



# AFTER HAPPY HOUR

LITERATURE AND ART

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# AFTER HAPPY HOUR ISSUE 23

## SUMMER 2024 EDITORS AND READERS

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## FOREWORD

Dear friends of our little journal,

First let me thank you, once again, for cracking the proverbial spine of this, our small beloved publication. We can't thank you enough for reading.

Some of our editors had the good fortune to be able to venture out into the world earlier this year for AWP in Kansas City, to set up a table and hawk our wares and, best of all, to actually meet some of you lovely readers. Kansas City was a romp, from the 12-hour drive full of cows, corn, and beloved albums on repeat, to our side quest in Casey, Illinois, where we saw all the Largest Things.

Actually, I want to talk to you about Casey, Illinois.

This tiniest of towns is a strange, beautiful weigh-station of the soul. It is dotted with charming tourist traps of unreasonable magnitude (may I recommend, in particular, the World's Largest Rocking Chair). The entire town appears to go to sleep at 7:30, with the exception of a singular bar and decidedly too many gas station slot machines, billed inexplicably as video games.

Casey, Illinois is objectively fantastic. Casey, Illinois makes no sense, and to stay for more than a night would have given me a kind of seasickness. It is the type of place that needs to be taken as it is: a small portion, to be swallowed whole and digested slowly.

I tell you this because here, in these pages, is a kind of literary Casey, Illinois.

Each piece in this issue wrestles with itself. Each has a precariousness, an unease, a between-ness. These pieces are mournful, and quiet, and they go to sleep in your brain at 7:30 only to shock you the next day with the World's Largest Feelings.

Read these nuggets slowly. Savor them. Let them sprawl, wonderfully weird, across your insides. Let this issue be a weigh-station for your soul.

Liz Abeling  
CNF Editor

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# Still Life at Viking Lake

BY TODD ROBINSON

With the same hands that hooked minnows  
                    hold the snapback branch  
so Bud doesn't get whipped.

Drive a stake through marshmallows,  
                    into lakeside mud, feather hair  
you inherited from your mother

born on a doomed farm, her blue  
                    Nebraska dance moves  
under center pivot steel.

Lake like a daguerreotype.  
                    You assumed the dirt trail  
boys were boy kings,

pashas in patched denim laughing.  
                    They were, they weren't.  
All those campers full of happy drunks,

crappie and bass to weigh and gut.  
                    Your uncle a greaser  
no cancer could kill. Nostalgia a summer

with black curling at the edges,  
                    corn casting lacy shadows.  
Dogs with green ticks dreaming

blood. Assume you were good  
                    cowboys. The silver bullets  
you tunneled through fathers only pretend.





SUSAN L. LIN

# A Memory in Four Acts

BY JOHN M. FREDERICKS

I

WOULD YOU CONSIDER it assault or harassment if my father, like, touched another woman, walked up to her from behind and took a handful, and she shouted in terror and ran from his grip and collapsed onto the sidewalk, with my little family unit, my sister, my third stepmother, myself, stationed behind him, a tiny battalion, rounded in a familial half circle, all unsurprised, because we've seen him do things like this before—like the day, years earlier, I watched his calloused hand, meaty at the knuckles, gold rings flashing and his expensive watch, sunlight lancing off miniature diamonds laid carefully into its hours, move through a child's autumn-blond hair in the middle of a mall in Atlanta, and the kid froze and his mother gathered her son's shoulders into her chest and said *what the hell* and glanced back and forth, back and forth, clocklike, tick-tock, at my father, who walked into a department store without looking back, as though it was his right to run his fingers through that child's wispy hair—I walked alongside him that day and watched all of this unfold, because everyone in my family had seen him commit some such insensible, remote, minute gesture before: fingers twirled through the lengthy locks of an unknown woman; two hands on the hips of a young child; a sock stuffed into his pants; all of these images crystallized into the collective memory of the family nucleus, unspoken but known, and do you think that was assault or?

## II

THIS WOMAN SAT on the sidewalk and rested her hands at her side, and she didn't cry or sob or convulse or shout like you've seen in the movies, not then anyways, and—forgive me because my imagination molds into the memory here, so I imagine her walking down this busy street, battling the commotional bustle of an urban island orifice on her way to haggle with a street vendor about the price of chintz before maybe renting one of those motor scooters, its little engine exploding into the fearless rabble of turistas and vendedoras, and riding to the beach to splay her softcolored towel across the quartzine sand and tuck her face away from the sun into whatever book I know she carried, because I can see it now: cover down, moisture-faded dust jacket rippling near the spine; the book lay by her painted toes cased in newish sandals and she stared into the melted horizon, flamed with light, like a wick afire, and my father, who now fills my memory's frame and dominates my imagination, towered over her and covered the sun with his gargantuan sylvan beard that he never shaved during vacation and his erratic smile painted onto his face in this geriatric way, as though he'd walked out of a messianic cave, an ascetic in a wasteland, because he'd burned his face one night years ago; his breath aswim in vodka, he had attempted to blow out a mosquito candle and the flame must have met the alcohol and licked his chin and it burned his skin badly enough to where it hurt for him to shave, and I remember when the second degree burns smattered his neck and pocked his jowls like acne and his beard grew so thick and black at the mustache that people said he looked a little too German and I don't know if I was five or six but I know that I was worried about the temporary scars on his face because to me they looked painful, and the beard offended me, so much so that one night at dinner in a nice steakhouse catty cornered to a busy intersection of north Atlanta, I sobbed, heaved, in the parking

lot, because I felt so, like, afraid for my father and of his scars, and so he dragged me to the leathery backseat of his luxury car and slapped me across the face and told me to shut up about it and stop acting like such a pussy, so he never touched a razor to his face after the burns if he didn't have to, especially on vacation, and so now the beard arrests my memory, because his head blocked the sunlight as this woman looked first at the horizon, then at him, then at us, standing behind him like the audience of the world's creepiest Shakespearean play, and my father smiled his corpulent grin while his coarse, black whiskers slipped past his lips to cover his mouth, and he said to her, *I'm sorry, I thought you were my wife.*

## III

HIS WIFE, IMAGINE that, what a thing to say to this woman on the sidewalk who did not at all resemble my third stepmother, Sherry, whose slender frame forced her clothes to sashay about her in a skeletal way, like if you put cream colored blouses and blue jeans with subtle patterns sewn onto the ass, on one of those skeletons in chemistry class—no, khaki shorts, I know for certain that's what Sherry was wearing that day, because she had stained the fabric the night before at dinner with wine, always wine, and she had attempted to bleach the shorts, leaving a globular white pattern that kissed the hem of the fabric and I know those shorts, can see them now as we're sitting here with our eggs and tortillas; she wore those shorts the entire trip to the Bahamas or Saint Thomas or Jamaica or wherever we were, and this other woman—folded unmoving on the sidewalk—did not wear bleach-stained shorts and she stood much taller than Sherry and she was younger too and fleshy in all the areas we knew my father preferred, because he commented on women's looks all the time: women on the news; on ESPN; waitresses at Applebee's where he drank at the lacquered bar on NFL Sundays; women



he worked with, promoted, fired; women like my first stepmother or my sister or my cousins, who for their part faded from family functions like rising mist until they stopped showing up at all, and nobody really knew why or maybe we all knew, and where Sherry was the opposite of the women he catcalled this woman was not, so my father just stood there, fucking smiling his crevassed smile, repeating his inane excuse, *I thought you were my wife, I got you confused, just a mix up* (ha ha ha) and then he walked towards nowhere, because here the memory just disintegrates, except for the sweaty scent of the sea that washed ashore and slipped through the markets and the hotels and the rubber bicycle chains wrapped around windswept trees and the taste of salt.

#### IV

THOUGH ALL OF it tastes like Diet Coke now, because that's what I'm drinking on the plane when this memory appears before me and unfurls like a map. I'm sitting next to a wealthy woman on my way to see you and I'm reading this book I have with me now, here in this booth next to the tortillas, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, have you read it? You should, because the prose is wonderful and she uses words like sylvan, which is why I described my father's beard as sylvan, because Edith Wharton did it first, so this memory approaches me fully formed in technicolor and it plays out as I'm reading this incredible novel and I'm wooden, fixated on this woman with her hardback book placed facedown and I can't move at all, except I try to waggle my hand, so the Diet Coke knocks over onto the tray table and I can see the caramel colored fizz and sour airline ice sluice and soak the pages of my novel, so the book's edges take on an oaken color and the paper starts to stick together and this rich lady next to me is, like, worried, so she says, *sir sir there's water everywhere SIR* and the flight attendant comes over but I can only see her navy blue dress and cloudy stockings in my peripherals, because my eyes are stuck on the way liquid consumes paper, so the

attendant calls to someone else, because I can't move at all and now everyone is worried about 24C and all I can see are Sherry's khaki shorts and the hardback book by this woman's side and my father's moonface smile totally oblivious to, like, all human decency and this woman's expressionless gaze stuck in what you'd call shock, I guess, and that's it, those are all the images: my father's clown face and the words *I thought you were my wife* (ha ha ha) and I'm filled with this irrational fear that the flight attendant has called over my father who is not on this flight because he's nowhere near me but still maybe his face will somehow materialize next to the attendant and smile and apologize (ha ha ha) so I don't move my head because I am definitely not going to look at my father's stupid smile and his sylvan beard or acknowledge him in any way so there's Diet Coke everywhere and the feathered edges of my book are wet and a cold washcloth hits me in the face BAM so I'm thrown out of this awful trance and I reach for the napkin that is supposed to serve as a coaster but the napkin is useless and everyone is so worried that they all stare until the woman next to me throws up her hands in mock-scarecrow and says *everyone hates flying to Dallas* and the airplane breathes with laughter (ha ha ha) and that's why my book is ruined.



# Death Cleaning

BY MAIRIN LANDIS

She throws the window open to let out the rot,  
Fresh air working through the mesh  
And bleaching the remains.  
She drops a heavy sack onto a roach  
Or vole, maybe, white mushroom cloud dusting  
Her hair and countertops, then she sifts the flour  
Plucking out weevils and dropping them down the garbage disposal.  
A spoonful of sugar, then back to the top shelf.  
She leaves the tap on to fill the kettle;  
It drowns the bow legged cricket orchestra  
Playing under the sill,  
But still,  
The peonies are crawling.  
Scent slipping down to the bed quite rid of bugs,  
Clean, freshly turned bed  
Filled with clay and flowers,  
What a beautiful place to rest,  
And hydrangeas, and dirt, iron, and worms, and  
Bedridden blue hydrangeas like you've never seen,  
Beautiful resting place, clean.

LADY ASIA WEeping



ERNEST WILLIAMSON III



# Coyote

BY KRIS NORBRATEN

HER WEDNESDAY RITUAL: a lap around the cemetery, a DVD from the library, enough groceries to feed a whole family, and the scenic route home, through the woods and past the high school.

The cemetery walk is cold, awash in yellow from unfallen leaves. The woman ignores the state of the flowers set by the usual headstones, two laps today because the air is crisp and smells of wood smoke. She tucks her hands into her pockets and blows steady white breath.

Teenagers in black trench coats wait for rides outside the library doors. In the foyer, after a computer class, retirees mingle. The woman drops last week's DVD in the return slot and heads upstairs, toward the movie stacks. The selection is dated, stream-able at home, but this is ritual. She lands on *The Remains of the Day*, unable to remember if she's seen it before. The machine beeps and spits out a reminder slip, which she tosses in the can. She never forgets, always back in a week to return it and pick out the next.

The grocery store is packed. The woman rolls her cart through the produce, bagging apples, inspecting bananas. Pre-made salad mix. Baby carrots. A clamshell of berries. She circles the outer ring of the store. Meat and cheese, milk for cereal, butter, juice. Pizza and ice cream pops from the freezer section.

Self checkout is a hassle. The plastic bags won't hold their shape. Her hair slips into her face. She tucks it behind her ears, but it falls out again.

She swipes her card and hoists the bags, then heads for the parking lot. The cart rolls away. She doesn't run to catch it.

The route home avoids Main Street. She drives slowly, fingers barely clinging to the wheel. If she could just let go, swerve off the edge, and drop. But off the edge of what? There's only dry, overgrown grass, a shallow ditch, a farmer's field, and no way to get up enough speed to do any damage.

The road winds past a grove of pines shielding the private high school. She wonders what it would have been like: art programs, summer trips to Europe, counselors prepping kids for college. She slows near the entrance. It's almost dark now.

One lamp post in the empty parking lot flickers on, a yellow spot light brightening the pavement. She turns in. The school building looms with stately brick and blackened windows. Something about it makes her sick.

Out the driver's side window, in her peripheral vision something darts across the lot.

A coyote turns circles in the spotlight. He's scrawny and drawn, with patchy, mottled fur. He pants and trots, searching for something. *Water? Dinner?* The woman wonders. *He's lost. Perhaps he's lost his family.*

She steers towards the light. He doesn't notice or, if he does, doesn't care. He circles and pants then does it some more. She lowers her window and says, Hey there, little fella. The coyote doesn't respond. He trots out of the light, and disappears into the pines.

NO ROOM IN the pantry or fridge, the woman unloads the groceries on the kitchen island, and empties last week's food into a garbage bag which she hauls outside and heaves it into the bin for the men to pick up in the morning.

One week later, while she's dumping the groceries into the garbage again, she sees the scraggly coyote trotting along the neighbor's

fenceline, into the drainage where the cattails grow. He emerges under the footbridge, then disappears into the cottonwoods lining the creek.

She imagines him fording the autumn trickle and slinking under the barbed wire fence, his fur matted wet against his scrawny body. *Probably after those cows, she thinks. He'll search for the littlest calf.* The way the coyote crouches, sneaking and stalking, makes the woman smile.

The cows moo loudly that night, when the woman is in bed. She can hear them through her bedroom window, cracked open for the breeze. One cow wails like a stricken child then goes silent. Then, down the creek, in the distance, she hears something else, a throng of the condemned, howling and chirping. The woman pushes herself upright and listens. There is only darkness beyond the silhouette of trees as she strains to decipher the ragged howls, yips fading to laughing barks, the humanoid voices of the lone coyote's lost family. Practically hyenas.

The woman shuts the window and yanks the covers over her head.

SHE JOGS THE gravel path alongside the creek. Her body is at once brisk cold and erupting with heat, adorned with a fleecy headband and mitts. Exercise clears her head of ghosts and her chest of skeletons for the duration of the run.

She imagines what it might be like to know the people on the path: other runners, middle-aged couples walking hand-in-hand, dog-walkers, fathers chasing toddlers on strider bikes, mothers slightly younger than herself pushing strollers. She doesn't say hello or start conversations. She urges herself until a stitch forms in her side.

One run lingers late, when evening animals emerge. Bunny hour. Bat hour. She dashes past backyards and open fields. Halloween lights adorn fences; wind whips ghosts dangling from trees. A great horned owl hoots somewhere high above. Farther down the path, another owl answers. The woman presses on toward her townhouse where the porchlight beckons. She sprints up three steps then bends panting.

Behind her, a crunch. Someone, something, in the communal yard.

Rapid breath snags behind the woman's ribs. She pulls her sweaty band from her head and turns toward the sound.

It's the coyote, sitting like a dog. Dry grass sticks out from under his scrawny rump. A patch of white fur protrudes from his chest like a vagabond's vest. The two stare: *See me?* She sees. Her pounding heart calms, and whatever she has left extends toward the animal. Her warmth envelopes his tiny frame.

He stands and shakes. His back arches in a cat-like stretch, so high she can count the knobs in his spine. He slinks to the porch, and she holds out her palm. His paw hovers over the bottom step as he sniffs her lotion, cooking aroma, sweat. He turns and trots away, toward the creek.

"No," she calls. "Come back!"

THE NEXT EVENING, the woman sets out a plate of leftover soup bones. Her heart thrums, remembering the coyote's sunken chest and patchy fur, his hungry eyes. She watches through the front window but finally goes to bed.

In the morning, the bones are gone, plus the gelatin and fat. That night, she sets out ground beef, and pulls an all-nighter at the window. Past midnight, he comes, padding warily up the porch steps and sniffing the contents of the bowl. He licks the shiny red meat. Then he feasts, gobbling and inhaling.

The woman rushes to the door and takes hold of the handle. She presses the lever, and the latch clicks. She opens the door an inch, maybe two, and peers through the crack. The coyote looks, ears twitching. Flecks of beef cling to his black lips. One small piece dots his little black nose.

Her heart bursts.

The woman crouches as she eases the door wider. He's a statue, hunched and bony. He doesn't dare move; only half the meat is gone.

"Hello," she whispers, extending a hand. The coyote's nose twitches. The woman smells her hand—dish soap lemon—and tucks it away. "It's



okay,” she says, “you’re safe here with me.”

One paw inches forward.

“That’s it,” she says.

Then there’s a sound from across the creek, where the cows graze. A yip-scream, loud and mocking. The coyote turns, listening and sniffing across the dark expanse. Then he returns his focus to the meat.

“It’s alright,” the woman says. “You can finish.”

He gobbles everything down. It’s so private, almost obscene, but he can’t help it. One harrowing laugh punctuates the night before he turns and bolts, not towards the voices, but away.

The woman doesn’t mind the messy porch. She goes inside to wash the dish.

THE THIRD NIGHT, while she’s ransacking her fridge for something to put in the bowl, there’s a scratch at the door. The woman rushes to the peep-hole and there he is, sitting as proper as a dog for a treat. She opens the door. “Give me a second,” she says. “I’ll be right back.”

She peels open a container of Lunchables, dumps in a pack of her husband’s beef jerky, and pours in half a box of chicken broth. The meal sloshes over the rim as she returns to the door. When the bowl hits the porch, the coyote’s face is in, slurping and swallowing.

THE FOURTH NIGHT, when he scratches, she sets the bowl in the foyer, but must move it to the porch.

THE FIFTH NIGHT, he comes inside. The woman knows coyotes are wild. This is about survival.

THE NEXT DVD is *Dances with Wolves*. The woman thinks, *if only we had a little cabin*. Halfway through the epic, she pauses to take the roast out of the oven, and instead of the foyer, she brings the coyote’s meal to the living room, so she can finish the film. He trots to the rug for his meal.

Afterwards, he climbs onto the sofa, curls into a ball, and falls asleep. As if they’ve lived together forever.

One night when she lets him in and feeds him, and they curl up on the sofa to watch a movie, and the movie wraps up, and she flicks off the TV, Coyote shifts his head from his pillow to her lap. She reaches out and strokes his fur. The exterior is bristly, but his plush undercoat is beginning to fill in. His nose twitches and he returns to his pillow.

The woman leans forward and opens the coffee table drawer for an album, thick and heavy, suede-bound. She sets it on her lap, opening to a photograph of her family against a mountain backdrop. The woman’s fingers linger at the corner of the page, but she doesn’t turn it.

She closes the album and returns it to the drawer, which she slides shut with her foot. Coyote startles, jumps off the sofa, and scrambles through the kitchen. The dog door to the patio and backyard is open. He ducks his head through the flap and disappears.

He’s back the next night, gobbling what’s left of the pork, and this time, when the woman is ready to go to bed, the dog door is shut. The woman rises from the sofa, doing the best she can not to disturb Coyote, hoping he’ll stay the night, curled in his little ball.

The stairway creaks as she sets her foot on the bottom step. Coyote’s head pops up, ears twitching. Their eyes connect. He blinks, watching and listening. He hops down, and her heart sinks. She ascends toward her bedtime routine.

Coyote doesn’t dart towards the back door. He trails after her with padded footfalls, and when she reaches the landing, he’s behind her with a straight tail and curious ears. He slinks past the kids’ room, into the bathroom. Then he bends his head and drinks from the toilet bowl.

“No!” she cries. “Don’t do that, silly.”

He looks over his hunched shoulder. *Why not?*

“It’s dirty,” she says.

*It’s not so bad.*

The woman laughs, and Coyote goes back to lapping until he’s

satisfied then he sits on the bathmat while the woman brushes her teeth and washes her face. When she shuts off the light, he trots out of the bathroom.

She changes into a T-shirt while he sniffs the room's corners, sticking his head under the bed and behind the dresser. When she emerges from the closet, he has one paw on the bed.

She grips the closet door jamb as something squeezes inside her throat until her trachea feels blocked. She can hardly catch her breath as she looks at Coyote, thinking, *my dog, my little boy*. She claws her neck, breathing through her nose.

"Go on up," she says, trying to sound casual.

Coyote curls against her husband's pillow and falls asleep, cute as can be.

The woman slides into bed, snuggling the duvet up to her chin. She doesn't touch Coyote, but curves her body toward his, as if she might protect him, as if seeking protection.

In the middle of the night, Coyote startles, shooting onto all-fours. The woman rouses, drowsy in half-dream. She turns toward the window; breeze blows through the opening. A cold front is coming. But first, a sound.

It's the pack. They're in the yard, howling in unison, a canine choir singing for their lost brother, their son. The woman rises to her knees and pushes the window shut. Coyote presses his nose to the chill pane, but the woman lowers the blinds, and Coyote must pull away.

The woman makes scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast.

"I bet you've never had bacon before." She scrapes the meal into Coyote's bowl and sets it on the mat. He eats until his bowl is licked clean.

THE WOMAN FORGETS her Wednesday ritual. Coyote is a fixture now, eating from his dish, curling up on the sofa, sleeping in her bed, only venturing into the small yard to do his business. One night, she brushes

his bristly fur, stroking the soft white patch on his chest with extra care.

This time, when she brings the album out, she flips the pages so Coyote can see. "This is my husband Randy," she says. She traces her finger along Randy's head, down his flannel shirt, to his jeans and hiking boots. Randy holds a long bow with a quiver of arrows across his back. He's wearing a ballcap. She turns the page to a collage of a little girl. "This is Sadie, my first." The woman turns the page to a speckled Australian Shepherd with a frisbee. "This is Ranger."

Coyote waits.

The woman turns the page to a collage of another child. "This is Elliot, my sweet boy." The next page shows a picnic, the next, a camping scene with an SUV and tent. The woman places her hand flat on the page, to cover the image.

Coyote rests his snout on the woman's knee. She closes the album and says, "They're not here anymore." Coyote makes a snuffling noise. "Now I have you." The woman scratches Coyote's head, returns the album to the drawer, and goes into the kitchen to make dinner.

It's midnight again, and the coyote choir sings from below their bedroom window. The woman peers at the dark silhouettes. The pack caws like a murder of crows. She reaches for Coyote, but he's up, pacing and panting the moonlit room.

"It's okay," she says, patting the duvet, "come on back." But he won't stop pacing.

*I'm not okay*, he seems to say. *I don't know what to do*. His tongue lolls, creating a wild look.

"You're safe with me," the woman says, patting the bed again, but he won't join her, so she gets up and opens the bedroom door, thinking he might need a drink. Coyote trots out of the room and down the stairs. She follows, asking, "Where are you going?"

Coyote darts to the dog door, only to find it closed. The woman wraps her robe tight. The pack is farther away now.

"You can't go out. It's dangerous. Come back to bed. It's nice and



warm in there.”

He returns to the base of the stairs but doesn't go up.

It pains the woman to leave him downstairs. She treads to her bedroom, listening for his footfalls, but they don't follow. When she wakes, he's in his spot, curled in a bun, snoring.

SHE DOESN'T DARE take him for a walk. The pack lives somewhere along the creek, with easy access to the pasture. The cows bellow, tortured every time the coyotes snag one of their young.

THE WOMAN IMAGINES feral faces and bared teeth, wiley legs prancing through the snow, and bristly, hackled fur covering hunched shoulders. Nothing like Coyote.

It's not long before, one night, there's scratching at the front door, so aggressive the woman must answer. She tip-toes downstairs, Coyote at her heels. She gathers her keychain from the foyer, bracing a canister of pepper spray in one hand, the deadbolt in the other.

“Stay back,” she whispers to Coyote.

He lingers on the bottom stair, ears perked, nose twitching.

The woman flings open the door, unleashing pepper spray onto the waiting pack. They whine and skitter, dashing into the snowbank, deploying into the darkness.

Coyote creeps forward, his fur brushing the woman's legs, and looks into the night, where his family ran hurt and howling. He no longer cares what they did, how they left him caught, his skin snagged on barbed wire, rancher running with shotgun held high, big white dog barking violence. Coyote no longer cares how he had to rip himself free, make a run for it, bleeding and panicked.

He yelps a clear call into the cold air. Before he can bolt outside, the woman slams the door shut. Coyote sits on the foyer rug as the woman crouches and says, “Remember, I found you in the parking lot, alone and starving.”

He remembers a cold, wide-open space with no prairie dogs. He remembers yipping as loud as he could with nothing in return. He remembers searching the creek, trying to catch a duck, and it flying away, squawking angrily. He remembers the cows braying across the water. He remembers the woman and the meat.

The pack knows better than to come back. Coyote hears them in the distance while he and the woman get ready for bed. When he does his business, he hears them pace beyond the fence. He hears them in the deepest hour of the night, while the woman sleeps, when she looks most alone. He rests his chin on her shoulder and listens through the crack in the window.

DAYS AND NIGHTS pass, and the woman hardly leaves the house. She stares at a glowing machine and orders groceries, delivered to her garage door. When she must leave, she scoots Coyote into a metal cage with a pillow and a bowl of water, but Coyote won't settle, whining until the woman returns. He paces the bedroom and stairway, wearing a pathway in the carpet.

The woman barks, “Go to the kitchen.” Coyote is allowed to run circles around the island, but the tile is cold and slippery on his pads, so he curls up on the sofa instead.

He listens for a sound, the hum-and-grumble that comes before the woman opens a door and brings boxes and bags into the house. One time he hears a flock of birds; another time, a truck; yet another, humans talking.

IT'S SPRING, AND Coyote hears birds through open windows. Squirrels and humans chatting. The woman feeds him, and they watch television, but she barely notices him otherwise. Trucks idle then drive away. He has not heard his family in many nights. He goes in and out the dog door to do his business. He keeps his ears up and his nose wet.

The breeze blows warm, and it's the first time the woman opens

the door to the garage and does not think about her husband or her children when she sees her SUV, their camping gear, her husband's bow and arrows. She presses the button to open the garage, neglecting the house door behind her. She sees the delivery truck, and waves to the driver. A package sits on her driveway: toilet paper, printer ink, dry kibble for Coyote. She grunts as she pushes the box up the driveway.

Coyote hears a truck and rumbling door, the sound of birds. He pads softly through the kitchen and sniffs the oily garage, the fresh air beyond. He steps across the threshold, onto the smooth cement. The woman doesn't hear as Coyote slinks along the far side of the SUV, between the plastic bins stacked against the wall. She's so busy opening her box that she doesn't hear him creep out of the garage, onto the driveway. And she doesn't hear Coyote shimmy between the house and a lilac shrub covered in new spring growth. She's inspecting the bag of kibble, wondering if it's the right one.

It's not until Coyote is fifty yards down the alley that the woman notices the house door wide open.

With a sickening, sinking feeling, she drops the food bag. Coyote is trotting towards the road. It's not busy, that's not the problem. The problem is that it leads to the trail and the creek and the pasture beyond.

"Coyote!" she calls.

He stops to listen but does not turn.

He remembers the bones and gelatin, sticky pink meat, a turkey leg and pork. There is no promise of a prairie dog, a mallard, a calf.

"Coyote," he hears again, but doesn't look for fear he might turn back. "Coyote, please!" the woman calls.

He looks over his shoulder to say goodbye. As he faces the road—the way to his pack—and begins to lope away, there's a sting and a snag, worse than barbed wire, worse than the fear of violence, and he goes down on the pavement.

The woman, crying, goes to him. She scoops him into her arms and

carries him inside. When she tries to ease the arrow out, his muscles tear, and the hole blows outward, ripping his fur, exposing what's inside. She didn't mean this. She only meant to stop him from going away.

His eyes are glassy and human. His ears are soft, his nose sandpapery. His belly stops expanding. She strokes his white vest, and can't stop crying. Her howl is wet and sickening, and holds all the tears from what she has lost, the ache of years of things and people disappeared and gone. One small creature encompassing a lifetime.

When she plods upstairs, and climbs into bed, if the woman doesn't look, she can imagine the coyote curled up behind her, sleeping. In the middle of the night, down the creek, the pack yips and cries, and in the morning, all is silent.





ANNIKA CONNOR

# A Fire, the Tree, the Oyster, and the Octopus

BY KORKUT ONARAN

I

Once a fire told me that  
he is tired of burning.  
Stop burning then, I told him.  
He did  
and he disappeared.  
I miss him.

II

The tree records the years  
in its trunk. The oyster  
records his journals on its shell.  
The octopus, on the other hand,  
doesn't record anything. Her ink  
creates a cloud in which  
she disappears.  
Octopuses live short.  
They are magnificently smart.  
Then, they die.



# Back When Our Gas Had Lead and Everything Was in Fact Poison

BY CHRISTINE RIVERO-GUISINGA

I see myself in the backseat, my parents in the front. They talk; they do talk, don't they? They can't have been quiet the whole ride home. I'm looking out the car window, looking up at the lights that say it's now dark and you need to see; it's now dark, it's just not late, not until the signs blink off, all the signs, all except one on each side of the road (so two). Gas stations —Where it's decided how much is left, and how much more we can afford to go. "One hundred," my father said to the attendant, and the white numbers on the gray face of the gas pump rolled to 100; whatever the tank could hold, it held more or less half-empty. The crinkled peso bill my father paid with came from my mother's purse. The air was all around us sweet. No one said, hold your breath. No one said —

the air here, it's no good.





# Hex

BY TIMOTHY GEIGER

The cloud drift, silver-  
plated overhead,  
          obscures  
turkey buzzards circling  
before their quick  
          descent  
to the dead rabbit torn  
by the field side.  
          All signs  
and portents point  
to a summer  
          of calm  
despair. The rabbit  
a dark spot by  
          the road's  
berm, a broken thing  
splayed open  
          spilling fate,  
should I read it, like  
a witch's spell.  
          It's entrails  
on closer inspection  
form a question.  
          Rain?  
Rebirth? All things ending?

Tractors churn  
          far afield  
horizons to dust.  
Another April left  
          behind,  
I go back inside. The birds  
like stones begin  
          to drop.











you reach the narrowed top. And stepping from the shower wrapped in a towel, or lifting another 5-gallon bucket of well water, or just rising from a straight back chair, the last light you'll ever see will burn the brightest you've ever known, and then something else taking over in a fiery glory, or nothing else.

It's just you and the pig now, his insatiable hunger, and those eyes buried beneath the four folds of his brow, coarse black hair covering every inch of his head, sitting there like some fat god, taking you back to all the places you never thought you'd return despite all your practice, at self-deception.

He'll need fresh water and a full bowl of food, and the hay that makes up his bed needs to be raked, needs to be cleaned up before morning can pass into what may well be your last pleasant afternoon, before he'll even consider you no longer a threat to anything he'll snort, stop chewing the wires, and finally get out of your way.

DESSANDDA



PHILIPPE HALABURDA



# Finger-Pointing

BY MORGAN ROSE-MARIE

WHEN I THINK back to my wedding day, I remember the wind but not its chill, though I know we felt it; the photographs capture us willing our shoulders to relax down. I remember sing-shouting my vows over the gusts, surprising everyone who thought me only capable of whispering. I remember the sun cutting through the lake like a torch.

And then there was the way the anger floated down on a feather, so soft and light and breaking.

WHEN MY YOUNGEST sister was small, she was put in speech therapy. Words turned to water in her body—every time she reached for the language she needed, it slipped through her grasp. She had only sound to make loud.

One morning before I left for elementary school, Erica couldn't remember how to say "cup." She pulled a chair into the center of the kitchen, climbed atop, and screamed. Her whole body went stiff like a hollow straw. My grandmother tried to talk her down. But I'd already learned words wouldn't work here. My sister's voice was noise that filled the space of our house, made empty by a fleeing father, who scattered the rest of what was left of us.

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES away from where I'm seated with my foot propped up on my other knee, my mom's cell phone must beep or buzz or ring to alert her to an incoming text.

When she opens the message, she sees a photograph: a finger pointing at the top of a foot.

My finger pointing at a specific, very painful place on the top of *my* foot. Underneath the picture, I've typed, "It hurts here. What is it?" I've described the kind of pain (sharp, debilitating), when it occurs (just walking, not even running!), and my Google-informed diagnosis (stress fracture).

She laughs. Not at my pain but at the text from her almost thirty-year-old daughter, the oldest of her four.

As a nurse, she gets this type of request for diagnoses frequently from all her grown children. Images of random places on our bodies, where somewhere underneath the skin we feel pain.

She'll reply to suggest it's tendonitis. I'm not surprised when a second text lights up my screen: "Rest."

I'm not good at this. It's likely the reason I'm in this situation. I noticed the start of this pain more than a week ago. If I'd stopped then, maybe I'd be fine now.

As a child I had an aptitude for the balance beam. When the ground beneath me was stable, I could dance across it. My world now spins. Trying to figure out when to stop and when to push feels like navigating a slackline. The boundary between alleviation and aggravation moves as unpredictably—at least to me. My body slips one way, the world slides another. It cannot be fixed.

I ARRIVE AT my wedding and Erica is crying hysterically. Between her fingers, she clutches her phone and a canned Margarita.

"I thought you had cancer!" Erica sobs as she hugs me.

"What?" I pull back. "When?"

Through my sister's garbled speech, I cobble together that she is referring to a text I sent her several years ago—my coming out. Back then, she thought I was going to share I had cancer, not that I liked to kiss girls.

Half an hour later a guest jests, “Your sister is having a good time, isn’t she?”

I laugh but look around the tent to see if I can locate her. When I fail, I take a seat next to my wife to warn her. In this moment, my sister finds us.

Erica has always known only one volume: loud. “I love you both the most!” she exclaims. Her Margarita has been replaced with a glass of wine.

My eyes search for the nearest adult—adultier than me—for help and identify my stepfather. He reads my expression and suggests to Erica that she mingle. Offended, she scoots in closer to my wife, who is too gracious to demur. I am not so generous.

I rise to find my mother.

Erica must be escorted away. My mom takes her hand, but Erica retracts it, running back to my wife and me. “I’m not being a problem? Right? Tell her! Tell Mom.”

I can’t tell Erica what she wants to hear. I can’t tell our mother she is okay. Things haven’t been okay for a while.

On the way out, Erica passes my other sister, Lea, who has been standing in line at the food truck.

“You look crazy,” Erica hisses. To avoid making a scene, Lea doesn’t reply. This doesn’t stop Erica from digging in. “Don’t be a *bitch*.”

A cousin has been hovering on the edge. She used to be a bartender and this is a familiar scene. “You okay?” She asks Lea.

“Yeah, fine now,” Lea answers to Erica’s retreating back. And she will be. She will enjoy the rest of the evening, a kindness to my wife and me. To enjoy a moment is to make it enjoyable.

IN THE WITCHING hours, I pulled out my hair. I brushed the tendrils back in front of the bathroom mirror, leaned in, tilted my head so I could better see my scalp, and found a hair that was too thick. I held it lightly. I ran it between my forefinger and thumb a few times until I

couldn’t stand it anymore. Then I plucked it out.

My nine-year-old fingertips found another strand that was rough, and removed it. Over and over again. There was always another hair that irritated.

Then my hand came away stained red. Fingers of panic squeezed my heart with mortal intent—the same way my own fingers had gripped each hair. I recoiled and pressed my palm to my head. Blood was supposed to stay inside. What if it didn’t stop? I couldn’t fit a band-aid to my scalp. I ran back to bed and put my left ear to the pillow, bloody side-up, hoping to slow the flow outward.

The first thing I did the next morning was find Mom. I didn’t want her to know about my bald spot, but I needed her to assure me I wouldn’t die. I pulled my hair back to show her the fresh scab and tried to sound calm when I asked, “Will this be okay?”

For a moment, it seemed like everything would be fine. Then Mom gasped. “What have you done?”

And okay was just a memory from years and years ago.

“I THINK I’M having a heart attack.”

My mom must be surprised when a photo of a damaged body part doesn’t accompany my text this morning. I can’t get a picture of my heart.

“Probably not.”

I’m grateful she is in a time zone two hours ahead of me and that her hospital shift starts at 7 because it’s 4 a.m. where I am, and I can’t wait another minute. “It feels like my chest is going to explode. I haven’t slept all night.”

“Does it hurt anywhere else?”

“Just the center of my chest.”

“Did you work out yesterday?”

The high school basketball team I coach did push-ups at practice, and I did them too. Apparently, the chest has quite a few muscles; besides



the pecs (pectoralis major and pectoralis minor), there is the subclavius muscle and the serratus anterior and the intercostal muscles between the ribs that help with breathing. It's beautiful, this flesh that brings our bones to life.

"Take some Aleve," Mom instructs.

The pills alleviate the pain from my chest but do nothing to relieve whatever ache inside compels me to repeat the same routine the next day. My heart feels like it is being broken, but underneath the spasming sinew, it's safe, from past and future, even from me.

OUR WEDDING BUDGET was grad-student small. We invited only our parents and siblings to the ceremony. The reception was held in my in-laws' backyard.

I had only one concern: the drinks.

I'd recently attended a cousin's funeral—my aunt's only child. She'd died unexpectedly in a car crash at just 24 years old. At the reception, Erica's slight frame was saturated with alcohol. She regaled guests on the topic of exotic dancers when our aunt joined our table. I squirmed watching the lines on our aunt's face contort acrobatically.

Back at our hotel, I stepped too heavily, and a shell sliced through my sole into my foot. I'd treaded carefully at the reception, and my body was now tired and clumsy. My sisters had gathered in the room I was sharing with our mom when Erica announced that, as a blonde, she experienced as much discrimination as a queer person.

I might have let this go if I weren't engaged to my now-wife and in the middle of planning our wedding. If I weren't teaching a college course addressing structures of oppression. If I could forget the image from the night before of Erica at my aunt's house crying about her boyfriend while my aunt grieved her daughter's death. If... if... if...

"It's not the same," I said. The piece of shell pierced the tender part of my arch.

Erica's flame-blue eyes lit and widened. "Yeah-huh, have you ever

heard blonde jokes? No! I get them all the time."

I acknowledged that blonde jokes are unkind, but when I pressed on, explaining the difference between unkindness and discrimination, my words slid like water down a straw.

By now, we all knew better: water wouldn't quell this kind of fire. Still, Lea attempted to defuse her. This was a mistake.

"You're rolling your eyes at me!" Erica shot at Lea. Her anger engulfed us.

"Okay, let's stop talking about this," our mother tried. She'd driven more than seven hours to attend the funeral and would drive seven hours home the next day. Sitting with her back against the headboard, she looked exhausted. Exhausted from these familiar outbursts that seemed inevitable when Erica was around. Exhausted from supporting her own sister through the loss of a child. Exhausted perhaps from a vicarious grief. *What would it be like*, she must have wondered, *to lose one of my daughters*.

"No, listen to me because you're acting like I'm crazy," Erica continued.

"Just stop."

"Shut up!" Erica dove at our mother. My mother. "Let me just talk to you for a second." I watched as her nails sank into the 60-year-old skin around her wrists. Slipping outside my own body, I wondered about all the different ways we can be lost to one another.

"Stop," our mother repeated.

"LET ME TALK!"

"I think *I* need to go to bed," Lea interrupted.

"Yeah, you should," Erica snarked.

"We should all go to bed," I suggested.

And though we did, I did not sleep. White microcrystalline granules had accumulated like snow drifts in my blood. My body expressing sympathy for itself.

Besides triggering the flight-fight-freeze response, adrenaline encodes emotional memories. The greater the importance, the stronger the



memory. Memories themselves as snowflakes in the frozen landscape of my mind.

I BEGAN THERAPY at nine years old with trust issues and Lefty, my Beanie Baby donkey, complete with a hand-crafted bridle made of string. Though my therapist, with his white hair and face like Einstein's, fit my expectations, nothing else did. His office felt more like a living room than a clinic. Rather than reclining on some futon, I sat on the floor in front of his fireplace. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. When I spoke, mine was quieter.

Neither of us said much. Instead of talking, we drew.

He sketched two hills separated by a valley in the middle. A goat perched on each peak. "There were once two Billy goats," he started, tapping his crayon on their horns. "They used to live together, but then they decided they liked their own hill better..."

The tale he told didn't have a troll or a bridge or even a plot, so I didn't think it really counted as a story, but in its telling I realized the point of the exercise. The picture and story were an analogy for my family—my parents on separate hills, me caught in the sloping, empty in-between. It felt pedantic even if I didn't have that word for it then.

I decided the story I would tell would have no connection to my situation, so I drew mice.

When the therapist asked for my narrative, I explained the mice's parents were dead, and one mouse was left to care for its younger mice siblings, venturing out from the safety of the burrow in search of food. I described the dangers the mouse faced, the victories and defeats, but most of all the mouse's determination to survive.

I thought he might compliment my drawing or the creativity of my tale, but the therapist said little. His eyes didn't reflect pride. Instead, I saw something I recognized and didn't like: sympathy.

I believed it was possible back then to save others while saving yourself. My hands felt tired. I set my drawing aside, wondering what it

might feel like to set down the story as well.

MY MOM MAY have thrown her phone after looking at a picture of my finger pointing to a bump on my leg. That would explain the extended wait time for her reply.

"Ingrown hair?" she types.

"I thought that, but no."

"Wart?"

"Don't think so."

We agree it's not cancer.

My doctor confirms. It's fibrosis: scar tissue. I don't know what caused it.

I'm prescribed a steroid ointment, which I apply twice daily for a month. The bump doesn't improve. I could have surgery to remove it, but I've been warned the scar tissue could be just as bad.

I decide to let it be. It's not painful, sitting there beneath my skin, it just is. Occasionally, when I'm not paying attention in the shower, my razor catches it, drawing blood. After years of being careful, my wrist learns how to maneuver around it. In several more years, it will flatten. I have to go looking for it if I want to feel it.

WHEN MY MOTHER takes Erica back to the Vrbo, she is gone from the wedding reception longer than I expect. She misses dinner, which I will learn on a phone call weeks later. She'll also share that my wedding was ruined for her. I won't understand—why she chooses to tell me this, why she feels this way—until I realize what she really means is that I ruined it. That by pointing out Erica's inappropriate behavior, by saying she needed to leave, I had ruined my wedding for my mother.

After they'd left the reception, my mother stayed at the rental to calm Erica down. She was worried my sister would destroy the place. When Mom does finally leave, Erica will text Lea hateful things, cursing her with familiar names and insults. She will call our mother's phone again



and again until the reception is over and everyone has left and my family has returned to the house.

I, however, will not hear from her.

For the rest of the night, I do not think about Erica. Nor do I think of her over the couple days that follow when my wife and I honeymoon on Mackinac Island, where no cars are allowed, only horses. I will only think of my wedding as wonderful.

I expect to hear from Erica the following week. But time passes, and then passes some more. It will be almost a month later when I send an email asking for an apology. As I type the words, I wonder what an apology can mean if you have to ask for it.

ERICA DEVELOPS OCD in middle school. She washes the back of her hands until they're raw. Then keeps washing. She looks like an abandoned dog with mange.

Before we leave for school, she sticks out her tongue and checks it in the reflective metal on the side of the oven once, twice, half-a-dozen times. No one—not even she—knows what she is checking *for*. But it's probably the same thing I'm trying to remove when I pull out a hair.

On a weekend afternoon, Erica insists we play a game. She picks Sorry! and my mother sets it up on our dining room table. The game moves in starts and stutters; so much of it depending on the roll of the dice.

I move a blue pawn home. I get bumped back to start. I move another pawn home.

Erica has trouble getting out of start. Then one of us makes the strategic mistake of bumping her. *Sorry!* In frustration, she flies from her chair and, with a swing of her arm, wipes the board clean from the table.

*But you made us play,* I wanted to say.

Over the years, Erica's tantrums would become more unpredictable and more violent. Blacked out memories of her hands rolled into fists,

their grip, her nails, even her teeth. She knew how to hurt when she ached.

We owned beautiful kitchen knives, and—fair or not—I saw Erica gripping the handle of one and plunging into my back, my chest, my heart. I started locking my bedroom door at night.

Sitting at the table that day, the Sorry! pawns and cards all around my feet, I feel wooden and blue and stuck in a landscape of only right-hand turns. The game is over, but we are all still trying to find our way home and getting bumped back and back and back.

MY MOM MUST have to squint to make sense of the picture of my finger pointing to a part of my ear that's red and swollen.

"Looks like trauma," she types.

It *is* trauma. From rolling. I've taken up jiu jitsu, and my rolling on the mats is causing "cauliflower ear."

Still, martial arts has healed much more than it has hurt. In learning the angles of my body, the ways joints can rotate—and the ways they cannot—how to leverage the build of a human skeleton, I've grown comfortable in the skin I wear over mine.

More than comfortable, I feel powerful in this body that always wanted to be protected. Healing is something she can't do for me. This is something I must do for myself.

I NEVER GET an apology for the wedding. Instead, I get excuses. Erica blames her explosive nature on childhood trauma, and I understand that nothing will change. I also understand that my own healing will require careful excising. A slicing that can create its own wound.

This is a relationship I can't hold together anymore.

For years, as my body had been fracturing under the strain, I had been collecting the bits of bone and flesh slivered off. I am smaller but I've used these parts to reassemble a sturdier self.

My response is firm, clear and cutting: no more relationship until

after therapy.

That was a year ago. She's yet to enroll.

I NO LONGER send my mother pictures of my finger identifying pain. When I tell my mother over the phone that I have ended my relationship with Erica, she is not happy. I explain, on this call and several more over the weeks and months that follow, that I will not put myself in a position to be abused any more. I plead with her to set some kind of boundary to protect herself, to protect me and my other siblings who suffer verbal abuse regularly at family gatherings Erica attends.

"It's your house," I say. "You don't have to let her treat you like this. You don't have to keep letting her in, letting her hurt you."

"She's my daughter."

"Are you happy with your relationship with her?"

"You don't turn your back on family."

As I've gotten older, there are certain things I've come to believe about my mother: I believe she worries her divorce traumatized my sisters and me. I believe she blames herself for the way each of her daughters turned out.

I don't.

My mother believes blood is thicker than water. I do not have children of my own, *so you can't understand*. Maybe she is right, because I don't.

ON A RANDOM Monday morning a year and a half after my wedding, Lea calls. The sound on the other end of the line erupts. I think she is laughing. Then I realize she is crying so hard she can barely speak.

Our mother has booked a trip to Ireland. With Erica and our youngest sister.

Lea and I are not invited.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I just talked to Mom last night, and she didn't say anything about traveling."

"She bought outlet adaptors on Amazon. I saw the order and texted

her."

For as far back as I can remember, well before I met my wife, Lea has suggested our family forego Christmas presents and take a family trip to Ireland. While Lea vacations widely, our mother has never understood her love for travel. The only place we've ever seen Mom express interest in going is St. Pete, Florida; it was where her parents took her and where she brought us when we were small.

Now, our mother finally wants to take the international trip Lea's asked for—but without Lea or me.

"How could she do this?" Lea sobs into the phone. "How could she not invite us?"

I don't have an answer. I try on several explanations, but none of them fit. The truth, I suspect, is that our mother doesn't know how to handle the inevitable conflict that will occur when Erica is put into a room with all of us. My mother will only avoid it.

In the family's group chat, I type that we all need to improve our communication to stop hurting one another. It wasn't right to keep the whole trip a secret. To not invite everyone. It isn't right that when we hurt each other, we deny and ignore instead of apologizing and taking accountability.

My mother never responds.

Erica does, though. She tells me my request is wild. She writes, "I have a great relationship with mom."

Objects and curses careen across the room, pelting our mother. Nails sink into wrinkling skin. I see it all at once, a microburst of frozen memories. I wonder about the way terrific once meant "to cause terror" and now means "great."

A WEEK LATER, my mother texts me. She does not mention the trip. She does not explain or apologize. Instead, she asks if I bought a horse I'd been considering.

I have an answer to a different question: I tell her I cannot pretend



nothing has happened, that everything is fine. The family's pattern of ignoring hurt and waiting for the storm to blow over isn't something I am willing to participate in anymore.

"Will you do virtual family therapy with me?" I ask, once. "I can schedule and pay for all the sessions." Twice. "I'm not understanding how 'yes' isn't the answer." Three times.

She says no.

She says I can go to therapy alone.

I could not imagine a world where my mother wouldn't do anything for me; I still cannot. Yet this—talking with a therapist—she will not do.

I find myself blameworthy for asking. For ruining her trip to Ireland. For ruining her experience of my wedding. For ruining her family.

I do not confess to these things. Nor am I interested in levying accusations instead.

The thing about finger-pointing is that it's so easy. The human hand can carry so much weight, but none so heavy as the blame it assigns.

## IN HAND



PAULINE SHEN

# Of honoring bluebirds

BY EMILY HEILMAN

Another way of making bluebirds rage  
is to break the fifth commandment—  
sharp bones of the mouth, pointed  
toward the adolescent scavenger,  
they hook like an anchor, collide in  
a fallout and sink with all the gravity  
and grace of a witch trial:

Drowned,  
without just cause, all ties rescinded.

Their battlesong sits softly  
in the fertile spring air,  
and in my ear as I  
pluck twigs for  
another's nest.

# Shrimp Shack

BY ALYX CHANLDER

I keep a rhythm raised in ripping.  
*Fastest in the family*, twisting off  
halves with thumb and forefinger,  
leggy bodies loved. I know antennas  
are all about intimacy. Orienting  
to what's close, what's dangerous,  
what's there momentarily: beheading  
by the dozen, bathing small talk  
in butter, cocktail sauce fingerprints  
everywhere. I tear down condo-sized  
differences, emerge as a hurricane  
inhaling a time share. No more veins.  
No more age. Only blood that won't boil,  
our shoulders squeezed by sun. We eat and eat.







# The Highest of the High Flyers

BY JACKIE JONES CLOWNEY

MY BALLS ARE squashed into my white tights. I didn't take the time to arrange them like I normally do. Like I used to do. I see my shirtless reflection in a mirror by the opening in the curtain at the ten o'clock entrance to the ring.

Jesus, I've gotten fat.

Turning to the side and sucking in my gut, I experience the familiar pain on my left side. It's been almost a year since I took that fall from the trapeze in Belgium. I hit the edge of the net and went down, breaking my collar bone, three ribs, and dislocating my shoulder.

We're in London and we're one of the few circuses that still perform as a tent show. Most, especially those in the States, are now performed inside permanent buildings like auditoriums, sporting venues, and concert halls. If you're looking at the big top as the inside of a circle, and you're looking at that circle as you would a clock, the performers enter at ten and two. The dressing and staging area is between them behind the curtain. The larger animals, in and out of cages, are sometimes brought in through a slit in the center. There is a center ring and two smaller rings, situated in a sort of triangle—but those rings and all the patrons, all the performers, and all the animals are one in the larger, all-encompassing circle.

Alastair and Willie T., our resident Siamese twins, walk up behind me. They are what everyone imagines Siamese twins to be—like Chang and Eng, one of the most famous sets from the nineteenth century—

except they are not identical. They each have one arm and Willie's chest is connected to Alastair's abdomen.

"You look good, Harry," Alastair lies. I've been fucking him for years—fucking him good, too—but he doesn't have to look at me when I do it.

I see him, though.

He's a native, British born and bred, but with a darker complexion than most who hail from this cloud-covered island. His back is smooth—no bumps, no bruises, no blemishes. It's just a cascade of soft, taut, sun-kissed skin spread out before me when I bend him over. Something's stirring down below.

I turn my attention to Willie T. If anybody can wreck a hard on, it's him. He looks like the twin of Alfred E. Neuman, the fictional man-child affixed on the cover of the *American Mad Magazine*. It's not just his deformities that make him look so different from Alastair. It's as if they came from two different planets instead of from the same womb. Alastair is tall, dark, and handsome. Willie T. is crippled with scoliosis of the spine and has a single, shriveled up leg. He blames Alastair for it all—something about Alastair taking all the good genes from their mother in utero or some shit like that, but Willie T. is just an ugly wart on Alastair's otherwise perfect body. He likes women, so when I'm fucking Alastair, he's usually fucking Ella, the assistant to the elephant trainer and a Danish beauty.

Willie T. talks way too much during sex. *Ooooh, Ella, you ride me good like you ride that elephant, don't you? I'm bigger than that elephant, ain't I, baby?* The only way Ella can stand it is if she's looking at Alastair.

Sometimes she and Alastair even kiss.

It's weird, but we're circus people—we've all done weirder. Don't try to figure out the logistics.

"Where have you guys been? It's almost showtime," I say.

"We went to visit Mother," Alastair says in an elegant accent.

"Yeah, that old bitch refuses to fucking die," Willie T. says, in a baser accent, taking a drag off his cigarette.



“I wish you wouldn’t smoke. It’s not good for either of us, you know,” Alastair says..

“Fuck you, Alastair,” Willie T. says and blows smoke right in his face.

“Look guys, I’m going on soon and I need to get ready,” I say.

Alastair puts his hand on my shoulder, leans in, kisses me on the ear and says, “You’ll do fine, darling.” He pulls back and they walk off on Alastair’s two good legs and Willie T.’s single shriveled up one, aided by the cane that the broken brother is never without.

Willie calls back over his shoulder. “Break a leg! Or was it a collar bone?” and mutters “motherfucker” under his breath.

But I hear him.

I hear him laughing all the way back to where the dressing rooms are set up, but I can’t think about that little asshole now.

My mind turns to Antonio, who I probably would consider the love of my life if that can even be a thing in this fucked up existence of mine. Genuine support, compassionate advice on how to change my life for the better—that’s what Antonio gave me, while all I really ever gave him was the clap.

And a peaceful final resting place.

His parents—Spanish and Catholic—shunned him when they learned he was not only gay but had attached his wagon to my bucking bronco. Fuck them. I try to figure out whether I really miss Antonio or if I just miss having someone in my world believing that I could be a better human than I am. He’s been gone two years, but every day since then, Willie T. has made it his mission to remind me that I am a piece of shit on this godforsaken circuit. I have never known why Willie T. hates me so much, but I think that he is jealous that I was inducted into the Circus Hall of Fame. Yeah, it’s a thing. Or maybe he just hates the fact that I’m fucking his brother.

I walk away from the mirror and go over to one of the large white poles that holds the circus tent up around the perimeter. Grasping it with both hands and bowing my head to touch it, as if in prayer, I say

softly to myself, “I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.”

I tap my head three times against the wooden beam. “I’m the highest of the highflyers, the highest of the highflyers, the highest of the highflyers.”

I tap my left big toe three times against the wood, then do the same with my right. I clasp my hands together, head still touching the wood pole and say again, “I can do this, I can do this, I can do this!” I clap my hands together three times and then go over to the partition where the curtain opens out onto the rings. I take one last look in the mirror, suck in my gut, and get encouraging pats on the back from members of the troupe that have now gathered. I’ve practiced, of course, but this is my first time in front of a live audience since the accident.

Felix, the ringmaster and general manager, shouts from under his top hat in the center ring, “And now ladies and gentlemen, I invite you to train your eyes on the sky, as you witness the one thing that men have always aspired to do; that they’ve only been able to achieve with the assistance of machines, but that our own Harry Hart, the Highest of the Highflyers, has mastered. The art of flying. Let’s welcome him back on his triumphant return to the Big Top!” Felix runs out the other side of the ring, which is my cue to run in.

But I’m frozen.

Someone finally pushes me from behind and I run into the ring and begin climbing the pole to the platform.

Alastair and Willie T. mentioned visiting their mother, so of course I think about mine. She had not only *not* refused to die, she had welcomed death.

I see her like I have a thousand times before in my head—with the trapeze bar wound around her neck, just hanging there. She did it after my father returned to his people in Budapest. She was a silly American girl, but good at her trade and the show was sorry to lose her. She didn’t understand the ways of love; not even domesticated love, much less European show people love. I don’t blame my father.

He was Roma.

What did my mother expect? *I* expected her to take care of me, but she didn't. I was twelve when she hung herself from the trapeze, the very one I am grasping for now.

"Fuck it," I say under my breath and jump. I leap from the platform, into the air, holding the bar suspended by ropes on either side like a swing, and travel across the sky of the circus tent. I do a triple twist and grab onto the other bar that one of the tech guys swings out at me from the opposite platform—his timing so precise, thank God—and then I do a double back flip to the original swinging bar, returning to me only by the momentum that I give it.

Nine minutes later I am on the ground, shaking, with blurred vision. But I've done it.

Now I need a drink. Or maybe something stronger. Maybe something a lot stronger. I'll start with a drink. What is the preferred alcoholic beverage in London? I need more than a pint.

AFTER A THREE-WEEK run, we pack up near Smithfield Market, travel to Harwick—about an hour or so north of London—and board a chartered ferry that takes us to Amsterdam, the next city on our circuit. After working the shows in London, all I can think about is how it's becoming more difficult to do my job.

Any distraction, any thought, can paralyze me. Felix has started having every other performer enter through the two o'clock entrance.

It's July and Amsterdam is in the middle of a heat wave. It's hot as hell.

I wish I was Stateside, inside an air-conditioned building. I realize just how much when sweat starts dripping down my arms and running into my wristbands which keep my hands from getting all slick. My palms are sweaty enough on their own. I was obsessed with my Americanism when I was a kid. It's 1971 and if I had been born in the good ole USA, I'd probably not be in an air-conditioned venue flying on the trapeze

but on the other side of the world in Vietnam, fighting a war that I didn't understand and that frankly, I didn't care about.

We set up in Amsterdam and start our performances. I chalk my hands again and go through the motions. Three times I say, "I can do this." Three times I say, "I'm the highest of the highfliers." At least that's what all the banners say, in Dutch at present. I bump my head three times on the wide beam holding up this ten o'clock side of the tent. I tap my left toe, then my right.

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

I interlock my fingers together and say, "I can do this, I can do this, I can do this!" I clap my hands together, again three times, and watch as the white, muddy chalk is propelled as tiny clumps into the air. I watch the particles descend to the ground, like snow in winter.

"Harry!" Felix runs into the staging area. "You're on!" I look at him blankly. "Didn't you hear me? You're fucking on! Get out there!"

I walk over to the opening in the curtain but hesitate when I get there.

Felix grabs my shoulders.

He squeezes, making me all too aware of my past, but lingering, injuries. "You can do this," he says with conviction.

"Say it again," I plead.

"You can do this. You were born to do this," he pulls me to him and says this with his mouth close to my ear. I can smell the scotch he sips out of a flask during every performance.

"Again," I say.

"You...can...do...this," he says with such deliberation and intent that I believe him and go do what he tells me I was born to do. My nine minutes is down to six, but the audience doesn't seem to mind and gives me a rousing ovation as I leave the ring.

Many performers, including Alastair and Willie T., Ella, and several



of the clowns that I can't bear to see without their makeup, are there to cheer for me when I leave the ring.

It helps afterward. I can no longer stand it before.

Alastair and Ella each grab one of my arms and take me back to my trailer, Alastair dragging Willie T. along for the ride. I lie down on the banquette, putting my head in Alastair's lap and Ella gets a washcloth dipped in cool water to put over my eyes. Alastair strokes my hair as the three of them say nothing; they just wait for me to recover. They wait for the dizziness to subside, the hammers to stop pounding behind my eyes, my breathing to become less intense, my motions to become more fluid.

They wait for the shaking to end.

When it does, Ella leaves after seeing to it that I have a full glass of bourbon in my hand.

Alastair and Willie T. stay, but Willie is back to being the asshole that he is. "Jesus, Harry, you're such a goddamn pussy! This has to stop! I won't waste any more of my precious time on these fucking fits of yours."

"You know Willie, I wish they would cut you away from Alastair and bury you on the side of the road so no one could find you. Who would care anyway? Even your own mother wouldn't visit your grave!" Anger is always the best way for me to come out of one of my "episodes."

"Please, stop. Both of you!" Alastair begs.

The three of them initially waited around until I recovered, so we could all fuck and feel good, but I haven't been able to get it up in over a week. After the brothers leave, I finish the bottle of bourbon, then open the trailer door and yell, "Hey Sam!"

Sam is one of the clowns that I can't bear to see without his makeup. He's old. He's bald. He's fucking depressing to look at. At least with the makeup, he has a smile painted on. Sam comes running. He never lingers too far from my trailer.

"What's up, boss?" he asks, treating me like I'm still someone important.

"You got your kit on you?" I ask.

"Never leave home without it, just like that credit card ad says!" Sam is what they used to call an opium fiend, but now they just call a junkie. He comes into the trailer and sits down across from me. He opens up a black leather pouch—it's the old-fashioned kind, the kind I pictured when reading a book about Jack the Ripper while we were in London. It has a real silver spoon and a silver and glass syringe under two elastic bands that hold them each in place. But the silver is tarnished, the glass on the syringe translucent, but not transparent due to the residue that holds fast to its insides, and the needle on the syringe looks rusty.

Sam takes a small balloon from his pocket and I think about the irony of a balloon full of heroin at the circus. He taps out some of the brownish powder into the silver spoon. Mexican Black Tar is all we can get now. You used to be able to get China White all day long in Europe. That was the shit—clean and white as the driven snow, it was as pure as it comes. But I take what I can get. He heats up the ashy powder with his cigarette lighter until it liquefies and starts bubbling. He draws the liquid up into the syringe, taps the glass, and expels a tiny shot of it through the syringe.

He hands it to me. "After you," Sam says, although I know he's dying to go first. After we shoot up, we just lie there ignoring the sounds of the animals rooting around for their dinners and the clowns, drunk, honking their hand-held horns at each other outside the trailer. Sam's mouth turns up within the painted-on smile. This goes on the entire time we are in Amsterdam and it becomes part of my ritual.

I now have the before and the after.

I will live this segmented life for as long as I continue to do what Felix says I am born to do.

WHEN WE PACK up in the Netherlands, we head to Paris. I quit the before and the after for a bit, because without the in between, I don't really need it. When we arrive in Paris, it is the second week of August, so we have a couple of weeks off, as the whole of the Parisian middle-class exits the city en masse for cooler weather at the coasts. They'll be back in droves at the beginning of September, eager for some amusement to bring them back from their leisurely, sun-tanning days.

I spend my nights drinking and gambling, and I get my mojo back, fucking Alastair and any two-bit hustler still hanging around the Latin Quartier when I arrive back at the boarding house on the Rue du Monge where I've rented a room. I am offered a free place to stay in the Marais, but that's where Jim Morrison died a little more than a month before we get to the City of Lights.

I'm twenty-seven. My superstitious soul can't stand it.

I wake up late in the mornings and walk to the Île de la Cité, crossing the Seine at the Pont de l'Archevêché. I walk and walk, passing many of the monuments and most of the bridges of the city. I feel just at home on the Right Bank as I do on the Left. I am certainly not a godly man, but the churches of Paris give me comfort. They make me believe that things can last, but of course, things don't last.

Not monuments, not people, not peace.

Whenever I reach the stairwell at Notre Dame Cathedral where I have the opportunity to climb up and look out over the city from one of its towers, or I come to the base of the Eiffel Tower where I can take an elevator to the top and take in the view from the observation deck, I just can't force myself to do it, as much as I'd like to.

I know I'm finished.

I stop going for walks. I stop answering the door when Alastair and Willie T. come by. Ella comes to the door one day and whispers softly that she is leaving me a thermos of hot soup. Hot soup? In this weather? I neither respond nor do I retrieve the thermos from the corridor. The next day, she returns. "Please Harry, please let me in. You have to eat.

If you don't, you'll die."

I'm already dead, I think. But it seems like I'm the only one who knows it.

I even ignore Sam when he comes knocking. I want what he has—bad—but a student on the first floor has the same stuff.

Unfortunately, my neighbor likes women, so I can't work off what I owe him by fucking him or letting him fuck me. I usually pick up a couple of women in the Yugoslavian's bar down the street, depositing one of them at my neighbor's door, and after collecting my prize, sending the other down the back stairs and into the alley with a few francs.

Two days before we are set to start performances, Felix comes, breaks down the door and finds me drunk, hungover, and high all at the same time. He pushes his way in. I start up, off the chair, shocked at the brash intrusion, but Felix pushes me back down into my seat.

"You got to get your shit together, man," he says, putting the kettle on the hot plate. He puts coffee in the French press. He thinks he's going to sober me up, but I'm not having any of it. "What if I get another flyer? A girl? Someone light? Someone you could toss and hold easily?"

"I can't be fucking responsible for anybody else, Felix! I just can't fucking do it anymore, man. I can barely stand to be in this building even though I've got two floors and a foundation underneath me. You think I can go up there? You think I still can fly? I can't climb. I can't fly. I'm finished." I put my head in my hands.

Felix grabs me by the collar and drags me out of the room, down the hall to the bathroom. He throws me into the tub and turns on the cold water, splashing it up into my face as the tub fills.

I tell him over and over I can't do it anymore.

He begs, he pleads, he cajoles. He calls me every name he can think of, in every language he knows.

Then, having tried everything else, he physically attacks me—slapping me and stomping on my legs, nearly climbing into the tub with me. I fight back, or I try to.



I scramble out of the tub, slipping in my wet sock feet, falling over the side and grabbing Felix's legs. When I fail to pull myself up, he picks me up by my armpits and then punches me three times in the face.

I start to cry.

He leaves me with what will become a black eye, my jaw knocked out of place, and a promise of more injury as he drops me there on the wet floor. He turns just before he heads down the stairs, finally giving up on me. "There is a quicker way to do this, you know. Asshole."

And then he's gone.

I am called back to my room by the whistle of the kettle. I finish making the coffee, but I don't drink it.

I know I'll run out of money soon and I'll have to leave Paris. I have a grandmother in Wisconsin that I only met once when we were touring the States. Who knows if she'll take me in, help me out, but the people here only care about me because of what I can do.

Or what I used to be able to do.

My hope is that my grandmother will care about me because of who I am, even if she only sees me as her dead daughter's son. Even if she could never see me the way Antonio saw me.

I send a telegram—not to my grandmother in Wisconsin—but to Antonio's mother. I never told his family where I buried him, although they tried everything in their power to find out. They even enlisted Felix to try to get the information out of me one night when I was shitfaced.

But that night, I couldn't even remember my own name, much less where I had buried the lover that I never deserved.

I ask Antonio's mother for money in exchange for the location of her son's grave. To think that they would go there, his fucking family, and mourn him as a person that he wasn't, that he never was or never would have been, makes me sick to my stomach. Or it could be the beginning of the nightmare known as withdrawal.

I get an answer from Antonio's father the next day.

They will not pay.

As far as he is concerned, they never had a son and I am a degenerate not worth their thought or time. He demands that I never contact them again. If I do, he says he will show my telegram of extortion to the police and have me arrested. I throw his telegram of denial to the floor, storm out the door, and run down the stairwell.

When I reach the Seine, I stumble, angrily, along the Left Bank and try to think of every possible scenario in which I can maintain my current circumstance.

I realize there are no viable options.

What was I thinking? My grandmother? In Wisconsin? Jesus.

I stop and stare into the dark green water of the river and see someone unrecognizable staring back at me. Felix is right—there is a quicker way.

Am I too much of a coward for that shit? If only I could contract a deadly disease, be a victim of a terrible car accident, be involved in a plane crash, go down on a ship, anything.

Anything where courage and forethought had nothing to do with it at all. But I guess, with my luck, that's out of the question.

So, I walk along the Seine and find a spot at the Quai de Montebello near the Pont au Double. I perform my ritual, kicking my right foot on the raised stone embankment wall three times and then my left. I bang my fists hard, three times, on the wall. First my right hand, then my left. But I am left speechless when it comes to the words. I climb up onto the embankment, leap without hesitation and soar, surprisingly out over the concrete path below. Falling feels like flying until I hit the surface of the water. I don't land as hard as I think I will, but it still hurts after the beating Felix gave me. The instinct to reverse the downward velocity hits me almost as soon as I'm completely submerged and my arms start flailing, my legs start kicking. I break the surface, like a sinner freshly baptized cleansed by the polluted water. Treading water, I suck the precious air into my lungs and decide to swim to shore.



EMMA AINSWORTH

# Sand Dollars in a Small Wooden Box

BY BETH KANELL

This is wealth: three delicate sand dollars, gray, pale, tucked in a tiny wooden box. Souvenirs of a friend's beach rambles. Surfaces shedding fine gold-gray sand with every touch. See, she whispered, here is the mouth centered within the five-petaled surface. And here, the anus. Algae in, remainders out. I, who never held a live sand dollar, never witnessed one propel itself through wet sand, spurting, spined, moist, stroked again the rough emery finish, the grained surface, and settled these (three, for luck or love) into their container.

The mind, they say, is a curious thing; the brain, surely so. Wet, questioning, curled in its own tidal pool, saltwater and moon collaborating. My fingers are sliced open by a net of knowledge; dampen my morning with dreamy details. In its dry casket, a sand dollar is a skeleton of a sea urchin bereft of nourishment and moisture. Of impulse. It had spines. It digested. It explored, left larvae, expelled exhilaration plucking a single note of life, life, life. Hunger accompanies harmony. Lift this to the tongue. The sand dollar tastes of salt and secrets. See, here is my mouth. Lost on a raw Atlantic beach, say in Maine, where cold winds rip and the surge of water overwhelms, I screamed. Once, someone tried to drown me. Now my fingers, five parts scratching and scrabbling, spread like the sand dollar—scrape at the sand, scramble toward skeletal certainty. When I'm finished, I'll wait in that wee wooden box.





IRINA TALL

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Emma Ainsworth** is a 16 year old artist seeking to make her mark on the world through her photography. She lives in Texas with her dog, Hank, a source of inspiration.

**Alyx Chandler** (she/her) is a writer from the South who received her MFA in poetry at the University of Montana, where she was a Richard Hugo Fellow and taught composition and poetry. Her poetry was a finalist for the Michelle Boisseau Poetry Prize with Bear Review and can be found in the *Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Cordella Magazine*, *Greensboro Review*, *SWWIM*, *Anatolios Magazine*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and elsewhere. Recently, she was shortlisted for the 8th Wavelengths Chapbook Context with Thirty West Publishing House. You can read her poems at [alychandler.com](http://alychandler.com).

**Jackie Jones Clowney** lives in Santa Fe, NM with the ghost of her dead husband, her very much alive and much younger boyfriend, and her hound dog Memphis. She has a B.A. in English Lit, a Master's in Philosophy, and an MFA in Creative Writing. She considers herself a long-form writer, but all her novels start out as seeds, as does *The Highest of the High Flyers*.

**Annika Connor** is a Brooklyn-based artist known for her evocative watercolor and oil paintings. Connor's work is characterized by symbolism and vivid imagery that sparks the imagination. A passionate activist and advocate for women's rights, Connor's paintings serve as a visual dialogue on various topics, from political commentary to explorations of beauty and nature. Her art often delves into themes of female identity and current social issues by utilizing metaphorical imagery to provoke thought and challenge societal norms. In her studio practice, Connor blends beauty and allegory to captivate viewers, to create compelling and enigmatic narratives. Annika's art invites contemplation by offering glimpses into worlds that are at once familiar and mysterious. To learn more, visit [www.annikaconnor.com](http://www.annikaconnor.com).

**John M. Fredericks** is a doctoral student studying educational policy at Arizona State University. His work has been featured in *Newsweek*, *The Hechinger Report*, and *The Clarion Ledger*, among others.

**Timothy Geiger** is the author of the poetry collections *Weatherbox*, (winner of the 2019 Vern Rutsala Poetry Prize from Cloudbank Books), *The Curse of Pheromones*, and *Blue Light Factory*. His newest collection, *In a Field of Hallowed Be*, is forthcoming in September 2024 from Terrapin Books. He runs a small farm in Northwest Ohio and teaches Creative Writing, Poetry and Book Arts at the University of Toledo.

**Philippe Halaburda**, a self-taught abstract painter born in 1972 in France and based in Newburgh, NY, USA, defies traditional education with his graphic design degree from Sornas Arts School in Paris. Inspired by Bauhaus and Constructivist techniques, he explores the emotional impact of urban and natural landscapes through vibrant geometric map compositions. Since 2010, Philippe's work has graced European exhibitions, gaining recognition in private and public collections. His American debut at Peyton Wright Gallery in 2013 marked a creative expansion, followed by solo exhibitions at The LionHeart Gallery and Artmora Gallery in 2016. He has collaborated with European and American galleries since 2018.



**Emily Heilman** is a Minneapolis-based storyteller, but her day job is in higher education administration. Most of her creative energy is spent making stories for table-top role playing games and learning to code video games. She's published or forthcoming in *Looming's Magazine*, *The Augustine Collective*, *As Surely As the Sun*, and more.

**Beth Kanell** lives in northeastern Vermont among rivers, rocks, and a lot of writers. Her poems seek comfortable seats in small well-lit places, including *Lilith Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, *The Post-Grad Journal*, *Does It Have Pockets?*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Ritualwell*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Northwind Treasury*, and *Rise Up Review*, and she wrote the runner-up poem for the 2024 Steve Kowitz Prize. Find her memoirs on Medium, and her reviews at the *New York Journal of Books* and *Historical Novels Review*. She also writes feature articles, short stories, and novels, recently *This Ardent Flame* and *The Long Shadow*.

**Mairin Caitriona Landis** is an undergraduate English writing major at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA. She has also been published in *Spectrum* and *Lexicon Literary Magazines*, and she reads and writes poetry obsessively. Her best NYT Mini time is 14 seconds.

**Serge Lecomte** was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S. he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender and painter.

**Edward Lee's** poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen*, *The Blue Nib* and *Poetry Wales*. His poetry collections are *Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge*, *The Madness Of Qwerty*, *A Foetal Heart*, *Bones Speaking With Hard Tongues* and *To Touch The Sky And Never Know The Ground Again*. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

**Susan L. Lin** is a Taiwanese American storyteller who hails from southeast Texas and holds an MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts. Her novella *Goodbye to the Ocean* won the 2022 Etchings Press novella prize, and her visual art has appeared or is forthcoming in *Invisible City*, *The Sunlight Press*, *The Memoirist Quarterly*, and *Midway Journal*. Find more at <https://susanllin.wordpress.com>.

Originally from Houston, Texas, **Kris Norbraten** holds a BA in English from Baylor University, followed by a Masters of Theology. She lives and writes in Colorado, where she enjoys cream-rich Americanos, alpenglow over the Indian Peaks, and remote backpacking adventures. Her short stories—fantastical explorations of grief and loss—appear in *Two Hawks Quarterly* and *Gulf Stream Magazine*.

**Korkut Onaran's** *The Book of Colors* has received the first prize in Cervena Barva Press 2007 Chapbook Contest. His poem *House* has received the second prize in 2006 *Baltimore Review* Poetry Competition. His first book of poetry, *The Trident Poems*, has been published by World Enough Writers in February 2018. His poetry has been published in journals such as *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Rhino*, *Colere*, *White Pelican Review*, *Crucible*, *City Works Literary Journal*, *Water –Stone, Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Bayou*, *Common Ground Review*, and *Baltimore Review*.

**Christine “Robin” C. Rivero-Guisinga** works for a humanitarian organization. She maintains an informal gallery of amateur photography and short poetry inspired by the haiku form on <https://www.instagram.com/storyseamstress/>.

**Todd Robinson** has published two collections of poetry, most recently *Mass for Shut-Ins* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018). His work has appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Pinch*, and *Sugar House Review*. He is an Assistant Professor in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and caregiver to his partner, a disabled physician.

**Morgan Rose-Marie** is a queer writer and an Assistant Professor at Utah Valley University. She has a PhD from Ohio University and an MA from Colorado State University. Her work has been featured in *The Normal School*, *Sonora Review*, *Entropy*, *Bending Genres*, and *Thin Air Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Heavy Feather Review*.

**Pauline Shen's** work aims to highlight beauty and truth. Her stories showcase strength and unity in the face of countless forces that pull us apart. Her writing and visual art is published with *Amethyst Review*, *Blank Spaces*, *Cool Beans Lit*, *Dreamers Creative Writing*, and *Quibble Lit*. Pauline is located in London, Ontario. Follow her blog at [paulineshen.ca](http://paulineshen.ca) and on X (Twitter) @ZenPaulineShen

**Rachel Shpuntoff** is a student in the Boston area studying Education, Theater, and Creative Writing. She grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and has lived in the US, Turkey, and Israel, which has depleted her bank account. Her previous work has been featured in *Laurel Moon Magazine*.

**Irina Tall** (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition “My soul is like a wild hawk” (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorny the Exhibition is Irina's animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren.

**Dr. Ernest Williamson III** has published creative work in over six hundred journals. His poetry has appeared in over two hundred journals including *The Roanoke Review*, *Pinyon Review*, *Review Americana*, *Aroostook Review*, *Poetry*, *Life & Times*, and *Westview*. His art has appeared in hundreds of journals including *New England Review* and *Tulane Review*. Currently, Ernest lives in Tennessee.

**Bill Wolak** is a poet, collagist, and photographer who has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

**Ann Wong WanYee** obtained a BA in Visual Arts from Hong Kong Baptist University in 2020, and currently lives and works in Hong Kong and Sweden. She uses different media to record and reflect on trifles in life. In her works, she explores the possibilities among media by duplicating, extracting, covering or simplifying individual elements and then combining them in a specific way.



