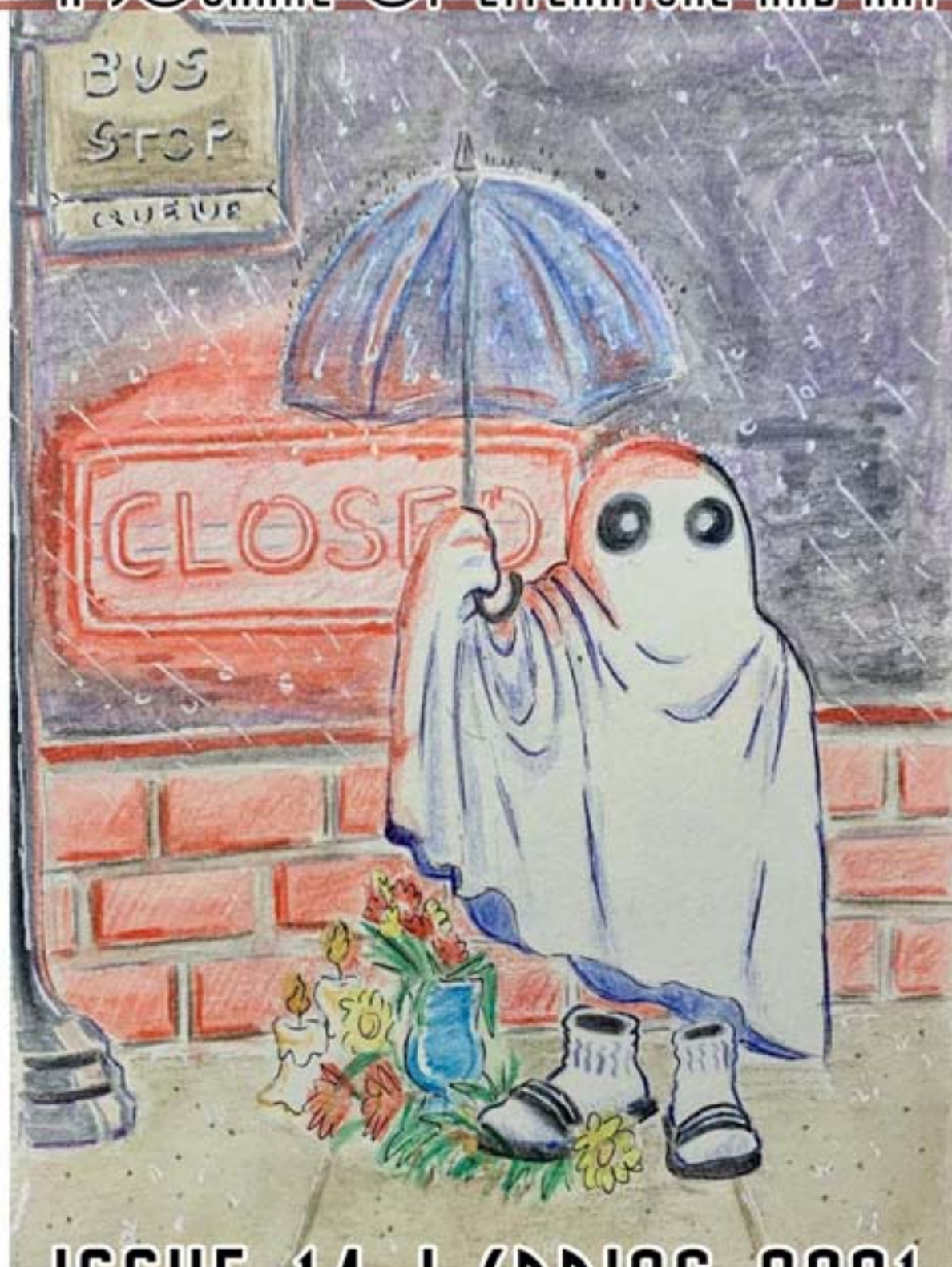


AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART



ISSUE 14 | SPRING 2021

AFTER
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HOUR
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FOREWORD

Welcome to Happy Hour Review's 14th issue. It's been a ride.

Our last issue was composed in the depths of quarantine, the world in this weird kind of anxious sleep. The shockwave from COVID isn't over by any means, but with the vaccine reaching more and more Americans, the lockdown restrictions lifting, the world these days feels more like a kind of bleary-eyed morning—that brain fog, that first crackling stretch of limbs.

Some days it feels like it's all loss, a kind of blanketing grief. The corner bar is gone; your friend's wedding was cancelled; the coffee shop is closed, forever. Maybe that cool bookstore down the street never got to open, and now the building's for sale.

And you were so excited about it. I know. I was, too.

Maybe not for the same bookstore, maybe not for a bookstore at all. Maybe for the concert that never happened, or the little independent venue stage where you used to have poetry readings and puppet shows.

Spring is like that, though. It is empty garden beds, realizing your hasta plant didn't make it over the winter. It is weekend mornings spent watching endless rain, the shivering frustration that is lingering winter wind.

That's not all Spring is, though.

I've been reading for this journal for something like a year now, but it's my first issue since stepping up as Creative Nonfiction Editor, and I've found it's given me new eyes. Reading for this Spring issue feels like more than just mourning; every time I opened up our submissions, I was reminded that you are all still writing—that creativity is one of those things still flourishing.

Writing, for me, has always been a little bit about preservation. The things we've lost, this year? They're still here somewhere, pickled in our words, in our gestures, in the way we live our lives.

I hope the pieces we've selected speak to that feeling, that safekeeping of moments and memories, of feelings and places. I hope there's something that reminds you: this waking up? It isn't just about what's gone. It's about what's still alive.

Liz Abeling
Creative Non-Fiction Editor

The Trees

BY JULIA HANDS



ANGELICA EUN

I think I have a tree growing in me, the girl says to her mother. She sits in the mother's kitchen eating bread and gouda. There is stew cooking on the stovetop like there had been through much of the girl's childhood. The mother stops stirring, putting her full attention to the daughter. *If it grows too wildly, we'll root it out.* The mother is kind enough not to ask who she had been sleeping with. Instead, she pats her daughter's hand before ladling the stew into the same yellow ceramic bowls the girl used as a child. *We will take care of it, just like anything else.* The girl nods but knows this is something bigger. The sap stiffens between her joints.

The girl has taken the train to her mother's house every Sunday since she moved to the south end two years ago. On her way to the train, she always picks up a bottle of wine and a bag of pre-made salad from the store, maybe a baguette if the bread smells warm. Every Sunday evening, she catches the 10pm train back home, is jostled as she rides home with a Tupperware of stew in her lap.

That evening, leaving her mother's, she feels dirty. Like she needs a plastic sheet between her and the rest of the world as she sits in the back row. When another young woman sits down next to her, eyes tired with the week to come, the girl shies closer to the train wall. Inside is something rough, foreign, not her body.

At the consulting firm she works for, the girl keeps her head on her projects, snacking on the yogurt her mother prescribed, emailing her boss the reports on the consultants' latest projects. She grids out the next month's schedule and aligns it with their clients' fiscal years. A new year

means new budgets for system upgrades, and the hospitals want to invest in their updates sooner rather than later. The girl assigns the consultants to the different hospitals on her radar. The entire day, her abdomen pounds; her elbows and back stiffen.

After 5pm, her coworker and her head the bar next door for their weekly happy hour.

You okay? The coworker says over a whiskey ginger. The bar is dim, lit red from vintage fixtures almost gothically black and the bright pink cancer sweat shirt she wears stands out.

Mom and I drank too much wine.

I love your mom. Her coworker takes a deep sip of her drink. They finished at the same college a semester apart and it was the friend who helped the girl find this job in the first place.

Do you remember Sara?

The girl whose hair turned green? Sara who always said her name meant “princess.”

Her coworker laughs and explains that Sara just let it get that bad. She doesn't name it though, the tree that burst out of Sara.

She's probably still rooted to campus, she says and snorts.

The girl smiles, relieved. *She's probably growing at the center of Red Square.*

Sara never knew how to grow up. Her coworker reaches for her hand but doesn't touch it. You do. Just call the doctor and take an afternoon.

The girl never calls in sick. If she's too sick, she works remotely. If she has to go to the doctor, she schedules her appointments at 8am, around the corner from her office, with the same woman for the past two years. The only appointment the girl could make to solve her predicament was at 2pm with a specialist in a neighborhood 40 minutes away by bus. Furious, the girl scrolls through her work email in the waiting room, forwarding what she can to her boss who is trying to cover her phone while she's gone. She is all the angrier when, naked under a white sheet from the waist down, a man in a white coat walks in and reaches out to shake her hand. Throughout the procedure, she glares at the wall. When he explains that the test results will come in two weeks and the nurse will call her with

results, she hears him but is just thinking about how she wants to put back on her clothes.

After, on the bus ride home, the girl holds herself close. Her eyes burn red, tired of acting polite as the doctor bent between her knees with a speculum. He had quickly rescinded the hand when he saw her glare. She glares out the bus window so hard that no one tries to sit next to her on the quickly filling vehicle. Her legs cross tight, her stomach a hole. Back at the office, her coworker comes over to laugh off the procedure with the girl. Only the girl isn't laughing when she gets there. Her face is still red. Once crossed, it's difficult to straighten her arms.

Up until this point, the girl has had an active social life. Happy hours every Monday with her coworker, pick-up Salsa classes on Thursdays. She would joke with her mother that she saw the bus more often than the inside of her apartment. Now bark grafts onto her skin and she finds herself tripping more and more at the class. The wood peeks out from beneath the girl's shirt. It's winter so she can justify the scarf inside but has to pull her sleeves over her hands in meetings.

Every month the doctor spreads her again see how much the root has grown, removing the new bark gently to reveal raw pink skin underneath. Its roots always find their way back. The doctor explains men simply spread the seeds the way bees carelessly do on their legs shaking off as they pollinate and gone long before the seeds come to root. There's no way to identify who or warn the next girl. The man could be several men. Unlike her mother, the doctor does ask her to identify how many she has slept with. After some hesitation, she narrows the man down to two.

What she doesn't tell the doctor is that with the first, it happened in the trunk of his truck for which he had just built a platform. On the carpeted riser she rode him, the gears and him groaning beneath her as the leaves rattled in the spring rain. He was sweet and didn't know better. His release shook her and the truck simultaneously and they held onto each other as if the world was ending around them. He left for an internship for Portland. Still, he calls every night before she falls asleep.

It was likely the other. The man from work who took her home from

the bar one late Christmas night. They decided to watch a movie on his couch. His clothes came off. Her world was spinning and she put her hand out. He kept coming. He pushed her into the cushions, her head buried in pillows. His breath was sour with whiskey, his skin salty with sweaty as he pushed against her. She kept her face up, struggling for breath. That was six months before the truck and she hasn't spoken to the man since.

At work, her boss requests that she emails him, just until it all clears up. Her coworker says loudly that *only a coward would be afraid of a little wood*. She stands on the other side of the girl's desk. Their weekly drinks become less frequent. With the antibiotics the girl is on, she can't drink much anyways. After three months, she is granted permission to take her work laptop and files home. Her coworker helps carry the box of her things, wearing gloves, and waits with the girl for the Uber. She doesn't take public transportation anymore.

On her next visit, the doctor grows grimmer. He pulls the bark from the webbing between her fingers and sits back on his stool to rub his eyes. He roots more and more seeds out each time, he explains. If they continue to grow back, they'll have to take more extreme measures. Her mother drives her home and holds her hand delicately. The girl is raw and bare, holding herself together in the bucket seat of the minivan. At her core, she is ripping. It's a dull constant pain that follows her to sleep. When the boy calls her that night, she leaves this out, encouraging him to extend the position in Portland. By the time he comes home, she reasons to her mother one night over dinner, *it will all be cleared up and we can go on with our lives*.

The doctor prescribes a new home treatment and bed rest. Now before she goes to sleep, she must rub acrid-smelling black lotion beneath her nostrils, eyes, and pelvis. The antibiotics no longer prescribed, her mother prescribes a glass of deep red wine. She is Greek and explains how red wine from Nemea grows from the same dirt where Herakles killed the lion, making it strong with its blood. Together, they sip their glasses slowly and follow them with another for good measure before her mother helps her upstairs to sleep, each step heavier.

The doctor urges her to tell the boy even if she thinks it wasn't him. You need support, he explains. The girl flaps her hand at the doctor. *He doesn't need to know this*. She flinches as he peels another splinter from her forearm. The doctor shakes his head. *How would you feel if he didn't tell you?*

I would be happy because I didn't know. At this point, the doctor sits on his stool, halfway through his peeling work. He shakes his head at the girl like he would a daughter. She glares at the wall again as he returns to work. She's still buttoning her pants as she leaves his office in a huff, storming past the bench where her mother picks her up, walking to the bus stop around the corner. She makes it as far as the park across the street before the weight of her legs forces her to stop and catch her breath. She drops onto a metal bench, glaring at his office.

Over her head, two trees share the sunlight on the shadowy boulevard, branches intertwined, creating a cathedral of limbs. She lays back her head and listens to the branches creak. There was a rumor of women who grew into trees, like Sara, their roots growing deep into the earth to transcend in this higher form of communication. The whistle of the wind in their leaves makes a music only made by that particular architecture of boughs. The bark is thick and strong, warm to look at; at sunset, the trees look gold.

The doctor, hands in his pockets, walks across the street, on the phone with her mother. He sits with the girl until her mother pulls up, and they both help her stand. The doctor and her mother talk about the boy as they walk to the car, talking over her head like she's three. The doctor explains that he had asked the girl to call the boy but she had declined. They might as well spell the words inoperable and cancerous. As her mother drives away, the girl looks back at the trees still holding each other against the darkening sunset.

At home, the mother calls for her, the girl crying on the couch.

She's sick, the mother explains, stepping outside the house so he doesn't hear the girl's sobs. It takes a week for the boy to buy a train ticket home from Portland to sit the at the edge of the girl's bed. She hides underneath the covers.

Do they think it was me? He asks.

There's no way to know.

I'm sorry.

It might not have been you. She thinks about the man from Christmas.

He lays next to her, the sheets between them, and holds her like they are back in the truck bed, kissing her cheek through the fabric. Her mother brings up a tray with two bowls of stew. The boy stays with the girl until she falls asleep, running his fingers through her hair.

It's no surprise the doctor orders bed rest. She can barely lift her arms some days. The girl's apartment in the city has been sublet to a woman off Craigslist. She still works from her childhood bed, but only part time. Over the phone, the coworker says apologetically they're looking for a replacement. The girl says she should visit and the friend laughs noncommittally.

Now the bark is always between her fingers and under her eyes. She pulls what she can from her chest each morning, layering on the acrid substance. Now that she stays at home, sometimes she just leaves it. Her mother helps with her back, crooning a lullaby as she rubs it deep. They don't share wine anymore as the doctor is concerned it will lessen the effect of the new antibiotics. Despite the bed rest order, the girl wanders restlessly around the house, dragging through the carpet to read books in the kitchen and watching shows in the living as she idly picks at the casing on her body. The bark grows faster than she can harvest. When she pulls it off, there's now another layer beneath. The rings on her fingertips grow more pronounced.

The girl's hair greens. She is phosphorescent like young trees in spring. Her fingers lengthen and she imagines that someday she'll grow fruit and all who eat it will be evergreen as well. The boy is the first. She grows a grove of men and women all bearing her fruit and carrying her bark, her at the center, the roots deep into the earth. The man will finally eat his share and he will falter, his legs growing stiffer as he tries to walk toward her. His feet plant in the shadow of her leaves. His body outgrows itself like the moss growing calmly on her side.

The boy explains to her that once she's better he'll build her a house out of the bark that they've peeled. That they'll fill the house with stew and

wine and whatever else they want. He'll have a job that pays all of the bills and she can stay in her house forever, not a care in the world. The girl smiles as she hears this, but she imagines what that bark will look like. Black and rotten when pulled off her, a barricade reeking of the black lotion the boy now applies on her. Unlike the bark on her skin or on the trees outside her window, this wood has died many deaths to be peeled away from her. The boy kisses her green hair; she kisses his cheek. *Maybe another house.*

The doctor paces before her. Her muscles have grown circular, her torso a trunk. Her mother is now in the room, no longer content to wait outside with the boy. *Well, is there an answer?* She asks. The doctor continues to pace and the girl grows more nervous. She kicks the metal of her bed with her legs. They are still soft and smooth and stronger now that they must hold the rest of her up. At night, the boy holds them in his lap as they watch procedurals with her mother. He kissed her goodbye before she left for her appointment.

The doctor shakes his head. *We can just continue to peel.*

But there's more bark, the girl explains. The doctor just prescribes her a stronger dose of the lotion. This, the boy rubs into her also, all over every splinter of her hardening body. Now, she stays in bed all the time, her legs growing too heavy to lift from the bed. The boy and her mother take turns staying with her. The boy works from home and her mother takes partial leave.

That night, as the boy talks about his work, the girl watches the trees outside, the earth pulling them deeper. In her office, which she would someday go back to, there were windows. But the cubicles only had fluorescent lighting and the windows were high like jail cells. Plants that needed little to no natural light grew best in that environment. Her coworker used to have a bowl of moss growing on a rock at her desk. The boy, meanwhile, was thrilled at the prospect of moving back downtown to their own apartment. To her, the prospect is daunting and even as he talks, the trees reach out.

Trees of the same species are communal, her mother said over dinner. *They*

form alliances. Her mother reaches over and takes her splintery hand. Her mother understands her hesitation to move in with the boy. *There's no need to rush,* she says. *Stay with me until you're all the way better.* After all, her mother laughs, we're made of the same bark now, and she pulls a splinter out of her hand.

The next afternoon, the mother is at work and the boy gets a call from his boss to video call in for a meeting.

It will just be an hour, he explains.

I'll see you soon. She feels lighter today than other days. The night before less bark grew and when they peeled it, there was nothing but her skin underneath. He kisses her on the forehead and goes into the guest room. Once he leaves, the girl gets up to get herself a glass of water. She sits in the kitchen and sees that winter has turned to spring. The sunlight through the window warms her. She can hear the boy talking upstairs, his professional voice on as he laughs at a joke someone on the call makes.

Her intention is to take her water to the patio and stop. Only she keeps walking. She walks to the center of the yard and stops, standing still, her arms outstretched. When the boy comes out to join her, she hears him cry out. She keeps her face turned up, letting the sunlight fall through her leaves.



HYESON KIM

How to Know If You Are Living in a Fairytale

BY BETHANY F. BRENGAN

Your father is a tiger. Your mother is a thrush. Marriage was a revelation. When you walk through the forest, the trees spread their ears.

Out of the corner of your eye you see three black dogs, always. You cannot speak of them.

The castle walls turn to blood in the moonlight. The streets are paved with coins you are forbidden to touch.

The king may kill whomever he wishes—doctors and thieves, fools and magicians. The princess may snip off the fingers of suitors who can't make her laugh. You may get cursed for trampling a lily.

Your children know your instructions. They will not obey. You do not know if this changes the ending. You hope the queen of bees will remember your service, coat your tongue with honey. Kindness may save you, but shrewdness will keep you.

Your children are deer. Your children are bread. Your children are knives. Someone always wants to eat them, they are so sweet.



E.E. KING

Seeing You Again at Target

BY JEFF GATELY

When we were kids, your name was Jed, and now you're a baby again. I just walked past you with your mama and grandma in the Target parking lot in Danvers. It's 2020, so mama's cart is full with diapers, toilet paper, milk, and a box of freeze pops. I'm hungover and feeling especially depressed, so I bought reusable straws. You're only 2 or 3 years old, still young enough for diapers, I guess.

I'm sorry, but you're just an ugly baby. You haven't done anything to anyone yet, but you'll be a grotesque, hard thing as soon as you can talk. You're on this path now. There's a brutish face of points and angles on a baby's body. I really do wonder, were you dropped on your face as a newborn? You're innocent and dumb like you're supposed to be, but you don't look it with those deep eyes. It breaks my heart, but no one will tolerate you. You'll be treated like a shit kid as soon as you can walk a little better and that'll give you a shit attitude about things. Your mama and grandma will be two of three people to ever love you; the other is me.

I couldn't tell if you were bratty or cute, because you're just so weird looking. I'm still not sure, but I love you because you were climbing into your car seat all on your own. Swinging your knobby-kneed legs as you went, beaming your smile of sparse but growing teeth. You were proud, with your tiny eyes, that are so horribly close together, shining. Needle-nosed monster with an overbite, bless you. White-blond buzz cut, bless you. Your skin is blotchy pink, bless you.

You were my bully when I was a soft, chunky kid. You were ugly then, too. A big head, squinty eyes constantly swollen, pig-nosed, your teeth

grew uneven in a gaping mouth. Your arms were too long for the rest of you, but that was a plus. You'd swing them around to punch and slap at the slow movers like me. Two clammy, sweaty hands grabbed all the hair on all the heads and slammed them into the dirt, or grass, or brick by your feet. You were a tormenter of the little league field.

You were just a baby before that, too; born in the late eighties, raised in neon play clothes and a bowl cut in the beige ease of the nineties. You got hit, or maybe just screamed at, at home for making noise just like the rest of us. Your dad was probably bad at being a dad, too. A firefighter, a cop, a clerk, or maybe a lawyer; the men with union jobs or better who could buy us decent bikes. Like the bike you stole in the seventh grade after we became friends. I remember you needed to get home fast after your dad called my house and barked at my mom. You took the bike, a lender. I was scared for you, but you laughed about it all. Fearless in front of your bullied boy; I loved your guts and I wanted guts, too.

Back when your name was Jed, you could be soft sometimes. One time in particular, we watched SNL and you told me how you just wanted to be funny. If you couldn't be funny you wanted to be cool, so when I got a guitar, you did too. My parents, the union-paid, made me take lessons; they weren't going to waste the money on an instrument without making me train. Your parents, less overbearing, kind of absent I thought, just got you the guitar, figuring you'd lose interest like you did with everything. And you lost interest in guitar, so they bought you drums that you lost interest in when you weren't immediately good. That, you figured, meant you were just bad. I guess that's why you went so hard. Same with Emilio, Freddy, and John when they pantsed me at eighth grade graduation rehearsal. You weren't part of that, you just laughed; so did everyone. Then you told me you felt sorry. You wanted to help me get revenge, but I was afraid of getting in trouble.

You chased me down a few more times when we went to different high schools. Your young man's hands, dry skin and bit-down nails, grabbed my hood and pulled me back to the sidewalk. Called me predictable slurs. Clapped my shoulder, laughed at my flinching. Asked why we never hung

out anymore. I'm still not sure if that was a real question. You were the troll of Flax Pond. You weren't dumb, just cruel. Quick enough to shut me up. Edgelord enough to smoke weed outside St. Pius V Church and stick your fingers under my nose and say *guess who*. I got the bike back, only when my dad called your dad for it, with two flat tires and a rusted, broken chain a few days before Christmas, 2001; that was the last time I saw you.

You were a varsity lacrosse star; you were dedicated. You went to college, even though you always told me you wouldn't finish highschool. You made more friends, had more love in your life. You, as that bully and friend, died five years ago. I heard different things, but haven't thought much about you since. Now you're an ugly baby, again.

Years in your new future, before your arms are too long and your eyes squint, you'll have jagged, dirty nails, filth in the webbing of your hands, and a perfect juice mustache. In your future and all the time, you'll be screaming at your mama's friends for getting high while babysitting you. I'm sorry they do that, but you still hug them in a blanket fort and, when you leave to go home, you say *I love you, bye bye*. You don't know it, but your mama doesn't send you to your neighbors' place because she's mad at you, but because she's six nips of Fireball deep and scared for you. You run around someone else's house in your bare feet screaming with glee, dumb to the situation as you should be, and she gets the break she needs. Your teachers will low-key hate you for being lazy and have a low bar that you'll just manage to clear. When you pull all C's and a D+, they'll be as proud as your mama, Grandma, and me; the guy who walked past your family in a parking lot once.

But before all that, in the now of 2020, there's the smell of pencil shavings, just like September should have, but it's the middle of a street on a Wednesday at noon. You and the other kids aren't in school. You're screaming for everyone to get out of the way and let you all ride your bikes in peace, but you want them to stay and see. I've stayed to see older yous popping wheelies on Lafayette and Derby Street, feet up on the seats, one hand on the bars, riding twenty strong in and out of traffic without a face mask in sight. It makes me anxious, but that's me. You're all fearless

like I never was. Grinning and proud, not thinking about C's a D+, just a bike with big wheels and a bright blue seat. As cocky as your brothers and cousins would've been.

You weasel-faced baby: be careful on your new bike with your bullies and friends. It's okay to be quiet if you want, or to bleat for your mama when you have a weird dream. Even though you're kind of ugly, you're still just a baby. Stay in the blanket fort that's been made for you. Hold your own hands and tell your mama you want to be a good man like I'm pretty sure you can be. Remember your mama's face when you're scared or angry and it'll be okay. Learn to build your own forts, and make them big enough for all the other babies to huddle up and share their bed-wetting, thumb-sucking love.



MERCURY-MARVIN SUNDERLAND

Cut the wires together and find your new home in this rift

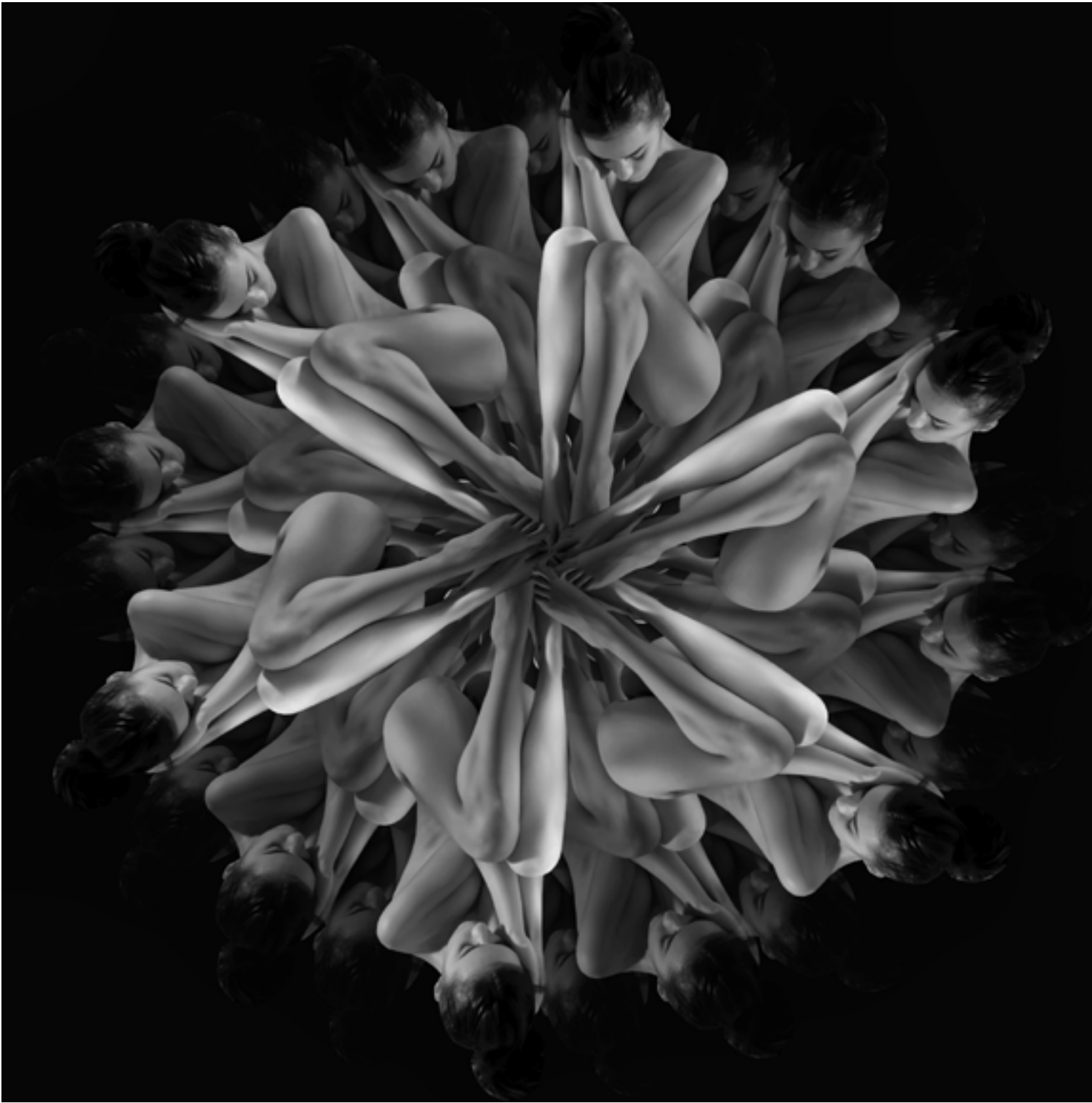
BY CARRIE GEORGE

so afraid of thunder your grandmother
told you the angels were bowling
throwing balls down slicked lanes to tumble ten bodies
off their feet she stroked your hair while she said it
cultivating static fingers rush and hiss and stick
something blue and frizz feathered your humid head
growing grape-bushel big in the pre and post storm
your jolt and jump when you once plugged in a cord
with your thumb pad still pressed against the metal
you screamed saw gold like a halo spinning
down a narrow passage you know you screamed
the house full but no one blinking that current
that imagined song
was that light?

Write your own myths

BY CARRIE GEORGE

Before I woke up there was a cloud.
It was the day before the longest night of the year.
Children everywhere prayed in the snow
for candle wax and chewing gum.
After they prayed, great hands fell
from the sky. The clouds
and the hands and the prayers
were only tangentially related.
The hands started walking.
They took the children's prayers
in fistfuls because they were hungry
and the children already got
what they asked for. Didn't you
already get what you asked for?
I asked for the answers to all my secrets.
I asked for diamonds to crawl
from my pores and take over.
I asked for you to leave me alone,
to stop raining, to keep out of my sleep
and my waking. But the hands are yours,
aren't they? They're taking and taking
and taking.



EMEL KARAKOZAK

A Different Kind of Sea

BY CHELSEA BARTLETT

Jacob burst up through the surface of the ocean—cold, even in June. His arms were covered in goosebumps. He shook his hair out of his face and opened his eyes. Sinking back into the waves, he allowed the buoyancy to hold him close to the surface. With the water covering his ears, all sound took on the same gray quality as the sea around him and the sky above.

The coast of Maine had been Jacob's home forever. At school in Georgia, others teased him for his pale skin—"Your parents never let you outside?"—but he went outside every day at home. His parents swam and sailed and camped, and they had taught him their love of nature from the womb.

He'd never seen a grayer June than this one though. He had been home for a week, and every day so far had been dreary, with a sharp chill. Slimy fingers of seaweed brushed his ankle and he kicked out, throwing himself off balance so he had to right himself or risk falling back and filling his nose with water. He used his arms to pull himself upright and put his feet down on the sand.

Facing the beach, and his house up above, he saw something moving along the rocks. The beach was private property, and he knew his mother would not have left the house. When Jacob had come out to swim, he'd left his glasses with his towel on the beach, so he could only make out a blurry shape. He squinted. A person, making his way down the rocky slope toward the water.

Jacob felt as though someone had just walked in on him in the bathroom. He bent his knees and sank further below the surface, to hide. And then the figure turned and moved down the beach away from Jacob's house. Jacob

watched until the trespasser had moved onto someone else's property before he waded back to the shore.

Back up at the house, Jacob found his mother where he most often found her: in her studio, sitting in front of an easel, but without any paints or canvas around her. She sat facing the window that looked out on the eastern side of the house. Nothing but ocean, all the way out. But she didn't look at the view. She looked beyond it.

"Mom?" Jacob took a step into the room.

She turned to him, blinked, lifted her hand in a little wave by way of greeting. Jacob had hardly heard her speak since he'd been home. The house drowned in thick, heavy silence. He wanted to wrap his arms around his mother's shoulders but he didn't.

Instead he went to her and bent to kiss her head. Gray had started creeping in around her dusty blonde hairline. More now than there had been the last time he'd come home, which hadn't been since spring break.

Jacob had gotten the call on his last day of finals. Not from his mother, but from Crystal, his mom's best friend. It happened in the middle of the night, but his mom made Crystal wait to call until the afternoon so he wouldn't screw up his economics exam. At first he'd been mad she hadn't told him right away. But it wouldn't have mattered. He couldn't change anything. His dad was dead either way.

In his room, Jacob dried off and got dressed. For a moment, he sat at the desk where he did his homework in high school, but as he had every day he'd been home so far, he found he couldn't stay there.

Even though his dad had almost never come into Jacob's room, being in there felt too familiar, too much like he might step out at any moment to go downstairs for dinner with his parents. His mom would tell him what she'd painted that day, and his dad would tell him funny stories about his biology students at the university.

So Jacob hadn't been hanging out in his room. He spent as much time outside as possible, and when he had to come in to check on his mom, he milled around areas of the house he never would have spent time in before. The liminal spaces: staircases, hallways, empty spots behind furniture. He

stood in the shower for far longer than he needed to. A few times, he'd been tempted to go into the coat closet.

But he sat at the desk for as long as he could. A training exercise or self-punishment, like pressing on a bruise harder and harder until he couldn't anymore. He made it three minutes and thirty-six seconds.

The next day Jacob woke up at 4:34 AM—thirty-two minutes later than the previous morning, which he counted a success. Waking up early was a side effect of grief. It was good for swimming.

Jacob had three pairs of swim shorts. He wore each pair twice: always one in the laundry, one clean, and one hanging over the curtain rod in his shower to drip dry. He pulled the damp pair down from the shower and headed out into the still-dark morning.

The sun rose in Maine earlier than anywhere else in the country. Jacob liked to be in the water to watch it. The back side of the house looked out directly over the beach. Jacob left from the back door and only had to walk a few yards to the rocks that led down to the beach. Not an especially safe place to live.

A few times in his life, Jacob and his parents went to stay elsewhere—either at his aunt's house further inland or sometimes at a hotel—during bad storms, though the house had never undergone any serious damage that he could remember.

The rocks were steep and sharp, but Jacob had been climbing them his whole life. His feet were sure in his flip-flops as he navigated down. As he went, he hummed a song that had been popular at school, just to hear a human voice, even his own. He thought he could count on his hands the words he'd heard his mother say in the past week. She cried every day. Jacob had yet to cry at all.

Today he left his towel and glasses a little closer to the edge of the beach. He stepped in, the water painfully cold on his toes, ankles, knees, thighs. The trick was to go quickly, and then, once in up to his hips, he dove under and swam a few feet.

Jacob swam in circles, never going too far out before turning back toward

the beach. No one should swim alone, especially in the ocean. That had never stopped him from doing it, and it wouldn't now. But for the last few days, it felt different than it ever had before. Dangerous, and defiant. Reckless. So he tried to be careful, never going too far out or letting himself get too tired, for his mother's sake.

He trusted his ability, took pleasure in it even now, but ability wouldn't always be enough. And the thought of his mother alone in the house, with no one to get out of bed for, drove down Jacob's pride.

The sky lightened. The sun first peeked up over the horizon in a deep, vibrant orange. Jacob had never seen another color quite like it. He didn't watch the sunrise so much as let himself experience it as he alternated swimming laps and floating. He could have stayed all day, but he didn't want his mother to worry.

On the beach he scrubbed his face and hair and put his glasses on. When he looked up, he again saw a person coming down the rocks toward him. He tied the towel around his waist and for a moment considered slinking over to hide behind some rocks further down on the beach.

The person—a young man, he could see now—drew closer, though he seemed not to have noticed Jacob yet.

Jacob called out and the man looked up.

"This is private property."

The man did not respond but came closer, until Jacob could see that he was more boy than man—around Jacob's own age.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said. "I didn't realize it belonged to someone else. I'm staying there," he said, and pointed behind him toward the house next to Jacob's, though they were separated by a couple hundred yards.

"We're renting the place, me and a few friends, to celebrate graduation," he added. "The owners said we could use the beach." When he smiled, he put one hand on the back of his neck and shrugged.

"It's fine," Jacob said. It didn't feel quite fine, but he didn't want to argue.

"I'm Gabe." The stranger held out his hand. He had long fingers, Jacob noticed—good for playing the guitar, or piano. The light blue-gray of his t-shirt made a perfect contrast against his dark skin, and when he smiled,

a dimple appeared on his left cheek.

"Jacob." They shook hands and when they let go, Jacob pointed up at his own house. "I live there."

"You live there?"

"It's my family's. I'm home for the summer."

Gabe shuffled his feet and Jacob noticed that he was barefoot. Even Jacob didn't try to come down the rocks without anything on his feet.

"Nice to meet you, Jacob. I promise I won't trespass on your beach again."

"Don't worry about it."

Jacob started back up toward his house. Before he reached the rocks, however, he stopped and called out a congratulations for graduating. Gabe waved and continued on back down the beach.

Inside, Jacob could hear one of the showers upstairs running. A good sign. Where Jacob had started standing in the shower for far longer than necessary every day, his mother sometimes went several days in a row without showering at all. Jacob ran up the stairs to his room and threw on some clothes. He'd been going through laundry faster than he ever had in his life, because every time he came in from a swim or got out of the shower, he had to put on clean clothes again.

A few minutes later, his mother said, "I thought we might have breakfast together. Why don't you go start getting together ingredients for pancakes? I'll be down in a few minutes."

She hadn't spoken as much in the last week altogether.

In the kitchen he gathered everything they'd need for pancakes and put the kettle on the stove. His dad had been the coffee drinker, and the coffee maker still sat on the counter, unused and untouched since the morning he died. They had not had people back to the house after the funeral.

Jacob's mother came down the stairs in sweatpants and a frumpy sweater, but at least she came. She pulled Jacob close to her and kissed his forehead. Her chatty mood seemed to be over—for the most part she made their pancakes in silence—but Jacob didn't complain.

This felt like an old, familiar quiet, when Jacob would do homework while his mom painted and his dad read the paper.

Sometimes his mother would drag her easel and paints down from the studio, lay a tarp over the living room floor, and paint down here, just so they could all work in the same space, to be near each other. When she finished cooking, they sat at the table together and ate quietly. After a few minutes, Jacob's mother looked up from her pancakes to ask how finals had gone.

Jacob squeezed more maple syrup (the real stuff, because his dad always insisted that real Mainers had to use real maple syrup) onto his plate. He didn't like to saturate his pancakes because it made them soggy. Instead he cut bites and dipped them in a puddle of syrup on his plate.

He didn't love the idea that his first real conversation with his mom would be about school, but the thought of bringing up anything important made him want to abandon his pancakes.

"Bio was easier than I expected. I had a rocky start on econ but it turned out okay."

It must have felt strange to his mother too, talking about something so ordinary, because she half-smiled and seemed to think for a moment about what she should say, like she'd forgotten how to have boring conversations.

"I'm sure you did great," she said. And then she actually laughed. "You always expect to do poorly in biology. I don't know why, when you've had your father filling your head with facts your whole life."

Jacob drew designs in his syrup with the tines of his fork.

"Have you," she started, but then paused to take another bite of pancake. "Have you met anyone, at school?"

Jacob thought she sounded awkward more because it felt like a strange thing to talk about right now, and not because by "anyone" she meant "a boy."

He'd come out to his parents after his first year at school, and both of them had taken it well. Still, for all their closeness, his family's New England sensibilities kept them from getting too personal. They'd only ever asked direct questions about certain, safe topics, like school and public events.

"Not really," Jacob said. His mother went back to her pancakes, which meant she knew that by "not really" Jacob meant "no one serious."

She didn't speak again for the rest of breakfast, but at one point she put her fork down and reached across the table to lay her hand over Jacob's. And once she tapped his shin with her slippered toes, as if just to remind him she was there with him.

She took care of the dishes when they were finished eating, and Jacob watched her retreat back up the stairs with her tea in hand. Too soon for another swim, Jacob couldn't be stuck inside the house either. He slipped on his sandals and went out the back door to take a walk on the beach.

At school, he missed the ocean. He'd taken it for granted his whole life, and didn't factor it into his decision making when he looked at colleges. But there were a lot of things he hadn't considered when he'd first left home.

Another gray day. Jacob looked out over the horizon, at the light, white on the water. As a kid, he used to wish he lived someplace with blue ocean, like it always looked in photos. His father explained to him that the colder water here was better suited to algae. Jacob had been so upset that the gray-green color came from billions of microorganisms living in the water that he hadn't touched the ocean for months.

Now he liked the gray. This kind of sea meant something other than paradise or 365 days a year of sunshine.

Jacob leaned over to take his sandals off. He carried them in one hand so he could feel the sand between his toes while he walked. As he came up to the edge of his parents' property, about to turn around and go the other way, he saw Gabe climbing down the rocks to the beach. Jacob stayed where he stood and waited as Gabe approached him.

"This is where my family's property ends," Jacob said.

Gabe nodded and put his hand on the back of his neck again.

"I'm paying a ridiculous amount of money per night for this place," Gabe said. "I think I can invite you over to my side."

Jacob stepped beyond the invisible boundary, and they walked together. "You said you're staying there with friends?"

"Three," Gabe said.

This struck Jacob as strange, and he realized he didn't have anyone he'd

want to share space with for so long. But he didn't want to talk about that. Instead, he said, "What's your degree?"

"Fine Art. Not the most practical thing, as my parents love to remind me."

"They're not supportive?"

"It's not that." Gabe dragged his feet through the sand when he walked, leaving two trails behind him. "They just want me to be comfortable. They don't want to have to worry about me, want me to have more in life than they did."

"Seems generous of them." Jacob heard a note of bitterness in his own voice. It surprised him; he didn't know what caused it. Maybe just that Gabe had mentioned both of his parents.

"We didn't all grow up in fancy houses on the coast of Maine."

Jacob looked up, startled and embarrassed, but Gabe grinned.

"Sorry. I've been a bit on edge lately."

Gabe let this slide. "What about your folks?"

Jacob wanted nothing but to lie down and let the waves wash over him.

"My mom's great," he said. "She's an artist too. She'd be happy no matter what I decided to do, as long as she knew I wanted it."

"You're lucky," Gabe said. "Love's all you need, I guess, but unconditional support must be nice. What kind of art does your mom do?"

"She paints. Landscapes, sometimes portraits. When I was in middle school, she went through a phase where she painted nothing but nude portraits and abstracts. I wouldn't invite any of my friends over for a year."

"I guess I won't show you my collection of abstract nude portraits then."

Horrified, Jacob realized he'd said the wrong thing for the second time in one conversation.

"I'm kidding!" Gabe said then. "I do portraits, but just faces, I swear. You should let me paint yours, but only when you're embarrassed because that is a good look."

Jacob pressed his fingers over his eyes beneath his glasses and shook his head. "Do you always make fun of people as soon as you meet them?"

"You're so serious. I figured you could use some lightening up."

No doubt true. Jacob hated the idea that a complete stranger could tell.

Then again, maybe it was better that way. Gabe didn't know him, didn't know anything about him, didn't have any preconceived ideas. Jacob could, maybe, talk to Gabe without worrying about creating some fundamental change between them.

"I didn't mention my dad earlier, when you asked about my parents."

"I noticed," Gabe said. "Figured I shouldn't ask."

"Will you? Ask?"

Gabe didn't say anything for a moment, and Jacob assumed he must be thinking that the conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn, but then he said, "Where is he?"

"He died," Jacob said. "Last week."

"Shit. I'm so sorry, I didn't—"

"No, it's okay. Do you mind if I talk about it?"

Gabe nodded and rubbed his brow with his thumb and index finger.

So Jacob told him—about the storm, the boat his father had loved so much. He told Gabe how his father had never been too proud to heed the ocean's power. About how he couldn't understand what had sent him out there. Did he not know the storm would come?

He told Gabe about how his mother had been away when it happened, and about how she'd barely spoken and hadn't left the house at all, except for the funeral, since he'd been home.

Gabe listened without speaking. Jacob heard himself, knew that these words had been rising in him like a tide for days, and felt relieved that they were finally spilling out of him. When he stopped, he expected Gabe to apologize, because everyone apologized. But Gabe didn't.

He said, "But you still go swimming."

Jacob pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He'd thought about that himself—that maybe he should feel an aversion to the water now.

"A long time ago," Jacob said, "my dad brought me out here, just to sit in the water and play with some toys. He watched from the beach, behind me. At some point, I let go of my toy, just for a second. A wave came and swept it up. I tried to grab it, but it was just gone. I watched it move further and

further out until I couldn't see it anymore.”

At some point they had stopped walking.

“I remember realizing that the same thing could happen to me. Anyway, I never saw the ocean the same after that. I guess I'd thought of it as mine. My own backyard. But it's a wild thing. It can't belong to you.”

Jacob felt embarrassed for having said this. He didn't know how to read Gabe's neutral expression. The silence seemed expansive on the beach.

“I should go,” Jacob said. “I should check on my mom.”

This brought Gabe out of whatever thought he'd been trapped in. “I'll see you tomorrow,” he said. But before he walked away, he added, “I'm sorry about your dad. If you ever want to tell someone about him, you can tell me.”

No one ever said that. They just said, “Sorry for your loss,” and moved on, like they had paid their due and could wash their hands of the whole business.

When he got back to the house, he called for his mother, but as he expected, he heard no answer. Upstairs he nudged her bedroom door open just a bit and saw her lying in bed. He went to the studio and picked up her mug of tea from breakfast. Still full, and cold.

“What are you working on?” Jacob asked Gabe when he found him the next morning.

Gabe sat on the sand without a blanket or towel beneath him. He had a notebook in his hands and he wrote in it with a fountain pen. He wrote slowly, pausing often to think about the words.

Jacob could make out a few of them: tide, mollusk, and one that could either be “invasive” or “invertebrate,” but he couldn't tell which. It occurred to him that he shouldn't read it, but he tried anyway.

“A poem. About the ocean,” Gabe said. “Original, I know.”

Jacob sat down next to Gabe, burying his feet in the sand. He put his hands behind him and leaned back, tilting his head up toward the sky. He listened to the waves, enjoying the feel of the ascending sun on his face, and Gabe worked on his poem. Jacob focused on the sound of Gabe's pen

on the paper, and not on the fact that he could feel the warmth from Gabe's body even though they weren't touching.

“How's your mom?” Gabe asked during a pause.

Jacob opened his eyes but didn't turn. “Pretty bad,” he said. “I don't think she's left her room since yesterday morning.”

“She needs to get outside,” Gabe said. “My freshman year, I almost flunked out. Depressive episode. Some days I couldn't get out of bed at all, and when I did? Forget about homework. If I managed to feed myself and take a shower, I'd had a good day.”

Unsure what to say, what would be appropriate to say, Jacob kept quiet and pushed up his glasses. He listened and he felt bad for Gabe, but it felt nice to feel bad for someone else—someone other than himself and his mom. And anyway, Gabe was here on the beach writing poetry, not rotting away in a bed or underground somewhere.

“I might have stayed that way for a long time,” Gabe continued, “except my roommate dragged me out. I hadn't declared a major yet, but hanging out with my roommate's art friends got me into painting. I ended up choosing Fine Art and seeing a counselor on campus. She got me on a prescription and it hasn't been that bad since. But I never would have made it that far if my roommate hadn't made me leave the dorm.”

“I'm glad you got help,” Jacob said—a ridiculous, stupid thing to say, but what else could he do?

“You should try to get your mom to do something. Don't push, but encourage.”

They spent the rest of that day together. Gabe read Jacob some of his poetry—the poems that he said were the best—and Jacob confessed that before his father died, he'd been taking guitar lessons from a guy at school. And even though he'd started out just because he thought the guy attractive, he'd ended up enjoying it. He hadn't played since then. Gabe didn't react, until Jacob got to the end of this story.

Then he said, “Been there. I played football for a few months in high school even though I hated everything about it. Well,” he paused to give Jacob a pointed look, “not everything.” They both laughed, and Jacob felt

relieved to be on the other side of the exchange.

Late in the morning, they went for a swim and stayed in the water until they were both hungry and exhausted. Jacob wanted to invite Gabe back to his house, but the thought of his mother emerging like a ghost from her bedroom kept him from saying anything. That shame chewed at him for the rest of the day, and that night he thought of nothing but Gabe and his poetry and the curves of his shoulders and the warm undertones of his brown skin.

Two o'clock in the afternoon and Jacob hadn't seen his mother at all yet—not in her room, or her studio. He hadn't heard any sound all day but that which he made himself and the waves outside.

The house felt large and empty around him. When he got out of the shower, he threw his clothes on without drying off, letting them cling to his body. In the hallway, he paused to listen. Faintly, if he held still, he could hear the waves crashing outside. But no sound of his mother. Down the hall, he pushed the door to the studio open. Her empty stool stood facing a blank canvas that she'd set up on the easel days ago.

"Mom?" he called in the direction of the stairs. No answer. In the kitchen, no sign that she had made herself tea, which she could be counted upon to do even when she never drank it. Out of muscle memory, or maybe to have something warm to hold in her hands.

Jacob made a full circuit downstairs. Then he went outside and searched the perimeter of the house. The car still sat in the driveway. He had no idea where his mother could have gone. Maybe she'd gotten bored of staring at the walls of her bedroom. With a small surge of hope, it occurred to him that she might have gone for a walk.

The doorbell rang. It cracked through the day's long silence. Jacob thought it might be his mother, but when he went to the door, her shoes had disappeared from the doormat, and Gabe waited on the other side.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "I wouldn't have come, but your house was closer."

He leaned hard against the doorframe. Jacob looked down and saw that

Gabe's foot was bleeding badly.

"Of course," he said, "come in." He got out of the way so Gabe could follow him inside.

It occurred to him that Gabe would bleed on the carpet, but Jacob didn't know what else to do, and he couldn't imagine his mother caring now. "Are you okay?" he said and led the way into the living room.

Gabe followed, walking on his toes to avoid leaving bloody footprints. "It's not as bad as it looks." He grabbed a napkin as they passed the dining room table.

Jacob told Gabe to sit down while he went to find first aid supplies. The only Band-Aids in the bathroom had multicolored dinosaurs on them, for when Jacob's little cousin came to visit. Jacob's dad had bought them.

In the living room, Gabe sat on the couch, holding the napkin to his foot. Jacob sat on the floor in front of Gabe, put the dinosaur Band-Aids down, and opened the first aid kit he'd found in the medicine cabinet.

"What happened?" he asked, even though he knew what it must have been.

"I slipped on the rocks," Gabe said. "Stupid. Where's your mom?"

Jacob swabbed at the gash on Gabe's foot with an alcohol wipe. With the blood gone, the cut didn't seem too bad.

"I think she went for a walk."

Jacob avoided looking at Gabe and finished cleaning the cut. "Sorry about the Band-Aids," he said when he pulled one out of the box, but Gabe waved the apology away.

"Thank you," Gabe said when Jacob lay the Band-Aid in place.

Jacob pushed himself up onto his knees to stand, but then stopped. He lifted his hand and placed it on Gabe's knee. Gabe didn't move or say anything. Jacob looked up over the frames of his glasses and saw Gabe watching him.

His mother could be anywhere. She could walk in without notice, and in the open-plan house, the couch sat exposed from every angle. He could ask Gabe to come upstairs. But that would be the wrong kind of vulnerability. And his mother had gone off somewhere. He pushed his hand further up

Gabe's leg, over the pocket of his jeans, to the button at the waist, and met no resistance.

After, they were pressed close against each other on the couch, back-to-chest, Gabe's arm draped over Jacob's rib cage, his nose pressed into Jacob's shoulder. He had dozed off.

The house stood silent and still, and Jacob could once again hear the waves churning outside. He began to cry. He made no sound, his body didn't shake, but he let the tears come. He felt their presence, the fact of them, roll over him. And then he broke their surface and emerged, on the couch in his parents' living room, Gabe's body lining the length of his own. He turned his head to make sure Gabe remained asleep, and then he gently lifted Gabe's arm and slipped out from beneath it.

The carpet felt cool beneath his bare feet, and the sun hung late-afternoon-low in the sky, turning everything—the sea, the light, the house—gray. Jacob went to the window and looked out over the water at the waves crashing into the rocks. There at the bottom of the world, cradled in a cup made of rock, stood his mother, feet bare, her head tipped up toward the sky. Jacob couldn't tell from this distance, but he imagined her with her eyes closed. As he watched, she stretched her arms out to either side like she could enfold the sea into them, against her chest. He hoped that, when the waves crashed on the rocks before her, she could feel the spray on her face like rain.



A.A. CRAIG

The Call

BY JAMES MILLER

We will chop sprouts for the butter,
pull weekend's waste
to the curb.

Faulty shingles,

reddish-brown
stains on pale ribbed ceilings.

Peaked gables, oilsick streaks
in the garage. We will weep

curled together,
while winter rain
gusts between us.

Next morning,

the trash can will lie
on its side, boated in chill
streetdamp.

My mother will call again,
desperate. Where am I,
where have you left me?

I will watch you, dressing
for rehearsal, playing out
Bernstein choreography
at the mirror
with faint twists at the waist.

I know that song.
Something about Ozone Park.
Something about the best bread, the safest toast.
Where she is, where I have left her.

The Untitled Fan Applauds the Grace of Epithet *

BY FRANZISKA HOFHANSEL

I am all out of wine you see with nothing to do but walk across the country and I am stopped now in Blackbird, Delaware, having just left San Bernardino, California, and before that Bangor, Maine, and I have walked all over this night, I have seen berries growing and a Rubik's cube giving birth to a German shepherd and once or twice a man stopped me on this road to tell me he was very lost, and had I seen his pregnant Rubik's cube, he was worried sick for the poor dear, and I have seen a woman with the wildest farmer's tan you ever did see burying a paint chip, it was her mother she said, leukemia, and the treatment too expensive and I almost said to her something about sunscreen, I almost gave her my sunscreen, I almost said *Good luck*, I almost said *I almost drowned the other day in a puddle, my teeth came out the other night in a dream I feared was a metaphor for something unholy and I stopped by the church that morning to beg for salvation, I said I will do anything, I will give up sex, liquor, take my makeup off before bed, I will be good, Lord, I will be good again, and don't you know the good Lord never wrote me back, never came to me in a dream, don't you know I am 49 next week and think I look damn good so forget abstinence, only my teeth came out in another dream and I woke to all the lamps in my house doing cartwheels, We won't forgive you, they said, we won't forget how you refused to dance, how you murdered us all for your own peace and we won't forgive your laughter, your unabashed hunger in the face of things, and I have been walking ever since and when I see a silo I fall in love and do not forget to dance and still on occasion I hunger for things only I have been walking so very long, I think I am owed another chance, I think when I get out of here I will do things differently, yes, scratch the golf ball with my hooves, tell the man he owes me, gallop across the country in the night dressed like a movie star like I'm in love, like I've been loved before, like there is someone waiting for me up there in the velvet black only he wants me here, right now, so long as I come home to him eventually.*

* Title taken from *In Baseball* by Baron Wormser



Blank Spaces

BY JACLYN REED

Whoever Justin Barnes was, his car is a mess.

You drive south. Not on purpose, but that's what the car tells you. You don't know what's south of Louisville, but there's bound to be a place to stay somewhere. When you got up this morning, the whites of your eyes were bloodshot. You slept for eight months, but there are still bags under them that push down on your plump cheeks. Now and then, you sigh at your stomach that's pressing against the steering wheel. Empty beer bottles clatter on the floor of the back seat when the road swerves, and you wonder how many six packs Justin Barnes drank a day. You think you can feel the abrasions on your liver. Your hands don't look yellow, at least not in this light. The sun is going down and everything has a pinkish tint.

Justin Barnes was an idiot who shouldn't come back.

Now you have to decide who, if not Justin Barnes, you are. You know some things: you are the kind of man who runs away from a wife that sat by your hospital bed in the coma ward, the kind of man who doesn't say goodbye or even leave a note, the kind of man who runs instead of trying to remember. Maybe there's a reason you don't want to remember. You know something about that, something that's in you but you can't get hold of.

You know soon Theresa will come home and find you and a suitcase gone. The car won't be in the driveway. At first, she'll panic; then, after hours of looking, she'll think you abandoned her—and you have. Your gut twists. She's a nice woman, but you don't know her. You've laid next to her every night for the last two weeks unable to sleep because she is no one. She's a stranger that expects you to love her.

You look down at the purple and blue teeth imprints on your hand from Barnes' dog, Roxy. She loved Barnes, but you aren't him, and Roxy knows it. You have Barnes' body and voice, but nothing else. Even your smell must be different. You left one day as Justin Barnes, slept for eight months, and woke up a different person. You wish Theresa was as understanding as Roxy.

The road goes by slowly. Your muscles still remember how to drive, but you don't remember how the trees look outside your window. They start as trees, turn into green and brown blurs beside you, then back into trees. You feel like there is a word for this, something that has to do with stars and spaceships, but you can't remember that either. The yellow lines on the road are sucked under your tires. It's difficult not to focus on these things. The doctor said your social and muscular knowledge is intact, or something like that. He said you'll know how to act, understand the decorum, but things will still seem new to you. It's like half your brain has been erased—the half that made you Justin Barnes—but you can still feel guilty about all the shitty things you did. Like leaving a dedicated wife without any way to contact you. Without an apology. Without anything.

Up ahead, you see a rest stop nestled in a break in the dense woods. You pull into the parking lot and feel the car vibrate under you. You remember to put it in park. There's a small brick building with blue signs hanging over the doors with a stick figure man and a stick figure woman. There's only one other car: a red van at the end of the lot.

You unbuckle and get out of the car, then turn back before closing the door to shut the car off and take the keys. The bathroom is muggy. You find only one toilet that isn't still filled with other people's waste. There's a layer of grime over the mirror through which you examine your rounded figure and thinning brown hair. You sigh and go back out to the car, jogging clumsily through the onsetting rain. The gold ring spins loosely around your finger. The doctor said you lost nearly thirty pounds while you slept, but that only makes you feel worse. How fat was Barnes before? How could he have let himself get so bad?

You sit for a long time fingering the ring, until the headlights of your

car sense the darkness and automatically turn on. One is dimmer than the other because the right one was recently replaced. Theresa doesn't talk about what happened. She won't tell you which guardrail you hit on your way to work that morning. All she says is that the car is fixed and you are fine and there is no reason to revisit the bad stuff. This is her stance on everything. When you ask about the empty room at the end of the hall, she gives you a similar answer. It's the past, she says. It isn't worth discussing. But there's something haunting about the room painted baby blue with animal-silhouette trim and a disassembled crib.

When you put your head down on the steering wheel, you feel the engine rumbling in your body. You focus on it. Feeling is hard for you. It's like you're wearing skin three sizes too big. You touch the dash, but all you can feel is the pressure of it on your hand. You know you're touching something, but that something could be a burning log and you wouldn't even notice.

You look up as the red van pulls away. There's a woman standing in the spot where it was with a large duffle bag looking at your car. She's small underneath the sweatshirt and cargo jacket. She stares right at you, so you look away first and put your head back on the steering wheel.

You think about turning around, telling Theresa you went for a drive to try and remember things, saying you're sorry for forgetting the phone on the counter. You think about making love to her—or fucking her—because she deserves that, and maybe it will make some of the frustration go away. But you worry you'll be bad at it. Just because you remember how to drive and walk doesn't mean you remember how to satisfy. You don't know what she likes or how she likes it.

You have to keep heading south. Or west. What's west of Kentucky? You think for a moment, but nothing comes to you.

A noise pulls your attention to the window—to the girl, maybe only seventeen with a long face and pronounced cheekbones, standing beside your car, tapping a chipped nail against the dirty glass. She takes spots out of the dust with her finger and stares at you from underneath her hood. Rain falls in slow, steady drops on and around her.

You only roll down the window halfway. "Yeah?"

"You going down 65?" she says.

A sign a few miles back on the road said 65, so you nod.

"I need a ride," she says. She holds up a couple twenty dollar bills.

"Okay."

She gives you a once over before walking around the car and getting in the passenger seat. She shoves her duffle onto the floor on top of the fast food bag and empty Bud Light can. She puts the money in the cupholder closest to you and stares straight ahead.

You pull the gear shift down to reverse and ease yourself out of the faded parking spot, merge back onto the now dark and empty road. The beer bottles clank. The girl looks into the back seat, then at you.

"I didn't drink them," you tell her. "Well, not today."

"No judgement here," she says.

You ask where she's heading after a couple miles. You aren't bothered by the silence—not like you are with Theresa, when you feel like she's waiting for you to remember and make her whole world better—but you feel like you should say something.

"Away," she says. "You?"

"Away." You tell her the car says you're heading south.

She says the south is nice, but you can't tell if she's just being polite or serious. Maybe your social skills aren't intact. "My grandma lives in Florida," she says. "I used to visit her when I was little." She doesn't look at you or smile fondly like Teresa does when she talks about the past. The girl's thin mouth is permanently in a line, like it's drawn on with marker.

"That sounds nice."

"It was," she says. "The past is always nice."

You want to disagree. You think about the blue room at the end of the hall and the replaced headlight and Teresa's sad face across the kitchen table. But those things are in the present, so you don't say anything.

Minutes pass. You know the clock on your dash is wrong because it keeps blinking 10:00 at you in green. You haven't figured out how to change it. You've thought about just ripping it out since you haven't listened to the radio anyway.

“I’m Katrina,” she says without looking at you. Her small grey sneakers are pressed down on the duffle bag, and she holds the strap with the hand closest to the door.

You don’t know what to say back. You aren’t Justin Barnes, and you don’t want to say you are for the sake of convenience. “I used to be Justin Barnes,” you tell her, “but now I’m not sure who I am.”

“That’s okay. Katrina isn’t my real name, if that makes you feel better.”

“It does.”

“Sometimes it makes people feel worse.”

You turn the heat on. You’re conscious not to put it on too high and sweat her out of her layers. “Why Katrina?”

She thinks a moment and says, “Because of the hurricane.”

“What hurricane?”

She’s looking at you now. “Hurricane Katrina.”

You glance at her. You expect a frown or a glimmer of tears in her eyes, but she isn’t Theresa. She smiles.

“Live under a rock or something?”

“No, I lived in a house. In Louisville,” you say the way you practiced, “only fifteen minutes from downtown on Cherry Lane, which sounds fake, but it isn’t.”

“If you’re going to lie, you need to get better at it.”

You sigh because you’re not lying, but you feel like you are. All the things you know about Justin Barnes are things told to you, things everyone else wants you to know. The only thing you know is that you don’t really like him, and that makes it hard to decide how you feel about yourself.

“Hurricane Katrina killed a bunch of people and basically destroyed New Orleans.”

New Orleans sounds familiar. “Why would you name yourself after a hurricane?”

She shrugs and puts her hood down. Her hair, a deep red that doesn’t seem natural, is braided around the side of her neck. “We’re all storms,” she says.

The rain picks up, like buckets of water dumping over the windshield.

You click for the wipers but hit the high beams and the turn signals and the washer spray before you find them. Even the wipers’ highest setting doesn’t seem to be enough. You slow down and lean forward, squint at the black road. You think about red boots squeaking against the sidewalk and puddles as deep as your ankles. They’re flashes, gone as quickly as they come.

“You’re young to travel alone.” You’re not sure why you say it, but you feel it’s something you have to say.

“You’re old to travel alone,” she says. She pulls one knee and shoe onto the seat against her chest.

“How old are you?”

“Too young for you.” There’s something in her voice. You feel the tingling in your hand from Roxy’s teeth and wonder if she bites that hard.

“I’m married,” you say. You squint harder.

“Where’s your wife?”

You wish you could forget Theresa in the present like you’ve forgotten everything else, that the memories would slip from your mind, onto the car floor, and under the seat with the beer cans and crumpled receipts. But you can’t forget her. You can’t stop thinking about her looking for you now, worried you got lost or in another accident.

“She’s at home,” you say after some time.

“But you’re not going home?”

“No.”

“Home’s overrated.” She leans back and closes her eyes, which look about as rough as yours. She isn’t interested in you, and she doesn’t want you to be interested in her. But you are. She’s the only one since you woke up that hasn’t made you feel guilty.

You drive until the trees turn into small town buildings and the buildings turn back into trees. The rain lets up but never fully stops.

A sign passes you, or do you pass it? It points at an offshoot towards Louisville. You think about turning around. You pull the car off to the side of the road, hitting uneven pavement that bounces the tires. The darkness is thick with fog around you; your headlights barely cut through it.

“Where are we?” Katrina looks out the window.

“I don’t know,” you say.

“Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know anything?”

“No.”

It’s better if you leave Theresa now before her hopes get too high. Break her heart all at once. It’ll heal faster that way. At least, that’s what you tell yourself before easing back onto the road.

You don’t know Justin Barnes, but you know he drank a lot and you know he never put the crib together in the blue room, or even bothered to put it back in the box. You know you don’t like him, and you’re not entirely sure he liked himself.

You feel Katrina looking at you. The wariness is gone, and now her entire face is relaxed and almost droopy in the shadows.

“You’re weird, you know that?” she says.

“It’s the only thing I know. I’m weird, and I’m not Justin Barnes.”

“Then who are you?”

She doesn’t seem afraid of you, and you imagine it’s because people who hitchhike see a lot of things.

“I don’t know,” you say.

“Who do you want to be?”

“Not Justin Barnes.”

“Then you’re not Justin Barnes.”

“But, if I’m not him, who am I?” You feel genuinely desperate, but you know she doesn’t have any more answers than you do. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Mid-life crises are normal. My dad had one, and he took off, too, but he came back a week later with a new car and a terrible red suit and a diamond necklace for my mom. I’ve never seen her more surprised, but I guess that would happen if your ex-husband showed up and re-proposed with a necklace.”

“Proposed with a necklace?” The other day, while holding Theresa’s hand in the living room, you remembered in short bursts putting the silver band

with two little diamonds on her finger. She was in a short pink dress and blue shoes. You couldn’t remember how you felt or how her hand weighed in yours, but she looked happy, and you are sure that, had you seen yourself, you looked happy, too.

“He said he couldn’t find a ring good enough. My dad’s weird, too.”

You want to say your dad was weird, too, but you can’t remember your dad. Theresa told you both your parents died a few years ago. She said they didn’t suffer, but you still don’t believe that. Your gut twists when you think about it, and you’re painfully aware that you are forgetting something important.

“Why don’t you want to be Justin Barnes?” she says.

In your mind, a million faces and voices and flashes run like a skipping movie. You don’t know them or care for them, and for the last two weeks you’ve despised yourself for pretending to. “Justin Barnes isn’t a good person,” you say. It’s a revelation that comes without memories, without sudden flashbacks and miraculous recognition. It comes only from what you, as Justin Barnes, have done since you woke up. You lied. You played. You ran away.

“Then fuck Justin Barnes,” she says. She sits up suddenly and points with a stubby finger at the green sign racing towards you. “Hey, can you drop me off there? There’s a diner just off the exit.”

You nod, but feel like you should object. The car slows and crawls over the bumps while cornering the exit. You find the diner about a mile down the road.

Katrina unbuckles herself once you’re parked, and as she gets out, you hand her back the few twenties. She hesitates, but she doesn’t fight you. She pushes them into her pocket and smiles. “Thanks, Not-Justin-Barnes,” she says. She closes the door and goes into the diner.

You watch her find a booth towards the right and take up a menu before reversing out of the parking lot and finding the highway. Your car says you’re going south, and you think the south must be a nice place.

One Shoe

BY CATHERINE STRATTON

I discovered his shoe in the trunk of my car. A chocolate brown suede loafer, the left shoe, a man's 9 EE. Worn in. Worn out. Like my Uncle George when he died at ninety-four, five months earlier.

The shoe must have fallen out of his bag of clothes when I moved him from the hospital to assisted living. Stuff he'd never need. He was back in the hospital within two days, in hospice a week later, and then gone.

What does one do with a dead man's shoe?

The shoe made me uneasy, and I didn't want to touch it. It was a live thing, electrified, and designed to shock. Expecting a mournful response and succeeding. A solemn, personal artifact left behind by a man I loved.

I doubt I would be as rattled if I had found one of his polo shirts or a pair of trousers. Without a body to drape, clothing is just cloth, two-dimensional, inchoate. But shoes retain the loss of us. Like this shoe, wide open, a yawning maw, left yearning for my Uncle's singular swollen, calloused, precious foot...a shoe I don't know what to do with.

I suppose I could chuck it in the garbage can at the street corner, where passersby toss their leftover ketchup-soaked fries, half-slurped sodas, green plastic bags of dog shit, and other icky things. I picture his shoe, wrecked, stained, reeking.

Maybe I'll pitch it in my apartment building's garbage chute—out of sight, out of mind—condemned to be compacted 'til unidentifiable. There's the rusted Salvation Army donation bin in the ShopRite parking lot. That's an idea. Let them get rid of it. No matter what I do, his shoe will end up where all garbage goes. The worst kind of betrayal. Not a place of rest.

"Thanks for the call, Cath," Uncle George would say whenever I phoned. Always in the same tired, appreciative cadence.

His shoes couldn't carry him the day he fell. He was curled up on the kitchen floor when his cleaning lady found him. It was the first time he was raced to the hospital.

His shoe goads me. It's like a heartbreaking mirage. Its gaping hollowness screams at me. Challenges me. I cover it with a shopping bag, slam the door shut, and walk away.

I was supposed to call the day he fell.



NAZRENE ALSIRO

My Boss Informs Me that Moose Are Dying

BY CASEY REILAND

After he scolds me over email
for writing “still” twice in one sentence:
Still, still. As if dead moose are an afterthought,
a tire barely skimming the soft
skin of an animal on asphalt, a tree
splitting open from old sun-scalded wounds.
Chronic wasting disease is what it’s called,
caused by a prion that deteriorates the brains
of moose, elk, and deer to a spongy substance,
salt in the rain. I’ve never seen a wild
moose, but I would run into herds
of deer around my college campus,
their legs muscular as a ballerina’s,
their faces hesitant and all feathered eyelashes.
I would whisper, *Don’t be afraid.* Now, I wish
I had said a blessing: *Be safe, be well.*
There are always deer lingering
in the white spaces of my writing.
They emerge along the creek, near
the tree line, their antlers growing velvet,
supple and shivery in the autumn
sunlight, and peeling from their skulls.
The forest floor a keratin graveyard until new
bones sprout from their heads months later.
No matter how many times they stumble

into an open road, they always wait to flee
until the last second before a car barrels into them.
How easy it is to fall into patterns.
In the city, I don’t see deer anymore,
but last winter a group of teenagers
kept appearing at the U Street Metro stop
every Monday night. Their bare arms glowed
in the orange street lights as they dodged cars
on their skateboards like water striders gliding over
ripples. Once, a boy slid on some ice, and his friend
caught him before he hit pavement. *I got you, I got you.*
Laughter seemed to burst from their lungs
all at once, their brains collectively begging for more life.
How easy it is to find meaning in repetition.
Still, we cut words. Still, we curse the deer repeatedly
for leaping into the road a second too late.
We think, *Can anything be saved?*
And yet, there is sometimes a person you love, reaching
out to you over and over, whispering the blessing,
I got you, I got you.

Ten Thirteen

BY EMMA WUNSCH

Leo is dead. Nina can feel it. She's back from yoga and has brought coffee to the studio instead of driving up to the main house. The cat is at her feet as soon as she opens the door.

"Tucker," she says, glancing at him. When she looks up, she sees Leo. He's on his back, on the bed. She walks over. Her heart sputters, like it's not sure if it should speed up or slow down. She lifts Leo's arm with her free hand. It's neither cold nor warm. There's something slightly sunken about his cheeks. Viridian green mixed with Payne's grey and flake white. Or maybe manganese blue and Naples yellow? Nina is a painter and the color of her husband's cheeks is the giveaway.

"A dead giveaway," Nina whispers to Tucker, who's still at her feet. She's all alone. Unless you count the cat, but she's not counting the cat.

Nina breathes in Leo's studio, which smells like salt and pine and maybe a faint tinge of cigarette, even though he supposedly stopped smoking inside. After he quit smoking, Leo smoked two cigarettes a day. One at 9:30 a.m. (coffee); one at 9:30 p.m. (scotch). Nina lets go of Leo's arm and walks across the room to his desk. She puts the coffee down. Leo will never drink it. The clock on the desk says 10:13 a.m. How long does she have?

She walks back to Leo and unconsciously clasps her hands together in prayer. She's not religious, but still. Her husband has died. Leo is dead. Nina unclasps her hands, puts a finger on his cheek, looks back at the clock. 10:15. For the moment, she's the only one in the world who knows. For how long? Five more minutes? Three days?

No, that's crazy. People must know: Leo Charles is dead.



HYESON KIM

“Ten thirty,” Nina tells Tucker who is at the door. “I will tell the world at ten thirty.”

The cat meows. Nina walks across the room, opens the door, and lets him out. Now she is completely alone.

Heart attacks aren't *that* terrible, in that they're quick. It must have been quick, and it must have been a heart attack because while Leo's death is surprising, it's not shocking. Seventy-three. High cholesterol. High blood pressure. He should've cut out all the red meat and booze. The two smokes a day. It could have been worse. Nina knows worse. Her mother's body had turned utterly against itself but refused (for years, years, years) to die. Her mother's death, decades ago now, was horrendous at best. Leo's death is...well, not. Here lies the famous writer in his studio on a fittingly gray autumn day. The white-capped waves of the frigid and relentless Atlantic smacking the jagged coast below. *Gone, gone, gone.*

It's a literary death for a literary superstar and Jesus Christ it's already 10:18 a.m.

So, Nicky first. In twelve minutes, she'll call Nicky, because he's first, last, favorite. Nicky is hers. Theirs. First boy. Her first and only child. Leo's last child, first and only son. Favorite—well, possibly, by default: Genevieve hates him, Stevie is nuts, and Hazel is dead.

Nina looks at Leo again, his eyes closed, his hands by his sides. He probably thought he'd rest his eyes. Poor Leo.

Nina walks over to the bookshelves that line the walls of the studio. Leo was not sad. There was deep sadness in him (isn't it in everyone?), but he was mostly a success and success made him happy. Look at all of his books! Shelves of books by Leo Charles, translated into so many languages. Finnish. Polish. Croatian. Japanese. Languages Nina can't even name. Leo Charles was a phenomenal success and that is...

Nina isn't sure what word she wants. Could she paint what she feels about Leo's death? Stretch and gesso the canvas and there's Leo on the bed, the large windows behind him, his desk, which looks out on the pummeling

waves, the rocks that just keep taking it. Nina isn't a phenomenal painter—her career is nothing compared to Leo's—but put a bowl of oranges next to a pair of candlesticks and a tortoise shell comb and she can teach the students in Painting Still Life 3 how to paint the fuck out of it.

In Painting Still Life 1 and 2, you don't get the comb.

There's a rustling outside. Nina holds her breath. This would be a terrible time to have one of the boys appear. The boys and occasional girl used to be more frequent. Twenty, thirty years ago, it seemed like an endless number of teenagers who fell in love with Leo, with his books, with the way the characters got into their heads and made them take a Greyhound or drive mom's Volvo to rural-ish Maine. It doesn't take too much Googling to find the college where Leo Charles taught, the town where he lived, the name of his cat. With one notable exception (he set the old studio at the old house on fire) the boys were harmless; they were that glorious combination of sad/kind/skinny/greasy. They wore black jeans and combat boots. They smoked incessantly and needed Leo Charles to know how much they loved him, how much his words meant. If there ever was a time for a Leo Charles disciple to not appear, it is now. But there are definite sounds outside. Nina opens the door.

It's only the cat. Nina exhales. The cat is back in the picture, back in the frame. Tucker races in full throttle, leaps on the bed, and splays himself just above Leo's head. Nina thinks this is slightly creepy but also fitting. There are cats, as very minor characters, in all of Leo's books. Leo Charles has always been very fond of cats.

“At least you were here,” she tells Tucker. “At least he wasn't totally alone.” She reaches for him, but he leaps away in some kind of state.

Speaking of states, she needs to call Stevie.

Stevie is...well, Stevie is Stevie and there's no way Nina can let Leo's firstborn child find out he's dead by reading his obituary (above the fold?) in *The New York Times*. Then again, does Stevie even read the newspaper? They are piled, not quite floor to ceiling but much too high, in her apartment, but

Nina doesn't know if they're actually read. Still, Nina must call her. First? Yes. Leo's children must be informed that he's dead. She can make the calls from oldest to youngest: Stevie, Genevieve, Nicky. Then the funeral home and the president of the college. But what about Leo's editor? His agent? The new excitable publicist? What about his students, his former students, the one whose new book is climbing *The New York Times* bestseller list? His ex-wives? That peculiar biographer with the hot mustard breath and twitchy knees who was always around that summer?

No. Wrong way. Nina has to turn this around. It should be Nicky first. Youngest to oldest. Nina needs to talk to her son nearly as much as she doesn't want to break his heart by telling him that his father is dead. She doesn't want to ruin his senior year at his expensive but middling college in Wisconsin. Nicky is the baby, the only boy to a famous man who'd had two daughters. No—three daughters. Don't forget Hazel. Without Hazel there'd be no Nina, no Nicky.

Nina puts her face close to her husband's, looking for her son, but it's hard to find Nicky in Leo at the moment: Leo has white hair and a white beard, neat and trimmed. Nicky is still baby-faced with a mop of thick wavy black hair. Also, Leo is dead and Nicky is very much alive.

Nina looks away from Leo. Nicky will sob when she tells him, which will probably make her sob. But sobbing doesn't mean surprised. Nicky is twenty-three years old (gap year in Peru), Leo is seventy-three. *Was seventy-three*. Nina is sixty-one. Even though Leo was an older dad when Nicky came along, he was loving, affectionate.

Leo was a shit dad with his girls. He'd admit it himself. With his first children, Leo would say, he was so young and their mothers even younger, and he was just at the precipice of his career. There were the girls and the writing and the alcohol, and the truth is that writing won. Alcohol, for many years, came a very close second.

Nicky got a different dad—not a soccer coach or a Cub Scout leader dad, but Leo gave bottles, checked homework, made spaghetti Bolognese. Nicky got baseball hats from Chicago and stuffed animals from Kalamazoo when Leo was on book tour. And when he got older, Leo took him along: Seattle,

Denver, London, San Francisco.

"He makes it better," Leo said, when Nina protested that Nicky shouldn't miss a week of sixth grade. "Even when he's just reading comic books in the back of a store, I like knowing he's coming to dinner, that it won't be just the publicist and fawning booksellers."

And how could she say no to that? Nina looks at the clock. 10:21. Father and son. Nine minutes. Oh, Nicky. He'll be so sad, but it will be nice to have him here, have him home.

It will not be nice to have Stevie here. Jesus Christ. How long will she stay? Oh, Stevie. How long has it been since she's seen her? Three years? Four?

The thing about Stevie: long silences fold the weeks into months and you'd almost forget and then, boom! Endlessly long rambling messages. On and on, one after another after another, Stevie's heavy voice filling the invisible machine.

Dad? Nina? It's me. Stevie. I guess you're not home. Maybe you're writing. Maybe you're writing another book. Maybe baby. It's supposed to rain. Is it raining up there in the Maine? Rain Maine. So rent is due, and Olive had to get three teeth out and the cunt receptionist charged me nine hundred dollars so can you please call me back, please? Bye.

Nina looks at Leo. "You always called back," she whispers.

Of course, calling back doesn't erase being a shitty dad who left her and her mother to write bestselling books. Or maybe it can?

So. Maybe Genevieve first. Stevie is too loaded; Nicky too heartbreaking. Genevieve is a soccer-carpooling mom in a very nice colonial in suburban New Jersey. Or is it Pennsylvania? New York? Genevieve never mentions her father; doesn't have any of his books. Those other moms would be shocked to know who her dad was. All they know about Genevieve is that she's a reliable carpooler and never comes to book club.

Genevieve might be the one to get the ball rolling now that it's 10:23. Genevieve hates (hated) her father. He didn't leave, but he was never there.

Missed everything.

The stuff with Hazel destroyed Genevieve.

Hazel and Genevieve were twins.

Hazel and Genevieve Charles.

Some of the books Leo wrote when he wasn't raising his daughters:

The Farm's Boy, Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller. Adapted into two successful movies, an off-Broadway play, and, not long ago, that HBO miniseries hit.

The Mattress, international bestseller and banned constantly. Who among us didn't share a smuggled copy in high school? And the classic movie with the oh-so-young Meryl Streep? Brilliant.

Egg Man, one hundred and fifty-seven weeks on the bestseller list. Jesus, that's impressive. Nominated for Pulitzer. Won Man Booker. Too much sex to be taught in high school but studied in college since the structure was "revolutionary."

There are many more books by Leo Charles, but these were the ones that Hazel used to circle the words for her suicide note. Three books. Five words per book. Circle, circle, circle. And then the gun stolen from the dim dad down the street and—

bam! Brains all over the prize-winning books while the other twin is listening to such loud music up in her room she doesn't even hear.

But she will see.

The obituary for Hazel was honest. To a point.

Hazel Lynn Charles, the sixteen-year-old daughter of the writer Leo Charles, died by suicide at the family's home in Riverdale. In addition to her father, she is survived by her mother, Kate, twin sister Genevieve, and half-sister Stephanie. A private memorial service will be held at a later date. Donations in her memory can be made to any library or animal shelter of your choosing.

The obituary said nothing of the words Hazel had circled in Leo's books. How could anyone write about that?

10:25. Who will write Leo's obituary Is it already written? What will it say? It won't say he's survived by the not-so-successful painter Nina Krantz. It'll say he is survived by his third wife. But Nina is not surviving the death of Leo Charles. She was saved by him. Nothing like his readers, who only think they are.

Watch Leo Charles swoop into the dining hall that frozen afternoon in February a million years ago. He saunters like the famous writer he is, wearing a loose suit of grief and desperation. He takes it all in (the long tables, high stools, laughably young students) before sitting next to Nina, who's eating obscenely salty pea soup. Leo chooses her! Reliable, perpetually single and childless Nina, who doesn't mind 8 a.m. classes or Friday afternoon department meetings, is chosen by Leo Charles as his future and final bride.

Nina, associate professor Nina, who lives in graduate student apartments next to campus because she's so afraid of winter, snow, and ice!

And now, so many years later, here's Nina, not afraid anymore. Leo taught her to buy big gas-guzzling cars that can take you anywhere. Leo said when it snows, you call Chad with the plow on his shiny new truck and shovel it away. Leo said of course you can buy an enormously beautiful house that comes with another house right on the water and even though you are old and single and childless you can have a beautiful baby boy and get married and renovate your kitchen and rescue a few dogs and a couple of cats. You can do this and when the snow falls you just watch it from inside your magnificent warm house.

Nina could even leave her house. She could go for a drive. Before it snows again. Before anyone and everyone knows! When the people know Leo is dead, they will have so much to say. They love him. They loved him. She might not be able to listen to all the love.

But also, it's possible that some people (women) might not all have such wonderful things to say. They might say not-nice things about Leo Charles. They might say things that have been bothering them for a very long time.

But what if, instead of calling these people she doesn't want to talk to, she

drove to an immaculate suburban doorstep in New Jersey or Pennsylvania? Nina once read that children are genetically more like their grandparents than their parents. If that's true, then Leo Charles is still a little bit alive in the toothless second grader running around a playground. What would happen if Nina went to meet Leo's grandchild? How would Genevieve introduce her? *Here's the third and final wife of my shitty father? Here's the last wife of a famous writer I didn't want you to know I was related to?* Would Genevieve refuse Nina a place at the table after she drove all that way? Nina would be extremely polite, helpful. The child might like to draw with her. She could take requests. Could that be her next series? Painted objects from the relatives of the writer Leo Charles?

On the way back from Bala Cynwyd or Ho-Ho-Kus, Nina could take three Benadryl, stop and see Stevie. She will pet all of the cats, ask Stevie what she pictures when she thinks of her father. Nina will listen. After Stevie, Nina will visit Genevieve's mother, wife #2, who lives outside of Boston in a place that's for people who broke down after their daughter died and their husband became rich and famous. Stevie's mom, wife #1, lives in Connecticut with a boring man who makes her happy. Wife #1 has been writing a memoir of her time with Leo Charles for fifteen years. The name of the book is *When We Were Young*. It'll never get published but it gives the first wife something to do and she will happily talk to Nina when they meet. *Thorns*, the first wife will say when Nina asks her what object she thinks of when she thinks of Leo.

And then, Nina will go back to Maine and spend the rest of the winter making art. Her art. Her Art. The subjects will be all over the place so the show will be crazy. But maybe it will be a little bit phenomenal.

Nina would like to be a little bit phenomenal too.

But now she needs to let the whole wide world know. Nina puts her hands over her eyes. People will have so much to say. They love him. They loved him. She walks over to Leo and looks at him. "I really loved you," she says. "Thank you."

Beep beep beep, Leo says.

It's not Leo.

It's the alarm clock. Set for 10:30 a.m., when Leo took his pills. Crestor, Wellbutrin, Vasotec.

Nina jerks the cord right out of the wall. She picks up the coffee he'll never drink and walks to the door. When she opens it, Tucker runs back out. Nina dumps Leo's coffee into the sink, puts the cup in the garbage can, walks to the bed, and puts her hands on her dead husband's non-beating heart. She takes a deep breath, moves to the windows, studies the waves below. Nina turns back to Leo. She looks at him.

And then, Nina Krantz picks up the phone.



Blue Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

got the job through their ex-lover
whose grandmother owns the place:
mahogany bar, gilt railings, pillows
fringed with onyx and carnelian beads
in the shapes of tiny roses. They
have to wear a long silk vest
studded with jewels they can give away
to customers longing for souvenirs
of their choices inside these smooth walls.
The grandmother sits in a purple chair
and hands out poems on paper cards
she'll recite for a dime or a buck or a drink
depending on her mood. Blue
Unicorn smiles and nods and makes
fat tips to pocket away. And
most of their pay they trade each night
getting high from Cook's succulent food.

Faerie Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

got lost one dawn when he went for mushrooms
in the summer glade near his mother's home
high on a hill with a broken driveway
of stones that shimmered and flaked. He'd

thought to fill his sturdy basket
with a gift for her, to make her breakfast
of eggs he'd gathered from their good hens,
the mushrooms warmed in good bright butter

and sprinkled with tarragon, garlic, salt.
But seven slow steps into the trees
all became strange, a shadowed wild,
and a hand not his lifted up his basket

and wrapped it in ribbons trailing down
to the moss and roots at his feet. Faerie
Unicorn forgot his name
and all the love he'd left behind:

now all he knows is this one story,
the path where he is meant to stay,
with mushrooms gleaming beyond touch,
his four new dark hooves dancing.

River Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

likes to walk along green banks
two days after a thunderstorm's hit
so there's no fierce gush, no rushing mud
but the water's deep enough for her
to cool her careful hooves if she wants
to make her way down to the shore.
Growing up, she revered Connecticut,
summers of strawberries, wild daisies, wide sky
with her old father teaching her how
to guide tomatoes up twisted sticks
and gather bell peppers when they are ripe.
Taking it slow is the mantra she learned
and now that she's getting old herself
River Unicorn moves where she will,
legs less limber, withers worn,
her soft little beard a soothing sign
she'll be wise enough to flow with time
when her blue hour comes.

Sister Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

still dreams of her brother's ghost,
brother with his fists of roses,
brother who dared touch her wrong,
brother who could not survive
dark shadows that pursued him.
She's alive and she makes gardens
and she sings her pain away.
But nights, still, he comes to her,
a wisp, a whisper, a creak, a cry—
and she wakes hating once again
that he used his own horn to die.

Sword Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

dances for other incest survivors
so they can turn anger into art:
horn circled with jewels, hooves
bare to smooth earth, eyes
outlined in kohl for strong gaze.
Across her rump she's draped small coins
to remind watchers of self-worth,
the way young women long years ago
sewed money into layered skirts
after earning it in the square. Sword
Unicorn raises her sleek curved blade
over her head like an Isis moon,
inviting secrets to shed shadows
and move freely in new light.

Tarot Unicorn

BY KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN

pulls the King of Wands again: no matter
what deck, which artist's dream, he
stares at a man with a staff in hand
and a mantle of power, a crown. How
can he ever forget his father? This time
there's a throne, a cushion with gryphons,
a frown between eyes gazing far:
yes, just like his mother's husband
who'd had enough of a six-year-old kid
so cleaned out her savings, grabbed the good booze,
and headed out fast in a stolen red car.

Eppley Airfield Honeymoon

BY BRETT BIEBEL

So me and Lena get laid off on a Tuesday, and we use the severance to buy a few dozen piranhas and then set them loose up by the airport, and there's enough left over to grab some real nice steaks and a couple of cases of Coors. We bring a portable grill. We sit by the water drinking. She throws in a few rocks, and I tell her in ten years we'll be seeing beavers all up and down the shore. Muskrats and rabbits and maybe dogs even, and every last one of them will be stripped right down to the bone. Could be there won't be very much left. It's warm and after midnight, and her eyes look real good in the dark, and she's got these ripped up jeans tugged down past her hips, and she must catch me staring because she says I shouldn't get too excited. She says, Them fish'll be belly up by winter, and this all ends just exactly like everything else.



HELENA BARBARGELATA

Why Cows Can't Fly

BY DAVID JAMES

Of course,
they used to.
Any old farmer will tell you that.
Picture cows floating over the trees
like thousands of black and white kites,
raining milk down on the fields.
Some say it was better for the crops
than rain, better than spring water.

In truth,
it caused a massive cat problem.
Thousands of them
ran across fields of soy and wheat
to keep up with the cows, mouths open,
growing as big as goats.
And the incessant meowing late into the night
kept everyone awake, sleep deprived.

Of course,
with cat shit everywhere and dozens of kittens
at every doorstep, they had to do something:
so they tied down the cows, kept them inside barns and stables,
until, eventually, their ability to fly was lost.

In the long run,
it worked out, and we learned
how to package and drink milk, give it to our kids.
The cat population shrunk to a reasonable level.
The latent flying gene, of course, appears occasionally.
Look up some night and you might see a cow in the sky
jumping
over a milky white moon.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Nazrene Alsiro is a practicing Interdisciplinary Artist located in Atlanta, Georgia. She was born in the Philippines with a mixed racial background of both Palestinian and Filipino. Her original focus at Florida State University was Video/Photography and Sculpture, though lately she has been focusing on painting and analog. She presents her photography in a variety of formats as well as video installations that may include sculptural forms. Her curiosity is drawn to the complex connection between mental health and the need for societal normalcy. In previous and ongoing work, Nazrene addresses the ongoing turmoil that takes place in the West Bank, hoping for peace while presenting subtle truths of what is taking place. As of recently, she has taken interest in paint drenched paper towels used to clean up paint, recycling it into a material used in paintings inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic. In photographs, she uses the double exposure format in which compresses two moments that set a narrative of what she sees during the All Black Lives Matter movement. She plans to continue to use exploration, observations, and experience as a part of the process.

Helena Barbagelata is a fashion model, multidisciplinary artist and researcher. She studied philosophy, literature and politics and was the recipient of several fellowships from the Onassis Foundation/University of Athens, University of Barcelona, University of Trieste, among others. She works predominantly in the medium of painting, but includes mixed media in her larger scale installations. Her artworks combine mixed media, acrylics, ink and watercolor techniques and have been exhibited in Europe, South America, Australia and the United States. Helena is also an author and curator in several literary publications.

Chelsea D.G. Bartlett makes her home in beautiful southern Maine. She believes in the quiet moments, and uses her work to highlight the magic in the everyday. You can read more of her work at chelseadgbartlett.com.

Brett Biebel teaches writing and literature at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL. His (mostly very) short fiction has appeared in *Chautauqua*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Masters Review*, *Emrys Journal*, and elsewhere. *48 Blitz*, his debut story collection, is available from Split/Lip Press. You can follow him on Twitter @bbl_brett.

Bethany F. Brengan is a freelance writer and editor who splits her time between the Olympic Peninsula and the internet. Her poetry has appeared in *The Gordon Square Review*, *The 2015 Poet's Market*, and *CV2: The Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing*. She is also a contributor to *Dick Grayson*, *Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin*, *Nightwing*, and *Batman* (McFarland Publishing). She can be found at www.brenganedit.com and <https://medium.com/essays-no-one-asked-for>.

Erick Buendia is an aspiring artist, writer, filmmaker and a junior from the DC area. He looks towards creating striking and fun imagery in his art while capturing a mood. His art has appeared in *3Elements Review* and *CelebratingArt.org*. His short stories have also been seen in *Bombfirelit* and *101words*.

Elaine Choi is a junior based in Seoul. Elaine finds great interest in contemporary social and environmental issues, and her artwork often reflects her thoughts and ideas regarding them. Through art, she also expresses her identity, which she believes is a work in progress. She hopes to be able to constantly create artwork that communicates, inspires, and summons actions.

A. A. Craig creates art that cross-sections the meaning of Figure and Poetry, studying their intersections like the moon and the body's tides. These pieces are subject to interpretation, as they came from hazy memories. These abstract pieces beg the viewer to ask what they're looking at, decide, then blast that idea into the stratosphere. Their paintings aren't here to spell it out, they're here to give a place for the viewer to dream while awake. Acrylic, ink, graphite, watercolor, and oil pastel have all wormed their way into these pieces. A. A. Craig is an artist and author.

Angelica Eun is an artist who now lives in Seoul, South Korea. Her artwork captures moments which compel viewers to wonder what has happened and what is to come. In each piece, a unique narrative is created from the interaction between characters and their environments. Yet while color, medium, or form may differ, her determination to communicate concepts of emotion and societal implications remains consistent. Stemming from her fascination with observing her surrounding environment, she unites elements from different mental and physical perspectives to craft a cogent narrative, most often to prompt reflection and consequent change.

Jeff Gately is a writer and tutor living in Salem, Massachusetts. While earning his BA at Salem State University, he was awarded the CCPA Creativity Award and published a chapbook of non-fiction, *Rabbits* (Salem State University, 2019). He enjoys writing about how we remember and misremember the people and places that most affected us, either for good or bad.

Carrie George is an MFA candidate for poetry at the Northeast Ohio MFA program. She is the graduate fellow at the Wick Poetry Center in Kent, Ohio, where she works with visiting writers and teaches poetry workshops throughout the community. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her work has appeared on Poets.org and in journals including *sidereal magazine*, *The Emerson Review*, *Gordon Square Review*, and *Watershed Review*. The titles for these poems were borrowed from the astrology app Co-star.

Julia Hands is a writer and editor out of Seattle. She is the current Editor-in-Chief at *Crab Creek Review* and has fiction and poetry published or forthcoming from publications such as *Cream City Review*, *The Evansville Review*, and *Aquifer: The Florida Review Online*.

Franziska Hofhansel is a recent graduate of Knox College, where she majored in creative

writing and worked as fiction editor for the literary magazines *Catch* and *Cellar Door*. You can find her on Twitter @mobybitch1.

David James' fourth and fifth books, *A Gem of Truth* and *Nail Yourself Into Biss*, were published in 2019. *My Torn Dance Card* was a finalist in the 2017 Book Excellence Awards; his second full-length book, *She Dances Like Mussolini*, won the 2010 Next Generation Indie book award for poetry. He has published six chapbooks and has had more than thirty of his one-act plays produced in the U.S. and Ireland. He teaches writing at Oakland Community College.

Living in Adana, **Emel Karakozak** is the first woman in Turkey who has EFIAP/g title. She opened her first personal exhibition, 'Lotus', in 2010 in Adana Sabancı Fine Art Gallery. She opened her second personal exhibition in Istanbul Artgalerim. She also worked in the Art Bosphorus Contemporary Art Fair (2011 and 2012) and the 2011 Contemporary Istanbul Contemporary Art Fair, and her works were placed in Hacettepe Art Museum, BAKSI Art Museum, London Saatci Gallery, Romantic Bad Rehburg Museum, Steyerberger Rathaus Vittebsk/Belarus Center for Contemporary Art, Cultural Center of the Divina, and Museum of Kreises. She worked at Artgalerim Nişantası Art Gallery as a photograph artist for 3 years and she continues her career as a photograph artist at Artgalerim Bebek Art Gallery and Lust Auf Kunst Art Gallery. She works as a federation delegate for TFSF (Turkish Federation of Photographic Art).

Hyeseon Kim is a senior attending North London Collegiate School Jeju in South Korea. She is currently preparing a portfolio to attend university. Her other hobbies include contemporary dance, piano, and soccer.

E.E. King is a painter, performer, writer, and biologist - She'll do anything that won't pay the bills, especially if it involves animals. Ray Bradbury called her stories, "marvelously inventive, wildly funny, and deeply thought-provoking. I cannot recommend them highly enough." King has won numerous various awards and fellowships for art, writing, and environmental research. She's been published widely, most recently in *Clarkesworld*, *Flame Tree*, *Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores*, and *On Spec*. One of her tales is on Tangent's recommended reading 2019. Her books include *Dirk Quigby's Guide to the Afterlife*, *Pandora's Card Game*, *The Truth of Fiction*, and *The Adventures of Emily Finfeather*. Her landmark mural, A Meeting of the Minds (121' x 33') can be seen on Mercado La Paloma in Los Angeles.

Katharyn Howd Machan, author of 39 collections of poetry (most recently *A Slow Bottle of Wine*, winner of the 2019 Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Competition) has lived in Ithaca, New York, since 1975 and has taught Writing at Ithaca College since 1977. After many years of coordinating the Ithaca Community Poets and directing the national Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, Inc., she was selected to be Tompkins County's first poet laureate. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, textbooks, and stage productions, and she has edited three thematic anthologies, most recently a tribute collection celebrating the inspiration of Adrienne Rich.

James Miller won the Connecticut Poetry Award in 2020. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lunch Ticket*, *The Atlanta Review*, *A Minor*, *Typehouse*, *Eclectica*, *Rabid Oak*, *pioneertown*, *Off Course*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Yemassee*, *Phoebe*, *Mantis*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Permafrost*, *Grey Sparrow Review*, *Blue River*, *8 Poems*, *SOFTBLOW*, and elsewhere.

Jaclyn J. Reed received her MFA in Writing from Carlow University/Trinity College, Dublin and her BA in English from the University of Pittsburgh. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Sunlight Press*, *Northern Appalachia Review*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and *The Write Launch*, among others. When not traveling, she lives vicariously through fictional characters across the way from Hershey's chocolate factory.

Casey Reiland's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *On the Seawall*, *The Puritan*, *Stirring: A Literary Review*, *CausewayLit*, *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, and elsewhere. She received a BA in English Writing from the University of Pittsburgh and currently lives in the Washington, DC area.

Evan James Sheldon's work has appeared recently in the *American Literary Review*, *the Cincinnati Review*, and *the Maine Review*, among other journals. He is a Senior Editor for *F(r)iction* and the Editorial Director for Brink Literacy Project. You can find him online at evanjamessheldon.com.

Catherine Stratton is a writer and filmmaker living in Hoboken, New Jersey. Her work has appeared in *The Delmarva Review*, *The Tahoma Literary Review*, and Woodhall Press's *2020 Flash Nonfiction Anthology*.

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man from Seattle with Borderline Personality Disorder. He currently attends the Evergreen State College and works for Headline Poetry & Press. He's been published by UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, UC Santa Barbara's *Spectrum Literary Journal*, and The New School's *The Inquisitive Eater*. His lifelong dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @Romangodmercury on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Emma Wunsch is the author of the YA novel *The Movie Version* and the chapter-book series *Miranda and Maude*. Emma's short fiction has been published in a variety of journals including: *Arts & Letters* (forthcoming), *The Malahat Review*, *The Tishman Review*, *Passages North*, *The Best of the Bellevue Review*, *Lit*, *J Journal*, and *The Brooklyn Review*. Her story "Looking for Cat Stevens" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017.

