

FLORA FICTION

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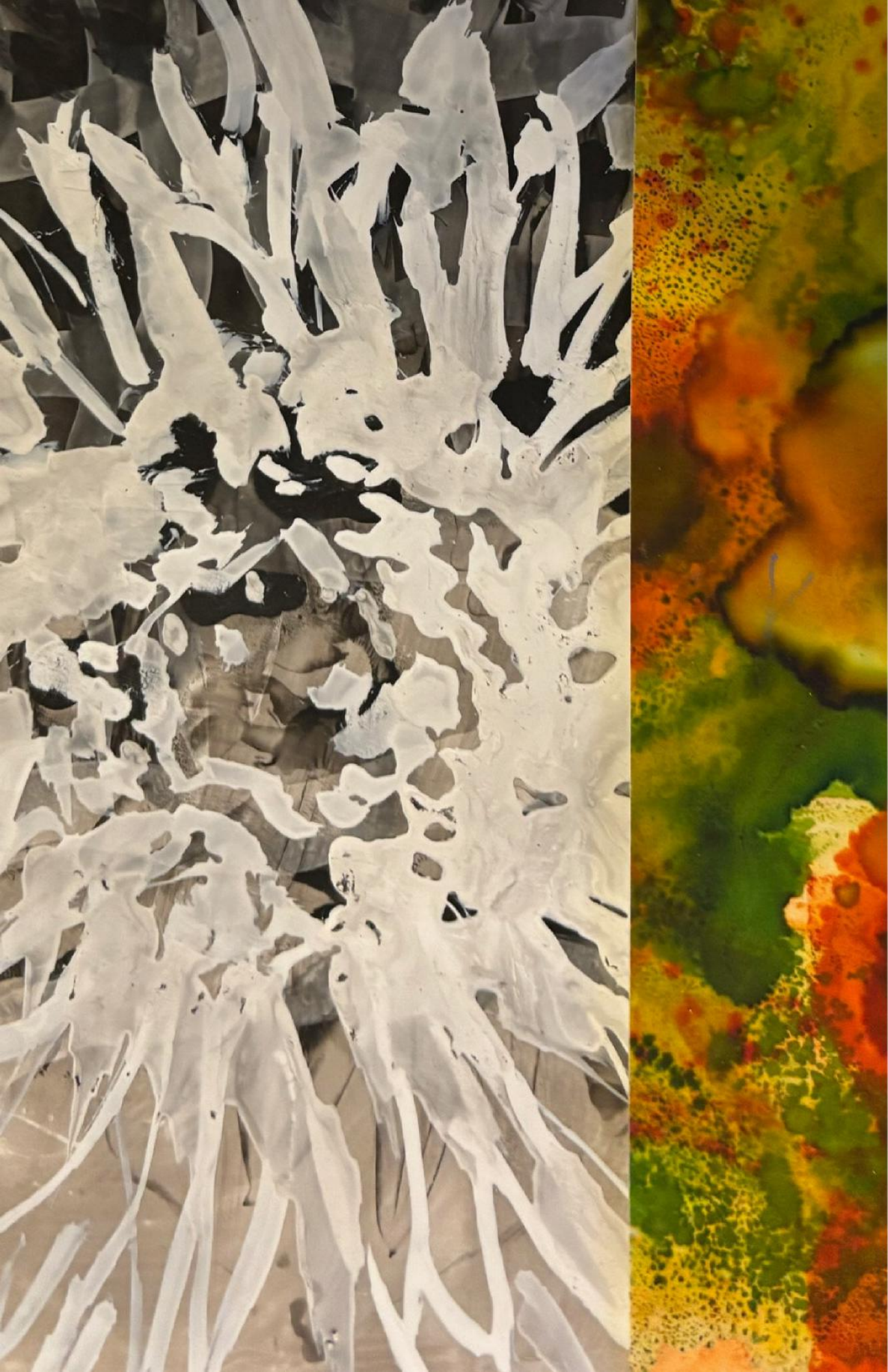


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Please visit our website for more information. florafiction.com/contribute

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Flash fiction, poetry, illustration, and review submissions for website content are accepted on a rolling basis. Entries for the seasonal Literary Magazine are done quarterly. Please visit florafiction.com/submit

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As we journey through the pages of *Flora Fiction*, I am thrilled to welcome you to our Winter 2023 issue. This edition, themed "Journey Within," invites you to explore the depths of your inner landscape and share your discoveries with us.

Life often presents us with a whirlwind of experiences—moments of joy, challenges, and everything in between. In the midst of this whirlwind, it's easy to lose sight of our inner selves, to neglect the whispers of our hearts amidst the clamor of the world.

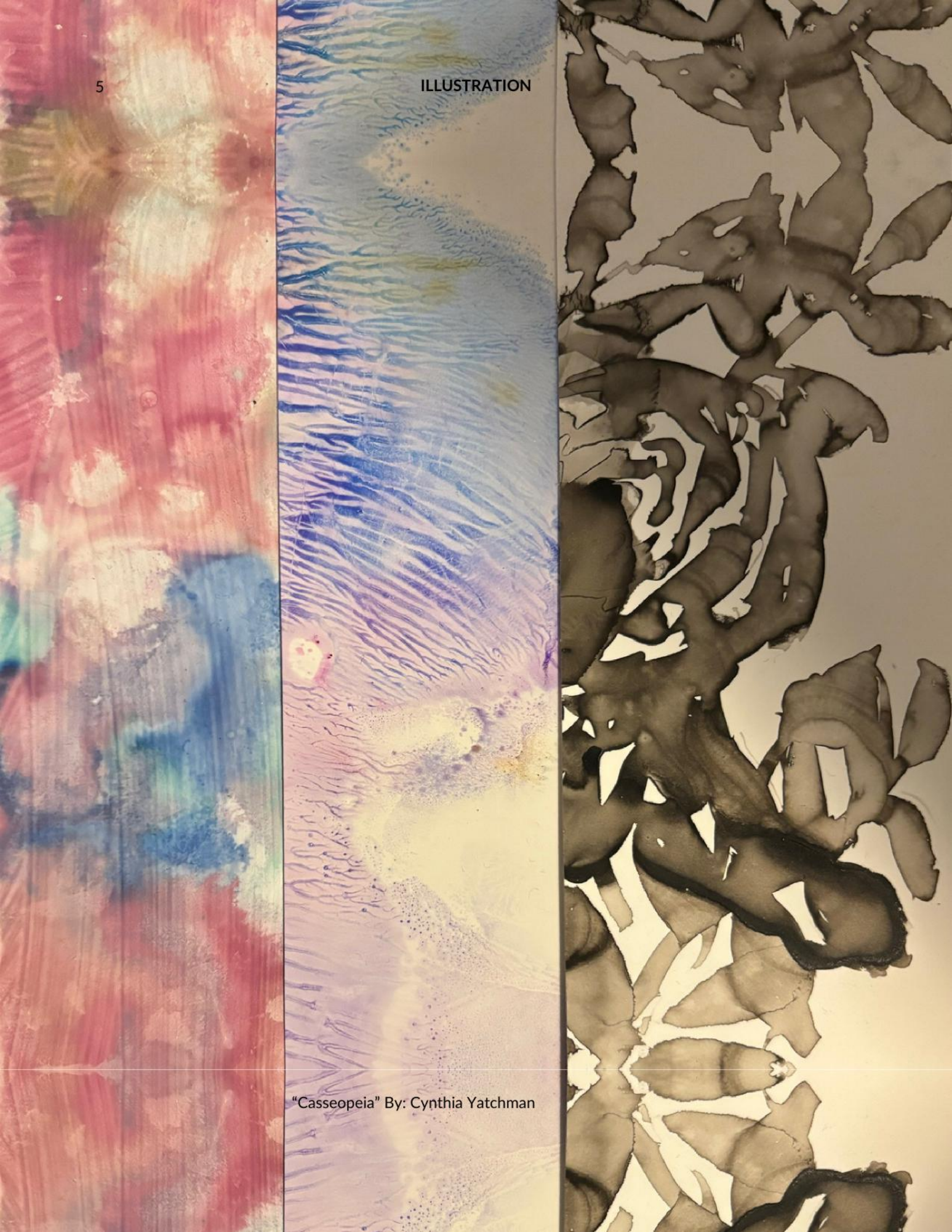
But within each of us lies a rich blend of emotions, memories, and dreams waiting to be explored. "Journey Within" is an invitation to delve into this collection of art and unearth the hidden treasures that lie beneath the surface of our consciousness.

Through the pages of this magazine, you'll encounter a diverse array of voices and perspectives, each offering a glimpse into the depths of the human soul. From poetry that sings of longing and love to art that captures the essence of the human experience, each piece invites you to embark on a journey of self-discovery and reflection.

As we navigate the twists and turns of life's journey, let us remember the importance of introspection and self-care. Let us take the time to listen to the whispers of our hearts and honor the truths they reveal.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. Your presence enriches our community and adds depth to our collective story. Together, let us explore the boundless realms of imagination and creativity, and may these pages inspire and uplift you on your own journey within.

xoxo
Flora Ashe



"Casseopeia" By: Cynthia Yatchman

ILLUSTRATION

"Pussywillows" By: Cynthia Yatchman

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. She shows extensively in the PaciNic Northwest



ILLUSTRATION



"covidcolor 2023f" By: Cynthia Yatchman



Learning to Breathe

BY: ELYSE HSIAO

I never learned to breathe. I never bothered to.

I learned to scream as soon as I entered the world. I learned to laugh with my full belly whenever you entered the room. I learned to sing with my heart and soul but never my lungs. I never learned to breathe.

You always knew how to breathe. Your breath, big and strong as Pacific wind, was enough to keep us both alive, to keep our ship sailing along the waves. I would dance and revel at how my ruffled purple skirts would flutter as we sailed across the atmosphere together, trails of stardust sprinkled in our path as we ventured across a sweet, milky sea.

It was the day you lost your breath, that I also lost mine.

I learned to cry so hard and quietly by compressing my lungs so long that I could feel myself passing out. I learned to hold in my screams, replacing them with soft prayers murmured in candlelight with a familiar inkling of hot, black anger dripping down the back of my throat. I learned to curse and sweat as I pushed my body to the edge of extinction during workouts, parties, driving down the I-5, desperately trying to grasp at the tails of your wind. Each day I survived on ragged sobs and fits of rage and shreds of hope that someday, it would be enough to sail me back to you.

But my tears stained the milky water like crude oil. My screams, in any magnitude, were merely ripples to the waves of wind you once filled my world with. If this journey was a race against the others, I had already cut away with the free loaders enough to be winning. Their empty promises of trust and gusts quickly transform into savage feasting upon my spoils and chuckling behind pale palms with amusement at my episodes. The blunt, ragged edges of rope that used to tether them to our boat remained a constant reminder that no one had followed through the same you had. And with each passing pirate and voyager I had grown deliriously less able to believe anyone would.

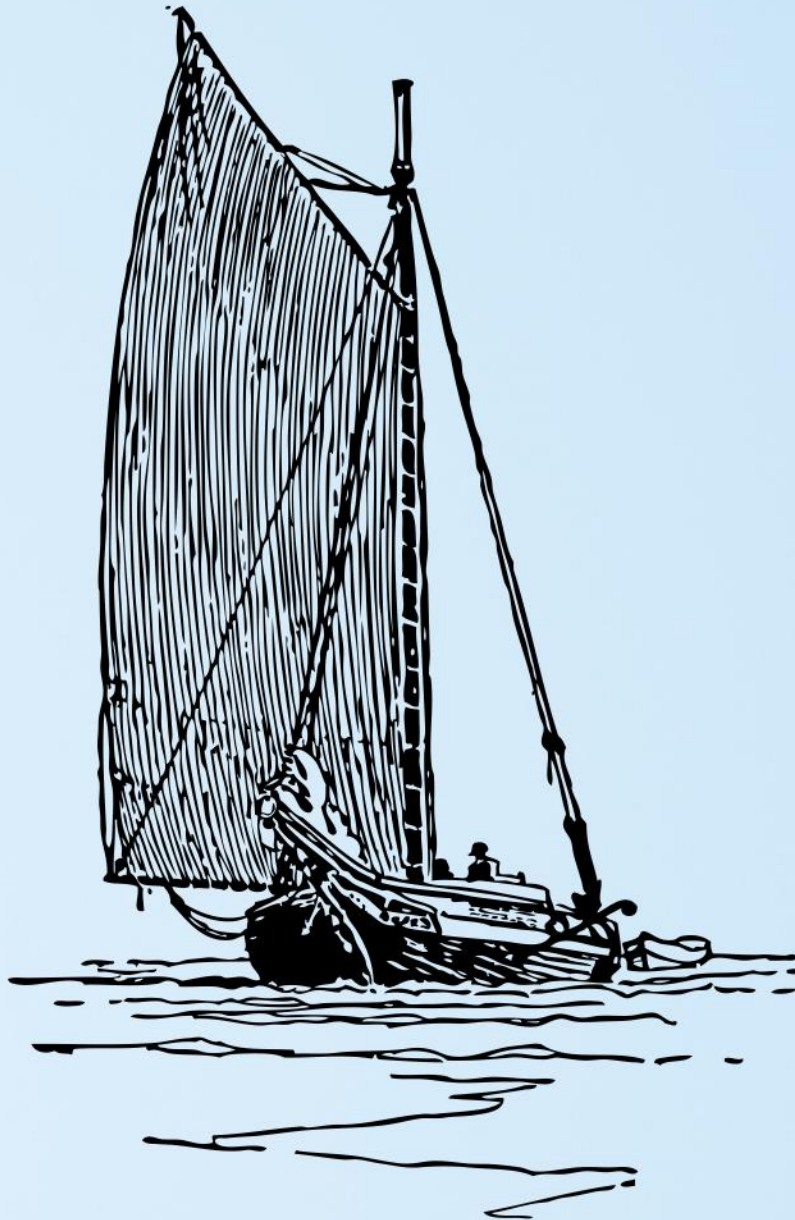
But when the world stopped, so did my will to straggle forward. I looked at myself in the water, the reflection of my burned throat and shriveled lungs infected with acid and poison from the years of wear and tear. My eyes sunken in and purple, my hair matted and singed at the ends. I had never looked closer to how you lay that day in July when I felt your hand, cold as the night sea, your body that once gave me breath and life suddenly vanished from the earth. I wonder if this is what you would have wanted for me, if my desire to be like you was enveloping, swallowing, obsessing me until I was as cold as the night sea, no longer able to breathe.

And it was then when I decided to rest.

I wonder if you are proud of how far I've come. I've been getting my full hours of sleep whenever the clock hands strike 12. I've washed my tears away in stardust. I've been taking classes that teach me how to breathe, how to sit with the twinkling universe before and feel fulfilled by my own presence rather than ache endlessly for yours. I've been treating my lungs and throat with ointments and nourishments, often provided by the new companions I've let tether to my boat. And, I love. I love so much. I love you so much that I think I'm ready to let you go now. I think I'm ready to let you bring wind to the sails of others. And I know we'll meet again, sooner than it will feel (though it does feel impossibly far away). I know I am sailing to you. And I think that's why I'm learning to breathe, now.

I think that's a good first step.

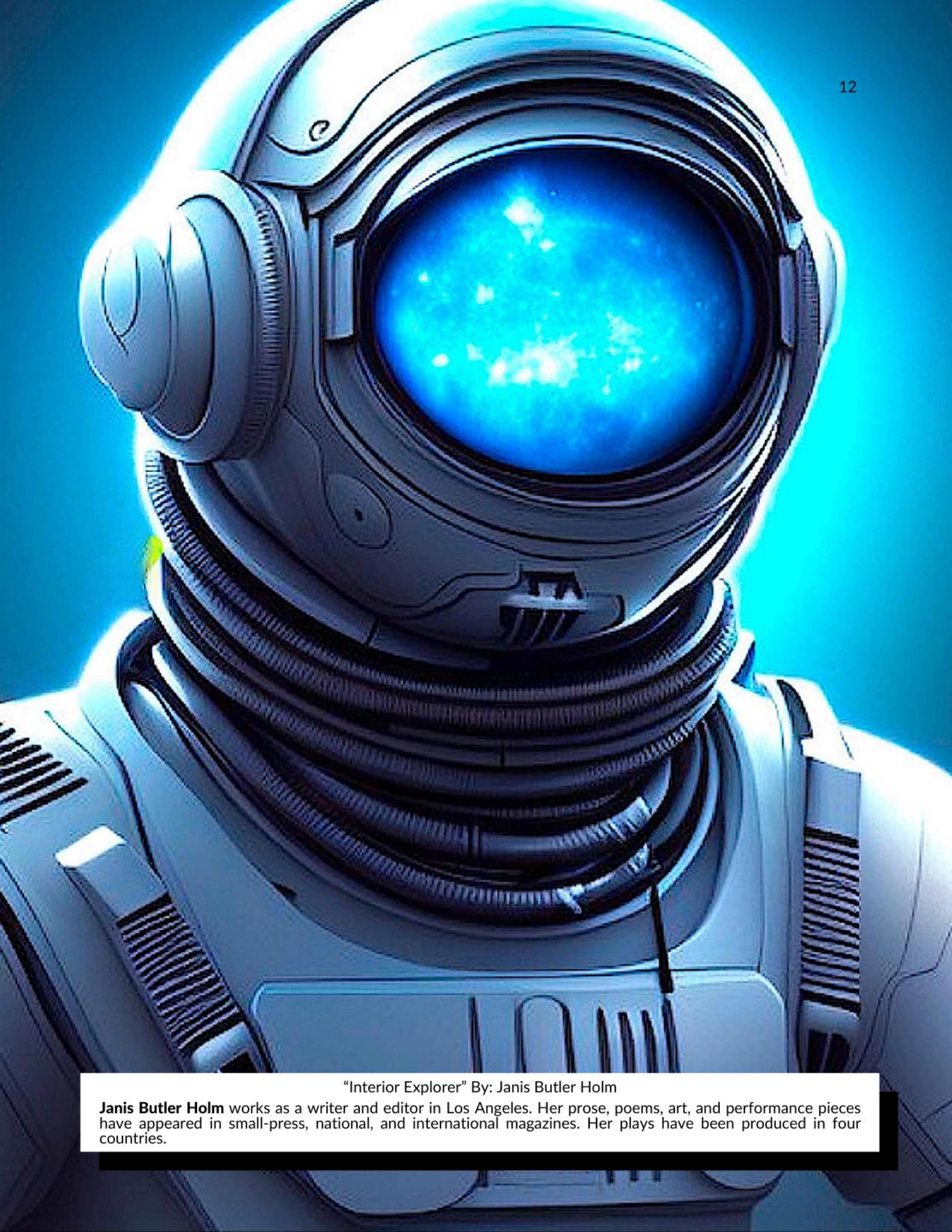
Elyse Hsiao is a Los Angeles 20-something who writes somewhere between the lines of quiet introspective grief and dumpster-fire breakups. She served as a music critic and editor for her newspaper at the University of Southern California.





“Jellies” By: Sherry Shahan

Sherry Shahan watches the world and its people from behind; whether in the hub of London, a backstreet in Havana, or alone from a window in in Paris; whether with a 35mm camera or an iPhone. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts.



"Interior Explorer" By: Janis Butler Holm

Janis Butler Holm works as a writer and editor in Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in four countries.



"WELCOME TO THE STAR OF HEPPENIS" By: Ellen Pliskin



Own It SHHHH State of Mind

"State of Mind"
By: Sherry Shahan

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STILL MOURNING

BY: LOUIS FABER

I think about you often, lying beside
my grandparents on the hillside
overlooking the Kanawha River,
bathed in the utter silence
that only the dead can clearly hear.
I think of you more often than she
who replaced you, she who later
replaced me with her own, I
an adjacency, still useful but
no longer fully or truly valued.
I think of you lovingly, knowing
for those too few moments
my tears watered your grave,
mourning the mother I never
met but knew so well in the core
and the essence of my very being.

Louis Faber is a poet living in Florida with his wife and cat (his editor). He's been widely published in the U.S., Europe and Asia and nominated for a Pushcart Prize.





"Bad Dream" By: Dahlia Hosny

Dahlia Hosny creates art that empowers people connect with their deepest selves. Wanting my art to make people feel something, to challenge their assumptions, and to see the world in a new way.



"Dragon" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

How Hope Is Made

BY: LOIS VILLEMAIRE

Hope is designed in the mind,
a collage of positive images pasted

with chocolate chips and confetti.
It begins with a dream, not in sleep

but during waking hours
as you venture to the outer edges

of a rose garden in bloom.
Hope is a reflection

of an untamed imagination,
expectations come true.

Hope is sustained with
blueberry muffins and sunlight,

dandelions and a tablespoon
of peanut butter. When hope is lost

look beyond the foggy morning,
visualize a bright orange sunset,

a pumpkin nearing the horizon.
Encourage hope to return

with promises of walks on the beach.
Welcome hope with hugs and love,

comfort hope with hot cocoa
and nutty banana bread.

Keep hope alive by propagating joy
from a single leaf of your being.

Lois Perch Villemaire is the author of "My Eight Greats," a family history in poetry and prose published in 2023. Her work has appeared in journals and anthologies. She lives in Annapolis, MD.



"Star Gazer" By: Neil Lavey

Neil Lavey is an artist & illustrator known for his figurative works and Hudson River scenes. He graduated Cooper Union 1981, His mediums include drawing, painting, sculpture, as well as digital art.



"Let's Swim to the Moon" By: Neil Lavey

I may

after Stevie Smith's *I'm Not Waving but Drowning* and Ken Jones' *Just*

I may laugh
but tears simmer beneath
the surface of my smile

I may walk
but I am desperate
to avoid the pavement cracks

I may sleep
but wake sleepless,
unrefreshed and unrested

I may dance
but my feet are sore and tired
from treading broken glass

I may seem calm
but my heart pounds
or skips a beat of life's breath

I may wave
but, honey, I'm paddling like mad here
to keep from drowning.

END

Tina Cathleen MacNaughton is an author, poet and acupuncturist. She divides her time between Crowthorne and Portsmouth, UK. Writing fills in the missing pieces.



"Deadfall" By: UneasyViewing

UneasyViewing is a celebration of the spontaneous processes of nature. With a focus on the Earth's undiscovered beauty and its natural imperfections, the artist emulates the harmonious imperfections of the natural world. Through the serendipitous application of watercolor and ink, their illustrations evoke a deep sense of contrast and mystery, all while addressing the taboo.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

"Connected" By: Sherry Shahan

Sherry Shahan's scissors are like her, rusty and dull. The glue, too thick. Her collages resemble drawings found in a kindergarten classroom. She likes that about them; it frees her from ideas of what art should be. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Slowly, in 2 (♩ - ♩)

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Em7



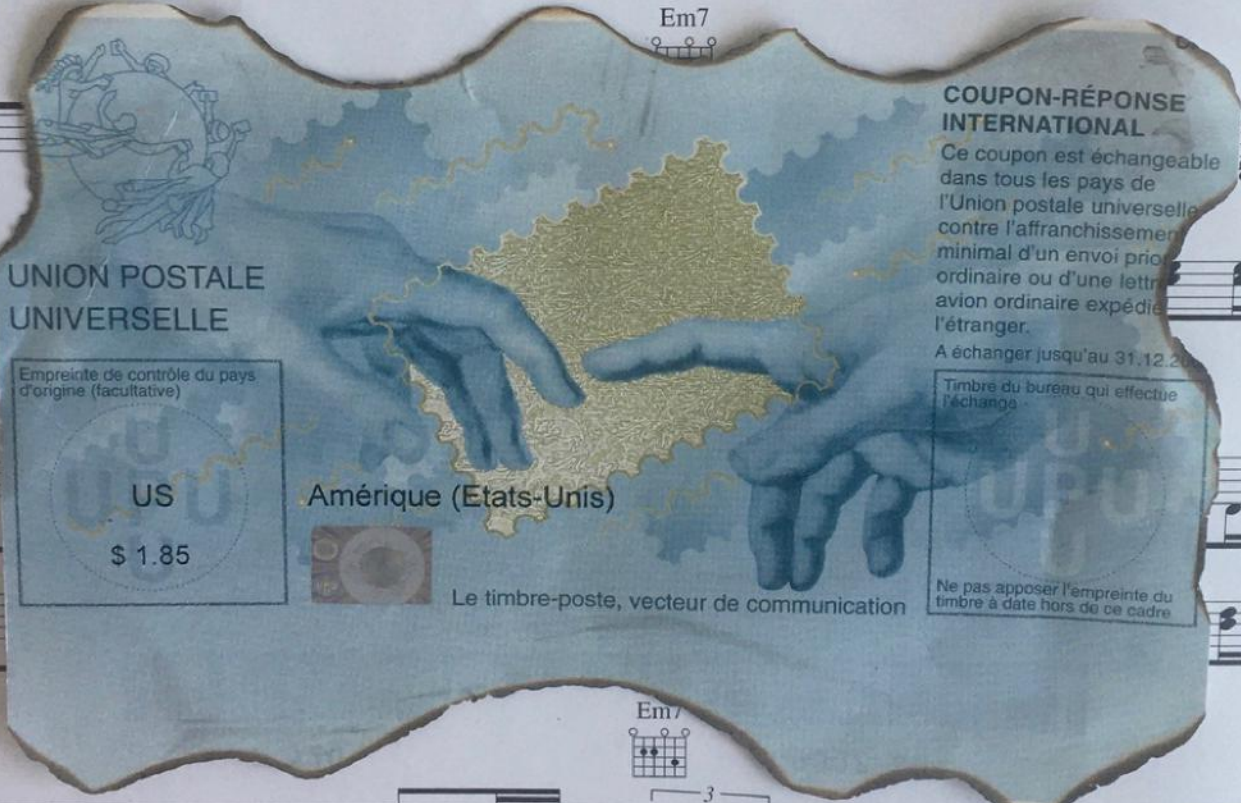
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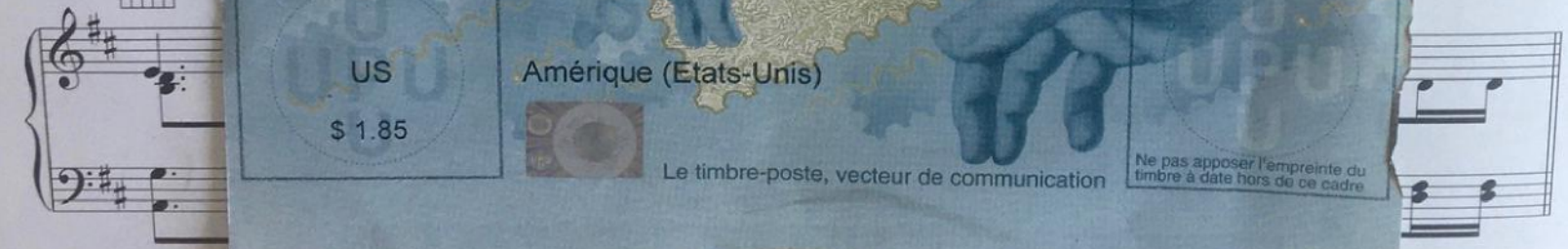
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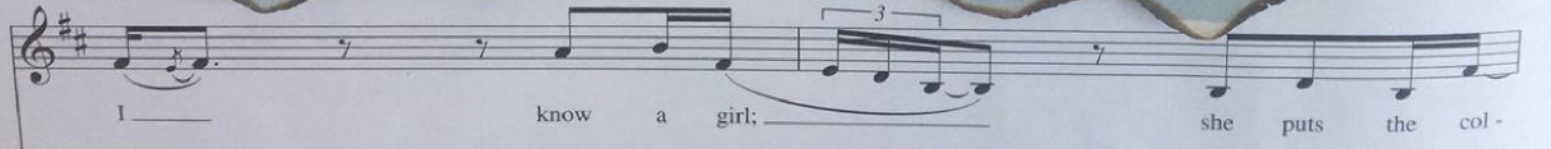
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I know a girl; she puts the col-

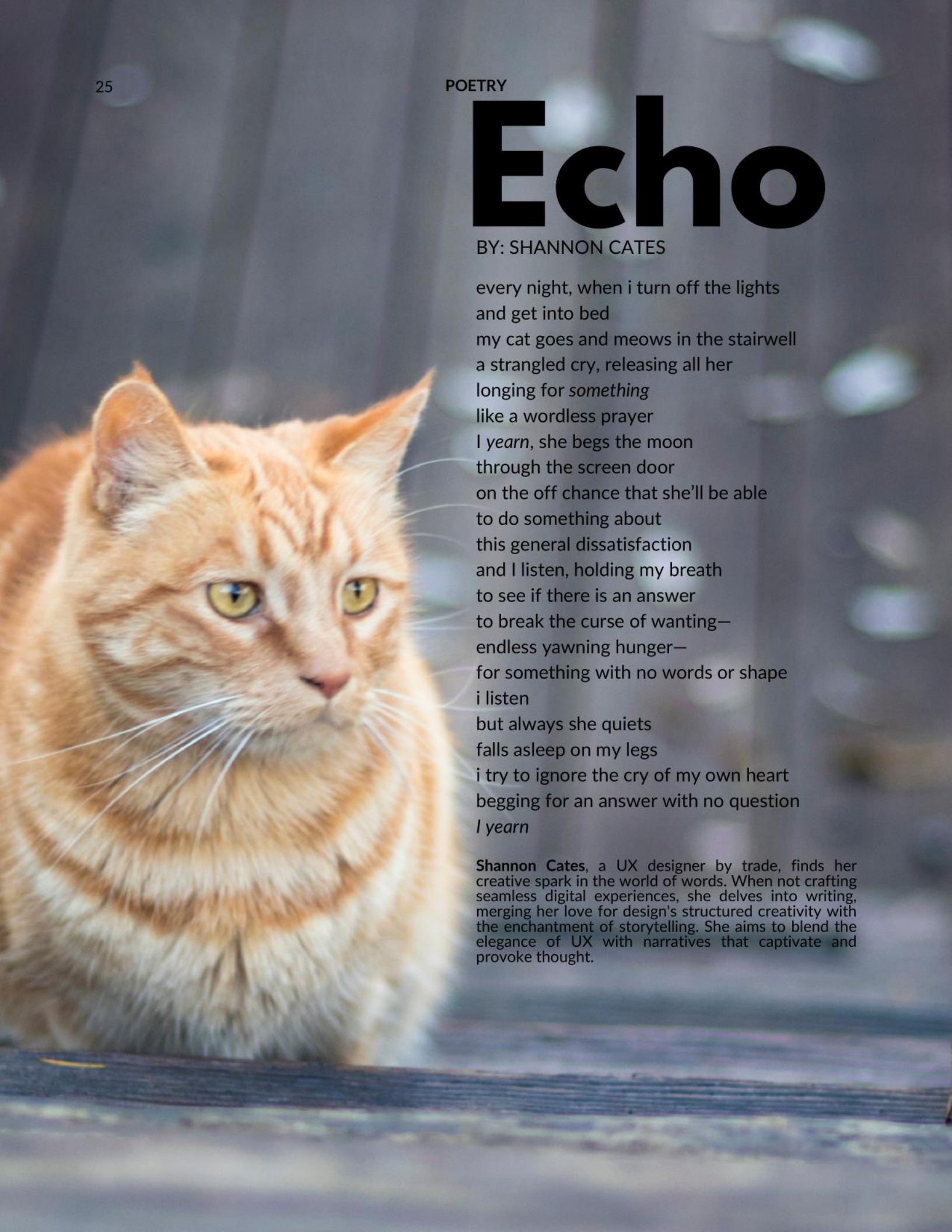




"A WINTER'S STROLL" By: Ellen Pliskin

Echo

BY: SHANNON CATES



every night, when i turn off the lights
and get into bed
my cat goes and meows in the stairwell
a strangled cry, releasing all her
longing for *something*
like a wordless prayer
I *yearn*, she begs the moon
through the screen door
on the off chance that she'll be able
to do something about
this general dissatisfaction
and I listen, holding my breath
to see if there is an answer
to break the curse of wanting—
endless yawning hunger—
for something with no words or shape
i listen
but always she quiets
falls asleep on my legs
i try to ignore the cry of my own heart
begging for an answer with no question
I yearn

Shannon Cates, a UX designer by trade, finds her creative spark in the world of words. When not crafting seamless digital experiences, she delves into writing, merging her love for design's structured creativity with the enchantment of storytelling. She aims to blend the elegance of UX with narratives that captivate and provoke thought.



"Golden Smile" By: Yusuf Olamilekan Dauda

Yusuf Olamilekan Dauda is an artist, art curator, art historian and educator.



“Saadhaka 5” By: Neerja Peters

ILLUSTRATION



"The Self 3" By: Neerja Peters

Neerja/23



"Dis Integration, Day 11" By: Susan Matthews

'Dis/Integration' is a project exploring the erosion of our sense of self as a result of traumatic experience, it employs a printing technique which leads to the image gradually distorting and disappearing.



"Dis Integration, Day 04" By: Susan Matthews



"Sleeping Diego" By: Eric Kollin

Eric Kollin is an acrylic artist/Illustrator, who resides in the Riverdale, NY. He often uses characters from holidays, and folklore to express joys or fears, and themes of power, beauty and brutality, and the urge for freedom.

the human business (or that time i didn't leave my apartment for a week)

BY: SHANNON CATES

it starts small—
the unwinding
at first there is rule and order
weft taught, shuttle spun
there is plenty of room for every string
for my fingers to pinch and pull
it happens so slowly,
the unspooling
as my hands fly, they grow callouses
it hurts to pluck the strands
as the warp tightens
but each time my threads loosen
there is peace here
in the nest of string and bone
needle
there is an order to the architecture
like a bird, only i can see it
there is a liberty in knowing
i could build a soft home here
and be forgotten
and yet it unravels
every twitch of my hand steals a bit
from the spool
i weave words in a language only i know
me and the string
as much as i want to stop
i keep moving my fingers in fevered prayer
knowing that it is only when they cease

that i will feel the pain
in my back and legs and hands
it is only when the thread runs out that
will look up and
realize i forgot how to understand
the architecture of the world
outside of weft and warp
how to navigate without strings
only for a moment
i remain in the pattern
stuck in my own web
the under-over, the tug
but eventually the thread unwinds
i take apart my beast
because now
i can see the ruins, the order
the one that comes to me
as the thread goes
my peace is captured there
my madness
the tiny culture that bloomed from my fingers
the words that worship silence
soon i'll forget how to read it
and go about it
with the other bodies—
fragile. like birds in nests,
the human business of making worlds

"Tommy's Turnpike" By: Uneasy Viewing



ILLUSTRATION



"Girl Dream" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)



ENK

"Queen's Escape" By: Eric Kollin

"contorsionista" By: Catalina Aranguren

Catalina Aranguren is South American. She studied at SAIC with a stint in Paris. Catalina lived 20 years in NY/NJ where she continued her photography, and also started a public arts organization, Walk Bye, during the pandemic.





"The Girl Next Door" By: Balog Bela

Simple lines, shapes, shading and colors are often a more difficult way to tell a story visually. Yet this is the way that most naturally and accurately expresses mood, opinion, and freedom.



PROWLING FOR ANTIQUES

BY: WILLIAM DORESKI

A dusty attic. Sunlight
bleeds through the gauzy windows,
obscuring resident ghosts.
With the householder's permission

I'm prowling for antiques to sell
but fear disturbing the heaped
old furniture, family portraits,
ancient Christmas decorations

and carefully bundled magazines.
A drift of love letters, a sparkle
of cracked azure sandwich glass.
I feel the ghosts pass through me

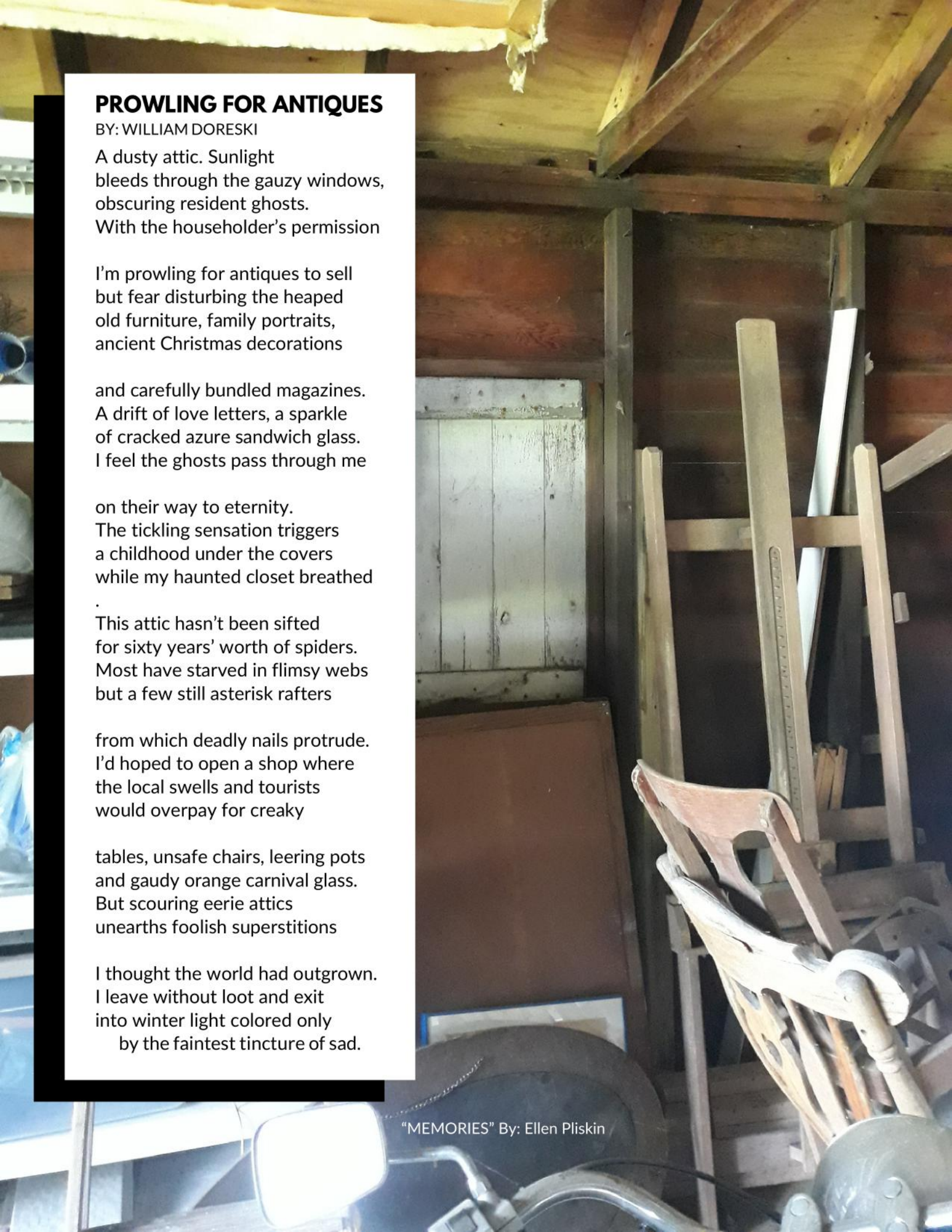
on their way to eternity.
The tickling sensation triggers
a childhood under the covers
while my haunted closet breathed

This attic hasn't been sifted
for sixty years' worth of spiders.
Most have starved in flimsy webs
but a few still asterisk rafters

from which deadly nails protrude.
I'd hoped to open a shop where
the local swells and tourists
would overpay for creaky

tables, unsafe chairs, leering pots
and gaudy orange carnival glass.
But scouring eerie attics
unearths foolish superstitions

I thought the world had outgrown.
I leave without loot and exit
into winter light colored only
by the faintest tincture of sad.



"MEMORIES" By: Ellen Pliskin

"MOTHER'S TOOLS" By: Ellen Pliskin





"Under Pressure" By: Robert Matejcek



"Foolishness" By: Robert Matejcek

ILLUSTRATION

"Vanity" By: Robert Matejcek

Robert Matejcek obtained his BA in Art, Magna Cum Laude, from Fontbonne University in St. Louis, Missouri. Robert and his wife, Anna, currently reside with their dogs and guinea pigs in La Junta, Colorado.





"Inner Turmoil" By: Sonjaye Maurya

Amb. Dr. (HC) Sonjaye Maurya has many national and international awards to his credit, including many Golds, 'Kala Ratn', 'Kala Shiromani', 'Bharat Jyoti' and 'Swami Vivekanand Excellence Award' by Ministry of Sports and Youth affairs. His works have been appreciated by world renowned personalities like Padamshree, Padma Bhushan Indian Sculptor Ram V. Sutar, FIAS International (USA) and many others. He has been conferred with Doctorate Degrees (Honoris Causa) by many organizations from all over the world. He has been nominated for 'Padm Shri 2024'.

Gun Story

BY: HOLLY DAY

He put the gun in my hand and pushed the hammer back until it clicked into place and made me point it at his crotch and said, "Just lower the hammer super slow, and it won't go off. You've got this. We practiced this so many times. I trust you, I know you won't blow my dick off."

I held the gun steady—so steady. The hammer was pushed all the way back and if I sneezed or just put the gun down or even touched the trigger, it would go off. I knew this because it had happened before, but that time, we were outside and the gun was pointed at the ground.

"Do it!" he shouted, and I tried not to sneeze but I was crying and the snot was running over my lip and I wanted to wipe my nose or sneeze so badly but I couldn't with the gun in my hand.

I lowered the hammer down as slowly and carefully as I could and it didn't make a sound. There was no recoil, no flash, no painful ringing in my ears; there was barely a tiny tap as the hammer stopped against the frame of the gun. I set the gun down on the floor carefully and wiped my eyes and nose off with the bottom of my t-shirt.

"You did it," my boyfriend said. He didn't look scared at all. "I told you you could do it." He made me do it again and again, and I was just drunk enough to think I'd accomplished something.

The next night, buoyed by my skill as a gun owner, I took the gun out and pointed it at my closet doors. I pulled the hammer back all the way and slowly, slowly lowered it down to the resting position. There was a loud noise, a bright flash, and my ears rang so loudly I couldn't hear anything but ringing.

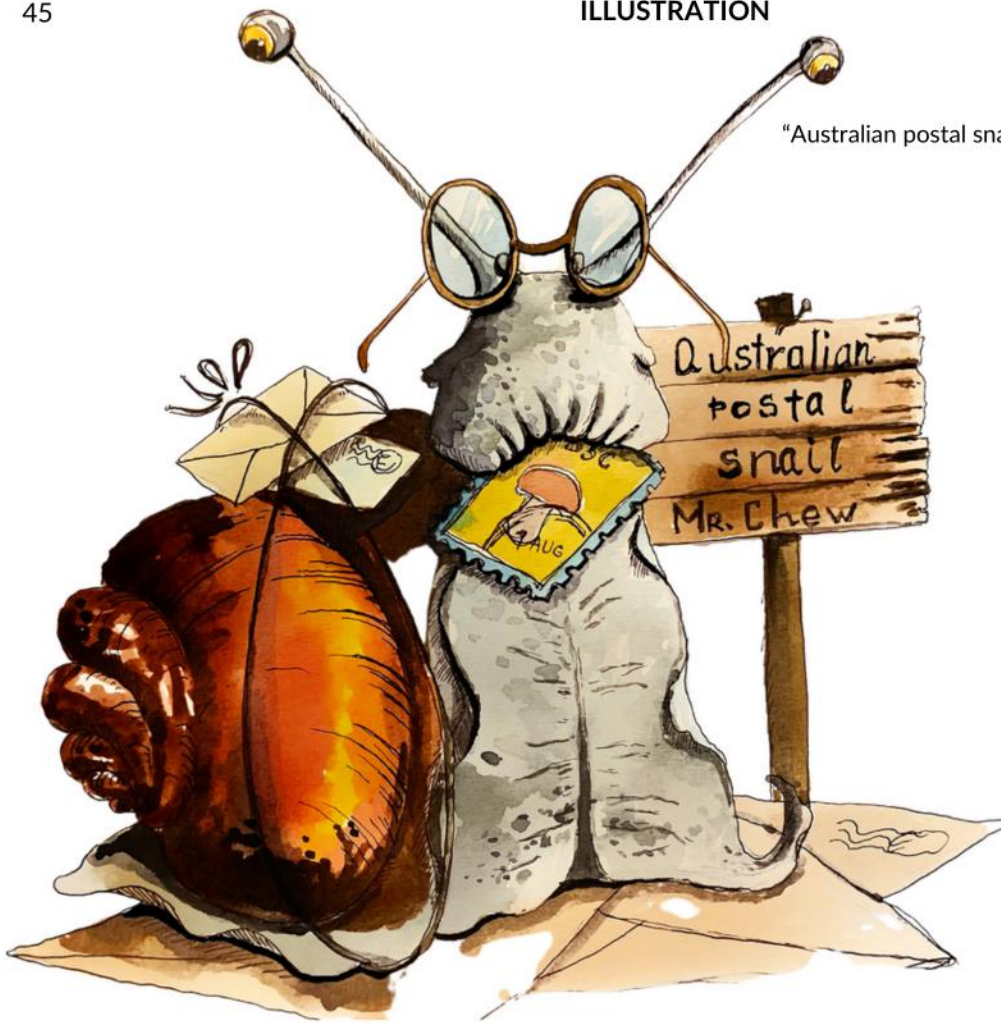
The door opened a crack and my two cats ran out of the closet where they'd been sleeping. There was a hole in the closet door, in the wall in the back of the closet, in my bathroom wall, and in one side of my laundry basket. Lights came on in the apartments all down the street, and I quickly shut my own lights off and lay down on the floor hoping that no one could tell where the shot had come from. I stayed on the floor until I could hear again. No one knocked on my door, and no police came.

I called my boyfriend up and told him what had happened and said, "How come I've got so much more control when I'm drunk than when I'm sober?"

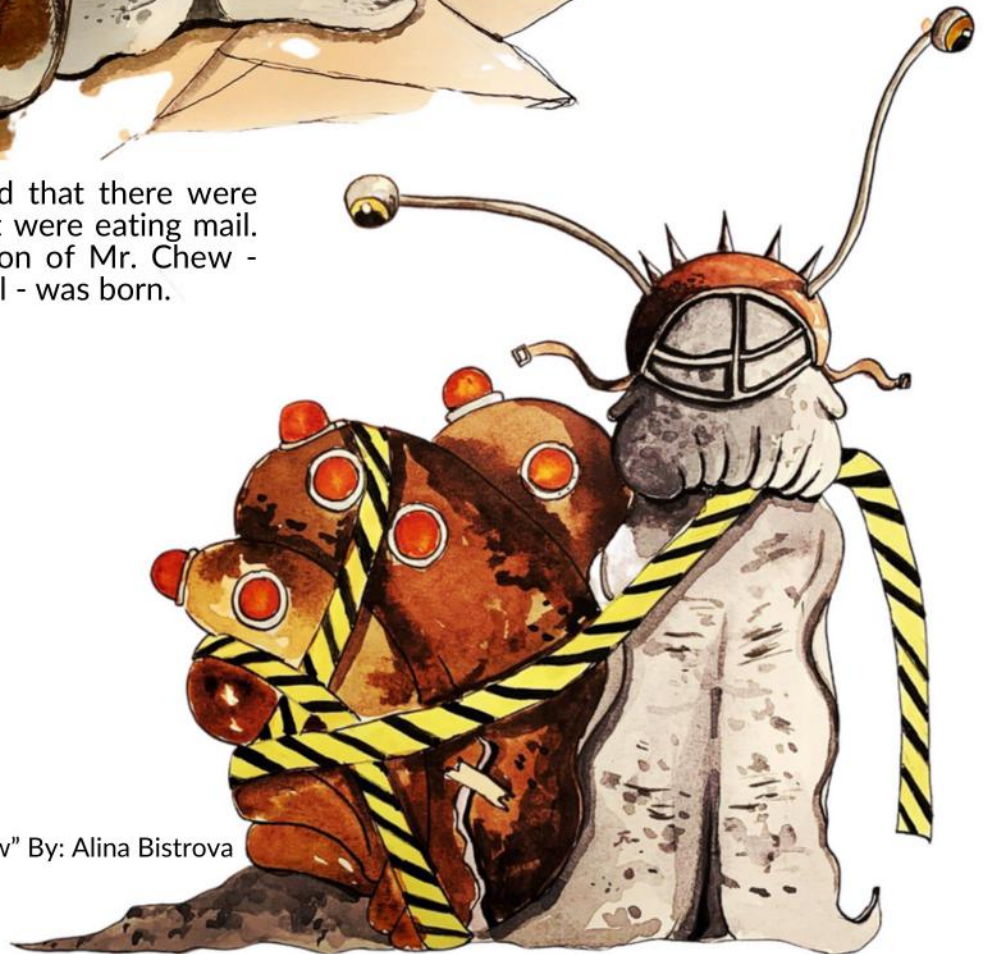
He laughed and said, "You think I'm stupid? I took all of the bullets out before I gave it to you. I'm not going to get my dick blown off just because you're no good with a gun. I was just trying to give you some confidence."

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Analog SF*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *New Plains Review*, and her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Music Composition for Dummies*. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

"Australian postal snail Mr. Chew" By: Alina Bistrova



One day my pen pal said that there were snails in her mailbox that were eating mail. This is how the illustration of Mr. Chew - the Australian Postal Snail - was born.



"someone stepped on mr. chew" By: Alina Bistrova

POETRY

Slingshot

BY: JIM BATES

He was quiet that fall
Withdrawn
New school new grade
Old friends drifting away
He took to walking the nearby woods
Liking the feeling of aloneness.

One day on a whim he whittled a slingshot
Why? No clue
He carved the hackberry wood until it glistened
Added stout rubber bands and a leather pouch
To hold the projectiles he would shoot
Acorns that's what he used
He didn't want to hurt anything and he didn't
He missed every time
But being alone
Being out in the woods
With the safe wildlife
The peace and the quiet
And an unfamiliar mind
Wandering down new pathways
Walking and healing
Exactly what he needed.

Jim Bates lives in a small town in Minnesota. He loves to write! His stories and poems have appeared in nearly 500 online and print publications



"HERON A Look Within" By: Molly Heron

Nature transports her from the bustling outer world to an expansive inner world.

Waiting

BY: DON NOEL

Their first real conversation about death, Susan remembers, was on her sixty-fifth birthday when they were both in ebullient good health.

“Let’s be realistic,” Charlie said. “Sooner or later, everyone dies. Later, we hope. But when it comes, let’s not prolong it.”

Imagine! That was twenty-three years ago! They’d agreed in a vague way, the way they might have agreed that if a flood came they should seek higher ground and then went on to wonderful retirement years. Remembrances of those years flooded in; she smiled across the living room at him, tipped back in his recliner.

She’d been dubious when he decided at age 75 to grow a beard, but in time grew fond of it, snow-white and neatly trimmed.

“More on my chin than my forehead,” he liked to joke.

She is tempted to get up and plant a kiss on that forehead, but it is easier to stay put, cozied by her fleecy lap robe. The remnants of the cup of tea at her elbow were long gone cold.

A few years ago, the state doctors’ association invited people to get their physician’s approval to write, send a check, and get a ‘DO NOT RESUSCITATE’ bracelet. Charlie embraced that idea with his characteristic enthusiasm. She fingers hers now, a shiny thin chain that might almost be cosmetic on a wrist that has grown thin.

A few years before that, someone began a movement to let terminally-ill people end their lives with lethal medication. Prescribed by a doctor, but self-administered so no one would think spouses were just getting rid of worn-out partners. It was Charlie’s idea to send some money to the organization, called Death with Dignity. She and he sent identical letters to their state legislator urging a permissive state law.

They sent those darned letters every year since, in fact, and the state still hasn’t passed the needed law. A decade ago, when they were still up to going out at night, she recalls, they attended a campaign rally for their state legislator. Charlie had shouldered his way through the crowd to tell the man, face-to-face, that it was a good law and he ought to vote for it.

Didn’t do any good; the man voted against it next time it came up. So at election time, Charlie insisted that they vote for his opponent, even though that fellow had no chance of winning.

That was her darling, tell-em-like-it-is husband, she thinks; never hesitant to get out in front for a good idea.

When legalization of marijuana came up two years ago, he embraced that, too. “I’ve never had even a toke,” he told friends, “and don’t expect to. But if someone wants pot instead of my bourbon, that ought to be a choice.”

She hadn't disagreed, but hadn't joined him at the ramparts on either issue. She'd been the town librarian, and having a public opinion on controversial topics would just bring out the crazies. It was bad enough having grown people combing through the children's section looking for any mention of human bodies or body parts that they insisted might corrupt the minds of innocent children.

She's retired now, of course, but still goes to the library now and then to help out on a volunteer basis, so still maintains her silence. Or maybe she's just reticent by nature.

"My sweet little mouse," Charlie called her once. Not that their elder lives have been stuck in the grooves of defending libraries' independence or espousing unpopular issues. Charlie, a few years older, retired before she did, and when she gave it up too they traveled to all the exotic places they'd dreamed of. The kids worried about them at first, but then decided to relax and let their parents enjoy themselves.

They had indeed, tapering off to a river cruise or so when their legs balked at more ambitious adventures. She remembers floating the Mississippi in a drought year when the river banks seemed too high, and he expounded on the dynamics of rivers.

She smiles across the living room at him again. Dear man! His mouth is only slightly ajar, what could almost have been a grin as he met the stroke or whatever it had been. And his eyes are closed, thank goodness! Otherwise she would have to get up and close them, not wanting to remember him staring blankly at the ceiling.

She'll wait a little longer before calling security, long enough that they'll know right away that it's over, and won't try any urgent restorative stuff. But they may ask why she didn't call earlier. We were both napping, she'll tell them.

Then she'll phone the kids, and begin making all the necessary arrangements. It will be hard, the next few weeks, and lonely for a long time to come; she'll cry.

But not now. Her dear husband of sixty-odd years has died with dignity. May she be so lucky, she thinks, when her time comes.



Don Noel is retired after four decades' prizewinning print and broadcast journalism in Hartford CT and received his MFA in Creative Writing from Fairfield University in 2013, at age 80. He has since published more than 100 short stories.



PHOTOGRAPHY

"HERON Green Light" By: Molly Heron



Apology

BY: WILLIAM CASS

It was my wife Molly's idea to have us try again. It came out of the blue the same way her declaration had several months earlier that she was having an affair with a colleague and needed time apart. I had no idea anything was wrong and was utterly dumbstruck, heartbroken. She moved into a studio apartment over a garage a few streets away. In some desperate hope that it might help fuel a reconciliation, I agreed to our eight-year-old daughter, Hannah, spending three nights a week with her there. Otherwise, Molly seemed to always be with her lover, Don, a man fifteen years her senior whom I'd considered a friend. Despite my constant efforts to the contrary, she refused to communicate with me in any manner except by terse texts solely concerning arrangements for Hannah. So when I received her message telling me that things "had quieted" with Don and suggesting a family picnic, I was shocked but pleased.

The picnic was a tepid, awkward affair. Molly mostly doted on Hannah, following her around the park's playground equipment, then said she needed to leave early for a work appointment. Except for a brief bike ride during which she stayed behind me the whole time and meeting once for coffee where a mutual friend descended on us gabbing until I had to pick up Hannah, Molly always seemed to have an excuse for not spending time alone together. She texted that she was trying to get "centered" and "decluttered by avoiding unsettling exchanges". Needless to say, I was confused, discouraged, and hurt.

Since Molly left, Hannah and I developed certain activities and routines in which we seemed to find a measure of solace. For example, we enjoyed shopping at our local farmer's market on Tuesday afternoons and often went for donuts before I dropped her at before-care at school in the mornings. Several weeks after Molly's surprise text, Hannah happened upon a new booth at the farmer's market selling gladioli and begged to bring a bunch to her mother because they were her favorite. I agreed but stayed parked in the alley while Hannah ran them around the garage and up the stairwell to Molly's apartment. When Hannah returned, she said Molly hadn't been home, so she'd leaned the flowers against the door.

SHORT STORY

The next morning at the donut shop, Hannah made a similar request when she saw that they had the maple crullers Molly loved. I demurred a second time even though it was much too early for Molly to be awake and remained in the idling car while Hannah disappeared towards her mother's stairs.

I regarded her knit eyebrows as she strapped herself back into the passenger seat, and said, "What is it?"

She fixed me with a perplexed gaze. "I rang the bell over and over, and Mom wasn't there again. The curtains weren't drawn either, but the bouquet was still leaning against the door. So I put the donut bag next to it."

My heart dropped, a chill spreading through me. I swallowed once hard, then heard myself say, "She'll find them."

I leaned over, kissed Hannah on her forehead, and tried to stop feeling like a rock falling in a bottomless well.

•••

Molly didn't pick up when I called her cell immediately after dropping Hannah at school, so I left a disjointed, tortured message. No response came until I received a text after I'd tucked Hannah into bed that night that read: "I know you're in pain, and I regret that."

I perched frozen on the edge of the couch and was vaguely aware of the furnace kicking on in the basement. A cluster of smiling family photographs that Molly had artfully framed stared back at me from the fireplace mantel. I read her words again and thought: "What does that even mean? Is that an apology?"

A blinking ellipsis hovered on my phone's screen, and a moment later another message from Molly arrived: "It's time for us to heal and move forward. I want a divorce."

The room seemed to spin. I struggled to breathe. The phone fell from my hands, clattering onto the hardwood floor. Hannah appeared in the open doorway of her bedroom, rubbing sleepy eyes. Looking at her, I choked back a sob. She walked over, sat by my side, put her head against my shoulder, and wrapped her arms around my waist.

William Cass has had over 300 short stories appear in literary magazines and anthologies. A nominee for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, he's also had six Pushcart nominations and two short story collections published by Wising Up Press.



"Girl" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)

"Untilted" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)





"Dreams" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)

PHOTOGRAPHY

"The Lady in Yellow" By: Konrad Hellfeuer

Konrad Hellfeuer is a freelance artist who specializes in photography and drawing. He has always had a passion for art and creativity, and this led him to pursue a career in the arts. His work has been featured in numerous publications, and he has also exhibited his work in several galleries across Europe. Konrad currently lives and works in Germany.



“Bayou” By: Amanda Althoff

Amanda Althoff is a writer and artist from Europe, currently residing in New York City and working on her doctoral dissertation in archaeology.





"Halfway to the Peak" By: Jordyn Pimental





"Common Grackle" By: Jordyn Pimental

Jordyn Pimental is a college student in coastal Massachusetts studying Environmental Science. Having an obsession with the natural world, she is happy to express her love for the planet by taking pictures of it.



POETRY



The Search for Fresh Starts

BY: JEAN JANICKE

In memory of Bruce Miller

I am the dark horse of your next incarnation
Choose your cowboy hat, white or black?
Grab my mane, ride with me, your legs
melding into the blackness of the earth.

I am the slippery fish of your fresh start.
Hold my fin, hold your breath,
and we will swim upstream.
Choose your chances: slim, fat, or none.





Abandoned Nest

BY: JEAN JANICKE

To feather the nest of promotion, I pretended not to hear the mockingbird second-guess each note. I fluttered to gather taut twigs of resume text, to weave bright threads of memos and slide decks, to copy the crow's search for something shiny. And then I left.

Maybe a late start, like the hummingbird lingering at my feeder in September, but I pin the position of the setting sun, follow forces from the earth's interior, and fly toward the tropics, toward abundance.

Jean Janicke is an economist, executive coach, and writer living in Washington, DC.



ILLUSTRATION



“Self portrait with Michael the Turkey” By: Diana Kurz

Diana Kurz has been an exhibiting painter since the 1970's, and her work is in numerous museums in the US and abroad. She was born in Vienna, and lives in Soho, NYC.

Trudging to Athenry

BY: MATT GILLICK

Dawn. A soft day.

I'm searching for an impasse on a green road outside Galway in February to make the choice of either/or, but instead, I find a rusted rail track going straight ahead. There's this tugging in my body. Like I'm on the other end of a coil being sprung back to the work-line. Tattered soles beneath my Virginia feet curl in soft brown wetness. I look further into the fog to see if this road meets a destination or ends at the sea. Possibly all the way to hilly Donegal, where my distant cousins hid and preferred to starve along the frigid shore. A train pounces from the mist, its emersion striking me from behind like a baton with a London accent, saying to keep at it, keep digging, young man. I am pulled toward the passing train; the wind's hands saying, No, come here. I half-expect to be lifted into a hay cart and find other muddy travelers looking for that same impasse. Thunder comes from nowhere.

-

Afternoon. Lightning. Rain.

A pitch-black noon. Flash. Hills crest over like waves plucked from the sea. Flash. They rise epileptic and fall back to the green ground. Shy in their lightning discovery. I imagine Patrick Gaelica, my many-great grandfather, thought of these hills while on the stormy seas to New York, rocking in the vomitous hold of a floating tuberculosis ward. Clouds in the Galway sky demand midnight. The faint trail ends. I cannot hear the screech of wheel on rail anymore. To the top of the hill I go, looking for a vantage point. No lights, save for white-blue puppet strings dangling crooked to the ground, trying to find something to snap onto, regain control. Were we once connected to this electric miasma when there was no need to cut through the sea, breathe in harsh coal, waste away on blackened hills, dig dirty green roads for a moldy radish? If I just reach a bit higher, stretch my finger, I may come back home and see the sun again.

-

Evening. Silence. Dark.

Rain stopped. Clouds blot the stars and moon. The puppet strings dissipate past the Cliffs behind me. Far away is the occasional flicker. A town, a struck tree, an ashen weary wanderer caught in the storm now burning like a scarecrow. My feet make no sound and curve themselves into empty. The feeling of wet thatch drizzles my outstretched hands. I come upon this jagged structure darker than the sky. St. Mary's. Roof collapsed and dusted away. No pews. Standing room only. I listen for tormented hymns or the glassy pop from a lit candle. All that's left is dripping wet stone and a peat-covered bell. Athenry is here, but it is knotted away, tied off like a useless artery. I sit on the mossy bell and wait to see if morning will show something other than a caved-in church.

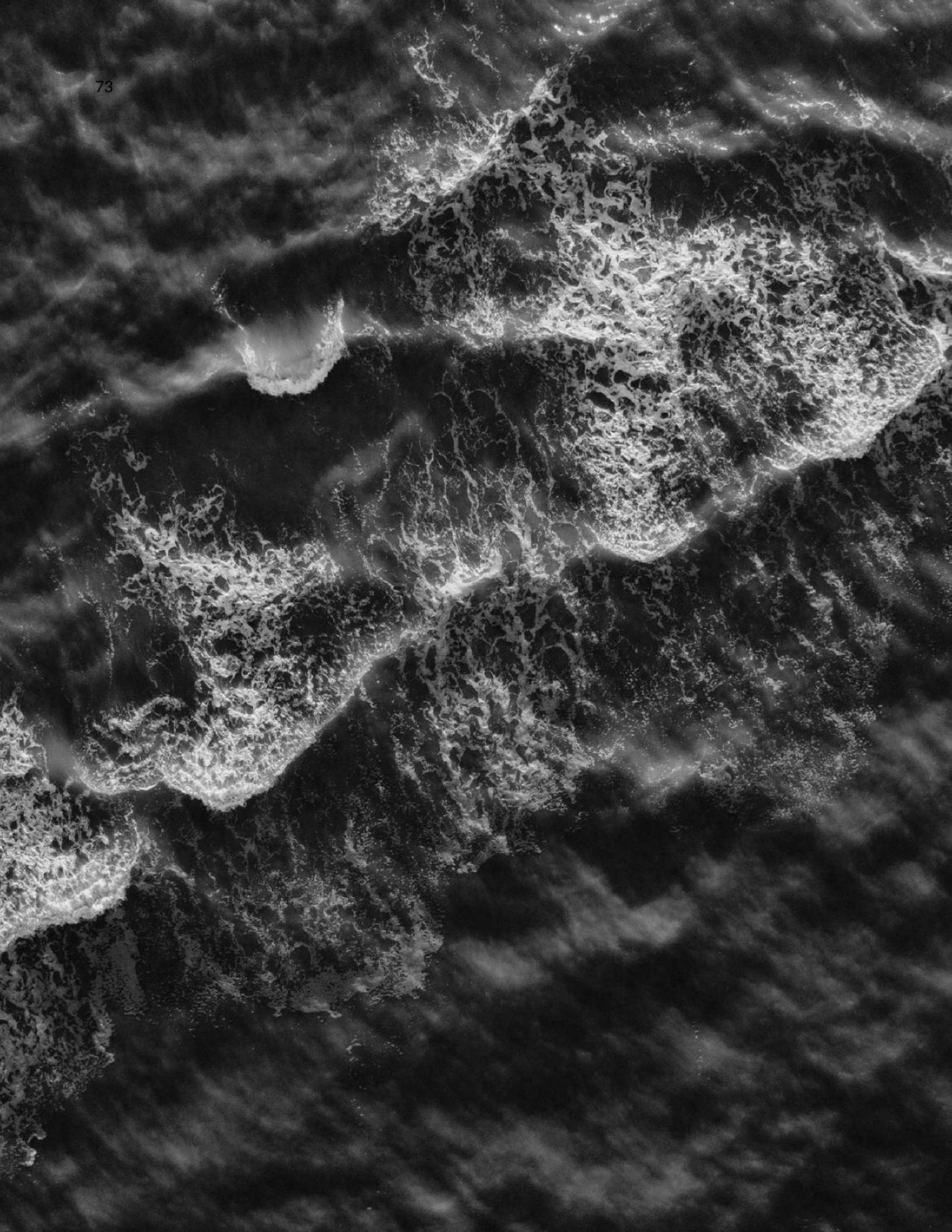
Matt Gillick received an MFA from Emerson College before becoming a co-founding editor of *Cult. Magazine*. Recent work in *Currant Jam*, *Bruiser*, and *Hidden Peak Press*.



"Wave Gush" By: Jordyn Pimental







READING JOSEPH CONRAD

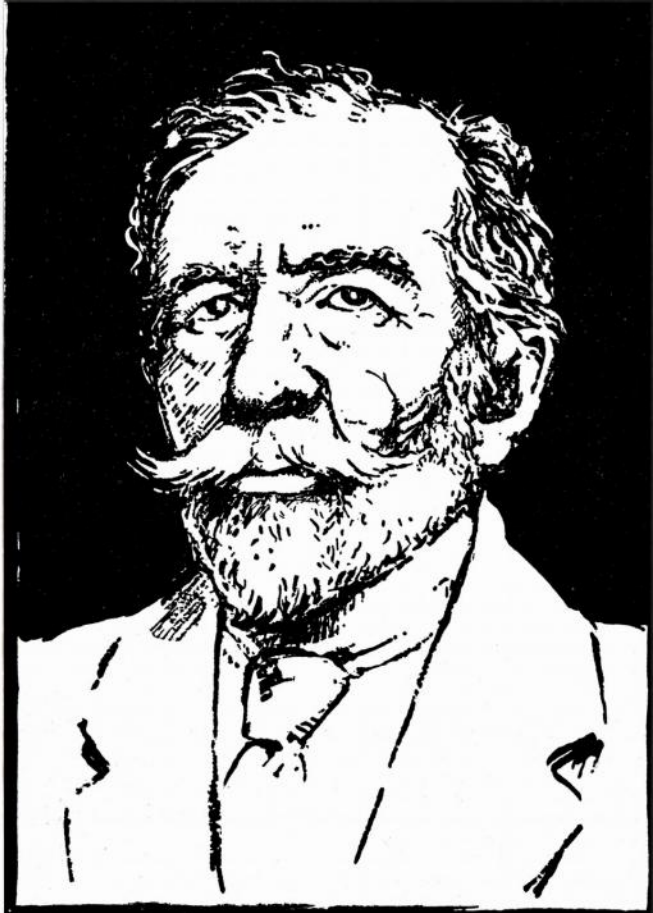
BY: WILLIAM DORESKI

The loneliness of old age
creeps from the depth of a dug well
and shivers in January gloom.
You don't see that lean figure
gazing into the leafless trees?
My father warned that it would track
me to my den and devour me
with a thousand painless bites.

I don't have a den, a study,
a room of my own. You and the cats
crowd the house and disperse
the ghosts that try to embalm me.
But loneliness isn't a ghost—
it's an actual being composed
of a trace element found
in every scrap of human tissue

Reading Conrad's sea stories
I discover shades of gray
seen only out of sight of land.
You also read Conrad to open
fresh dimensions to study
in the dark of your intellect
where no one's ever invited
without showing vast credentials.

The figure of loneliness stands
aloof from itself. It suggests
a first mate on a late watch
scanning the horizons for storms.
The storms will arrive soon enough
and we'll huddle indoors listening
to threats that suggest that all of us
spend our alternate lives at sea.



Portrait of novelist Joseph Conrad

William Doeski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Venus, Jupiter* (2023) and appeared in many journals.



"I Walk the Valley No.3" By: Vera Saltzman

Vera Saltzman is a Canadian photographer currently living in Saskatchewan. Through her work, she focuses her attention on issues of identity and the development of a "sense of place," the passage of time and the fragility of life.



"I Walk the Valley No.1" By: Vera Saltzman



"presenting a bloom" By: Pauline Burnett

Pauline Burnett is an emerging artist looking at the world through art. Her passion is that of anything created by herself that captures a moment in time that had meaning and the freedom of expression.

"Unicorns" By: Irina Tall (Novikova)



Unresolved

BY: KATHY PON

We have circled this orchard on foot
thousands of times, its borders
frayed, dirt ground to powder,
seeking rhythm.

How can we know what is true
when all around
earth and its creatures sigh
in equal parts -- revolt and mercy?
Fighting decline, pleading a different way.
I can only look for constants
of this farmland

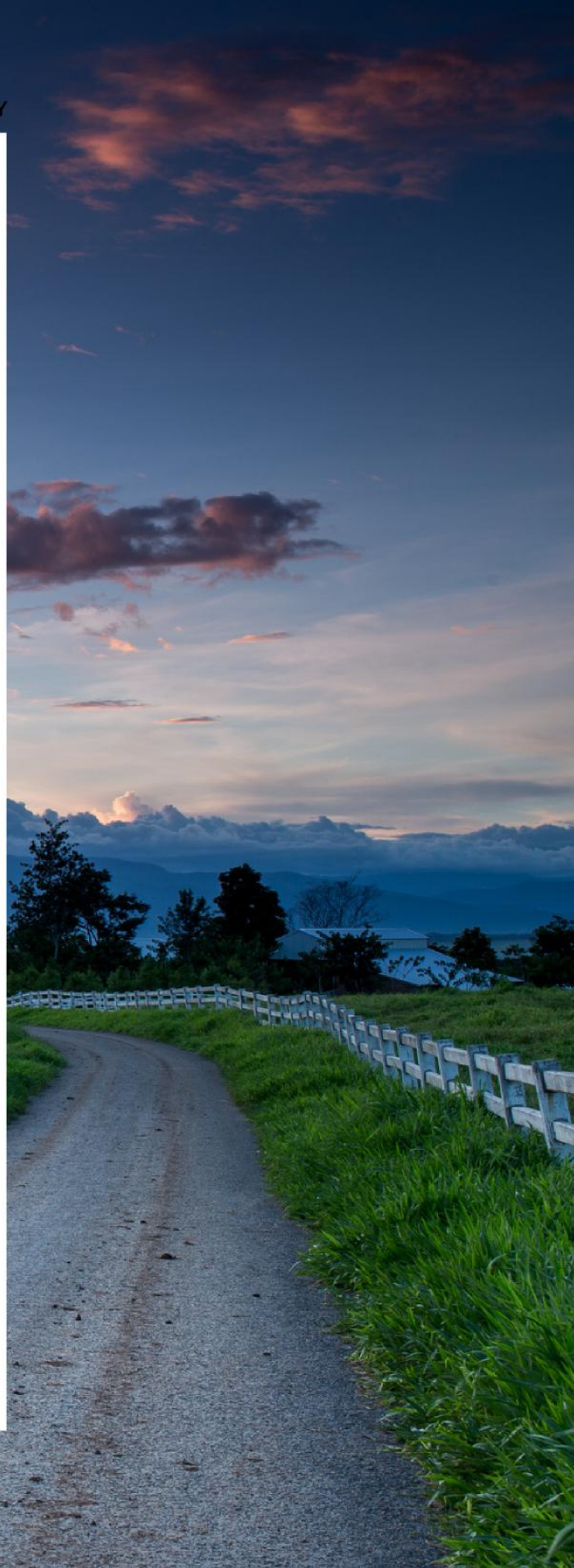
Skeins of Ibis forming
in morning sky toward irrigated pastures.
An egret's lift, low croak with slow
wingspan gracing the irrigation canal.
Always, sparrows and phoebes lighting
tops of branches like tiny stars,
a chorus chirping faith in timeless
weeds and seeds and daylight.

Still, uncertainty lodges in my hips,
muscles unwilling to flex with sunrise.

Today, every tree wilts, thick with
The resignation that comes from emptying.
Below, a cover crop of crisped safflower
practices how to come undone.
Don't we all taste rot at times
in our search for nourishment?

I glance at you in careful stride
beside me, conversation
dissipates in wisps of *shoulds* and *maybes*
or arbitrary agendas for the day because
we forget the language for desire.
I have become gray and weathered
like the bark of these trees
pushing through disquiet,
sensing a pathway
right as rain.

Kathy Pon earned a doctorate in education, but in retirement has turned to her life-long passion for poetry. Her husband is a third generation farmer, and they live on an almond orchard.



Memory



"Memory" By: Sherry Shahan

PHOTOGRAPHY

"Sunset at Sea" By: Pauline Burnett





ILLUSTRATION

"Flowing Emotions" By: Sonjaye Maurya



Sonjaye

PHOTOGRAPHY



"Peep Hole" By: Sherry Shahan

PHOTOGRAPHY

"Looking Back" By: Sherry Shahan





CRACKED PIECES

BY: DOROTHY JOHNSON-LAIRD

I listen for the love stars within my heart
They are there flickering on off on off
There is no man now, all gone - disappeared into the night
No boyfriend, no partner, no one in sight
I am not looking for the time being

I do not miss the cruelty, the unknown beds, the worn table lights
I do not miss the lies
Battered and bruised heart, headaches

Alone with these hands and this page
Returning to the word that was always my safe place
I return again to this woundedness and wait
Some fragments of glass still here in the center of my heart

Memories of your angry voice yelling at me from a next door room
No escape, no hiding, no hide and seek
I was a nervous woman sitting on the edge of the bed, shaking a little, quiet
Not knowing how to defend myself

I am a poet alone with her words now
But I am safe, I am intact
These words - my comfort

The self that was shattered into hundreds of pieces
Strewn at some forgotten roadside, betrayed, all over the floor
Kicked to the side, an unknown object, waiting to be collected

The self that was unseen by me, lost in the drama of the latest romantic escapade
Who cried into the sheets at night
No more tears for unavailable men
No more inventions of men, no more fantasies, no more false companionship

No more lost time, watching the phone, waiting for the ringing
No more escaping myself

Instead, I write this love poem to myself
I am fifty-two - All the cracked pieces are gathered inside
All the cracked pieces are gently worked together
They form one unity
I begin again

Dorothy Johnson-Laird is a poet and social worker who lives in New York City. Recent poems published by *Aji*, *Cantos*, and *Pedestal Magazine*, among others.

"Never Ending Saga" By: Sonjaye Maurya



Meredith

BY: ZACH MURPHY

Each night, Meredith places her husband's blue terry cloth robe next to her in the bed. Before she turns off the dusty bedside lamp and drifts into her dreams, she drapes the robe's fraying sleeve across her body, hoping to feel a faint embrace, if just for a fleeting second. When she wakes in the morning, sometimes she smells the aroma of dark roast coffee wafting into her bedroom. As she journeys downstairs, the steps creek like her bones. She looks into the kitchen and it's always empty. Maybe the aroma has lingered in the tattered walls. The walls hold a lot of history. Or maybe the aroma has lingered in her head. Her head holds a lot of memories. She keeps the windows closed during the day, even when the temperatures are sultry. This makes it easier to feel a desperate breeze. The house is over a century old, so she realizes it's no stranger to witnessing drafts. At dinner time, she swears she sees the tablecloth move every once and a while, especially on the nights when she cooks her husband's most cherished meal of beef stroganoff, garlic potatoes, and red peppers. She knows that your eyes can play tricks on you, but she'd rather not blame her cataracts. After the sun sets, the same routine begins. Some people fear ghosts, but Meredith fears missing out on what could have been. Time is an excruciating toothache when it doesn't give you what you long for. Meredith learns that moving forward is even harder when you want to be haunted by the past.

Zach Keali'i Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.



PHOTOGRAPHY

"HERON New Perspective" By: Molly Heron



Miscommunication

BY: ANONYMOUS

Today, she decided that she was done giving him sentimental things. She was done putting her heart out there only to be hurt. She looked at the trash and saw the pictures in the broken frames. The photos she printed at CVS and framed in gold for his birthday. He didn't want them anymore. She didn't want him.

Tyler's been territorial lately, especially when it came to "his" things. He hated when Ally touched his things, moved them around, or "organized" them in her mind. Ally recently discovered she had OCD through consistent therapy and self-discovery. It didn't matter though, at least not to Tyler. He was sick and tired of hearing the same old tired trauma bit. He just wanted her to "change."

But, looking in the mirror is a tough thing to do and while Tyler admitted that he "might be depressed," he refused to do anything about it. To be fair, he's been depressed for years, but its ugly head has consumed him. Tyler was a husk of his former self. Where he once was happy, smiling, and positive, he now only sees the worse case scenario and thing that everything done to him is personal.

He told Ally he knows that she's not the source of his happiness but she's the reason he's depression. Ally must accept that this is his journey to take, and no matter how hard she forces him to be better, he won't listen. His parent's tried to tell him to get out. Even his boss told him to be more involved, but yet day in and day out he sits and sulks.

Not to say that Ally didn't know what that was like. She was there, not too long ago, and that's what Tyler says caused it all. He said that over time that it was her. It was her not listening to him, ignoring him when he needed her, and not getting over her own trauma. He wanted her to be better after the trial and life doesn't work like that. War doesn't work like that.

No one knows what it's like for Ally to feel the pain she constantly does. She seeks God as her only solace. God tells her to have empathy, to have love. So when she looks at the broken pictures that Tyler through in the trash all because Ally rearranged his office when she was exhibiting her OCD and trying to settle the chaos in her mind with the patterned behavior, she tried not to take it personally.

She felt her heart breaking inside and the tears well in her throat but her mind told her to keep it down. Make it stay put and never come out. Ally would never show Tyler that this hurt her more than he'd ever know. She would stay married to him. She would devote her life and love to him in sickness and in health, but never again would she give him something this sentimental. Instead, she'll go ahead and buy him things, just like he wants instead.

ILLUSTRATION

"Cross Roads" By: Sonjaye Maurya



Sonjaye Maurya

to breathe by myself

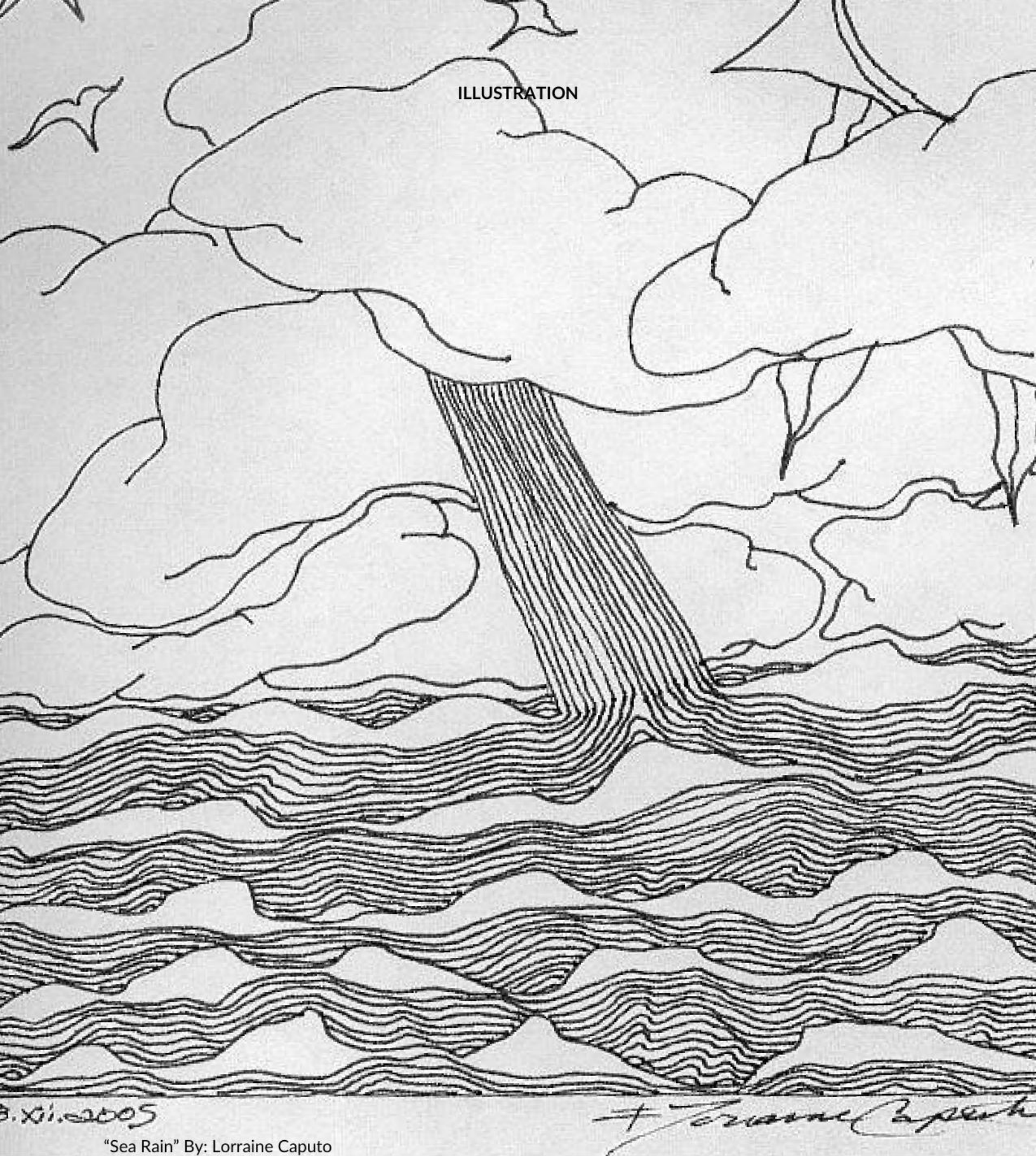
BY: ASHLEY WILSON

each morning I wake up in the darkness
wondering when the mask i wear
will become the face i recognize.

do something, anything to distract
myself from the constant
gnawing at my brain
telling me I'm not enough

I'm making mistakes
but my mask is colorful
smiling, feigning ignorance
of how I'm really feeling.

ILLUSTRATION



B.XI.2005

Lorraine Caputo

"Sea Rain" By: Lorraine Caputo

Lorraine Caputo's work reaches five continents, in the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Chachapoyas, Peru), and has been exhibited in the US and Ecuador and dozens of international publications, including *Thimble Literary Magazine* and *Ofi Press* (Mexico). Her poems and travel narratives appear in over 400 journals on six continents and 23 chapbooks – including *In the Jaguar Valley* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Caribbean Interludes* (Origami Poems Project, 2022).



"Turf & Surf" By: Lorraine Caputo





"Night Beach" By: Lorraine Caputo

7.1.2021

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ART Ser joven es crear, proponer y actuar



Francisco

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