything except each other.

Our avatars met at a freefall punk show,
unsanctioned sounds amplifying an atmosphere
while we moshed like pinballs among endless mist.

For dates we floated into 3D art show renders,
copyrights be damned, superimposed
our interpretations atop canvas.

We tested full-body emotes, slept inside
ethical hacker dens with tie-die collaborations
and joined a hundred causes each coding session.

We flirted between neon-clad streets, alive
with nothing but promises of impossible
futures and stained river walks

where we dropped glow bricks,
watching them brighten pessimistic
coasts and then degrade into data chum.

Our personas broke into encrypted libraries
to uncover banned Kamasutra sequels
melting into silhouettes of words

and blended watercolor sleeves.

Let's rediscover physical love, splice

a scheme for our flesh to meet, do it all again.

Brandon C. Spalletta

Miscarriages

The first lies in wait just out of sight.

The word yes seems more promising
than warmth after winter's bite.

The preceding days are long
like sunlight reaching down through the canopy
to bless your new forest of discovery

until you thoughtlessly push through
some thicker brush to step into the sixth week
and your nameless daughter's heartbeat
is swallowed whole by quicksand
from right underneath your feet.

You see the second one coming from years away,
the word yes containing less integrity than maybe—
chance appointed Master of Ceremonies to fate.

Feeling devalued like a pawn cast off to the side
from a worthless deal you're left wondering
which sin you're being punished for,

if it's more than one,

or all of them.

The deafening blasts of silence's ensuing wrath
whisper what your bones knew all along—

you weren't promised a damn thing.

It's like gambling—anticipating
the mountains of a new life off
in the distance until learning
that the most beautiful sunrises
which will never reach for you
wait patiently at the summit.

Blair Martin

Of All of Nature's Leaves, Envious

most of autumn's vibrant
declining; the toasted oranges,
gentle browns & cranberry reds.

More photogenic than the fuzzy
budding of spring, the firm green
in summer's heat, the slumps
of winter's decomposing.

Not so though for many humans;
we, especially in the white West,
crave only the new, freshly
unfurled youth of May.

Here, in the summer of my life,
may I welcome the fall's graying,
spotting, wrinkling. May I treasure
the ache that remembers spryness.

When the chill and I acquaint,
may I gather myself in a cozy
blanket & pour a cup of tea,
leaves falling down.

Blair Martin

Two Months Have Passed

Cleaning out your studio,
my fingers linger on a tube
of ultramarine oil. You'd swirl it

with turpentine to paint washed
seashore waves, sky blues.
I hoist it towards the bin; my palm

curling 'round. The crinkled aluminum
contours in a curve. My eyes well
& brim over at your hand's imprint.

You squeezed mine when we dug
clams on the beach. Sand, sunburn
for days. An unmoored canvas.

Bill Garvey
Toolsheds

for Ted & Shelly

My neighbor across the cove
hauls gravel in a wheelbarrow
from the mound at the end
of his driveway to the section
of lawn where the new toolshed
will be built to replace the old.
The cove is wide enough that
I can't see the gravel or the
wheelbarrow, but I see him
methodically march to and fro,
bending to scoop more gravel
with a shovel I also can't see.
It's all in his white T-shirt – a ghost
laboring the wheelbarrow from
point A to point B. He passes
the old, weather-beaten, rotting
shed, also a ghost leaning against
the sky, nodding to the T-shirt
as he passes, wondering how
in the world it has come to this.

Bill Garvey

Cottages

Hackett's Cove, N.S. May, 2024

The dock of the cottage two doors down
juts into the cove like an old, gray chin
with all of its earned defiance, daring
the wind and sea to do something about it.

Four lonely white rockers rock with the stiff
wind from Saint Margaret's Bay, occupied
by long gone lobstermen who built
the structure, God knows when, to be

a fish shack with an unfancy bed. Maybe
they plan to haunt this new family
who won't arrive till July, maybe June,
giving them time to loosen floorboards,

unglaze a few windows, or however ghosts
mess with the livings' heads. They sway,
have a hearty laugh on the summer people.
Case in point: the folks two doors up

who paid nearly a million for something
less than \$4,000 built in the 40's. And then
they go and plop a hot tub in the yard
as if living by the sea isn't cool enough.

Did I mention the outdoor kitchen?
If I was dead, I'd laugh, but I'm not.
I sit on my deck in earshot of their pretension.
Sipping Chardonnay. Writing poetry.

Beth Brown Preston

The Painter

You sat with brushes in hand and the light flowing above and below,
the prayer like paper, the light illumined all our sacred trees.
Somehow, we forgot all our raucous and joyous past loves
when I asked you to listen for the screen door's slam
and the call to supper as I brought you the evening meal.

And then there was that folio of your recent sketches:
so many similar dark faces filled with joy.

I gazed at the rich, brown texture of a watercolor on the page,
a man's tortured face, his beared, his glowing tough bronzed skin.
You said it was a portrait of your brother,
who died overseas during a rain of fire in the Viet Nam war.

And you put down your brushes to confess
we were going to start life all over again
without waging the private wars that keep us together.

You painted your dead brother's face
against a background of blue.

Beth Brown Preston

Collage

after Romare Bearden

Gather out of star-dust:

memories of tender Harlem evenings where portraits filled
my young mind with jazz. And we stayed awake late nights
in our rented place on West 131st Street laughing and talking
the talk. DuBois, Hughes, Ellington. The gatherings
when I heard their stories, the abstract truth, scientific in grandeur
yet ever so real, down to earth, stories of Time and then,
the soothsayers, the truthsayers, singing their jogo blues.
Silence willfully broken. Scrapbooks of faded brown photographs,
clippings from Ebony and Jet. Folks dancing the original Charleston,
the fine old step, the swing and the sway.

Gather out of moon-dust:

There was crisis and opportunity. Black new voices, new forms.
Voices of folk singing real soft and mellow.
Lessons on how to become a “real poet,” while Claude McKay
joined the Russian Communist Party. Fire from flint.
Letters were penned by Countee Cullen to Langston Hughes.
Shadows reigned over the evening skies of Harlem.

Gather out of sky-dust:

a time for the “new negro,”
For Pullman porters to unionize
and for Josephine Baker, chanteuse extraordinaire, to exercise
her wings of gossamer silk and satin.
Music warbled from an ebony flute

while poor folk sold their fine clothes to the Jews.
Was Christ Black?
Do angels really play trombones for God
in a black/brown heaven?

Gather out of song-dust:
Did we owe it all to Spingarn, Knopf, or Van Vechten?
Or was originality and improvisation our sacred creed?
As I gazed from the window at the skies
of my fading youth, all I could see was fire.
I wanted to hear the Blackbirds Orchestra wild on a Saturday night.
To hear "Go Down Moses" sung in church on a Sunday morn.
Wanted a style of my own.
To become Emperor Jones.
Daddy Grace.

Contributor Bios

Casey Aimer is a cyberpunk poet and editor who holds master's degrees in both poetry and publishing. He works for a non-profit publishing science research articles and is founder of *Radon Journal*, an anarchist science fiction semiprozine. His poetry has been featured in *Strange Horizons*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Apparition Lit*, *Star*Line*, and many more. An SFWA and SFPA member, his work has been a Rhysling Award finalist and Soft Star Magazine contest winner.

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, *Southern Poetry Review* and *Vassar Review*. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work.

Chris Bernstorf is a touring poet. He gives all of his poetry albums and books away for free via Bandcamp and direct message on Instagram and Facebook. He'd love to come perform in your living room and is always grateful just to be there. His wife has a killer mall emo band called Visitor Pass, of which he is the number one fan.

Safiyya Bintali is a writer, researcher, and children's illustrator. Her work has been featured in *Drip*, *Bridge Eight Press*, and *Beyond Thought*, among others. She has taught high school English and completed a residency with *Tiny Spoon* literary magazine in Fall 2022.

Annette L. Brown is a mother, wife, friend, retired teacher, who lives on an almond farm in Central California where she enjoys spending time with people she loves. She is grateful for the support of The Taste Life Twice Writers and The Light Makers' Society. Annette has work in several publications including *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Last Stanza Poetry*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Every Day Fiction*, and several Personal Story Publishing Project anthologies.

David Cameron writes poems and stories in Western NC where he lives with his spouse and son. After a career writing to deadline, he is currently on loan to the mountain trails and waterfalls. He has been published by *The Rural Fiction Magazine*, *Friends Journal*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, *the Avalon Literary Review*, and the *NC Poetry Society* among others.

Cassandra Caverhill is the author of the chapbook *Mayflies* (Finishing Line Press, 2020). Her work has appeared internationally in journals across the US and Canada, most recently in *The Coalition*, *Pagination*, and *Short Reads*. Cassandra is a graduate of Bowling Green State University's MFA program in poetry, and she teaches creative writing in her hometown of Windsor, Ontario.

Tommy Cheis is a Chiricahua Apache writer, medicine leader, veteran, and Cochise descendant. After traveling extensively through distant lands and meeting interesting people, he now resides in southeastern Arizona with his horses. His short stories appear in *The Rumens*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Carpe Noctem*, *ZiN Daily*, *Spirits*, *Red Paint Review*, and other publications. His first novel, *RARE EARTH*, is under submission, and he is at work on his second.

John Dorroh has never fallen into an active volcano, nor has he caught a hummingbird. However, he did manage to bake bread with Austrian monks and drink a healthy portion of their beer. His poems have been nominated for Best of the Net and have appeared in over 100 journals, including *Feral*, *North of Oxford*, *River Heron*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *El Portal*. He had two chapbooks published in 2022.

Matt Dube teaches creative writing and American lit at a small mid-Missouri university. His poems have appeared in *Scud*, *Slant*, *Interstice*, and elsewhere.

Bill Garvey's collection of poetry, *The basement on Biella*, was published in 2023 by DarkWinter Press. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Rattle*, *One Art*, *San Antonio Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Nixes Mate Review* and others. He is retired, and lives in Nova Scotia and Toronto with his wife, Jean.

Howie Good's latest book, *Frowny Face* (Redhawk Publishing, 2023), is a mix of prose poems and handmade collages. He co-edits the online journal *UnLost*, dedicated to found poetry.

Richard Hartwell is a retired middle school teacher who just moved to northern Illinois from southern California with his wife of fifty years, Sally Ann, one grown daughter, and ten cats. Like Blake, Emerson, Thoreau, and Merton, he believes that the instant contains eternity.

Kevin Henry was born and raised in New Mexico but is presently following his wife and 4-year-old daughter up and down the Lost Coast of Humboldt County California in a desperate search for mermaids.

Richard Jordan's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Terrain*, *Cider Press Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Rattle*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Sugar House Review*, and elsewhere. His debut chapbook, *The Squannacook at Dawn*, won first place in the 2023 Poetry Box Chapbook Contest. He serves as an Associate Editor for *Thimble Literary Magazine* and lives in the Boston area where he works as a mathematician and data scientist.

Katrina Kaye is a writer and educator living in Albuquerque, NM. She hoards her published writings on her website and is seeking an audience for her ever-growing surplus of poetic meanderings. She is grateful to anyone who reads her work and in awe of those willing to share it.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge is the author of four full-length poetry collections; *My Aunt's Abortion* (BlazeVOX books 2023) is her most recent. She also has published four chapbooks of poetry; a memoir; and two novels. She reviews books for *American Book Review* and reads poetry for *COUNTERCLOCK* literary magazine.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as “a cosmopolitan poet” and another as “prolific, bordering on incontinent”. His work has been nominated for Best of the Net, Pushcart, and the Forward Prize, and has been released in three collections; *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

Blair Martin grew up on a small farm in Lancaster County, PA. They received their PhD in Clinical Psychology from Bowling Green State University and teach at Joliet Junior College as a professor of psychology. They are participating in the Lit!Commons community with the Loft Literary Center.

Bianca Matthews is a trans author that currently resides in Missouri, but will always be a Texan at heart. Her publishing credits include *365 Tomorrows* and *Saving Daylight Magazine*.

Lisa McKay earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Southern Connecticut State University. She and her husband live in coastal Connecticut with one indoor cat and a yard full of bunny rabbits.

Peter Mladinic's most recent book of poems, *The Homesick Mortician*, is available from BlazeVOX books. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico, United States.

Thomas Molitor is a graduate of UC Berkeley and lives in the high-desert of New Mexico.

Susan Morritt is a writer, visual artist and musician from Waterford, Ontario, Canada. Her work appears in numerous magazines including *34 Orchard*, *The Rabbit Hole Writer Co-op Anthology*, *Third Estate Art's Decapitate Journal*, *The Speckled Trout Review*, and *Does It Have Pockets*. She was short-listed for The Staunch Short Fiction Prize, long-listed for The Redbud Writing Project Coppice Prize, as well as others.

Leah Mueller's work appears in *Rattle*, *NonBinary Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Citron Review*, *The Spectacle*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. She has been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Net. Leah appears in the 2022 edition of Best Small Fictions and was nominated for the 2024 edition. Her two newest books are *The Failure of Photography* (Garden Party Press, 2023) and *Widow's Fire* (Alien Buddha Press, 2023).

S. Abdulwasi'h Olaitan is a Nigerian poet and essayist. He writes from a hole 54 kilometers away from Kwara State. He's the author of the longlisted chapbook *Life, An Objet D'art* (Arting Arena Poetry Chapbook Prize 2023). His works can be found in *Believeau Books*, *Bare Hill Review*, *UGR*, *The Graveyard Zine*, *OPA*, *Avant Appalachia Ezine*, *Ta Adesa Magazine*, *Wordsempire Magazine*, *Shooting Star Magazine*, *Lacuna Magazine* and elsewhere.

James Owens's newest book is *Family Portrait with Scythe* (Bottom Dog Press, 2020). His poems and translations appear widely in literary journals, including recent or upcoming publications in *Channel*, *Arc*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *Atlanta Review*. He earned an MFA at the University of Alabama and lives in a small town in northern Ontario, Canada.

LeeAnn Pickrell is a poet and freelance editor. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *One Art*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Loud Coffee Press*, *Atlanta Review*, *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, *Eclectica*, and in the anthologies *Coffee Poems: Reflections on Life with Coffee*, *Eclectica Magazine Best Poetry*, and *A Trembling of Finches*. Her chapbook *Punctuated* is forthcoming from Bottlecap and her book *Gathering the Pieces of Days* is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press. She lives in Northern California.

Christine Potter lives with her patient husband and two spoiled cats in a very old house in the Hudson River Valley. Her poetry has been in *Rattle*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *The McNeese Review*, *Does It Have Pockets*, *Thimble*, *Consequence*, and on ABC Radio News. Her time-traveling YA series, *The Bean Books*, is published by Evernight Teen. Her latest poetry collection, *Unforgetting*, is on Kelsay Books.

Beth Brown Preston is a poet and novelist with two collections of poetry from the Broadside Lotus Press and two chapbooks, including *OXYGEN II* (Moonstone Press, 2022). She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and the MFA Writing Program at Goddard College. She has been a CBS Fellow in Writing at the University of Pennsylvania and a Bread Loaf Scholar. Her work has been recognized by the Hudson Valley Writers Center, the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute, and elsewhere. She has written a debut novel — *CIRCE'S DAUGHTERS* — a work of historical literary fiction.

Marina Ramil is a Latine lesbian whose work can be found in *Stoneboat*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *OxMag*, *Astrolabe*, and elsewhere. They live in Miami with the alligators and strangler figs.

M.S. Rooney lives in Sonoma, California with poet Dan Noreen. Her work appears in journals, including *The Blue Mountain Review*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *Leaping Clear* and *Pensive Journal* and anthologies, most recently *Alchemy and Miracles* (Cassandra Arnold, Editor). Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Cliff Saunders is the author of several poetry chapbooks, including *Mapping the Asphalt Meadows* (Slipstream Publications) and *The Persistence of Desire* (Kindred Spirit Press). His poems have appeared recently in *Quadrant*, *The Rockford Review*, *Exacting Clam*, *Concision Poetry Journal*, *ArLiJo*, and *Cigarette Fire*.

Clayton Shirk is a cashier.

Stuti Sinha is a published and award-winning Indian writer living in Dubai. She has been acclaimed by writing competitions including the San Antonio Writers Guild Poetry Competition, Letter Review Poetry Competition, Westmoreland Festival Fiction Contest and others, and has been published by international literature magazines and presses.

Brandon C. Spalletta lives just outside his hometown of Herndon, Virginia with his wonderful family. His poem “Daydreaming” received an Honorable Mention for *Day Eight’s* 2023 Luce Prize, and his poetry has been published in *Ghost City Review*, *Gargoyle Online*, *Dodging The Rain*, *Panoply*, *Elysium Review*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *WWPH Writes*, and *The Mid-Atlantic Review* (formerly *Bourgeon*). At twelve years old he stood atop Old Rag Mountain, and his heart never left.

Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania who works as a financial director for a large non-profit. His haiku and related poetry have been published broadly including in *Humana Obscura*, *The Asabi Shimibun*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron’s Nest*, and *Mayfly*. He has received recognition for his work in these forms from the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational, the San Francisco International Award for Senryu, the Touchstone Award for Individual Haiku, the British Haiku Society Award for Haiku, and the Trailblazer Award.

Irina Cristache-Taylor is a Romanian immigrant who moved to England at the age of 19 in pursuit of higher education and the promise of a better life. Her writing draws inspiration from her experiences working in restaurants where she encountered an abusive boss and other exploited migrants. Ten years later, she calls London her home and through her writing showcases the realities of working in the hospitality industry as a woman and immigrant.

Donna Vitucci has been publishing since 1990. She lives in North Carolina, where she enjoys reading and writing, yoga, hiking, cooking and gardening. Dozens of her stories, poems and slices of memoir can be found in print and online. Her work explores the ache and mistake of secrets among family, lovers and friends. Her painting is very much in the early stage, but if not now, when?

Megan Wildhood is a writer, editor and writing coach who helps her readers feel seen in her monthly newsletter, poetry chapbook *Long Division* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), her full-length poetry collection *Bowed As If Laden With Snow* (Cornerstone Press, May 2023) as well as *Mad in America*, *The Sun* and elsewhere.