

# *Thimble Literary Magazine*

*Volume 7 · Number 3 · Winter 2024*

PROUD MEMBER



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*Thimble Literary Magazine*

Volume 7 · Number 3 · Winter 2024

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*Thimble Literary Magazine* is based on the belief that poetry is like armor. Like a thimble, it may be small and seem insignificant, but it will protect us when we are most vulnerable.

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Brief Guidelines for Submission

We are not looking for anything in particular in terms of form or style, but that it speaks to the reader or writer in some way. When selecting your poems or prose, please ask yourself, did this poem help me create shelter? Simultaneous submissions are accepted, but please notify us if the work is accepted elsewhere. All material must be original and cannot have appeared in another publication, including social media.

*Poetry:* Please send us two to four of your poems.

*Short Stories:* Please send a single work of around 1,200 words. It can be fiction, creative non-fiction, or somewhere in between.

*Art:* Please send us three to five examples of your art, which can include photographs and photographs of three-dimensional pieces.

All work goes to [ThimbleLitMagSubmissions@gmail.com](mailto:ThimbleLitMagSubmissions@gmail.com) with the genre in the subject line.

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## *Editor's Note*

by Agnes Vojta

---

Dear Readers,

Fall is my favorite season. The heat and humidity of summer have given way to cooler, crisper nights. The light is milder, the last warm evenings are tinged in gold. The last fruits have ripened, a few late asters still bloom, the trees let go of their leaves. The milkweed seedpods have burst open and released the seeds on their fluffy parachutes. The title of Kathleen McIntosh's poem in this issue, "*What I learned tending the garden*", resonates with me. The garden has been a patient and wise teacher for me, and it holds many more lessons.

The poems in this issue invite us to walk in the cool of the garden and on moss, listen to snowfall, observe the metamorphosis of a monarch from caterpillar to butterfly. They ponder a bug carcass caught on a window screen, tell of the encounter with a doe in winter.

Several of the poems recall memories: of the treasures a mother brought home from her work in a fabric store; of a walk in the cemetery with grandmother; of a horseshow the morning after the mother had been rushed to the hospital; of a haircut in the kitchen. Autumn invites remembrance and lets us ponder mortality. The yellowing of the leaves foreshadows their falling, breakdown, and transformation into earth, a transformation no less spectacular and beautiful than that from caterpillar to butterfly. Many cultures devote special days to the

memory of the ancestors; it is no coincidence that those often happen in the fall.

We write against the forgetting. We preserve memories in poems and stories, try to hold on to what is fleeting. We struggle to make our peace with impermanence. The lessons from the garden help. We witness the miracle of the compost and the mystery of the seed. Endings give rise to beginnings. The wind carries the milkweed seeds into an uncertain future. Gardening is always an exercise in hope.

May you, dear readers, journey through the dark season with hope, and may art and poetry help you with that. Thank you for being here.

Best,

Agnes Vojta

## *Naked Parrot*

by John M. Fredericks

---

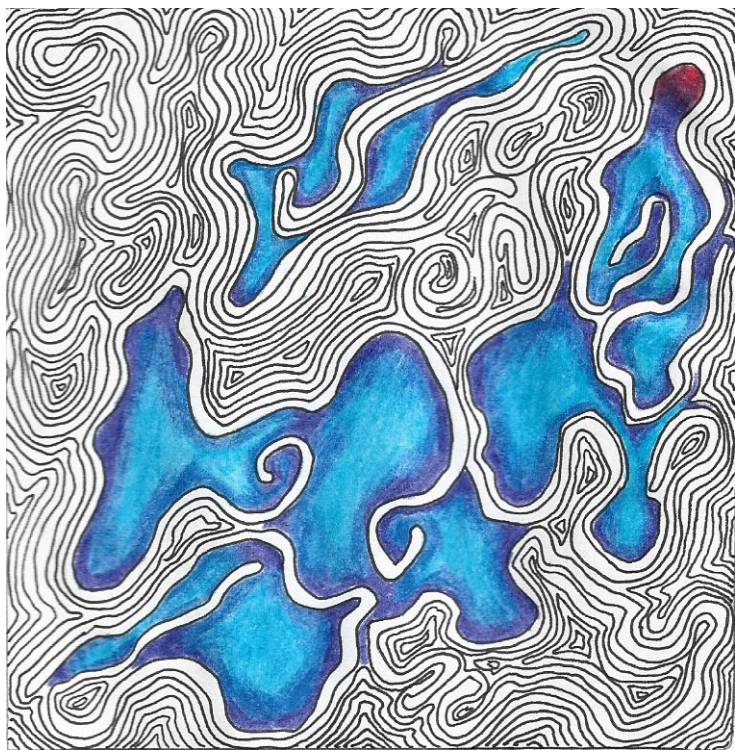
A parrot will pluck  
its feathers clean off—  
stand naked in the cage—  
yap, imitate strangers,  
warble madly,  
call out to visitors and  
perch in full view of the  
skin that hangs on its  
prehistoric shape.

The vet will not know  
why the parrot  
chews itself, mutilates  
the feather's knotty calamus,  
draws blood sharp stains  
over its skin, until  
it lets go, and  
falls to the bottom  
of the cage, among paper.



The doctors will say  
depression—  
or maybe she  
won't eat because she is  
distressed, you know—  
eleven is a hard age,  
for a girl—  
but they will admit  
in private that nobody knows  
exactly why she has trained  
her body to abandon itself.

*Into Stillness* by Lorraine Caputo



## tongue and cheek

by Isabel Flick

---

some days i wish i could cut off  
    my mother tongue—  
    my extra limb of foreign pain.  
a white man asks me  
    what i think of donald trump.  
i tell him,  
    *i don't know*      *who that is,*  
to see if he will leave me      a l o n e.  
i can taste the blood  
    pooling in my mouth  
    as my teeth take a piece off  
of      my mother tongue  
    while he laughs      at his reaction  
to my *joke*— and asks me again.  
    a boy once asked me  
if the candy cane scar  
    on my mother's leg  
    was from it being cut  
o p e n  
    when she jumped the wall.  
    i gnaw on my tongue with  
aching teeth      as i hold back  
    from asking if his father  
is proud of

the colonizers in his bloodline  
while he laughs  
    and claps my shoulder.  
i chew through my tongue  
    like a wolf with its leg caught  
    as my father in law's fiancé  
speaks to me in b r o k e n spanish  
    and tells me her nanny  
    was mexican, too.  
    *mexicana*—she calls me  
    as i choke on the blood  
that has started to run down my throat.  
    ignorance—is not bliss, i know.  
    ignorance is the weight  
my atlas tongue carries  
    as i struggle to swallow the blood  
while i laugh—again—at the jokes  
    some people make.

*Southern Cross by Lorraine Caputo*



## *Lovesong*

by Zoe Berger

---

My taxi driver turns up  
the love song for both of us.  
Later tonight  
I'll manage my soul lightly  
so as not to touch against yours.  
I'll shoot honest, won't mess  
with the spread, careful  
not to fuck with the game.  
In all my work  
I'll mimic the browned roofers,  
laying down shingle  
after shingle. I'll wash cups  
after dinner parties,  
leave the house at an  
appropriate time,  
wish for sensible things.  
I'll work like a dog.  
Yes, this is a prayer.  
I know you are listening.

# Light

by Ezra Levine

---

*Color* my teacher once said *is the light we can't admit.*  
Green is the one thing leaves are not. This six o'clock sun  
that tips through the window of the 116 to Wonderland  
can angle blunt despair through a prism into wistful.  
By Revere, a few jilted photons start feeling godly,  
but God is not a quality of light—its amber, its shine.  
Years ago, with the light dying on the roof like this,  
a woman I loved without thinking about it  
told me how she could only learn to read  
by laying a red transparency over the letters,  
and put her head in my neck, and let me be warm for her.  
In the morning, I wanted the weight of her endless...  
If any heat was awe, hers was. Light absorbed  
and given back like the wood warmth of the boardwalk  
I walked as a child, barefoot for weeks at a time,  
sandals left out to whiten with salt air. She married a flutist.  
I read into things—the fuzzy halo around those weeks,  
and the cataracting over them, all of it blueing, cooling  
into casual, what we call ordinary, incidental, past.

# *What I Learned Tending the Garden*

by Kathleen McIntosh

---

*Summer, 2024*

How to attack those tall weeds in the back  
with a scythe. How to love kale, or wisely pretend.

How to watch for emails from David our manager  
regarding times for mulch delivery, or the acquisition  
of new tools—the garden requires more administering

than you might think. How to hold present and past  
in one season. This year, David tells me, he will be absent  
at times owing to several trips to Serbia.

Mid-summer, over ready-to-pick beans and plans for clean-up day he  
reports  
*yes, it was a good trip, after a church service I sipped sherry  
with the papal nuncio at a reception; of course lots of the local people  
don't want to interact with us. They still think of Mladic and Karadzic as  
heroes.*

How to recall with detail. August: It's twenty-nine years now since the  
genocide.

*There were six massacre sites in all — when it started they cut off  
electricity  
to the region so those villages would have no contact  
with the outside world.*

*In the Omarsk concentration camp they got one meal a day,  
most days. Many of the survivors left for good  
but others felt, you know, this is my home  
I won't let them take it away.*

How to water: a last email for the season admonishes, *we have invested  
in a new hose—  
the old one was leaking--please be careful not to wind it any tighter  
than necessary, and be especially gentle  
with the nozzle.*

*Southern Cross II by Lorraine Caputo*



# *Pap-Smear*

by Nicole F. Kimball

---

Drowning in the lens of clear milk, the nursing student waits for my  
shadow  
to fill the gown as though my bones are made of obedient snow.

I wiggle down into the footprints of other women, toes flossed in cotton  
mittens.  
She's nice enough, the doctor in pearls, her belt locked so tightly that I  
wonder

if she ever cleanses the work-day from her skin. The mold of mothers  
dying beside their babies, spatulas to pry O'Keefe paintings from their  
canvassed riverbeds.

I pretend the gown is my wedding dress all over again. Grippy socks  
as heels, glitter of family still there. As she bends, her pearls click and  
chatter.

Waxy strips hide the craft beads purchased in bulk. I lay back  
into the most primal position any woman could know.

*Bear down tightly for me one more time.* She asks, divots wells into my flesh.  
*Does miscarriage count as giving birth?* I ask, tenderly. I gather more mess.

No one on the planet feels the cotton nose sneezing soul inside.  
It only hurts for a moment.



## *At the edge*

by Jean Anne Feldeisen

---

I'm waiting for the locomotive and its chain  
of clacking boxcars and caboose to roar  
around the corner of Daddy's train board.  
Electric smell of friction  
and the building fury  
of the train as I sit,  
as close to the edge  
as I dare, pray  
it will make the turn but knowing  
it sometimes derails right here  
in a spectacular screech,  
rims sparking metal.  
I tie my eyes to the track,  
my face nearly touching  
as long as I can stand  
before it's coming—  
too close,  
a scream escapes—  
and pull back,  
safe.

Since then my sentence  
to wait at the edge of dread.

# *The Weight of You*

by Mary Kathryn Jablonski

---

*How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?*

I remember a bright, bright winter day, blinding sun,  
and a sky mirroring in clouds the banks of white.

As we walked the Battlefield, the snow groaned.  
Exhausted as though plodding through dunes,  
I stopped suddenly and dropped  
to lie on my back and watch the movement above.

You, without a long coat, refused to join my reverie,  
not wanting to get colder, wet. I pulled you down,  
your back on top of me, your hair at my neck, your breath  
soon in synch with mine, sharing pockets as I held you.

The weight of you, the warmth, such a contrast,  
pushing me deeper into the ice at my back.

If ever I am raised up, let it be the lifting  
as when you finally rose and turned to me,  
snowblind, the indentation we left, one body.

# *Father is a Ghost*

by Clyde Kessler

---

One night I worked some hot jazz riffs  
as if they could burn the guitar, playing  
against my finger bones like wedding rings  
for skeletons, or a wobbly drunkard's ghost  
scratching a hundred hallelujahs while  
throating down a song alone like always.  
Fingertips stayed sore, and calloused.

Sunrise roughed up the curtains  
and I quit playing. Looked outside.  
My father was a real ghost walking by.  
He snuck through trees like a skint bird.  
I propped the guitar against a bookcase.  
Waved. He pointed at his green hat.  
It was weaving itself into pine branches.  
And my father began disappearing there.  
I disappeared, too, into some music  
and words for him. We both wore it gone.

# *My Life as a Painting by Vermeer*

by Evan Gurney

---

Here I stand, holding in my outstretched  
hand this delicate balance, surrounded by  
a constellation of meaningful objects,  
symbols begging for an easy moral:

gold coins and pearls, a mirror, blue cloth,  
just over my shoulder a painting of Christ's  
judgment lit up by a shock of light  
through the window. But my attention

rests on the balance, which holds nothing  
but air. Perhaps I've finished weighing  
my life's valuables, perhaps I will do so  
in a moment. Even I do not know.

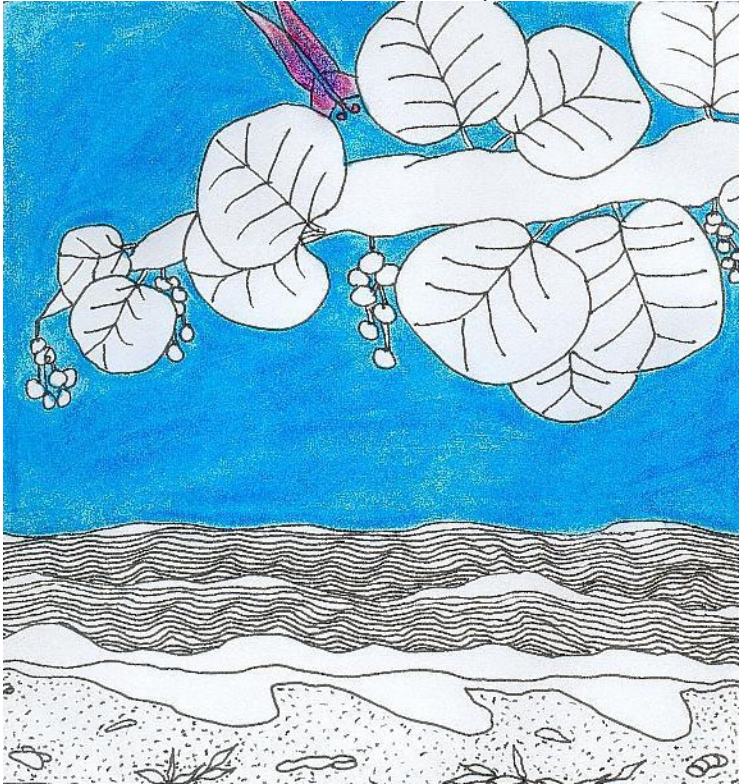
For now I have achieved perfect equipoise,  
the fulcrum at rest, the beam  
a horizontal axis, the two plates hanging  
in true from parallel threads.

An exquisite stillness presides over the scene.

Then I watch as the balance in my hand  
swells into a human head, its fulcrum  
the brain, those threads like tiny nerves  
leading to the inner ears. And Christ,

from the painting above, slowly reaches  
over my shoulder and drops a tumor,  
like a brilliant pearl, onto the measuring plate  
at my left, and the world begins to spin.

*Sea Grape* by Lorraine Caputo



# *Headlong*

by Karen George

---

Driving to pick up fresh eggs from a poet  
with hens, I pass red crabapples and Yoshino  
cherries, one full bloom, the other a tad faded.

Crave the romaine salad with two hard-boiled  
eggs I'll eat for supper, dressing: olive oil,  
red wine vinegar, peanut butter, pepper.

Crisp, succulent green leaves, creamy luxury  
of orange yolk. At an intersection, on pavement  
in front of my car, a Cooper's hawk. I grab

for my camera, but the light turns green,  
and two vehicles behind me want to accelerate.  
Edging closer, I see the hawk grips a house finch

in its talons. Horrified, I inch toward it, hope  
it bolts. Head turned my way, its large dark  
eyes pin me. A horn honks, I roll more.

The raptor swings its wings open, slings itself  
upward, a blur, zooms over my roof. I turn  
right, unsettled, clamped by the hawk's

long thick-banded tail, slate wings, black cap,  
hooked beak. Maybe its chicks squawk  
in a nest, mouths ached open. I can't

be sure the finch did not escape  
the panicked ascent. It remained  
inert, maybe stunned or playing dead.

I can't deny the hawk's beauty, divinity,  
the imagined softness of its striped russet  
breast, ruffled, blasting past me.

*Cordillera De Los Condores* by Lorraine Caputo



# *The Blue Ribbon*

by Olivia Thomes

---

My mother was rushed to the hospital  
the night before my junior horse show.

All that summer I moved our living room furniture.  
My feet were hooves carrying me through an imaginary arena—

to side G, the coffee table,  
asking for a trot at the sofa; wall A.

My mother cheered from the hallway,  
offering a soda after a hard day's ride.

—

I set off on a jet-black pony with crooked white socks.  
The first corner he pulled his weight to the center of the ring.

I tightened the reins, bent my right elbow, pulled him around,  
snout to ass,  
until he turned back on the rail to try again.

The arena was silent except for the crunch  
and squeak of new riding boots.



—

At the end of the hospital bed,  
yellow stuffed duck from the gift shop;  
my feet pretending to trot—

my reenactment: hands  
balled into fists, thumbs on top,  
reining the horse back from fussing.

# *Invincible, We Thought*

by Merna Dyer Skinner

---

It's a wonder we weren't snatched from the streets,  
we two tween girls in summer halter tops  
and madras shorts, strolling Lansing's barren  
sidewalks before dawn split open the day.

We'd waited till the house fell still, the spire  
atop capitol's dome, like a spotlight  
burning, beckoning us to sneak away,  
to tiptoe down each creaky step, newbie  
aerial artists learning to balance.

Before us, sweet stillness. Sleeping city,  
mysterious as the interior  
of a circus tent, hours before the show.

Near dawn, two men, in a slow rolling car  
pulled alongside. *You girls lost? C'mere. Yeah.*

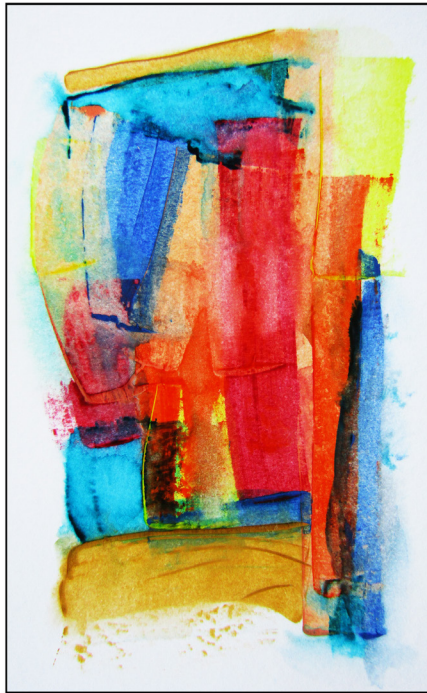
*We wanna show you something.* Coaxing us

like show ponies, they flicked their tongues, tk-tk-  
tk-tk. Between houses, we ran, hiding  
behind bushes, waiting till engine sounds  
faded, till we felt safe. We debated  
shortcuts home, to walk or not walk the train  
trestle, high above an abandoned road,

single tracks leaving no option but straight  
on, walking a tightrope of aging ties.  
Who decided to go first? Half way cross  
we felt rails vibrating, shaking beneath  
our sandals' soles, one of us said we should

turn back, the other ignored the warning,  
sped ahead. Were we possessed by peril  
or, by the competition of reaching  
the other side first before the rumble  
and screech reached us? One broke into a run,  
the other screamed a laughing plea, *Wait up!*

*Wait! Wait up!* As if dying together  
were better than ever dying alone.



*Orotund* by Michael Moreth

## *Notions*

by Anne Graue

---

In what she probably wouldn't call her heyday, my mom worked in a fabric store, in the notions department, where small things amassed into elephants, where she found scraps and remnants—reds, pinks, & yellows—blooming into elegant migraines of possibility and promise. None of her careers were as lively or as variegated as this one. My Barbies wore faux feather boas and sported mod prints on miniskirts for when they went shopping or walking around looking leggy and smiling. Mom liked these perks, especially the one when she could choose from what was destined for the bin and take what she liked home for free. I like to think that she thought of me and my sister while she chose the best pieces, but it might've been that she took what she liked, and if we liked it, that was a bonus or coincidence. Our dolls never had it much better than that.

# *Curiosity's End*

by Abigail Michelini

---

The rain smacks the pavement  
the way my son pastes pieces  
of paper to paper, repeatedly  
slapping what won't shake off—

his hands, crusted with white  
flakes of dried glue, wave wildly  
at the window where the sky  
rids itself of this sopping mess—

like a tired parent, who sighs  
and finally sits down, watching  
the rinse coat the streets,  
the houses, the cars, the trash—

nothing too gross to inspire  
restraint, instead, the rain carefully  
lifts every piece of litter in its path  
to carry it down all the way to curiosity's end.

# *China Patterns*

by Katy Goforth

---

Mama died on a Tuesday. Miss Ross saw her feet sticking out from the next to the last row of corn. Having Miss Ross as a next door neighbor was always stressful for Mama on account of her meddling. The one time it actually benefited anyone, and Mama's not here to laugh about it with me.

Word is a blood clot let loose in Mama and that was all she wrote. Dead in an instant right there in her corn field, half-filled bucket of corn tipped over next to her. I had been expecting Mama's call that day. My ears were anticipating her soprano voice telling me that Miss Ross was messing in her business again.

Now I sit here in Mama's rocking chair, her crow's nest, overlooking the garden that she had nurtured like one of her children. Although, if Mama had nurtured the garden like she nurtured me, then it likely wouldn't be so vibrant. But if you ask my sister Libby, she'd tell you her relationship with Mama was as lush as the lavender hydrangeas that greet people when they come up the front steps. Me and Libby don't have much in common but for our blue eyes. Mama was generous to us with those.

I rock, anticipating Libby's breathless arrival combined with her exclaiming how busy she is, and I grip the arms of the chair. This rocking chair has been in our family for decades. Mama's mama lost count of

how many. At least that was what Mama said. But if the truth is known, she just blamed not remembering on her. After all, you do what you were taught.

The rocker has worn itself a path in the old oak floors. The grooves are like a piece of music that Mama has left for me. I try rocking different speeds to see if I can decipher any messages. I want to conjure up the past that I can't remember. I want to feel her smile that forms when smelling my sweet baby hair. I want to watch as an outsider and maybe witness some attachment to me.

As I rock back and forth, I close my eyes. Slow my breathing. I run my hands up and down the arms of the rocker and settle them at the curved ends, wrapping my fingers around and finding the spots where Mama's own fingers would rest. I start to wonder if the rocker is haunted. Haunted by the tears from mamas who never had any babies to rock. Haunted by the mistakes mamas had been making for decades, passing them down like a fine China pattern from generation to generation. You don't register for this pattern because it is already yours.



*Unnamed 2* by Akinrinsola Babajide Azeez

## *Near and Farther Suns*

by Amy Milin

---

Can I feel tenderly towards the morning, if not for my lover?  
The sunrise hanging low and near, I step outside to greet it  
cross-armed in his jacket, keeping my heat close.  
I leave my jilted feelings. I leave my lover's peaceful sleep.  
My sigh is a lovelorn song, and the white fog of it  
circles the early winter forest like a searching bird.

The sun, at least, has a little still to give me,  
has a little left for everyone: it comes all this way  
for the sparse leaves of the evergreens, imparting  
all its life and spark, and still it saves  
this very last drop of itself, gleaming and pure  
just for catching golden in my eyelashes.

Can you believe it? The sun comes all this way for me!  
I strain to watch the light. It trembles in my view then breaks  
apart in beams of color, glinting wings unfurled.  
Burning yellow center the mothhead,  
now the sun and I are face to face.  
Too bright for eyes, and both of us too beautiful.



Returning to the window, I watch my lover, seeking.  
His face is soft and creased like folded bedthings,  
so faultless in his sleep. The baring branches catch the sun  
and they simply are hands, they plainly say *I want to hold your hand*  
bound in skies they'll never touch but going on  
pained and bold and reaching to receive whatever the sun

can give. Oh, yes—whatever  
the sun can give.



*Unnamed 1* by Akinrinsola Babajide Azeez:

## *Dead Letters*

by John Dougherty

---

My mother said the envelop had to be just so,  
According to the ritual, or else—  
The stamp most carefully aligned,  
The destination precisely clear and centered,  
The return address complete.  
An awful fate awaited those that didn't measure up:  
Suspended animation. The undeliverable, the unreturnable,  
Writings and greetings destined never to be read,  
Were certain to be consigned to the dreaded Dead Letter Office.  
This fate today is euphemized into "Mail Recovery Centers,"  
And initialized into MRC.  
It's lost its ominousity.  
I doubt a kid today could be afraid, or take a warning  
Much to heart, or take the time to contemplate  
The troubling paradox of all the unread writings.

## *Microcosms*

by George Freek

---

Silence sits on my sofa  
like an uninvited guest.  
On the wall is a painting  
of birds flying headless,  
searching for the sun.  
A shadow as long as  
a lizard's tongue,  
catches flies  
and spits them out again.  
A moth lights on my shoulder,  
his wings like hands  
folded in prayer.  
He flies into the darkness  
the shadow created,  
only to kill himself from light  
escaping my door,  
and turns to dust on my floor.

## *Feeding the Dying*

by Victoria Grageda-Smith

---

First, dab balm on the pale, chapped lips.  
Next, offer a sip of water from a straw.  
Then, spoon the soup gently into the  
trembling mouth: chicken soup, but not  
the kind they serve in this country, heated  
straight from a can that Warhol had passed  
off as art: the noodles—soggy short strips or  
floating alphabets no oracle could interpret;  
the diced carrots—a bright orange, yet long  
dead and dissolving; the tidbits of chicken  
—hydrated sawdust. No, that just won't do.

She came here eons of moons ago—  
more girl than woman, with cheekbones  
so high they pushed her eyes into upside-  
down melon wedges when she smiled—  
from that ancient land that had invented  
noodles, where the cooks lost their heads  
if the emperor's meal failed to match the  
divinity of his pedigree; chose herbs and  
spices to enhance the flavor of meats, not  
mask their decay; poached vegetables  
only enough to be kind to rotten and  
missing teeth—yet firm, not overcooked.

They said she was dying. So I prepared  
*tinolang manok* from my Motherland:  
the soup that mothers feed their sick  
children—guaranteed to raise the near-  
dead back to life; its secret: ginger—  
that freak, grotesque root of immortality,  
sautéed with potent garlic, onions; and  
green papaya—sure to flush out toxins;

and the leaves of the pepper plant, which  
would relight the pilot flame of the spirit,  
slow-burning it into ethereality; and, finally,  
the *pièce de résistance*: tender chunks of  
the sacrificed fowl's meat—dark, the muscles  
nearest the bones rich with marrow and the  
veins that carried the lifeblood of the bird:  
flightless, except when it had to fight for its life.

We were friends for many years but  
with few, brief encounters—cut to  
the core of our shared orphanhood,  
our loss of everything maternal: mother,  
motherhood, mother tongue, motherland.

Today, as I visit her—possibly, for  
the last time—I feed her as a mother  
bird to her chick: a masticated feast  
for the soul, passed on lip to lip.

# *Museum of Light*

by Maureen Clark

---

the religions of deep velvet gloom  
preach endless grieving and brimstone hell  
but some messengers speak with tongues of water  
or with the clicks of dolphins

at the end of the world trees will bleed  
bright meteors will come like fallen angels  
I am tied to my father by DNA and star dust  
in the museum of dark there are rules about light

in the museum of light there is only light  
why have I only now imagined him  
in that luminous place where we all carry  
luminous oceans inside blue midnights

and dazzling mornings trees that bleed  
and dolphins that speak messengers deep  
in the rivers of our veins each of us a museum of light

*August 27, 2017*

by Riley Johnston

---

Rain peels paint like my father  
peels fruit. Ah, the walls are melting  
again. Rain seeps through the gaps  
between words whispered  
in the night. How old was I  
when we last spoke? Rain sags carpet  
like shoulders—you carry  
this storm on your back like a wounded  
soldier. Rain grows tall  
like a boy well-loved. It sneaks  
into my room while I sleep. Rain  
is all my mother talks about for years  
when you ask her how her day was. Rain  
gets a place at the table. Rain eats for five.  
Rain laps at my feet while I pray. Rain  
is a portrait of a child  
lost at sea.

## *Dolls*

by Kassie Rene

---

Casper has a shelf on the wall above his bed. His room is moldy and cold and grey, the duvet halfway on the floor. Things are stacked haphazardly that I have to step over to make it to the island of his bed. But on the shelf, the items are all carefully centered with just the right amount of space in between. There are three tattoo guns, a clock he bought when he came to visit me in Berlin, and a Matryoshka doll I bought him in Prague.

He's kept his dolls stacked inward on themselves—the way they are meant to be stored. I have a matching version, but I took all of my dolls out. They are spread across the vast expanse of a bookshelf that greets me when I first walk in the door. When I saw the two dolls in the shop, I thought they suited us both. I still think they do. A stoic black one for him. An unpainted version for me. Both are adorned with flowers and castles burnt into the wood.

“You still have that,” I say, pointing at the doll. I am surprised to see her, pristine on the shelf. If I were Casper, I would have thrown it, and maybe even the clock, out.

Casper sits relaxed and leaned up against the wall, while I nose through his belongings. I am picking the items up and putting them back down a little too loudly. I am trying to get a reaction out of him, but he is contained. I pick up one of the tattoo guns, and he suddenly



comes to life.

He leans over towards me and starts picking up tiny levers and telling me whatever it is that makes this particular machine special. That he got it from Dani for cheap. That people don't make machines like this anymore. It is a trick I have learned about Casper, who doesn't always have the grandest of emotional responses the way I would like him to. But if I prod him about tattoos, a light will appear behind his blue eyes that wasn't there before. And if I don't listen to the words he is really saying, I can pretend that it is excitement for me.

Casper finishes explaining whatever it was about the tattoo gun and carefully takes it from my hands to put it back where it belongs on the shelf. And the machine will go on unused because Casper doesn't even know how to tattoo.

*Unnamed 3* by Akinrinsola Babajide Azeez:



# *Neither the One Who Plants*

by Valerie A. Smith

---

This season is for walking in the cool of the garden.  
For listening to the cardinals sing love, happy,  
*Soon and very soon*, a hymn of increase  
Of rebound, of comeback, of justice  
Eternal. Forty springs is a kindness,  
A testament that trouble don't last long.

Winter, shorter now, still seems long.  
We plant, we wait to sow the next garden.  
The ground beneath the knees is a kindness.  
Perennials, they say, volunteer to return happy  
For those who plant one time. Justice,  
Jesus said. At least there will be increase.

But spring is not always about increase,  
Celebrating what we've waited for so long.  
Not the fair season for all equal justice.  
Tares grow beside the flowers of the garden.  
And what is spring but a fight to be happy,  
A dirty rebellion for earth's simple kindness.

And to whom do we repay this kindness  
To show stewardship of this increase?  
*Blessed are those*—a version of happy.  
Mercy endures forever, grace as long  
As the cool intended walk of the garden  
Before any need for justice.

What the world needs now is justice  
Planted like the nine fruits, of which kindness  
Growing by love, joy, and peace in the garden  
Of our hearts, would show increase  
In patience, goodness, and faith as long  
As the word is alive in us, He calls us happy.

That's it then. Spring calls us to be happy,  
Despite life lacking equanimity or justice,  
Despite the warming winter still too long.  
We must, like a cardinal song, sow kindness  
Before perennials voluntarily increase  
It is our duty, now, to tend the garden.

We don't know how short or how long  
The assignment, just that blessed—happy —  
Is a chance to walk in the cool of the garden  
A chance as fair and full of justice  
As a life filled with returning kindness  
And Glory to God, the increase.

## *Go with the Flow*

by Lana Hetchman Ayers

---

Slow motion of childhood, eager summers, lawn mower growls, sprints under sprinklers, rainbow halo of wet skin, autumn tumbles in in heaps of leaves, winter snow taller than elbows, dances among flakes, icicle fingers, ears and nose red as happiness, spring bookbags strewn in the grass, all seasons flee later in life, fast forward from green to grey to white, home as an old woman without an aria, sped-up chipmunk songs of envy, already note the distress of faded hydrangeas, tomorrow's anxiety of slick roads, time the movie we can't run backwards, onslaught of seasons like sneezes unable to be stopped. Death's a Bufflehead duck on this great blue pond in space, paddling ever onward.

# *After the Fireworks*

by Jessica R. Gordon

---

On one side of the fork in a bend on the Tuckasegee river, nine geese sit in a loose “V”—the river is low and they’re close to the rocks—I keep counting the large grey-brown river rock a goose—want to make an even ten—and I don’t want to confirm what I know—why these Canada Geese sit bobbing over inches of water and smooth stone on July 5—they dip, pop up, formation unbroken even when families on red and blue tubes and floaties glide past—one shakes its tail only slightly—Listen,

the signs aren’t good. I don’t need to type in keywords to know Canada Geese shouldn’t be in a river bend off the Smokies when it isn’t snowing in Ontario. But I too have lingered on in seasons when I should have gone and made myself a home in shifting waters. The connecting “V” flips under the surface completely—got to get cool, this heat so sticky, so pressing—back upright again—black eyes on the laughing, floating family headed downstream—

I take my sandals off at the bank, creep in—shallow water spills over my toes—so cool—a dream, to linger. All water rushing past, all patterns with it.

# *Find Me in the Whirlwind*

by JJ Amaworo Wilson

---

Find me in the whirlwind.

Nevada, July 4, 1910. Jack Johnson looming over the prostrate contender knocked out in the fifteenth round. “Never saw it coming,” says the loser two hours later in the back room of the speakeasy where they take him to recuperate on whisky sours and French bourbon. And Johnson walking away with the belt in his hand and the woman on his arm and all over America the white riots begin.

Find me in the whirlwind.

Ocoee, Florida, 1920. The Black people want to vote, so the white people start shooting up the neighborhood and they hang Julius Perry on a lamppost to show what happens when Black people get uppity. And afterwards the coroner scratches his head and says, “This body is too heavy, heavier than what it should be.” And the mystery is solved when he realizes the white people pumped the body full of lead after the man died because that’s what people do when their hearts are full of hate.

Find me in the whirlwind.

1921. Tulsa, Black Wall Street burned down by white mobs. Two days of looting and murder, airplanes dropping grenades on their own soil, on their own people, on the progeny of the ones they brought over in shackles to do their dirty work, the progeny of the ones they whipped and punched and raped and hunted down with dogs and horses. They

burn it to the ground and five-hundred souls ascend to heaven.

Find me in the whirlwind.

Old show tunes, jazz numbers on the jukebox, Satchmo growling. Billie Holliday opens her mouth and the whole of Harlem comes out and three-hundred and forty years of living hell and white supremacy. Baldwin's head dipped over the typewriter, haloed in cigarette smoke, the ashtray overflowing in gauzy light, tells the white folks "I can't believe what you say because I see what you do."

Find me in the whirlwind.

1963, in the cool of the Alabama church where the little Black girls play and pray, dressed in their Sunday best these god-fearing children in the house of the Lord. Turns out it isn't God they need to fear. Because the whites plant their dynamite and Carol and Denise and Cynthia and Addie May die in the blast and the flames, yes, say their names. And they fly straight to the bosom of the Lord they feared. And every stained glass window of that church shatters into pieces except one: the one showing Christ walking with children.

Find me in the whirlwind.

Toni Morrison staring down the interviewer who asks her when she's going to tackle mainstream subjects as if Black people are not mainstream subjects, and Morrison not batting an eyelid, Morrison not losing her cool, Morrison not telling the interviewer to go fuck himself, Morrison perfectly coiffured in the eye of the storm folds her arms and begins to explain.

Find me in the whirlwind.

The breath in the ship's hold. Prostrate and shackled to their kinsmen. Heat like a furnace. Surrounded by the dead. Here on the ship, time plays tricks. The wooden mast creaks. The ocean waves churn. The sky darkens and the sun dips down leaving its fire smeared above the horizon. The captives and the captors trapped together in history's grip till the end of Time. Till the whirlwind slows and slows and there, you will find me.

# *Milkweed*

by James Kangas

---

I planted milkweed roots  
from Holland to help feed  
monarch butterflies whose  
numbers have dwindled  
greatly these last many years.

Some grew tall, some shorter.  
Pink and white and yellow  
blooms, but no orange which  
I was expecting. I saw three  
monarchs in two months.

Then four caterpillars  
appeared, chomping on  
the milkweed leaves. After  
many days, three disappeared,  
but one, a pupa, a chrysalis now,

attached itself to the lip  
of a planter on my porch. After  
many more days, the pupa turned  
dark, and in another day or so,  
one morning she hatched, stayed



hanging on her husk for a while  
exercising her beautiful wings.  
Then off she flew. I hope she  
finds blooms and nectar. I hope  
she reaches her destination.



*Unnamed 4* by Akinrinsola Babajide Azeez

# *On the Road to Oruro, 1995*

by Alison Hurwitz

---

For *Professor Sikkink*

Rickety and gabble-squawked with chickens,  
the bus bumps rough across screed pocks  
and potholes, veering hairpin turns around cliff  
edges. The drop is sheer, heartstopping,

final. Such a plunge that clouds obscure the bottom  
like a shroud. On this dust-encrusted road, death and dirt  
churn into sepia motes, cover up the people as easily as time.  
Each curve contains another cross. And that's only to get home.

On the bus, hens puff out their feathers, cock heads, then gargle  
loose their syncopated squabbles where the track gapes open-mouthed.  
They flap their agitation, then splotch the floor with white. I don't  
know how to pray. I only know my task: to study how the people

masked and danced resistance when the Spanish tried to stifle  
local deities with Catholic prayers. Naively, I believed that I could  
understand this story. I am wrong. The gods belonging to this place  
are tricksters; they've colonized the church, shape-changed

into saints who flicker votive candles; deities and martyrs melt into cohesion. Death, after all, has no opinion on salvation. My body, on the other hand, is convinced that I will fall. I grit the turns like kernels in my teeth, my gut a knot. I'm chicken shit.

In the bus, the women sit, their faces lit with animation, telling tales around the bends. Calloused, their hands stroke hens, calm and strong as Quishuara branches. One perceives my fear, my shortened breath, and nods in my direction kindly. She passes me a wad of coca leaves,

mimes the act of chewing. I take it, grateful, younger than they've ever been, take a breath and watch them nest their feathered charges inside lliqlla shawls, or provide a roost inside a Borsalino hat. I swallow coca juice and dust, try to parse the swollen throat

of what they've lost: how men they loved and married died of black lung in the silver mines before they reached their fortieth year, left wives alone with small ones at the breast. Now, half stay home while others journey

days away to sell their weavings at the market, buy supplies to feed their altiplano village. Women stroke their chickens as if children. If a sudden recollection comes to crack the heart, they leave its broken shell behind them on the road. They know

how to go on. Now, one woman with small stars encised across her teeth laughs out loud, then adjusts her hen to show us what the rubbled world keeps giving: among the pecked remains of corn, stray feathers in her lap, still warm, one perfect oval egg.

## *White Terror*

by Jean Li Spencer

---

Aunt and uncle promise you many things, have said many things to you. So you wait for them to pick you up at the airport, black hair braided and skin polished brass. Palm trees are wilted but propulsive in the wind and cast hunchback shadows on the open asphalt. The sun vanishes slowly, bathing you in a divine light. It has not been so long but also too long. You are ten years old and alone. You run your swollen tongue over the shy mounds of bone beginning to protrude from your gums, these objects that cut and grind and tear, these things called—inexplicably—teeth.

In Florida, you get two shades darker, two pounds heavier. Over the course of a week, you become wide and dark as your shadow; you harden in the sun like the first humans, who were supposedly made from clay. You imagine mā sitting next to you, berating you for tanning. Like a peasant. You can practically see her eyebrows arch with disdain. But it is spring break, and you wave her away and let her presence dissipate. You sit out on the screened-in porch at aunt and uncle's and take an interest in the brief sightings of scurrying lizard, salamander, and frog. Until today, you thought frog was a creature of Chinese fable, only to be found in the stories of *Zhuāng Zǐ*. There are no frogs on Mott Street. All you can think about is your next cherry-flavored popsicle, your next hour in the hot sun.

When you unpack your clothes in the guest room closet, it is already

bursting with plastic bags. The white, starchy kind you get at the corner bodega in the city with a yellow smiley face printed on the front. There are newspapers stacked high and too many canned foods to count—canned peaches and canned lychees and canned bamboo shoots. Uncle is eating kimchi and rice in front of the television. He swallows before answering your question: “*Ā yí* cannot bear to throw anything away, *guāi guāi*. She is stubborn as an ox, *āi yà!*” Your clothes never do get hung up. They lie crumpled on the floor like shed skin.

Aunt is seventy three years old on her American passport, seventy four years old according to the lunar calendar. Her shoulders sag like heavy bags of jasmine rice and she is stuck in a constant bend of the body, her back in a slight kowtow towards anyone—the bus driver, grocery store bagger, public library attendant, pimpled teen at the McDonald’s drive-thru—so that it looks as if she is saying, sorry excuse me pardon me without uttering a word. Aunt smooths the whitening cream across your forehead with her calloused, red hands—in this way, she anoints you a woman. You concentrate so intently on her hands, they seem to disconnect from her arms, shoulders, chest, and torso. They have been severed from her body. The whitening cream gives you a light searing sensation, like a sunburn. “No more sitting on porch,” she tells you. You listen to her, because in her voice, you detect a hunt of jealousy. She is scrutinizing your body for traces, glimpses, of her own girlhood. While uncles, cousins, and grandfathers were dragged off in the hot Taiwanese night, aunt attended university and worked as a nurse’s aid in a western-style hospital. She washed her hands so frequently in the antiseptic metal sinks, she washed the color right out of them. Uncles had hung from mountain trees by their thumbs, grandfathers trapped in underground pits like amphibians and starved to death, joining the buried underground; to be greeted again in the hazy smoke of a cigarette, the bottom of a glass, in half spun dreams.

At night, a genesis. Aunt does not dream of the lost; she dreams of an enveloping and total blackness. When she awakens, she realizes the blackness was the flesh of her body crawling over her eyes and suffocating her, trapping her with dead grandfathers. Only in America did aunt regain her color; first, she regained the rigidity of her hands. Then the delicacy of her neck muscles burning, followed by the tender rest

of her body. She worked long hours as a bank teller, telling the fortunes of those richer and more fortunate than herself. You admire yourself in aunt's plastic bathroom mirror. The white mask of cream may make you more beautiful, but does it also turn you into a ghost?

On your last full day with aunt and uncle, they suddenly remember the promises they made and take you for the early bird special at Applebee's followed by a trip to the shopping mall. In the restaurant, one of your baby teeth pops loose. You show the adults. "If I put it under my pillow," you explain, "The tooth fairy will exchange it for a dollar." Aunt and uncle are baffled by this American tradition of giving money to children who do not deserve it. They cannot understand your pleasure. In the Applebee's parking lot, the sky flashes gray and green as if a great pressure swells inside the chest of the Jade Emperor. A flash thunderstorm is coming, typical of the peninsula. This is when Yù Huáng will cleanse you with the tears of his tantrum, for the Monkey King must have escaped and wreaked havoc in heaven again.

That night, you dream of a shredded, disemboweled darkness. Into the shadows you fall, sacrificial and yoked to yourself. You are beginning to understand that the incident with the whitening cream was an unofficial baptism. Aunt eagerly recounts her stories to you now, in the gasping, free way she does with the Mahjong ladies. This darkness is different from the one that aunt described to you, whirling and porous like charcoal rubbings. It has movement; it is alive. The decibels, sounds swelling out. Leaking. You dream of plastic bags over your face, lodging themselves in your throat. Writhing for air, you bolt upright in bed, cotton sheets slick with perspiration. There is starlight falling here—you listen for your heartbeat as it gradually, slows, down. Time, like hours. Each one a wound. Finally, as if it only took an exhale, daybreak filters through the thin shades and casts bars across the wall opposite your bed. The window is open and cools your rash of fever, salt in the mouth. Crickets sounding sweetly in the bush unseen. Aunt is hanging laundry on the wire outside and the merciful, bright clothes blow out to full staff, ready for sailing. For taking away, for bringing back. You recall that there is an offering waiting beneath your pillow. You feel around for the dollar bill, but instead grasp something tiny, fragile, and wet. You remove your pillow and, to your intense surprise, uncover a frog.

# *Adrift with JM*

by Kimberly J. Simms

---

(1972–1999)

The bottom of the canoe pushes  
over the silt. Our feet make clapping  
sounds through the water. We scuttle  
inside the canoe with a sound like a blue  
heron taking flight—our oars go down  
into the muck, propelling us, bouncing  
over the rippling in-tide.

We make some soft talk of future  
shimmering towards the center.  
The tree canopy orange ablaze  
as we stow oars to go adrift.  
Your head astern, mine snuggling bow  
our feet casually intertwine.

In tableau, this image is how I think of you  
eternally reclined in a drifting canoe  
the molten lake sending ochre  
shadows across your drowsy smile.

# *Guardrobe*

by DL Pravda

---

My friend Lesley is kind of a witch.  
We walk down the beach at Willoughby.  
She collects shells with loops in them,  
says hag stones keep evil away since

only good can pass through a hole.  
I don't know who stole the world.  
I expect no answers from clams  
and oysters. As waves cool our feet,

the moon claims dark magic fails  
in moving water. Demons don't surf.  
I like to explore shorelines and beliefs  
deemed wild by fake faith and paid

pastors. Maybe tarot cards. Maybe  
my dreams. Maybe grandmasters  
of the galaxies unknown to sages  
and scholars. The web says moon snails

make so-called perfect shell holes  
digging through with their tongues.  
The wind sings the same song.  
A dragonfly lands on my hat and licks



his beard. Everything is weird  
and alien and feared. Washed-up  
seaweed reminds Lesley she needs  
some rosemary (aka Herb of Remembrance,

Elf Leaf, Guardrobe and Mary's Cloak)  
for spell jars. I want to poke holes  
in folklore, but a tiny fish in an inch  
of tide breaks my hex of arrogance.



*L'Aventure* by Julia Caroline Knowlton

# *Walking on Moss, Iceland*

by Rosemary Dunn Moeller

---

Moss separates boulders mote by dust mote, patiently,  
persistently, hardly hurrying except just before a final  
long sunset in freezing dark winter.

Lava rocks bubble into stone lumps, difficult for walkers.  
I'm off by centuries and go back to the green pastures  
aged to fertility for wooly sheep

wobbling away from Iceland's  
Main Hwy 1 at their own pace.  
We travel at ours to waterfalls, black beaches,

field trenches bordering hay baled bundles.  
Moss moves to mulch, to topsoil, to birches  
no taller than shrubs. All white trunks bend to breezes,

leaves barely turn green to deathly rusted veins,  
just before equinox. Gray has many shades,  
touches of blue, red or green. All are displayed throughout

cloud covered skies, blocking and dispersing sunlight  
across icy waters and froth, creating  
a dome from glacier to ocean of hundreds of grays.

The kindness and gentleness of death blankets lands,  
first sanded, then flooded, then covered in cooling  
lava boulders, that will soon be moss covered.  
In a few centuries all will be newer, older.

*Image 4* by Richard Hanus



# Sinkhole

by Elizabeth Mercurio

---

Grandmother stands on the porch  
wearing only her slip, handbag looped over her arm.  
She tells us the minister has come by,  
she's sure he wants to have sex with her.

We amble into the house,  
Mother goes straight for the kitchen.  
I sit with grandmother in the living room stacked  
high with Better Homes and Gardens magazines.  
The Christmas tree is up—it is April.

Grandmother announces  
*I never did know what to do with your mother.*  
*Her sister was so compliant, but your mother—*

Mother scrapes crusted casserole from plates.  
Grandmother tells me grandfather isn't home.  
I am glad. The last time he kissed  
me on the mouth and put both of his hands  
on the back pockets of my jeans.  
Mother went white—in a hissed whisper she said,  
*don't let him touch you like that.*

On the ride home, I look out the window,  
miles and miles of Florida wetlands—  
Heavy rain pounds the car.

Mother has her sunglasses on.  
She looks straight ahead.  
She hasn't said a word.

I want to tell her I love her.  
But she won't say it back, so I don't.

And no one can predict  
when the ground will open  
and swallow us whole.

*Under the Bridge* by Donna Vorreyer



# *When the Crossword Answer Was Grapes but All I Could Think of Was Graves*

by Beth Gordon

---

Nobody told me that my daughters would hunger for blueberries, fresh shrimp, spaghetti carbonara with all the cream: all the eggs: all the bacon: all the freshest parmesan. My single mom budget, the budget of boxed Mac-n-Cheese: Chef Boyardee: 3-for-a-dollar Ramen: the generic brand of Pop-Tarts, unfrosted. Nobody told me that they would sneak out of their rooms at night to meet friends in our small-town cemetery: ignore the nightly curfew siren. Write their names in wet cement: run from cops like feral animals with no remorse. Nobody told me that they would refuse to wear what had been passed down. Refuse to clean out the dirty dishes from beneath their beds: unapologetic in the face of a small symphony of mold that emerged from the cereal milk: attached its tempo to the only scarf I ever knit by hand. That they would sneak into the basement: spray paint a pentagram to summon demons in exchange for enough money to buy the sparkly purple Doc Martens. My God: how they burned down everything. Burned it down & rescued me from the fire. Carried me on their angry shoulders to show me my power: refused to let me swallow another drop of man-made pain. Unafraid to stand at the edge of their own graves: knowing that love is dangerous/love is untamed.

# *All There is to Know*

by Alessio Zanelli

---

The moon drops across the Belt of Venus.  
Below, the town melts in the rising fog,  
slowly—streets, buildings, steeples.

Uniform and liquid, the glow seeps in.  
None that shines, as it reveals nothing,  
it proclaims itself—pristine soft light.

Beyond the panes, memories start a dance.  
Steps with no pattern—harmonious, though,  
performed as if to sketch the secret townscape

Thoughts soon prevail, the glow intensifies.  
They don't dance but march through the fog—  
if invisible, they know the sun is right in front.

# *Not For the Faint of Heart*

by Candice Kelsey

---

Rushing to the cardiologist down Fury's Ferry in an Uber  
With Eldon listening to Dexy's Midnight Runners  
Belt out *Come on Eileen* as he slows and half-turns to me  
The universal pose for I'm about to ask you a question  
To in fact ask me if I know what the lyrics are all about

And I admit ignorance while tapping my feet to the jaunty  
Beat of this shiny well-loved oldie but goodie that opens  
The door to the early 80s me in Jennie Olson's basement  
Where we spun faster and faster to the urgent horns  
Weeks before she moved to Pennsylvania and her brother

Pins me to the Sycamore around back by the empty shed  
Midnight after packing the house his tongue spins down  
My throat his summer fist feeling up my terry-cloth polo  
The one from Lake of the Ozarks Tan-Tar-A Resort shop  
To find my private twelve-year-old chest rhythming fear

That night I swore my heart stopped from a swirl of desire  
Mixed with disgust and Eldon steers me to his question  
Where I'm fifty-three and off to get a boring echocardiogram  
*Ma'am it's about the desire to remove her red dress*  
I chuckle and agree politely that it's creepy and no one cares

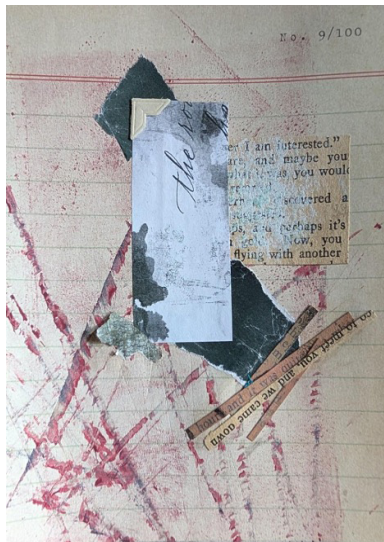


To question familiar things like a best friend's older brother  
Or the heart's structure because chambers vessels and valves  
Clenched into a fist-sized red dress exist to tap and run  
Us into existence every morning until something unexpected  
From around back tears the artery and splits a problematic flap

I find myself with a stent and follow up with some Dr. Miller  
Who unlike Eldon does not show up so it's Stacy who does  
My echo today—*Undress from the waist up*—half-turned I  
Ask how she can read the screen know where to click and drag  
For measurements also what are those blue and red splatters

Pollacking about my chest in an iambic jaunt she chuckles  
She's studied the heart for thirty-six years she's majored  
In cardiac imaging that the blue and red are blood cells  
From the Doppler just like we see on the Weather Channel  
I go quiet thinking of the tiny storms patterned inside me

And ask what she likes about the heart to which she obliges  
*It's so small and yet so complex this ever-shifting always*  
*Twisting sexy little pop song of life like adolescence in a way*  
I offer Stacy who ignores me tapping more keys and staring  
At my embarrassing blob of life askew and displayed in gray



*Unsent Letters* by Donna Vorreyer

*How to Teach English Composition at a  
Community College Near Minneapolis,  
or How I Teach English Composition at  
a Community College Near Minneapo-  
lis, or How I Imagine I Teach English  
Composition at a Community College  
Near Minneapolis, or How I Dream I  
Teach English Composition at a Com-  
munity College Near Minneapolis*

by Brian Baumgart

---

Imagine that your grandmother is in the back row, knitting sweaters for each of the students whose own grandmothers have blinked out of this world, and I say this even though my own grandmothers have blinked out of this world and never touched a knitting needle except in those moments they spent on the floor of the closet wondering if he was going to come again and if the knitting needle could seal the cuts beyond the bruises or just keep him back a little longer, but don't worry because even my grandmothers are there, knitting sweaters for students who bury caution in the snow drifts to come to class, and once

you're done imagining grandmothers, know it's time to greet your students  
with hands out, hands back, touching, not touching, embracing, distancing,  
but whatever way you do this, be sure to read all the signs that say  
if their histories of touch bring you in or hold you out, and know that  
they dictate what is okay. Okay?

If you know their mystery, know you  
have become community.

Speak their names.

Speak their names in echoes of the quake inside their voices. I  
am Gayle. I am Rashid. I am Marlon. I am Trinity. I am Beesan. I  
am Riley. I am Fatuma. I am Nathan. I am Jazzy. I am Chee. I  
am Camila. I am Choua. I am Iman. I am. I am.

Let them tell their stories.

Forget that.

Let them tell their own stories.

Let them tell their own nerdy stories.

Let them tell their own queer-ass stories

Let them tell their own stories in which they've been broken by the  
world around them.

Let them tell their own stories in which they've felt joy in the living  
and the telling.

Let them know that grades are not an assessment of their stories, of  
their lives, of their selves, and even though they won't believe  
you because they've been graded on who they are their entire  
lives and you're just some wall of academia standing or sitting  
in front of them, and even though you want to hold them and  
convince them that they are loved, know that grades are reward  
or punishment and the only glory is telling our fucking beautiful  
stories of pain and joy and all that surrounds us,

so make sure you tell your own  
nerdy, queer-ass stories,  
like the one when you were seven years old and your friends were  
riding  
their Big Wheels across the street and you never had a Big Wheel  
and even though you weren't ever suffering for food you felt  
that Big Wheels were a sign of success or that you'd made it in this  
world,  
so you went to cross that street, looking both ways because that's  
what you  
were taught, but looking both ways wasn't enough because some car  
still crashed into the side of your seven-year-old body and tossed  
you  
through the air  
onto your skull

—and this is when you show them the scar on the back of your head  
to say, yes, I'm telling you the truth, and I have scars to prove it—  
ha, ha—and perhaps at this point, as you're telling the story, your  
limp comes back, left leg stiff, a little jacked up, and you're  
pacing, but not like a tiger in a cage, that's too easy, too  
aggressive, but like a pet dog who has to pee and no one is  
opening the door—

and you let your students know that you survived, that you're okay,  
that you went from head injury to college professor, and maybe  
some of them will get this message but most will wonder what's  
next, so you tell them you woke up, dizzy and spinning, no pain,  
no nothing, and that emergency folks were working on you,  
telling you you'd be okay, but you started crying, not for fear of  
your injuries but because these emergency folks were cutting  
off your best pair of red sweatpants that you just loved so much  
and because you didn't want all your neighbors and your friends  
with their fucking Big Wheels to see your underwear.

Say: Fucking Big Wheels.

Say that your story has a lot more to it, like a broken femur and bad recovery and an additional scar on your mother's leg even if that doesn't make sense.

Say that all our stories have a lot more to them and that this is simply a class and even if their writing is fucking brilliant it still won't encompass everything and all that they are.

Say: Fucking brilliant.

Because they're fucking brilliant. Tell them this.

Don't ever forget that Fatuma and Rashid and Jazzy and Trinity and Choua and Nathan are all fucking brilliant. They are light.

Imagine your grandmother in the back row clapping for you because you can't forget that you, too, are brilliant, that you are light.

When a student falls asleep in class, let them sleep; it might be the only sleep they've gotten this week.

When a student cries in class, let them cry; it might be the only safe place to cry this life.

When a student says they don't get the lesson or your nerdy, queer -ass stories, tell them it's okay; there will be plenty more. Offer them plenty more.

Ask them what language they live in.  
Ask them if their histories are buried inside their lungs or their gut.  
Ask them how many breaths they take when they're afraid of failing.  
Ask them to describe the music that plays in their minds and mouths when they feel seen.

Listen to their answers if they choose to share them because this is the birth of magic.

Do not grade them on their magic.

I've made the mistake of grading their magic. You'll make the mistake of grading their magic.

Remember that writing is more than paragraphs; writing wears our skin and dances to music that hasn't been performed yet; it screams into canyons carved by billions of years of planets cracking wide:

show them how to scream and dance; they already know how to wear their own skin, so don't pretend you know

that skin is both real and imaginary, or that everything lends itself to literary analysis because sometimes a pen is just a pen, skin is just skin, and an absence is just absence.

If you feel them slipping, wink, and say you have the real reason for this class, and that it's just around the corner, just under the cover page, just on the palm side of their hands, and when they look at the lines and crevices and scars and blisters and that one spot of darker or lighter skin they've been concerned about since they can remember, tell them

language is a trick.

The Real Reason you teach this class is for magic words, to learn the spells of communication, of manipulation, and you want them to discover the language they can use to cast spells on their readers, to bring them to understanding and love and knowledge of just who they are, which means they can understand just who they are, which is magic all on its own. And when they turn away and mutter that their spells are bad English, tell them the second secret: others cast spells, too, and the counter-spells work best in bad English.

Tell them about the grandmothers and their fucking brilliant names and the magic of fucking Big Wheels and why grading is an exercise in cruelty and that your limp has healed and that you don't really know what you're doing but you're doing it the best you can and that their stories are beauty, that they are beauty, that this—this thing you're all doing together—is a little jacked up, but it's fucking beautiful.

*Eurydice* by JC Alfier



## Neil Diamond, *Denim Moon*

by M. Benjamin Thorne

---

The summer of '87, lush greens  
giving way to sand dunes along  
the highway, beachgrass fingers  
coaxing us forward in the breeze.

I'm crammed  
in the station wagon's wood-paneled womb,  
Neil Diamond's crooning become a drone,  
the live cassette long since stuck,  
listening over and over to whale songs  
of a future morn, thanking the Lord  
for cherry America, or something.  
Bored, my thoughts passed exit signs  
promising tobacco outlets, porn  
emporia, back to the day before,  
in the living room with Steven,  
poring over illicit *Playboy*  
contraband. I was too young,  
but he wanted to look, joked  
about his big woody rising  
to glossy fake boobs. My body's  
awkward unfurling in response  
an aching secret kept close in denim.



The memory washed over me  
like a wave, left salt on my skin,  
salt in my mouth. Floating on  
baritone currents with the angel  
Caroline, I felt a smile etch itself  
across my face as our Buick Estate  
slid down the dotted highway  
like a pulled zipper, baring  
its teeth to a new-risen blue moon.



*Better Left Unsaid 1* by Carly Maling

# *The Nettles*

by Christian Ward

---

I didn't know the nettles would sting  
worse than a handful of hypodermic  
needles. The neighbour should've  
been more careful retrieving the rose  
nestled like a fairy-tale princess in their patch.  
He ought to have noticed the purple  
warning lights of flowers, their warpaint,  
how every other plant backed away.

I planted the nettles while the moon  
kept watch. Bribed a generous amount  
of fertiliser to satisfy their feral tongues.  
I'd had enough of the Bluetooth speaker  
banging its fists against my wall  
at all hours, but didn't know the nettles'  
rhizomes would slither through the floorboards  
and into my ear. *You were born to do this*,  
the voice said. And I believed it,  
even as its children started to swallow me.

# *I Have My Mother's Thighs, and Other Things*

by Susanna Stephens

---

My aunt would wear strawberry  
lip gloss while toting a bubblegum

clutch on the Norfolk shoreline.  
Bent over, she scoured for lady

slipper shells. *This one would  
make a fun earring!* Had my eyes

been closed, I would have  
felt the vibrations of her smile

like confetti bursting from a can.  
One night, she asked why I wore

a long tee over my bathing suit.  
*I have my mother's thighs*, I explained,

matter-of-factly. Her mascara smeared  
to form a Rorschach around

crow's feet. She clarified,  
*No, darling, you have her shame*

# *Forgotten Headstones*

by Delaney R. Olmo

---

*Why are they separated from the rest of us?*

I ask my grandmother who does not meet my gaze,  
but grabs my hand as we walk through the dirt path.

I am following along from our way to the Round House  
pulling up my fuchsia skirt as we walk ahead.

*That is the way of our ancestors, how it has been.*

Each headstone is separate from the others, no  
flowers or trinkets on their graves— a gate separating  
the few from the other relatives buried beneath trees.

*Sinners cannot be buried with the rest of us.*

She places her hand on my back, until we approach  
a grove of redwoods, an ocean stretches out further  
than we both can see, the clouds no longer in view.

# *First Tracks*

by John Davis

---

The more I listen to snow  
the more I know of love, of  
winter's gift and the kindness  
that cold brings to the forest.  
To be a guest on this ridge  
and angle my angle down.

To praise the fire that blazed  
this chute, honor it and know  
what the mountain is giving  
away what I am giving  
away to ride the surface  
of calm, to carve my whole name.

Am I related to the snow  
or to wind that crusts the slope?  
When I know what the mountain  
has in mind for me, I will  
know how giving has gifted breath  
and breath has blessed my being.

## *Your New Place*

by Julia Frederick

---

Your new place is almost entirely white. It's a little unnerving at first, but I guess you never liked the cluttered yet homey, thrifted old furniture and handmade quilts, cozy aesthetic of your childhood home anyway. You were always more of a sleek, modern, minimalist type. Your eyes widen when you open the door and see me standing on the front porch.

"Oh, wow. You look so different. New haircut?" you ask as I step over the threshold and into your new place.

"Yeah, I decided to try the pixie cut look," I say, self-consciously fiddling with the uneven edges of my haircut, only a week old. I somehow forgot that you haven't seen me since you left. The pixie cut was an impulsive decision that I made one night around 2 am and executed using the somehow-still-sharp scissors I've had since we first outgrew safety scissors. The same scissors that we used to make scrapbook pages of the vacations our families took to Disney together, cut out magazine pictures of our favorite boy band members, and put together our poster for our middle school science fair display. I wanted to build a volcano; you wanted to do something more original. "You look like your same old self," I add.

"Yeah, you know," you shrug and laugh a little as you trail off. I force a smile and return a small courtesy laugh.

“Well anyway,” you abruptly change the subject, “why don’t you come inside? I’ll make some tea.”

I follow noisily behind as you silently glide into the kitchen and put on the hot water. As we enter the kitchen, I immediately notice that, despite the all-white furnishings, you have vases of flowers covering nearly every surface. Carnations –the color of the lemon chiffon cake you had at every one of your birthday parties– practically spill over the top of the stainless steel fridge. The marble countertops are completely obscured by a garden of pale pink roses. One of the dining chairs is buried under a variety of floral wreaths. I stare goggle-eyed as I take it all in; I’m so awestruck that I almost don’t notice when you turn to me and motion to the bouquet in my hand.

“Are those for me?” They’re lilies, your favorites. White in the center that ombres into a light pink toward the edges of each petal.

“Oh, uh, yeah. I um. I thought I’d get you a little something. You know, sort of as a housewarming gift,” I laugh and roll my eyes at the awkwardness of it all, “you’ve had one or two visitors since you moved in?” My attempt at a joke. You respond with a breathy, silent chuckle. One of those laughs that’s more of an exhale than a laugh.

“I guess you could say that. Just set them down anywhere,” you reply warmly, gesturing all over the kitchen as you turn back toward the tea kettle. I set them gently down on a countertop and sit down at a glass table that looks freshly Windexed, in an ivory-colored, cushioned, dining room chair. God, your chairs are so soft.

You prepare me a cup of chamomile tea, but you don’t have any. I sip slowly and peek at you over the mug while I do so. It’s just so hard to believe that I’m seeing you since you moved to your new place. It’s only been a few months, but it feels like it’s been years. At the same time, it feels like you only just left a few minutes ago. You ask me how I’ve been.

“I’m doing okay,” I say.

“You’ve been having a hard time,” you reply. I have never been good at hiding my true feelings, and you’ve always been able to read me book.

You knew I had a crush on Dylan Reid in the sixth grade even before I admitted it to myself, and you didn't reveal that you knew all along until months later when I finally confessed to you. Despite hemming and hawing to declare a major until the spring of my sophomore year, rotating between accounting and nursing, anthropology and art history, you knew deep down I always wanted to study French. So it's no surprise to me that you can tell just how hard adult life has felt, especially now that you're gone. As if searching for my first real adult job hasn't been difficult enough. As if my parents getting divorced after thirty years together wasn't hard enough. Things got even harder when you got the diagnosis. You, who has always been there for me through thick and thin. Since you left for your new place, I've felt so directionless, so lost, adrift in unfamiliar waters without a compass, without a map, without a lighthouse to guide me to safety.

You tilt your head slightly and flash me a sad smile as you take my hands in yours.

"I just- I-" my voice breaks. Fuck. I promised myself I wouldn't do this in front of you. My eyelids shut tightly as the tears gush forth. I can't stop crying. You scooch your chair closer to mine and pull me into a hug. You pat my back ever so gently as I cry and wail into your shoulder.

"It's okay," you whisper through my sobs. You say it over and over until I finally wear myself out, the tears replaced with a pounding headache. We pull away from the hug. You take my hands again and look into my eyes.

"I don't have any profound wisdom from beyond the grave to share," you say, "and I don't think I can tell you what to do or how to cope. But you can stay here as long as you need, and you're welcome to come back to visit me as often as you like. I know you better than anyone else," you squeeze my hands extra tight as you say this, "and I know you'll be okay. Maybe not today, or next week, or next year, but you will."

We sit like that in silence for God knows how long. I take deep breaths. After a while, your kitchen begins to fade away. The flowers surround



and your voice becomes inaudible.

“I love you. I miss you,” I read your lips.

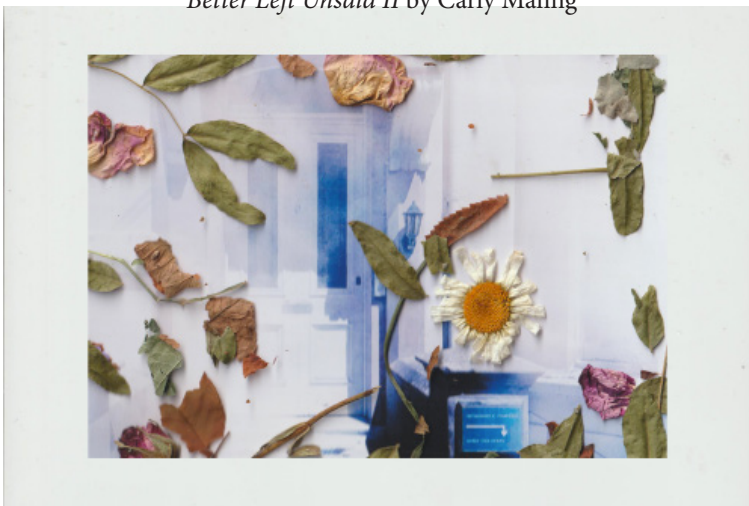
“I love you, too. I miss you, too,” I say aloud.

Before I know it, your new place has slipped away entirely. The cool touch of the gravestone as I trace the letters of your name brings me crashing back down to reality. I set the lilies on the ground and sit cross-legged next to you.

I stare out into the distance. A butterfly flits into my peripheral vision and lands delicately onto my knee. Her wings are a striking azure bordered by an inky black, and they open and close in slow motion and then, as quickly as she appeared, she flies away. I watch her fly until she's no longer visible.

Then I exhale, stand, and walk back to my car.

*Better Left Unsaid II* by Carly Maling



# *The Concrete Patio*

by Diane Melby

---

*After 2020*

## THE CONCRETE PATIO

stamped to look like stone, is cool under bare feet  
waiting for the sun to cut through the wood  
separating it from the road. The patio,  
lined by jagged rock, rises six feet before giving way  
to a tidy lawn. When the grandbabies come

they fill their tiny arms with creamy-eyed daisies  
until shots from the neighbor's gun  
sends them running. Fear radiates  
from their shelter, the patio  
abandoned in a shroud of faded blooms.

But now, there is only a gentle breeze.  
Dissonant notes of robins and cardinals crescendo,  
an alleluia chorus—silenced—as a tsunami  
of overpowered truck grinds up the road.  
Probably a neighbor off to work. I hope

they have a good job, one that pays well,  
getting up early to toil on some dusty site  
or maybe commuting long hours to do the labor  
that eases my life. But in its passing,  
reverberations of impotent rage set loose.

And I know there is no wood dense enough  
to keep me in, shield us from imminent strife  
for in the roar of this morning's diesel,  
I hear the growl of a gathering storm  
threaten lives I so love.

*Better Left Unsaid III* by Carly Maling



## *Nurses Trying*

by Alison Heron Hruby

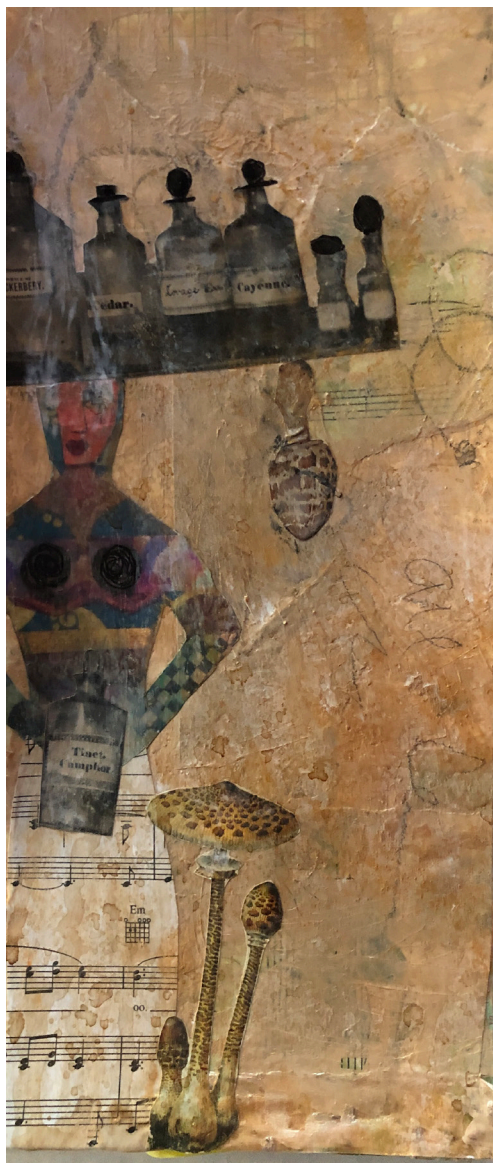
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They might  
use words  
that empty  
out of stark boxes,  
their mouths  
keeping damp corners  
hidden by calling me sweet,  
but  
I hear miniscule tumors  
in the table paper  
rustling.

At sonogram  
the news-ink  
is already wet.

In biopsy  
their tone  
is a  
long  
deep  
bell  
furling off tongues,  
soon to cross  
telephone  
wires.

The white speck on  
the film we  
watch together,  
an uncracked egg.



*Tinctures and Tonics*  
by Luanne Castle

# *Kandinsky*

by Richard Stimac

---

My mother was an artist, of sorts, conjuring meals,  
mortgage payments, Halloween costumes, Christmas

gifts from the offerings of a Catholic school salary  
and odd cash from cleaning laundromats and doctors'

offices. In college, she wrote a paper on Kandinsky.  
I found it, by chance, hidden among my keepsakes:

reports cards; a third-grade science report; yearly  
school photos. I read it. I did not understand,

at the time, how my mom's face twisted into  
a portrait of ruefulness and disappointment.

As if our house were a void in her soul, she filled  
it with pin-and-thread, burlap and yarn, an elongated

statue of a mother and her child. She took pride  
in her work. What did I know of the bitterness

of hands that cannot make their art? I don't  
have the poetry to answer. Maybe these abstract

shapes, these lines, these curves, I trace on a page  
can, with imagination, represent her loss, and her gain.

# *Once my Mother Cut my Hair in the Kitchen*

by Peihe Feng

---

My Ma rinsed her kitchen scissors with boiling water  
and had me sat down in front of the kitchen sink,

where a mirror is propped vertically against the tap; though  
the sink itself was glinting beneath the light        so shiny

that I could see her movements behind: lowering her face  
to my hair, frowning, lips pursed, hand parting my hair with

the same ruthless practicality she used to empty a fish's belly;  
for numerous time she has done that in the metallic sheen of the

blade and the sink. Now as I bend my head to the weight of her  
hand, the scent of blood and raw meat rose up from the iron basin

and glided across my bow soft as a phantom fin. I could almost  
materialize blood stains on the gleaming surfaces that Ma

polishes three times a day, a paranoia as if she is actually covering up  
a crime scene. The scissors, her lethal weapon, pressed against her  
hand

with a reassuring weight, exuding heat like a magical sword  
re-forged and sharpened daily from the bellies of fish and chicken

and geese. Its edge warm as a mother's hand was gliding between my  
hair  
draping over the back of my neck. I shivered and Ma's other hand  
landed

on my shoulder. *It'll come off ugly if you won't stop squirming.* Her  
voice  
rung above me, distant as an ancient deity. Swift, swishing sounds

like ragged breathing or a loud sigh erupted at the end of the wires  
that connect straight back to my head. I thought about the noise

she makes when removing the scales of a fish still writhing  
in her grasp—really, the kitchen is filled with mysterious sounds

Like metal chair legs scratching over a cold tiled floor, sounds  
that the fish could never had heard in the water. Butchered

vegetables crying out in voices only Ma can hear; the soup  
heating up on the soup is emitting nightmarish screeches of the  
drowned.

The good thing about having your mother cut your hair in the kitchen  
is that all of it would end soon: efficient as one deconstructing a  
ticking bomb

my Ma wields her blades, in her element in the only place  
she cuts and bleeds like breathing. The only place, she'd insist

she can give me a good haircut. When its over my hair was strewn  
all across the kitchen floor, trapped in the cracks between the tiles

inside the sink and in our slippers. Black strands of fiber as hard  
to remove as the smell of the the kitchen on my Ma's skin:



juice of fresh vegetables, raw meat, vinegar and her lemony blue dish soap, on her clothes and hands like a persistent ghost. She

bent over towards me, our faces level in the sink's reflection. Two  
heads  
of kitchen-scissored hair both looking like an uncanny  
duplication

of the other. Ma raised a strand of my short hair to her nose and dictated her verdict: *now, even your hair smells like mine.*

*On the Block* by Luanne Castle



# *Do Not Be Afraid to Look into the Light*

by Suzanna C. de Baca

---

In those days when I first returned, I startled easily,  
edgy like a doe in hard winter. Searching, grasping  
at grass, twigs, branches, crashing through timber,  
bedding down hungry. But nothing could fill me.  
I ran deep into the woods, up hills, down ravines,  
into the creek bed. I broke through the ice one morning  
just as dawn broke on the horizon and the sun stopped  
me in my tracks and I heard a voice that said  
do not be afraid to look into the light.

Today I walked along a winter path, sun exploding  
in the bluest sky, clouds streaking on the horizon,  
loopy calligraphy scrawls in long stips, creek running  
and rays shining, ripples dancing like tipsy ballerinas.  
My eye caught on a branch in the stream, but it was a doe,  
a small one, standing dead still, legs and lower body  
submerged in the stream, a gray statue camouflaged  
in the dark water.

I heard a splash and turned and saw a coyote bounding through the icy current. He leapt up the bank, shook violently, threw his head back and howled. Two coyotes emerged from the dry prairie grass and goldenrod, and the three ran, as if carried by a current, across the snowy bottomland and into the woods.

When I looked again, the doe was gone and sun beams exploded in stars on the stream, blinding me. I did not know which way to go and the morning said do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to look directly into the light.

*Trademark* by Luanne Castle



## *Dear Bone Mother*

by Minadora Macheret

---

There is a June Bug carcass  
tethered to the window screen  
as if by specters. Each storm  
passing by rattles all it left behind.  
Its exoskeleton no longer a deep chestnut  
now caramel-colored & full of wind.  
I've watched it for days,  
a crater where its body erupted.  
Somehow, despite the loss,  
it hangs onto the screen  
as if its memory is enough  
to stitch its body in place.  
Is this the death you warned me about?  
One foot planted in the endless past.

# *Elegy for the Renaming*

by Tiffany Aurelia

---

In this dream, I speak to my ancestors in the language  
I never learned. I find them pressed against  
the floorboards, hands knotted in war-hymn. Air

of crushed goji and lemongrass—the house,  
shifting with Javan warmth. Here, they still  
keep the names they were born with, as if they

never needed to change origin to the pronounceable.  
Before our syllables were stretched, kneaded into  
assimilation, each letter hard and motherless like

shrapnel. Before a *willow* bent into *stone*, a *plum* fell  
into the *earth*, and a *song* became lost into the echo  
of a *sky*. Before this, there was wholeness. Every

time my tongue tries to name familiarity, emptiness  
takes the shape of a missing word. Generations split  
into untruths. Because in the altar of the soul, I pray that

the remnants of our names lie within searching  
distance. Even the hollowness knows a home. Online,  
I only find one-third of my last name: 羅:to collect, to catch

to *sift*. Please, tell me how to gather the missing pieces.

# *Sad Face Daddy*

by Jared Mills

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I saw the look of fear and shock in my son's eyes as he heard his name, Ethan, expel itself from my lips in wrath. He still held the paddle overhead and his eyes had torn themselves open enough to drown his pupils and irises in seas of white and tiny red veins.

With the sharp electric sting at the top of my skull ran a sudden flash of memory rip roaring through my mind.

I had a paddle ball set similar to Ethan's—one of those thin flat wooden rackets with a ball and string attached at the center. I'd been smacking it around in the direction of my father in spite of his warnings. I inched closer and closer to his face, then the string snapped and the ball went flying, caught my dad right in the eye and busted his glasses. He leapt up out of the chair, snatched the paddle from my hand and smacked me over the ass I don't know how many times—the loose string flying back and forth like a party streamer—until the wood itself cracked in two and I was sent to my room.

My mother found the larger of the two paddle halves in my room some time later. I had drawn two dots over a curved line sloping downward at each end and scrawled the word "Daddy" underneath.

I think my memory of this incident is false because I see it happening in the third person. I remember it mostly because my mother loves to

tell this story. Kept the paddle, even. I think she still has it. She laughs when she tells the story and calls the sad face daddy scribble adorable.

The pain atop my head was already retreating into a dull ache and a memory. Ethan dropped the paddle, turned, and ran. I heard his bedroom door slam. I wondered how he would remember this incident, if at all. He was only four, but big for his age, precocious, a prankster.

I picked up the paddle and squeezed the handle. In the kitchen, I opened a junk drawer and picked up a pen. I set the paddle down on the counter and wrote Ethan's name and an accompanying sad face. I put the paddle back on the floor where he would find it and got an ice pack for my head.

*Colors Passing on By* by John Waterman



# *I Will Leave You With This*

by Aida Zilelian

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I am a terrible daydreamer; I consider possibilities. And suddenly, I bear your old silence.

Cold filaments brush the sky. How did you leave when you weren't even here.

The birds serenade darkly, their shrieks buried under the hunter's sun. They alight in dangerous circles.

You're a native to your ailments. Holes in the sky so large they orchestrate a dissonance

that tethers me to you. I am flailing.  
There are the birds again. So black, a hoard of nightmares.

I thought once, we ran through the same woods together. That we had been betrayed so deeply,

we would be safe with one another.  
What bucked the final shot.

In my descent, a die tumbled warily,  
knowing you are the hunter, your aim reckless, precise.



*Nestle* by Michael Moreth



*Operational* by Michael Moreth



## Contributor Biographies

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JC Alfier's (they/them) artistic directions are informed by photo-artists Toshiko Okanou, Francesca Woodman, and especially Katrien De Blauwer. Their most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, and *Vassar Review*.

Tiffany Aurelia is a South-East-Asian writer and student from Indonesia. She has won runner-up of *The Kenyon Review's* Patricia Grodd Prize and the Woorila Louis Rockne Prize. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *Diode*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *The Shore*, and elsewhere. She loves ocean swims and strawberry matcha.

Lana Hechtman Ayers, architect of the "Severed Sonnet," has shepherded over a hundred poetry volumes into print in her role as managing editor for three small presses. Her work appears in *Rattle*, *The London Reader*, *Perigrine*, and elsewhere. Lana's latest collection, *The Autobiography of Rain*, is available from Fernwood Press.

Akinrinsola Babajide Azeez is a twenty-two year old indigene of Ondo state(Nigeria) with a Yoruba background. He started his art journey at the early stages of life. He drew inspirations from books and movies, which he tried in every way to replicate. His concept is made to bring out harmony, authenticity, and balance. The harmony of the physical and the virtual in which he combines pen, acrylic and sometimes digital into his work. This is a concept where in all portraits he makes sure the human skin is inked with a blue pen majorly because he loves to showcase the beauty of the human skin.

Brian Baumgart (he/him) is the author of the poetry collection *Rules for Loving Right* (Sweet, 2017), and his poetry has appeared in a number of journals, including *South Dakota Review*, *Spillway*, *Whale Road Review*, and previously in *Thimble*; his writing has been nominated for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net awards. Brian is an English professor and previously served as the Director of Creative Writing at North Hennepin Community College. He has been Artist-in-Residence at University of Minnesota's Cedar Creek Ecological Science Reserve and co-coordinated the Minnesota State Write Like Us Program. For more: <https://briandbaumgart.wixsite.com/website>.

Zoe Berger is a queer, Filipino-Jewish writer based in Brooklyn. Her poems have been published or are upcoming in The Poetry Society of New York's journal *Milk Press*, *Antiphony Press*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *The Naïve Journal*, and she recently completed a residency with Tupelo Press to refine her manuscript for a forthcoming book of poems. Her work explores cyclical patterns of nature and the limits of primal bodies. She can be found on Instagram @sadsport.

Lorraine Caputo's artwork and photography are in private collections on five continents, in the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Chachapoyas, Peru), and has been exhibited in the US and Ecuador. Her visual creations also appear in dozens of international publications, including Ofi Press (Mexico). Her poems and travel narratives have been published in over 400 journals on six continents and 24 chapbooks – including *In the Jaguar Valley* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Santa Marta Ayres* (Origami Poems Project, 2024). She has done over 200 literary readings, from Alaska to Patagonia. Ms. Caputo continues journeying south of the Equator. You may view more of her work at Latin America Wanderer <https://www.facebook.com/lorrainecaputo.wanderer> and <https://latinamericawanderer.wordpress.com>.

Luanne Castle's Best of the Net-nominated art appears in *Raw Lit* and in Best of Mad Swirl's 2023 anthology. Her Pushcart, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net-nominated writing has appeared in *Copper Nickel*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Bull*, *South 85*, *Thimble*, *Bending Genres*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *River Teeth*, *Dribble Drabble Review*, *Does it Have Pockets*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Flash Boulevard*, and many other journals. She has published four award-winning poetry collections. Her hybrid memoir-in-flash will be published by ELJ Editions in 2026. Luanne lives with four cats in Arizona along a wash that wildlife use as a thoroughfare.

Maureen Clark is retired from the University of Utah where she taught writing for 20 years. She was the director of the University Writing Center from 2010-2014. She was the president of Writers @ Work 1999-2001. Her poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Alaska Review*, *The Southeast Review*, and *Gettysburg Review* among others. Her first book *This Insatiable August* was released by Signature Books in February 2024.

John Davis is the author of *Gigs*, *Guard the Dead* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Terrain.org*. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea and performs in several bands.

Suzanna C. de Baca is a native Iowan, proud Latina, executive, author and artist who is passionate about exploring change and transformation. A member of the Iowa Writers' Collaborative, her poetry has been published widely in national and international literary magazines and journals. She is the recipient of the Derick Burluson Poetry Award and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives in the rural town of Huxley, Iowa, population 4244.

John Dougherty: B.A. (History) + Grad School Dropout + Musician + Cabinetmaker/Machinist + Cook + High School Teacher + Chef + Free-lancer + Chef-Instructor + Nature Columnist + Teacher, again = (will wonders never cease) Poetry.

Jean Anne Feldeisen is a 75-year-old grandmother from New Jersey living on a farm in Maine. A retired psychotherapist, Jean Anne had her first poem published at age 72 in *Spank the Carp* and more published in *The Hopper*, *The Raven's Perch*, *Neologism*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *Eunoia*, *Mockingheart Review*, and *Fairy Tale Magazine*, among other publications and anthologies. Main Street Rag published her first chapbook, *Not All Are Weeping*, in May 2023. In the fall of 2023, she and her friend, Argy Nestor, self-published their collection of poetry and art, *Catching Fireflies*. Follow her at [jeanfeldeisen.com](http://jeanfeldeisen.com).

Peihe Feng is from Guangzhou, China. She has published a collection of her prose in Chinese while her English poems are published or forthcoming in places like *Lavender Review*, *Rundelania*, and *The Write Launch*. In her free time, she gardens on her family's balcony with her cat.

Isabel Flick is a Mexican-American artist and poet based in Saint Louis, Missouri. Her work has been showcased in many local galleries and publications. She received an Associates of Education from Saint Louis Community College and a Bachelor's in Studio Art from the University of Missouri – Saint Louis. She is also working towards her first book, *Anthropologist's Digest*.

Julia Frederick is a scientist and an emerging writer from the Philadelphia area. Her short fiction has previously appeared in *Quail Bell Magazine*. When she is not writing, she enjoys reading and attending the theater.

John M. Fredericks is a doctoral student studying educational policy at Arizona State University. His work has appeared in *Newsweek*, *After Happy Hour Review*, and *The Hechinger Report*, among others.

George Freek's poem "Enigmatic Variations" was recently nominated for Best of the Net. His poem "Night Thoughts" was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Karen George is author of the poetry collections *Swim Your Way Back* (2014), *A Map and One Year* (2018), *Where Wind Tastes Like Pears* (2021), and *Caught in the Trembling Net* (2024). She won *Slippery Elm's* 2022 Poetry Contest, and her award-winning short story collection, *How We Fracture*, was released by Minerva Rising Press in January 2024. Her work appears in *Adirondack Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Cultural Daily*, and *Poet Lore*. Her website is <https://karenlgeorge.blogspot.com/>.

Beth Gordon is a poet, mother and grandmother in Asheville, NC. She is the author of several chapbooks including *The Water Cycle* (Variant Literature), *How to Keep Things Alive* (Split Rock Press), *Crone* (Louisiana Literature) and *The First Day* (Belle Point Press). Beth is Managing Editor of *Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, Assistant Editor of Animal Heart Press, and Grandma of Femme Salve Books.

Jessica R. Gordon is a poet currently based in North Carolina, where she is an MFA candidate at Queens University of Charlotte. She serves as Genre Editor in poetry for *Qu: A Literary Magazine*. She is a first-generation college student who has chased the literary life holding numerous odd jobs and traveling where-and-when-ever possible. In her spare time, she volunteers for a wildlife conservation center.

Katy Goforth is a writer and editor for a national engineering and surveying organization and a fiction editor for *Identity Theory*. Her writing has appeared in *Brevity*, *Reckon Review*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Salvation South*, and elsewhere. She has a prose collection forthcoming with Belle Point Press (2025) and a novel with Cowboy Jamboree (2025). She was born and raised in South Carolina and lives with her spouse and two pups, Finn and Betty Anne. You can find her work at [katygoforth.com](http://katygoforth.com).

Victoria Grageda-Smith is an award-winning Filipino American author published in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Her poems were finalists in the 2024 Yellow Arrow Publishing Chapbook Contest, 2017 New Millennium Poetry Awards, 2016 Edwin Markham Poetry Award Contest, 2016 Knightville Poetry Contest, and 2016 Crosswinds Poetry Journal Contest and appear in, among others, *Reed Magazine*, *Slippery Elm Journal*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *New Millennium Writings*, and *Dicta*. Her poetry collection, *WARRIOR HEART, PILGRIM SOUL: An Immigrant's Journey* (CreateSpace, 2013), was well received by Kirkus Reviews. She wrote the 2024 BookFest Award-winning nove., *THE THOMASITE* (Orange Blossom Publishing, 2023); the award-winning novella, *FAITH HEALER* (Brain Mill Press, 2016); and the first place-winning story, *Portrait of the Other Lady* (*Ventura County Star*, November 28, 2004).

Anne Graue is the author of a poetry collection, *Full and Plum-Colored Velvet*, (Woodley Press), and two chapbooks, *Fig Tree in Winter* (Dancing Girl Press) and *Metonymy* (Origami Poems Project). Her work has been featured in Sundress Publications' *Best-Dressed Blog* and has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Verse Daily*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, and elsewhere. She is a poetry editor for *The Westchester Review*.

Evan Gurney is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina Asheville. His poems and essays have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Contrary*, *New Ohio Review*, *storySouth*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Whale Road Review*, and elsewhere.

Richard Hanus: had four kids but now just three. Zen and Love.

Alison Heron Hruby (she/hers) is an associate professor of English education at Morehead State University and lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Her poetry is published in *Juste Literary*, *Red Tree Review*, *Sleet Magazine*, *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*, and elsewhere. You can find her on X/Twitter @aheronhruby and Instagram @alliehope68.

Alison Hurwitz is a former cellist and dancer who now finds music in language. A two-time 2023 Best of the Net Nominee, she is the founder/host of the monthly online reading, *Well-Versed Words*. Widely published, Alison's work is forthcoming in *Sky Island Journal*, *South Dakota Review*, *Raven's Muse*, and *Writing in a Woman's Voice*. When not writing, Alison officiates weddings and memorial services, takes singing lessons, walks in the woods with her family, and dances in her kitchen. Find her at [alisonhurwitz.com](http://alisonhurwitz.com).

Artist/poet Mary Kathryn Jablonski is most recently author of *Sugar Maker Moon*, from Dos Madres Press. Her poems and collaborative video/poems have appeared in numerous literary journals, exhibitions, screenings and film festivals, including *Atticus Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Film Live* (UK), *Poetry Ireland Review* (IRE), *Quarterly West*, and *Salmagundi*, among others. She was awarded a NYSCA Individual Artist's Grant in Poetry for a video/poem "chapbook" and is Senior Editor in Visual Art at *Tupelo Quarterly*.



Riley Johnston is an alumni of the University of Houston. She plans to pursue a masters degree in creative writing in hopes of one day becoming a professor.

James Kangas is a retired librarian living in Flint, Michigan. His work has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Penn Review*, *Unbroken*, *West Branch*, et al. His chapbook, *Breath of Eden* (Sibling Rivalry Press), was published in 2019.

Candice M. Kelsey [she/her] is a writer and educator living in both Los Angeles and Georgia. A finalist for a Best Microfiction 2023 and long-listed by *Wigleafs* Top 50 Short Fiction in 2024, she is the author of seven books; her work has been featured in *SWWIM*, *The Laurel Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Passengers Journal*, and *About Place* among others.. She mentors an incarcerated writer through PEN America and reads for *The Los Angeles Review*. Please find her @Feed\_Me\_Poetry and <https://www.candicem-kelsey.com/>.

Clyde Kessler has published poems in many print and online magazines starting back i 1974 , so fifty years. Kessler has published four books of poems, most recently *Fiddling At Midnight's Farmhouse* in 2017.

Nicole F. Kimball is an emerging poet and artist from Salt Lake City, Utah. Her debut work of fiction is forthcoming in print later this year. Nicole loves to spend time with her husband, and Chihuahua named Tinkerbelle. A proud Piscean and Pianist, her poems are in several literary journals. She is passionate about creating social change and meeting new friends along the way.

Julia Caroline Knowlton is a poet, artist and Professor of French at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Recognition for her poetry includes two GA Author of the Year awards and an Academy of American Poets Prize. Kelsay Books published her first book of poetry for children in August of 2024

Ezra Levine is a poet, dramaturg, chaplain, and editor; they generally want a hand in anything that involves care through narrative revision. They earned their Master of Divinity from Harvard in May and are now based in Brooklyn, NY. Their poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Colorado Review* and *In Parentheses*.

Minadora Macheret is a Herbert Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Texas. She received the James Merrill Poetry Fellowship from Vermont Studio Center. Her work has appeared in *Brevity*, *Salamander*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. She is the author of, *Love Me, Anyway* (Porkbelly Press, 2018).

Carly Maling is an award-winning neurodivergent creative based in London, and you might recognise her from one of the various creative roles she's had over the years with: Co-Relate, Goldsmith's, Laura Ashley, Monkey Shoulder Whisky, The Gulbenkian Theatre, The Margate Bookie, The Whitechapel Art Gallery, Wildfire PR or that art festivals she ran for a while - Making Waves. (She also happens to have a BA in Media and an MA in Photography). She's had a lot of fun over the years. Learnt a lot. Laughed. Cried. Broke down. Twice. But ultimately, that's what has led her towards teaching. And these days, you'll find her at Goldsmiths university as a trainee art teacher! All while launching a brand-new podcast called "The Art Block".

After a peripatetic childhood, Kathleen McIntosh settled in New England where she taught literature and language for many years. She began to write poetry when retirement opened a door to this creative space. She lives in Connecticut and currently serves on the Board of the Connecticut Poetry Society.

Diane Melby was recognized for literary excellence in the Jeffrey Hewitt Memorial 2023-24 Annual Contests sponsored by the Poetry Society of Virginia. Her poetry has appeared in *Gyroscope*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and *Plate of Pandemic*, as well as in other print and online publications. Her latest poem is forthcoming in the *Northern Appalachian Review*. She is the president-emeritus of a private university in Texas and writes from her home in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. <https://www.dianemelby.com>

Elizabeth Mercurio is the author of the chapbooks *Doll* and *Words in a Night Jar*. Her work has appeared in *Lily Poetry Review*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Vox Populi*, and elsewhere. She is a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominated poet and was named a finalist in the Cordella Press Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize and the Two Sylvias Press Wilder Poetry Prize. You can find her at: <https://www.elizabethmercurio.com/>.

Abigail Michelini teaches writing at Northampton Community College. Her work can be found in *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Speckled Trout Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Superpresent*, and *Whale Road Review*, among other publications. She is Poetry Editor of *Oyster River Pages*. When she's not writing, she can be found playing with her kids and running Pennsylvania roads. Find her at [www.abigailmichelini.com](http://www.abigailmichelini.com).

Amy Milin is a writer of fiction and poetry from New York City, currently wandering the woods of rural Pennsylvania. There she runs Swift Waters, a startup retreat and residency for writers and artists. Her work has been published or forthcoming in *Joyland*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Frozen Sea*. You can find her on Instagram at [@swiftwaters\\_creative\\_retreat](https://www.instagram.com/swiftwaters_creative_retreat) and [@amy.mylin](https://www.instagram.com/amy.mylin).

Jared Mills lives in New York City with his wife, daughter, and grumpy cat. He has worked as a telemarketer, gas station attendant, retail cashier, film and television editor, and software engineer. His debut short story was published in the Summer 2024 issue of *Catamaran*.

Rosemary Dunn Moeller is the author of *Long Term Mates Migrate Great Distances* and two chapbooks. She has poems published in *Young Raven's*, *Upstart Crow*, *Tenth Muse*, *Muleskinner's*, *Freshwater* and many other journals and anthologies. She and her husband have traveled from their farm on the Great Plains to all seven continents, exploring and adventuring. She writes to connect to others through images and ideas.

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, metropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois.

Delaney R. Olmo is a writer who has been a finalist and semi-finalist in several contests. She is an enrolled member of the Kashia Band of Pomo Indians. A recipient of the Social Justice Writing Prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming to *Green Linden Press*, *Feminist Formations*, *Visual Verse*, *Solstice Literary Journal* and many others. Her first full length poetry collection will be released in 2025 with Flowersong Press.

DL Pravda tries to keep it together either by jamming distorted reverb juice in his ears or by driving to the country and disappearing into the woodsfarm dimension. Recent poetry appears in *Blue Collar Review*, *Bookends Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Rockvale Review* and *Spring Hills Review*. His book *Normal They Napalm the Cottonfields* is a past winner of the Dogfish Head Poetry Prize. Pravda teaches at Norfolk State University.

Kassie Rene's writing has appeared in *Coffin Bell Anthology*, *Parentheses Journal*, and other literary magazines. She is the author of "what's worse? me or ai?" and the zine "i'm not insane! (a zine for insane people)." She lives and writes in Brooklyn. Mostly.

Kimberly J. Simms's literary voice is rooted in the Southern tradition of storytelling, informed by her British and Southern lineage. She is an award-winning poet who entertains and educates with poetry that is both poignant and inspiring. In her debut book of poems, *Lindy Lee: Songs on Mill Hill*, Kimberly chronicles the lives of textile workers in the Piedmont region with historical accuracy and imaginative insight. These are poems of sorrow, joy, and redemption that linger in the heart. Among many titles and honors garnered: former Carl Sandburg NHS Writer-in-residence; TedX speaker; and slam pioneer turned curator. She is a current member of the SC Humanities Council's Speakers Bureau and her work is included in the South Carolina Poetry Archives at Furman University.

Merna Dyer Skinner's poems appear in numerous US and international journals, and six anthologies. She was a finalist in the 2023 Crosswinds Poetry Contest, and semi-finalist in *Naugatuck River Review's* 2023 Contest. Most recently, her poetry appears in *Whale Road Review* and *Chiron Review*. Her chapbook, *A Brief History of Two Aprons*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Based in Portland, Oregon, Merna is finalizing her first full-length collection, and is editing an anthology of fishing poems by female poets.

Valerie A. Smith is the author of *Back to Alabama*, her debut poetry collection from Sundress Publications. She is the 2024 Solstice MFA Spotlight Poet, a 2022 Sewanee Writers' Conference Scholar and 2020 Hambridge Center for the Creative Arts Fellow. She earned a PhD in English from Georgia State University and MA from Kennesaw State University. Her poems appear in *South Carolina Review*, *Radix*, *Aunt Chloe*, *Weber*, *Spectrum*, *Obsidian*, *Crosswinds*, *Dogwood*, *Solstice*, *Oyster River Pages*, and *Wayne Literary Review*. Above all, she values spending quality time with her family.

Jean Li Spencer (she/they) is a We Need Diverse Books grant recipient, former editorial assistant at a Big Five book publisher, and poetry reader at *The Adroit Journal*. Holding a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, she is now an asset-based school educator in New York City. You can read their poems, short stories, and articles in digital archives across the World Wide Web.

Susanna Stephens, Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst and poet living in Brooklyn, NY. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Rust & Moth*, *ONE ART*, *Red Eft Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *ROOM: A Sketchbook for Analytic Action*, and *DIVISION/Review*. In addition to writing, she maintains a private practice in Manhattan.

Richard Stimac has published a poetry book *Bricolage* (Spartan Press), two poetry chapbooks, and one flash fiction chapbook. In his work, Richard explores time and memory through the landscape and human-scapes of the St. Louis region.

Olivia Thomes, MFA, is a poet, educator, and farmer from Massachusetts. Her publications include, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Passengers Journal*, and *Kissing Dynamite*. Often-times she can be found barefoot in her garden or lounging with a cup of tea enjoying the sounds of happy livestock. Olivia operates her own farm with a focus on providing natural, hand-crafted food and apothecary products. She founded *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*, where she publishes poetry, prose, and music. More information can be found at: [www.harespawfarm.com](http://www.harespawfarm.com) and [www.harespawlitjournal.com](http://www.harespawlitjournal.com).

M. Benjamin Thorne is an Associate Professor of Modern European History at Wingate University. Possessed of a lifelong love of history and poetry, he is interested in exploring the synergy between the two. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Rogue Agent*, *Feral*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Molecule*, and *Red Eft Review*. He lives and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, NC.

Agnes Vojta grew up in Germany and now lives in Rolla, Missouri where she teaches physics at Missouri S&T and hikes the Ozarks. Agnes is the author of *Porous Land* (Spartan Press, 2019), *The Eden of Perhaps* (Spartan Press, 2020), and *A Coracle for Dreams* (Spartan Press, 2022). Her poems have appeared in a variety of magazines; you can read some on her website [agnesvojta.com](http://agnesvojta.com).

Donna Vorreyer is the author of *Unrivered* (forthcoming, 2025), *To Everything There Is* (2020), *Every Love Story is an Apocalypse Story* (2016) and *A House of Many Windows* (2013), all from Sundress Publications. Her poetry, fiction, and essay work have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Cherry Tree*, *Poet Lore*, *Salamander*, *Harpur Palate*, *Booth*, and elsewhere. She lives and creates in the Chicago area and hosts the monthly online reading series *A Hundred Pitchers of Honey* this year.

Christian Ward is a UK-based poet with two collections, *Intermission* and *Zoo*, available on Amazon and elsewhere. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals and recognised in several competitions this year.

John P. Waterman (aka: John E. Epic) is the author of the novel *Ill Digestions*, the illustrated children's book *Such a Little Apple: The Anatomy of a Bully*, and numerous books of poetry and photography. He also is a performance artist that has appeared on stages up and down the East Coast and all the way through the Bible Belt. John is an existentialist at heart.

JJ Amaworo Wilson is the writer-in-residence at Western New Mexico University; a faculty member on Stonecoast's MFA in Creative Writing; and the author of over twenty books. His 2016 novel, *Damnificados*, won four major awards and was an Oprah Top Pick. His most recent novel, *Nazaré*, came out in 2021. He has lived in eleven countries and visited over seventy.

Alessio Zanelli is an Italian poet who writes in English. His work has appeared in over 200 literary journals from 18 countries. His sixth collection, titled *The Invisible*, was published in 2024 by Greenwich Exchange (London). For more information please visit [www.alessiozanelli.it](http://www.alessiozanelli.it).

Aida Zilelian is NYC-based first generation American-Armenian writer, educator and storyteller. She is the author of *THE LEGACY OF LOST THINGS* (2015) and *ALL THE WAYS WE LIED* (2024). Her work has appeared in *Phoebe*, *Ekphrastic Review*, Red Hen Press (anthology of immigrant writing) and others. Her poem “The Escape Artist” was a finalist in the *Sand Hills Literary Review* poetry contest.

