



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

What does Freedom mean to you? Is it having enough money to live without caring for money? Is it being who you are without restraint? Is it attainable? We live together, a mix and blend of people whom some feel free and others don't. What's stopping you from being free?

Wherever you are there are two things you must do to free yourself, should you ever find yourself stuck: (1) change your environment, make a plan, follow-through, and persevere to the place you want to live your life, and (2) accept your reality for what is it and be grateful for your present day. Know your today—focus on the light, not the dark—all the while you reach for the stars tomorrow.

It's in our nature to desire freedom, and it's all something we deserve. When we feel as though our own dreams are out of reach and we are trapped, look toward others for inspiration, guidance, and support. You matter and so does your ability. Take this summer after the pandemic to have fun, be healthy, and reconnect with the artist child within.

Our Summer 2021 issue's theme is *Freedom*. In digesting this collection, we hope you find the courage to lift your wings and fly toward the dreams you've been holding on to. Understand what freedom means to you and chase it.



xoxo
Flora Ashe

Jill Price is an award-winning multi-media artist that works at the intersection of drawing, sculpture, and ecology. Currently investigating unmaking a creative act, Jill often deconstructs old works on paper and canvas to arrive at new collages and assemblages that point to how the human and more-than-human worlds are materially connected.





Flower Pots

BY: RUTH GOOLEY

Tidily lined up in a row
on a narrow balcony,
spotless pots filled
with pretty manicured plants,
clipped and trim, vacuum cleaner
clean,
no dirt, no grime there.

How proud she must be –
with her perfect sun-bright days,
orderly, hours lined up tight,
one and the next, no space in between,
like the row of pots
on her immaculate garden wall.

My garden is a tangled
mess of flowers, straggling
branches and dead leaves.
The plants grow as they will,
like impetuous offspring,
curling from round crumbling pots.

They seek the sun every which way,
my balcony littered with clods of dirt
and broken pieces of clay,
home to earthworms and mealy bugs,
ladybugs and hummers,
my hours just as unrestrained.

Ruth Gooley has published a chapbook called *Living in Nature* (July 2018) and poems in various journals, such as *Colere*, *The Comstock Review*, *Slab*, *Flyway*, *Aji*, and *Weber*.

Lazarus in Bloom

BY: JOSH POOLE

See me rise from the soil, from the untended and the unloved. See my stem first peek above the earth as a green proboscis gasping for air. See the first of my little leaves reach towards the sun and see them multiply as I grow taller than the petty stones around me. See my bulb form like a head poised at the end of my long neck. See my trunk struggle to stay upright as I grow top-heavy with the rain until my roots have grown strong again.

Death could not stop me, for I cannot truly die. Each season I return, I whisper back into existence before exploding with a roar of yellow and white color. Behold, my lion's mane, my countless petals, and the deep richness of my bloom. With my stigma, anther, style, and filaments, I salute my brothers as they sprout around me. They grow as I had, slow, timid, and weak beneath the rains. Yet, as they reach my height, we become strong, tethered to one another underground and interlaced above with outstretched leaves.

Watch as we bob back and forth when heavy bumblebees land on our heads. Watch us stand guard when your large yellow dog fusses about in the nearby grass with its bone. Watch as we brace ourselves for the coming rain sensed long before you see the first drop. Watch as we persevere, as we survive, as we thrive beneath the golden sun.

Listen to me as you sit nearby, listen to my words of reassurance. Listen to me tell you that all that dies is never truly dead, that it becomes part of something else. Listen to how your lost pet nourished me and my brothers through the hard seasons and allows us to glow with life. Listen to me thank you with all of my heart as I realize how hard that must have been. Listen to me weep as you sit so close, but cannot hear.

Lay your hand upon my petals as you would a child's face. Feel my life touch your own, and know that my golden luster lives only with your care. Feel how little weight it takes to break me, but know that I have more than enough strength to survive. Feel the earth extending its hand through my body to hold your own. This is life, and I am its messenger.

Cherish me as you would your child. Cherish me the way that a daughter would reach her small hand out to her mother and ask for nothing more than to hold it tightly. Cherish me with all of your life, for I present to you all of mine in these magnificent petals. I have given much of my mortality to let them glow, to capture the sunlight and reflect it towards your eyes even when the moon is all the light one sees.

Protect me against the creatures who seek to destroy me. Protect me with your fences and your net, with your stones and your gravel. Protect me until I am allowed to descend back into the earth in my last moments. Protect me and I will love you in full bloom for as long as I can.

Loan me and my brothers to your friends, let them see my beauty in the daylight. Loan us in your vases full of water and place us in your church for the hundreds to worship us. Take as many as you wish, for we are here only for you. Take us and share us with many others, we will grow back for you once more.

Promise me that you will be here when I return. Promise me that you won't die when all of us rise again and return to color. Promise me that you won't leave us, that you won't have us fend only for ourselves in a loveless world. Promise me that you would never do such a thing, and I will promise you that I will return with the sun until the sky itself falls down to the Earth.

Remember me and the light that I gave. Remember me and the way that I would dance in the wind without snapping at the middle. Remember me and the yellow dust that I would leave on your finger as you dared to touch my body. Remember the fruits from the trees that I graced with my pollen. Remember me as your true lover, as the one who stood the test of time, year after year, without hesitation and without fail.

Speak of me as if I still stood at your side, as if you could still smell my scent. Speak of me in the way that you would your most intimate lover and closest friend. Speak of me in your happiest voice, in the way that you would hum as you groomed my brothers and me under the boiling sun while you wore that ridiculous hat and tanned in harsh lines around your spaghetti strap. Speak of me the way that you know I speak of you.

Love me for as long as you can, and I will come back like a letter that never yellows with age. Love me until you, too, grow old and wither away into nothingness. Love me as much as I love you, with the same intensity and the same fealty. I am your flower, I have nothing but my own joy that I reflect off of you. Love me as I fall apart at the end of the season.

See me as I wane. Watch and listen, lay in the grass next to me so that I may cherish you. Protect the gift of life that you have loaned me. Promise to remember me, and speak of our love. Above all, remember.

Leave me as I begin to wilt, for I don't want you to watch me die. Leave me when my petals sag and my colors turn repulsive. Leave me when my stem can no longer bear the weight of my own beauty and folds under my bloom. Leave me as I turn brown and dry, as I breathe my final breaths and vow with them only to return to renew our love. Leave me as I die. Leave me, I love you. I will bloom as soon as I can. Farewell.





PHOTO BY: JULIA GRACZYK

Julia Gracyk is an illustrator and photographer based in Poland. She hosts a small radio show about experimental music and is a moderator for the *Women of Noise* blog. She's permanently fascinated by own interactions with the world.

Tina's Path

BY: MANDY EVE-BARNET

Tina sat daydreaming into her coffee, oblivious to the hustle and bustle of the staff cafeteria. A short thirty-minute respite from the boredom of the day to fantasize about all the 'what if's' that crowded her mind. Her childhood visions of her future had been of traveling the globe to exotic places, meeting high society personalities and movie stars. Jet-setting her way from fashion house to catwalk show to glamorous photoshoots on hot sandy beaches.

Tina's deep sigh went unnoticed as she stood, placed her empty cup in the collecting area, and trudged back to her cubical. The airless open-plan space hummed with computer terminal noise and the click, click, click of hundreds of keys. The grey fabric of the sectional dividers merged into the overall gloom of the windowless area, surrounded by offices on three sides and a bank of elevators on the other. A rare glimpse of sunlight through an office door was the only bright spot in Tina's day. There was life out there somewhere, ever-changing seasons - sunshine, rain, snow - and excitement. The monotony of work, eat, and sleep dulled Tina's spirit inch by inch, day by day.

She had tried to brighten up her workstation with pictures of deep azure water, palm fronds, and bronzed bodies but the oppressiveness surrounding her was just too much. The clock hands ticked ever so slowly toward her release time when a surge of bodies crammed into the descending metal boxes. In the foyer, each box spilled out even more workers and funneled them into the fresh air outside. No matter what the weather, Tina, rejoiced as she fled her captivity. Freedom was always bittersweet knowing it would only last until the morning but she would make the best of these precious moments.

A glossy brochure was curled into her mailbox as she retrieved the other contents. More pictures for her workstation perhaps? Casting the letters onto a small table, she closed her apartment door behind her and leaned against it. Sanctuary. Not until she had eaten and cleared away the debris did she remember the brochure. Clutching it she snuggled into bed to browse the wonderful photos as the TV flickers its constant images, the sound a gentle wash to keep silence at bay.

"Tina, darling, it's been such an age. Where have you been?"

"It's been an utterly constant whirl of engagements to attend, darling. No time for the wicked. How was Paris?"

"Stupendous - Carl excelled himself with his spring collection. What could have kept you from his show?"

"A summons from Gucci actually - but I'm sworn to secrecy."

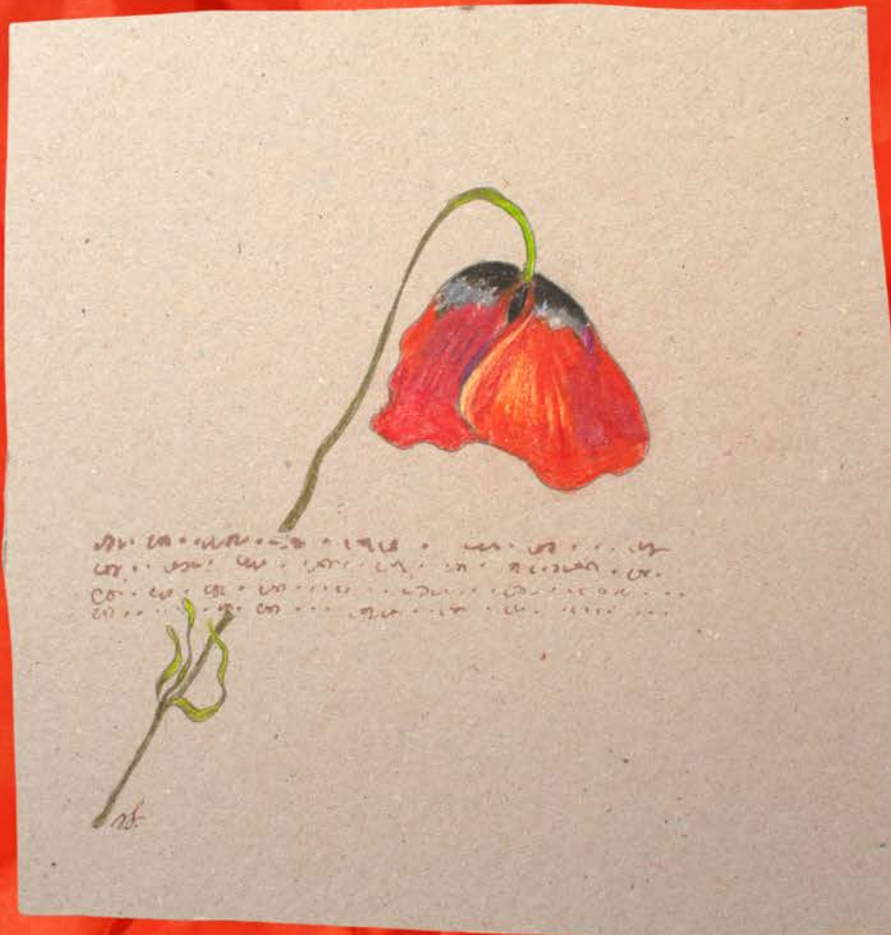
"Oh, do tell, Tina, I won't say a word."

All too soon the alarm broke into Tina's dream - disappointment enshrouded her - just another dream. Not bothering to open her eyes she swung her legs onto the floor - her bare feet sink into the lush carpet, unlike the moth-eaten rug's thin material. Tina's eyes fly open to see a richly decorated boudoir. A dream within a dream - she certainly hopes so. As she breathes in the delicate scent of roses she runs her hand across the silk sheets - such a vivid dream. She hopes it will last and last.

Newspaper headline:

OFFICE WORKER STRUCK BY GUCCI TRUCK; VICTIM IN A COMA.

Mandy Eve-Barnett is a multi-genre published author, freelance writer, secretary of *Writers Foundation of Strathcona County and Alberta Authors Cooperative*, and writing community advocate.



Nata Buachidze is an artist based in Tbilisi, Georgia. She works in different media: painting, drawing, installation. Her artworks are in private collections in Georgia, the USA, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Czechia, France, Norway, Australia.



Ocean Miller-Shaked is an illustrator. Her inspiration mainly comes from religion, Oni masks, and Roman statues.

will you, viet nam?

BY: JO NGUYEN

-will you in
clude me in your will to rise every morning
clude me in
to your fight for an opening – a job
well done in not stumbling over you
toxic activity can't
keep propping you up / stand up for
me: only – a number a prop in this
stand up late
night show [?is this a joke! {shut up}
in convenience time can you;
just take – a flight stop
showing up {in-coming}
late, i am
done chasing after
your consent.

Jo Nguyen is a poet and writing activist. Her current work reflects femcentric ideas, multiculturalism, bilingualism, poetic experiments, and figuring out how to exist in the world as a second generation and Vietnamese-American.



"FREE" BY: IREM TURKKAN



"JOY" BY: IREM TURKKAN



"SPIRIT WAVE" BY: BRITNIE WALSTON

Adding Sand

BY THOMAS ELSON

This had been their spot. Where they stood years - decades - ago holding hands. Where waves lapped onto shore and cold water shocked warm feet. Where they left unfinished sandcastles.

The young father inhaled the same scent of seaweed and algae he remembered from the times with his grandad. Careful not to spill what he cradled in his left hand, he looked down at his son and squeezed the boy's hand just like his grandad twenty-two years earlier.

"Daddy, daddy," his son shouted when the waves struck his bare feet, "Cold!" The boy laughed and hopped just as his father had.

"Do you want to go back?"

"No! Do it again, daddy. Make the waves come back."

And the young father did. Again and again. Each time the waves rushed over the boy's feet, he jumped and laughed as his father did when his own grandad held his hand on this very spot.

"Do you need some help?"

The young father turned toward the sound of his wife's voice.

He shook his head from side to side. "We're fine." He watched his wife lean back on the beach towel laid atop the sand.

As the tide calmed and rolled, as white peaks morphed into foam and tall breakers turned into gentle laps, he twisted the lid with his right hand, opened the jar and poured some of the contents on the beach and some onto the coastline.

"What are you doing, daddy?"

"Adding sand to the beach."

"Why?"

"Because he's your grandad."

Thomas Elson's short stories, poetry, and flash fiction have been published in numerous venues, including *Ellipsis*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Flash Frontier*, *Short Édition*, *The Selkie*, *New Ulster*, *Lampeter*, and *Adelaide*.



"COLUMBIA" BY: KATELYN KOPENHAVER

SOAR SPOT

BY: ALLISON FRADKIN

You know something? I got sand. That's why I came to the beach. I heard they were running low. Speaking of hearing things, I wish I had some tunes. That tribute to transformation, "I Am Changing," would really hit the spot right now. Well, not the sore spot.

But I don't mind listening to the sound of my own voice. I never really noticed it before, but it's...present. Pleasant. Much more mellifluous than something off of your Greatest Hits album, which includes such scintillating singles as "Diss You Much," "Proud Marry in Haste, Repent at Leisure," and the pièce de no résistance, "You Can't Stop the Beatdown."

Except I can. I did. I stopped the beatdown. You knew my motto: Batterer up, three strikes I'm out. You'll never have the pleasure of seeing me cry anymore. Or the pain of seeing me smile. In fact, you won't see me any kind of way, ever again. I know the first time leaving is the hardest—first is the worst and all that—but once you go black-and-blue, you—I—never go back. Words to live by. Which is why I'm going to beat the odds my first time out. Well, maybe not beat 'em, but overcome just sounds so underwhelming. I've got guts for days. Weeks, months, and beyond.

I can't take all the credit for my courage though. Got to give gratitude to Sofia—from *The Color Purple*, not *The Golden Girls*. Her song "Hell No," about refusing to be cruising for a bruising, is what got me to make tracks in the first place. A person hears something often enough, she starts to believe it. She starts to repeat it. Out loud. I'd croon, you'd cringe—and criticize: "I know why the caged bird sings. She's a Maya Ange-loser. Come on now, don't pout. You know I'm only teasing, and still, I get a rise out of you."

And what did I ever get out of you? Nothing but another bouquet of your sorry-not-sorry-ass flowers, the kind perfect for playing that time-honored game of "He Shoves Me, He Shoves Me Not." That's right—I'm playing games without you, and guess what? I can identify 'em. None of that baseless accusation B.S. What games was I ever playing with you, huh? Trouble? Aggravation? Pac-Man?

Well, since you neglected to specify, I picked my own game to play: Pack-Your-Bags-and-Leave-That-Man, where every woman's a winner. See, I knew that underneath that coat of war paint I applied to the bruises was a brave face just waiting to be put on. Someday, even when those bruises are gone but not forgotten, they'll still be souvenirs of survival, and they'll still be a sore spot with me.

But now that I'm no longer under your skin, your thumb, or your spell, I can spell that word a little differently: s-o-a-r.

Hell yes.

Allison Fradkin delights in applying her Women's & Gender Studies education to the creation of stories that vibrantly and valiantly validate the identities and experiences of women.

ODE TO A TARPON CAUGHT ON A FLY

BY: PAUL BROOKE

—after Pablo Neruda's "Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market"

The fly
fisherman
jiffles,
rankled
by three
daisychaining
bruisers,
chromed
cruisers,
lined
with crimped
aluminum foil,
silver
submariners
in the aquamarine,
bucket-mouthed
entrepreneurs,
trained
in the mangrove
backrooms,
schooled
in the seas'
boardrooms.

The fly
fisherman
fankles
the line
around his feet,
untangles
and casts
Black Death
into the melee.
(Throw at the lips.)
(Throw at the lips.)
Strip.
Strip.
Strip.
Slow.

Bulldog.
Headdown
Drag zizzing.
(Clear the line.)
(Clear the line.)
Water
hissing,
the tarpon
launches
into the brume,
a tomb
of catapulting
air and cloud.
(Bow to him.)
(Bow to him.)
Head shaking,
water quaking
in the landing.
(Keep constant pressure.)
(Keep constant pressure.)
Forearms
cooked.
Fingers
cramped.

The fly
fisherman
pulls, reels,
pulls, reels,
reels
until
the wide-bodied
goliath
surrenders,
lays
bubbling
on its side
in a Great
Depression.
(Touch the leader.)
(Touch the leader.)

Two hands
cup the lip.
Another
extracts
a scale,
large as a fist,
The fish
is unnerved,
unbalanced,
on the edge
of a ledge
a hundred
stories high,
a bankrupt man
unable to bring
himself to leap
one final time.

The fly
fisherman
slowly revives
the once great.
(Feel the strength and let go.)
(Feel the strength and let go.)
The throat repurples.
The gills reanimate.
Oxygen is hope.
It sends
blood coursing,
the whip streaming.
Each fin swish
propels him
faster, faster,
down backstreets
and alleyways,
pushing past
a million prey,
pushing past
a thousand deceptions,
into the pulsating,
liquid dream.

SEASHORE PANORAMA

BY: EILEEN SATERIALE

Azure ripples sparkle
laced by white cream
creeping on caramel sandy shore.
The tall grass dances in a zephyr
cooling nesting areas for piper plovers.
As the tiny shellfish
burrow back into the sand,
avoiding the creeping water
which recedes,
becoming invisible.

On a neon terry cloth carpet,
seagoers in colorful
bathing suits digest
what lies underfoot,
over head
and on the horizon.
A sun screened bather
picks up a shell,
inches from her beach towel and
sheepishly holds it to her ear
listening for the waves and
admiring the polished interior abode.

While the sun beats down,
overwhelming olfactory and tactile senses,
nature's headset orchestrates
the sound of the wave's crescendo.
A pelican plunges,
as a seagull dives in ocean's direction,
and a skimmer skims;
while white puffy clouds splotch the sky.

A dolphin swims close to shore.
breaking the ocean's surface
then gently receding,
barely causing
a ruffle or ripple.
darting in and out,
lazily graceful,
ignoring pocket handkerchief
triangular sailboats
that survey the coast.

Eileen Sateriale is a retired U.S. Federal Government analyst who lives in Massachusetts. She has had poetry, short stories and travel articles published in print and online media.



Maria do Sameiro Barroso is from Portugal. She is a medical doctor and multilingual poet, translator, essayist, and researcher in Portuguese and German Literature, Translations Studies, and History of Medicine.

WEALTH

BY: S.M. MOORE

I do not want a big house with a porch and chairs.
I have no desire to have lamps and beautiful flatware,
or cellars full of wine,
or closets full of clothes.
And I see people speak about their rooms full of couches,
and their rugs,
and their expensive televisions mounted upon the walls like pictures.

And in the driveways I see new cars with boats attached to them.
Rented lake houses with fire pits and sitting rooms,
and there is nothing wrong with any of this,
but I do not want it for myself.

I have seen all of these things,
purchased and used by people who do not seem to be fulfilled.
And yet it is the backpacker,
whose entire being is held in the bag slung over his shoulders who seems to be the most
content.

Live with little
and the world is yours.
Live in excess
and you will realize that you can never buy the freedom given to those who live simply.

GLESARIA - AMBERLAND BY: MARIA DO SAMEIRO BARROSO



THE LAST WEEKEND IN JULY

BY: ZACH MURPHY

It was the summer of 1993. Keilani and I sat by the crackling fire as the bullfrogs croaked a sonorous symphony, the grass swayed from a whispering breeze, and the stars zipped across the vast night sky.

"What a weekend," Keilani said, resting her hands on the back of her jet-black hair.

"Rad like a cat wearing sunglasses," I said.

"Satisfying like spelling Sriracha right on the first try," Keilani said.

That was our thing. One of our things. In fact, when you've known someone since the age of five, you amass a lot of things.

I leaned in toward the warmth of the fire, took a deep breath, and prepared to tell Keilani something that I'd hesitate to tell her all summer.

"I decided I'm not going to Northwestern."

"What?" Keilani asked.

"I've thought about it a lot and I just don't think college is for me," I answered.

"But we had it all planned out," Keilani said.

"Together."

"I'm so terrified of tossing four years away," I said. "And going into debt forever."

"Why did you wait until the last minute to tell me?" Keilani asked. "You always do that and it drives me crazy."

"It's not the last minute," I said.

"That's another thing you do," Keilani said. "I know it's not literally the last minute, but you just have this affinity for suddenly dipping out on plans."

"Like when?" I asked.

"Remember when you didn't even show up to your own birthday party? The party that I organized!"

"I had the flu!"

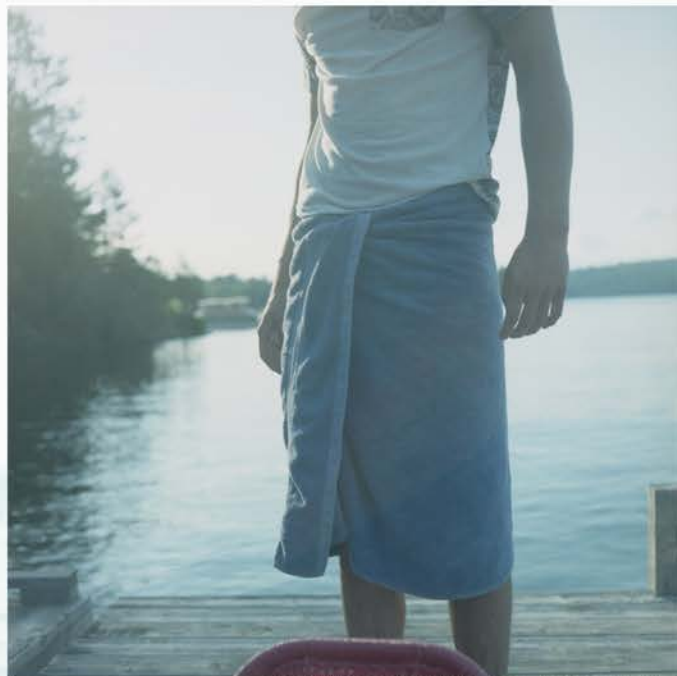
Keilani stood up. "And the time you said you would pick me up from my dentist appointment and didn't show up?"

"I had a panic attack about driving in downtown traffic," I said. "I had just gotten my license!"

"I had to use a payphone while half of my mouth was numb!"

Keilani tossed another log onto the fire and a flurry of sparks burst into the air.

"I'm sorry," I said.



"EVENING SWIM" BY: AVA MARGUERITTE

Keilani sat back down, fanned the smoke away from her eyes, and brushed the ashes off her sweatshirt. "I'm going to miss you. That's all."

"I'm going to miss you too," I said.

"So what do you plan on doing?" Keilani asked.

"I want to save the world."

"Like Wonder Woman?"

"No," I said. "I keep having these dreams about rainforests losing their color and oceans warping into garbage dumps. I want to try and do something. I'm just not sure what yet."

"Maybe someday there will be an invention that allows us to see each other's lives from far away," Keilani said.

"Sure," I said. "And maybe Blockbuster will go out of business!"

We both laughed until we snorted.

Keilani reached over and grabbed my hand. "We'll still look up at the same moon," she said.

I wondered if I'd ever have a moment with Keilani like this again. "What a weekend," I said.

Keilani sighed. "Over too soon like a Prince song."

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His debut chapbook *Tiny Universes* is available via Selcouth Station Press. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Baltic Sea

BY: MARIA DO SAMEIRO BARROSO

Once, my heart was a rosehip, a fruit,
a red fragrance, a brilliant wine,
a song on a cliff skimming dreams
over a sunny valley.
Once, lovely friends talked about rosehip juice,
sweet jam, charming folklore,
and ancient plant lore, unknown in my land.

Once, I glimpsed cormorants guarding faraway
secrets and bright mist hanging over the sea
of hidden gems.
My skin was chilled in that wild rose garden,
hosting a haphazard creeping snake.

Then I came to the amber shore
and I felt safe, gathering marine spoils,
watching the boats,
the amber fishermen, the salty nets,
listening to ancient lullabies.
My hands were shells, legends, spells,
lost words from the ocean breeze,
seaweed, waves, darkness,
and my fingers touched
bright limestone skeletons
veiling deep in the Baltic Sea.

"OFF THE SHORE" BY: AVA MARGUERITTE

Ava Margueritte is a neurodiverse multidisciplinary artist, primarily focused on photo-based works and drawing, painting, and writing. Margueritte has a BFA from OCAD University in Fine Arts Photography and a Diploma from School of the Photographic Arts: Ottawa. By absorbing her surroundings, she evaluates the connection between body and mind.



Vincenzo Cohen





Vincenzo Cohen is an Italian painter and nature photographer. His work consists in reworking of travel and life experiences through an expressionist language and by means of photography or through the combination of both artistic techniques.





"HANDS" BY ILYA SVIRIDOV

Ilya Sviridov is a collage artist, painter, tattoo artist and freelance illustrator born in 1991 in a small town outside the Urals.

Impoverished

BY: S.M. MOORE

To really live,
 it must sometimes look like you have died.
 Some people won't get it.
 Maybe you will sleep on the sidewalk,
 ask strangers for money,
 and quit a well-paying job.
 People will think you have lost it.
 You will look like someone who had everything,
 who now has nothing.
 You have no money,
 and maybe you miss meals sometimes.
 But now you have time,
 and you have freedom.
 Perhaps that isn't much in this world.
 Perhaps those things aren't worth much.

S.M. Moore has published a section of a novel he co-authored in a small newspaper based out of Bates College. Moore is also a regular writer for the *Portland, Maine newspaper, Up Portland*. His poetry is published or forthcoming in *Down in the Dirt*, *Cacti Fur*, and *Literary Yard*, among others.

Flightmares

BY: GILLIAN CRAIG

All the flights I have run for
and missed in dreams,

though I have never missed
one in real life
(have come close to it),

haunt me:
that feeling of not being
on time for your future;

of not being there
for the challenges
you are ready for

and now I am trapped
right here, right now
(I didn't run for that flight)

and next time, I will be hours early
and running with all I have.

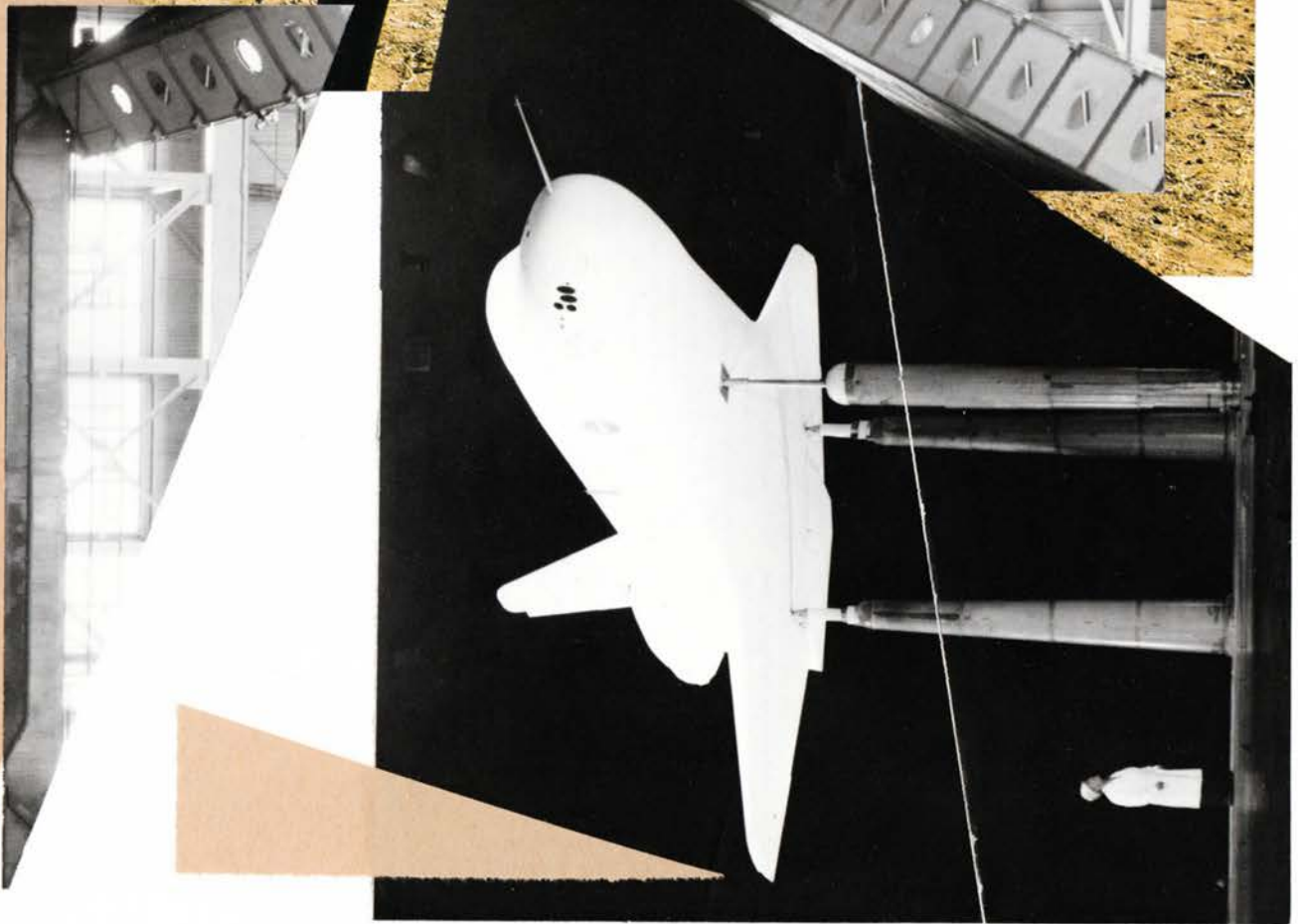
Gillian Craig, from Scotland, has spent half her life in the Middle East, South East Asia and East Asia. Her poems appear in *New Writing Scotland*, *The Adriatic*, *Orbis* and *192* magazine among others.



"FREEDOM" BY: ILYA SVIRIDOV



"THE ROAD TO SPACE" BY: ILYA SVIRIDOV



Decisions en Route

BY: PAULA BONNELL

The road is littered with glass –
that's from the accident –
and with tacks. Those were
scattered by the ones we are
pursuing. The glass is cube-shattering
safety glass but the tacks are deceptively
sharp. We think about descending the cliff
and taking the way south along the stony shore
but the tide is coming in and it's doubtful.
We could traverse the sharp wet shards of the rocky shore
fast enough to intercept them if their boat
launched from Crake Harbor.

At this juncture we can't stop to consider
whether the best course is simply to be thankful
if they leave the island. Just outside of town
we take the old track over the fields – we may
be able to bypass them and gain the advantage
if we can find and follow the blue blazes
and the overgrown path. The dew
in the grass glitters and we move quickly,
alert for change in these half-familiar fields.

The fields give way to woods and the woods
to fields. Ahead there's a tarpaper shack, shuttered,
near where we rejoin the road. We may have a chance
there to wait and watch, and then –
we'll see.

Paula Bonnell's poems have appeared widely in the U.S., also in the U.K., India, and Australia, as well as in four collections: *Message*; *Airs & Voices*; *Before the Alphabet*; and tales retold.



Barbershop

BY: ERNESTO REYES

The man and his son were business partners of the only barbershop in town. They took in all clients and had barbers come in if they needed extra help which was rare—there wasn't an afternoon too busy that the two of them, father and son, couldn't handle. Naturally, the two had the same look: same small eyes, same large nose, same mole even on the bottom side of their cheek. Of course, the father looked older, had even the same mole, glassy eyes, and dark circles underneath them. The son had more life in his face and stature. The son did, however, have a very small piece of his ear missing. Where his earlobe should've been was missing, sliced off. In the '90s, after the Tyson vs Holyfield II incident, some of the other clients came and joked: That man, Tyson, bite your ear off too?! The son had a sense of humor and entertained this chatter, but neither he nor his father ever gave a direct reason for what happened.

One of the barbershop's best customers, a young man fresh in college, who had been coming in since he was five years old, made his way in to get a haircut. He had a hot date, he said. Woo-wee, the son said, how about that! You heard that, Paps? I heard that, Paps said, smiling. The young man sat in Paps' chair while his son went to go on his break. I'll be back in a bit, said the son. Take your time, said Paps, it's slow today.

Paps handed the young man the remote, and the young man changed the television from the news to the basketball game. The two made small talk; the young man had lost his father a few years ago to cancer and found Paps to be almost a second father to him. Paps certainly knew the young man long enough and seen the young man, who was once a young boy only a little while ago, grow up.

The two paused whenever someone made a three-pointer, but then went back to talking about things as usual. Then, out of the blue, the young man said, What happened to your son's ear? Paps looked at him. What do you mean? The young man shrugged: I've always noticed that a piece of his ear been missing. I've always wondered what happened to it. Paps looked down. It's really nothing, Paps said, shaking the peach-fuzz off the side of the young man's cheeks. It seems like something, the young man nodded. I don't know, I guess I've been paying extra attention to things, that's all. What do you mean? Paps asked, curious. I don't know, the young man said, I been thinking about the future lately is all. About school. About girls. What if this is the girl for me? the young man said to no one in particular, a look of blank excitement on his face. That'd be real fine, Paps said. That'd be real fine, son. You'd find yourself something most people never find. The young man nodded gratefully.

The young man came back a month later. It was a little busier this time, which wasn't a problem. He sat down and Paps' son was there, finishing up his last client. You ready, young man? Paps' son said, who himself had four boys and two daughters. Yes sir, the young man said. You seen that Canelo fight the other day? Paps' son said. The young man nodded. I knew Kovalev would be out in eight, the young man said. I made some good money off that fight, the young man said. That's good, I'm glad, Paps' son said. Are we getting the usual? Paps' son asked. The young man nodded his head again. Yeah, the usual, he said.

Sometime later, the young man asked: Can I ask something? Paps' son nodded. Yes, of course, Paps' son said, almost in a fatherly tone. The young man took a steady breath in. How'd your ear get sliced up like that? Paps' son paused, his eyes low. You really wanna know? Paps' son said. The young man stared blankly at the ceiling and nodded his head once more. Well, it actually happened a long time ago, Paps' son said. Maybe when I was a little younger than you said, he said. My Paps had just quit his job being a mechanic and was getting his start cutting hair, Paps' son said. He was real good. Took great care, paid attention to detail, all that stuff. The young man was listening intently. Then, the night my Mama left, my Paps got a bottle and started drinking. He drank that bottle so fast. Then he had another. Oh, said the young man. Yeah, said his barber. Then there's me, watching cartoons, Paps' son said. And Paps comes and tells me, Boy, you need a cut. This caught me by surprise. I said, Paps, you just cut my hair a few days ago. What do you mean I need a cut? But Paps, I don't know, I don't think he could hear me 'cause he went on in his room and got a pair of clippers. He picked me up and sat me down on the couch and as I was watching cartoons, Paps was cutting my short hair, making it even shorter, the barber said. The young man nodded. Then I feel this stinging pain, a pain so sharp—I ain't never felt before or since. A pain that made everything go quiet and numb around me, said the barber. Since then, I ain't seen Paps take another drink. I guess that was the silver lining in all this, the barber finally said. The young man's eyes were low now. Oh, I see, he said, and neither he nor his barber said much else.

Ernesto Reyes is currently an M.F.A. candidate at Fresno State, where he also teaches first-year writing. He's a film buff, an avid reader, and a chocolate cake connoisseur.



"PREPARING THE SOFTBALL FIELD" 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 Faso.



Chip & a Day

BY: RICH RENNER

Chipmunk sticks the landing
beneath the bird feeder, the
warm water embrace at your
kitchen sink in early autumn,
clank of the metal mailbox lid

all flock to, drown and deafen
what ought to be the conveyor
belt of your factory setting, but

even though the faucet sputters
ice cold at first and too hot later,
and the odds are pretty good that
your dream-buried and decidedly
unrequited love never licked a

stamp while thinking of you,
not even as she paged through
her yearbook during quarantine,
that one thing you both had in
common, surviving a pandemic,

you feel the death grip around
your chest loosen a bit and open
to the possibility that maybe joy
and warmth are
more than enough,

so you shutter the blinds, draw
down the faucet, toss the junk
mail in a heap, and call it a day.

Rich Renner is an Emmy award-winning producer from New Jersey, whose work has appeared on screen, stage, and in literary publications. He is a volunteer organizer of the Collingswood Book Festival.



"SUMMER BOUNTY" BY: ELLEN PLISKIN



Matt Snyder is a Northeastern Pennsylvania-based multidisciplinary artist working since 1988. For more, visit his site at aprolificpotpourri.art/

"BREAKFAST FOR HER" BY: FABRICE POUSSIN

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review* as well as other publications.





Free-Falling Flower

BY: KARIMA HOISAN

The beginning is a tight-wound bud of choice,
closed up around one tiny thoughtful seed
smooth and reckless in unknown potential
an egg of some rare and unnamed species.
Anything might hatch, anything might see the light.

Then the orchestration plays its song,
starving winds, a piper's plaintive flute and bells
suspended bloom the breeze now coaxes patiently
and dancing petals bend and beg to open.
No one can stop revealing this unraveling.

Ah, the leap of faith for blossom bravely plunges,
the world below is like a mouse unto its' hawk and dive.
and every part unwinds to rushing gravity divine
falling with no net or guide, just falling
perfuming sky, while cloud banks raise their flags.

Grace is not essential for a flower in full plummet,
careening down, abandoning both balance and restraint.
Hidden petals whistling, twisting round on opening,
it's a yielding of the trusting bloom, surrendering,
to forces pulling, unbinding cloistered beauty in descent.

Freedom's sigh escapes from lips of clinging leaves,
all so open-wide as in slow motion now it floats.
Who would be the one to pity this free falling choice of beauty?
Every twirl on every current brings it closer to its marker;
every second in decline, sweet perfume paints the countryside.

And just before it makes a perfect upright landing,
it somehow knows that this is where it was to be.
The seed it carries finds its way to nurtured earth and mud;
what will it grow is not decided by the trusting carrier,
whose pleasure was to only serve the need; free falling was its ecstasy.

Karima is tri-national poet since 9. Originally from Karak, Jordan, now currently in Costa Rica.

Joshua Hunsberger is a father of two that just started his photography journey. He likes to capture the life of his wife, their son, and new daughter. He also shoots still life and animals.





Damnation Be Damned

BY: MARK HENDERSON

Spring is over; the sap has risen, as the old folks say. It's like the radio knows—playing songs and instrumentals by Seals & Crofts, Mungo Jerry, Quincy Jones, and Kool & The Gang. That Devil music. Church children, grown up, are wearing less clothes—feeling themselves, looking at each other. They shrug and close in. Great training for Hell, this heat and humidity. They go down to add their own, distracting the demons with their love and play, breast- and backstroking through the molten waves of their predestined souls. And they will sleep well at night.

Mark Henderson is an associate professor at Tuskegee University. He has poems published in *Cozy Cat Press*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *Defenestrationism.net*, *Bombfire*, and *Former People*.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: JOSHUA HUNSBERGER



Suicidal at 67

BY: MARJORIE SADIN

(after Dorothy Parker)

An asp like Cleopatra,
poison hemlock like Socrates.
set yourself on fire like the Buddhist monk,
fall from mountain rocks,
let a riptide strip your life,
murder and get the electric chair,
inhale carbon dioxide in a locked car,
jump from the eightieth floor,
catch a cold that turns into pneumonia,
hang yourself from the closet fan.

Why end it all when you're
close to death?

Marjorie Sadin is a nationally published poet from the Washington DC area. She has five books of poems in print including a full-length book, *Vision of Lucha*. Recently, she's also published a new chapbook, *In the Closet*.

"LUX AESTIVA" BY: STEPHEN SEVERN

Stephen Severn is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist who frequently works within photography, object-creation, and assemblage and who enjoys exploring objects not as representations of human identity, but in a process of becoming alongside human existence.



A close-up photograph of a man's face, partially obscured by a dense arrangement of pink hydrangea flowers. The man has short dark hair and a light beard, and is looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a red and white patterned shirt. The background is filled with more pink hydrangeas and green leaves. A thin white vertical line is visible on the left side of the image.

PHOTOGRAPHY

"AESTAS FLOS" BY: STEPHEN SEVERN

The Sixteen Foot Race

BY: MICHELLE FULMER

She emerged into the ever-brightening sunlight. Time for the race was growing near. She had to eat what she could hold and get ready. There would be no time for eating along the race. She would be too busy humping and pumping up the track. She wore her colors with little thought, mostly yellow, with a little red, and black on her feet. She took her ever-present string with her. She would need it when she won.

The April wind was stiff, and she was thankful it was cool, but worried that it could make her lose her footing. She would have to find the right starting spot. This was the most important race of her life. The main heat.

One thing. Just one thing was all that mattered now—the top. The top of what didn't matter, just the top of it. In this foot race, she needed to get as high as she could. But sixteen feet was all that she had. Others competed for the coveted position, but she could taste it. This race was her destiny, and no one was going to beat her. At the starting line, she stretched and grabbed a purchase, hunching her body over to pull herself up.

Go! She couldn't see the top, but she could feel it, it was just past everything she knew.

All racers wore various colors of yellow, white, red, black, and orange, yet there were no teams. It was everyone for themselves. There were no rules to this dangerous game. Only each runner vying for the same place and the same prize.

Blind instinct pulled her along. Climb. Climb. She would meet her destiny or die trying. There were dangers along the way, like sudden winds that could blow her off her footing. Gravity fought against her constantly. And monsters, there had to be monsters, because suddenly a fellow racer was snatched up. One minute you're on your way to your fate and the next, nothingness. She didn't know that, but she knew that somehow not all would make it to the precipice.

Her feet grew weary and her back ached from pulling up with each vertical step. Leg muscles cried out. The push and pull strained her body, but not her resolve. The top is the only antidote. Find the next foothold, climb, climb. The surface was rough. Crag brushed at her body, threatening to fling her off the

track. Her dim eyesight made the path difficult. The sun shone from the side, blinding her. Turning her head away, she concentrated on the next crag. She was sure to fall if she didn't pay close attention.

Up. Still up. She had no choice. Hump and pump, get to the top. She ascended the racetrack amongst the others. She must make it, and first, or face failure. The rough, woody path tore at her feet, but there was a balm ahead. She only needed to win. She must win her place at the top. Her life depended on it.

Somewhere along this race, the texture of the track could become smooth, making her lose her footing. It was bound to get wet when night fell. And the hairy grass would entangle her if she blundered into it. So many dangers. Such high stakes.

Hump and pump, get to the top. She couldn't look down to see her opponents unless she fell, but she could feel their nearness. Both male and female, in orange, yellow, black, and red heavy coats. Coats so long their feet and legs were obscured. She was so thankful for the cool air. Not all races happen this time of year.

Climb. Foot after foot, up she climbed. The prize awaits—balm and rest. Surely, she would make it. She couldn't see what lay ahead, but she saw some opponents falling past her to certain death. She saw other racers simply stop, give up, and waste their string. Hump and pump. Don't give up. Don't give up. Get up! Her mind clutched onto that thought. It energized her. She could feel the top was close. She was almost there.

Suddenly, her feet slid out from under her. Instinct told her to move to the side, and she found the craggy track again. Did that mishap cause her to lose ground?

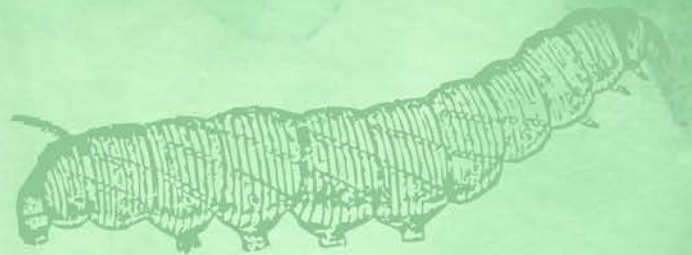
Hump and pump, she moved faster. As weary as she was, she found the strength to keep going. Climb, climb. The prize was near. Balm and rest.

Then the track rolled forward. Not just up. Something was happening ahead!

The top! She had reached the top! So had several others, but it didn't matter. There was plenty of room for her. She was there! And look! A space for her, a nickel's worth. Right at the top, in a wide crack. She rested her feet briefly, wishing there was more to eat. One quick glance around for the monsters and she climbed into the crack. With the string she carried, she wove a soft bed and tent. With one last look around, she crawled into her tent and received her balm and rest. Sleep quickly found her.

And sleep she did until she felt a stirring inside her. A renewal. Her rest was finished. Suddenly, the tent felt too small. She tried to wiggle her feet, but they were gone. Her back felt heavy like she was carrying something. Something new. The strangeness made her fight her way out of her tent. Her eyesight was different; she could see clearly. She had feet, just not as many. She tried to pull that weight off her back, but when she touched it, it moved and spread upwards. The breeze picked her up, flinging her off the top of her haven. How would she get back up?

Then from the inside, something told her to fly. And that little brown moth flew.



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

The background of the page is a photograph of a lush green field under a bright sky. In the foreground, the dark, leafy branches of a tree frame the left and top portions of the image. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Conquering Freedom

BY: ANA STJELJA

The clock is ticking.
We are running out of time.
Hours, minutes and seconds
are melting from the fire of life.
Clock hands are hanging
exhausted from the battles.
We must forge a new sword
made of pure light,
to use it as a lantern
or torch which will show us the right way
while we dance like shamans
or ecstatic performers
on the dark stage of the brave new world
while conquering our freedom.

Dr. Ana Stjelja (1982), is a poet, writer, translator, literary critic, editor, independent researcher, journalist, and president of the Alia Mundi Association for promoting cultural diversity, living in Belgrade, Serbia.

"EMANATION" BY: AISHLING MULLER





BY: DAVID SWAN

Marni's black night had finally fallen. On a nameless road, miles from the nearest speck of a town, the darkness sat thick and unbroken, not even a porch light shining through. Behind the locked door of the bathroom in the single-wide, hunched over the toilet, she cupped her phone in her hands, blinking at the screen.

She couldn't see too well because her right eye, the better one, was purple-red and swollen almost shut. But since Kyle went to work hungover and got fired, and the diner where she waitressed had to close, they'd been together 24/7. She could hardly step outside without him yelling and calling her back. She had no other chance, no time to be unseen, except when the heavy, moonless night offered comfort and cover.

Her fingers flying, Marni searched *grounds for divorce* as the lawyer at the women's center had told her. She stared at the results, thinking she'd hit the jackpot: *cruel treatment, habitual intoxication, habitual drug addiction, an act of violence*. She wondered if she could claim desertion even though he came back after she miscarried. *A prison sentence of at least two years* didn't help: he only did six months for the meth, plus three for the unlicensed gun. His latest assault on her face had gone unrecorded, unpunished.

She was almost finished when he stirred. Her trembling hand hovered over Clear Screen, then clicked *Send*. Grasping the knob like an eggshell, she opened the bathroom door, tiptoed toward the bed, and got under the covers. For once, she was glad to hear the low, rumbling snore that signaled he was passed out.

"Ma-arrn, where you at?" She hated being called that all the time, the way he dropped a syllable and dragged out the rest so it wasn't even her name. "Out here," she replied from the little yard behind the trailer where she was taking clothes off the line.

Kyle hardly looked up as she walked by with the laundry. In the bedroom, she leaned toward the mirror, her face almost touching the glass. The scar was nearly gone from her eye, but her forehead was a tangle of worry lines, her formerly rich black hair receding at the temples.

She had to work to push her mouth into a smile, especially since she had no cause for one. The lawyer had promised the papers in two weeks and it'd been almost three. That night the blackness felt like a weight instead of a friend, pressing her down in bed, in a box where she'd never break out.

She felt her phone vibrate and sneaked a glance. A little later, Kyle was about to put away the Jack when she laid her hand on his shoulder and said, "Have another one. I'll join you."

He grinned. "Whoo-hoo! We get to drinkin' you know what's gonna happen." It did and was as ugly as ever, but as she'd hoped, he fell asleep within seconds afterward. The papers would be there in the morning. She had to be gone right now.

Marni dressed, picked up the bag she'd discreetly filled with jeans, shirts, and underwear, slipped out the door and into her rusted red Chevy Cobalt. Her pulse pounding and her foot on the brake, she turned the key partway and put the gear in neutral. The car rolled slowly and silently over the driveway to the pavement, where she turned onto the road's gentle downslope.

She waited in frozen time, not wanting to start the engine until she was out of earshot. Then the darkness exploded and the rear window shattered. Marni screamed and ducked. Glancing back, she saw Kyle standing in the road, shouting curses and aiming his pistol with both hands.

Marni slammed her foot on the gas, the car rocketing forward as the second bullet whined past the window. Swallowing her heart, she raced down the narrow, twisting road toward the state highway as fast as she dared. She heard a big motor and was almost blinded as Kyle's F-150 shot around a curve and the lights flooded the mirror. The big silver truck smacked the rear of the Cobalt, then fell back as Marni fought for control.

Kyle had his arm out the window, gun in hand. His engine revved and the pickup charged forward, but just before impact she swerved into the empty left lane. The F-150 scraped her fenders and roared past, then the right front wheel lost the shoulder and the truck flew off the road, the sound of ripping, cracking metal, and terrified screams filling the night. Marni braked and shuddered to a stop, gaping at the pickup flipped over in the ditch, wheels in the air.

Kyle's cry rose from the wreck. "Marn, help me, I'm bleeding. Jesus, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Like she'd never heard that. "Ohhh no, oh God I can't move."

She closed her eyes and exhaled but didn't budge. "Marn, where are you?" His voice was getting weaker. "I need you, please, please get help." She pulled herself out of the car and leaned on it while her knees quit shaking. The voice dropped off to a piteous, "Marni... Maaarrrr-neeess...."

She started to cross the road, then stopped. There was no one in sight, no sirens in the distance, and now no sound from the truck. She didn't need the shelter of the night anymore. And she didn't have to run.

Almost casually, not hurrying, Marni got back behind the wheel and settled in for a long trip. She soon reached the highway, then the interstate, the terror fading with every mile as she remembered how to feel free. Daylight found her west of Biloxi with tears of relief in her eyes, the blue Gulf water at her side, and the morning sun at her back.

Dave Swan is a blogger, editor, former journalist, and lifelong writer. His work has appeared in the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and the *Red Fez*.





"Emergence" By: Aishling Muller. An Irish lens based media artist, who has been creating and exhibiting her works since 2007. She has shown work internationally and works with themes of inner and outer changing landscapes.



"NATURAL CORNER" BY: ALEJANDRA COIRINI

Alejandra Coirini graduated from Prilidiano Pueyrredón National School of Fine Arts Bachelor of Visual Arts, with a painting specialization.

If, on a Winter's Night

BY: LOUIS FABER

"Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" is not something the Buddha said, although in retrospect, he might have cribbed that one if it had already been written.

It's easier said than done, of course, which is why it might have appealed to Buddha, but it would drive politicians way over the edge, which, when you think about it, may be a very good thing.

Actually, Italo, I have such a tenuous grip on reality so those around me might find it hard to believe that I am doing anything put of the ordinary.

But Spring will soon be here, so even if I take to travelling, the nights will be a bit milder, and it wouldn't be the same, for on a spring night

travelers are more common, and their stories less likely to interlace, so I will just sit here on my zafu and abide your original advice.

Louis Faber is a poet living in Port St. Lucie with publications in England, Scotland, India, Japan, China and hidden corners of the web. Always with pen in hand.

"SADNESS" BY: FABRICE POUSSIN



"JUST PICKED" BY: ELLEN PLISKIN



The Ice Cream Truck

BY: ANTONIA FACCIPONTE

trundles over concrete, spilling
silly song through sun-bleached branches,

deadpan driveways, the dry silence
of crispy yellow lawns: sugar-

soaked lyrics sing on repeat, swell
in midday humidity—expanding

over bikes that lie deflated
in grass, jump-ropes forgotten

at the curb—leaking through closed
windows and brass-bolted doors

to summon kiddie-winkies, who, addled
by the exhaust-infused upswing,

sneaker-up without sunscreen
to chase the wheeling siren,

the warm van of frozen milk.

Antonia Facciponte is a poet in Toronto. She's a SSHRC-funded MA Candidate at the UofT. Antonia's first book of poetry, *To Make a Bridge*, was published with Black Moss Press in April 2021.



CONNUBIAL DISTANCE

BY: DON NOEL

In the first year after she and Jerry retired—45 long years after they married—Prudence Murphy seriously considered divorce for the first time.

Contemplating separation after decades of what the outside world saw as a happy marriage might seem capricious. Her friends would ask: Infidelity? No, not recently. Physical abuse? No. Mental abuse? No, not in the usual sense. Are you crazy, then?

Hardly so: She had been pushing the thought aside for every one of those 45 years, making busyness take the place of marital bliss. Now that suddenly neither of them was busy, they spent much of every day with each other. Jerry, as near as she could tell, was happy as a clam. No, not a clam, the opposite: one of those modern gadgets that, when prompted, will indefatigably recite information of minimal interest or value. She could hardly stand it.

Jerry's tenderness and solicitude as a lover had evaporated with conquest, and she'd realized within months of their marriage that he was no soulmate. By then, though, she was more months than that pregnant. Little Ellen soon arrived, the first of four children who would become her central focus, the joys of her life and reasons not to throw him out.

He was still a handsome hunk, which was surely why she'd fallen in love with him—and was the cause of occasional heartache over the next decades. Anticipation of pleasure was the spice that whetted his appetite and made sex savory; time and familiarity diminished his satisfaction in coupling, let alone any aspiration to satisfy her.

"In the early days of what seems a romance for the ages," she would in due course tell Ellen and each of the other children as their hormones kicked in, "don't let sexual compulsion overwhelm cerebral hesitation."

She liked the polished sound of that advice, but when Jerry Junior's turn came, she wasn't sure he got it, so she simplified: "Groins can overwhelm brains. Think about it."

Her husband was, in those family years, a good provider, so she didn't even think of divorcing him until the kids were all married and out on their own—having, thanks to her ministrations, made wiser choices than she had. Jerry for all those years busied himself with season tickets to every professional and collegiate team within hours' drives, worked out at a gym and played golf with any business acquaintance who even hinted at knowing which end of a club to hold.

She, on the other hand, finished an advanced degree by long-distance while the kids were in college. By the time the youngest left home, she had gone back to work.

She was promoted—to Jerry's astonishment—several times, to a position and salary as good as his. They had a circle of other empty-nest friends with whom they shared a constant round of theater and concerts, card games, or just relaxed restaurant meals. She was certain that her social life would diminish or strangle if she were single.

Another reason to stay put was that Jerry's sexual appetite—and prowess—had diminished.

She would long have been content with spooning for a time and then rolling away to sleep; now that satisfied him, too, most of the time.

Retirement, though, reinforced by age, changed everything. Jerry stopped working out as assiduously, found that nine holes of golf was more than enough walking, and complained that stadium seats made his joints ache; his passion for sports events was sublimated into larger television sets. He complained if she left him at home while going to the library to borrow or return a book. He expected company—and sit-down meals—whenever the TV screens fell silent.

He drove her crazy.



As luck had it, in the space of a few months two bridge-partner couples sold their homes and moved into Harmony Acres, a senior retirement community they raved about.

It didn't take long for Pru to decide to join them, even if it took some persuading to get Jerry to agree.

It proved perfect: Women outnumbered men almost two to one, and there were endless clubs and committees and activities that they dominated. Inspired by some of the men, Jerry took up woodworking in a well-appointed shop, and joined others in grooming and maintaining trails through an adjacent meadow and woods. Although few of the programs were deliberately unisex, those who joined in the other genders' activities were scarce; no one expected spouses to join each other.

Meals were another joy: Harmony Acres hired a skilled kitchen, and Pru arranged an ever-changing bouquet of dinner partners, both couples and widows or widowers. They often lingered in adjoining parlors over post-prandials late enough that by the time they got home Jerry preferred sleep to late-night television.

It was ideal—until the coronavirus pandemic began.

The elderly were universally the primary victims in the early months, so few objected when Harmony Acres' managers decreed isolation as the necessary preventative. The dining room was closed; they began ordering take-out meals online or by telephone. Soon the distancing imperative became more severe: Those meals—as well as mail, newspapers, and packages—were delivered to shelves outside their doors.

They had no face-to-face contact with any living soul except each other. She got up early and let Jerry sleep in; she insisted on afternoon naps alone in her recliner, and retired early, encouraging his revived interest in late-night television.

It nonetheless seemed like all Jerry all the time.

It was more than Pru could manage. On Monday of the third week, early enough that he was still asleep, she telephoned the lady in marketing. There were, she knew, vacancies unlikely to be filled while the pandemic lasted.

It was time for what she diplomatically described as a trial separation.



Ranjana Kashyap is a self-taught artist from Jhakri, Himachal Pradesh, India. She is a painter by profession. Whenever she feels a moment, she likes to paint.

Release

BY: SINDHU SKREEKUMAR

Today I am going to draw
a bindi on my forehead,
not the black
not tiny,
but a big red round,
like a mid-noon sun
flaming arrows
on scorching back.

I will wear
some Kajal on my eyes
and arch them across
my eyelid,
blacken them,
so they speak to you,
like the ink of a night.
A pair of jhimiki*
on my ears
with its golden jingling beads,
chirping feathery bird secret.
I'd put my hair down,
disheveled curly,
out of its tight bun,
like churning currents
running across a valley
with silver lines reflecting
the glow of the sky.

I shed my
mute grey attire,
and drape my cream
gold-bordered,
set-mundu* around my body
with a bottle-green blouse.
My gleaming black glass-bangles
on my wrists ring a rhythm
to the tunes of my dance.

ILLUSTRATION BY: RANJANA KASHYAP



Sindhu Skreekumar lives in Kochi, India and teaches children reading, poetry and stories. Sindhu writes memoirs, travelogues, and poems.

*Jhimiki is a kind of earring worn by women across Kerala.

*set- mundu- a traditional two piece attire in Kerala worn by women- called as "veshtiyum mundum". Looks almost like a saree but different.

Khanzeer

BY: FARIS KASSISIEH

As I heard the adhan on the way home with Cheetos and a plastic bag of zucchinis dangling from my fingers, it dawned on me that the pink mass on the empty plot of land behind the mosque was a pig. A real pig. They were so immense in real life. In pictures, they always seemed gentle and pure, but, now, there was something characteristically sinister about its presence. It stood completely still, and it had no spots, and it seemed to orient itself completely perpendicular to the angle I was looking at it from. It stood there, basking in the noon sun and the brilliant blue of the sky that faded into beige smog at the horizon—if the horizon could be seen anyway.

I continued walking down the little hills made by broken pavement. Still looking at the colossal swine, I suddenly found my black running shoe in my field of vision, and before I knew it, I was squirming on the ground trying to cope with the sharp pain in my tailbone. Once the pain ebbed into an ache, I looked back to where the catatonic pig stood expecting that the universe had corrected itself, or that what I was seeing was, in fact, a dusty sheep standing at just the right angle. No. It still stood there in all its porcine majesty. I got up on my feet and slapped my now chalky white thighs and butt as a plume of white dust surrounded me. I marched my way home.

The plastic bag of zucchinis sat sad and wrinkled on the counter. I had never tried raw zucchini before. It was tempting, so I reached into the bag and pulled one out. I fumbled with it for a few seconds conjuring up a plan to get its raw flesh into my mouth without Mama finding out when she came back from work. My fingers crept over the stem. It wasn't ideal, but I needed to taste some part of that raw zucchini. With my eyes still scanning the vegetable, my hand reached into the drawer directly in front of me and scrambled around for a knife, and once I felt its plastic handle, the knife levitated toward the stem. Just as it was about to break the skin, I noticed how wrinkled it was. I pressed on it, and it felt like mush. It was a bad zucchini.

I dropped the knife and zucchini on the counter and grabbed the large bag of Cheetos set next to them. I stomped into the living room noticing how the sound of my heels striking the floor was louder in some parts of the house. I soon lost interest, though, and sat on the large grey couch in the living room. I prepared to turn on the TV until I saw it from the corner of my eye: sitting outside the sliding window that led to the garden was a muddy ginger cat with the face of a pig. Its nose was shaped like an upside-down heart and its eyes were too virtuous for it to be a carnivore.

We gazed deeply into each other's eyes. It looked as if it were about to pounce, but then its eyes wandered off and locked onto a fly. It hopped away.

Faris Kassisieh is a rising junior in high school from Amman, Jordan looking to share his work with the rest of the world. He usually focuses on depicting the absurdity of the mundane in his short stories.

I am what I make up.



Maggie Swofford loves outer space, fashion, and Georgia O'Keefe's watercolors. She adores poetry with strange imagistic metaphors and often finds herself playing with unusual expressions of emotions in her own.

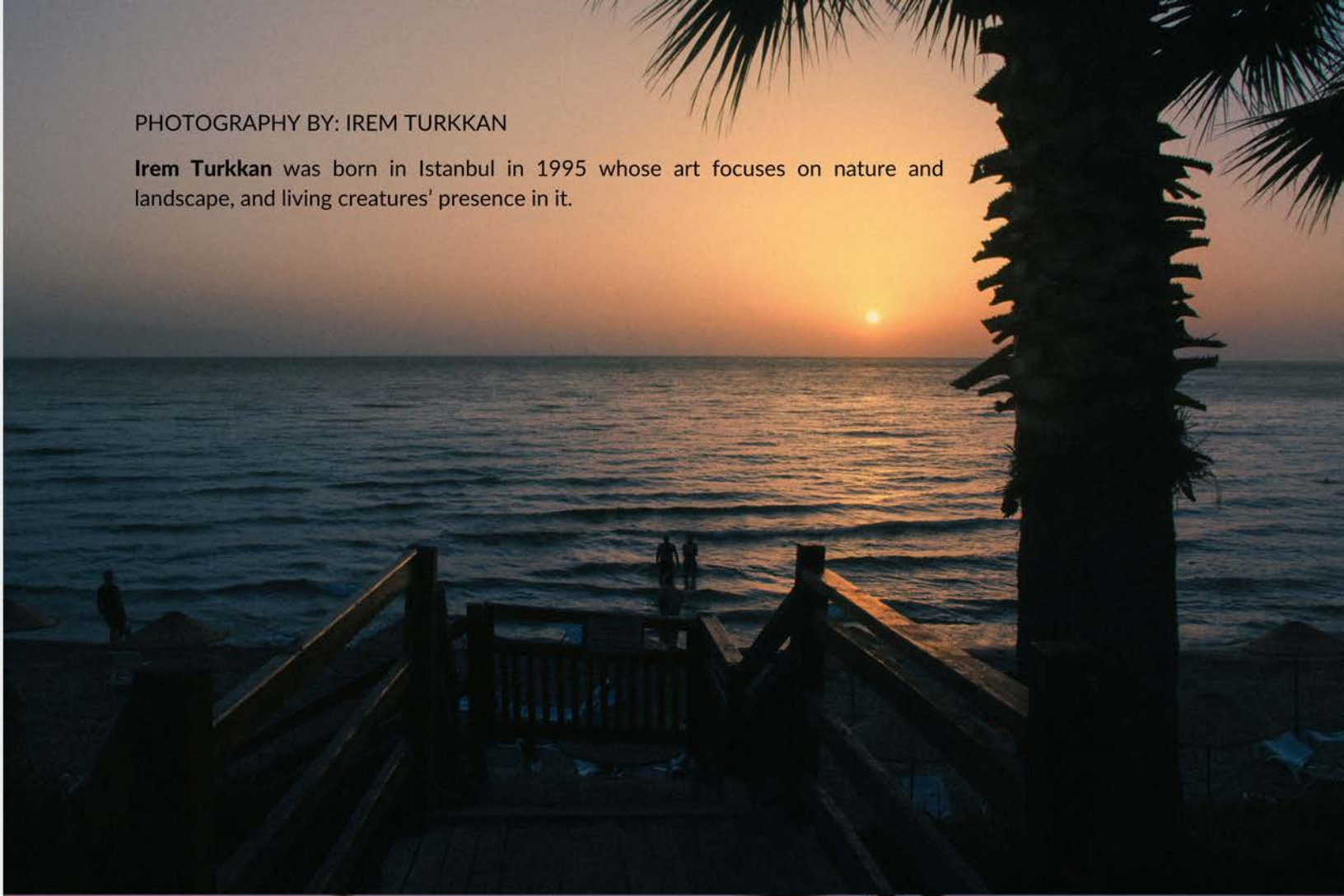
I WANNA BE WHAT I WANNA



ILLUSTRATION BY: MAGGIE SWOFFORD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: IREM TURKKAN

Irem Turkkan was born in Istanbul in 1995 whose art focuses on nature and landscape, and living creatures' presence in it.



Ultimate Freedom

BY: TOM CORBY

He appeared noiselessly in the tiki bar, slipping in from the beach. The torches had been lit as twilight descended. The flames were reflected in his sunglasses. Afternoon drinkers had moved on. The dinner crowd was getting dressed for the evening. He stepped around the koi pond and sat at a table, pretending to dump sand from his sandals as he surveyed the bar. His contact was known only to be female and would be at the bar from five-thirty to five forty-five.

There were two women at the bar: a twenty-something bartender with succulent breasts spilling from a lime green tank top and an older woman sitting at a barstool. The barstool woman was about fifty, shabbily dressed, with a masquerade of bright lipstick. She was knitting something, a sweater for a grandchild or small pet. His instructions were to use the word 'mustard' as a sign of recognition. The correct response would include 'zipper.'

He did not directly approach either woman as he stepped up to the bar and studied the chalkboard menu. He took a moment before asking the bartender, within earshot of barstool lady, "I'm thinking of ordering the Cuban sandwich. Do you have spicy brown mustard?"

She responded, "No, just regular yellow mustard."

He said he would think about eating and ordered a Mount Gay rum and tonic. As he turned with his drink to take a table, the barstool lady said, "Do you know you're unzipped?"

He was astonished. Was unzipped closed enough to the "zipper" to signal recognition? He glanced down. His zip was zipped. He was desperate for freedom and decided to take a chance.

"Would you join me for a drink?" he asked. They moved to the farthest table.

She put her knitting into the large woven beach bag she was carrying and took out a smartphone.

"Take off those dark glasses," she said. "I have facial recognition software on my phone and need to verify your identity before we get any deeper into a conversation." She pointed and clicked and within ten seconds put the cell phone away. "Isn't Artificial Intelligence a marvelous thing? Now tell me about your desire for freedom."

"I've been accused by the regime of cybercrimes. I'm on—or was on—the state committee monitoring broadcasts from the mainland. They think I'm complicit in making those broadcasts and have goon squads trying to find and arrest me. I'm desperate to get off the island, get my freedom. Suspected traitors are not treated well, as you probably know."

"How much money is freedom worth to you?" she asked.

"I'm wearing a money belt with ten thousand cash," he replied. "I was told that would be enough."

"That's the right amount," she said. "Are you ready to leave tonight? Right now?"

"I am. Like I said, I'm desperate. I have nothing tying me to the island any longer."

"Okay," she said. "It will take about three hours to arrange a pickup. A small boat will arrive at Crab Cove at nine o'clock. Are you familiar with Crab Cove?"

"I think so. Isn't it down the beach just past the Sands Hotel?"

"Right. There is a small stream just past the hotel and about a thousand feet beyond that is a small, secluded cove."

"How will I recognize the boat?" he asked.

"Don't worry. I'll be there to signal the boat and help you get onboard. Now enjoy a leisurely dinner and I'll see you later tonight."

"Great."

"One last thing. This is a paid in full -- in advance -- boat ride." She reached for the money belt as he stripped it from under his shirt. "Consider it the freedom express, my friend."

"Oh, one more last thing. Don't be early for the pickup. For one thousand of your ten, the goon squads will look the other way for ten minutes and then start patrolling again. Be precisely on time."

He switched from rum to coffee and willed the clock over the bar to increase speed toward nine o'clock and freedom. She said it was a ten-to-twelve-minute walk to the cove, so he left the bar at eight forty-five. There was a three-quarter moon providing some illumination on the darkened beach beyond the Sands Hotel. With open water to his right and a tangled mangrove to the left, he stopped at the edge of the cove.

"Over here," called a woman's voice. She switched on a flashlight, pointing it first at his face, and then toward the ground so he wouldn't trip on the mangrove roots. The moon provided enough illumination for him to recognize her face, although she had shed what was obviously a disguise she wore at the tiki bar. She had on a dark jumpsuit, the garish lipstick and painted-on wrinkles were gone, and her hair was twisted into a bun with two six-inch knitting needles skewering the bun.

They heard the low throaty rumble of the engine just before the boat glided into the cove with its lights extinguished. "Hurry up. Get on Board," were the guttural commands from the captain. She helped him climb over the gunwale and then jumped onboard as the engine came back to life and they headed for open water. He had just begun to realize that freedom was at hand when she took a knitting needle from her hair and jabbed it into his thigh.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. He felt his muscles relax, then he lost control of his bladder, as the strong animal tranquilizer took effect. "What . . . wha . . . ?"

"You're about to experience complete and utter freedom," she said. "The ultimate. No more worries about goon squads, gum disease, or pattern balding. You see, we're on the way to our clinic where we harvest human organs and sell them on the dark web. Your donations are much appreciated."

"Night, night," she cooed, as she took the second knitting needle and plunged it into his neck.

Tom Corboy is a retired airline pilot who decided to pursue creative writing in his ninth decade. His interests include poetry, flash fiction, and short stories, as well as slow progress on his first novel.



"KOI REFLECTION" BY: CATALINA ARANGUREN

"CHINESE GARDEN" BY: CATALINA ARANGUREN



Catalina Aranguren was born in Bogotá, Colombia, and raised in Caracas, Venezuela. She studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Spéos Photographic Institute in Paris. She is currently raising three bilingual, bicultural, biracial and bustling boys in New Jersey with her husband and their giant dog.

BAIKAL FREEDOM

BY: EDUARD SCHMIDT-ZORNER

Bolot Kurbatov awoke from a nightmare. He dreamed about his grandfather Bair, who was sentenced to forced labour in a Gulag during Stalin's time, where he spent years in a camp near Lake Baikal until he escaped and made his way to the Chinese border. When the ice started to melt in spring, he walked over 1700 km in nearly two months through an unknown hostile landscape. He survived near the Chinese border, practically in "no man's land" in a small hut, which he got from a local shaman. He knew the tradition of the shamans and the mystics of the indigenous people. He spoke their language, gained their knowledge, which he passed down to his daughter and to Bolot, his grandson. His grandfather's family was allowed to move to the vicinity of Lake Baikal during that time and they were tipped off prior to his escape to avoid repercussions. They found refuge on island Olkohn, a big island in Lake Baikal, where they were hidden and supported by locals until after Stalin's death. His father was Russian and his mother a Buryat.

Olkohn, in Irkutsk Oblast, is the largest island in Lake Baikal in eastern Siberia. Much of the island is covered by forests and features a combination of taiga, steppe, and even has a small desert. A deep strait separates the island from the land. Bolot is a fisherman, as are most of the inhabitants. During the winter, he and his fellow countrymen are idle, so they repair their nets, the fishing gear, the boats—there is no income.

Bolot peeled himself out of his duvet and the wolf's fur, which was on top of the bed, and went to the window, which was covered with ice flowers, to see the temperature on the outdoor thermometer. He blew a hole into the ice and saw that it was minus 42 outside. Back to the bed, he made his way to rest a bit on the pillow.

He wanted to bring an amulet to a woman he loved who lived on the mainland opposite the island. She was from a Buryat family. It was February. The ferry did not operate because of the thick ice on the lake.

He did not want to wait for spring and intended to cross the ice between Olkohn and the mainland by car, a distance of five kilometres. A usual but risky undertaking, practised by a lot of the inhabitants of Olkohn island and Lake Baikal.

He loaded his four-wheel drive with a tucker box, some warm blankets, water, a cooker, fishing lines, diesel, and a flask with hot tea. He knew it was dangerous and the weather unpredictable.

When he drove on the icy surface, the thick ice was transparent. One could see the black water underneath, the surface like a polished mirror. He would have wished to have more snow on the surface or a rough surface to give the tires some grip. Slowly he moved forward. The car slipped from time to time and he had to reduce the speed. After half an hour, he felt some vibration in the steering wheel and the car moved sideways. He stepped out; his tire was flat.

He pulled out the tools, the carjack, and changed the tire. His hands were numb; it was bitterly cold. He rested for a while in the car to get warm again and continued his travel. After an hour, nearly half his journey was done, the sky darkened, and a snowstorm set in. One could not see the hand before the eyes in the howling snowstorm; a black sky, nearly no visibility, he was losing orientation... With his eyes glued to the compass, he moved slowly forward. Finally, the storm settled, and he continued his way.

Was he imagining the ice crackling and cracking? He was afraid that the crevices on the ice might jeopardize his journey.

He prayed to the gods of the Baikal. The gods of the indigenous Buryats, adherents of shamanism, believe that Olkhon Island is sacred and that Baikal Lake is a spiritual place; There is some mystic contained in this gigantic lake far out in Siberia near the Mongolian-Chinese border.

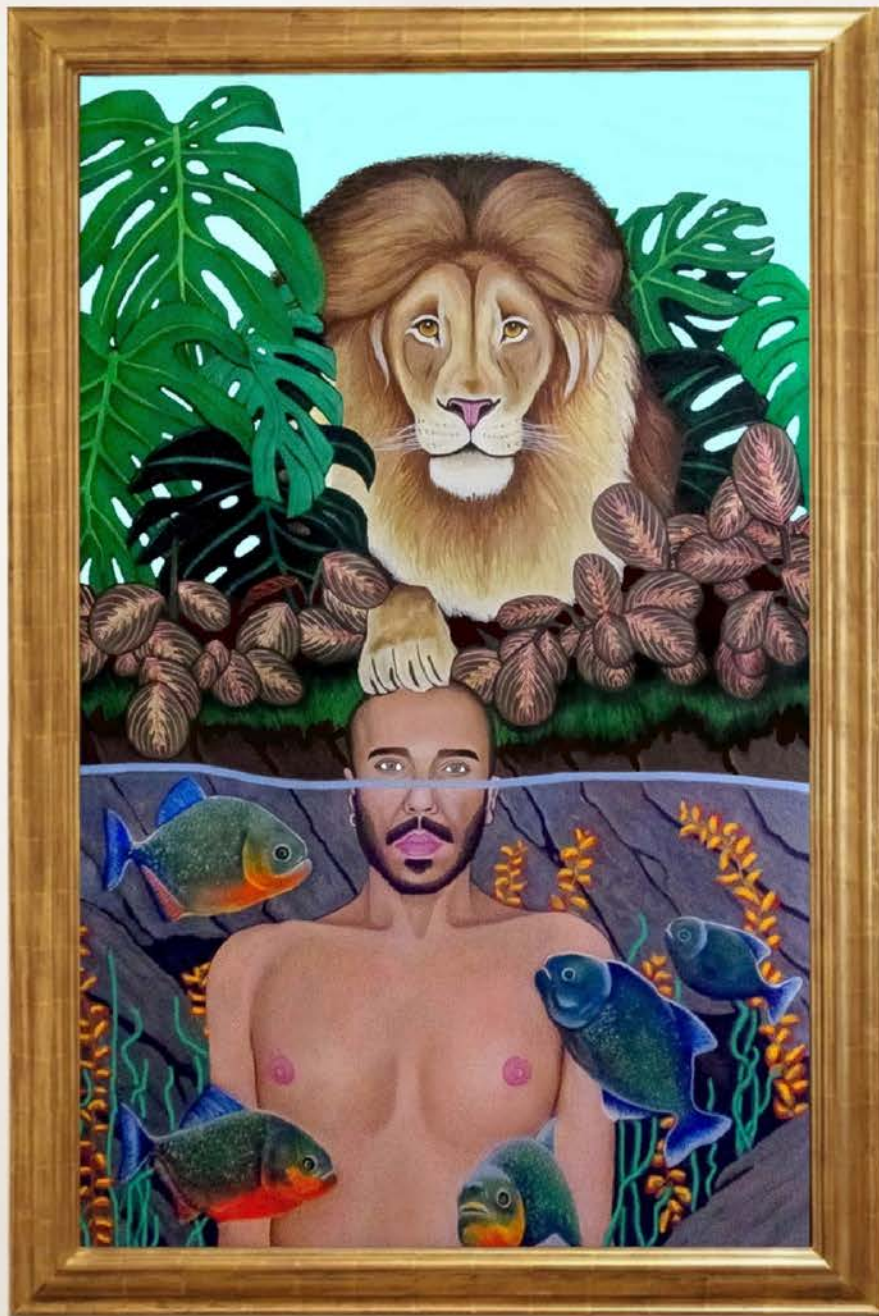
He felt some vibrations as if the ice had shifted and heard a sharp sound as if the ice was starting to break. He was afraid and watched out to avoid gaps, crevices, or disruptions in the ice layers. He felt unsure that the layers of ice would bear the weight of his car.

Suddenly a giant black apparition appeared under the clear layer of ice directly in front of him. The ice broke and an enormous ice floe burst out of the water taking huge amounts of the surrounding ice with it. The ice layer in front of his car collapsed and took the car. As the car sank, he felt the ice-cold water rise about him. He was frightened to death and awoke.

He now realised that he had fallen asleep again after checking the outside temperature and sitting down on his bed.

He thought of the woman on the other side of the strait and decided to wait for the spring and not to tempt fortune or dice with danger to battle against a hostile, powerful, and cruel climate and annoy the gods of the Baikal.

*Ice wind like needles
molten by heart heat
spring brings freedom.*



Kryštof Novotný lives in the Czech Republic and has been painting since childhood. The exhibition *What It Feels Like for a Girl* from 20210 tries to capture a woman's life (desires, thoughts, and feelings in individual important moments of their lives) in 20 oil paintings.



Britnie Walston is a versatile Maryland artist who works with a variety of art mediums. Living near the Chesapeake, her work is inspired by the beauty of nature, often depicting liberation.



"POST PLUVIA" BY: STEPHEN SEVERN



"NATURAL IS ESSENTIAL" BY: ALYONA FUTSUR

Hair

BY: ANTONIA FACCIPONTE

The sky unpins a curl
of moonlight

that tangles
with the yellow

of a streetlamp. To comb
out the shimmer, you

must walk past houses,
into the pine-scented

clearing. Stand
in the dark as sneakers

dampen in grass, unclipped
shag.

I SAW AN AD FOR A MODEL: NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

BY: JEFF HARVEY

While waiting on the Greyhound to whisk me away from Arkansas' cotton fields, I apply a thick coat of my new Coral Sunset lipstick. It makes my lips as soft as marshmallows. The woman at Wal-Mart told me it was the most popular shade in L.A. and that all the stars were wearing it. It cost two bucks, and I need all my funds for Hollywood. I don't think Sam Walton or his crew will miss it. Besides, we've spent plenty there over the past few years since they put our downtown out of business.

Jeff Harvey writes flash fiction and lives in San Diego.



Alyona Futsur is a film director, photographer, and video artist. In her art, she seeks to convey the idea of love, energy, and awakening necessary for a human's happy life on Earth.



Mila Djajic was born 1998 in Novi Grad, BiH. She is currently at the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade, scenography department.



Photography by: **Kevin Vivers**. His photographs capture the aesthetics of every day—the people, buildings, plants and animals, trash, rocks, possessions, and images that moment by moment weave the tapestry of our lives, even as we pass them by.

My Personal Freedom

BY: STUART CHRISTIANSON

slow summer waves,
seagulls lazy on warm wings,
fish escape with ease.

tumbling through aeons,
ash clouds shimmer in darkness,
as stars turn to snow.

endless sky hangs low,
snowflakes glisten off moonlight,
owl scans patiently.

Stuart writes because he must. There's a pen tied to his hand, literally. It's rather frustrating... he should probably call someone.



1964

BY: DC DIAMONDOPOLOUS

When Dawn saw the Beatles on Ed Sullivan she understood what those women in her mother's dirty books were talking about. Her life changed from sunshine and lollipops to a screaming fit of juvenile ecstasy more powerful than an atomic bomb. Bye, bye, Frankie and Annette. Hello, John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

Dawn squealed from the front seat of her father's black Cadillac de Ville. She glanced back at her best friend, Judy. "Look," she said, feeling her braces scrape the inside of her cheeks. She winced and pointed to the Hollywood Bowl's marquee. *Tonight 8:00 P.M.* "The Beatles In Concert" Sold Out. "I think I'm going to faint." She lifted the Brownie to her eye and clicked the camera's button.

Hundreds of kids rushed along Highland Avenue. Police guided traffic, waving their arms, blowing whistles.

"My God," Dr. Murphy said. "You'd think it was V-Day."

He drove his car into the side entrance and rolled down the window. "My wife's on the board," he said to the security guard, pointing to the sticker on the windshield. "I'm dropping off my daughter. I've never seen anything like this. Kids all the way down to Hollywood Boulevard."

"They camped out overnight," the guard said, shaking his head. "It's crazy."

"Dawn, don't do anything to embarrass your mother."

"I'm not a baby."

"Hang on to that camera. I'll pick you up at 10:00."

"Thank you, Dad. You're the best."

"Thank you, Dr. Murphy," Judy said.

Dawn and Judy walked down the incline, the strap of the Brownie gripped tightly in Dawn's hand, photography as much a mania for her as the Beatles.

Girls dashed out from the underground tunnel. They jammed the footpath, bodies spilling over inside the moving walkway—a stampede of teenagers with zits, headbands, and Aqua Net flips. Their mothers' Jean Nate perfume whiffed through the frenzy.

A yellow haze circled the warm August evening below a pale blue Los Angeles sky.

"Everyone's gone ape," Dawn said. "Including me," she shrieked, grabbing the sides of her head. "Let's go, Judy."

Dawn squeezed her chubby body through the crowd, dragging her friend behind.

At the gate, she reached into the pocket of her lavender peddle-pushers, pulled out two green tickets, and handed one to Judy.

"I know where to sit," Dawn said to the attendant. "I come all the time."

Dawn hurried through the gate. Reserved Section Row J 17 38. "Eee, look at our seats," she cried, sweeping her blonde bangs out of her blue eyes.

"Box seats. Second row. Center," Judy said, clutching her heart. "I am so stoked."

Inside the box were four seats. Dawn and Judy took the front two. Dawn turned and snapped a picture of the rising tiers as thousands of girls crammed the aisles. She took photographs of people in trees and the surrounding Hollywood Hills.

Giddy she aimed the Brownie at the stage with the pool in front. She took a picture of Ringo's drums sitting high on a platform.

The sun ducked behind the canyon as teenagers reached their seats. The lights in the Bowl turned on.

Dawn wiggled her shoulders and moved her bra straps—something new since she'd grown boobs as big as her mother's. She straightened the pink bow above her bangs, made sure the clip was tight and centered—just in case Paul looked at her. Because of her braces, she refused to smile when Judy took her picture.

At 8:00, a man walked on stage. When he said the word Beatles, Dawn and over 18,000 girls screamed a mating call to their heroes.

The host introduced Jackie DeShannon. She sang her hits. The Righteous Brothers followed. Dawn clapped politely, drummed her foot, propped her flip with the palms of her hands, and waited for the fab four from Liverpool, England.

When the last act left the stage, a hush spread around the amphitheater.

The host came out and presented the KRLA deejays. In unison, they said, "And now here they are, The Beatles."

Dawn and everyone erupted into screams. The noise so great Dawn couldn't hear herself.

Girls stood in the aisles. Camera bulbs flashed. The Hollywood Hills twinkled with lights.

Tears rolled down Dawn's baby-fat cheeks. She raised the Brownie, but with the emotion of seeing her idols up close—the sexy way John sang, Twist and Shout with his legs slightly spread and, oh, Paul, so dreamy—Dawn stopped snapping pictures and just let herself bawl.

She peeked at Judy pulling her hair, wailing.

If Dawn wanted to be another Margaret Bourke-White, she thought, she'd better get with it. She wiped her eyes, lifted the camera, and aimed it at Paul. But the girls in the first row kept jumping up down, waving their arms, and the clutz next to her was jabbing her elbow into the side of Dawn's head.

Dawn pushed past the bozo and grabbed the edge of the box seat. Girls ploughed into each other. Dawn forced her way down the steps until she stood behind the pool.

She lifted the Brownie. Bad angle. Standing on tiptoes, she held the camera above her head. Someone shoved her, and the Brownie went flying over the pool. Dawn lunged, caught it in midair, bellyfopped into the water with her arms extended saving her camera from ruin.

"Ohh," she yelped. Drenched. Her teeth chattered, face hot. But what a vantage point.

Dawn waded to the ledge, put her elbows on the platform, and clicked pictures a pro would be proud of. She saw a cameraman in the wings with a press pass pinned to his shirt taking pictures of her. Oh no, if her mother found out she'd ground her for a year.

Fans leaped into the pool, splashing and slopping water, trying to heave themselves onto the stage.

Guards arrived and fished the girls out.

Dawn looked up at Paul. He winked at her and grinned, a smile that gave her heart wings.

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with over 275 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals.

My Third Affair

BY: KATE KELLY

A love affair without the sex
my aunt discloses while I am
pregnant with my first.

I laugh primly, disrobed
by naked words.
But, once I indulge,

I am not satiated
by just *once*.
I yearn for 5:45.

She lures me in
to carry her to bed.
I fix her a drink and

as my husband turns,
I skulk away. He believes I am
selfless, granting permission to sit

while I tend to our secret,
alone in our bedroom,
our fingers entangled.

I pull back the covers, nestling
our bodies between the sheets, she sips and
I savor every whimper

her tiny fingers move toward my lips
open and close, a wave inviting me
to kiss her eyelids, they flutter open,
her blue eyes drinking in mine

she nuzzles her head in my neck
I massage her back

she smiles an inch from my face, dances
her nose against mine enticing
to keep her awake longer, she exhales
a tender warmth I breathe in her breath

our family in the next room
voices threatening to expose us
I whisper into her ear words only meant for her

I tuck wisps of hair delicately
behind her ear, lie her down,
smooth the rumpled sheets, conceal
the imprint of our bodies in the bed I share

with my husband. I don't want him
to envy a relationship he will not have.
Returning to the crook of his arm,

I pine for tomorrow, our romance
clinging to my aging body, denying
all I sacrifice for such passion.

She's likely to be my last.
But she makes me want more and more and more.

Photography By: Kacar Jana, who is about drawings, book pages, spaces, and storms. And collecting art experiences. She is an architect among other things.



"LOVE IS FREEDOM" BY: ALYONA FUTSUR

FREEDOM

BY: KELLI LAGE

Hands calloused from years of
rubbing stars on the washboard.
Under the beating moonlight,
I set fire to the tattered calico dress.
Tasting freedom among the flames.
Snapping my fingers
to the pulse of the crackling tune.
Rum dripping from my fingertips,
a sonnet erupts in the pit of the
hearth and my soul.
Pinpricks and bee stings
tumbling from the trapeze
of my mind.
Dawn and prairies stay.
All that remains are daydreams,
spread out for me to riffle through.
I pick the one where the clouds
looked like ice cream cones.
I laid on the lawn and lifted my finger
toward the honeybees.
The church bell chimed
and all that remained was smoke.

Kelli Lage lives in the Midwest countryside with her husband, and their dog, Cedar. Lage is currently earning her degree in English Education. Lage states she is here to give readers words that resonate.





Photography By: **Angela Grasse**. As a photographer, she loves to get up close and personal with my subjects. Exploring minute detail, paying attention to the magnificent, she aims to capture the glorious intricacies and beauty she finds all around.





Belinda Subraman is a mixed media artist as well as a poet and publisher of *GAS: Poetry, Art & Music* video show and journal. Her art has been featured in *Beyond Words*, *Flora Fiction*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Eclectica*, *North of Oxford*, *Raw Art Review*, *El Paso News*, and *Red Fez*. She sells prints of her work in her *Mystical House* Etsy shop.















A Quiet Night

BY: ASHLEY WILSON

Camp at our spot in Ocala National Forest with a blue F150 covered in dust traversing a hidden trail off the main road leading to an overgrown lake. Tall, skinny pine trees leave open spaces between the earth and the green needles that touch the sky, looking something like a bottle brush. Sunset is accompanied by nature's dance: a sickle of the moon illuminates brighter the faster darkness falls, the cicadas chat alongside crickets, unusual species of frogs croak in a chorus, bats dance with birds and bugs between the trees—what are those? Flickering fireflies perform a mystic light show.

Camp with a shovel and firewood to keep yourself warm. Rushing oxygen fills lungs damaged with stress, leaving the mind void of thought. Clear the mind. Clear the consciousness. Enter another realm of seclusion, openness, and unbound intimacy with yourself and your origin. Look up at the stars and search for a shooting star while your companion relieves themselves in the woods and you keep a lookout.

“I saw a UFO I swear.”

“What did it do? What did it look like?”

“Like a saucer. It was just hovering for a bit and then it shot off at incredible speed.”

“I believe you.”

Ashley Wilson is a writer from St. Augustine, FL with an BA in English from University of Florida.









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