



FLORA FICTION

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Flash fiction, poetry, illustration, and review submissions for website content are accepted on a rolling basis.

Entries for the seasonal Literary Magazine are done quarterly. Please visit florafiction.com/submit

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR


Our past haunts us. Our actions haunt us. Our minds haunt us. Our consciousness doesn't know the passage of time; it blends the past and present. What we know and what is real is part of our own, singular narrative. Where we come from and what we've experienced shape who we are, yet this does not define us. What defines us is how we pick ourselves back up and carry on. We're defined by the way we treat people and the way we treat ourselves.

We are but observers of this world, controlling only what we think and how we act upon our thoughts. We cannot control people who come in and out of our lives, willingly or not. We cannot change the actions of our past. We must move forward or sink into the darkness. The saying goes, "Time heals all wounds." It doesn't. We, as human beings, just get better at handling that pain.

Cultivating human connections is necessary. Despite the potential pain that these relationships may bring, they are worth it because they change us. Relationships help us grow and become the people we've always wanted to be. Even when they hurt us, we learn it's about a balance of joy and pain, for one cannot exist without the other.

Our Fall 2021 issue's theme is "Hauntings" and we have collected the artwork of individuals around the world to share with you a common experience. Please, take the time to immerse yourself in this collection of work.

xoxo
Flora Ashe



Joshua Hammaren's work breaks down the recognizable it into something abstract, asking the audience to rebuild it according to their own imagination.

Warning

BY: LAUREN ROSE

do we
fill our homes with photographs of the dead
to remind ourselves
we are still
alive,
or as a warning

one day we too will be
nothing but paper,
empty eyes,
and ink.

Lauren Rose has a BFA in Creative Writing. Her previous work has been published by *Cardinal Sins*, *Peregrine Journal*, *Running Wild Press*, and others.

Bogdan Boușcă started photography in 2008. He participated at over forty photo exhibitions over the world and has articles and editorials published in more than thirty magazines, permanent artist of one important art gallery in Toronto, Canada, and active in many auction houses over Europe. In present he runs one of the most important photo events in Romania, called "Narrative Nude" by "Bogart image".





Nobody's Ghost

BY: MARK JABAUT

It's not so much of a haunting as it is an awkward game of follow-the-leader. He lurks at a distance, turning away when I look and pretending to find something interesting in the sky or on the ground at his feet. He is hesitant, self-conscious, like a new employee who hasn't yet been through orientation.

It is late evening and I am walking from my office toward my usual parking lot. The streetlights have just come on, there are few other pedestrians.

"What do you want?" I say. "Why are you haunting me?"

He doesn't answer; doesn't seem to *have* an answer. He tries to act like he's not following me, then trips on a curb and almost falls. I am embarrassed for him. How does a ghost trip on anything?

"Can we talk?" I ask. "It seems like you could use a hand." He backs off a bit; the concept of a meeting seems to terrify him. His grey form wavers briefly, then solidifies. I turn and continue on my way. The ghost follows tentatively. He is like a lost kitten, I think. He wants to get closer but is afraid. I wish I had a bowl of milk.

Or whatever ghosts like.

I grow weary of this skittish dance, sitting on a bench set back from the road. I stare straight ahead, never looking his way so as not to spook him. Eventually, after what feels like an eternity, I feel his presence at the other end of the bench. I turn my head slowly and look at him. He smiles weakly.

He is all grey and white. Clearly once a man, he is wearing contemporary but translucent clothing over his equally translucent body. He is clean-shaven with a receding hairline. He leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees, twiddles his thumbs. His lower lip seems to tremble, although his entire ghostly form trembles and wavers a bit, so I'm not positive if the lip thing is due to emotion or normal ghostly quivering.

He is a wretch.

"Look," I say, "I don't want to be rude, but you don't seem to know what you're doing."

He looks up at me sadly and nods.

"Are you – new at this?" I ask. Again, an ashamed nod.

"Well, buck up," I say. "Don't feel bad. We all have to start somewhere." He kicks at a pebble, but his foot goes through it.

I try to think of how to help him. I'm afraid if I don't, this long-distance dance will continue unabated. I've got things to do, and don't have time to babysit a ghost.

"Let's see if we can figure things out," I say. "Is it me you're supposed to be haunting? Because I don't recognize you at all. I know that's not necessarily a requirement, but—"

The ghost abruptly stands up and takes two vaporous steps away. He looks to the heavens as if searching for an answer, or perhaps a voice, and then back toward me. He shrugs.

"You don't know if you're to haunt me?" I say. He nods.

"How are you supposed to know who?" I ask. He looks pained. He points to an electronic billboard for a local law firm, and then to the baseball stadium in the distance.

I think for a moment and then figure it out. "Trial and error?"

He nods and puts an index finger to his nose.

"That doesn't seem very efficient," I say. The ghost appears to agree.

"How many people have you haunted before me?" I ask. He looks at his hands and begins to count fingers. When he gets to ten and looks ready to continue, I stop him.

"You don't have any clue about whom you're supposed to haunt? No initials, or a picture, anything?" The ghost shakes his head, pulls his gauzy pockets inside out. Nothing.

"I think management has really screwed this up," I say. "I don't know how to help you."

He shrugs again and nods once as if to say, thanks anyway. Then he wanders away down the street, back toward city central, nobody's ghost.

Mark Jabaut is a playwright and author living in Webster, NY. Mark's fiction has appeared in *The Ozone Park Journal*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Spank the Carp*, *Defenestration*, and others.

Demolition Derby

BY: GERALD YELLE

The shadows can be sped up so that they pass
through the room
without anyone's being able to catch them.
They especially like to congregate in the basement
-especially on the floor
which we always try to keep clean
-but it almost never works
and we think it's because of the shadows.
We put rugs down but gray grit
and grainy dust always work through.
Once we took everything out.
Thought about laying down a wooden floor
and starting over
but we couldn't get rid of the shadows.
Nothing seems to work
and the longer it takes
the less likely that it'll ever get better.
We may have to take the house down and rebuild.

Gerald Yelle's books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, FutureCycle Press, and *Mark My Word and the New World Order*, Pedestrian Press. He has chapbooks at Yavaneka Press and Finishing Line Press.



The Curse of Xandra Flame

BY: LEAH C. STETSON

I grew up inside a Shirley Jackson story.

My bedroom in the tower overlooked the misty harbor,
Rooftops of Castle Tucker and my grandmother's Big House,
With its seven bedrooms and the old barn, the slanted doors.
Behind it, my doll's house, a haunted thing with plywood floors.
Instead, I played with my grandmother's tea sets in the parlor.

Maybe other kids had imaginary friends; I didn't know about that choice.
Growing up in haunted houses, I played with poltergeists, who rearranged
My mother's pantry, the furniture inside my doll's house, so the dolls
(At first I blamed) lay deranged, and messed with my brother, a toddler,
Who pointed at the offending ghosts; my parents said, "we know, we know."

Unlike when I slept in trundle beds at little girls' homes and their moms,
Clueless, whispered, "sweet dreams, Sleepy-heads." In my pink bedroom,
I sometimes knocked on the hollow wall behind my rope bed
Daddy tightened each night so it wouldn't collapse—just to hear
The ghost girl's bony brittle knuckles rap back.

I pretended I was dead, to get along. After all, her make-believe,
Her house, her rules. I was six and already a defender of ghosts.
Four walls walled off the old nursery after she passed, I believe
Her family plastered it, hiding the two doors, according to
Original blueprints that my father, the werewolf, pored over.

Halls led us down dark passageways, a hidden staircase,
Uncanny footprints on the high ceiling. The four of us
Circled and cycled around multi-storied parlors, but never
That sealed room right in the middle. My father ignored
This force of tension within our family's architecture.

Windswept atop a ledge, the Weeks House rose above a pretty village,
Supposedly the 'Prettiest,' it is arguably picturesque as Maine scenery:
Blue Sheepscot Harbor, White's Island a tiny Paradise in the estuary.
From the front yard, hiding in the lilac bushes, I stared at the mirage:
Faces framed at the window—those eerie transparent portraits, weary
Like a child left, a widow's house. I never decoded her message.

Along the ledge beneath the house, I played in the juniper,
Poison sumac and lilacs. I pretended their small white flowers
Held magic power; I made potions with tiny petals, well water
Mixed with hydrogen peroxide and witch hazel in my mother's
Jean Nate bottles; I treated my wounds, my baby brother's.

Once, at six years old, I leapt off the ledge, and tumbled
Down through the juniper, poison sumac, thorns. Blood
And sap stuck to my shins, knees, face—as I fumbled
My way up an old iron staircase by the barn, where Dad
Made things in his workshop, including my doll's house.

Deep in ancient burial ground, its foundation hunkered low
Obsidian arrowheads, we found their points in soft grass.
Edged in a labyrinth of lilacs, Dad hacked a maze to trim
The overgrowth; I hung back, stole his tracks, traced the broken
Limbs of cuttings he sacrificed. I was seven then and brave, save

A fear of Halloween masks made far scarier when spied or seen
Through the black lattice work: Vents in the hardwood floor.
My brother and I knelt side-by-side flipping the lever
Like a picture book: we read the fable of our parents'
Costume parties—drunk demons, familiar faces, cleverly
And terrifyingly deformed. But by eleven, we lived elsewhere:

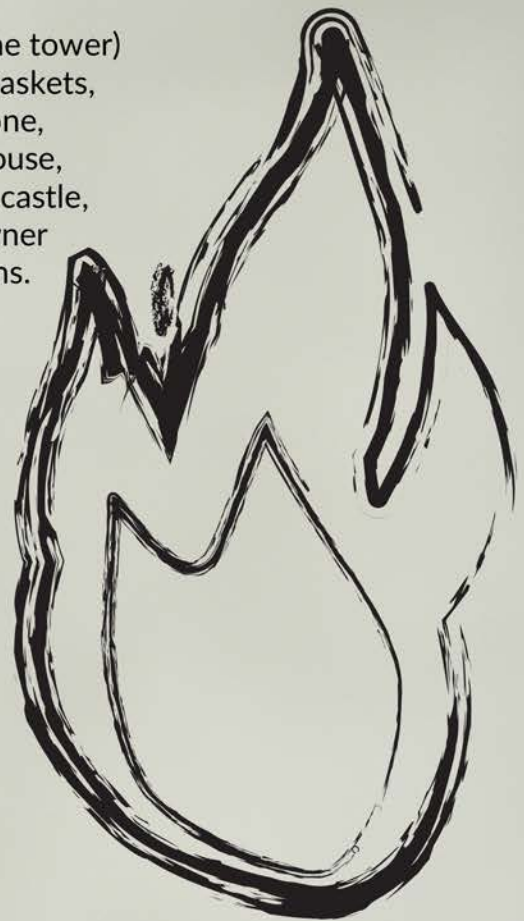
A Federal-style house, a Victorian, (my bedroom was in the tower)
We moved around like this, carrying our stories in hand-baskets,
Tote bags and chests, storing some things in the attic of one,
Staying temporarily on the third floor of Gramma's Big House,
Living in other people's houses, beside a church, beside a castle,
Next to the famed Musical Wonder House, where the owner
Played his harpsichord and eyed me through sheer curtains.
He looked like Vincent Price.

What was the curse of Xandra Flame?
Haunted and haunting her adolescence,
Even her given name, the family name:
They taunted her. Teachers, her classmates.
They thought it was metaphor; it's memoir.

To the old Weeks House, her roots, Willie the Whale,
A granite ledge perpetually lunging, a humpback
In the gardens, her father's German tomatoes,
The building renovated and turned into inns;
(The inn-keepers kept changing the sign.)

Reinventing the rooms, they sledgehammer
Vacancies, waking what remains, remain.

Now a bed & breakfast, they rent her old bedroom,
Redone in shades of green, a *Romantic* get-away
They labeled,
The Defiance.



Leah C. Stetson grew up in historic, haunted houses on the coast of Maine, where she started writing poetry and stories by recording them into a 1980s tape recorder in her haunted bedroom.



Lingering Ice

BY: MERI BENSON

Sun bright as Adrienne stepped out of her house, she settled the large black hat on her head. The floppy brim had already been trained to fold just so in order to perfectly keep the sun from her eyes without impeding her vision, so it provided the well-needed relief for her to see the steps down from the porch to the walk without squinting. Though it also meant that she could easily see her lawn needed good mowing and the flower beds were starting to choke on weeds.

A soft horn broke the silence of the sleepy street and had Adrienne jerk her emerald gaze from the tulips that reached up to her for help. She'd have to see if she could get to them later, or maybe find a gardener to do the first quick bit of maintenance on them first. For now, she moved down the walk quick enough, coupled with a soft tug of wind, that her hand reached up to hold the hat on her head. Couldn't let it slip away. That would be rude of her.

Ice touched her hand where it rested on her head, and she shivered slightly despite the warm weather. She shook it off though when she glanced behind her and found no one and nothing there.

"You okay?" Her friend, Lynne, leaned across the seat a little to watch her out the open window. The redhead's brow arched expectantly at Adrienne, though a smirk lingered along her lips. "You're not expecting me to get out and open that for you, right?"

Pulling the door open, Adrienne rolled her eyes slightly and slipped in. Her hand smoothed the sundress down the back of her legs so she'd be sitting more on the fabric than the hot vinyl seats of the car. "I'm perfectly capable of getting a door for myself, I'll have you know." Feet settled in the car, she turned to reach for the door to pull it closed.

Only it closed itself for her without prompting.

A frown settled on Adrienne's features as she let her eyes trail up the walk of the house, almost like she was following the path of someone walking back up to the front door. No one, of course. Just empty air, and yet as she turned to offer a smile to her friend, she couldn't help feel like someone lingered at the door out of the corner of her eye.

"Cheer up, hot stuff!" Her friend reached over to pat Adrienne's knee before she put the car into gear and pulled away from the curb. "It's not even a date, just a friendly gathering among friends."

No pressure. That's what Lynne was trying to get across to her. It'd been a year, plenty of time to move on, right? Because her friends were already trying to ease her into meeting new people. In group settings, more like just a friendly lunch or dinner party. But the understanding and meaning were still there. Adrienne still caught the not-so-subtle hope she'd find someone new.

But then, that was also the question. Did she want someone new?

A chill slid along the back of Adrienne's neck. It could almost be a caress, a welcomed touch if it weren't so cold that it caused her to shiver. "Just a lunch," she commented almost idly as she glanced out the window. Reflections of the backseat teased in the glass and a dark shadow flickered in the back seat for a moment.

"You don't have to look like I'm taking you to a funeral!"

The laugh from Lynne faded in Adrienne's ears, the comment hitting harder than it should have. A funeral wasn't really a joking matter on this as a whole after all. Not since him.

That chill settled more solidly around her shoulders, the feel of arms wrapping themselves around her and pulling her back against the seat of the car. They didn't hurt; they weren't that tight. Almost like they tried to offer comfort. Adrienne couldn't help one hand raised to rest on her shoulder, though where there should have been an arm to rest on only chilled air.

"Oh god, Rin, I'm so sorry." Her friend glanced over, eyes a little wide. "That was callous and too soon."

Adrienne shook her head a little. "It's fine. I'm just not sure if the year has been enough, honestly." Because how could she move on when she still had these feelings? Like Mic was literally right here, holding her from the backseat, not far or gone at all.

Glancing over, Lynne frowned but didn't answer that comment. Adrienne relaxed into the chilling touch with a soft sigh. She was grateful, honestly, that her friend wouldn't argue with her. "I know you loved him, Rin, but I just don't want to see you hurt forever."

Frost trickled along the corner of Adrienne's window, spider webbing slowly and she tried to calm her own heart in the hopes that it would calm his. "Pushing me into a new relationship is what will harm me. I'm fine as I am."

A shiver slid through Lynne and she reached to turn the temperature in the car up a little. "All right, Rin. I get it. So today's just lunch."

"Just with friends," Adrienne solidified with a nod. The frost along the window melted and the chill through her faded. Enough so that it wasn't long before she stretched to turn the temperature back down. "It's not that I don't appreciate it, Lynne. It's just not the right move forward," she offered a little more gently. But how do you explain you can't move forward when that ice lingers at your back, around you, even currently teasing a strand of hair on your shoulder in a way that it merely looks like the car fan is making it move?

Ice she's come to find comfort in.

Because he's not gone. Just different now.



Woman: A Vignette

BY: MELODY WANG

She claimed super-abilities, much like she claimed the hearts of men whose names never left imprints on her memory. Hour-long baths: body submerged in the water, spirit floating through obscure and unseen portals. Rooms that would tilt at the whim of her mind's eye. Invisibility that clung to her like a cloak and refused to let go even as the night was perfumed with the scent of stolen innocence.

In the fading glow of clove cigarettes, she let herself remember the ghosts of her past. They that lurked around every corner, silently stalking the places she had become drawn to most. The ones whose faces she swore she saw in random passers-by on days when the universe was not quite aligned. Entities of age and light, faded beauty, and the scent of forgotten flowers.

They drew near to her, kneeling at her feet and offering shallow condolences, for she was much closer to them than ever before – and they knew her sorrow all too well.

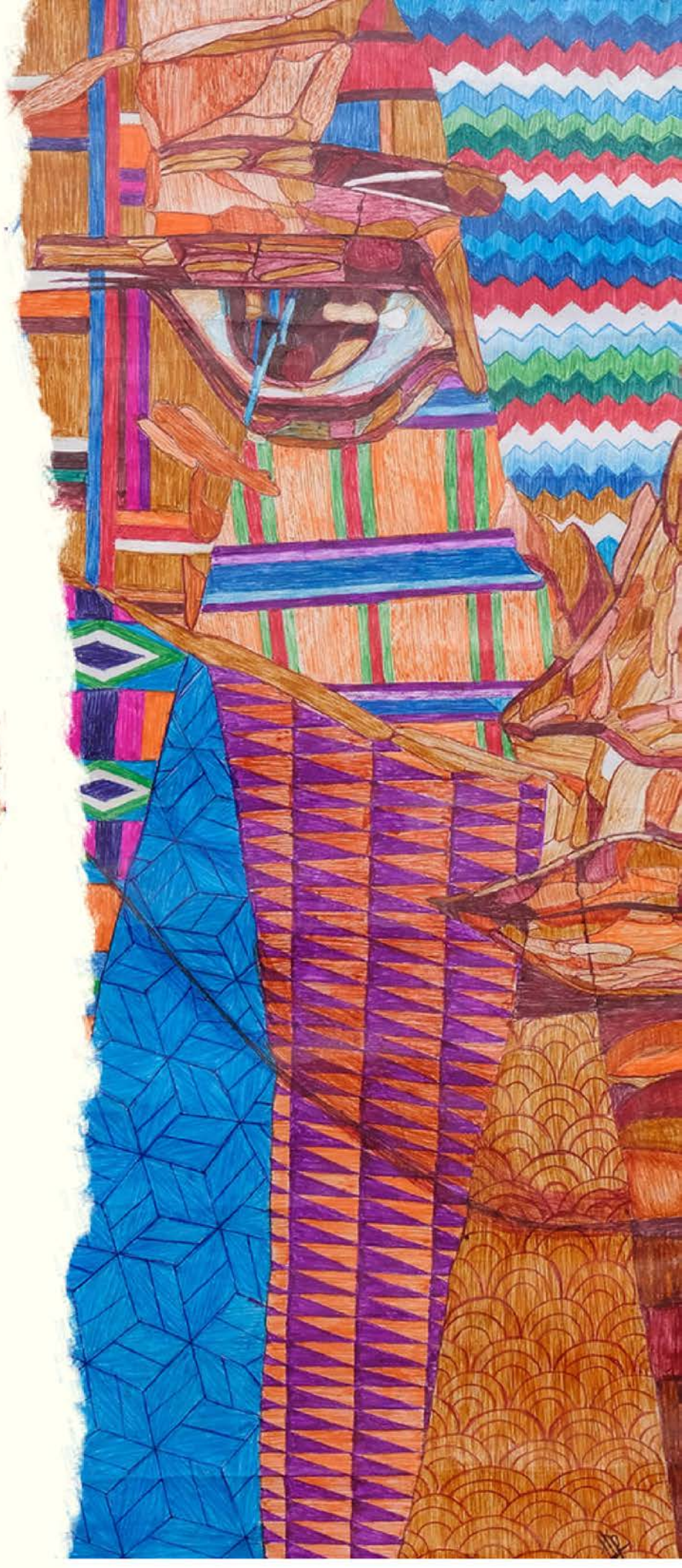
Melody Wang currently resides in sunny Southern California with her dear husband. In her free time, she dabbles in piano composition and also enjoys hiking, baking, and playing with her dogs.



"Untitled" by: Mélusine Brosse

Mélusine Brosse lives and works in France.; a concrete jungle mouse dreaming of grass on bitumen.

"A Secret Mind" By: Haripriya Gowrisankar
Haripriya Gowrisankar is a self thought
artist and pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in
painting .



The Quiver Response

BY: DOUGLAS CALA

I draw back my bow,
Three fingers positioned on the quiver,
Needing to summon fortitude to reach my intended target,
A moving one that also shapeshifts and manifests, difficult to track,
I summon all the tensile strength imaginable
Like Oliver Queen, Legolas, Robin Hood, or Cupid.

These days, my focus is obstructed, unrestrained.
Pending projects pile up, skyward, as high as the equator.
While time gets away from me
I engage my backup auxiliary generator to keep the lights on,
But there needs to be someone home, a pilot in the cockpit, a self-aware consciousness—
I disengage my ship's thrusters and lower my defensive shields,
Not yet prepared to initiate a warp through a super speed hyperspace jump,
At least I skipped my breakfast realizing that, in hindsight, I would be blowing chunks in zero gravity as my innards jostle around in my body like ping-pong balls

Suddenly, my radar picks up a safety beacon in the outer rim of a planet I have not yet visited,
Just a blip, the immediacy and intensity of an erupting star, powerful enough to vaporize any living creature,
We are all writing our captain's logs, each unique in the paths we select,
There will be forks in the galaxy and obstacles to test our mettle,
There will be foreign beings but plenty of opportunity for mutual understanding,
There will be common enemies and mutual friends as races and creeds comingle.
The end of my Stardate.

Douglas G. Cala is a performance poet, content writer/editor, photographer, and videographer from Staten Island. He has performed at a myriad of venues in the East Coast predominantly.

An Artifice of Intimacy

BY: KALI PASZKIEWICZ

We are alone inside our bodies. We
are amalgams in skin-tight meat suits
big enough for one consciousness –
pulsing with firing neurons (all bodies
try to do the same things, but)

we
are not made of the same stories.

The world doesn't change when we see it;
we see through abstract
eyes— Our perceptions ineffable;

we put on an artifice of intimacy
like a light jacket.

We translate everything through
the same pond Narcissus once found
himself staring (a sieve.)

I have become synthetic.
Absorbing the emotions, the thoughts,
the quirks I like the most about people but

in isolation,
they have fled my body, like ghosts
returning to their graves.

Have I become a cemetery?

Kali Paszkiewicz (they/ them) is a librarian in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Art, especially poetry, is their medicine; their way of being in a world that is absurd, cruel, and, most of all, beautiful.

The meaning of carnations

BY: JAMIE SPEED

Regret is a morning song
a pulse that echoes feet into red dancing
the alarm that stirs my valentine chest

Regret is breakfast
bleared across a bouquet of cotton stitches
the necklace that snags

Regret is a little girl
I didn't say goodbye to, refusing to
believe there wouldn't be another chance

I forget to prepare coffee the night before
I forget to grab the baby monitor
when I get up
I yell at the kids, the dog
I don't think anyone answers me
I plant an armful of carnations
I burn supper and have to order on my phone
but I don't call, I still don't
do the dishes
before bed

I spin my arms into weaving dreams
into rows of wildflowers
into sirens

Regret is a piece of toast
laced with the unknown, choking
my daughter, the twitching red

lights that blaze
across the slatted window panels
a door barging open, not closing

I hold them in the dark, sleeping
my cold sheets
have come undone

I wake covered in seeds
the ritual isn't lost on me

I don't oversleep

I misplace the alarm

I tell her see you later, leaving baskets

I don't remember her response

I forget to buy pink carnations
on senseless days

I leave the purple daisy dreams
because I have to

I have to put the dog away, unlock the door
the voice on the phone is instructional, dry
about to catch fire

I only cry alone, in my own arms
at night, regrets

kissed and tucked to bed

I say goodbye

even though I know

I'll see them in the morning

Jaime Speed is from Saskatchewan, Canada, and her poetry has appeared in several collections as well as numerous magazines, including *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *Channel*, *The Wild Word*, and *Eunoia Review*. Her prose poetry is forthcoming in *Best Small Fictions 2021* by Sonder Press.

How My Sister Continues to Shine

BY: LOIS PERCH VILLEMAIRE

Fabric of bold colors,
Flowers, stripes,
geometric designs,
durable texture,
Her fingers edged the material
under the needle of the machine,
to design, create, produce
yoga mat bags,
stitching love and pieces of
herself into fashioning
straps, pockets, polka dot liners.

The time would come when
her star could no longer shine,
She would become ill,
trying every treatment,
unable to continue.

All it takes to unravel
is to pull one harmless string,
turns out it held everything
together.

One person missing,
that link no longer in place,
would set off a series of events,
never imagined,
never thought possible,
Although no one speaks of this,
it's all I can think of.

After her bright light ceased,
an empty space, a loss so great,
her signature bags
would become tangible,
radiant memories
she left for us

Lois Perch Villemaire lives in Annapolis, MD. She writes memoir flash and poetry to express feelings and life experiences.

"Just wondering all the time" By: Geneviève Dumas

IN WONDER IF YOU EVER



THINK OF EACH OTHER
AT THE SAME TIME?



"What They Don't See" By: Shannon Gardner



"Missing Person" By: Shannon Gardner

Shannon Gardner appreciates the spontaneous process of nature and strives to explore Earth's natural imperfections. She creates art depicting horrifying elements and iconography. Her use of watercolor and India Ink are unforced, creating beauty within flaws.



"Does the heart know?" By: Mélusine Brosse

Life Fades to Black

BY: LISA VANGALEN

A faded photograph in a heavy frame rests in the old man's lap. His feeble fingers trace the outline of the two young people captured for eternity by Kodak. Despite his age, his eyes are clear, though they were no longer the colour of a summer sky. Sorrow has bleached them to a fine grey mist.

Robbed of his youth by a war, finding love in a land devastated by famine, he had survived much more than the loss of his wife. But somehow, this was the hardest battle he had ever fought. Every morning, he would wake, certain he had felt her hand upon his cheek as he slept. And then would come the remembering.

The image, frozen in time, showed them as young and vibrant. It was how he always thought of her. Not as she was at the end. Not as she lay in the bed, ravaged by cancer, her body wasting away, leaving her mind to endure the pain.

"This," he thought, as he tapped the frame, "this is how she is meant to be. Always."

Time is a thief. It robs us of our youth, our vitality, even our identity. Before the diagnosis, he often claimed he couldn't remember "from twelve until noon". Everyone always laughed. They weren't laughing now.

Now his children tried desperately to keep the memories fresh, to see a glimpse of the man that raised them. Pictures and videos, stories, and “do-you-remember-when”, have done little to slow the deterioration. They felt his grief, understood his pain, needed his assurance. But he could tell them nothing. For he did not know them as they were. Like old photo albums, his memories have gradually lost their images, each one fading into blackness.

Standing in the doorway, his daughter calls his name. He looks, but recognition does not light up his face. After sixty years, she was a stranger. Their exchanges have become routine.

“I’m waiting for Abby,” he would say. “Do you know her? She’s my daughter.” And each time he asks, the wound cuts deeper.

Tears fall as she turns away.

“Wait,” he would call. “Can you find Abby for me? I need to talk to her.”

“Of course,” she always replied. “I will try.” An impossible task.

Today marks his first anniversary alone. His family has gathered, hoping to create a happy memory for them to hold. They have long since been forgotten, their names and faces unknown to the frail man in the room.

Peering around the door frame, a collective tear falls as they witness a scene they cannot be part of.

The old man sways in a circle, dancing to a tune only he can hear. His eyes fall closed as he sinks into the memory, his arms wrapped gently around his beloved wife. Their first dance together on their wedding day. She loved this song. The world disappears, the shuffling of his feet creating harmony for the heart-wrenching sobs of his family. Beyond hope, beyond their words, the man they called father is gone, lost in the ravages of the mind-eating disease, replaced by a man they never knew.

The day passes into the night. His children have gone, their children with them. The frame drops softly to the carpet, his fingers mere inches from the floor as he exhales. A faint smile creased his dry lips as his true love enters the room and takes him by the hand. He would know that beautiful face anywhere. Eyes, once bright with life, fade and grow dim as he steps out of his earthly existence to embrace his beloved. It is time for their final waltz.

Lisa VanGalen loves to write novels but is embracing the challenge of flash fiction.



"Sunset Pond Shadows" By: Lois Bender

Lois Bender is a New York artist working in mixed media, printmaking, painting and photography. She's inspired by the natural world's phenomena: waters, botanica, panoramas, dramas and our inner emotional landscapes connecting us to our world.



Leapfrog

BY: ZEV TORRES

Next thing you know more time has passed
And you know that even though you haven't yet opened your eyes,
And it turns out to be no less true even after you have,
But you don't know if it's been hours or minutes
And you don't have the stomach to look at your clock
Or the inclination to roll over and consider the closed slats of the drawn blinds,
To discern whether the sun has risen or is in the process of rising,
And instead decide to focus your efforts on trying to recall
That thought, that idea, that moment of inspiration or awareness that
Jolted you into consciousness, not this time but
Several awakenings ago,
But did not impel you to reach for a pen and scrap of paper because
On principle you do not write down
Thoughts, ideas or moments of inspiration or awareness
That jolt you awake,
And after several futile passes your attention drifts
And is replaced by the recurring quandary
Whether now is the time to look into the source of that
Unsettling cry
Emanating from the depths of impaired consciousness or, perhaps,
From an adjoining room,
Or whether your time would be better spent
Checking your bank account balances,
Before stepping into the glare of the sun,
Or into the refined obscurity at the heart of night,
Or whether you should proceed, as usual,
Catapulting over the perils and promises protruding from
The nebulous veneer permeating all your waking hours.

Zev Torres is a writer and spoken word performer whose poetry has appeared in *Maintenant 15*, *Escape Wheel*, *Open Skies Quarterly*, and many other publications, and in his latest collection, *Stalactites and Stalagmites* (2021).

A Letter To The Visages In The Willows

BY: JADEN FONG

On Saturday, I learned that willow trees can reroot from branches that they lose too early: hacked off by a cotton-clad man, snapped off by a child curious to hear the tree's knuckles pop, chased off by the threat of static existence.

On Sunday, I saw faces in the matted hair of a weeping willow. I beheld the rounded, blear cheeks of a newborn, and how its tangled, olive arms reached for its mother's hunched shoulders. She held a woman's head in her lap, her limber fingers brushing the bristled peaks of the woman's brows.

All their eyes were swept toward mine with a sluggish brushstroke—tomorrow, the wind will mutilate their fleeting permeance, and these eyes that held mine in a chilled embrace will become ears, or souls, or nothing. I felt their voices maneuver through the pin pricked seeds planted along my naked arms as I surrendered my breath to the robin's ballad, the gypsy moth's flutter, the mule deer's bite.

Collapsing into the earth beneath me, my legs peek through the other side. And as an ardent river rushes through the creases in my feet—moments before soil kisses my lips—my first epitaph escapes in a sedated whisper: "I will remember these weeping willows even if a different air fills my lungs."

Jaden Fong is a Senior at Santa Clara University. He won first place in the *Academy of American Poets Tamara Verga Poetry Prize*, and has work on *poets.org* (forthcoming) and in SCU's *The Owl*.



"Missing you more than I remember you" By: Geneviève Dumas

Geneviève Dumas is a Montreal screen printing artist.

Kwaidan

BY: IVANA TURUDIC

Lost in gloom, I stood in the dark hallway. It was one of the old Zagreb buildings like the ones I'd lived in during my studies. These hallways often had exciting patterns on the floors, almost lost in time and lost under people's feet. The halls had large windows but could be dark at night. I looked down at my feet, thinking of the mosaic of her face. That was what got me there: the work of art that was in my family for generations before we lost it. The Sculptor who made it used to borrow it for exhibitions until it got lost, somehow.

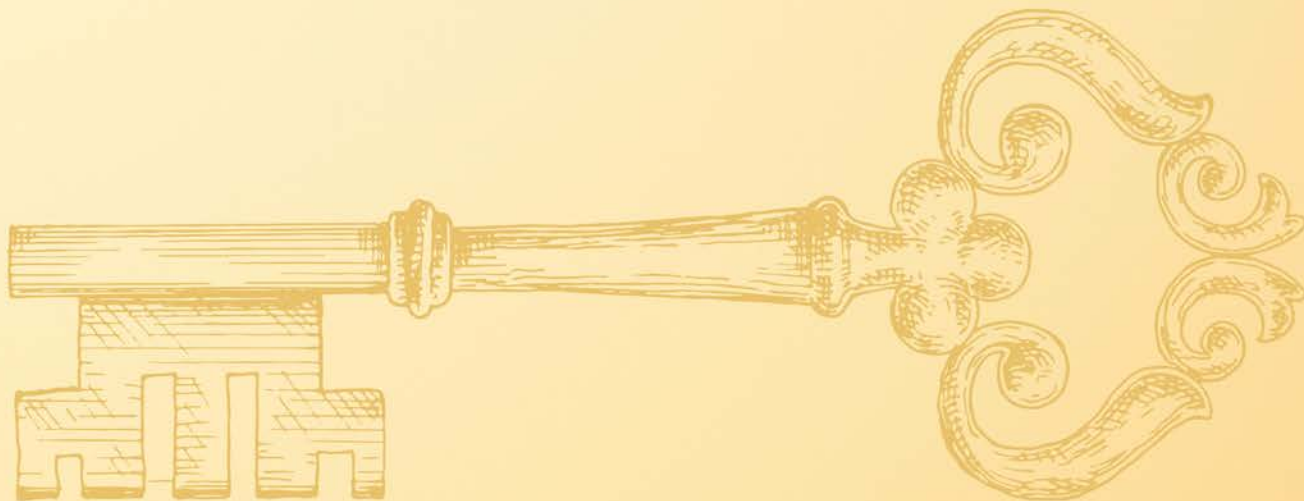
My mother's story began when she'd just got back to work from the summer holiday as a teacher. A book salesman brought an anthology of fine Croatian art. He opened the book right on the page with the mosaic showing my mother's late aunt, Bonifacia. It said "Mande's sister" below. Mande was my maternal grandmother from the island my mother spoke of with nostalgia and visit on the summer breaks. The Sculptor was spending summers in our village on the island, and he used to call my grandma, "Mande, olive's root." Should I have given another ring to these doors? My salvation might've been behind them.

My grandmother lost her beautiful sister, Bonifacia, when she was very young and tender. Either there was no penicillin, or it got to her too late; the memory of the event was vague after being told from knee to knee. What comforted my grandmother in her sadness, after a while, was a strange occurrence. My nonna, maternal grandmother, said it happened when she walked the fields with her other sister. A heartwarming light appeared but didn't speak. They somehow heard the message that Bonifacia is safe, and they shouldn't be sad about her death. This was what they both saw and heard, in a way. Years later, my nonna's father, my great grandfather, experienced something similar.

Everyone called him Meister Jure because he was a skilled labourer and was incredibly strong. He never made a fortune though he traveled the world seeking it. He went to China once and twice to the Americas. The story goes that he got back with a mysterious trunk called "bavul" that no one ever opened. But the point was he returned to his family after imprisonment in the Great Wall of China penniless and went back to work in the fields. He couldn't leave home. Especially not after he lost his son fighting for social justice in the Grand War. So, Meister Jure lost two of his children, Bonifacia and Ante. At some point, even before his strong body betrayed him, he got in the bed waiting for his death. He said he has seen the heartwarming light telling him his children are awaiting him. That was the story my mother told about Meister Jure, and it was why I started my own quest: to find the long-lost mosaic of Bonifacia.

The Sculptor died decades ago. I heard about the death of his daughter, a talented designer, and recently his ill son that lived in a convent. Finding the image of Bonifacia was quite a task; it could be easy to imagine why, given the circumstances. I knew her tender, profound features from family albums and her image from the cemetery photo on the family grave on the island. My features were somewhat similar. I always longed for the Sculptor's mosaic of her, and it seemed it was rightfully mine. When I faced the severe diagnosis, it wasn't just nostalgia driving me to get there. It was more of a vital force. I was hoping that I'd be able to buy that image back from the collector I met online once the door open. I genuinely hoped that the meeting with the heartwarming light would give me some directions on what to expect: the key.

Ivana Turudic's background is in linguistics, philosophy, literature, and disability advocacy. She never stopped herself from daydreaming and is currently exploring familial roots.





"Angels of the Earth" By: Chery Holmes
Chery Holmes is a Montreal-based artist with a passion for creating collage and mixed media work connected to the intricate world of the theatre.



PHOTOGRAPHY

"Haunted" By: Sherry Shahan

Sherry Shahan's artwork is widely published in magazines, newspapers, and literary journals. She earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and taught a creative writing course for UCLA Extension for 10 years.



The Saguaro Cactus Taco Contest

BY: AMY VAN DUZER

Dedicated To Nick and Lesley Cardasis.

Alberto chopped the onions, shallots, vegetables, meats, and lengua at five a.m. He then boiled the horchata mixes, coffees and heated the oil for the chips. The salsas verdes and rojos, pico de gallo, and guacamole had been freshly prepared the evening before. Smells of cilantro and pepper lingered in the air. The beans and albondigas boiled hot and ready on the stovetop. He opened the front door of the taqueria to accept the morning delivery of tortillas and tortas. The early morning dew christened the grass and buds of sunflowers in the plot next door. Small bluebirds lined the fences. He smoothed his moustache, poured himself a steaming cup of coffee, and took a look at the walk-in fridge to see what he was missing. Nada. The morning was complete, except for one thing...

He had seen the flyer three weeks before. The Annual Saguaro Cactus Taco Contest. First prize winner got a thousand bucks. It was enough to account for the loss the taqueria incurred during the pandemic and keep his family and him afloat. Alberto debated entering but was undecided. He paced back and forth, looking at the flyer every few moments. He had to tell his wife, Guadalupe, his decision that night. Esta noche, he whispered to himself. An incredible cook herself, he trusted her opinion of his dishes.

That night over coffee his large brown eyes beamed as he received Guadalupe's blessing. Why not? She asked, taking an ever-optimistic stance towards his dreams. That night in bed, he smiled. The pandemic would not shake him nor his familia.

At four a.m., the morning of the contest, he loaded his old chevy to drive to the far desert and pick the best saguaro cactus. Alberto's stomach tingled at the thought of the ribbon. He had prepared his mother's secret famous salsa recipe the night prior. He had a decent shot, he thought. Then he spotted it, the mirage that indicated the growth of the best saguaro. His great Uncle, Ernesto, had taught him to look for this as a child when they went out picking. Inside the haze, there looked to be an outline of a man, similar to the stature of his uncle, the one who had died the year prior. As he approached, the face became clearer. His uncle appeared in Wranglers and a hat just as the day he died, right before his chevy. Alberto gulped and fumbled for his phone, snapping a picture. The photo revealed nothing but a grey fuzzy screen. He stood there in the hot sun, mouth agape for minutes, unable to process what he had seen in the mirage.

Alberto reminded himself of his chore, nervously took some water, and readied himself to find the cactus. On the trek, he heard a step behind him, a crunch on the sand. He turned to look. Nothing. The saguaro bloomed full on the ridge before him. He gathered ten large pieces and headed back to the taqueria. His phone buzzed, Guadalupe. Buena suerte, read the text. As he descended the plateau toward the restaurant, he checked his review mirror one last time for Ernesto's mirage. Alberto laughed and thanked God. He knew he wasn't alone when entering the contest this year.

Amy Van Duzer is a lifelong writer and MFA student at Mt. Saint Mary's College in Los Angeles. She is most inspired by her travels as well as other poets and lyricists. She has published pieces in magazines such as *Everyday Fiction* and *Deep Overstock*.



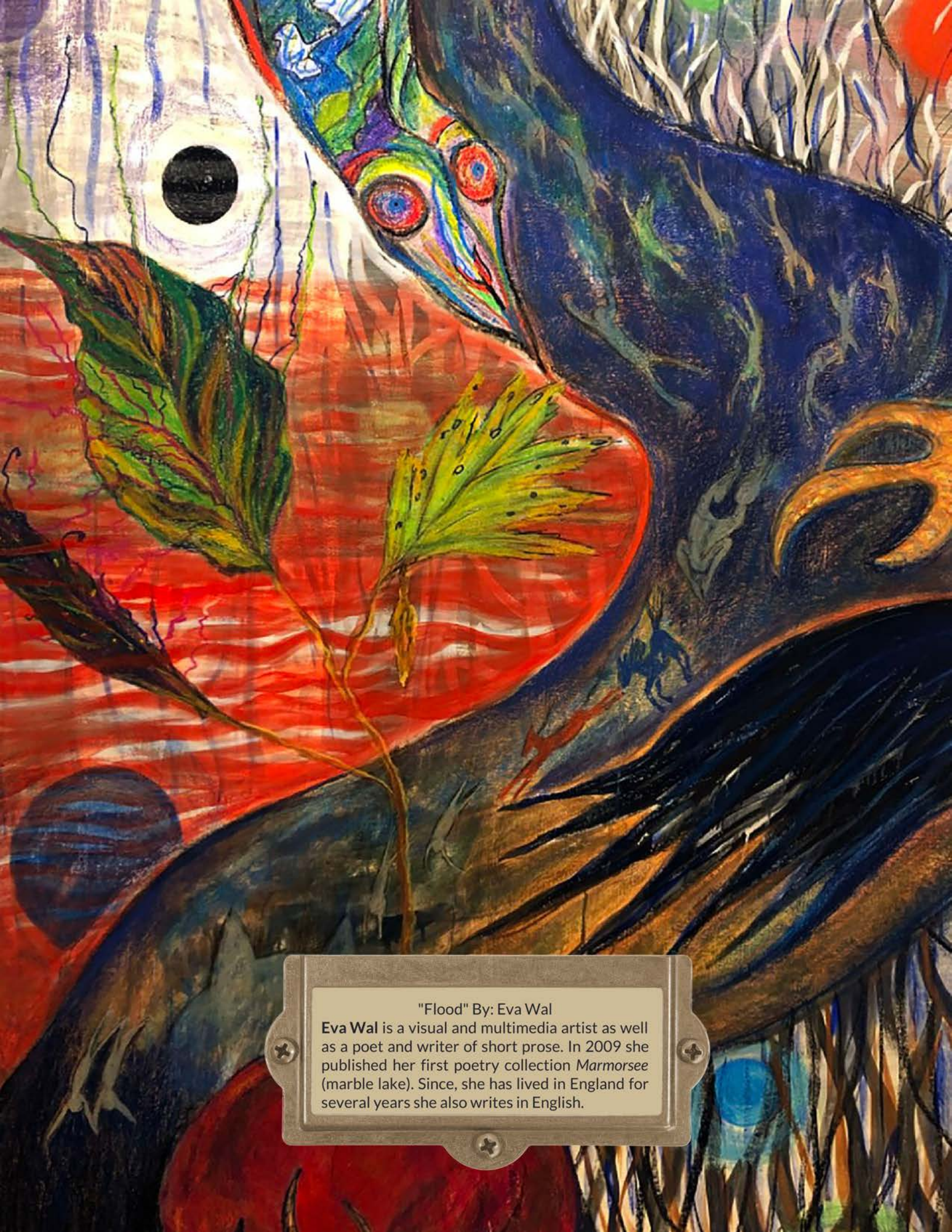


PHOTOGRAPHY

O Grata By: Guilherme Bergamini

Guilherme Bergamini is Brazilian photographic reporter and visual artist,. He graduated in Journalism. His works of the art engage the dialogue between memory and social political criticism. He believes in photography as the aesthetic potential and transforming agent of society. Awarded in national and international competitions, Bergamini participated in collective exhibitions in 46 countries.





"Flood" By: Eva Wal

Eva Wal is a visual and multimedia artist as well as a poet and writer of short prose. In 2009 she published her first poetry collection *Marmorsee* (marble lake). Since, she has lived in England for several years she also writes in English.

The Dungeons

BY: MICHELLE FULMER

I mow them down. And it doesn't have to be for anything more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could even be if they're in the right place, but I change my mind. Second chances? Hardly. I must hurry, and it's easier to delete them from my life than go back. They drag me down.

I watch as they go by in front of me. There's one in the wrong place. Doom. Gone. I don't have time for these tiny annoyances. They must behave, straighten up, and fly right. They know where they're supposed to be. They know what will happen if they don't line up in the right order. What's so hard about listening to me?

They're like pecking chickens wandering all over in front of me. Chickens aren't particularly bright and end up where they shouldn't be, just like these. They're like a school of fish swimming in tandem. One on the edge slips out and is eaten by a bigger fish. I am the bigger fish snapping up the wayward fingerlings.

They impede my progress. They take up my time. Annoying things that try to make me feel stupid. I won't tolerate it for a minute. I am a mastermind. I must push forward and get my job done. And if that means sending millions to the dungeon, so be it. All it takes is the push of a button. I use two to dispense with these things. One, I think, just goes to a dungeon, the other to darkness.

But they haunt my dreams. Little things, running from my fingers, getting snapped up and flung away. I should visit that dungeon and see what really goes on there. Do they suffer? Do they just languish? Do they try to get into the right formations, hoping to get released?

I'd never really thought of that. What should my dungeon do? Obviously, these little things violate many rules. I'm certain they are told what to do when they are brought in. Did they not listen? Or do they just not listen to me? My mind and intentions are clear. Yet, some choose to ignore my directions.

Just like all supreme beings, my hands carry out the commands of my brain. I have information that must get out and these characters are in the way. They can't just be innocent victims. Sometimes, they appear in my workspace randomly. My work is fine, then suddenly a blemish. I must teach them a lesson so that the others who follow will stop. But they never seem to stop. Mistake after mistake.

Tsk. Tsk. But it's easy enough to poke them out of existence. I just have to stop everything I'm trying to do and find the wayward one. But usually, they run in packs. If I find one, I find several. But what is infuriating is when they run through my work and leave errors where I had already looked. Bands of coyotes chasing and eating my precious rabbits.

I must devise another way. Take them out several at a time instead of the tedious work of punishing individuals. I don't want to waste any more of my time training them. They know the basics and if they'd just heed my fingers' directions, we'd all be a beautiful orchestra. My work would get done and only the rebellious ones would be punished.

Ah, but there's the rub. I've never been able to work without those little buggers jumping out of line. They mock me. Sometimes it's by disorderly conduct, others by refusing to instantly get into production. They make me wait for them. My thoughts pause altogether and there's a standoff. Them, hiding from my fingers, and me trying to get us all back on track. Yes, I desperately need to keep the dungeons.

An acquaintance once told me I should take it easy on my minions. It's not their fault that somehow, I am the one making errors. Could you imagine? Me? Steady as you go, me? I don't make mistakes. I think about it, my fingers direct it, and my orchestra plays. It's those subordinates. They're at fault.

My creation—my vast creation, months of work—how many of those characters left their marks on my work? They mock me. They disturb me. Frantically, I search for them but they're hiding in plain sight sometimes.

My work must be perfect. Critics will see it and notice the errors. Like an artist's canvas that has been reused, lumps and brush marks will show up. And these things stick out like a sore thumb. Things I didn't do. My creation is perfect, it's just the workers who don't care to listen to directions.

Now someone is watching me work, seeing the glory of my design. Unfortunately, the characters are misbehaving and I must send some to the dungeon.

"What do you mean, my fingers aren't directing the workers properly? My brain and fingers are one. It is the fault of the rebels."

Five more mutineers move into the dungeon.

"What do you mean, have I ever taken a typing class? What does that have to do with the wayward characters?"

The visitor laughs. "You can't type worth beans."

"Type? I am orchestrating the perfect novel. Those characters aren't falling in line."

"You delete as much as you keep. Your fingers are the culprit. Take a typing class and save your letters," says the visitor.

"But those little things mock me," I cry.

They do, don't they? I look at my keyboard. The backspace and delete keys have worn spots on them. Hmm. I was sending all these characters to a dungeon thinking they were at fault when all this time it was me.

I'm going to have to talk to a Word nerd and find out where they go.

Michelle Fulmer is an emerging author of a fictional drama series, short stories, and poetry, native to Central Florida, RPLA judge, and founder of a writers' critique group.



"Instinct" By: Lemuel Gandara

Lemuel Gandara is a visual artist dedicated and cinema with works exhibited in Brazil and abroad. Doctor of Literature and a researcher of the inter-artistic receptive processes with an extensive scientific and critic production.

Red Napkin

BY: THOMAS ELSON

The dinner—turkey, latkes, dressing, gravy, and my wife’s cauliflower and black olive salad—impeccably set upon a red tablecloth with white lace placemats reminded me of the red cassock and white lace chasuble I had worn decades before as an altar boy at midnight Mass.

Resting on the lace placemats were red napkins and flatware in the exact order my great-grandmother had dictated generations earlier. After dinner, I placed my fork upside down in the far rim of the dinner plate, wiped my lips with the red dinner napkin, folded it to cover the stain, then nestled it back on my lap. It was my final holiday dinner—only I knew it. Others would know soon, but not today.

Not my grandson, Matty, whose diapers I had changed and watched grow along the Pacific coast. Matty, my brilliant little boy, now twenty-six, an electrical engineer, soon to be married.

Not my grandson, Nicky, so like me no mirror was needed, same walk, same shoulders, hands, and head—an artist with an entire orchestra in his heart.

Not my daughter, the bright light of my life, more like me than she wanted; the one who keeps my spirit alive.

Not my wife—whose glow transformed my life into technicolor—a gifted teacher with a beautiful heart, in front of whom former third graders, now mothers, doctors, and teachers, morph into eight-year-olds bouncing with joy; and six feet three-inch men became little boys once again, looking for her approval.

My family did not know. Only I knew. I knew I was being devoured from within by something that left blood on my red dinner napkin.

Thomas Elson's stories have been published in numerous venues, including *Ellipsis*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Flash Frontier*, *Short Édition*, *Journal of Expressive Writing*, *Dead Mule School*, *The Selkie*, *The New Ulster*, *The Lampeter*, and *Adelaide*. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.



"Ghost" By: Catalina Aranguren

Catalina Aranguren is a latinx woman, immigrant, artist, curator, community organizer, and social justice warrior. Her work is in private collections across the United States, Australia, Italy, Colombia, and Chile, among others.



"In my living room" By: Catalina Aranguren

The Last Dinner

BY: JOAN MAZZA

Two days apart at the end of September-- my doctor's birthday and his girlfriend's. Annually, I made a dinner with their favorites: veal cutlets, artichoke hearts and mushrooms, a pasta dish. The doctor's wife never voiced

her preferences, but because his mother wouldn't eat garlic, cheese, or onions, I cooked a separate meal for her. The child was invited, too, a boy who was the girlfriend's son from her former marriage, adopted by the doctor and his wife.

I didn't know this dinner would be our last together as I cooked and set the table. I called to tell the doctor my great-aunt would be joining us: my grandmother's sister, who lived near. My father's age, the doctor's

mother's age. No. Don't include her. We won't be able to talk in front of her, he ruled. I hadn't asked for his permission, but offered that info as a courtesy to let him know. Your mother's coming. We can't say certain things

in front of her, my feeble protest. When had he ever taken my NO for an answer? Don't include her. I didn't. But I never cooked for him again, or for his extended family, cousins, in-laws, who'd all eaten at my table.

The doctor was my psychiatrist. He'd often warned me how people took advantage, said I was gullible, a pushover, a mark. Diagnosis correct. Insight bloomed on that day, though they came for dinner and we sang Happy Birthday.

Joan Mazza worked as a microbiologist and taught workshops on understanding dreams and nightmares. She authored six psychology books and her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Nation*.

Slug

BY: KALI PASZKIEWICZ

Shame is a black wax:

unyielding and cumbersome
in its misery. It exudes from my
skin, leaving a trail

behind me as I walk,
like a slug leaving
slime in its wake.

I wanted to be defiled. I wanted to hurt
so deeply, I would never be numb

again. Instead, I have receded
into my wax membrane, digging
deeper into a muddy punji pit.

But he was there to dig me up,
my mucus thick on his calloused palms.
He thought he had me.

He is drawing on my wax shell
with fingers like salt, writing sigils
and spells.

But what he does not know is this:
the wax is only a cocoon, and I
am torsioning,
transmuting,
beneath his burning scripture.

Photography By: Mpumelelo Buthelezi
Mpumelelo Buthelezi's camera has become an ally in the fight for sustainable change.







"Capitalistic Soul is Born" By: Maxim Shishov
Maxim Shishov is an artist of Happenstance Art Gallery (UK) and a member of Artists Trade Union of Russia.

"Caeiro" By: Carla Andrade

Carla Andrade is a visual artist with a degree in Audio-visual Studies, Philosophy, and an MA in Artists' Film and Moving Images at the Goldsmiths University of London. This intersection between visual means of expression and a field closer to reflection is precisely one of the defining aspects of her work.







"Caeiro" By: Carla Andrade

Michelle listens to shipping forecasts to help her sleep

BY: DANIEL PATON

The crackling music of an era gone by signals the start before the well-spoken broadcaster comes to guide her through the weather and water predictions.

Tyne Dogger—Northeast 5 to Gale 8, occasionally 9 in the North. Rain dying out. Mainly good.

When she had work to get up for every morning she found herself naturally crashing in the evening, but without that routine the days had got shorter and the nights longer. It felt like there was no need to sleep, and no reason to get up.

Dover Wight—Southeast 5 or 6, veering East later. Rain or showers. Moderate or good.

The words come from the tinny speaker of her phone on her bedside table; that reassuring white voice of her past always there to help in the paling light between days.

Portland—Southwest 4, occasionally veering to West 5 throughout. Just let go. Fair at first, Rain expected later. Occasionally poor.

It brings her back to a time when she was a student struggling with sleep, struggling with everything really. Then, like now, she found solace in these calm reports, their quiet authority, and consistency; the captured moments in time.

Lundy Fastnet—South East 7 to Gale 8. There's no point. Squally Showers. Poor.

With her eyes tightly closed she pictures boats bobbing on choppy seas in black and white, just like everything was back in the day, before the complicated introduction of colour.

South Utshire—North East 4 or 5 veering worse gradually like your pointless life to South 6 or 7. Occasional showers. Moderate fog patches.

The unconscious mind is vulnerable, but maybe it's more alert to some of the things surrounding its shell.

Shannon—North or Northwest 6 to 8, occasionally 9 in the South. Heavy showers. You've got nothing.

She's gone beyond now, somewhere on the black and white sea, the last lines of the report projecting across the clouds. How much really seeps into the sleeping mind? How much gets through switched-off ears? What seeds are planted in the dead of night?

Michelle—West 10. You're alone. Cyclone coming, disaster. Fog. End it.

Daniel Paton is a young writer who has completed both a BA and MA in Creative Writing. He has had short fiction published in several anthologies and literary magazines.

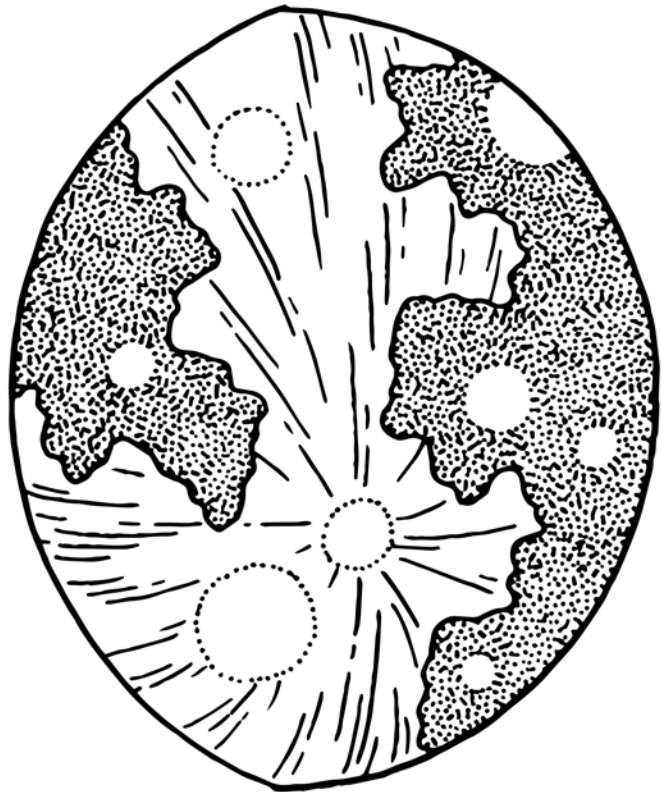


"Smoke and mirrors" By: Beatriz Dominguez Alemán
Beatriz Dominguez Alemán is a Chilean- Puerto Rican photographer and Anthropologist who explores the themes of intersectional discrimination, gender and racism through the art of edited photography.

Red Moon Promised: A Haunting Vision

BY: YUAN CHANGMING

Perhaps in a dream or delirium, but
He did clearly see an enlarged furry beetle
Green-backed, yellow-bellied, flat-bodied
Long neck reaching up like a cobra
Head looking the same as his first-class &
Sex-mate named Red Moon from
A shanghai university, as she kept
Shouting at him high above her voice
Definitely in complaint or protest
But he just cannot hear a single sound
Like a wounded gull lost in darkness
Listening hard to a whale screaming to sky



Yuan Changming hails with Allen Yuan from poetrypacific.blogspot.ca. Credits include Pushcart nominations and appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17)* & *BestNewPoemsOnline*, among others. Recently, Yuan served on the jury for Canada's 44th *National Magazine Awards* (poetry category).



The Three Deaths of Alice Dawn

BY: KATE KOCH

Alice died first when she tip-toed down the weedy hill, the balls of her feet bloody from shards of clamshell and sand burrs, slick and scarlet against the stone steps, grey slate. Her husband, waiting at the beach below, his face red beside his crude firepit, Alice's: cold, already almost blue.

Alice died next when the box arrived. White oak, her favorite, to contrast the red in her teeth—not that he could see them. The fat and flesh stripped from the tips of her fingers, which might be resting on the lakefloor, or in the belly of a muskie. Orange fins flitting through her remains, a color he would never wear, which killed Alice again.

Alice died last at lunch, with country club tablecloths separating two women whose plates of coq au vin, overcooked and dry, didn't remind them of Alice's favorite meal. Nor did the English Daisy centerpieces call to mind their friend's small garden, not far from the beach where some of her bones still hid beneath the sand. As they discussed the food and the flowers, Alice took her final stinging breath, and was no more.

Kate Koch is an internationally published poet, short fiction author, and screenwriter. She has synesthesia, so every sound flashes as a color before her eyes; her vivid condition has inspired her work at Harvard Extension School, where she is pursuing her ALM in Creative Writing and Literature.

All things poet

BY: CLARA BURGHELEA

What I found in the body of the first lover was neither lust, nor feelings eating their way out. I had spent the summer calling down love, mind swinging open in the dark, senses rapt in awe, before he took me to his friend's apartment and gently whispered into my ear that a queen deserved a moon of her own. The sound of the October rain lapped at the windows, and sadness treaded the dark room. His outstretched arm, his oversized heart, the sharp pain between my legs, the bedsheets reeking of mothballs, yes, memory is a slipping thing, no purpling moon of my own lit the face, no crown rested on the nightstand, when he left for the third time, I had corners of myself to crawl to, a sigh from here to wherever.

Salt and Gold

BY: MIA AMORE DEL BANDO

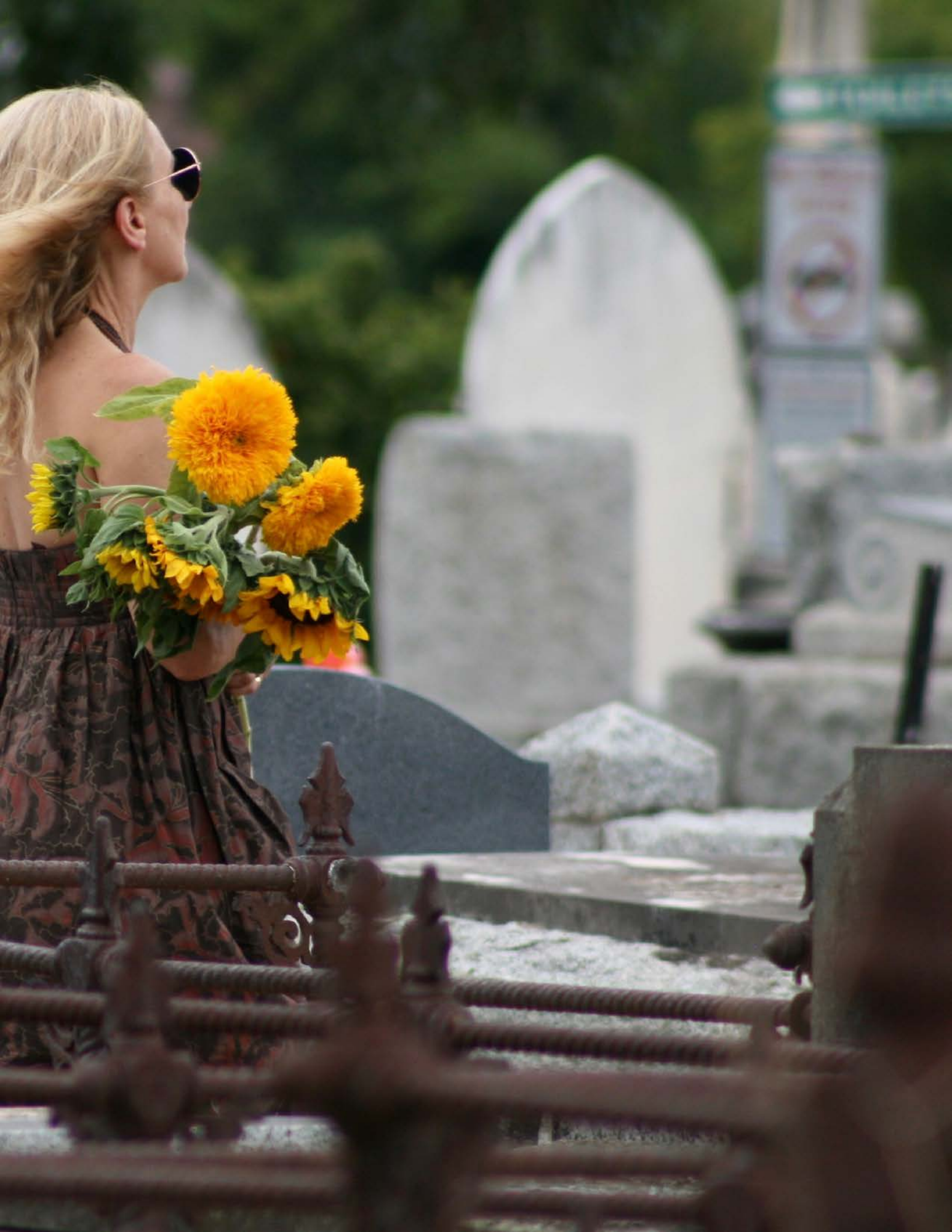
Texas used to petrify me
Struck me into
A salt pillar of a woman
At the hands of a man
Shackled in the corner
Woven fists and raging tantrums
Dents into drywall, dried blood creased in his knuckles
Slamming doors, almost falling off their hinges
Muffled fights between walls
Resentment and childhood trauma
Wedged into the cracks of our one bedroom
My plane skidded in the belly of
The Lone Star State
Nearly a year later
Work itinerary challenging my patience
I peeled off the residue of
That weak girl
Who flattened herself
Under the bedsheets
Shaken up by the volume of his voice
The grit in his teeth
The sweet girl
Who kissed the bruises
He gifted
Mended every broken promise
Swept up shattered kitchen dishes
Nursed the cuts on his fingers
The same nails that dug into my scalp
I cut off the string he bound me in
Unraveled quickly
In the means of escape
Headed west, homeless and defeated
I am back
My chest is plated gold
My hands are ivory
The sword strapped to my hip
I raise the blade, striking that salt pillar woman
She kneels over, dead
He has lost all power
I am not salt
I am gold
And undefeated
His hands will never touch me again

Mia Amore Del Bando is a flight attendant. Her work featured in *The Art of Everyone, You Might Need To Hear This*, and *Wingless Dreamer*. She is a faithful friend, difficult daughter, and selfish lover.

"Sunny Graves" By: Richard Moore

Richard Moore says that in the emotional backwash of two parents passing, they began to haunt the sprawling local graveyard . . . trawling through memories, admiring the architecture, and hunting for signs. Rocks are spirits and sunflowers beacons of hope.







"Pod" By: Catalina Aranguren

Campfire Story

BY: JAMIE SPEED

We are made for small town living
waving at passersby on slow days
as we lick the salt from off our lips
like settlers longing
for a familiar taste

We explore the changing pattern
of waves negotiating
with small islands and sandbars
we trust our feet
to rocky edges, building
fires that blaze for shore lunch
summer nipping at our lips
we memorize each fish
the slip of the spine beneath the blade
is easy in our hands as we adjust
our eyes to night in this place
where the purplest trees are
just burnt shadows to guide
our oars like ghosts through the dark

We learn to handle gravel roads
and thick air no matter how far we travel
the neighbouring towns are all on fire
and we're close enough to smell it
on our own unwavering will
to cling like smoke's intention
we want to embrace being uncomfortable
feeling unforgettable
singing songs around flames that grow
into the rhythm of tongues
and build into licks, a nibble, the shiver
of a zipper closing our tent
the campfire still burning
in our mouths





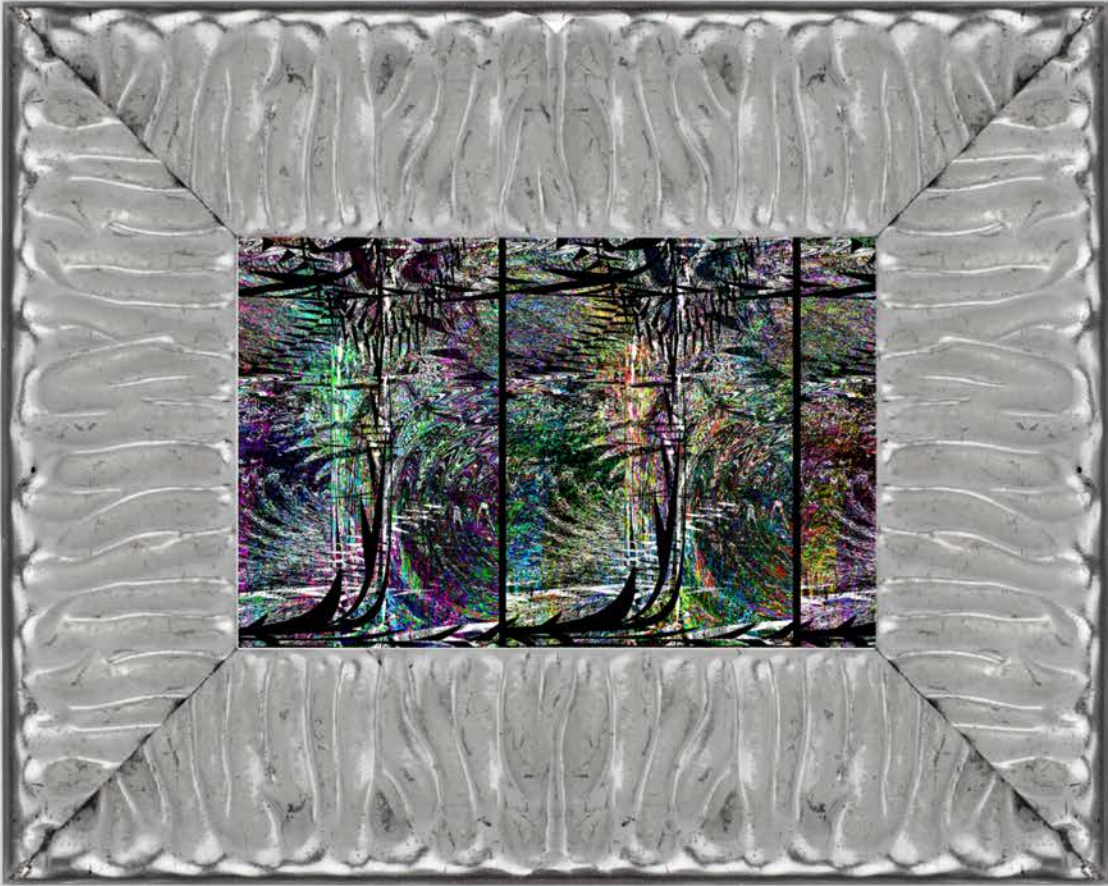
"Couch" By: Guilherme Bergamini

Shiver

BY: PETER ANDERSON

Air was getting in but where we didn't know. Old towels under the doors didn't stop the whistling. The windows were cold to the touch and rattled in the wind but had no visible cracks. We wrote messages with our breath, haikus that faded before they were finished. Baseboards were lined with frost, sockets plugged with foam, plywood nailed over the fireplace and still, the furnace banged like a caged beast dreaming of the wild. Nothing quieted our chattering thoughts. We poured steaming liquid but couldn't take a step without spilling. We burrowed under skins and hides like children but it didn't stop our shaking. We put our mouths to each other's spines to warm the cervical vertebrae with what hot air was left, the way our Italian mime teacher had taught us. He'd survived a night in the mountains during the war, but now he was dead and we were still cold. *Lucky to have each other*, we said. But our words were so muffled we couldn't be sure what it was we had said.

Peter Anderson lives in Vancouver. His recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Unbroken*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Sublunary Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, and *MoonPark Review*. His plays are available at the Canadian Play Outlet.



"Death of the scarecrow" & "Laughing shroud" By: Edward Michael Supranowicz
Edward Michael Supranowicz has had artwork, poems, and short stories published in the US and other countries.



Fear

BY: JOAN MCNERNEY

Sneaks under shadows lurking
in corners ready to rear its head
folded in neat lab reports charting
white blood cells over edge running wild.

Or hiding along icy roads when
day ends with sea gulls squalling
through steel grey skies.

Brake belts wheeze and whine
snapping apart careening us
against the long cold night.

Official white envelopes stuffed with
subpoenas wait at the mailbox.
Memories of hot words burning
razor blades slash across our faces.

Fires leap from rooms where twisted
wires dance like miniature skeletons.
We stand apart inhaling this mean
air choking on our own breath.

Joan McNerney's poetry is found in many literary magazines. She has four Best of the Net nominations. Her latest title, *Love poems for Michael* is available on Amazon.



"Grackle Reflection" By: Jack M. Freedman

Jack M. Freedman is a poet and spoken word artist from Staten Island, NY



Rite of Passage

BY: KATE KOCH

The two entrances to St. Croix Savannah stand on the verge of secrecy. A barbed-wire gate marks the first, hidden in plain sight along the busiest stretch of County Road 95, where it's already too dangerous to stop. The second is nestled away in a housing development, just far enough from civilization to feel charming. Start there.

You'll want to turn right at the orange house, from there you can't tell where the backyard ends and the Savannah begins. Sneak between the fenceposts—past the sign about invasive species, and Creeping Charlie—and relish every step as the sun-scalded stalks crunch underfoot. Walk far enough and you'll see the Osprey nest, which is nice, but not why you're here. The three chicks will crane their necks towards you as you pass, their black eyes bright against the stars.

You might even see the cliff soon, or the shadowy bear dens, long absent now, save the errant tooth or claw.

But, if you're here for It, you'll wander on until you find the blue station wagon, overturned in the dry ravine. You already know the driver's-side door has been eaten away by bullets from nineteen-seventy-something, and a different animal ripped the rubber from the tires.

You'll see the outer edge of Its nest first, bathed in shades of red. Then, the blinking from the backseat, the steering wheel, the glove compartment.

You told yourself you wouldn't turn back, so when your heartbeat is hardly a whisper, you climb in. And the moon crawls behind the trees when It locks the door behind you.







Art By: Kateryna Bortsova

Kateryna Bortsova is a painter – graphic artist with BFA in graphic arts and MFA. Works of Kateryna took part in many international exhibitions (Taiwan, Moscow, Munich, Spain, Italy, USA etc.).

On days when I am a mother

BY: CLARA BURGHELEA

I no longer carry a child on my hip, and actually, wash my hair,
I even enjoy coffee dates with other mothers, where I swear,
we either talk about our sex lives or parenting. Both, a matter
of strict coordination. I should know paradise, it smells of
tantrum-free afternoons, except this is my limbo, where I am
caught between longing a foreign body's weight against mine,
the open-throated sky above, no misplaced breath of motherhood,
and Thermomixing my way into the cool evenings. There is language
lapping at my feet, the heady scent of sea in my nostrils, all folded
nicely inside my poems that won't bend to the burden of the mundane,
yet cut out all the things -people, chores, body parts- that no longer
serve me. Outside these shredded bits of the day, the city moans and swirls,

heavy as a turtle sunning itself, the hefty gifts of July pressing its temples,
how do I trawl my way back to myself under these residues of fatal patience?

Clara Burghilea is a Romanian-born poet with an MFA in Poetry from Adelphi University. She is the Review Editor of *Ezra*, An Online Journal of Translation.

I'm Shining Your Crown

BY: MICHELLE FULMER

The Lord has called me away from this place,
to Heaven I'm lifted, been saved by His grace.
I know that you miss me, your heart's breaking too,
but I'm up here with Jesus, and I still love you.

It's hard now to see it, when you're sad and blue,
but this is my happy time and you'll see it too!
My mansion was ready and so was my soul.
Keep looking to God now, and keep your life whole.

My sad, little baby, He was ready for me.
My time here has ended, my soul's been set free.
I'll be up here waiting as your world spins 'round.
I'm building your mansion. I'm shining your crown.

The Lord will tell me about all your prayers.
Look always to Him, Love, I know He cares.
Don't think that I've left you, I am still near.
I'm waiting with Jesus until you get here.

I'm teaching the angels all of your songs.
As you are singing, we're singing along.
Live for the Lord and keep looking above.
I'm setting those jewels in your crown of love.

My sad, little baby, He was ready for me.
My time here has ended, my soul's been set free.
I'll be up here waiting as your world spins 'round.
I'm building your mansion. I'm shining your crown.

Michelle Fulmer emerging author of a fictional drama series, short stories, and poetry, native to Central Florida, RPLA judge, and founder of a writers' critique group.

Swing Creek Road

BY: THOMAS ELSON

When a Ninnescah County road worker discovered me, I was buried under leaves, hidden in a grove of trees, two miles west of a country restaurant where my husband and I shared our last meal. The parking lot where I left my car is now inhabited by weeds, potholes, and mud flung from tractors.

Within the hour, surrounded by sheriff officers, state investigators, and the county coroner, strangers in blue uniforms photographed, identified, tagged, and stripped me. They scraped my fingernails. Analyzed my skin. Examined my scalp. Studied my hair. Ripped, poked, dissected, and mauled my body. Forensics not only adopted me, they owned me.

And, within that act of ownership, they constructed a backstory based on the caliber of the four shells found near my body, the angle of the bullets' penetration, the ambient temperature, contents of my stomach, witnesses to our dinner, and myriad other elements which they laid out with such agility the only thing the county attorney had to say was "Yes".

Within a week, my husband was questioned and arrested. Within ninety days, he was tried by my old boss—the county attorney, convicted by a jury, and a life sentence imposed by the judge. Within a year, the state supreme court unanimously affirmed the lower court's decision.

Were I able, I would have told them: Three hours after my final dinner with my husband, the same county attorney who prosecuted the case pressed a pistol to my head, and pulled the trigger. His right hand jerked. The second bullet grazed my skull. He corrected himself. Pressed the gun under my chin. The third and fourth bullets exited my skull. Then he hauled me inside the grove of trees.

After which, the county attorney drove to my family's lakeside cabin where he and I frequented during our assignments and returned the pistol to the nightstand on my husband's side of the bed.

"Woods Path at Night" By: David Bromley

David Bromley is a gallery photographer and teaching artist, on the roster for the Virginia Commission for the Arts.







"Window Man" By: Guilherme Bergamini

THE HUSBANDS

BY: JOE BAUMANN

The husbands came in the middle of the night, their bodies tar-black and blending into the thick opaque darkness. If not for their eyes, shimmering like a precious red beryl, we wouldn't have seen them slinking down alleys, crouched between condos, prowling around fenced houses. They didn't speak, and their bodies barely let out any noise as they scuffled across grass and asphalt and concrete. Their hands were fingerless, their wedding rings long gone; yet we recognized them when we caught them peering into our kitchen and bedroom windows, staring up at our balconies, hovering at our patio doors. Even though their faces were nightmarish in their intangibility, we saw them for who they were. When they raised their hands in greeting, either waving at us with childish joy or signaling that they meant no harm—who could tell which?—we dropped the wine glasses we'd been rinsing, the books we'd been reading, the paperwork we'd been signing. We ignored our televisions, our children calling for glasses of water, our cats patrolling basements for mice. We ran to our husbands, flinging ourselves toward them, wanting to hold them as tight as we could.

But we couldn't.

They were air, they were vapor. They were porous shadows that we stepped right through as if cutting through spiderwebs. We felt them pass through us, our cells crossing theirs and coming out unscathed, unchanged, cold, and sorrowful. We tried a second time, rushing them with outstretched arms. A third, moving slower this time as if wading in waist-deep water. We held out our fingertips, which shot through their chests. We could feel where their black hearts sat behind their black sternums, flat and unmoving stones. We tried caressing them, squeezing them, stroking them, as if we could transfer our moving light to their dark inertia. Our hands began to ache, so we pulled our fingers back.

The husbands stared at us, their carnelian eyes like spotlights; they gave our hands, noses, and arms a scarlet glow like we'd been dipped in blood. If they had mouths, we could not see them. If they had voices, we could not hear them. We stood facing them: caught on our fire escapes, standing in our doorways, framed by our double-hung windows. We wanted to bring them inside but we knew, somehow, that the dining room chandeliers and the living room fixtures and the ceiling fans would wipe them away, the illuminations scrubbing them out of existence.

"Please stay here," we said. "Please don't go away." But then we didn't know what to do. Our feet were cold. Our backs were sweaty. Our skin itched at the assault of mosquitos and gnats. Our stomachs flopped at the prospect of saying goodbye again when the things we'd lost were so near.

Their eyes blinked, then vanished; they were covering them with their hands. We didn't ask why; we understood. Without those eyes, those red diamonds, those garnet circles, they were simply shadows. They could move undetected into corners, under awnings, out of the reach of our floodlights and lampposts. And that's what they did when we nodded; our eyes teary, our bodies freshly exhausted but our minds understanding. They moved away, back toward wherever they'd come from, and we let them because we could not tell them to do what we knew they must. We managed, at least, to wave goodbye, hugging ourselves for warmth and touch, even our own. Then we watched for a few minutes, a few hours, days, the sun rising and falling, light blooming and receding, darkness flipping on and off, our bodies growling with hunger and thirst and numb electricity. We watched until we were sure the husbands had left for good this time, to someplace where we could not see them. Finally, we turned and went back inside to dry our wet, bloodshot eyes.

Joe Baumann teaches in St. Charles Missouri. His work appears in *Passages North*, *Sou'wester*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and other magazines.





Birthday Candles

BY: JOHN MAURER

My mother has baked me two dozen birthday cakes
I remember the one that she didn't, the one I made
Pulled from the oven and immediately dropped on the floor

I remember when she would slide my meals under my bedroom door
When her ten year old son wanted to just not exist
To not spend another day getting showered in the angry whiskey riddled screams of my father

I remember every detail about my lovers' life story, as much as my own
I can't remember the faces or names of any of the women before her
It might explain all the strangers who throw drinks in my face

Strangers to me who I am not a stranger to
Walking through my life like the peeling lead paint of a haunted house
The ghosts are there, I just can't see them.

John Maurer is a 26-year-old writer from Pittsburgh who writes fiction, poetry, and everything in-between. His work always strives to portray that what is true is beautiful. He has been previously published in *Claudius Speaks*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Thought Catalog*, and others.



"Smolder" By: Robert Matejcek

"Reagent Bottle with Dried Flowers" By: Robert Matejcek

Robert Matejcek obtained his BA in Art, Magna Cum Laude, from Fontbonne University in St. Louis, Missouri. Robert is originally from North Dakota, but currently resides with his wife, with their dogs and guinea pigs, in Southeast, Colorado.



"Botanical Abstractions" By: Robert Matejcek

I planted my garden

BY: JOAN MCNERNEY

on the wrong side
of moon forgetting
tides of ocean
lunar wax wane

only madness
was cultivated
there underground
tubular roots
corpulent veins

flowers called
despair gave off
a single fruit...

I ate it
my laughter
becoming harsh
my eyes grew
oblique.





Stranger by the Lake

BY: EILEEN SATERIALE

An ominous black, shrouded figure
walks the barren banks of the lake.
It is a cold day in upstate New York
along the shores of Lake Oswego.
Brown, paper-like leaves blow off
the trees into the silvery water.
The nearby tourist town
has been abandoned for months.
Baseball fans have retreated
to their winter abodes.
Nobody is seen engaging in
swimming or boating activities.
The stranger walks slowly,
with a ghost-like aura,
surveying the bare ground
and leafless trees.
I follow the stranger.
The town and the lake
are behind as I follow.
I become part of the lake
and the stranger disappears.

Eileen Sateriale lives with her husband in Massachusetts. She is the mother of two grown daughters. She has had poetry, short stories, and non-fiction articles published in print and online media.



PHOTOGRAPHY

"Trees and Water" By: William Hicks

William D. Hicks lives in Illinois. He is not related to the famous comedian Bill Hicks (though he's just as funny).. Hicks will someday publish his memoirs, but they will be about Bill Hicks' life. His writing/artwork appears in numerous magazines.



Untitled

BY: IVAN DE MONBRISON

A land without fire.
All dead
All of them.
You too.
The end and the beginning.
Past and present.
Just one bird in the garden.
Just one body too.

Cloud hanging on the window.
The sound of your heart.
My mom calls me.
I have no name.
Not an hour, not a day, not a year lost.
The wall falls but my hand remains in the air.

Ivan de Monbrison is a poet living in Paris born in 1969.



A Haunting Yarn

BY: ELLEN HOLDER

Katie fingered the bottle of sleeping pills, thinking of a deadly and blissful sleep. No more worries or depression. She had known torment for so long, she was plain worn out from it. Sleep was elusive, and when it came, it often brought terrifying nightmares.

Her phone rang and she felt too tired to answer it. What was the use? She sighed and reached for the phone. "Yes?"

"Did I wake you?" It was her older sister, Arlene.

"No, I'm still up. I need to sleep, I guess." She was ambivalent about everything.

"Well, I'm worried about you. I'm afraid you're really depressed."

"Ya think?"

"Do you have to be so snarky? I'm trying to help you."

There was a pause. Katie hoped Arlene's useless advice was over, but no.

"Remember, if you start having suicidal thoughts, that's when you need to call for help."

"That's almost funny." Katie succumbed to a bitter chuckle. "When a person is suicidal, that's the least likely time they would call for help."

"Oh God, are you thinking of killing yourself?" Arlene's voice was shaking. "I'm coming over, I'm calling 911!"

"Please don't. I didn't mean to alarm you. Just . . . leave me alone, ok? You can call me tomorrow." Katie disconnected the phone and sat like a statue, with no incentive to move, or even breathe.

As the evening grew colder, she moved to the couch and wrapped herself in an old afghan.

She made it years earlier. Feeling the soft, fuzzy texture, she remembered her early fascination with yarn and crocheting.

While Katie's mother was at work, Miss Ruby took care of Katie. Day after day, Miss Ruby crocheted while the toddler longed to get her hands on it. "Me do, me do," she begged.

She was always told, "No baby, this is too hard for you." But, at every opportunity, Katie played with the old lady's needlework, tangling and ruining the yarn.

She also discovered Miss Ruby's stash: an open box of carefully wound balls of yarn. Katie made a shambles of it all. Time and again, Miss Ruby scolded her, and Katie's mother demanded that she stay away from the box. Katie dreaded all the scolding; even Arlene was mad at her. So, she made up her mind never to touch the yarn again.

One night she woke in her crib across the room from Arlene's bed and the troublesome box of yarn. Light from the corner drew her attention. She sat up to see the glittering form of a man hunched over the box. He glowed with multicolored lights from within, as if he had see-through skin. She was horrified to see him tossing the yarn in the air, like a juggler.

He locked eyes with her, sending her an evil grin. His face said, "I can do whatever I like. And you will get in trouble for it." The hate in his eyes made her scream.

SHORT STORY

Arlene sat straight up, instantly awake—and the man of lights disappeared. Arlene reached into Katie's crib, pulling her out. "Shhh," she whispered. "What's wrong?"

Katie wrapped her pudgy arms around Arlene's neck and tried to tell her about the big, mean, shiny man who'd made such a mess.

"You just had a bad dream. It's all right. You can sleep with me." Arlene laid her on the single bed.

"No, not here," Katie pleaded, afraid to sleep next to the corner where she'd seen the horrible man. Arlene moved the little girl over, then curled behind her.

The box of yarn was in a mess again. Would Katie ever learn?

Rousing from her memories, Katie ran fingers through her lank hair, then went to her lonely bed. She shakily reached for the lamp and switched off the light. The room turned dark and menacing. Her eyes grew heavy, and sleep weighed her down.

It seemed only moments later that her eyes flew open, her heart pounding. The glowing man stood at her bedside, grinning the same evil grin, opening her bottle of sleeping pills. "Sit up," he said. His voice was like a building sandstorm, with a promise of doom. His luminous hand extended toward her, and she felt herself rising, unable to control her own body.

You can't do this! her mind screamed.

"I can do whatever I like," he said, soft and menacing. "But you will get the blame."

She knew he would make her swallow the pills.

Suddenly, she was angry. Taking the pills had been her idea. She could also decide not to take them.

Katie threw back her covers and kicked at him with a rage she didn't know she possessed. He still towered over her, but his image wavered with each blow. His fierce look transformed into a grimace of fear and weakness. Finally, he dropped the bottle of pills and vanished into the inky darkness.

Katie's muscles felt like Jell-O, and she collapsed across her bed. As the early rays of dawn filtered around her curtains, she drifted into a sound sleep.

A few hours later, the doorbell rang. Of course. It would be Arlene.

When she let her sister into the apartment, the look of relief on Arlene's face gave Katie unexpected comfort.

Arlene hugged her tightly. "Did you have a rough night?"

"Better than some." Katie managed a smile.

"You have coffee?"

"Sure. Why don't you get it started while I get dressed."

Katie strolled into her bedroom and pulled on some jeans and a sweater. She saw the pill bottle, picked it up, and tossed it in the trash.

Confidently, she walked to the window and pulled back the curtains. She felt alive. . . strong and new. Sunlight poured into the room, and the smell of coffee drifted in from the kitchen. She turned and headed that way.

Ellen Holder lives in central Florida and loves to write fiction, essays, poetry and cozy mysteries.



"Ghost Forest" By: Ellen Pliskin

Ellen Pliskin is a painter, printmaker and photographer. Her works are currently on view at the United States Embassies in Bandar Seri, Brunei and Burkino Fasso.



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