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dec 2021 | issue #4

Out to Lunch

Records

Every Heart in this Family is Tired

CHRISTEN NOEL KAUFFMAN



It's said that the man's heart stopped
before the dynamite blast, my grandfather,

fingers black with explosives & one unruly
stump. Next it was his wife, breasts pillowed

into nightdress after going to check for fox,
one chicken gone & her head against the floor.

The aunt from Pennsylvania left a cow's tongue
on the stove, the muscle so thick no one

thought to boil it whole, but instead cut it
in thirds, sent to sisters in different states.

When my mother feels dizzy, I check my own
irregular beat, hand on my chest

until I feel the metric thump. There you are,
little drum, organ my uncle stole when he

buried a newborn calf. Once, I ate a deer
heart, sunk my teeth into every hollow valve

when my father brought it home. Nothing
can rebuild the arrangement of bones, the mouse

head my brother tried to skin & bleach clean –
its heartbeat ten times faster than a man's.

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ABOUT OUT TO LUNCH RECORDS



DANIEL NERGER

OUT TO LUNCH FOUNDER

MATT VEKAKIS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF | THE LUNCH BREAK ZINE

ADAM GURCZAK

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS AND DESIGN



@OUTTOLUNCHRECORDS

@LUNCHBREAKZINE

We seek to challenge, innovate, and explore new ways of creating and engaging on a musical and extra-musical level. All things avant, absurd, and oppositional are welcomed. The spirit of Dada and DIY are present and encouraged. Operating as a creative collective, Out to Lunch is not a genre or aesthetic specific music label, and that will be reflected in our output and artists alike.

Out to Lunch Records was formed out of a natural progression of collaborations and friendships in and around the Boston music scene, arising as a creative solution to a vastly changing musical landscape. The Lunch Break Zine serves as the literary arm of the label, providing a platform for writers, poets, and visual artists to share their work.

This issue of the Lunch Break Zine was designed by Adam Gurczak
adamgurczak.com

THE

LORRAINE CAVALLARO POETRY PRIZE

IS THRILLED TO ANNOUNCE

OUR WINNERS!



Lorraine Cavallaro was a Sicilian-American poet. Lorraine wrote verse in spite of life's objections to her creating art. Despite this, Lorraine would publish numerous collections of poetry and go on to receive many awards for her work. Like so many of us, Lorraine wrote as a means of necessity.

WINNER

Shiver by Evelyn Black

I've been walking these days through the starless night:
raindrops & the shivering clover
of the sky downtown:
streetlamps, headlights & the neon signs of bars—
what cataclysm is awaiting all of this?
nothing, probably: it will go on, like so
many things go on:
the break's in us: the homeless
squat on street corners,
sleeping bags & garbage:
Seattle hates them, won't give them
a home: it's a problem, we all say: it's tragic:
but what else can we do: (& nothing's all
we've done): I'm scared
that I will find my place
among the mad girls
of the street: schizophasia
on the page & in my mouth: gibbering
color & sound & spitting
madness's ekphrastic case for fear:
if light were coarser I might scrape
the world with it, get at the supple core
of life: instead I hover through
my thousand lives: anchorite, whore,
poet, sleeper, woman, inpatient:
in all of them I see
the things that aren't
there: tonight I sit among the fractal
rhododendron leaves & whisper
about angels on blank wings: how fast they fall:
crying of bright empyrean urns:



heaven's rough fingers
no longer holding
them aloft, instead
just all that blankness: space
to fill & space to fall: & so I fall,
each Tuesday when I wander
the queer district with my lover:
she says she wishes she could see
the things I do: curiosity, I guess:
in another time
I might have been
a seer, or a prophet:
telling of the gods: their anger,
or their sorrow: but certainly not their love:
& just as easily I could have been
lobotomized, or locked in an asylum:
instead I live at home,
because I am too crazy
to hold down a job: schizophrenia
comes to us from greek & means split
mind: schizo / phrenia: crazy, too, comes
to us a metaphor
of brokenness, initially
meaning shatter: to be crazy is to have
a shattered mind: today, though,
I am sane: I watch the dark
blue waves come in & out, receding
on themselves, like shakespeare lines:
& 5am another morning
while I think of split things &
brokenness, I think of you, your wife & I:
how the first night we all slept
together, you said
it was like "cuddle prison"
to be between us,
so on future nights I slept
in the middle, my hand
on your wife's side, & your breasts

on my back: I wrote then that we
made "a sunflower crowded with gods"
on your black bed: I felt so
at peace I said, "I could die like this":
why is it when I feel happiest I think of death?:
that somehow I don't want to keep living
after experiencing some joy:
fear, I guess that life
will never be the same:
that everything after
will be blank, waiting
for you to fill it: of course, you aren't
there to fill me anymore: & I'm trying
to figure out what to do with all this loss:
I had an old professor once
who said that every poem
needed an angelectomy:
no more angels
in poetry: they're over
done: & I'm not Blake:
I'm madder, queerer: but you were the first
person to teach me to feel comfortable in my body:
when we had sex I forgot myself & found
us both in our trans bodies
raveling this thing called gender
in our unburnt wings: & this coming
Thursday I will give you all
my old clothes for your transition: why
no more angels: do we not hold each other anymore?
the wave lights shimmer, our hope
just a momentary glint in the cosmic eye:
if heaven isn't blank, I'll be
surprised: it's not that I left it
in that bed (I did):
it's that a thousand lives encircle us
this moment, every heaven's empty:
always will be: but the angels & their
myriad wings go on: their infinite



eyes stream madness into the fanged sun:

to be perceived

is its own kind of horror & its own

kind of blessing: the difference between angels
(which I do not see) & demons (which I do)

is how many endings they show you:

this poem has so many endings, & this morning

I am holding tight to all of them:

I think there is a part of me that loves

everyone I've ever loved

I keep them with me

in my words, my mind: my poems are

my heart: I don't mean to say I still love you (I do):

what I mean to say is love

is that which cannot be put away:

seeing you this Thursday was like the color
of seaglass burnished in the waves:

when I see you, I feel that I am walking

on the human shore: where water tapers back

the edge: I wish I were bodiless as water:

with the form of everything:

I think blankness fills

to what we know, a ready echo

of what's true enough: the blank,

as it falls outside, falls open:

I thought a long time

that a great radiance cracks between us,

cracks as a name intercedes: if I could

spend a year asleep I still might want

to wake up to your light:

I think this is the last doxology

I'll write: the angels ask, *how am I*

to read this: & I answer

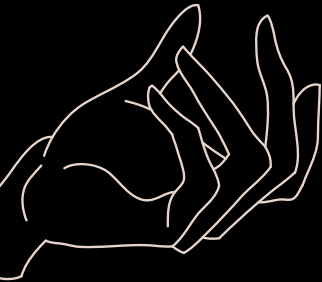
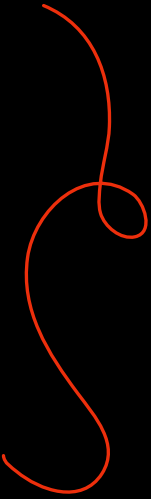
as a song: I have within me an aberrant

grammar: everything

is garbled, everything

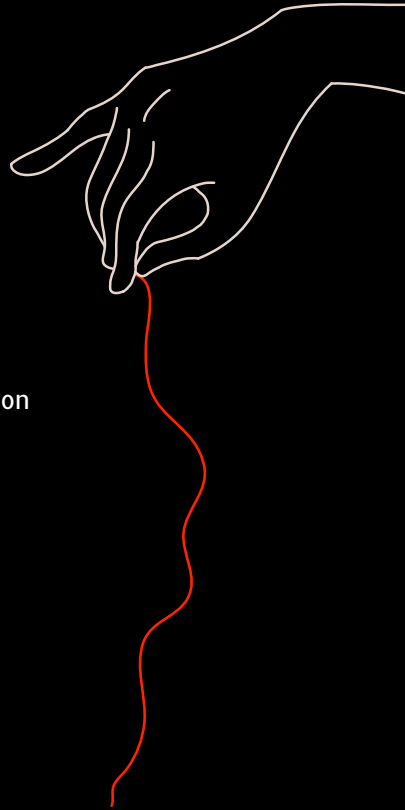
is true: my brain makes

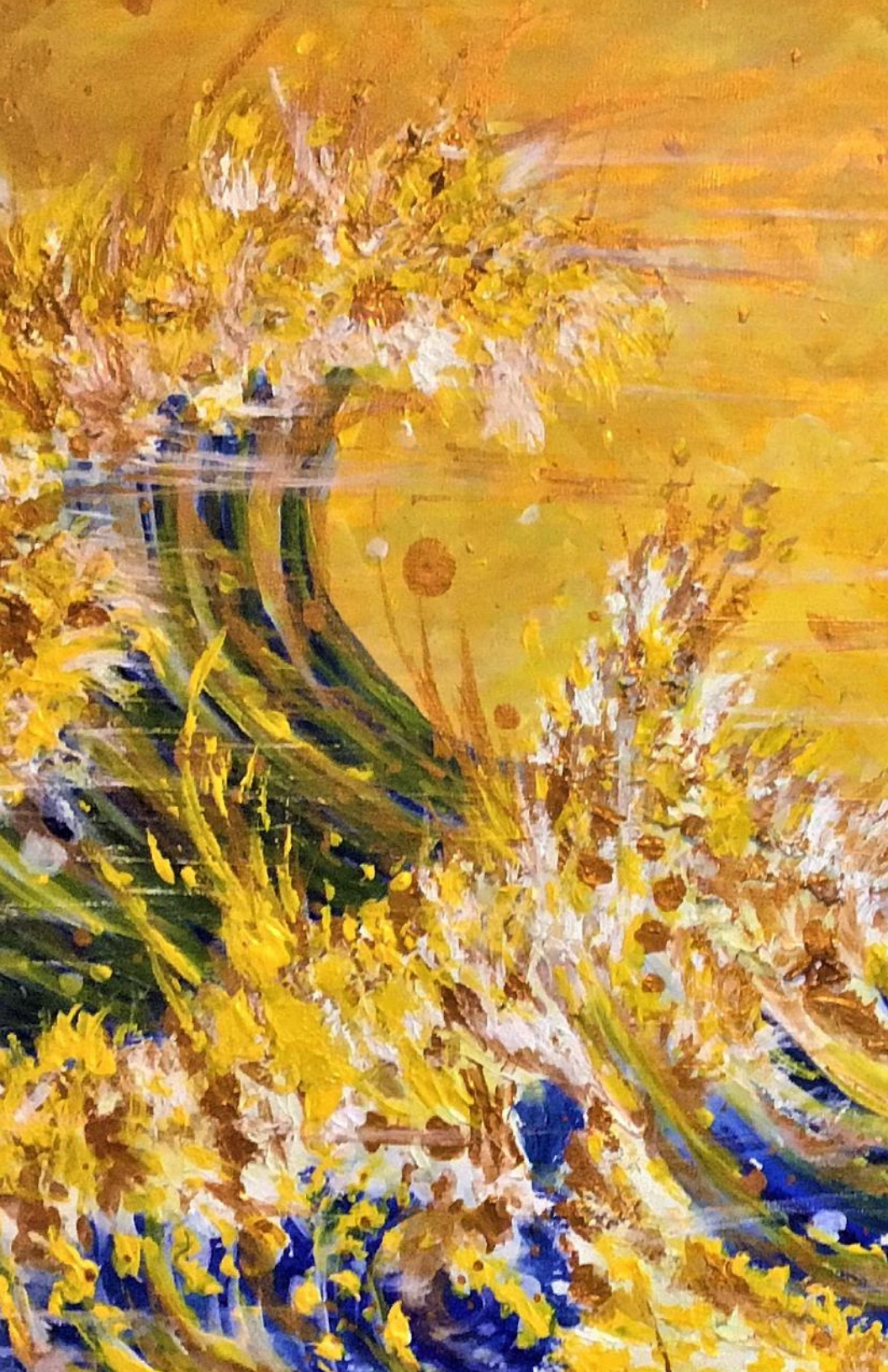
monsters of the light: I see



those visions of myself killed in detail,
some psychotic movie: impaled
on a spike, flung headfirst at a wall:
nothing stops the visions: every angel
is dread: every vision showing me
the multiplicities of fear: & yet I think it is
the multiplicities of love
that interest me: a group of people
lost on earth: it's just I never felt so lost
when I woke up between you two: your inflection
is the echolalia
of my heart: so here's
my violet prayer:
that deep in the stranded heart,
we are in the parentheses of an open road:
I don't believe in souls, or soul mates:
just that inexplicable part that lives on
in another person: a memory or feeling,
the moment just before
or the moment after,
a hand on a hand:

we resist all attempts to open or to close ourselves
those moments when we feel the most:
& we have incommensurate
wings: I think of angels like a promise kept:
how they herringbone themselves together, knit
their thousand arms in patterns
one by one: to get as close as possible
as though being close
might make them closer:
their eyes a clamorous grace
arising fresh to puncture and to terrify:
I think of you, AK, KE, LF, ZZ, & HB:
& something in me stays that dread:
I think I recommend this life.







RUNNER-UP

Judgment by Caitlin M.S. Buxbaum

Billowing before you,
what narrow-minded specter
could comprehend
the splay of your hands,
not outstretched in supplication,
but facing the absent floor
in resignation, your back
to its fury, smoking like charcoal;
a god's rule will not be watered down
by your murky morals. And yet you believe:
if one thing could stay its wrath,
that would be Love, bound up
in a body so inked with its
shame and luster, it might outshine
Death, eternally rippling
through the darkness. But
if the Judge is no saint, only
some demon leaking ectoplasm,
go ahead — light the match.
Burn the motherfucker down.



RUNNER-UP

outlaws on the jornada del muerto trail
by Alani Hicks-Bartlett

i should lie to protect myself.
no, i should tell you my name.
it is here, round like a young cow's eye:
an offering, you cannot miss it.
the etching of an eyelid,
this fêted fringe on the edge of dark or death or light.

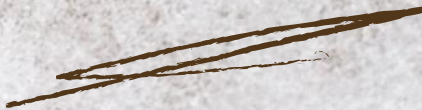
a growing number of bones
stretch me taller.
it is painful to blink in the searing light.
it is painful to sit in the blazing rock's cleft,
cooler, yes, but still so sharp and hot and tight.
i think about home,
where the moss and mushrooms
were at their most resplendent and thick:
glittering, poisonous, moist.
not these bleached graminoids.
not this difficult bajada.
not these forgotten stones and shale.
you have been crouching in the sparse weeds all day,
a spiny shelter.

it is a hardening,
the way your serpent touch stabs at my thumbs,
the way your tongue struggles to lick
at this language i call my own.
it is not yours, and eludes you,
just as a whip-poor-will's mottled plumage
flares here and there in the dramatic desert,
or along the grease-wood speckled slope
of a curved dune here,
the patch of chaparral grass there.

come, take my hand and i will forage at night for you.
chew on these metallic fig beetles,
the green valley grasshoppers,
the sleeker plume moths,
their slim wings looking like a fraying cross,
the occasional round, fat grub...
the brittle brush's yellow flowers are delightful,
attracting butterflies and fat gleaming worms.
the desert milkweed's syrupy sap is almost cloying
in all of this heat and burning.

so yes, given the singe or flare
of our abandonment,
it does surprise me that you want to draw closer,
that you hover your burnt lips over mine
pressing into me like some sort of erosion,
looking for a refuge from the sun?
a hut in which to store your poison?

i should laugh to console you.
i should pour cool silver into your ear,
and harbor you deep, whispering—
there, there. they cannot find us here
or: hush, we are outlaws now
or: yes, it is true that i might love you
or: no, there is no pathway going back.
—but what if my voice is the scabbard you were missing?
but what if my name is the lie?



RUNNER-UP

I Cannot Write About Clouds

by Ingrid Wagner

I cannot write about clouds,
beautiful and billowing,
majestic in their magnitude,
when so many can't see the sky.

I cannot write about birds,
whose songs pierce the sunny
morning light in melodic rhythm
when others can only hear bombs.

I cannot write about love,
its power for safety and joy,
its deep knowing of inner peace,
when hatred is institutional practice.

I cannot write about flowers,
their textured foliage and
vibrant hues, when we poison
the honey bee's refuge.

I cannot write about clouds
until they part their dark
curtains and wash the world
clean of our most human failures.

paying your passage by RC DEWINTER

the day they buried you there was no wind
no sigh or moan disturbed the stillness
of the trees ringing that bitter ground

the only sound the hollow clang of metal
striking stone as shovels kissed rock
on the steep slope where you lie slanted

facing east
the only appropriate direction
for your eternity

the only mourners crows
silent sentinels sent by those
unable to show their faces in daylight

and me
uninvited crouched in the arms
of a thornbush

needing the pain of the physical
to damp the claws of sorrow
rending my chest

and when it was done
earth piled neatly over bones
and all was silent again i rose

walked the twenty paces to your grave
and buried the ring you sent
your token for the ferryman

RESTROOMS



George Stein Photography

*The Cause of All
Desire is Suffering*

BY ANGELINA BROOKS

Roseate spoonbills are not flamingos, but proper names don't always matter.
In East Texas marshes, they are Degas'

painted girls, tip-toed in silt, perfect pirouettes. I was a flamingo once,
age 4. Not thin, perhaps, but proud

of my belly's fit in my pale leotard. Now, I forego lycra and tulle, take a breath,
correct my reflection's waistline.

In West Texas, men with large belt buckles do almost the same, hook
their thumbs into waistbands. Readjust.

Their eyes move up and down, and they clear their throats.
Once, I met the stare of a mountain lion

who'd watched me pause on a hike. Take a few photos, water the dogs.
I am too pink,

but I know to move away slowly, to back downhill below
the knee-high and golden grass.

His coveted us and the thrill of dragging the last pup off by her backbone,
the taste of her: tendon and tissue.



Jocelyn Skillman



To
GET
What
You're
After

KG Ricci

After this prayer into the white-bladed ceiling fan, there's no God until the next time I need for Him Her Them to listen. I'll admit I love All Things California—

San Francisco any summertime morning, according to a dead professor who taught me so much, though he kept hitting the class with the Socrates quote about how you can't teach anyone anything. Which is horseshit.

I caught a nap at LAX on a layover on a flight from Honolulu. I spent a day or two at a conference in San Diego one summer.

Everything else I know about California isn't much. I'm like some bizarre Wikipedia entry: *a state in the Western part of the United States situated between Oregon on the north and Mexico to the south, which has been a state since we stole it from the Mexicans sometime before it became a state in 1850.*

Anyway, I pray into this fan. Its spinning-in-the-moment blur. Which I'm not saying is the Almighty until, all right, I am.



Auction for Society's Death
Matina Vossou



tsi

AMERICAN BIRTHRIGHT

by Sara Moore Wagner

I eat all the chips, leave
the dirty oil in the pan from frying,
potato skins in the sink I am learning
to do things for myself,
to not notice who cleans
up after me
in the same way
my grandfather did,
like it's my birthright
to stop taking care.
Midweek, I read
about the stoic's key
to peace,
and it's turning off
the TV, so I do.
It's going outside,
so I do, it's closing
my eyes, so I will.
I let the dog out
even though I know
a nest of eggs just hatched
in the grill, close enough
to get to. This isn't your world,
mother swallow, don't you know
how long it took me
to shovel under the roots
of each fat violet leaf.
The birds chirp me awake
with that song: the world is not yours,
this world is not yours, this world.
Just the same, my grandfather
crushed the earth in his teeth,
tearing roots and a single girl
from this exact craggy soil
and clutch of leaves.

Britney Spears Pantoum

Sara Moore Wagner

Light filtered out over the water where Britney was born,
golden haired baby on her mother's lap held up
by her father to the window where a great hawk swooped
low to grasp a cedar branch, and James saw this

reflected in the gold of the baby on her mother's lap held up.
Hang in there, he thought, claim this American gold, strung
low—like grasping a cedar branch, Jamie saw this,
as a man who knows the symbolism of the world, the kettle.

Hang in there to claim that American gold strung
in every bit of her skin and in her eyes.
A man like that knows the symbolism of the world, the kettle
was her body she'd grow to pour out. Tend it.

Keep every bit of her skin even her eyes
hungry, long and lean as the aisle in the church, this
was her body she'd grow to pour out. Tend it
as any holy thing, made for worship, adoration.

Be you hungry for the lean aisle she walks, this
is a reflection of her goodness, even the whites of her teeth
are holy things, made for worship, adoration.
Never mind her mind, what's curled like a kitten at the hearth. Her ignorance

is a reflection of her goodness, even the whites of her teeth
have that pure simplicity,
never mind her mind, curled like a kitten, her ignorance
how it leaps and is cut at the tongue, chopped out.

she has that pure simplicity
that comes in a body like that, in a head of gold,
how it leaps and it cuts at the tongue
chopped out and raised above the heads of women

who also come in a body like that, heads of gold:
this is what you are, Britney, a man's gilded star: your father,
serves you chopped and raised above the heads of women,
then plunges you under the water where you were born.

This is what you are, Britney, a man's gilded star: your father,
your husband's, until you put on weight, fill out,
plunge under the water where you were born:
what's there to do but open your mouth, fill the water

until it's not your father's. Let it put on weight, plump
into an ocean where you, golden, are radiant, below—
what's there to do but open your mouth, fill the water
so not any hawk can swoop to grasp you. You are yours,

an ocean where you are golden, radiant, below,
singing in that twang you've mastered, brown eyed,
No hawk can swoop to grasp you,
you are yours, your body is yours, spilled out on a landscape.

Light filters over the water where Britney was born
not just to her father, who is that great hawk, who still swoops.





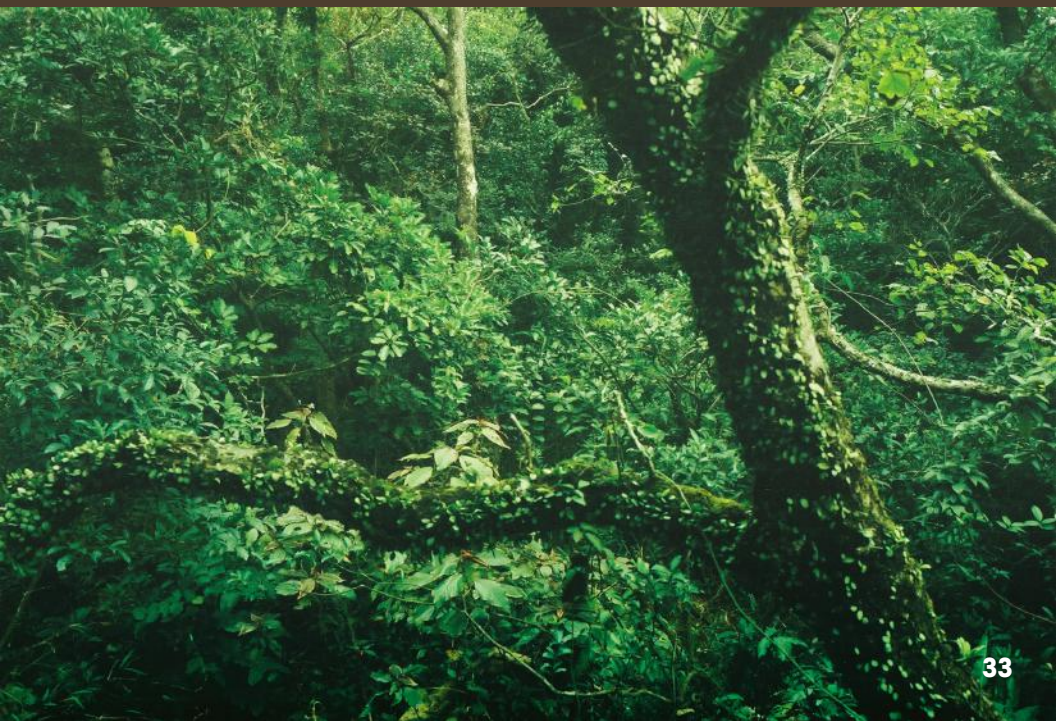
Between Midwest and Appalachia

BY CHRISTEN NOEL KAUFFMAN

It's like this: one minute you're city smoke
before fields birth pigmy goats & alpaca,
traffic lights to meteors perched on silo tips.
Of course, there are buses of children
parked in lines outside buildings of brown
brick, yellow after yellow on a county road.
Cows sip cocktails after dark, legs propped
on the sofa while chickens lay eggs beneath
the beds, laugh at free-range sparrows
hopping telephone pole to electric wire.
Between everything is a church, is a Jesus
next door – baptized in the river next to
snapping turtles and trout. Holy is every
potato salad bowl, every unsweetened tea.
Like anywhere, there's death in ditches,
the mine shafts abandoned after decades
of delivering the bread, canaries sent in
after tornadoes demolished the mall.
I've tried to dress it up in red lips, salmon
slip dress over spray tan, next to soybeans
in sheets of green under billboards, where
hell is real. Still, there's a mother suspended
in memories of poison oak, her body floating
in the pond where I hold my breath, hold her
as a phantom to my neck. Nothing ends
the way it begins, how birds can hear the hum
of electric charge & still they choose to land.



Min Ji Park





М. Бóккóч 2018



ONE NIGHT BEFORE PRIDE

the new car smell of your silver porsche; your magenta armani shirt, the king-size bed, paisley shams, loose bills thrown carelessly on the nightstand, but designer underwear neatly folded; how you intimidated me. i remember it all.

how you gazed at me like i was your prize, a new addition to your collection, how you insisted that i be impressed.

i tried to cleave through that hard, smug stare with cigarettes, music, lips, words. eyes, muscle, heat. something burst just for a minute. then you were done pretending, you withdrew stony-faced into an emotional prophylactic and scanned for updates on your investments.

has it really been ten years? an unexpected grocery store encounter and my face means nothing, you shrug, but i remember it all, each thing you said and didn't say, each flex and murmur, every vapor, every shard, every suggestive subtle put-down.

the sight of you, callous you. you never changed. i can't wait for you to move on, for me to get through the check out stand lest i shrilly shout to random strangers what was once my shame but never again

Written by Brian Yapko



Pigeons Coo of Other Things

Jose Varghese

The kitchen tap drips,
eager to annoy, as you speak
of April being a feeling
 within. Pigeons from
the neighbour's window
coo of things that aren't about
love or loss. You observe
 that songwriting has
always had a nasty past
of misinterpreting birdsongs,
forcing intricate human
 miseries to the plain
purposeful strands in calls.
I take it with a pinch of salt,
which doesn't just add
 taste to food, but alters
it, smoothing its flavours
as it slithers down food pipes to
intestines, split to elements
 beyond recognition.





Lawrence Bridges



Lawrence Bridges



Nangeli

by Jose Varghese

(Based on the village legend of a lower caste woman who cut off her breast in protest against the caste-based 'breast-tax' that existed in Kerala, India, in the early 19th Century)



They might write you off as mere legend
to deny you a place in history,
deem you a dream than a woman for all those
women who'd have sliced off their breasts
when denied the right to cover them from men
who were strangers to their honour.

The sons of the men
who had all the time to invent a breast-tax
must've looked for excuses
in some new historicist readings
of family portraits from your time
that show bejewelled noble women
posing with exposed breasts and satisfied smiles,
ruling out the role of caste in the whole affair.

For the upper caste woman, they would say,
a blouse was to be worn only in the bedroom,
only for her husband,
in order to sexualize, make desirable,
her otherwise worthless body.
So, let's go for more feminism that won't hurt
as much as your identity politics.

Anglo-Indian women who wore a blouse in public,
exposed their loose character, as per
the communal slur *chattakkaari* – wearer of
sinful blouses,
the woman who would dance with men,
have sex with them,
stay unwed, abandoned
by those who use their right to betray.

Silly filmic melodies on
women's pleasure that has to remain
under men's control
foreshadow eternal walks of shame.

The sons of the men who'd used up all the luxury
to theorize anything they fail to accept
as their flawed past would interrogate even further,
to find more escape routes.

They would ask what women were wearing
when those men, using their right to be seduced,
spotted them as living, moving objects fit for rape.

Graphic artists, commissioned by them
to depict you as a madwoman from a legend,
would be instructed to redden
the blood around your sliced breasts
on a plantain leaf
so that it looks like a savory feast
for the cannibalistic creed.



Elegy by DOMINIC BLANCO

For Joe Bolton

Facing the presumable east, I sense
a poem to honor as poets before me have
for their time in years, to the coming
and going of both desire and memory.

I will keep my cup of wine low, red lips
stained shut to the strain in this time,
to the stark hour of our lives on
the hill, twilight to what continues on
beyond the skyline, life still.

I surrender for now,
I am humble for the oncoming of night
with its timid air and shy people, that they
and I will continue to observe in private:

the lives we fail at through the years, but are
content to have tried on, to have been in.

Sensini

By Charles Kell

He was already sick when he left Madrid.
The sky was pink and white like sonnets—
he went away to the country because his son died in the city.
I'm going on sixty but feel as if I'm twenty-five.

A white and pink sky, sonnets.
That morning I felt not exactly happy again but more alive:
he's going on sixty but feels twenty-five.
One night I wrote and asked for a photo of his family.

In the morning I felt not entirely happy but more alive.
It was Gregorio, before he disappeared, more or less my age.
One night I wrote then received a photo of his family.
Shining at the end of a dim corridor of shadowy masses—

it was Gregorio, before he disappeared, more or less my age.
His letter was restrained; there was no outpouring of grief
shining at the end of a dark corridor of shadowy masses.
One of the bodies in a recently discovered mass grave was probably
Gregorio's.

His letter was restrained; there was no outpouring of grief.
A year or two later I found out he had died.
One of the bodies was probably Gregorio's, discovered in a mass
grave.
And Cortázar wrote about him, and Mújica Lainez too.

A year or two later I found out he had died.
He was already sick when he left Madrid.
And Cortázar wrote about him, and Mújica Lainez too.
He went away to the country because his son died in the city.







Matina Vossou

Rehab

By Charles Kell

His first betrayal was a needle
burning blue. Then the skin
glowed, stayed warm for days.
His second betrayal

was the night of tortured pins,
broken phone, ditch-damaged
waiting for the sirens.
Rain hammers the windowpane.

He sits in the almost dark,
pressing piano keys
so they barely make a sound.
His hands shake when he talks.

Trying to separate myself, pre-
tending—we lean on one
another when we walk the hall.
Watch the piano keys

sway, rain nailing glass.
His third betrayal
was the body flying through air.
There wasn't a third betrayal.

Khalil Elayari
MISSISSIPPI MIAMI

Yore that DIVEBOMBER DAME
from Amnesty Strikers Dance
Gret—Ah THINK I LOVE YOU

Steady...sssteady...stea—

KAMIKAZE WOMAN!
Dalliance at the R U OK Ball
gives me great pleasure to meet you

Ssteadier...

I am smitten
with everything intermittent
I love...UTURNS
I stutter, putter, mutter, clutter
and beffudled
bye your big toes personality outside its shoe

Hell...DAMNO...WAY OUT...
of HERSHIT!

WATER BALLOONS...ALLOF MY LOVE
ALLOF THOSE TIMES in B—ED
U—HURT ME...NOW'N LATER

I wishiwishiwish upon a lark
You're the APPLE OF MY EYE PATCH
PUMPKIN PIE MARSHMALLOW CREAM
You WANT SUM?

Stadiest...OF ALL

The DAMES IN DISJOINT
ED... MY NAMES

I THINK...I LOVE

your way back to me when I was hurting like I did for so long that it backfired into my soul all that I couldn't've possibly dealt with at the time when you were so young you fucked me so bad that I had to think of ways to die without living



Little Dog by GLEN ARMSTRONG

I had a little dog named Wu-Tang.
When he died,

he died everywhere.
Our world was but a world,

but a tree jumped out of the dirt
to serve as a landmark,

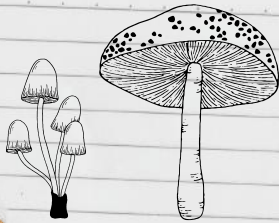
a meeting place.
Wu-Tang and I would walk

to the center
of our universe to piss

and piss and look to the sky
with equal parts shame

and defiance.

Lawrence Bridges
Photography



Birdslayer: Postcard from Parsippany, New Jersey

STEFAN MARQUART

“Birdslayer”. I’m the only person who has ever referred to it as such, probably the only person to ever really see it after the government planted it in the ground years ago. People notice it, sure. Thousands of drivers cruise past it on their way to work in the morning or home in the evening. They obey its titanium–white command to STOP. But nobody else really gets a chance to see it because nobody else walks along the boulevard in Parsippany, in all of the places where people were never intended to go. Those people never see it for what it truly is but for me the carnage that it creates is just another landmark on my commute.

I’ve heard that the most dangerous animals are the ones with the brightest colors, like those Amazonian frogs or the candy–colored snakes in Australia, and I believe that this is true. It’s the bright red face of the Birdslayer that is its main weapon. I can always see it from the window of my hotel home, the red shining through everything, be it darkness, snow, rain, fog. But it’s only during the daylight that you can see what it leaves behind. Birds, usually four on the ground at any given time, with new additions every other day. They lie there, bones cracked, staring up at the monolithic road sign and wondering how they could have ever fallen for its tricks. I feel for the little bastards, as Parsippany is no place to die. I’ll usually spare two thoughts, one for the Birdslayer and one for the bloodless pile of the slain at its feet, before I continue my journey through the gutters of the Garden State.

This is New Jersey and it has a way of setting traps. Like the Birdslayer, it has its tricks. It dangles New York City above itself as a lure to attract the young and naïve, then suffocates them under a cracked grey sky. It wields its turnpikes and parkways like a weapon, slaughters its prey swiftly and buries the carcass, like mine, in roadside hotels. The whole state is red, bright and inviting, until you find yourself broken–necked by the side of the road, just another bird who thought that maybe things would be different for them than all those before.



George Stein Photography

Brain Juice

The surgeon performing the surgery is a wide surgeon. A wildly wide surgeon. He takes up half the room and has a body shaped like a computer. He wields his scalpel like a club.

I ask him when the surgery will begin and he says, "It will begin once the surgery has begun. Now lie back, this might sting." He slides a wooden needle into the back of my head and it does sting. It stings like a wasp, like a rug-burned elbow, like a backhanded compliment from my mother. Earlier the nurse shaved off all of my hair and I cried. Not because I lost the hair, but because I know it will grow back.

The surgeon asks, "How do you feel?" I open my mouth to speak and a song comes out.

"I feel like a waffle after the first bite," I sing.

The surgeon nods, "Very nice." I tell him I hope he washed his hands.

"Yes, yes. I washed them with Kool-Aid," he responds. "It's the cleanest of clean. Antiseptic." I hum in relief.

The first cut has been made.

"Don't worry," the surgeon says. "I'm adding eyes so it will look like a smiley face." I am relieved to hear this. I thought it would look like a boat. I never liked boats; they feel sloppy. He takes a drill and drills through my skull. It tickles and I laugh. He asks me what's so funny.

"Ducks," I say. "They walk like they're broken." The surgeon quacks in response. He's been a duck this whole time and I never even noticed.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to offend you."

The surgeon responds, "It's alright. Water off a duck's back." He waddles over and hands me a chunk of my skull. "For your collection," he says. I am delighted. I'll put it in the box where I keep all of my brother's baby teeth. The surgeon's hands are deep in my head now. He is massaging my brain and it feels great.

"What a wonderful brain you have," says the surgeon. "So wrinkly in all the right places. Very shapely." I blush. I've never received such a kindly comment about my brain before. Usually people tell me it's set to automatic fire.

by Rita Redd

I ask the surgeon to take a picture so I can see for myself how beautiful my brain is. "But I don't have a camera," he says. "I'll have to implant the memories." He takes a catheter and funnels them into me. I cry as the images flood my eyes.

"It is a beautiful brain," I yell. "And it's all mine!" The surgeon puts a finger to my lips.

"Quiet, I'm trying to concentrate," he says. His words float around my face and up my nose. I lick the brain juice his finger left. It's delicious. It tastes like malted peaches in the winter and I want more.

I ask, "Could you pour me a glass of that brain juice, please?" The surgeon giggles.

"All right, but only if I can have one too," he responds.

The nurse runs into the room, holding a Nokia in her left hand.

"Surgeon," she says. "Wife Number Six is on the line." I wonder how many other wives he has. It must be a gas having so many.

"Excuse me," says the surgeon. "This will only take a moment." He steps into the other room, but they're on a speaker call and I can hear everything they're saying. They're talking about their pet capybara. Wife Number Six thinks he's come down with the plague. Surgeon says that's impossible.

"Only hamsters can get the plague," he says. His wife asks,

"Then why do they look so happy all the time?" I wait and wait and wait, but the surgeon never finishes his call. I am open on the table for days. My brain is molding. I am so thirsty. I drink my spit, but it's not enough. My glass of brain juice is just out of reach.



EMOTIONAL LABOR





hough it's only been a few weeks since we hit it off at a dinner party, she's already playing the role of confidante in the drama of my life—impeccably, like she was destined a to fill this highest of non-familial positions in my relationships org chart. Ever sympathetic and trustworthy, she has become the emotional safe haven I can always return to—a refuge from the usual social circles, now fraught echo chambers relentlessly pounding my eardrums with the same judgmental pronouncements.

And yeah, I'm really mixing/heaping on the metaphors—clichés, even—but that's exactly the point; she's so many things to me: soul sibling, therapist, sounding board, interpreter of dreams, arbiter of truth. To her, my woes are stories to be attentively listened to, then surmountable problems to be worked out with such mature strategies as the setting and maintaining of boundaries.

But as we grow closer (and I grow more reliant on our relationship), her solutions—if they can still be called that—turn increasingly... unconventional. There's the anewifier session, then the silence pills. This weekend, it's the screaming retreat.

Which, though taxing, proves to be therapeutic as I and fellow attendees holler our frustration, sorrow, yearning, etc. into open fields and deep ravines, striving to make each successive scream more cathartic with guidance provided by the retreat staff. But oddly, she doesn't partake in any of this and just watches, usually with earplugs. Why would she come all this way for two days to merely observe? She might as well do some screaming herself.

"They say that screaming when you don't have anything to scream about isn't good for you," she explains. "And this way, I get to see all the great progress you're making."

She's right about the progress. During the communal howling session that concludes the retreat, I growl mostly with gratitude—now disencumbered of the emotional burden I arrived with. Though in exchange, I leave with the physical burdens of my enfeebled body: hoarse voice, raw throat, arms leaden after so much fist shaking, chest aching from all the projecting. Needless to say, she's the one who drives us back to the city, all glowing praise behind the steering wheel, delighted by everything I've been able to "unleash."

In the days that follow, her ministrations of warm compresses, herbal soup and hot tea with honey restore enough fortitude for me to take part in the next thing she has scheduled: a day of aggressive agriculture—popularly referred to as rage farming, because the idea is to put one's fury into the growing of food.

When we arrive at the local farm offering this "hostility-channeling opportunity," an ethos of enmity is immediately apparent in the murals that adorn the grain silos and henhouses—stylized scenes pitting people against the land, depicting harvest as a hard-won victory in our oldest of conflicts: man versus nature. In the barn turned ops center, the organizers quickly make it clear to me and other participants that we are comrades in farming conducted as down-and-dirty, "hand-to-land" combat necessary to get the earth to yield the bounty it would otherwise withhold from us. Then, under a blazing July sun, I savagely weed the fields, viciously till soil and turn a monstrous compost heap spitefully. All the while, she watches from the shade of the farmhouse porch through binoculars, waving vigorously whenever I glance in her direction.

During the break allotted for lunch, she meets me at the edge of the kale patch, morphing from spectator into a coach-fangirl chimera.

"Beautiful work! Just fantastic that you're getting it all out so forcefully," she says, then hands me a wet washcloth.

After I wipe the sweat from my face and neck, we sit under an oak tree and eat—more like devour in my case—the sandwiches she’s brought. Too worn out to talk, I listen as she gives me pointers for improving my hoe technique. Then it’s back to the tasks I’m supposed to carry out as battles that must be won. Crouching in the fields, I peel snails from seedlings to the soundtrack of someone grunting and cussing as they fling manure.

We leave the farm with a box of fruits and vegetables that cashes out the day’s worth of sweat equity. Back home, she tends to my recovery—this time blending the fruits into smoothies and reading the news aloud while I can barely move my arms.

Her gauntlet of “solutions” continues on with ruthless housecleaning, the merciless grading of term papers (using pens that make the brightest red marks I’ve ever seen) then brutally honest product testing, in which I am encouraged to treat prototypes with “real-world roughness”—even take swings at the aggravating ones with a padded club. She’s always there to cheer me on and afterwards sees to my recuperation with a warm towel for my tired eyes, hearty stews for dinner or some cooling tincture for my aching hands. Strange as they are, these activities do the trick, alleviating my irritation, resentment, regret and despair. Until I reach a point where I’ve been emptied of these emotions—or can’t feel them anymore. Then the activities are just exhausting.

So when she comes over tonight, all excited about a chili pepper endurance, I tell her, “Maybe another time. I’m all catharsed out.”

Her eyes widen, becoming wild and frantic for a split second.

Then she smiles and says, “Of course, of course. You deserve a break.”

She turns away, and her quivering lips cut an arc through the air, sparking... something in me. But before I can tell what that might be, it’s gone.



Miu Ji Park



CONTRIBUTORS

Glen Armstrong (he/him) edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters*. He resides between Flint and Detroit, and has taught at universities and prisons.

Roy Bentley is the author of *Walking with Eve in the Loved City*, chosen by Billy Collins as a finalist for the Miller Williams prize; *Starlight Taxi*, winner of the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize; *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana*, chosen by John Gallaher as winner of the White Pine Poetry Prize; as well as *My Mother's Red Ford: New & Selected Poems 1986 – 2020* published by Lost Horse Press. Poems have appeared in *Able Muse*, *The Southern Review*, *Rattle*, *Shenandoah*, *New Ohio Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *deceMBER* among others. His latest is *Beautiful Plenty* (Main Street Rag Books, 2021).

Evelynn Black is a trans poet from Seattle. She received her MFA from Cornell University. Her work has appeared in *The Seattle Review*, *Peculiars Magazine*, and *Empty Mirror*.

Dominic Blanco is an emerging poet originally from Miami, Florida who currently resides and works in Chicago, Illinois where he has been in a tempestuous affair with poetry. Previously published work appears in *The Raw Art Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *The Write Launch* and others.

Lawrence Bridges is best known for work in the film and literary world. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *The Tampa Review*. He has published three volumes of poetry: *Horses on Drums*, *Flip Days*, and *Brownwood*. As a filmmaker, he created a series of literary documentaries for the NEA's "Big Read" initiative, which include profiles of Ray Bradbury, Amy Tan, Tobias Wolff, and Cynthia Ozick.

Angelina Oberdan Brooks as a poet who usually writes cross-legged on the living room floor before grading too many composition papers. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from McNeese State University, and her poems have been published or are forthcoming in journals including *Yemassee*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Southern Indiana Review*.

Caitlin M.S. Buxbaum is a writer and teacher born and raised in Alaska. She has published eight books of poetry, photography, and fiction through her company, Red Sweater Press. She currently serves on the Board of Directors for Alaska Writers Guild and the Poetry Society of New Hampshire. Learn more at caitbuxbaum.com.

Lillian Chow is an emerging artist coming out of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She continues to attempt to create new ways of provoking her audience with contemporary images mixed with a modern edge through the use of vibrant colors and imagery. Currently her primary medium has been acrylic on wooden board and canvas.

RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (Universe/NY Times, 2/2017), *New Contexts 2* (Coverstory Books, 9/2021) *Now We Heal: An Anthology of Hope*, (Wellworth Publishing, 12/2020) in print in *2River*, *Event Magazine*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Genre Urban Arts*, *Meat For Tea: The Valley Review*, the *minnesota review*, *Night Picnic Journal*, *Plainsongs*, *Prairie Schooner*, *San Antonio Review*, *The Ogham Stone*, *Southword*, *Twelve Mile Review*, *Yellow Arrow Journal*, *The York Literary Review* among others and appears in numerous online literary journals. She's also a one of winners of the 2021 Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Sonnet Contest, anthology publication forthcoming.

Khalil Elayan is a Senior Lecturer of English at Kennesaw State University, teaching mostly World and African American Literature. His other interests include finishing his book on heroes and spending time in nature on his farm in north Georgia. Khalil's poems have been published in *A Gathering of the Tribes* magazine, *Dime Show Review*, *About Place Journal*, and *The Esthetic Apostle*. Khalil has also published creative nonfiction, with his most recent essay appearing in *Talking Writing*.

Soramimi Hanarejima is the neuropunk author of *Literary Devices For Coping* (Rebel Satori Press, 2021). Soramimi's recent work can be found in *AMBIT*, *Pulp Literature*, *Constellations* and *Lunch Ticket*.

Alani Rosa Hicks-Bartlett is a writer and translator whose recent work has appeared in *The Stillwater Review*, *IthacaLit*, *Gathering Storm*, *Broad River Review*, *ellipsis...literature & art*, *The Fourth River*, and *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation*, among others. She is currently working on the following projects: a novel set in Portugal, translations of medieval French love poems and sonnets from early modern Petrarchan poets, along with a collection of villanelles.

Christen Noel Kauffman lives in Richmond, Indiana with her husband and two daughters. Her hybrid chapbook 'Notes to a Mother God' (forthcoming, 2021) was a winner of the Paper Nautilus Debut Chapbook Series. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *A Harp in the Stars: An Anthology of Lyric Essays* (University of Nebraska Press), *Nimrod International Journal*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Willow Springs*, *DIAGRAM*, *Booth*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Hobart*, and *The Normal School*, among others.

Charles Kell is the author of *Cage of Lit Glass*, chosen by Kimiko Hahn for the 2018 Autumn House Press Poetry Prize.

Stefan Marquart is a recent graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University and a writer of just about every form of writing that can be written, from short stories to grocery lists. He has a penchant for writing the absolute darkest of dark comedy and currently enjoys working a side gig at a pet crematory in the Philadelphia suburbs.

Min Ji Park was born in South Korea and raised in Hong Kong. She attended New York University but has since moved back to Hong Kong. Although she worked with film photography for a few years, she has become more consistent when she began using it to help with symptoms of her Autism Spectrum Disorder. In addition to photography, she writes poetry and has been published in Poets Choice.

Rita Redd is an emerging writer from Las Vegas, Nevada, currently transplanted in evergreen Ashland, Oregon. She studies creative writing there at Southern Oregon University. She enjoys swings in park playgrounds and crocheting sweaters. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Sad Girls Club and Wild Roof Journal.

K.G. Ricci has spent most of his life where he currently lives in New York City. It has only been the last few years that he has devoted himself to the creation of his collage panels. Though not formally trained, Ken worked in the art department at the Strand Bookstore during his student years, and it was there that he familiarized himself with the works of his favorite artists, including Bearden, di Chirico and George Tooker. After a career in the music business and a decade of teaching in NYC schools, Ken began creating his own original artwork in earnest.

Joey Rodriguez is a graphic designer by trade, but also an author and musician. They have published four novels, two novellas, and six short stories in the last four years; they also host a monthly podcast with their siblings, and create art and music on a daily basis. In February of 2021, they started "The Intergalactic Beets Project" in which they create real songs and attribute them to fake artists from other planets and galaxies. They design album covers, tracklists, and even liner notes to make each song come to life. This project has evolved into over 100 different songs from 90 different imaginary artists and they have even begun to press these songs on vinyl records. A punk-rock-style 'zine will also be released in August as the project takes on a narrative quality. There are heroes, villains, and, of course, beats. Visit IntergalacticBeetsProject.com for more information.

Jocelyn Skillman is a therapist and artist living in Issaquah, Washington. Art helped them survive the pandemic thus far.

Matina Vossou is a self-taught artist living in Athens, Greece.

Jose Varghese is a bilingual writer and translator from India. He is the author of 'Silver Painted Gandhi and Other Poems' and his short story manuscript 'In/Sane' was a finalist in the 2018 Beverly International Prize. His second collection of poems is scheduled for publication in 2021 by Black Spring Press Group, UK. He was a finalist in the London Independent Story Prize (LISP), a runner up in the Salt Prize, and was commended in the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in Joao Roque Literary Journal, SPLASH! (Haunted Waters Press), Bluing the Blade (Tempered Runes Press), Cathexis Northwest Press, Beyond Words Literary Magazine, The Best Asian Short Story Anthology, Dreich, Meridian – The APWT Drunken Boat Anthology of New Writing, Afterwards, Summer Anywhere, I Am Not a Silent Poet, Spilling Cocoa Over Martin Amis, Kavya Bharati, Bengaluru Review, Muse India, Re-Markings, Unthology 5, Unveiled, Reflex Fiction, Faber QuickFic, Flash Fiction Magazine, Chandrabhaga, and Postcolonial Text.

Sara Moore Wagner is the recipient of a 2019 Sustainable Arts Foundation award, and the author of the chapbooks *Tumbling After* (forthcoming from Red Bird Chapbooks, 2022) and *Hooked Through* (2017). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in many journals including *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Rhino*, *Sixth Finch*, *Waxwing*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Nimrod*, among others. She has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart prize, and Best of the Net. Find her at www.saramoorewagner.com.

Ingrid Wagner is a cultural anthropologist, curator, and sometimes-activist. She has spent her career writing for other people. She has been a trusted brand storyteller for companies big and small, a curator for museum and private exhibitions nationwide, a provider of voice for social justice causes, and a writing coach for professionals and students alike. Her poetry has appeared in *Twenty Bellows* online literary magazine. She lives in Boulder, Colorado.

Brian Yapko is a lawyer whose poems have appeared in *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Gyroscope*, *Tofu Ink*, *K'in*, *Grand Little Things*, *Society of Classical Poets*, *Cagibi*, *Seventh Circle*, *Poetica*, *Chained Muse*, *Garfield Lake Review*, *Tempered Runes Press*, *Abstract Elephant* and others. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico with his husband, Jerry, and their canine child, Bianca.

Thank you to all of our contributors for this issue of the Lunch Break Zine. We are so excited and honored to share your beautiful art with the world.

Dear readers, please take a moment to follow all of these artists on their social pages, websites, and shops; spread the love and keep art alive!

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