

raised by wolves

travis stephens

my mother is dying
breathing labored, forced
to seek a cool den
the damp earth a refuge
a hole.

We wait nearby, my brothers
who won't look me in the eye
each watching the wall,
who will be next?

A glance away
let the loud
snarl murderous thoughts
while we others
carry the grudge.

I shiver, understand as always
my teeth rotted and dull.
Even my father, that son of a bitch,
kept his bite until the end.
I was always ignored
last to marrow
filching bits from
other's old kills.
earn your keep.

We are a large litter
six males, one female.
My wife, baby girl,
always the cute one,
marveled at my brothers
“you have the same eyes,
and the nieces too”.

I'd like to believe
the next generation
is tamer, a little more wag
a little less bite.
But I have seen the way
their own young
start at noises, regard
new puppies with more
than affection.
I have begun to eye small houses.
I don't need much;
a bowl, a patch of sunlight
& dirt walls closing in.

- Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who resides with his family in California.

web: zolothstephenswriters.com

year of the rabbit

rachel dziga





- Blue tints the past in waves of nostalgia, beckoning one to look deeper in this cyanotype collage work. To find more on her art and classes just Google @racheldziga

after the relapse

cat dixon

Hopefully by the time you read this, I'll be over the state line, miles away with luggage in the backseat. My scent will linger on that carrot pillow, on the couch, on your sweater I left on the chair. You'll wonder how I escaped—by boat? By plane? By the orange hot air balloon in the distance? This car is registered to my father. He had me keep it in case I needed it. The magic of the highway—the speeders and slow drivers, the texters and wanderers—never allows a moment of rest. Each flashing headlight is a train crossing and each passed exit is a mirage. There's no interruption to the race. I wish I had music to pass the hours, but this car wasn't made for CDs or tapes—only Bluetooth, and I chucked my phone after I cracked its screen. I'll be going 90 with a cyclone in my hair—nothing to drown out the wind except hope, but that hummingbird has eaten out my chest. By this hour, you're in the shower—water or tears? The magic of the bathroom is how it's sacred with its growth of mildew, its coarse hairball clogging under the feet, out of sight, out of reach, its enticing medicine cabinet filled with bottles of remedies to ailments you've never suffered. Recovery is a long road, they say, and I wish you easy speedbumps, but I won't be there to retrace your steps, to clean up the mess, to opine about current events or how you react to stressors.

Hopefully by the time you open this letter, I'll be almost to Kansas—beautiful Dorothy with her red shoes, innocent girl in blue. I wanted a dog, but never got one—my father said I had an allergy. Was it true or just an excuse? Perhaps I'll never know. I will never know the zaftig bosom of a mother during a fever, incessant nag, the body swap, the unconditional love. We both lacked what we both lacked—both pulled into a whirlpool, a tornado, while everyone stood by and laughed or rubbernecked. Up ahead the cars will slow down for an accident. The firetruck, coppers, tow truck will spin their lights. Perhaps help is only a call away. Whenever a lonely addict calls for help, she ends up ambushed, pinned to a bed, silenced, guests only allowed if they called ahead. Heads turn to survey the wreckage, a blue sedan versus a white van. The airbags deploy. Unfortunately, we were born without those. Nothing to cushion the crash—our heads greeting the dash, our ribs cracked, our fists against the metal. No jaws of life, no one qualified to perform the necessary measures. The nursery zoetrope kept the gulls in endless flight—even the illusion of movement, of relationship, of time reversal trapped us, enamored us with those wings. *Let me fly!* We cried reaching up. *Let me fly!* We once whispered into the empty rooms of our youth. Maybe by the time you read this, my car will have broken down. Maybe my quest will never end. There's an untapped vein under these words, an arm unbruised, a magic not yet cursed. Take this letter, roll it up—a new kaleidoscope for you to peruse.

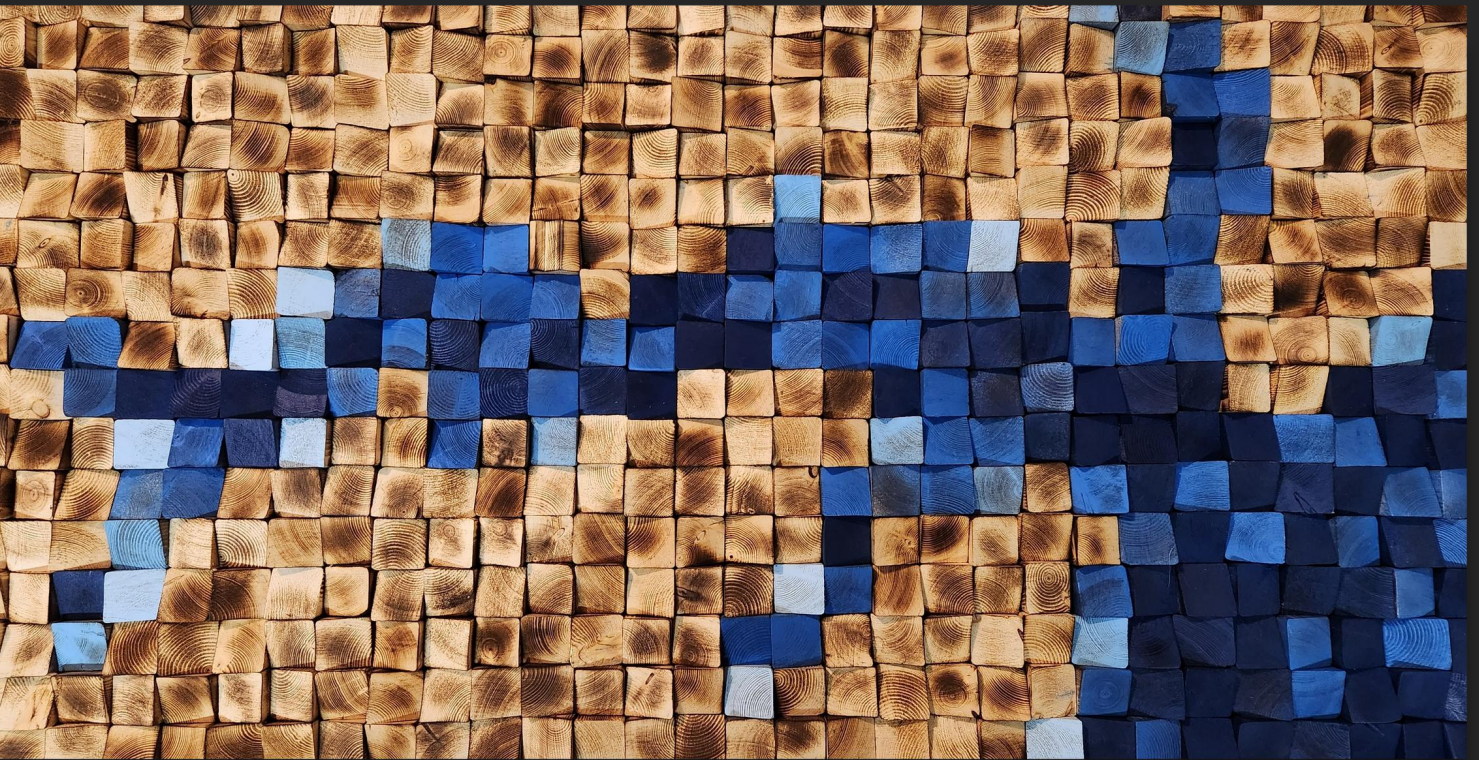
- Cat Dixon (she/her) is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. She is a poetry editor at *The Good Life Review* and the author of six poetry collections and chapbooks.

lake retreat

jake quick

Lake Retreat combines 480 individually cut 2x2 blocks of wood into a mosaic, recreating a serial view of our cove. By using larger mosaic pieces, it is much more abstract, which, in my mind, makes it more special that my family and I can identify the uniqueness of what we see out the window every day.

I cut the blocks with a miter saw, sanded five sides, and then burned them on a metal sheet with a handheld butane torch. After counting blocks for each color, I sprayed them with acrylic, keeping the grain visible. The bevels add visual depth and complexity by randomly arranging their direction. All the blocks are the same, except the one representing our house which was cut to match the roof profile. This project was a present for my wife's birthday.



■ Jake is a surgeon from Missouri who operates mainly on humans and occasionally on art and home improvement projects.





“I still don’t understand why the forks don’t go in the same way as the knives,” I say while loading the dishwasher. Stabby ends down. Three prongs are just as sharp, just as painful on a careless palm reaching in blind for a spoon for sneaking late-night ice cream straight from the carton. You don’t answer, yet I hear your cheeky voice say, *then stay out of the ice cream*. In the living room, the television flickers with one of your favorite food shows. They’re all the same to me: renovated restaurants, mystery baskets, bad cooks, soggy bottoms, the pressure cooker. Is it cake or is it cancer?

I open the fridge, inhale cold air tasting of leftover egg salad, search the door for lime juice. The oat milk for your matcha lattes expired weeks ago. I’ve continued to push it further back on the shelf with the excuse the trash is already full. Next time. Always next time. I’m sorry I yelled when you hammered nails and pinholes into the wall without levelling, measuring, searching for studs. You always were trial and error—a little less of this, a little

avo- cados tana buoy

more of that—just go for it and try again as you put up the pictures I was always too busy to hang: Finny as a puppy, the grizzly in Glacier, honeymooning in Maine. Our wedding portrait. My god, we were babies then. I thought we had time.

I open the cupboard above the stove, fight through all your cookbooks for the Ziplock bag containing the recipe for your great-great gran's guacamole. Set it on the counter safe inside the plastic. What started as oral tradition passed through your matrilineal ancestry is now on a notecard which you repeatedly told me was blasphemous as you wrote down the ingredients, stopping at every letter to rest your shaky hand. Scared the words wouldn't be legible. Scared it would die with you—*In case you meet someone new*, you offered.

“Stop it,” I'd said. “You're not dying. I won't let you.” Pinky promises.

I want you to know I'm still finding your hair balled in my hoody pockets and stuck like Velcro to the back of my t-shirts and the

bottoms of my socks. I'm pulling it out of my ass crack. I don't know how it gets there, and I slap the long strands onto the shower tiles like you used to do and watch them slither down like thin snakes into the drain.

I'm already fucking this up, aren't I? Not using the fresh limes, and I think I grabbed the wrong kind of onion. Trying to dice the tomato, but the cutting board quickly runs bloody with tomato guts. Try to stopper it with my hand from bleeding out onto the counter. Fail. These days and nights are an endless fog, thick and gray and void of sunlight, and Finny doesn't sleep at the end of our bed anymore. Still waits by the door. How do I explain to the goddamn dog you're never coming home and that I'm a liar? With the crook of my arm, I wipe away the tears burning my face. Definitely grabbed the wrong onion, and my cilantro cuts are atrocious. You once held this knife in your hand, rocking the blade in smooth even strokes. I should have been more present.

I remembered to cut the avocados last because you told me that once exposed to air, the fruit begins to lose its bright green color. Like a doctor performing life-saving surgery under duress, I tear the plastic baggy open from the side, pull out the three avocados one by one. At the grocery store, I'd selected them from the box labeled RIPE because I couldn't remember how to tell the difference between a good avocado and a bad one. Something about squeezing and being too proud to ask for help. The blade presses against the first and the insides give way before the leather skin does. Same with the other two. My throat constricts. Shaking, I drop the knife onto the counter, pick up the avocados and press them between my hands, a non-bright green mush oozing from between my fingers, shedding their suits and seeds in my fists. You were in remission. RIPE is supposed to mean ready to go and I can't stop feeling cheated. We were coming home from dinner and a movie and rocking out to '90s ballads and finally planning that dream trip to

Scotland when a black Nissan pickup jumped the median into our lane. I mix the ingredients together right there on the cutting board, bits of cilantro and onion and tomatoes all sticking to my palms. Pour on the lime juice and the salt and slap it into the bowl. I felt your soul leave, slip between my fingers. I wipe my hands, the counter, and load the cutting board and the knives into the dishwasher, press the quick cycle button. The machine groans and gurgles to life, and I swear I hear your giggle. *That looks like diarrhea*, Mikey. There's a half bag of chips in the pantry.

I drop onto the couch just as Anne Burrell is coloring a contestant's finger red with a marker for holding the knife incorrectly, and you're laughing at the uncanniness of it all. I dip a chip into the bowl of guacarrhea, bring it to my lips. Surprisingly, it's not as horrible as it looks. Finny walks out from the shadows of the entryway, shoves his muzzle into my crotch for pets. I glance at the wall where you'd hung the large canvas of my favorite sunrise from our last beach

vacation, where crooked sunlight pours through the holes in the storm clouds moving across the Atlantic. Seagulls fly in form along the coastline and fishing boats are scattered across the dark blue ocean like mini marshmallows and the silhouette of the freighter teetering the edge of that burning horizon.

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- Tana Buoy received her MFA from the University of Nebraska Omaha in 2021 and is a micro/flash fiction editor for *The Good Life Review*.

Twitter: @ThrowMeABuoy

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