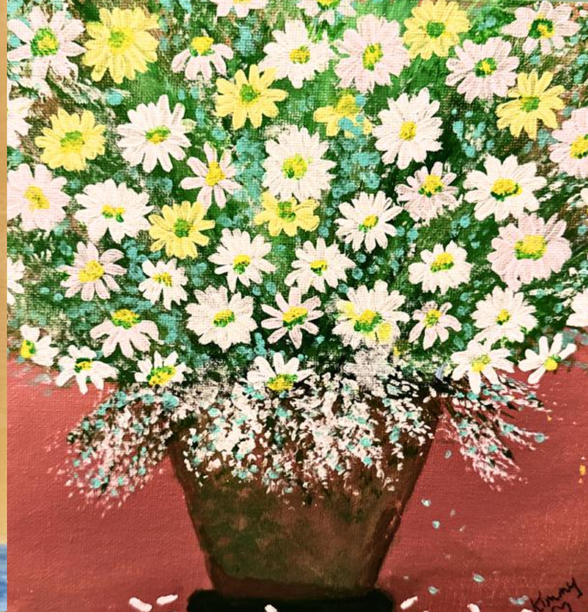
MAGPIE AWARD EDITION

SPRING 2026 ISSUE IV
CLARK CLOSSER MEMORIAL
LITERATURE AWARDS

HAYDEN **ARMOS** TOMIAS **KENO** LENORE **WEISS** TRICIA **KNOLL** R.A. **MOREAN**
PATRICIA KNIGHT **MEYER** MOLLY **QUINN** LES **BARES** MICHAEL **McIRVIN**
ELENA **ENDER** and cover art by KIM **MONROE**



COVER ARTIST

Kim Monroe is an Oregon native who moved to Missouri. She is a maker of pies, a gardener of flowers, and a wine connoisseur. The more color in her world, the better.

“I am a self-taught artist who began my creative journey just two years ago. What started as a simple gift, a set of watercolor paints from a friend, became the spark that finally pushed me to explore a passion I had talked about for years but never felt confident enough to pursue.

In those early months, I experimented with both watercolor and acrylic, learning through curiosity, trial, and persistence rather than formal training. After about three months of working between the two, I found myself increasingly drawn to acrylic painting, encouraged by my husband, who gifted me my first set and supported my growing interest.

Without any formal art education, my work is rooted in instinct, exploration, and personal expression. Each piece reflects not only my evolving technique but also the courage it took to begin. What once felt intimidating has become an essential part of who I am, which is a reminder that it’s never too late to start creating.”

Clark Closser memorial literature award

Clark Closser was a poet, storyteller, and creative nonfiction essayist. His poems were published in *His Times*, and his personal essays entertained and enlightened audiences for years at Missouri State University, where he taught for over three decades.

He received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where his dissertation focused on the work of British novelist John Fowles. Closser later read his essay, “In the Sea of Life Enisled: Narrative Landscape and Catherine’s Fate in ‘The Cloud'” at the John Fowles Symposium in Lyme Regis, England. John Fowles himself was among the delighted audience members to hear Closser’s presentation.

Clark was beloved for his memorable lectures, at once humorous and poignant. When registration opened, students immediately sought out a "Closser class." His charisma and passion for literature were infectious, and his grasp of source material was profound. One could not hold a conversation with Clark without an insightful reference to a literary work or a sonorous recitation of a relevant poem committed to memory.

Clark’s numerous talents included writing, dancing, painting, music, and theatre. He was a Renaissance man and a rock and roller, a poet and a man of letters, a sinner and an Eagle Scout.

Todd Robinson

poetry

Todd Robinson is the author of two poetry collections, most recently *Mass for Shut-Ins* (University of Nebraska Press). His work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Rattle*, *The Adroit Journal*, and *Spillway*. He is an Associate Professor in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

Teresa Carmody

prose

Teresa Carmody (she/they) is a writer of fiction, creative nonfiction, inter-arts collaborations, and hybrid forms. Her books include *A Healthy Interest in the Lives of Others* (Autofocus, 2025), T*he Reconception of Marie* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020), *Maison Femme: a fiction* (Bon Aire, 2015), and Requiem, recently rereleased by punctum books. This fall, Boabab Press will release their novella, *Today Must Be Sunday*, as part of *Agency 3*. Carmody lives in Omaha and teaches in the Writer's Workshop and low-residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Awards

06 HAYDEN ARMOS
a ballad for my best friend
poetry winner

09 TRICIA KNOLL
Pretend
poetry runner-up

11 MOLLY QUINN
Homespun
poetry finalist

13 LES BARES
The Shoemaker Finch That Does Not Exist
poetry finalist

15 MICHAEL McIRVIN
The Sundered Seams
poetry finalist

18 TOMIAS KENO
Charcoal Husband
fiction winner

28 R.A. MOREAN
Seeing Him
fiction runner-up

35 ELENA ENDER
The Middle of the End
fiction finalist

38 LENORE WEISS
Lobo, King of the Dogs
nonfiction winner

47 PATRICIA KNIGHT MEYER
Infant Of
nonfiction runner-up

ISSUE FOUR
2026 AWARD EDITION

EDITORIAL STAFF:

MICHELLE QUICK
RACHEL BASH
HOTSPUR CLOSSER
REBECCA ROTERT
JACK PHILLIPS
& SHYLA SHEHAN

JUDGES:

TODD ROBINSON
TERESA CARMODY

WINNER

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Poetry

from judge Todd Robinson: "a ballad for my best friend" cartwheels on a knife's edge for forty sublime lines, innocence grappling with experience, sense with sensibility, delight with torment. It's such a nimble and inviting poem, rich in charms and vexed with harms. The sound and sense here! Each verb a plosion, the momentum relentless as the tenderness. I would give much to write a poem this sweet and salty, this luminous and lonely. The poet constantly swerves, yet strikes their target with an unerring eye. This is serious play; this is joyful work.

a ballad for my best friend

Hayden Armos

Hayden Armos (he/they) originally hails from an island in the heart of the Pacific Northwest's Puget Sound. After graduating from college, he settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he currently lives with his ex-roommates two cats and works at a youth services nonprofit. His poetry explores intimacy, attention, wonder, and grief. You can read more in *Gigantic Sequins*, *Salt Hill Journa*l, *Press Pause Press*, and *Lost Pilots Lit*. Instagram: @harmosarmos

a ballad for my best friend

for M

Hayden Armos

1.
deranged, I asked if you would come
with me into the pink abyss.

you said, *it doesn't matter what color the abyss is*.
instead, let's say the abyss was a tunnel.

train tracks lined the tunnel—the downward pitch of it.
graffiti swarmed the walls. laughing, you said,

let's race, and you threw off your shoes.
together, we somersaulted down

that hysterical kaleidoscope of nonautonomy.
afterward, like little kids,

we made up stories about what we saw.
for you it was: *shame, shame, shame*.

I said, *me too*.

2.
and, because you had me feeling sentimental,

I also told you about the horse I met—how at first
she was shy inside her luminous coat.

from the edge, she observed me falling
and burning, all meteorite-like

and ablated.
what I had become: a bright red ache.

the horse came to me then,
and as she unteased me from the wreckage,

the song of my heartbeat
against her bones was full and sweet.

you see, I had just one thing
left to give the horse.

I gave her rivers and rivers of it.

3.
one day, when I am old and gone,

you will remind me of the California poppies
waving us on with their caution orange,

the rolling hills flashing
green in our teeth. and I will tell you

of the anadromous fish—
how, against all odds, an alewife

swims ten miles upstream
to die in the same place it was born.

you will say, *that's so me*, and
I will nod, strumming my June guitar,

watching as fireflies punctuate
the black sky with their light. ✧

RUNNER-UP

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Poetry

from judge Todd Robinson: "Pretend" is as capacious and possibility-dazzled as the decorated refrigerator box it describes. The warmth of its invitation lowers a reader's defenses, hurtles them through imaginal realms and hallucinatory terrain rich in visual sweets and psychic threats. In the wobble of space, the wonder of world-grit, the necessary palliative of friendship, this poem expertly braids possibility with reality, deft details with lightsome rhymes. Read it and be renewed.

Pretend

Tricia Knoll

Tricia Knoll's *The Unknown Daughter* was a finalist in the 2025 New England Poetry Club chapbook contest. More than 300 of her poems appear in journals and nine collections, full-length or chapbook. *Wild Apples* (Fernwood Press) details downsizing and moving 3,000 miles from Oregon to Vermont. After 18 years of working with free verse, she is now writing mostly prose poems. Fernwood Press will publish her full-length poetry book, *Gathering Marbles*, in July 2027. Knoll serves as a Contributing Editor to the online journal *Verse Virtual*. Website: triciaknoll.com

Pretend

Tricia Knoll

Let’s play spaceship in this generously decorated refrigerator box, which pretends to guard against heat, meteors, and news flashes about dead friends. We crave escape. You wear your green frog hat; I drape my shoulders in my cape of Haida design. Let’s paint our fingernails black and sit cross-legged on purple pillows. Leave Earth singing wheels on the bus as if we are children. Fortify our lunch box with poppy-seed cake for a coffee break. Let me captain our ship for the first leg, where we jettison the thruster rocket of my obsession with today’s disheveled floods and fires and your dismay at your family’s betrayal. You take over when we wave to the moon, view earth war-torn, swirling with hyperstorms, a green of promise, a blue of forgiveness. I don’t know how long it takes until we decide to turn back. We can’t be gone forever. My head rests on your shoulder, along with cake crumbs on your shirt. You hold my thumb until you guide our glide home, release the parachute for a soft landing in a heaving sea. To reawaken to wind on our skin. A pretend that mends. With the help of a friend. ✧

FINALIST

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Poetry

Homespun

Molly Quinn

Molly Quinn is a poet and incurable romantic. She lives in a town snuggled within the Ozark Mountains, where she works as a librarian. In her off time, she enjoys reading, writing, and finding meaning in the mundane.

Homespun
Molly Quinn

"They've done it again, those bastards,"
I grumble to him of the greed growing in our small town,
choking out the loveliness that used to flourish here.
He listens and slices a tomato to the rhythm of my rant,
red and ripe and freshly plucked from someone else's garden
(a neighbor or a friend from work, perhaps).
His careful fingers plate the uneven pieces
then sprinkle them with pepper and salt.
He thoughtfully places the dish between us
without a word.
I look at him and he gives a nod—
a final beat to my tirade.
We feast in silence on the summer fruit
as if we were gods devouring ambrosia.
Such a small gesture to share a
simple plate of sliced tomato, homespun
hints of earth and sun within
its tender flesh, yet in this quiet moment
the whole world, all of it, is a tomato–
garden grown and given to me. ✧

FINALIST

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Poetry

The Shoemaker Finch That Does Not Exist

Les Bares

Les Bares lives in Richmond, Virginia. He was the winner of the University of Virginia 2023 Meridian Journal Short Prose Prize and the 2018 Princemere Poetry Prize. His work has or will appear in *The Midwest Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Spillway*, the *Irish Journal Southword*, the *English Magazine Stand*, and other journals.

The Shoemaker Finch That Does Not Exist

Les Bares

The serrated edge of a leaf on a beech tree
saws holes in the breeze, spins whirlpools
of air from its pointed tip.

It seems to be trying to tell me something
as it goes about its business being a leaf.

I populate the tree with a shoemaker finch,
a bird with hints of orange under its wing joint.
A bird I have apparently invented
as the internet tells me there is no such thing.

This cobbler bird hatched somewhere
in my fantasy flits invisible on wind currents
stirred by the knifelike edge of a leaf.

The tree itself is real, or I hope it still is
there on the shore of Lake Ontario.
I remember it, grand, with all its proclamations
of love carved into its silver bark.

The shoemaker finch, which does not exist,
warbles its buzzy slur, blessing young lovers
kissing beneath the beech tree. Their ardor
going extinct before it can be engraved
in the bark, before it too can ever be named.

All the while, the turbulence of a beech leaf
is sawing holes in what never existed,
or what is invisible to the naked eye. ✧

FINALIST

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Poetry

The Sundered Seams

Michael McIrvin

Michael McIrvin is the author of several poetry collections, including *Optimism Blues: Poems Selected* and *New and Hearing Voice*s (Fearful Symmetry, 2020). His most recent novel is *The Blue Man Dreams the End of Time*. Michael lives on the High Plains of Wyoming.

The Sundered Seams

for Eli and Jesse

Michael McIrvin

Suffering is alchemy, change is God...
-Marilyn Chin

The man, considering without cease
how his world will soon be split to atoms, takes
the hand of his boy, who just asked if God
is in this gold-lit meadow among seedheads
heavy and swaying, insects turning light
to sound as aspen leaves shimmy, birds
singing under blue and intangible white, the day
turning down through every shade of heaven.

The child reaches to be carried and is asleep
before his head hits the man's shoulder.
The child who will one day ask that his world
be mended, every wounded atom sewn
back together by a magical seamstress,
her thread made of sunlight and bee buzz
and the slightest breeze.

The child whose younger brother, not yet old
enough for these mountains, will someday ask
the same question after waking from a dream-
rescue of younger children assaulted by storm:
the dream hero who will himself, when grown,
pray to be saved from yet another terrible rending.

These children, who have not heard talk of God
and yet can read the name as it is written
on the dying page of a late August afternoon,
in fly dance and lark flight and every turn of leaf

and flower and stem, who can hear the name
shouted in a dream tempest that will become life.

The child in a far town, someday-dreamer-of-God-
in-a-fearsome-wind; the child cradled
in the man's arms, sleeping soundly
as if any universe could ever be less than whole.

The man, as he walks this two-track road, whispers
lessons of care and grief for his sons, whose lessons
for him, the divine nearly shouting in their small voices,
are of beauty beyond measure. Not just in love's
every breath but in the sundered seams, in the sky,
faltering blue or black-and-spinning. Within
the inevitably failing light between
whereby we all are transformed. ✧

WINNER

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Fiction

from judge Teresa Carmody: With humor and playfulness, “Charcoal Husband” explores the uncanniness of connection—how those closest to us can become the most unfamiliar: forgotten, strange, the ones we can no longer quite remember. And then it’s the whole community, trying and failing to help us see what we cannot—the full, shifting complexity of ourselves and of others.

Charcoal Husband

Tomias Keno

Tomias Keno (1990) is a Dutch author, screenwriter, and singer-songwriter working at the intersection of literary fiction and science fiction. His work won first prize at the 2025 Dubai Future Stories Awards, held during the Dubai Future Forum. His literary fiction has appeared in Dutch literary magazines including *Op Ruwe Planken*, *DwB*, *de Optimist*, and *deFusie*, and he is a finalist for the 2026 Indiana Review Prize. In 2022, he launched Astronaut, a multidisciplinary project combining a novel, a fiction podcast, and a pop album; the podcast became the most listened-to fiction series in the Netherlands and Belgium and was nominated for the Rose d’Or, the NTR Podcast Prize, and the Belgian Podcast Awards.

Charcoal Husband
Tomias Keno

They'd put her in the side room by the vestry, the dusty one, where spare chairs were stacked to the ceiling, and a faded poster declared "Welcome new believers" in a font last seen on a yogurt lid.

From the sanctuary came the soft rustle of people trying not to rustle, a few strategic coughs, and someone's phone bursting cheerfully into "Angels" by Robbie Williams. There were one hundred and forty-seven people out there. She knew because her mother had mentioned it roughly one hundred and forty-seven times during the planning.

"You don't want to come out because...?" asked Kaylee, the Maid of Honor, leaning in at a cautious forty-five degrees to keep her hair from brushing the doorframe.

"Because I can't remember his face," said the bride, as calmly as ordering a salad. She hoped the calm might make it sound less strange.

"But it's just... it's Dan."

"Right," the bride said. "Dan, sure." She could remember Dan's voicemail: *Hi! It's Dan! Leave a message after the beat!* followed by truly terrible beatboxing. She could recall his handwriting somewhat. His neck, definitely, five angles of it, especially the angle when thinking hard.

Kaylee smiled a smile that was sympathetic, but not so sympathetic it looked like she'd chosen a side. "What if you close your eyes and try again?"

So the bride did. Tried again to find him. A sturdy nose, maybe. Lips with volume. Kind eyes? People always said *kind eyes* about men with nothing else to recommend them. And she needed a recommendation, a reason. Without his face, the man of her dreams was suddenly just... a man. And marrying any man wasn't really her sort of thing.

From the hallway came a whisper, not nearly quiet enough: "How's she doing?"

"She's trying," Kaylee answered.

The bridesmaids slid in then: three women in a color that had been described in the email chain as "sage," but in real life leaned more toward "unicorn pink."

"Sweetheart," said the one with the clip-on ponytail, crouching until her knees popped audibly. "We hear you've gone a

MAGPIE ZINE ISSUE IV - AWARD EDITION

bit… wobbly.”

“I can’t see him,” the bride said. It felt like confessing she’d started doubting the moon landing.

“Don’t be daft,” another bridesmaid said, whipping out her phone and scrolling through a gallery of men who all could plausibly be hers, each holding a drink. “There!” she said triumphantly, landing on one of him by a barbecue, squinting like sunlight was a personal enemy. “Face.”

“If that’s him,” the bride said, “then he’s better at being a photograph than a person.”

The bridesmaids laughed that particular laugh women do when something isn’t funny. Then they looked at one another, as if, between them, a solution might appear. Only silence did, and the distant sound of a flushing toilet.

When the bridesmaids drifted out, others drifted in: a slow procession of girlfriends and distant cousins, drawn by curiosity and duty, armed with good intentions.

“Honey,” Aunt Rita said, sitting so close their dress fabrics whispered against each other. “He’s a good man. He brought paper plates to my barbecue without being asked. Who does that? A good man.”

The bride nodded. She could picture paper plates, yes. But not the face handing them over.

“If you can’t remember his face, so what?” Aunt Rita continued. “What is a face, really? Nostrils. Holes! You’re not marrying holes.”

“Eyes too,” Kaylee offered, trying to be collaborative.

The bride wanted to say: *But it matters that I see him. It matters that when I imagine him say “I do” I see the particular shape of his mouth making it. That’s how you promise. Otherwise, it’s like promising to a crowd.* But she only nodded.

Then came another woman, relation unclear, who pressed a hard caramel into her hand and said: “My Harold never had much face to speak of, and we’ve survived thirty-two years.” The bride wanted to find that comforting, but it only conjured an image of herself on a sofa beside a lifelong blur.

The room was filling fast with helpful women and unhelpful advice. Voices overlapped until the door opened and conversation dropped dead. The bride’s

mother entered the room the way celebrities do in supermarkets. “I have been sent,” she announced. “Honestly, darling, this is melodrama. You’ll remember him the second you see him. You’re just having a moment.”

“I’m having a moment where I cannot recall his face,” the bride said, slumped in the only nice velvet chair, hair as defeated as her voice.

“That’s perfectly normal. I couldn’t remember your father’s face until well past the honeymoon.”

The room went quiet. Even Kaylee stopped pacing. The bride looked at her mother properly for the first time all morning.

Her mother adjusted her weight, resettled her handbag on her arm. “Well, I mean, obviously I knew what he looked like… in theory. But if you’d asked me to describe him, really describe him, to pick him out of a crowd or what have you…” She trailed off. “The point is, faces are not what marriage is about.”

“What *is* it about, then?”

Her mother looked genuinely flustered now, a rare event for a woman who held strong opinions about the correct orientation of cutlery in the dishwasher.

“It’s about partnership,” she said finally. Then, in a careful tone, like unlocking an old safety deposit box: “I have never, not once, kept a face for any man. They blur. But the senses make up for it. Smell gets heightened, for instance.”

“The smell of men?” Kaylee asked, brushing imaginary dust from her sleeve as if the very idea might stain her.

“Of course, men,” her mother said briskly, as though the question were indecent. “I can draw your aunt Susan’s pores from memory.” Aunt Susan nodded proudly.

Then the door opened, and in swept Dan’s mother, carrying the expression of a woman who might be about to lose a deposit. “Is she…?” she began, then saw the droopy bride and transformed the concern into a smile. “Sweetheart. He is beside himself.”

“Men don’t love being humiliated,” her own mother said, kneeling to tug at the bottom of the bride’s dress as if smoothing out wrinkles might restore her memory. “Think of Dan. He’s a catch.”

Everyone nodded. The bride thought of Dan catching things: a bus, a cold, the jar she’d once dropped making pasta. “A catch,” she repeated, as if saying it might reel in his face.

Dan's mother knelt beside her and clasped her hands. "I raised that boy," she said. "He's a good boy. Not perfect, nobody is, but good. He'll never leave a thing half-done. Laundry? He'll finish it. Conversation? He'll finish it. If he tells you he'll be somewhere, he's there."

"He was late to our second date," the bride heard herself say.

"Traffic," Dan's mother said swiftly. "Probably a missed turn. He doesn't do well with lefts. My family, we're not a left family. But you know that by now."

Her mother nodded. The two women stood like mismatched bookends: hers tall and angular, Dan's small and round. Different shapes, same expression: waiting for her to come to her senses. And she wanted to, she just couldn't remember where they were.

"Describe him for me," the bride asked. "Without saying *good boy*. Without mentioning his job, his hobbies, or the way he makes roast potatoes. Describe how he looks."

Dan's mother lifted her hands, palms up, and made little sculpting motions in the air, as though kneading the idea of him. "He has a... warmth," she said.

"So does a radiator," said the bride, not unkindly.

"His eyes," her own mother said, hand darting. "They're very... present."

"Eyes must be. It's biology," said the bride. "Otherwise, we call a doctor."

The smallest bridesmaid, revived by the chance to finally be helpful, added: "He's six foot."

"That's a length," the bride said.

There was a small, sympathetic laugh across the room, then quickly suppressed, like a sneeze in a lift. For a moment, they all thought. The bride could feel it happening, the slow bloom of an idea, something subversive, a little oil spill spreading: maybe it wasn't unreasonable to want a face to love. Without one, you were left with a man. And a man, as a category, was rather a lot.

The bride wondered what the groom was doing out there with his uncooperative face. She pictured a kindergarten drawing of a man: round head, two coin eyes, a line for a mouth. She hoped he wasn't sad. She didn't want to be the cause of male sadness, but she also knew men's sadness had a way of expanding until it needed its own postcode. What about hers?

The vicar's wife entered with the

efficiency of a woman used to patching crises. “We’ll say there’s been a leak,” she said. “There’s almost always a leak in these old buildings.”

Aunt Susan tilted her head. “Well, he *does* have nice teeth,” she offered, but no one could quite picture them anymore.

***

Because women are a natural committee, they instantly formed a focus group. Within minutes, someone had fetched a cousin who used to draw criminals for the police and now did commissioned portraits of Labradoodles. She arrived with a charcoal pencil and authority, sitting on a folding chair as if it were a throne.

“Describe his face,” said the sketch-artist cousin, who the bride mostly remembered for selling wax melts on Facebook. “Start with the top. What’s his hairline doing?”

A pause. No one wanted to say *balding* in a church. “It’s… tidy,” Kaylee offered.

“Eyes?”

“They’re a normal color,” said the organist’s wife, beginning to sweat.

“A nice smooth brown,” a bridesmaid added, cautiously. The bride pictured gravy and wished she hadn’t.

The cousin’s charcoal began to gather shape: a forehead, an earnest brow. Half a man, but more than a blur. It worked better than the photos, the bride thought. A drawing, even half finished, felt closer to memory; less about accuracy, more about point of view.

“His mouth,” one of the bridesmaids said. “Always thought it looked a bit… animal. Moose-ish, maybe.”

The bride flinched hard enough for a curl of hair to spring loose. Everyone noticed.

“Teeth!” Aunt Susan blurted, with the false cheer of someone yanking a conversation back from the brink. “What about teeth?”

“We’ve acknowledged teeth,” the bride’s mother hissed. Never a good sign, the bride thought, when the entire room had already pictured them once and chosen not to revisit the experience.

A teenage cousin appeared in the doorway, eyeliner sharp enough to notarize documents. “I’ve always thought Dan looks rather like a man from a car insurance advert,” she said, leaning against the door frame. “No offense.”

“We’re being positive, Zoe,” hissed a bridesmaid.

“I am being positive,” said Zoe. “Someone somewhere might call that hot.”

The women sighed as one. They could all see it now: the man appearing on the paper wasn’t someone you’d cross a room to marry. He was someone you’d politely let merge in traffic. They began to argue, gently insisting that faces didn’t matter, composing small mercies for the chap on the paper. The bride recognized the tone: the same one women used when convincing themselves to keep walking: down aisles, into houses, into compromises shaped like people.

Aunt Rita tried her usual refrain: her husband could fix things around the house. But at least Rita could see the man fixing things, could recognize the face she loved and called hers.

“Listen,” said the bride, sitting up in her velvet chair. Her tone made them all lean in. “You all know his face, but imagine him, as I must, without one. Picture just the blur of a man. Would you be thrilled to go home to such a blur? Every night? Forever? The blur will have opinions about shelving. The blur will say, ‘I don’t think we should get a dog.’ The blur will, at Christmas, buy you something with the word set on the box. But if there’s a dazzling face instead of the blur, or at least one that feels like home, you forgive him everything else, because you have something to hold, a place to rest your wanting. Without it, all you’ve got are the logistics of a blur. Do you see?”

They did. You could watch the understanding pass through them, a neat little relay. *Yes, oh God, yes; Christ, the blur.* The organist’s wife looked faintly ill.

Dan’s mother, bless her, made a final stand. “He has dimples,” she said, gripping the word like a handrail, but the damage was already done.

The room had the hush of women examining evidence from a crime they hadn’t realized they were part of. “He once said he makes a mean risotto,” Aunt Susan said. “I asked what’s in it, and he said, ‘Whatever she tells me to.’”

“He eats yogurt with a fork if the spoons are dirty,” said his sister, who had been quiet until now.

“He claims he’s vegetarian,” said Zoe, “except for kebabs.”

The vicar’s wife, who had seen many

marriages up close and had a professional interest in them not collapsing, tried to perform a tiny reset. “All right,” she said, kind but brisk. “What we are confronting here is that attraction, specifically facial, is the lubricant that makes the machine go without smoke. And if the lubricant is gone…”

A timid knock interrupted her. One of the ushers poked his head in, smiling with the earnest optimism of a Labrador. “Just to say: we can fit in another hymn, if that helps? Or maybe something modern? People like modern.”

The vicar’s wife guided him out gently, narrating an image of the women mopping puddles together.

“Life with a man can be delightful,” Aunt Rita said, attempting to finish the thought, but the sentence had the weary tone of someone describing a cat who sometimes comes when called. “There are… kindnesses.”

The women looked at each other with that frank, conspiratorial kindness they reserved for moments when the truth got out accidentally. The bride could feel them all tilting, gracefully, toward a shared realization.

“We are not against men,” the bride’s mother said diplomatically, to the air. “Men are fine. They’re like street signs: you’re glad they’re there. But you don’t take comfort from a sign you’ve never seen before. You want the one that tells you you’re nearly home.”

A bridesmaid giggled, then slapped a hand over her mouth, as if she’d just violated a church law.

“Does that mean we can start?” asked Kaylee. “I’ve got a thing at three.”

Before the bride could answer, the door creaked open with the slow hinge of someone afraid to interrupt. “Hey,” said a man, the word landing in the room just ahead of him. His voice had that soft, friendly register the bride remembered from so many small moments: post office lines, whispered jokes in bed, the time he’d spoken to a bird that flew into the house.

But when she saw him, the real, physical him, the remembered Dan refused to appear. A few parts clicked (oh, that chin; those eyelashes, yes), but mostly she saw someone new. The lines deeper, the hair slightly thinner. *Not bad*, she thought, *for a stranger*.

She noticed a scar on his left eyebrow she’d never clocked before, a pale line, as if someone had taken a pencil to him

and changed their mind halfway through. After today, she would always see that scar. She wondered how much else she had missed: maybe a crooked tooth behind his lip, or a twitch of the nostril when he was about to lie.

Dan said nothing. Just looked faintly panicked, as if he could smell what they'd been talking about. Then her brother barged in. "Sorry to bother you," he said to the room full of women. "It's just, Dan's got this little problem with... memory."

"Only the face," said Dan. "I remember everything else."

"Join the club," said the bride.

Dan's face did a small, familiar thing, an almost-smile that never quite made it. She felt a slight click of recognition. Not for his face, but the kindness that had always lived behind it. It felt like a relief in the stomach, something quietly untangling.

"I couldn't pick out Harold's eyes in a line-up," Aunt Rita began cheerfully. "But he's got this dent." She tapped her forehead. "Says it's from a cricket ball in '84, though we weren't yet acquainted in '84, so I cannot verify. Still, I've loved that dent like a family pet."

"Naso-labial fold," Aunt Susan intoned, with the devotion of someone reciting scripture. "On Lilian, it runs deep, like the path water carves when it's patient. Sometimes I dream of that fold."

"Birthmark," shouted the organist's wife, her eyes bright. "He has one on his forehead. If it vanished, I'd be bereaved."

There was murmuring, nods. Someone said, "Crow's feet," softly, like a pilgrim naming a shrine.

"Every one of you has a smaller nose than I," murmured the bride's mother, as if confessing to a crime.

"I have one ear that's lower," said Kaylee, tugging her hair to show it. "In photos I tilt, like I'm eavesdropping on a secret."

Bridesmaid Chloe began to cry. "I keep forgetting my children's faces," she said. "Google says hormones. I truly hope so."

And then the litany gathered rhythm, a cadence. They spoke of freckles, eyebrows, and the myth of symmetrical nostrils. Of mouths not as kiss-machines but as small, unique puzzles: lips that met reluctantly, lips that gaped a little.

People who hadn't been invited began to

drift in, drawn by the strange electricity of honesty. Someone laughed, and then everyone did, the kind of laughter that isn’t cruel, just human. A shared relief at the absurdity of all of us, walking around, wearing faces.

Through it all, the bride and groom stood together, as if posing beside a museum exhibit. Their hands found each other. Warmth flowed between them, carrying wordless messages. He fidgeted; so did she. She squeezed him. He squeezed back the exact amount, the honest clasp of someone with nothing to prove and nothing to hide.

The charcoal drawing lay on the floor: a faint smudge of a man, not yet trampled but well on its way to being forgotten. ✧

RUNNER-UP

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Fiction

Seeing Him

R.A. Morean

R.A. Morean (Rebecca Morean) is a Pushcart nominee, an award-winning fiction and nonfiction writer, and professor. She publishes literary fiction, romance, and mystery and has two screenplays represented under a dazzling array of pseudonyms. Her own work has earned a Strand International Short Fiction Award, starred reviews in Kirkus Reviews and Publisher's Weekly. Lee Martin, Pulitzer Prize finalist, describes her writing as ". . . spot on lyrical and full of grit exactly when it needs to be." She continues to teach creative writing and publishing and just recently relocated back to Vermont. A single mother of four amazing adults, she is left with one puppy and many empty boxes. Learn more about her and make contact at www.ramorean.com.

Seeing Him
R.A. Morean

When he died, he left his face behind. Not just in photo albums or in frames centered on walls, or in the soft feathery folds of early morning dreams, but concretely. Like now.

She stands in the aisle across from the cashier, trying to find a pen in the dark crevasses of a large chapped brown leather bag, digging through old receipts, a pacifier, used baby wipes, several crumpled prescriptions, a piece of granite, a clutch of creased cards with flowers or candles or doves or any combination thereof pictured on the front and inscribed with wide rolling script, a yellowed dog tooth, a scattered fistful of perfectly curled sandy sea shells and a wad of brownmade-from-recycled-paper napkins from Chipotle.

Her concentration excludes the quiet toddler in the heavy shopping cart who is stretching over in his seat to grab anything brightly packaged on the candy shelf. She glances up quickly and moves the cart further away from his little outstretched arms with a push of her foot. In the next aisle over, a man is checking out as well, buying just a magazine with cash. She finds her pen, raises the checkbook to the counter, and then, in a breath, in a moment too minimal to even have purpose, she glances up. And there he stands.

It is not him, though. Of course.

But in that nanosecond—in that whisper moment—she sees him. There in profile, glancing down at the change in his hand, or something in the title of the magazine, or at their small son. Then he vanishes when the man looks up at her and meets her eyes. He smiles and nods goodbye to the ponytailed teenager who rang him up, and in another moment, the sound of automatic doors closing signals he is gone. She is left again, the pen pressing down hard on the paper, and as she signs her name, she sees both of theirs in print and reminds herself to order new checks.

He appears only when she is unprepared to see him. The first time was at the gas station around the corner. It was just a month after the accident, after the gas truck took the curve on the interstate too fast and plowed through a chain-link fence that was supposed to be replaced with a cement barrier, but the budget evaporated for that particular fiscal year. A shame. A tragedy. Just terrible. I am so sorry. We are so sorry. The driver, a man named George, was new and did not gauge the weight of an empty truck when he took the curve. She did not ever want to meet him. The attorney

said his wife left him a week earlier—a week before the accident. She did not want to ponder how her life could be, how he might have lived, if a faceless woman had stayed in a marriage she knew nothing about.

Stepping out from the car to slip the nozzle into the slightly dented gray Subaru, she felt someone moving, and a sandy-haired man suddenly appeared on the other side of the pump, smoothly replacing the hose. That was the first time she saw him. Standing right before her, in the sun, looking away from her. But it was his cheek, his long nose, the same twist of sideburn, his strong throat. A whiff of gasoline scoured her nose, and she felt faint, and in the winter cold, her breath came out uneven. She jammed the nozzle back inside the pump, tore the receipt as it was printing, and climbed back into the Subaru, dropping keys, grabbing them again, turning the engine over, pulling out too fast. Their son fussed in the back seat.

Since then, she has seen him at least once or twice a week every week for the last few months. Instead of growing tedious, each fleeting encounter leaves her drained and slightly more undone, as if a malignant purpose is guiding him back to her or her to him. It's always the same, with him congealing in the periphery and then, as she turns, bringing him into focus, he vanishes. Completely—every single time. Street corners, the drug store, the children's park, through a restaurant window, on the bus, in a doorway, in all these places, some force conjures him, and she is at a loss as to why. Or when it will end.

The only time she doesn't see him is when she needs him. When Caleb is in the bathtub and someone knocks on the front door, or she's finished loading groceries in the car and he's strapped in his seat and she can't return the cart, or he's eating in his highchair and the phone rings upstairs—in each case, she doesn't dare leave him even for a second because, now, anything might happen. And if it did, she knew she would be swallowed up by something so sinister in its anonymity that she herself would disappear. There would be no recovery from a toddler's loss.

Her husband's face never reaches her after a meal or in the car—even though in both cases she often glances to where he would be sitting, sure she will catch a glimpse of him. But no. He arrives only when there is a body present, another man, like a stand-in, or conduit.

In bed, in the dark, she can't bear to roll to his place because she cannot picture

his back. And, finally, in the deep night, just before sleep, after several months of waiting, when she can neither bear it nor stand it, when she is finally brave enough to try it, and her hands find the lost "v" of herself, she cannot summon him. She continues, caught in a perverse duty, and when she comes, the waves fan and oscillate interchangeably, rolling her over into an abyss of guilty betrayal and then the hopelessness of the betrayed. Afterwards, she cries hard and long, and her face hurts for his complete and total absence.

Half of her life is now hidden.

"Come on Caleb," *put your damn foot in the shoe*.

"It's time to go," *right now, right now, right now, I can't believe this*.

"I said no candy," *everyone's looking at me*.

"I can't read. Mommy's really tired," *get away, stop touching me*.

"Just go to bed, go to sleep," *what the hell is wrong with you—go to fucking sleep*.

The first half of her sentences comes out soft and measured, and everyone is amazed at what an incredibly resilient person she is. They shake their heads and say things like, "God only gives you what you can handle." The inside of her head screams the second half. They do not know she does not sleep or still cries or is succumbing to a dark wave of hatred for her son, the source of which is unknown.

She does not believe in God. And not because of the accident. She has never believed in God. The crash, his death, her unspoken half-life, all lead her to believe she is absolutely right.

Caleb is growing fast now. It is late spring, and he is finding frogs in the early soft mud in the lot beside their apartment. She watches him running around in the side yard, knees muddy, fingers splayed, talking to himself. She fingers the number she wrote down from the grocery store kiosk on the back of another prescription she refused to fill. It was just this afternoon, and the last place she saw him. Coming up behind her to grab some vitamins, there was someone with his smell— sappy cut limes—and she turned, knowing she shouldn't, and there he stood, for just a singular moment, his light windbreaker brushing her bare arm. It was all too swift to say a word, to think, to do anything but hold so still she could stop time. She placed the folded paper near the phone in her bedroom. *It's Not About*

Fault. Every Parent is a Loving Parent. Call Us—is what the notice on the kiosk said.

It was certainly not her fault. But she was still a monster. When Caleb went to bed, it was all she could do to tuck him in and leave. She resented not being able to go anywhere without him, wrestling with the stupid car seat, packing snacks, milk, juice, diapers. She didn't want to change one more single diaper, make another meal, stuff boneless limbs into jackets or socks, get up every night for one reason or another: bad dreams, diaper rash, hunger, something invisible in an eye, a splinter. She couldn't stand watching him anymore and did not take him to the park.

But the thing that made her write down the number from the Kiosk was the night before, when she kissed him, she bared her teeth and pressed down on his face so hard he started to cry, and she had to turn and walk away. Later that night, she cried into her pillow.

Summer was hot. And though the heat made records, there were no jackets to contend with, or cold drafts in the apartment, or runny noses. The apartment complex had a shallow pool painted aqua marine, and it opened last week for the season. He loved to go and splash. There was a gaggle of young mothers who came with their children after work in the late afternoon, and she joined them. She had quit her job when he was killed, nine months ago. They had bought life insurance when she found she was pregnant with him, and she quit work as an assistant at a big law office. She was not going to work when he needed her. She did understand he needed her.

The cement is burning, and small footprints evaporate quickly. There are four other mothers around the pool. One, the blonde, is smoking with her legs crossed on the lounge chair, looking very much like a 1950s movie star with bright red lipstick, a white one-piece bathing suit, and a matching big white floppy hat. The other mothers are talking about a reality show, while intermittently yelling directions at their children, some in Spanish. The children are older than Caleb, four girls, three other boys, all wet and slick like seals, and Caleb wants to play.

But that means getting into the water with him. The shallow end is still over his head, and she does not want to get wet. The bathing suit she wears is navy blue, a one-piece, and faded in spots. It gets loose in the water, and the straps fall down. She just managed a shower this morning, and if her hair gets wet, she'll

have to rinse the chlorine out later in the sink because Caleb isn't sleeping well and has discovered how to climb out of his crib. And her hair will get wet. He will splash, and she doesn't want to yell at him. He's in a pool, for god's sake.

"Mommy, go in. Mommy, go in now."

"Mommy, go in, please?" *Shit, shit, shit*.

He is sitting at the edge, not looking at her, poking one chubby index finger into her thigh. "Mommy, please?" He quickly leans over and places his head in her lap for a second, and then darts to the water. She instinctively grabs his arm and relinquishes, slipping in quickly, the cold water making her inhale fast, and wrapping his arm over her shoulder. He turns fluidly and wraps his other arm around her neck, and gives a squeal. The other mothers look over. She has not gotten wet with Caleb since the pool opened, since he died at the end of last summer.

In the cool water, his small body is lighter than a bird's. He is nothing. He stretches out one hand and slaps the water, laughs at the transparent chaos, turns at the waist, and slaps both arms against the surface, just delighted with himself. She walks around in a circle while he tests the surface tension again and again, and then, realizing she will have to rinse her hair in the kitchen sink anyway, heads out to the deep end, thinking she will tread water with him, that she can tread water with him perched on her hip.

Caleb grows wide-eyed, laughs again as the water curls between them, and then throws his head so far back that she has to stop, or he will arch into the water. She tilts like a balance so he can still extend backward, but misses the surface, and she sees his straight sandy hair ropey with water, fall and fan out, and hiccup on choppy little waves. She walks around with him in his upside-down world and tries to ignore the singular idea in her head. The phone number is upstairs. It would take almost nothing. She could just let go. He would slip under.

The sun glitters on the surface of the water, and she makes her circles wider so she is really beginning to tread water going out. He squirms and laughs, and she must hold him tightly as his buoyancy grows. It is as if he is not even there, floating. He senses he cannot arch back anymore and watches the world through two fists held up to his eyes. Water fills her mouth, and he climbs higher, squirming to stay above the surface. She can feel his toes on her chest, pressing.

She knows she can never let go, and this

is how it will be for the rest of her life. She will always have to be vigilant, and she doesn't trust that she can be so strong, so focused, so in love for so long. Making the loop coming back from the deep end, his weight grows more substantial with each step, and he shimmies back down, an arm returned around her neck, and he tosses his head back again, looking once more for that upside-down world.

With his throat creased with baby fat, she tickles him, and he laughs and tries to protect himself and pushes himself upright against her shoulder again. He lays a wet head of new lank curls against her hot collarbone, and she turns in a straight line back to the shallow end, noticing two of the mothers are standing and watching her, and the one with the cigarette is half out of the lounge chair, clutching her hat.

But she is not looking at them. His wet hand finds her cheek, and he looks right at her. And she sees him. Not fleeting this time, but real. Caleb does have his eyes, blue and green, and like the sea, and when he turns, like now, to wave at one of the seal girls dancing in the water, she sees a ghost of a dimple. But it's not a ghost, it's real flesh. In the sunlight, she clearly sees that his hands, resting on her forearm, are his hands, and broad—everyone says Caleb will have large hands. And then he turns to her again, and she kisses him, smells him, he is a wet little boy, her boy, not his father but a part of him, and she can bear it. More than that, she can see him now, clearly, outlined against the blue of both sky and water.

And, as she moves to the curved edge of the pool, she understands she will never see Mark again, except when he is enclosed in those wooden frames and shiny albums—there will be no more fleeting moments of love, or desperation, or bewilderment.

She lifts Caleb up, still light, and as he leaves the water, his weight becomes real. Then they sit at the edge of the pool and count each other's fingers and toes. ✧

FINALIST

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Fiction

The Middle of the End

Elena Ender

Elena Ender spends her time writing silly little stories, scouring local dives for live music, and clowning around with her friends in Portland, OR. Her debut chapbook, *Still Alive, I'm Afraid*, is available now thanks to *Bullshit Lit*. You can find her online as: @elena_ender.

The Middle of the End
Elena Ender

I can smell the tar bubbling up and oozing down the street as a sign of the end times. The cars get gobbled, and the drivers climb out of their windows to sit on top of their hot roofs until someone brings them a small bridge to get them to the sidewalk, a mound of pillows, or a plank of wood, perhaps. Our death is inevitable, but at least we can help our neighbor get back to their lawn where they step on frogs, fallen from the sky, croaking over and over. I can hear the cicadas scream in chorus with the frogs, buzzing a harmony that only a mother could make you feel guilty about.

It's because you had premarital sex, she says over her morning coffee, doing the crossword and hearing the pitter-patter of blood drizzling on the aluminum siding of my childhood home. *And it was gay*, she bemoans. I moved back in at the beginning of the end, but the apocalypse hasn't fully taken enough time out of my day to keep me a safe distance from Mom's grumblings. She is retired.

I don't think the world is ending because I had premarital gay sex.

You never know, she shakes her head. *But it surely wasn't me*. Dad cleans up the messes that seep indoors but knows his favorite lawn-maintenance tasks are a lost cause. If I am the reason for the apocalypse, I'd mostly feel guilty for that; he loves taking care of the hydrangea bushes.

I still work remote writing social media ads for an agency that represents some questionable corporations. I'm getting paid, but not paying rent, and also going out much less, obviously. So if the world sticks around for another two years, I would maybe be able to afford a down payment on a condo in the city. It's unlikely, but it would be kind of nice.

None of my friends live in the area. It's all just people I knew from high school who never left. It's embarrassing seeing them again after so long, especially feeling like I failed for not hacking it in the city through all of this. It was just so on fire.

I try to keep up with my friends from the city, but not many of them are in places with cell service or general livability. Everyone without a plan was invited to join me, but no one wanted to share a bedroom. I mean, I get it: I snore, and I am bad about putting laundry away.

The days move slowly as the world waits for a merciful close. After the initial uproar, we became and remained

relatively quiet and level. I stopped dreaming a few weeks ago; I just sleep in static and wake up to an unfriendly alarm.

During the hours between storms, a hot, orange dusk, I take our old dog Benny for a walk. He sniffs the curb clovers and pulls at his leash to catch up to the creatures that have fallen from the sky or been unearthed from below. He never tries to bite, though, and he never even growls. He just wants to play. ✧

WINNER

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Nonfiction

from judge Teresa Carmody: Every childhood is mythical. If we're lucky, we grow older. And if we turn toward language to remember how it was, we might just conjure the many mythical creatures that lived alongside us. I love the voice in this piece—the contemplative hush of it, and its unexpected turns of phrase and image.

Lobo, King of the Dogs

Lenore Weiss

Raised in the Bronx and now based in Oakland, **Lenore Weiss** is the author of a novel, *Pulp into Paper*, and multiple poetry collections, including *Video Game Pointers* (2024) and a trilogy exploring love, loss, and mortality. Her prize-winning flash fiction chapbook, *Holding on to the Fringes of Love*, was published by Alexandria Quarterly Press. A member of the San Francisco Writers Grotto and Associate Creative Nonfiction Editor for *Mud Season Review*, she has collaborated across disciplines, most recently on *Life into Light*, a chapbook about photosynthesis created with scientist Dr. John Bedbrook. She is currently working on her second novel, tentatively entitled "Not a Good Season for Trust." Lenore has led writing workshops and tutored middle school students.

Lobo, King of the Dogs
Lenore Weiss

I grew up amongst older kids, counting bees and straining chunks of sandstone into empty soup cans. I watched cats play with dead mice and then ran up the block to an abandoned house filled with ceramic bowls heaped with flies. Like us, there were dogs, strays that wandered in the neighborhood sniffing garbage cans. My playground was the lot that adjoined our apartment building; it's where I climbed pretend mountains to explore new countries, where I studied flowers and whatever happened to grow in broken glass–clover, chicory, and dandelions, the local flora of the Bronx that took root amidst the discarded, empty TV boxes that became our playthings. We rolled in them until we became dizzy-sick, our sides sore from neighborhood kids kicking outside the box.

Sometimes, in the summer, I'd walk with my family to City Island east of Throgs Neck, surrounded by the Long Island Sound, where restaurants served up fried oysters, clams, and eels. I thought the world consisted of the Manhattan skyline held together with roasted coffee from the Café Bustelo factory—a smell that will forever be enshrined in my memory, together with garbage festering outside our building in the summer heat.

If I wasn't playing in the vacant lot, I held court upstairs in our one-bedroom apartment, on cold days sifting through the contents of a toy box stored in the foyer, just beneath the dumb-waiter that had been used at some point as a garbage disposal, but now served as a highway for cockroaches, allowing them to make excursions throughout the building. The bugs persisted no matter how much we crushed, sprayed, or stepped on them; the small white ones were the babies. The toy box, on the other hand, easily exposed its gifts, which included a stuffed squirrel my father had given my mother during their courtship days, and as such, an artifact of love. There was a mismatched collection of building blocks and a plastic bag that included a lump of clay, too hard to shape into anything, but nonetheless still interesting. Next to the toy box was the hallway closet (my parents') with a box of comics and a wine-colored velvet bathrobe. On days when I was sick, my mother allowed me to use it as a cover.

In kindergarten, my teacher was not the warm-hearted woman who ushered her charges to their seats with a loving smile. Her hair was so thin, I could see her scalp. She believed in disciplining children by making them stand in the

darkest corner of the clothing closet. The only happy thing I remember about her class was looking into a kaleidoscope, but that wasn't enough to forgive her, in addition to the sour containers of milk she handed out every morning.

Leaving home for kindergarten made me feel sick. I was happy to sit in the apartment and examine the many shoes that had been pushed to the back of the closet, including red and black galoshes, all of which had a rubbery smell and still had not dried out from the last snowstorm, and spend time with my box of crayons, mourning for each one that was no longer whole. I felt insecure in being pushed outside the apartment, where I'd learned to walk holding on to the arm of a chair and scouting my way to a glass table in the living room. Leaving the security of the apartment for school was an excruciating experience.

We lived along Hunts Point Avenue. "The Avenue," as we referred to it, had dry goods stores filled with nurses' uniforms and gray wool sweaters, and a stationery store we visited at the beginning of each school year. I loved the store for its pencils and crayons and its notebooks of white composition paper. It was just a few stores up from the delicatessen where they sold corned beef and pastrami sandwiches lacey with white fat, and where some rough-looking older boys stopped me one day to say, "You have a pussy in between your legs." I looked, but saw nothing.

Beyond the deli, and at the outermost limits of the Avenue, was the Garrison Bakery run by an Italian family who sold black-and-white cookies, five-inch disks with an anise taste. Past the bakery was the Bruckner Expressway, a thoroughfare of cars rushing headlong in opposite directions.

Once I crossed the Expressway, I arrived at the Hunts Point subway station. It was flanked on one side by a newsstand where people bought copies of the *New York Post,* the *Daily News,* and also *The New York Times*, which was displayed in a smaller stack beneath the two other papers. Then there was a triangular park with wooden benches where men, women, and children watched pigeons eat bread crusts. From here, the rest of Southern Boulevard fanned out, home to a toy store and a Chinese restaurant where we ordered sub-gum after going to the movies at Loew's Cinema, where my mother took me to see every movie by Rodgers and Hammerstein.

The street was our playground.

Summer raced by in baseball cards,

roller skates, hula hoops, hopscotch, marbles, jump ropes, bottle caps, highly-prized Spaldeens that were like tennis balls but without a furry outside, water guns, yo-yos, pea shooters, and coloring book season. Girls collected and traded charms. My "best one" was a purple swan. There were frequent rock-throwing battles where the Longfellow and Bryant Avenue gangs tried to see who'd go crying first to the emergency room of Lincoln Hospital.

"You hurt?"

"No, just bleeding."

I was the hula hoop champion of my block and could ride the hoop from my waist up to my neck and back down to my knees without stopping. One summer, I lost 10 pounds practicing outside on the sidewalk until the street lamps came on. I enjoyed roller skating over a slate sidewalk that adjoined the lot, a smooth ride on heavy metal skates with clamps tightened by a key worn on a dirty string around my neck. A heavy rainstorm flooded worms from their underground homes, pink against the black slate sidewalk. But riding down the hill past the Fire Station was the most exciting, watching out for cars, and at the same time, weaving from one side of the street to the other.

Slowly, I began to conquer the blocks that defined my neighborhood.

My explorations fanned out to Southern Boulevard and to the Hunts Point Palace, which, in its heyday, hosted bands from all over the city, but was now a dance studio. A long set of stairs led to a mirrored practice room where I took tap lessons but never got past learning the time step. Up from the Palace, I found Woolworths where I practiced petty thievery, strolled past fish tanks filled with darting slivers of color, past an aisle of pencils, papers, and notebooks—things I coveted and stole. After I exited through the doors and slunked back home, I shouted to myself, "Safe!" like our tag games of ring-a-levio.

Several boys lived on the block, including Eddy, next door to me, and also Bobby and Brian, Dodo's (her name was Dorothy) twins, plus Melvin, a boy who'd just moved into the building with his parents, who'd escaped from the Nazis and wore clothing that never fit. People said that was because the family got their clothes from the welfare department. Then there was Ronny, Yetta's son, who later became a heroin addict and stole whatever he could from his mother, but there was no one like Donny, who moved through the neighborhood like a clean knife cutting through cheesecake. For weeks, we

watched each other. I wasn't sure in which building he lived. He had dark hair and green eyes. I sat on the stonewall that bordered the lot and saw him cross the street. He asked me, "Can I sit here?"

Warmth radiated from my thighs, a preparation for something I couldn't imagine, but at the same time, knew everything about. In one moment, my thighs became sweaty and stuck together. I was about six years old. Donny's complexion was smooth, and he was close enough to my face so I could see a fine network of hair on his ruddy cheek and also above his mouth. I looked at the stupid Buster Brown Oxford shoes my parents made me wear. He asked if he could kiss me, and I said yes. He held my hand. Then the streetlamps came on. I watched him get up. I remained sitting there, still feeling the outline of his lips. Later, I heard from my sisters that he'd moved away. No one knew where. For years, I longed for a boy to make me feel what Donny had —the unknown danger and excitement of physical intimacy.

Each five years apart, my sisters and I shared a bedroom. They slept together. I slept in a separate bed against the wall, and my parents in the living room on a roll-away couch. After they got up in the morning, I plopped into the upholstered chair and looked out to the fire escape, where, during the spring, I grew morning glories in wooden cheese boxes with seeds ordered from the New York City public school system. My first garden grew on the fire escape.

The seeds arrived in brown paper packets stapled to our original order. They looked like small black canoes with an indentation on top. We soaked them in a glass of water. After a day's immersion, we'd plant them in a cheese box I had procured in advance from Mr. Kurtz's grocery store at the end of our street. Back then, American cheese arrived in rectangular blocks and was sliced to order—thin, medium, or thick— wrapped in wax paper, folded, and sealed.

My mother sent me to request an empty cheese box. Mr. Kurtz always wore a white apron and stood close to his register near a display of Hostess Twinkies. He went to the back room of the store and returned with a box about nine inches long. I carried my treasure upstairs. I don't remember where we got the soil–either from the Five and Dime, or dug some from the vacant lot. We prepared a garden bed for our morning glories by making a hole with the back of a soup spoon for seeds that were slightly swollen and cracked after soaking, pressing them into a prepared

row and covering them up, placing the box in the sunshine outside the kitchen window.

Each day I got up, walked past my two sisters, tiptoed to the kitchen, stuck my head outside the window, and checked on the progress of the seeds. One morning, I looked outside and saw the soil beginning to erupt. Even though I knew better, I used my finger to disrupt the fissure so I could see an individual seed sprout, head bent over like a crooked woman still encased in its seed hat, until it emerged from the soil, growing long and spindly, magically seeking a white string we had saved from a bakery box and thumb-tacked to the window frame. Each day, I'd investigate how much the morning glories had grown. From seeds to seedlings, I watched them wrap and braid themselves along the string. But we had to select the healthiest. We could only grow one or two in the small box. As summer approached, I watched blossoms appear, tightly pressed together like two palms, before they opened into blossoms bluer than Paul Newman's eyes, bluer than the sky, framing my window.

Some weekends, I'd listen to my mother talk with her friends at the kitchen table as they ate slices of her home-baked cake, downed with cups of freshly brewed coffee.

My mother filled her yeast cakes with chocolate and nuts; the dough was soft and pliable, the way my mother's breasts looked when she put on her bra. She taught me Hungarian words for poppyseeds and nuts: mákos and diós, plus the velvety prune butter she used in some of her cakes called lekvár. Around the kitchen table, my mother's friends discussed everything—which supermarkets were having the best sales, shared tidbits about their children and husbands, and gossiped about the next-door neighbors who were always fighting. I tried to understand how they knew when to move from one topic to the next.

"Tell your change-of-life baby to leave," said my mother's friend, Dodo, whose Italian alcoholic husband had died a few years before, an event she had celebrated in her apartment. My mother smiled. She had given birth to me after she'd turned 40 years old, an age when most of her generation was done with having children. Whenever my parents wanted privacy, they spoke Hungarian. But as my mother's friends only spoke English, they wanted me to scram.

"Oh, let her stay," my mother said, running her hand through my dark hair. "She won't bother us."

Yetta, who lived on the ground floor on our side of the building, didn't say much. My mother had told me that Yetta was sitting shiva, mourning for her canary that had recently died after seven years of flying around her living room. "How could you?" Yetta spat through the silver bridge wires of her mouth.

"Do what?" said my mother.

"Come downstairs, the two of you dressed in black?"

"But Yetta," said Dodo, chewing on a slice of my mother's yeast cake. "We knew you were upset about *Charlie*," the name of the dearly departed canary. "How could you think we were making fun?" Dodo always smelled like an expensive cosmetic counter, always applying moisturizers to her face and body. She pulled Yetta's blouse up on her shoulder and revealed a lavender bra strap. "Matching panties?"

Yetta was the only one who could afford such luxuries. Her husband gambled and gave her a sizable weekly allowance. She indignantly pulled her blouse back down. "Yes," she said, and always left a bright pink cupid's bow on the rim of her cup.

Since large pets were not allowed in the apartment building, Dodo feared her dog Coco would be discovered by the landlord. Our family had a parakeet from Woolworths, and it flew in the living room one day. I chased the bird from one side of the wall to another, as it desperately tried to grip the crown molding, and smacked directly into the wall, landing on the floor in a flutter of green feathers. It didn't move. I pushed its head. It was dead. Only moments ago, it was flying around the ceiling. I buried the bird in a shoebox, but told no one about my culpability.

In junior high (middle school), I began to get sick.

My mother took it as a personal insult that she had a sickly child. How could she, the self-proclaimed Rock of Gibraltar, steadfast in every storm, calm in the face of any adversity, have a daughter whom you could blow over with a single breath?

Any time the doctors prescribed a new food regimen, she discovered health food stores, places outside of her usual shopping route on Hunts Point Avenue.

I went through a gluten-free phase since the doctors thought I was allergic to wheat products. When that didn't work, I moved on to all-protein diets, eating broiled meat, cottage cheese, and raw vegetables. I cheated as much as I

could, pilfering Milky Ways from the closet. Finally, the doctors decided I didn't have a food allergy.

I knew it was the Sick Monster who was punishing me for killing my parakeet.

In junior high school, the doctors told my mother they wanted to send me to a hospital "for observation," which turned into a nasty regimen of urine and bowel collection and giving me tests that required barium enemas. On the morning when I was being discharged, I felt the Sick Monster jab me in the stomach with a sharp fingernail. "I will follow you wherever you go. You will never escape me."

I returned to school and tried to forget him, discovered the library where I read Greek mythology, stories about Psyche whose husband was invisible at night; Grimm's fairy tales about three tasks that must be accomplished before a prince can find love, or Hans Christian Anderson's Little Mermaid who dissolved into a sea of foam, sacrificing her silvery tail for stumpy legs. Love wasn't going to be easy. All the songs on the radio said so. But I thought it had to be the most wonderful thing in the world, the moment when Emile De Becque in South Pacific spots Nellie Forbush across a crowded room. I also dreamed about making the world a better place. But I couldn't find books to tell me how I was supposed to do any of this, especially how to find the person who was going to share a roll-away couch with me every night.

Throughout school, I never had a boyfriend.

Maurice was my next-door neighbor. Once, he showed me his rock collection with identifying labels. He also had a microscope. One day, we came across a stray dog like any other, with a body that was lean for the streets, rib cage visible, black and brown fur oozing around a sore. It was Saturday, several hours before dinner, as days began to shorten and whisper with a cold breath.

My mother had told me never to pet a dog, especially if it were drooling, because that was a sure sign of rabies. One of the twins had gotten bitten by a dog and had to go to the hospital and get injections with a needle that was as long as a baseball bat. I didn't want to go to the hospital. I backed off and watched the dog from a safe distance. Occasionally, the dog picked up its head and sniffed. Its eyes were green like the pastel chalk we strained over rusted screens and poured into socks on Halloween to pound on people's front doors.

He told me his name was Lobo.

“Lobo,” I said. “You look hurt. Better hide behind this rock. Don’t let the other kids see you because they might throw rocks. And watch out for Ronny. He’s the meanest. I’ll be right back with food. I promise.” I ran upstairs. I opened the door with my key and hoped my mother was still shopping. I rescued a slice of leftover meatloaf.

Lobo looked at me with his spinning eyes and said that another dog had chased him across Southern Boulevard. He was panting hard. We walked past the washing machine room in the basement. The floor was coated with scum from soap that had flooded countless times. We approached a hole in the pavement where rain had gathered. Lobo lapped up the water and gave me a few hairs from his tail. He said they were magic. If I were in trouble, all I needed to do was to stand in front of a car’s rearview mirror, hold them in my hand and call out his name. ✧

RUNNER-UP

Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Nonfiction

Infant Of

Patricia Knight Meyer

Patricia Knight Meyer is a journalist, adoption reform advocate, and survivor of the Baby Scoop Era black market. Born in 1970 and sold on the black market via an illegal adoption, she obtained her first legal birth certificate at age 47. She serves on the board of the National Association of Adoptees and Parents (NAAP), keynotes at national adoption conferences, and leads memoir writing workshops nationwide. She divides her time between the Texas Hill Country and New Orleans. *Wonderland: Memoir of a Black-Market Adoption* is her first book, and it releases on Nov. 3 by Unsolicted Press. Find her on Facebook at @Wonderlandthememoir or @patriciaknightmeyer and on Instagram at @wonderlandthememoir or @patriciaknightmeyer. Visit her website at www.myadoptedlife.com.

Infant Of,
an excerpt from WONDERLAND: Memoir of a Black-Market Adoption
Patricia Knight Meyer

“At thirty-eight, you want to find *her*?”

My mother is stewing in her wheelchair, pulled up alongside the bar in what she calls her “shithole shoebox” senior-living apartment. Although she still walks short distances, she likes how the footrests of her wheelchair rise to meet her feet, accommodating her short legs, “which don’t go all the way up,” she sometimes jokes.

It’s a gray fall day, and we’re sharing our Wednesday happy hour. Having made gin and tonics, I sit in my usual spot on the futon, ready for our chat about how my day at work went, what the pundits on TV are saying, and which news anchor she dreamed she danced with the prior night.

“Oh, Dan Rather had all the moves! With him, it’s always the tango.”

It touches me that despite the limp from a broken hip and the oxygen cord stretched across her face, she still dreams about moving and grooving with journalism’s hottest.

“Do you ever sleep with them?” I once asked.

“No, but Anderson Cooper lets his hand wander.”

“You’re not his type,” I’d reminded her.

“What can I say? Gay men love me!”

She works hard to get the last word, and usually it’s a zinger. But today, my mother isn’t talking about her dreams; she’s talking about mine. It seems she’s seen the Ancestry.com charge I made on her credit card while chasing that dream, and now I’m cornered.

“I thought you’d at least wait for me to drop dead before you looked for her.”

She’s only half joking.

Behind those boxy frames, she studies me. Adjusting her posture, she attempts to appear more composed, perhaps a tad healthier.

“Someday I’ll look, but not now,” I assure her. Having Mommy’s blessing to search isn’t the same thing as telling her I’m already doing so.

“You wanted me to find out, didn’t you? Why else would you use *my* card?”

She's got me there. Apparently not too blind to take a magnifying glass to a credit card statement, it's like she's caught me up to something. Which she has.

Having learned that Texas's birth records were searchable on Ancestry.com, I'd gone momentarily bonkers and used my mother's Mastercard to open an account. I'd left my wallet at home that day, and her emergency card in my work drawer offered an easy solution to my immediate predicament. I thought I'd gotten away with it.

While at UT Austin years before, I'd stood in the capital-based Bureau of Vital Statistics, mouth agape at the three-foot pile of volumes—all the 1970 birth records for Harris County, one of nine counties in the Houston metropolitan area. "They aren't by date," the record keeper said, grunting while she'd stacked them before me. "Each is listed alphabetically, by mother's last name."

I'd leafed through thousands of bible-thin pages that day, looking for mothers whose babies were listed as "infants of," those who most likely had relinquished, women like my birth mother who'd blindly trusted the system that absconded with their infants. But without knowing her name, my birth name, my date, or even the exact year of birth, searching the stacks had seemed daunting and pointless. Now, according to my sources, these records have been digitized and are awaiting scouring. And that's when I set up the account and started digging. The act seemed benign at the time. Why didn't I wait until I got home to use my own card? Did I subconsciously want Mommy to find out? Maybe?

"I'll pay you back," I say.

"It's not the money I'm concerned about," she snaps, side-eyeing me while fumbling in the pocket of her robe for a cigarette and lighter. I check for the hum of her O2 machine, which I don't hear, and relax—glad she's not about to accidentally set herself on fire again.

"Even if I found something, I wouldn't reach out. Not now."

"Why not?" She asks like she really wants to know. "Don't you want her to meet me?"

"It's not *her* meeting *you* I'm worried about," I answer, rattling the ice in my glass, wishing I'd poured a stronger drink.

Hopefully, that puts her questions to rest.

She doesn't need to know about my years-old profile on CousinConnect.com, or the warning received from a well-intentioned stranger: "I hope you already have a passport. Since 9/11, the passport office only accepts long-form birth certificates." I don't know if that's true, but long-form requirement or not, since the state seems to have no record of me, adoption or otherwise, I guard the one "identifying" document I have with my life—even if it's a fake, which it very well might be. It's all I've got.

"So, you didn't find anything?" Mommy pries, the smoke from her last drag screening her concern.

"You remember that massive stack of birth records at the Bureau of Vital Statistics I told you about? How I wanted to go through them, but it was just too much? Well, now they're searchable online. So, I could potentially find something."

Seventy-two, my mother nods like she knows everything there is to know about electronic records. Her silence is accentuated with a long sip of her drink and an even longer drag on her smoke. Sometimes silence means things are about to go sideways, and I'll leave with her upset or crying. Either way, she cries, sitting here hours on end with no one to talk to. She's not one to join gardening clubs or crochet circles, and her eyes are far too bad for driving.

"I have nothing in common with *those* people," she says, peering through the blinds, as shadows shaped like her neighbors amble up to the clubhouse for bingo or backgammon. Unless they are belly up beside her at the neighborhood bar, she considers most her age "fuddy-duddy drips" and "such boring bastards that neither Heaven nor Hell will have them."

On these visits, I usually call in any meds needing refilling, tidy her apartment, and make a day or two's worth of food so she eats well while I'm away. "Congrats, you're finally rid of me," she'd spat the day she moved in, sulking about her new five-hundred square feet of independence, resigned to accept the fucked-up fate I'd dealt her.

"You can't leave me in this hellhole to rot and expect me to cope without my vices," she often barters. "Make it a carton of smokes and a gallon of Bombay if you love me." I agree reluctantly. My compliance is ushering her to her death, but as Daddy did, I give her whatever she wants; Band Aids for the wounds she believes I've inflicted.

Lately, though, the Lexapro seems to be bringing Happy Mommy back, at least a

friendlier drunk than the previous version. I'm no longer the "ungrateful, self-centered bitch" of a daughter who dropped her here. Now I'm "the world's best daughter," especially when I deliver the goods on time and in sufficient quantities. *Still, how can I leave?*

No matter how much she says she's fine, each time I drive away, I'm abandoning her all over again. I look at the clock, calculate the time between now and when I need to head home to my husband, and push the guilt of leaving to the back of my mind.

Pulling out a tray of meds from under the coffee table between us, I begin refilling her massive monthly pill planner. Snap, snap, snap. Prying rows of lids open, I dose each slot, one after the other: morning, noon, afternoon, and night—plop, plop, plop, plop. "Truly, without being morbid," I say, "I don't want to share what time we have left with another mother. If I look, it'll be when you're gone. Not that you're replaceable or anything."

"You sure you didn't find anything?" she presses.

"Not really," I lie, dropping each pill into its umpteenth slot.

I had looked. And one record had stood out, an "infant of" with no birth name given or birth father listed, delivered the very same week I was presumably born, to a woman named Dinah—a name that sounds a whole lot like the name my mother let slip long ago, the name Diane. Within seconds, I'd slapped shut my laptop, overwhelmed by the prospect of sliding down a rabbit hole that I—the me I know myself to be—might not climb back out of.

"I saw some 'infants of'" I admit, "but no real leads. Even if I found a name, can you imagine how hard it would be to track down a person? People get married, they move, they die. But since we're on the subject, is there anything you need to tell me that you haven't yet?"

I keep plopping: diuretics, blood pressure pill, blood thinner, heart pill, thyroid med, anti-depressant, NSAID, iron, potassium, vitamin D ... Plop, plop, plop, I focus on the slots and try not to look overly interested in her answer.

"What do you mean?" she asks, wiping away a tubular grey ash that has tumbled from the tip of her cigarette and landed in the lap of her lilac house dress.

"Like some details you still need to share? Maybe about how things went down the day you drove away with me.

You know, with no papers or BC? It's not like I have a lot to go on."

"No, I don't think so," she says, eyes on the floor. "But don't worry," she adds, "Lola gets what Lola wants." *I've never figured out why my mother loves quoting old musicals as a way to taunt or humor me. Lola is from Damn Yankees.*

"You know what Lola really wants?" I prod on, snapping thirty days of pill box lids closed in rapid succession, "I want to find that attorney. Find out what he did with your $30K and my papers."

My mother raises a dismissive eyebrow and turns her head. End of conversation. I may not be done answering her questions, but she's done answering mine.

The medicine tray rattles as I slide it back under the coffee table. I look up to find my mother's gaze has wandered out of the room, thoughts threading through the sliding glass door, beyond the autumn leaves, to a time when I'm again alone in this world. I'm at once aware of the wind whistling along the windowsill, the tick of the clock on her wall, the dripping faucet at the sink.

"So, once you find her... after I'm dead," she sighs, eyes cast out the door, "how will you feel if she doesn't want to meet you?"

"Well," I say, scooting to the edge of the futon, reaching for her hand, "at least I'll know I tried. I do wonder about her, but mostly I want her to know that I'm okay, that you and Daddy gave me a good life."

The last part is a lie, but my "good life" response draws my mother's eyes and hands to mine.

"Well, I hope you aren't hurt or disappointed. What if she's ignorant white trash?"

"Seriously, is that your opinion of my DNA?" I joke, and she raises a quizzical eyebrow that makes me laugh, signaling I've set her mind at ease.

"I'm empty," Mommy whines, playfully upending her glass, and I rise to pour another round. The booze eases the pain of my leaving, and my second, her third, will seal the deal for us both.

"The mystery of me is a lot like *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice slides down a rabbit hole and loses all sense of herself. It's like that, but it's more about climbing out of that hole, like to find out who you were before you fell in, than finding any particular person."

Measuring out shots of Bombay by the fridge, I realize I just compared my life with her and Daddy to falling into a massive sinkhole.

"I don't care who she is." I go on. "I just want to thank her. Hell, she may not want to hear from me. I'm likely a dirty little secret kept from a family that knows nothing about me?"

I turn around, drinks in each hand, to find worry wilting my mother's face. It's as if she'd never thought of this before. It says, *I don't want you to do this now, but I don't want you going through it alone, with me dead and gone.*

My heart drops. This is harder for her than it is for me. I simply want a legal birth certificate, but she's dead-dog frightened. Is she fearful I'll be disappointed by the mother I've compared her to all these years, or is there something darker I might uncover?

Who in the world am I? has always been my great puzzle. Mommy still needs groceries, meds, trips to the doctor, and bi-weekly visits. Me. She doesn't need me searching for her replacement.

Yet, if I lose my only identifying document, I'll likely never be able to replace my passport or prove my citizenship. The minute people start dying, the truth will get that much harder, if not impossible, to uncover.

"I may never look, you know," I say, pushing the glass across the bar, urging her to drink up, forget about it. "I guess it's just curiosity."

***

And that was it. The last time we ever talked about it. I wish I'd told my mother that, despite being each other's replacements, no one could ever take her place. That she was and would always be my only mother. That she'd been enough. But the last part, her being enough, I could never have said, even as much as I wanted to.

Separation trauma had clouded every aspect of my life. I couldn't yet embrace the truth—that even when adoptive parents are the very best, they likely aren't enough to fill the gap in your abandoned soul. That's normal. Not betrayal. I didn't just want or need to know who I was and where I came from; I deserved it. Raised by those who created you, dropped in a baby box, placed for adoption, donor conceived, or trafficked on the street, every soul deserves the right to their true identity.

It hadn't yet occurred to me that if I ever met my first mother and wanted an authentic relationship with her, I too

would have some ugly facts to face. I'd not been raised by the idyllic family of so many first mothers' fantasies—the placement fallacies woven and sold to them by coercive agencies, lawyers, and parents of their generations.

Who knew what lies the attorney had told her? How many promises he'd broken? Or what she'd think about the less-than-perfect couple who raised her baby. Nor did I realize that she, too, might not be the ideal, uncomplicated mother of my dreams.

Leaving my mother's apartment that day, stopping on the sidewalk as I stepped toward the car, I still recall the sight of her through the window, seeing her little legs through the half-open blinds, rooted there at the bar in her wheelchair. Despite her inability to be the kind of mother I needed, I still remember wondering how sad she'd be 'til I returned, how I stuffed down the sobs that squirmed in my throat as I shut the car door and backed out of the parking space, but I can't for the life of me recall if I told her how irreplaceable she truly was. ✧

©2026 *Magpie Zine* magpiezine.com