

2023 / ISSUE 02

HOME / BELONGING

REDROSE THORNS MAGAZINE

AESTHETICS IN OUR HOMES

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BEYOND ABSOLUTE POWER

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"Home is not where you are from, it is where you
belong. Some of us travel the whole world to find it.
Others, find it in a person."

~ *Beau Taplin*

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about redrosethorns magazine



redrosethorns magazine is an annual publication, featuring work by our global community of authors and artists. Our magazine is a publication of redrosethorns Ltd. Liability Co., a feminist educational publication company designed to provide educational resources around mental health, gender & sexuality, and empower others through self-care practices. Founded by Kirsty Anne Richards, who believes that the art of expression is the most powerful tool we can use to build our self-worth and self-esteem, which in turn creates a society that is inclusive and fosters equality.

With the intention of sharing our human experiences through writing and artwork, redrosethorns magazine was created to provide others with a platform to share their work and to demonstrate the diversity found within our global society.

We wanted our magazine to be the reflection of the diversity actually found within our global community. To honour the voices of our authors, we have deliberately kept American and British English spelling, as well as unique dialects found within each persons work.

Kirsty Anne Richards
Creator & Editor-in-Chief

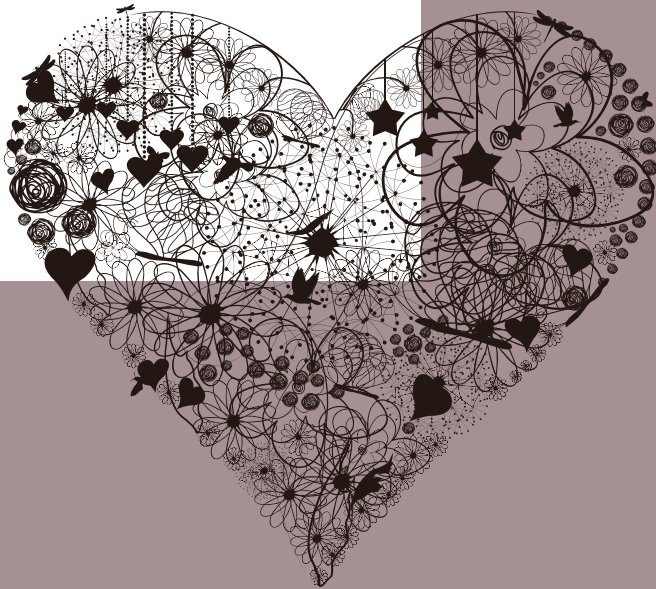
**redrosethorns
magazine**

HOME/ BELONGING

Embracing feminist ideals of equality, equity, diversity, & inclusion.

We hope our publication can bring us closer together, if not through action, then through the stories we share.

Our second edition of redrosethorns magazine, discusses the meaning and interpretations of home and belonging.



**redrosethorns
magazine**



Editor's Letter

Where are you from?

Is where we are from the place we were born? The place we spent our childhoods? Or the last place we lived? When I lived in America, people heard my 'accent' and I would be met with the 'Where are you from' question. *South Africa*, I would say. *What city?* some would follow up. And I would tell them I was from Johannesburg. Though I was born in Jo'burg, I didn't grow up there. My toddler years were in Cape Town, I then moved to Nelspruit where I spent my childhood, and just as I became an adolescent I moved back to Johannesburg before immigrating to California in my early twenties.

Now I live in London, and where I am from gets a little more complicated. I have not lived in South Africa for 17 years, so I tell people I'm from America. But my accent is a dead giveaway that I am not American, at least not by birth. So what was once a simple answer, has turned into my life story narration.

Both countries are as much a part of me as I belonged to them. I am neither completely South African, nor American, but rather a mash-up of both. England, too, runs through my blood as my ancestors are from this land. My cultural heritage is British, from the language I speak to the food I grew up eating (yes, we had bland ol' British food in my home), and the stories passed down our ancestral line were all laced with English undertones. Even my name is entirely British!

So, where am I from?

It's an interesting question to ask anyone and the answer should illuminate the diversity, complexity, and beauty of this world. Knowing where we are from tells us not only a story of our ancestral heritage but displays the fabric of our global society. It demonstrates our history, our politics, and our culture. I am from South Africa because of colonialism. I am from America because of imperialism. I am from England because of biology. My DNA test confirms this.

Instead - in the current political climate - the question of where we are from seers into the rhetoric that someone does not belong to the place they are living. I felt that cut when Americans asked me this question. I had the sense that I was being 'othered', reminded that was not one of them. And I began to discover the microaggressions hidden in plain sight uttered through our tongues. Where we are from dictates our freedom of movement on a planet that actually belongs to each of us. Where we are from determines the privileges afforded to us. Not just by country, but by postal, or zip code. Nothing makes this more apparent than the visa requirements for each nationality - who gets to decide which demographic is not worthy of being in another country?

I posed this theme of 'home/belonging' to showcase what these subjects actually mean to us, to see if we can find a pattern in our stories of what it means to belong, and what makes a place a home. People spoke about our earth, and nature, and expressed a deep sadness for her destruction. Others spoke of family and loved ones, of feeling safe and free to express themselves. As expected, there were stories about the actual houses one lived in, or where one would like to live. None spoke of borders or their nationalities, nor did anyone express disdain toward another race, gender, or culture. Some spoke of their culture or identity, and the reactions they received from those who imposed stereotypes on their existence, which made them feel that they didn't belong.

From these stories, I gleaned that what we are seeking is a planet that is protected so that she may thrive; freedom of movement and the liberty to express and be one's true self, without prejudice, and being surrounded by love and support with people we care most deeply for. I think that this speaks volumes about what home and belonging truly mean to us.



Home

by Jeremy Gadd

Home to a tern can be a sandy burrow;
to an earthworm, a warm furrow;
to a penguin, its feet in snow,
standing upon a crowded ice-flow.
To migratory birds heading west,
perhaps to wherever they return to nest;
for fish, the trough between swelling waves,
to stone-age people, it was often a cave.
Home could be a rock that blocks
the biting wind or, more complexly,
a spiritual connection to country,
like that which sustains Aborigines,
who reciprocate with respect and
ceremony to maintain their land.
To an elderly neighbour, it's within
the windows, framed with white lace,
that delineate her world. To a refugee,
it's any safe place offering security.
To others, its where their family long
lived and is associated with identity.
To an itinerant, home is wherever
they find a bed, if not, it's in their head.
For home is not necessarily a location,
a connection or belonging to a
community or being with kin,
for some it has to be found within.





Smells

by Shay Cook

Saturday morning. The smell of bacon rises from the cast iron skillet. Coffee gurgles in the percolator. I drape my waist in my grandmother's apron and stand in the posture of the woman she was before she died. Standing over the skillet, my body leans like weeping willows bending toward memories parched in longing. The bacon sizzles into mornings gone and endless

plates of yearning. I can never be the woman she was yet who she was is fostered in the breath I breathe, in the eggs I scramble holding on to what I can - self-rising flour rolled into

biscuits, butter smeared across the top of them like the red-clay roads we traveled together. I have exhausted myself searching for her in Sunday morning hymns; in stacks of pie recipes I've failed

to do justice. At the breakfast table the brim of my mug overflows from coffee beans I've doused in too much cream, the endearing aroma of my grandmother's Folgers steaming inside the cup.

Our Home is a Garden

by Kasey Butcher Santana

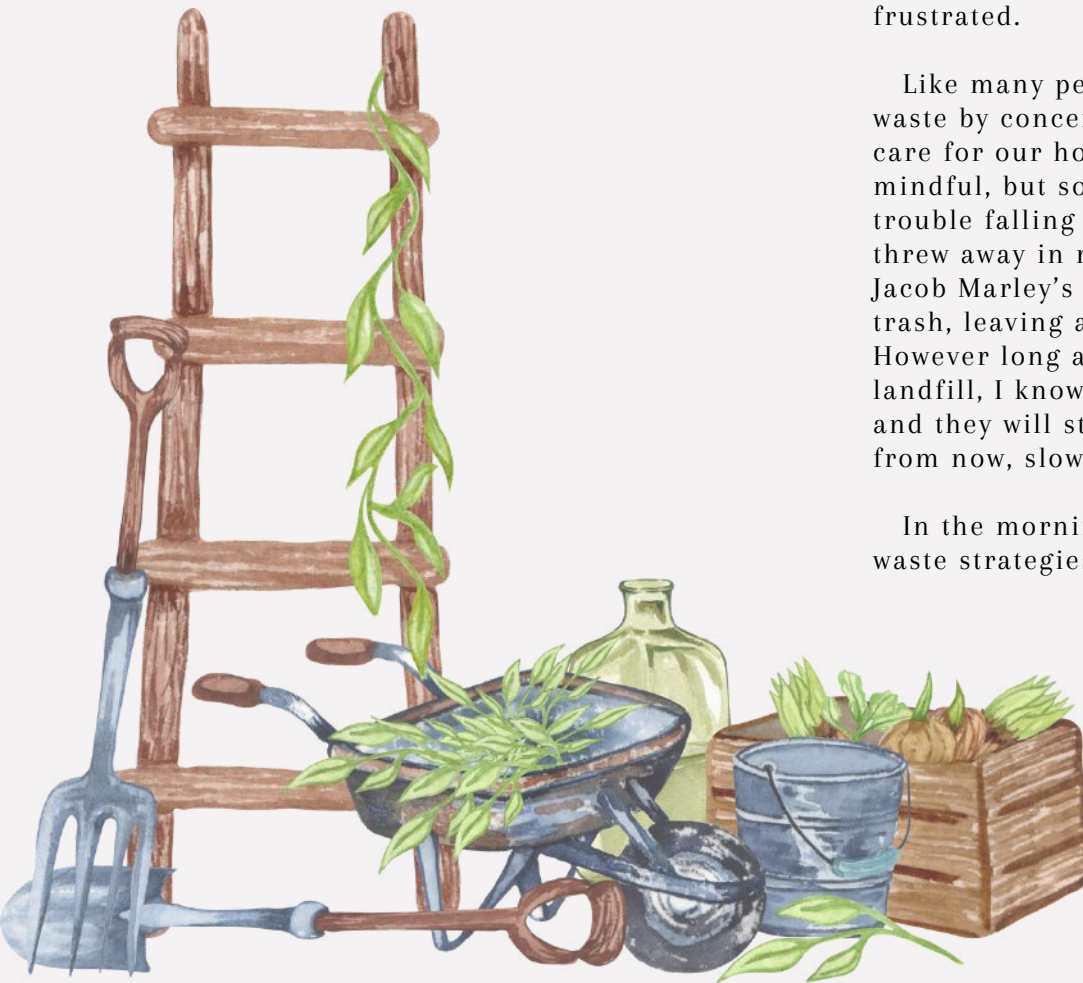
In swarm season, I am amazed by where people find honeybees seeking a new home. A tree limb is a classic choice, but beekeepers rescue swarms from electric boxes, rafters, and junk cars. The bees I keep in a backyard hive have not swarmed, but I find critters living all over our little farm. Before we tore it down to make room for the garden, a ramshackle shed housed the largest skunk I had ever seen. A robin nests in the tree outside the kitchen window. Bats sleep in the eaves of the patio. Mice burrow in the barn, avoiding stamping alpaca feet. Last summer, my husband, Julio, sealed a crack in the foundation, and I watched a rusty spider wasp frantically inspecting the foam, searching for the door to her den, which he had inadvertently closed.

When we replaced our kitchen sink, we meant to ask if anyone could use the old one. It was in pretty good condition but weighed a couple hundred pounds and when Julio tried to move it out of the way, he dropped it, damaging the porcelain on one side. I filled it with dirt and planted chamomile, hoping the tiny white flowers would resemble soap bubbles. A garter snake decided that the space between halves of the basin made a perfect cave. The more I work in the dirt, the more I learn that a garden is a home in which Mother Nature has embroidered “Waste Not, Want Not” on the throw pillows.

I often think of the garden as a metaphor for the earth as a whole. The mythical, Biblical resonance is obvious, but I meditate specifically on how I would feel if I were the Creator and someone filled my garden with trash. My garden is not even spectacular, and I would feel angry, sad, frustrated.

Like many people, I was moved to reduce waste by concern for the environment. As I care for our home, I try to be prudent and mindful, but sometimes, when I have trouble falling asleep, the plastic plates I threw away in my youth haunt me like Jacob Marley’s ghost, dragging chains of trash, leaving a trail of microplastics. However long ago they went into the landfill, I know that they are still there, and they will still be there maybe 500 years from now, slowly turning to poison.

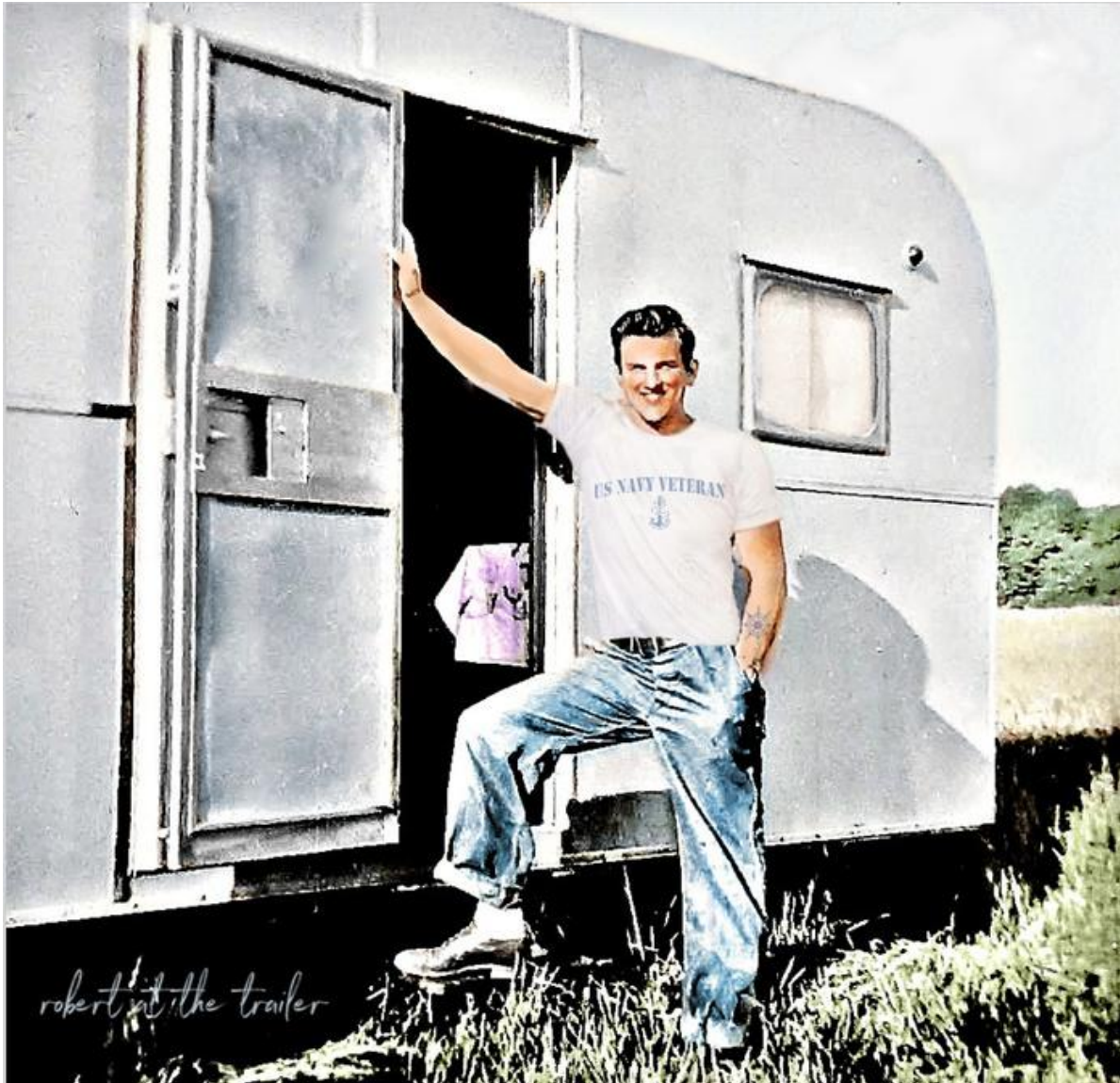
In the morning, I ponder how many low-waste strategies involve returning to older



ways of doing things - using dishcloths and cloth napkins instead of paper, and composting table scraps. I found that a switch in one area creates a domino effect. Reusable cotton rounds led to bamboo toothbrushes and biodegradable floss, but I firmly draw a line on reusable toilet paper.

When the global implications of garbage feel overwhelming, I return to the garden to put myself back into context, seeking beauty over worry. My efforts matter, but only as part of a whole network of humans and other creatures. As I watch bats take off for the night, dancing together in loops to stretch their wings, a spiderweb in the awning catches my eye. The spider captured a bee and wrapped her in shimmering threads, like a jar of jam in a cupboard. I wonder if the spider will likewise become a meal for bats or a rusty spider wasp larva. Days before, an insecticide salesman came, offering to control spiders. "No, thank you; we keep bees," I explained. Really, we keep bees, spiders, earthworms, bats, and the nearby owl. Our garden is a home, but our home is also a garden.





Robert at the Trailer

by Wendy Schmidt

Wendy Lou Schmidt, lives in Appleton, Wisconsin. She is a published author and mixed media artist.

Poetry/fiction/art pieces published are listed in her

Linkedin profile and found on

<http://instagram.com/lulubird1957>.



Wild Child

by Wendy Schmidt

Burlington

by Ted Millar

If I could, I'd pack it all in
and start calling you home.
The problem is the home I already
have on which I still owe 160K,
and the job I commute to every day
to be able to pay for it.

Our kids are in school,
our families practically live
across the street from one another,
my wife has on numerous occasions
used the "L word" when talking
about our neighborhood.

I guess the best I can manage
is another visit or two.
I don't expect you to wait.
You keep other lovers, I know.
Please leave the door open when I go.



59. R. INTERIMEN
JUNGER

A Letter to the House I Used to Live In

by Beth Mulcahy

Dear Old Friend,

I want to tell you what it's like for me, coming back to see you again. You may have gotten the impression that I don't care anymore, since I stayed away so long. I know we didn't part on the best of terms, but I want to make things right with you. The last time we were together, I said some things I regret about wanting to live anywhere else. You have to understand, I was going through something. My heart was broken and the ghost of lost love you let hang around was getting to me. I know now that we are so much more than those rough patches. When the house you grew up in is on the verge of being sold by your parents after 53 years, you realize that house is actually a seventh member of the family and that this is goodbye. I know me showing up here 25 years later to get these things off my chest takes a lot of nerve, but if I can just have one more night, I can explain.

You gave me millions of experiences, many I loved, many I didn't love, but needed, and others I could have done without. At times you were my refuge, the steady place to fix my gaze when the whirlwind of the world made me motion sick. At times, you were that place from which I had to escape, the moving vehicle to jump out of for solid ground because you stifled me. For all those years and all those ghosts, I wasn't steady enough to face you. I needed to be anywhere else. But when anywhere else got too scary, you were always there, welcoming me home with midnight chocolate ice cream and a bed to curl up in, until morning made it better.

There were so many things over so many years, like traditions, or just the way things were, that I took for granted, believing that they would last forever even though I knew somehow they wouldn't. I didn't even want things to be the same forever - so often I was impatient in those days, wanting to grow up, move out and move on. I didn't appreciate you. I didn't know how much I would miss the way we all were with you. If I didn't care, it wouldn't be so hard to say goodbye now. Would it be easier if I had appreciated the way things were when they were good? If I had come to terms earlier with the fact that everything I knew would someday be gone, would it make someday easier to bear?

It's the happy memories that make me sad now and I wonder if the same is true for you. I wish I could remember the last time we were all together, playing cards and laughing our heads off at the huge table in the family room. We did it so many times that it seemed like it would be a thing that would always be. But now, it won't ever be again.

If I can be honest without hurting your feelings, I have to tell you that you look really different than I remember. You look so empty and it's making me see you in a whole new way. I can see through you as I never have before. I'm noticing your plentiful gumwood, the curves of your arches and your pockets of built-in shelves. I'm listening to your nooks and crannies still holding our whispers and moments. I feel the comforting creaks of your floorboards under the stairs. I'm pausing in wonder at your doors, windows, entries and landings.

You don't seem like yourself anymore. Your age is showing you weary and worn, my dear friend. I see cracks in your ceilings and walls. Your beautiful wood floors are faded and scratched. There are spaces now where your floor is separating from your walls. Your walls are full of holes where lovely things once hung. I'm giving extra umph to shut your wooden doors and extra heft to haul them open again. Your bannisters are wobbly and you smell like old wood and dust. You seem smaller, too, like you've shrunk those vast spaces from when I was small. Don't worry, we are all older now and all this aging only makes you dearer to me. It's evidence of how you were so good to us for so many years, how you loved us so well, gave us all of you and the best of you.

It feels a lot like we are abandoning you after all you did for us. I guess nothing can last forever and I hope you know how much we loved and appreciated you for so many years. Our growing selves lived in your rooms, measuring that growth in charts on your walls and taking our first steps in your halls until we were running around your yard. We laid around bored on your floors, stickered our closet doors and threw everything we could fit down your laundry chute except laundry. We filled you with laughter, music, love and arguments over one bathroom and one phone. You were alive with us and we with you.

Now it's time for another family to help you find your full potential again - to fill up your rooms with their own memories. It's better this way - for you to be able to give to someone else, what you gave to us - home. I hear they have plans to renovate and remodel. I'm happy for you but I hope you understand if I won't be able to come back to see the new you. I need to remember you the way you were for us.

You held us up and held us together through it all. No one can say you're just a place. You are part of us and always will be.

With love,
the youngest





A Dream Called Home

by Dr. Vaishnavi Pusapati

“Where
are you really from?”

I am asked, often, always, everywhere.

Our family's past, is a page that is closed into darkness.

For now, the house is a dream perched in my mind's space where emptiness
sits without casting shadows, but casting doubts. I think about it, sleeping in the car,
My house is something I can take with me, like a snail, but much faster. From the window I

see, cardboard houses, like kid's play forts, and some old tents of the faithless but hopeful.
My possessions - my solitude, other knick-knacks. I belong to my belongings, and house fears
like Pandora's box, houses hope. Mom always says, it doesn't matter, where we are or were
from, rather, where we are going, that is what is really, important, really. We are going
towards a dream, called a home. An address with a post box, yards, front and back,
lawns, white picket fences, perhaps even a chubby dog with a little house of his own.



Ashley DeKellis has a knack for seeing a need in an industry and creating a business around it. In 2014, she started a subscription box business for travel lovers, featured in *Travel and Leisure*, and *Forbes's* Top 10 gifts for travelers. These boxes were also included in the Grammy and Oscar swag bags. Looking to spend more time with her son, Ashley switched gears and began Heirloom Fox, where she specialises in interior design for short-term rentals. She currently manages 40+ AirBnBs in the Chico, CA area.

When not working, Ashley can be found venturing with her son, hunting for furniture treasures, traveling back and forth to Marin and toting her mini golden doodle, Biscuit.

Aesthetics in our Homes

An Interview with Ashley DeKellis by Kirsty Anne Richards

K: I have always admired the name of your business. What was the motivation to start Heirloom Fox? And why did you choose this name?

A: I actually chose the business name before I chose the business. The business name "Heirloom Fox" was chosen with a desire to create something unique. The inclusion of the word "heirloom" reflects the intention to offer products or services that hold deep sentimental value, evoking a sense of tradition and nostalgia. This word suggests delivering something truly special and timeless. The addition of "fox" was influenced by the belief that names with an "x" sound tend to be more appealing and memorable to people. I heard this before, from the founder of Spankx and it's stuck with me.

K: What interested you in home design and/or real estate?

A: My journey into real estate began with a passion for home design, driven by my appreciation for beauty in all its forms. As a Libra, I have always been drawn to aesthetics and the art of creating gorgeous spaces. While studying fashion design at Cal State Long Beach, I realized that my love for aesthetics extended beyond clothing and into the realm of home design and real estate. What I love about the real estate industry is not only the allure of homes but also the opportunity to work with home buyers, helping them fulfill their dreams and build wealth. It brings me immense joy to be a part of their journey, turning their visions into reality and witnessing the happiness that comes with finding the perfect home.

K: Speaking of finding people's homes, what does the concept of 'home' mean to you?

A: To me, the concept of home goes beyond bricks and mortar; it embodies a peaceful retreat where one can truly find solace. It is a haven where I can be myself, free from the constraints of everyday life. Home is a sanctuary where I can let down my walls. It is a place where memories are crafted and family and friends are welcomed.

K: You have had a few businesses now, tell me what was the most profound moment you had experienced with starting your company(ies)?

A: One of the most profound moments I have experienced with my companies is realizing the impact I have on others and the difference I can make in their lives. While starting and running a business involves numerous aspects, what truly matters to me is how I make others feel. It's not always about receiving positive reviews or thank-you cards, but rather the knowledge that my work has contributed to making someone's life better in some way. Knowing that I have played a part in positively impacting someone's life is, without a doubt, the most rewarding aspect of my business journey.

K: I have often heard people discussing the rewarding parts of their lives, - which is important - but what is the most courageous thing you have done in your life?

A: The most courageous thing I have done in my life is to believe in myself despite facing adversity. It is often the case that people are told they cannot

achieve certain things, sometimes even by those close to them. However, I have learned to listen to my inner voice and trust my abilities. In the face of doubts and discouragement, I have chosen to persevere and prove those naysayers wrong. One in particular ;) This belief in myself has been one of my greatest accomplishments, as it has allowed me to overcome obstacles, push my limits, and achieve success. Embracing my own strength and resilience has been a transformative and empowering journey, demonstrating that the courage to believe in oneself can lead to extraordinary accomplishments.

K: I think those naysayers know what you are capable of, but are scared that if you succeed it will make them look bad. Though that is a conversation for another day. I'm curious though, now that we are talking about growth, how are you different today from when you first started your first business?

A: Since starting my business, I have undergone a transformation. Initially, I used to stress about trivial matters, obsessing over small details that held little significance in the grand scheme of things. However, as time has passed, I have grown to prioritize the bigger picture and focus on what truly matters. My perspective has shifted towards becoming a better person, not just in terms of my business skills, but also in how I serve my customers. I have come to realize that genuine success lies in my ability to provide exceptional value and cater to the needs of my clients.

Find Ashley at:
www.heirloomfox.com
[@heirloomfox](https://www.instagram.com/heirloomfox)

K: You had mentioned naysayers earlier, which I believe it's a lot of women who face being doubted in society, so what advice would you offer women specifically when starting their own business?

A: My advice to women starting their own business would be to pursue something they are truly passionate about and transform it into a business venture. When you align your work with your passion, it not only fuels your motivation but also creates a genuine connection with your audience and customers. It is crucial to embrace your authentic self, as attempting to be someone you're not will only lead to inauthenticity. People can sense sincerity, and by staying true to yourself, you build trust and foster stronger connections with your target market. Remember, your unique perspective and voice are what set you apart, so let your authenticity shine through every aspect of your business.



The River

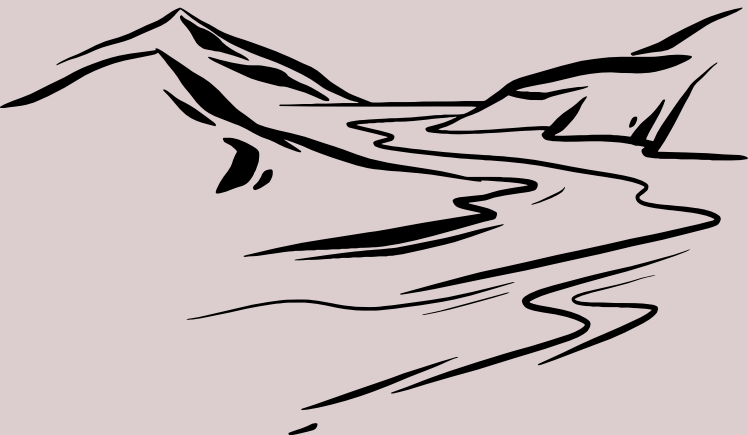
by Ariadne Will

When I look at the photo of my grandfather, I can hear that river. A lullaby sung by a vast and dangerous being and I am afraid of what it means to be young and new. I am far and sometimes gone. I tell my grandfather I am afraid of falling apart and stitching limbs back on; afraid that my movement - my absence - is what we are placed on dry earth to endure. I do not want to endure. I want miracles and hope and soil that sticks, and I want to sit on a porch watching daffodils and tulips; to spend an afternoon tending to forsythia as I sweat. I know this wish is futile but today is spring - yellow and warm like aching knees - and I try. I pretend I do not want to be drenched in rain but tell my grandfather I've never had as hard a time as this dry clime. He stares back at me, asks if this will germinate each year. I do not know. I have no taste for patterns, this place, this palette. New and exhausted, already, and wishing for water lapping at my skin like sunrise. If dawn is the flood and the nearest wet body I can find, I want to be lost in it, drowned by the warmth of that color, that light as it breaks over the fullness of day, and my grandfather, - when I return to him - he looks a tired man, his shirt tucked in, his glasses on. Looks stoic beside the river. Looks so old.

I know the river as well as any body of water, which is to say falsely. Which is to say my questions go unanswered even as it runs through me like something thicker. When I tell this to the yellow-red primrose on my porch, she asks me why I brought her here when I am cool like that green, faraway place; when her only companions on my porch are leaves, alone. Why would I capture her when I know nothing of the pinks of azaleas, and when I contain only a lexicon of blues, the beige of trousers, and the mud of the Missouri so far north?

I make no reply. I know I can't keep her alive for long and I mean to tell her that in my grandfather I see myself, and that I am meant to be tired in a different realm, but I deflect. I am hung up on the assertion that in warm, dry earth I know nothing. Maybe this is the secret - my grandfather and I, one lost and the other at home in the absence and abundance of water. I know my place but not how to get there, that landscape rolling like the sea, itself, and he - he is committed, his form captured: this one place, this stance. He knows it and, in his photograph, I can read his desire to be seen there, in front of that river, as if a man might once mean enough. In his image he knows how huge his ask is. He says, photograph me here. Let me stand by this river. I will be erect as a mile marker. I will be still as a home we love but may never know.

And though I am not there, I can hear my father - my father with the camera - say yes,



*"...one lost and the other at home in
the absence and abundance of
water. "*

I know what it is you are asking. Yes, this is where we fit best. This is where we try to make sense. Men and the river.

As if I could ever know what it means to be a man.

We are close, once - the river and I - and I am seven when these men walk me through the park to greet that serpentine being. When we lay eyes, the river is a swift, brown mass and swollen from the storm the night before. My father has waited long years for us to meet and on this day, I stand in awe and confusion. I had thought rivers were for fording and drinking and this - this is something different. This is more than I can bear, a river weighty with murky iridescence. A being so itself that my words melt like candy, a mouth dropped open, empty and full at once. It stands before me, this creature, ceaseless, one rolling body persistent as hope or something deeper. My father won't stop staring. I wonder about all that is green and if this is what it means to be a daughter. I wonder how we know when to come home.



No, Not Really Dad

by Mary McNichol

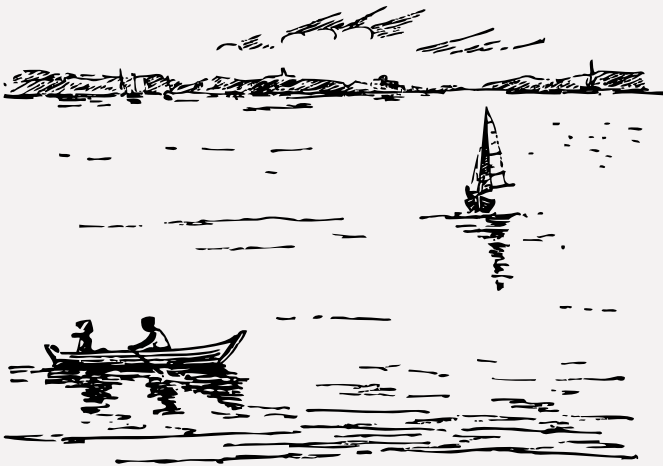
“Do you know what you’re doing, son?”

Before me lay a multitude of Legos, that when properly assembled would be a magnificent pirate ship. Or so, that’s what the picture on the box showed.

“No, not really, Dad.”

“Well, let’s see if we can figure it out together.”

Five hours later we sat beside each other smiling at our finished creation.



“Do you know what you’re doing, son?”

I was standing before a rusted, blue pickup I had bought for five hundred dollars, staring at an engine that wouldn’t start.

“No, not really, Dad.”

“Well, let’s see if we can figure it out together.”

A month later I smiled at my dad as I turned the key and the engine roared to life.

“Do you know what you’re doing, son?”

I stood in front of a mirror trying to fix my tie, my hands sweating and shaking. I couldn’t imagine my bride-to-be was more nervous than me.

“No, not really, Dad.”

“Well, let’s see if we can figure it out together.”

An hour later I saw him smiling at me from the front pew as I took the hand of my new bride. I touched my tie and smiled back at him.

“Do you know what you’re doing son?”

I held my newborn son in my arms, afraid I might harm this fragile blessing.

“No, not really, Dad. But I guess he and I will figure it out together just like you and I did.”

Eastward To Homeland

by A. Hasach

You ask me
where my home lies
And I point towards the East
my finger raised outward, upright, gaze watering
at the mention of a home I have abandoned for lies

Water lilies bloom
in abundance where the sun
shines benevolently upon the lakes
Marigold adorns all there is to fathom of life;
smatterings of yellow-and-gold upon celebrations and corpses
Come morning and all that is glorious of existence and death and decay
collapses into the rush of inexplicable, metaphysical cosmic waters; divine lakes

There is much
of divinity to be pondered
in these lands where the elephants carve pathways
Treaded upon by the dasi, the raja, cars and motorbikes akin
these roads lead to places where waterfalls spill over cliff sides to feed
neverending terraces of tea and eucalyptus, carved into red rocks formed when the earth,
the heavens and the cosmos and all in midst was wrought into existence in six days; thus pondered

This homeland of
mine demands sacrifice and blood
Already spilled in abundance by my forefathers
who so entrapped and ravaged by the ways of this land were
that their will to leave, escape, trickled into the water of the womb I
was created in, fastening me to a fate I did not, could not, contort, as it called
me away from bed and comfort to a land so distant I cannot breathe its air – damned forefathers

Here I lie
in this suspension of space and time
and right and wrong; I can no longer tell what is
the right and the wrong in this state of wistful longing for home
It does not call to me anymore, that place of belonging, home, where my mother
and her mother and her mother before her birthed into this world all that I would inherit
of wonder and knowledge; raven hair and brown skin, glimmering curiosity, a wistful gaze forever
longing for things not to be had; money of their own, house of their own, children to call of their own
names – mothers mine

I will leave
for that homeland once I gain
the strength to leave this sickbed; ailing is my mind
with sorrow and longing for my mother and my home and my land
False promises led me here to a foreign place that shall never be mine in heart
for it is too much of everything that is unfamiliar and alien and strange to me and my blood My
homeland does not call to me anymore and yet I will journey back to the place where the mangoes are
ready to be picked now, falling to the earth of my homeland in their ripeness, full of sweetness and the
taste of home



African Dream

by Dorothy Johnson-Laird

The sky turns orange
A brilliant sun appears over sand
The sand turns slightly in the gentle, warm wind

There is a small hut with a girl child peering out of the entrance of the hut
She has open eyes, an inquisitiveness
She wears a simple brown cloth for a dress

The sand is sifted by the wind
The sand is turning

In my dream I watch this moment
It is only a moment, there is no story here
Yet it is a moment

In my heart I know this is Africa
This is not the Africa I've watched on tv as painfully portrayed by Western news media
This is not the Africa of Hollywood film, a luminescent unreal image

This is an image of the brown earth
A girl with the sand surrounding her and light blue sky

The desert is not a welcoming place to some
It is barren, forbidden
People go hungry in the desert, they die

But in my dream the sand is warm, comfortable, familiar
I am the small child with wide brown eyes and softly curled black hair
Standing in the openness of the hut as the sand sifts passed me

This dream is a private journey
This dream is not shared with just anyone
I've only told a few people this dream

If I share it with just anyone, they will scrutinize it
They will pull it apart, judge
They will not see the sunlight moving over sand, the blue sky in the distance

For me, the dream of Africa is not some tourist vision
It is very real and rooted in the earth

The orange sky flows across the tall black trees
The water moves away from the land in slow ripples

There is a peace here that cannot be found in America
There is a peace between the land and the sky
There is a home for me here



Memory

by Norma Sadler

Norma Sadler works in acrylic and watercolor and likes to create an emotional connection with the viewer. Her artistic background includes courses and workshops at the UW, Madison and Boise State University. Currently she lives in Southern California.

From What Cradle Did You Crawl?

After Dean Atta

by Nona Lea

I come from the *amen* people
from the *if a cow licks the privates of another cow you cut off his tongue*
spirits of hellfire and brimstone

I come from a Pisces wearing a mask of tragedy and comedy
married to a mirror of pale gangrene
and a little white house that rained mosquitoes
and their little dangly notes mocking me
...Jesus loves me
... Jesus loves me not

I come from the swamp water eyes
the fear of moccasins falling from magnolia trees
mosquitoes paling Mother Mary
in a summer December crawl space

But I was born
from a closet of hungry tongues
from night sweats thick and sticky as water from the womb
from a belt who craved blood and saline and pleading for mercy

I was born when the eyes leered me up and down
and their hungry tongues ran over their sticky teeth

I was born when the eyes followed me around Walmart, community parks, & college campus
I remembered a wildlife documentary gazelles who jump the highest don't get eaten
I remembered male lions leave you alone if you bare your teeth &
fluff your feathers

I was born when I smashed a wine bottle on the ground and screamed
as blood spread around my feet:
ANYONE WANT TO FIGHT ME?



Their eyes always watching
Their tongues always wanting

I was bubbles and sunshine
And they made me mold and darkness

And my womb can only birth broken toys who need a mommy to love them unconditionally and she won't

Mommy doesn't want another lion or a gazelle

Mommy doesn't want the tongue running over her lips or the eyes humming with candy cane veins
& night sweat

Mommy has pearly black nightmares clinging underneath her bright red shell and they are her babies and she kisses them good night

And Mommy promises to her clutchlings: I will never go home



Blind Date

by Hannah Kurien

It happened during a blind date, set up by an almost-friend but mostly coworker, on a Friday during happy hour. I intentionally arrived at the bar three minutes late. I always avoid being too early on first dates. It gives me too much time to think.

I spotted her right away, and she stood up to hug me when I was close enough to our table. We made small talk, all cordial, comfortable, and polite. We discussed our plans for the winter season over a basket of fancy fries with too much garnish and not enough grease. She asked me if I was traveling anywhere for Thanksgiving. I thought about my tabby cat, my plants, and the work project that was due a few days before the holiday. I told her I was staying home.

Home.



I almost corrected myself, but the conversation fell right out from under me before I could cling to it. I wanted to interrupt or retract or clarify, but she began telling the story of how she moved to the city.

I moved here five years ago. It was the summer before college, and I was 17 going on 18. I promised my mother that I would visit home every chance I could. I stayed true to that promise for the first year. Then, I joined the on-campus theater production and had to stay in the city during winter break. Then, I decided it made more sense to remain in town for spring break because it was just *so* short, and there was no time, and I might as well. I started returning home only for the holidays. I interned inside a grandiloquent corporate tower the summer before I graduated. I ate free lunches and used their complimentary gym pass. I have not been home since.

Home was never my childhood house, a shoddy and chipped one-story bungalow with malfunctioning plumbing, year-round cobwebs, and a barbed wire fence. I grew up there, uncomfortable, and restless. The furniture wore down quickly, and the appliances broke too often. I could never consider anything mine.

I first learned what *home* meant when I was in someone else's. It was my best friend's birthday, we were seven years old, and her sleepover was the most important event of our lives. We ate cotton candy and played *Just Dance*. The sugar crash left us on the floor, limbs tangled, and hair splayed out. We picked a movie that we had all seen before and talked until the credits ran. After her parents fell asleep, we snuck downstairs to the kitchen, shrieking when the bright light and crisp refrigerator air

*"...my childhood house, a shoddy
and chipped one-story bungalow
with malfunctioning plumbing..."*



burned and blasted our faces. We huddled underneath a makeshift fortress and took turns spooning cookie dough in our mouths, letting secrets roll off our tongues. The strength of girlhood, an intangible feeling of belonging, that I could not fully describe at the time, overcame me. I felt integral to this moment with all of us in it. I was a puzzle piece, designed to fit perfectly around the girls cross-legged next to me.

It took 12 years for me to understand that family was more than a group of people who were legally and ethically bound together. There was something about the deliriousness of an eight-hour road trip that wore down my guard, leaving a delicate vulnerability behind. I was in the back seat, my head gently thudding against the window as my eyes took in the blurring landscape outside. The night was starry and clear. There were no man-made buildings or artificial lights in sight. There was just my mom's little Volkswagen amongst miles of farmland.

My mom was singing quietly, and my younger brother was sound asleep. His knee occasionally collided with mine when my mom sped on a winding road. I felt completely at peace that night, sitting on our crayon-stained upholstery and smelling the lasting aroma of strawberry milk. With my mother at the wheel, and my brother by my side, I understood that this was my *home*. Not a standstill place but a special group of people with whom I can be myself. Despite the pressing differences between us, maybe our shared genetics counted for something. I was not sure what the explanation was, but I knew the answer. I've been *home*.

On my 16th birthday, I screamed at my mother that she would never understand me. Though I am long past the melodrama of my teenage years, I have yet to come around. When I recollect these lost years, the pain strikes sharply like a gaping wound. It is too fresh, and I still feel too much. My thoughts were large and

burdensome, and my small frame buckled under the weight. What if *home* was just *me*? I knew it wasn't a place I could physically reach, but what if it didn't include other people either? The possibility freaked me out. I retreated within myself. I applied to colleges that were as far away from my town as possible, and I stopped showing up to rehearsal.

A few months before I graduated high school, I laid on a donut floaty and drifted through calm lake water. We were celebrating the opening night of our final school play, and I was feeling particularly grateful that I moved behind-the-scenes and joined the tech crew. Despite the chilly breeze, I felt warm, buzzed, and optimistic about myself and my future. I could hear the delightful squealing from the other kids on the pier, singing obnoxiously, touching, drinking, and laughing shamelessly. I wondered if home was a fickle feeling. Something that came and went. Organic and impossible to manufacture. I decided that this feeling was worth it, whatever it took to get here. I closed my eyes and dipped my toes underneath the cool depths surrounding me. This time I was at the helm, driving myself forward.

At graduation, my girlfriends and I held hands. We traced each other's faces, memorizing every dimple, crease, corner, and smile. I pressed my eyes shut, wishing I could live in this moment forever, hoping that I was always as endless, timeless, and human as I felt then. The beating sun, beaming expressions, and nervous giggling consumed me. I knew I would travel the world and live through lifetimes looking for this type of magic. The principal pronounces my class high school graduates, and our voices merge into one. Unidentifiable and brave. I do not know where I begin and end. Our caps go up and I am grabbed, hugged, and kissed. I cannot recall what it was like to feel lonely. It is as if I never was.

“Where are you from?” was a common question I was asked when I started college. My home stayed my *home*. When my first relationship ended, when I fell out with my roommate, and when I wasn’t sure which major to choose, I took comfort in that my *home* was somewhere else. I had a physical place to retreat where I could remain a child and hide behind my adolescence. Yet, the more time I spent exploring the city, meeting new people, and creating a life for myself, the farther I moved from home. The initial distance hadn’t changed, but the city became my real life, and my hometown became just a town. I played pretend there, exaggerating old memories and reminiscing with people I no longer knew. In the back of my mind, I knew I would return to the city, strip off the person I used to be, and wear my true skin instead.

I suggested that we hang out next week, and she said that she’d text me. I left the date thinking about *home*. My brother and I had grown apart. I scrolled through my messages to find our text exchange. He had not answered my last five messages. My high school friends and I communicate exclusively through the comment section on Instagram when one of us posts a celebratory picture. I walked up the steps of my janky apartment and fiddled with the lock a few times before the door opened. Beelining towards my bed, I threw my heels on the floor. My cat purred next to my leg, and I realized that I was alone. However, this time the loneliness felt different. It felt right. Perhaps I created my home so it can house my emotions, my experiences, my favorite memories, and my deepest regrets. It is more than a barrage of endorphins. It is the calm during the storm. I fall asleep inside my home and with *myself*.



More Love Here

by Angela Reinhart



Can't you see I'm not the person I was?
The sunset is no longer a creation, nor a thing to
give praise for.
Now, it is the colors of my flag, the site of
authenticity.
The journey was long, the river seemed endless
and my arms hurt from rowing, but the village
has finally welcomed me home.
I am embraced without stipulations, celebrated
without hiding.
To some, I am Judas.
But I know there is more love here than I ever
found at the altar.

Home in Memory

by Snigdha Jain

Home
What is it?
What does it mean?
Is it the building, the bricks and the walls
Or is it the people who inhabit it
Is it the items being hoarded
Timeless past nostalgia collected in old and decaying cardboard boxes
Memories which were once sweet
Now the same taste too bitter
Where once the air carried the sounds of laughter
Where the kitchen was always alive with the smells of spices.
A gas burner always on with tea bubbling
Knife constantly falling on the chopping board
And, mouth-watering and drooling.

Now the air feels stale and burnt
The stove is empty
The kitchen is dead
The house is black
What was the wrong being done
Why overnight families had to abandon
Their safe places
Getting displaced all over the world
A war somewhere
An internal conflict somewhere
A terror attack somewhere
In an instant happiness ceases to exist
Places rich or poor
Mansions or humble shelters with a tin roof
Had people loving and hoping and dreaming
Places where children grew
Where the walls stored within them the stories
Stories of happier and peaceful times
Moments which once were
Before....a before that can't even be remembered today
Times when the streets were bustling
When neighbours did not cast a suspicious eye on each other
When children were just children
And weren't forced to grow up too quickly.



Home!
Where is it anymore
It is there...in a distant memory and dream
It is not outside
It is what I carry within me
What exist in my mind
Idyllic almost seems unreal
Home
It is alive as long as I breathe
As I every breath I keep intact the forgotten
The old photographs which were burnt
Still imprinted in my mind
All the family heirlooms....stolen
Still pictures ed by me
The stories of a place called home and the people within
Live as long as I do.

Shuutoushunka: A Year in Japan

by Jennifer Elise Wang

Aki (Fall)

Innocent eyes scan fields of rice, browning with the cooling weather. Japan, will you be my new home? Knowing I have as much to learn from my students as I do in teaching them, I try to be present in the community. Listening, watching, tasting everything foreign and fascinating. My friend connects me with his neighborhood fall festival group. Nights are spent learning taiko and working on the parade float. One day I also learn the bon odori. Performing it in the festival parade makes me feel like I finally belong even if I end up wearing the wrong-colored pants.

Fuyu (Winter)

The busy streets are illuminated with Christmas lights forming a constellation in the trees. I see couples walking hand-in-hand - talking, laughing, loving. Colorful window displays bring smiles to their faces despite the wetness of white flurries making their heavenly descent. Being in the city gives me a comfort that I cannot seem to find in my home. I wonder how I wound up alone, why I cannot appreciate the blessings bestowed upon me. I stay awake to fight the on-coming tears and the envy that has been building with every happy couple I passed by. The night is so cold.

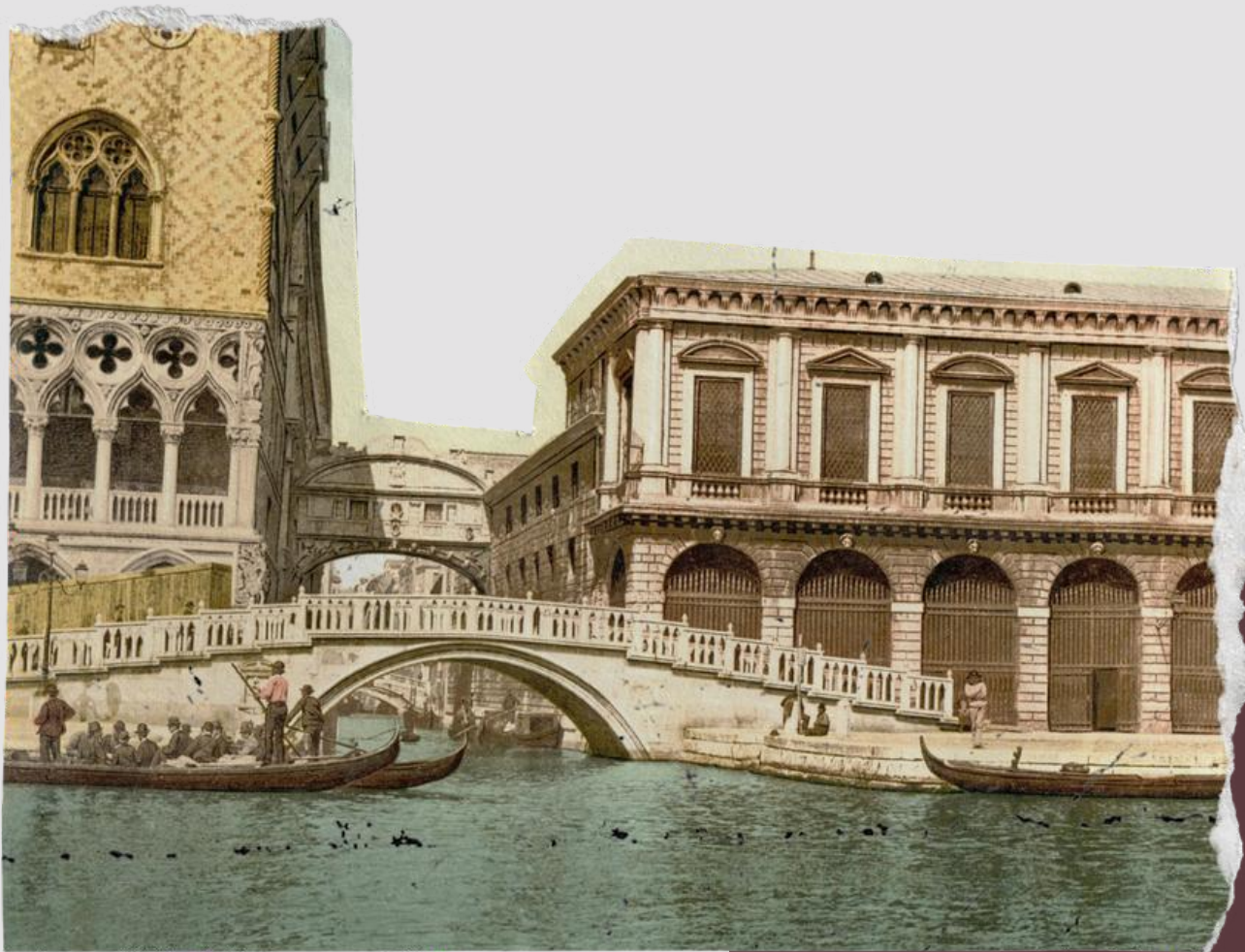
Haru (Spring)

My insecurity places me in a dark corner of the concert hall. I regret ending up so far away from the stage, but then the resonant chords of the guitars reach out and wrap around my body. They flood the room like a gentle rain shower for the last song, boosted by the recorded string instrumentals. Although I cannot see the lead singer's face, I sense the tears welling in his eyes because the same is happening to me. As his voice begins to give out, he taps his chest. Despite not speaking the same language, my own heart stirs.

Natsu (Summer)

I divided my apartment into three categories: things traveling with me to Tokyo and then Dallas in suitcases, things sailing across the Pacific in cardboard boxes, and things I needed to leave behind here in northern Japan. I had already sold some clothes to the second-hand store for a minuscule amount. That disappointment I could handle. But how do you pack up a life you thought you were going to start in another country? I focused on the soreness of my arms from carrying the cardboard boxes across town to the post office instead of the ache in my heart.





Untroubled

by Desiree Brown

Plates, slick with spaghetti, crowd the kitchen sink. Chunky toys--a singing truck here and blocks there--lay waiting for a careless foot. Yet, laughter from small bodies with bulging bellies and tired bodies with aching limbs fills the small apartment. Dishes untouched. Toys trampled. Souls uplifted.

Wind heavy with smoke
Lilies push through charred bramble
Fawns dancing in ash



Twists & Turns

by Lauren McGovern



My studio space, a loft in the former milking shed of the 1920s Sears-Roebuck barn my husband constructed room by room into our expansive home, and accessed by a narrow set of spiral stairs, has always held the promise of transformation. Before children, the loft was part of the compact apartment my husband and I shared with our three scruffy, mixed-breed dogs. The morning routine, as we readied for separate commutes, included folding up our futon bed so we had room to set-up the card table for breakfast. We'd used the loft as a different kind of DIY-zone, crafting beer and slapping fabric paint on every dish towel, curtain, and t-shirt. A sturdy winterized door separated us from the rest of the barn, a cold and cavernous shell.

Our home took shape beyond that door as we installed plywood floors, rough-cut pine beams to frame out the central dining-kitchen area, and sheetrocked miles of walls and ceilings. We welcomed our first baby. The milking shed became a bedroom for all of us. The newborn, sleeping and strapped to the front of me, added weight while I walked across the freshly tiled kitchen floor, helping to anchor the grayish-blue squares into their spots. When our second child joined us a couple of weeks early, we scrambled to finish the upper floors of the barn with a family-sized bathroom and new bedrooms all around. The milking shed became our library-guest area, but the loft remained a place of creative inspiration.

My children wanted to join me in the studio. Crayon volcano drawings gave way to stencils they cut from cereal boxes to trace onto notecards, matured into 3-D construction paper snowflakes and, eventually, fused glass jewelry. They learned to score, cut, and layer their pendants and earrings. Fusing mistakes became one-of-a-kind ornaments or lapel pins. They programmed the kiln. They sold their original pieces at craft shows or gifted their designs to friends and family, astonishing recipients with the flash of sparkle on holiday mornings or around the birthday table.

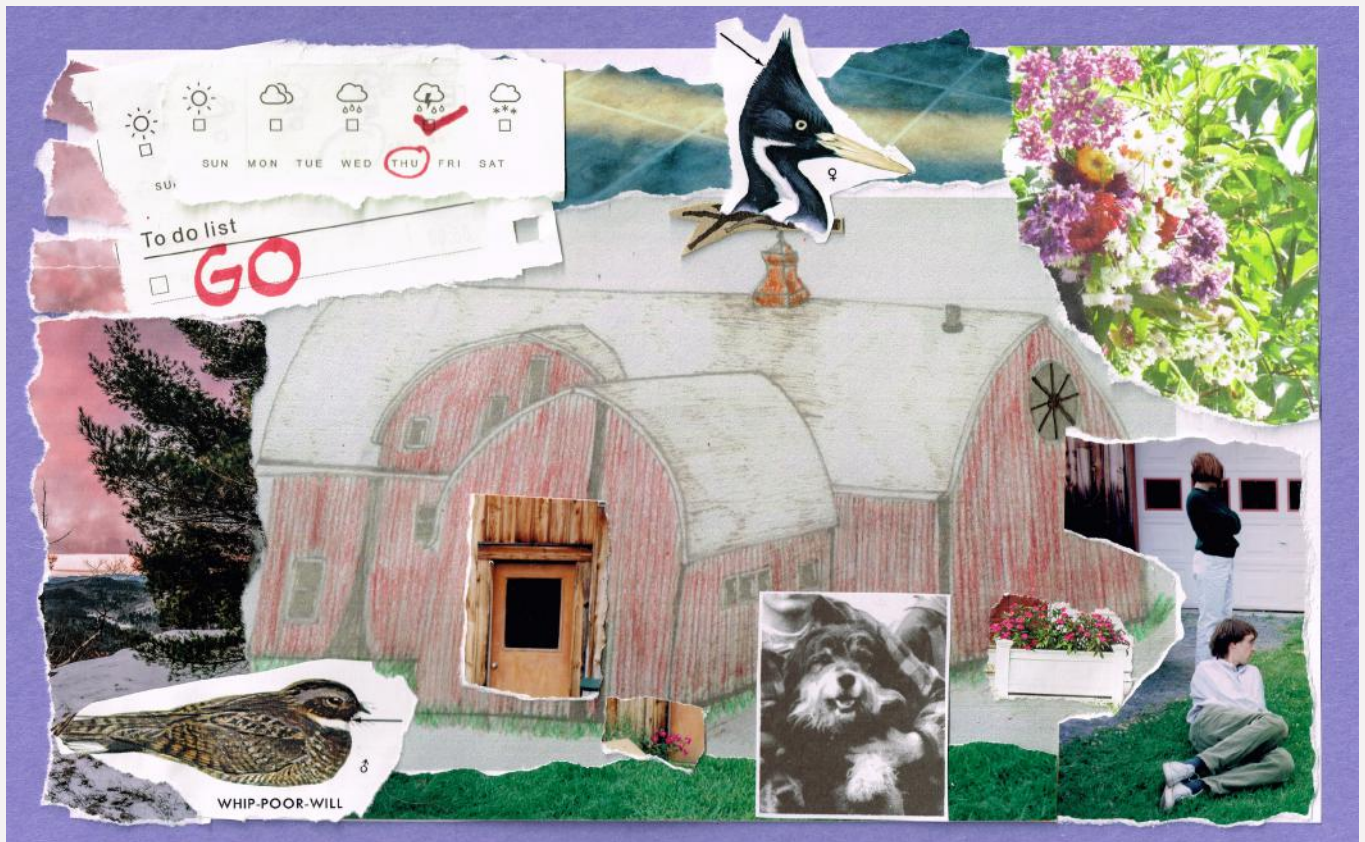
And. Then. A sudden turn. A twist.

One evening, on a New England campus bursting with autumn, my younger son, Owen, killed himself. That long weekend felt as though we were trying to walk fully clothed on the bottom of a murky pool. We surfaced and drove home, soaked through and dripping with shock.

In that jittery and sharp first season, I climbed the stairs to the studio. I settled in to work. I rolled out bronze metal clay, texturized it with spirals and waves, then cut and fired a series of O-shaped pendants to accompany whatever I wear. Each one is literally a touchstone for my days; my fingers reach and trace the familiar circular shape once, twice, or maybe fifteen times between getting dressed in the morning and before I unclasp the silky black cord at night.

I recently sold the kiln and boxed up all the broken glass to make room for erasure poems and mixed-media art forms. I began a process of reframing the guilt and shame, alongside all the sorrow, illustrating pages of the life I want into a spiral-bound notebook. The current arrangement: work-tables and containers stuffed with colored pencils, markers, and paintbrushes. A long shelving unit my older son built in middle school provides ample storage against one wall. I have a set of bright watercolors, sketch pads, a bookshelf overflowing with collections of outdated bird guides, discarded library copies of the solar system, ocean life, and advertising campaigns; diaries and engagement calendars of my *before* and *after*, boxes of Owen's handmade flashcards to learn Spanish, and instructional books about collage and doodling.

A tiny note from Owen about the adventure I'd missed at grandma's, house when they'd all taken the dock out and eaten chocolate while I attended a faculty meeting, states he brought a piece of sweetness home for me. I remember feeling grateful to have avoided standing in the lake for the routine task that September, reconnecting with colleagues and welcoming another school year instead, then warmed by the "Dear Mommy," and the "Love, Owen" and the chocolate I found at home. His words, scrawled on the edge of a shopping list pad stuck to the fridge a decade ago, are folded inside a silver antique pill box I can open whenever I want. Another message, from my older son, written in clear print and no punctuation, begins with a declaration of love and ends



Outbuilding by Lauren McGovern

with a hope that I had a great day. He used the notepad from elementary school that warns '**Prevent fires before they start— Practice Fire Safety**'. That one is on display, propped up on a tall bookshelf and visible when I emerge from the stairs into the studio.

My creative life expands and stretches through this forest of grief along the mountainside, with well-worn switchbacks, false summits, and rock ledges I avoid. I'm making my way. Most of us do. When I wander, I catch myself daydreaming about those times I shamelessly flirted with the future behind that heavy steel door. While I long to start over, turning back the clock to the days with the dogs, ensconced in the bubble of warmth pumped out by the woodstove, I know I cannot.

I can open the current door - it's now a proper interior one made of wood - to enter the milking shed and twist my way up to the studio. I can design images of grief and growth for myself and new members of this heartbreaking club. I have plenty of space and the tools. I can make something.



Pulse

by Erin Jamieson

I draw the curtains hoping
to hide from busy streets
heartbeat of a city
that always pulses
in my lonely chest

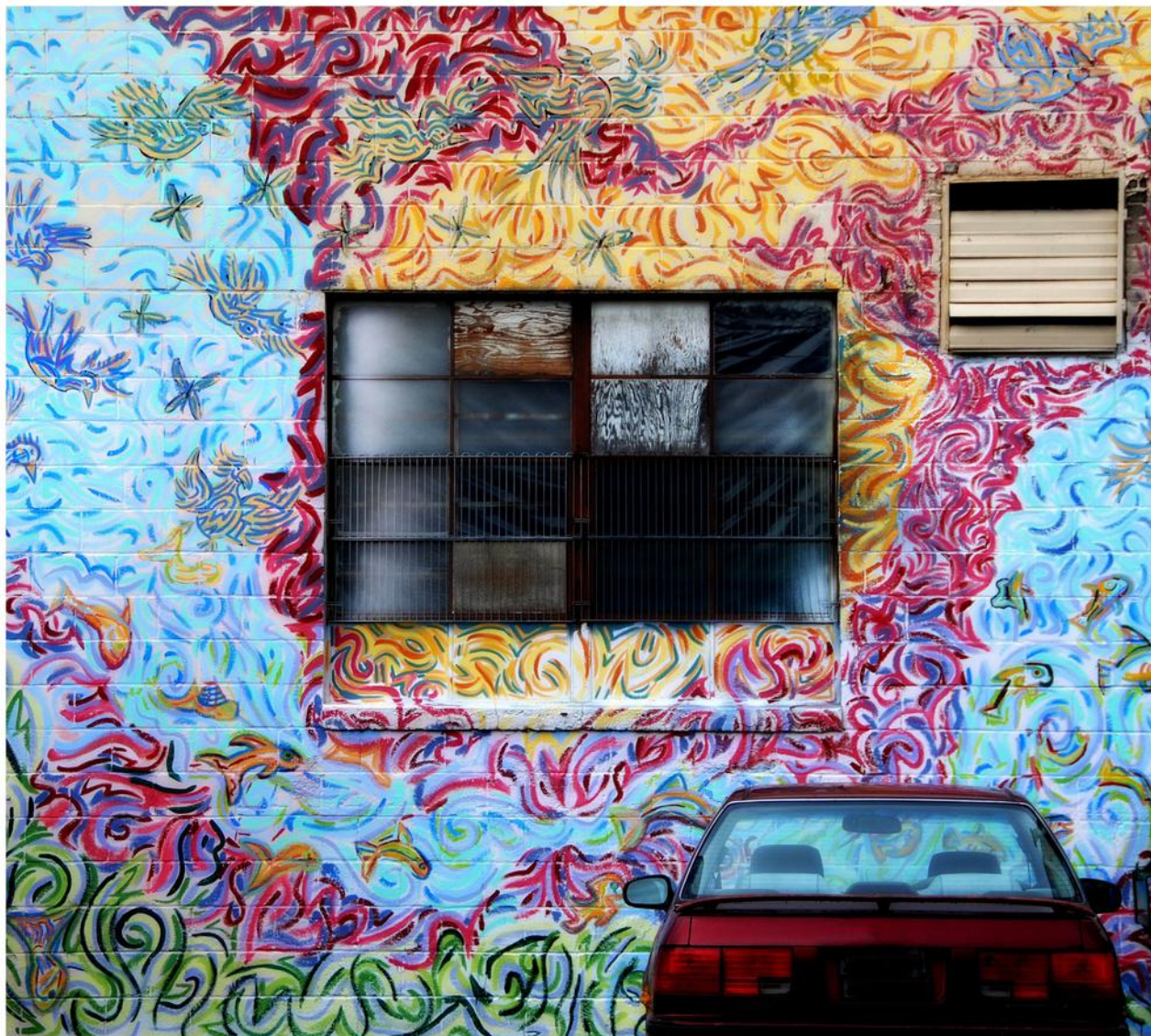
Cup of chamomile
& my ginger cat
curled in my lap

A tour bus with blinking lights
an orchestra of travelers
eager to discover
this city

Sometimes I long
to join them-

no matter how I try
this apartment
never feels
like home





Auto with Mural

by Thomas Gillaspay

Thomas Gillaspay is a Northern California photographer with an interest in urban minimalism. His photography has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals: *Compose*, *Portland Review* and *Brooklyn Review*.

Red Ink Dreams

by Michelle Trantham

When I think of my dream career I tend to forget I'm living it, at least in part. Gossamer ideas of academic grandeur, offices stuffed with books and notes and plans, are all just out of reach. Since I was young, the idea of being the one at the front of the classroom was enchanting. Those tall adults knew how to answer questions in a way that left an impression, and looking back I think that was the draw more than anything else: the chance to leave an impression.

I was the youngest kid in my whole family, which made it nearly impossible to talk to other kids on their level. I was used to watching the evening news and listening to big talk about politics and what money we didn't have. I learned to read the faces feet above my head to know how I should act through trial and error, sometimes too bold or too timid. Now I'm stuck in adjunct purgatory, bouncing between universities and community colleges every semester, wanting an office to call home.

The people at the front of the classroom had the answers, it seemed. My dad was a teacher, sometimes a long-term middle school substitute and other times a high school history teacher. As a kid, I was fascinated by his personal library and half-graded assignments scattered around his smoky house. I wanted to help grade them. The red pen called to me, and the idea that I would know who was right and who was wrong was the first concept of power I'd ever felt. I don't think I was allowed to touch that pen to paper as a preteen, but I looked through the piles of worksheets like I'd discovered the secrets of the universe: here lay the answers of kids I'd never meet but now knew exactly what they knew and what they didn't. They were stacked by my dad's desk, on the floor of whatever place





he was living in, dusted with the same cigarette ash that I'd take back to my mom's house all over my clothes.

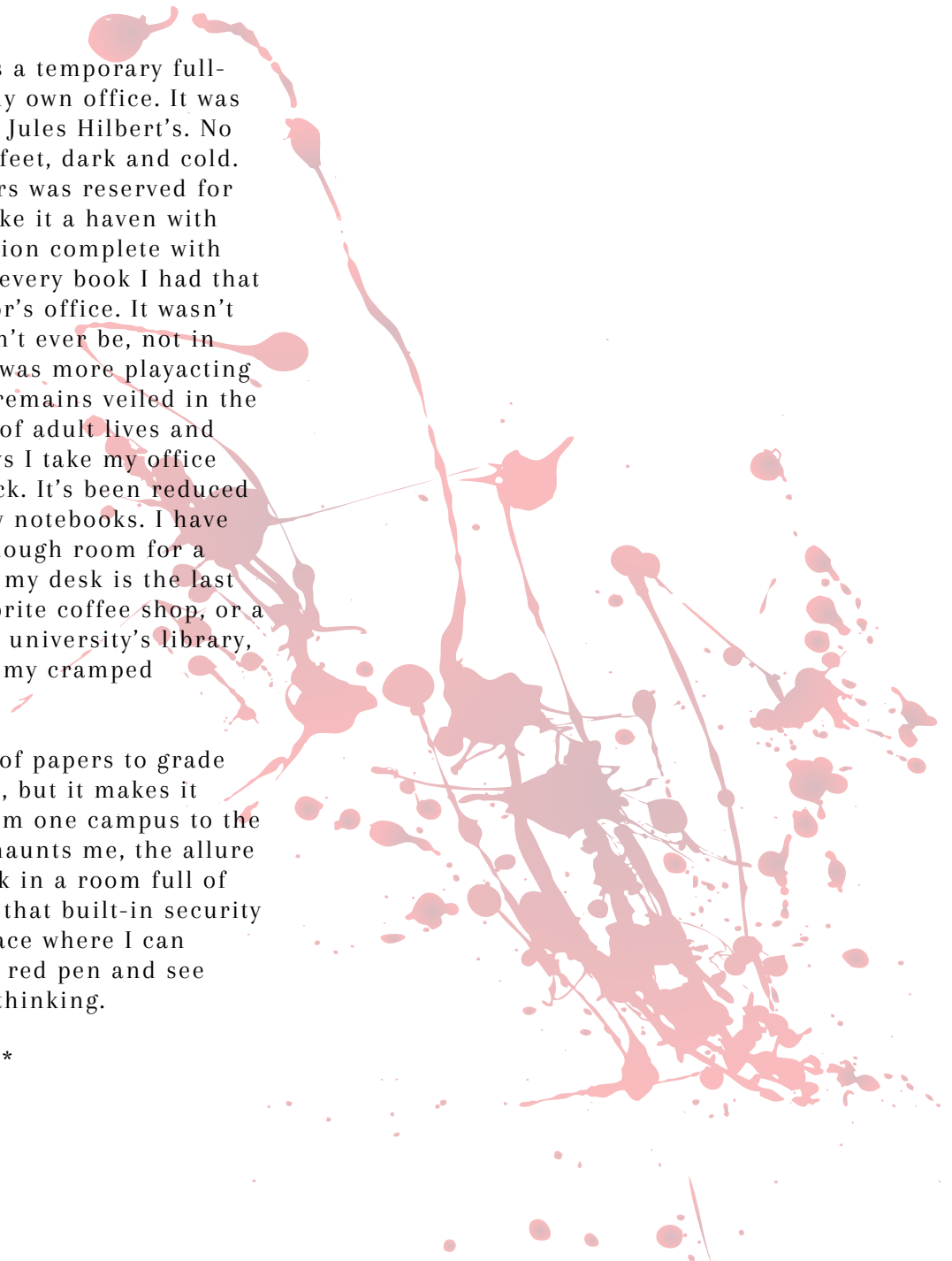
Mike, a guy in my undergrad circle of friends, told me I was the type to enjoy *Stranger than Fiction*. We liked him because he could play guitar and had an apartment we could get drunk in, both staples of college life. He had the same name as my father. Mike was a hipster before hipsters were cool, judging everyone on their taste in music and laughing in my face when I said I didn't have a favorite band. "You probably like *The Beatles*, don't you." I did, but I remember changing the topic instead of admitting it. It was in the same tone of voice that he recommended *Stranger than Fiction*: "I bet you'd like that movie." He based it on my generic English major, my goals for the future, my lack of relative coolness, no doubt. He meant to be condescending, which I recognized in the moment but had no defense against. I watched the movie a few years later, and he was right. I did like it.

The meta narrative, the human-first hope, the absurdity - the movie had traits that lined up with my interests. It was a rom-com, too, which I'd always liked the escape of. Harold Crick, the main character played by Will Ferrell in a wonderfully grounded performance, starts to hear narration as he goes about his day. The narrator's voice is the award-winning author writing his story, the chain-smoking Karen Eiffel, played by Emma Thompson. The author is wrangled by her publisher to finish the book, and originally Harold was going to die in a way that beautifully closed the narrative she'd built around his life. But she meets him and realizes that she can't kill a real person, another one of her creations. The lines between reality and fiction are blurred in a way I find pleasing,

but that causes the characters understandable distress. In their moments of need, they turn to Dustin Hoffman's character, Professor Jules Hilbert. Reader, I love him. I want his life in this movie: his office is a dream of floor to ceiling shelves and windows, broken only by a tiny TV jammed into the shelf that only plays BookTV. The desk, artfully messy, the couch, enough to dramatically lay on and read, the halls, a collegiate setting like no other. I want to escape into that little room forever, imagining the security and safety of what Professor Jules Hilbert must feel in his office.

I had a brief stint as a temporary full-time Instructor with my own office. It was nothing like Professor Jules Hilbert's. No windows, for one, 6x8 feet, dark and cold. One of my desk drawers was reserved for blankets. I tried to make it a haven with pictures and a tea station complete with kettle and honey, and every book I had that would fit in a professor's office. It wasn't near enough. It wouldn't ever be, not in that unstable job that was more playacting than real. The dream remains veiled in the same fiction we make of adult lives and movie plots. These days I take my office with me in my backpack. It's been reduced to my laptop and a few notebooks. I have snacks for comfort, enough room for a lunch box. Sometimes my desk is the last empty table at my favorite coffee shop, or a comfortable chair at a university's library, or the quiet corner of my cramped apartment.

I rarely have stacks of papers to grade with everything digital, but it makes it easier to transport from one campus to the next. The dream still haunts me, the allure of authority and a desk in a room full of books. It's the want of that built-in security I crave, to curate a space where I can finally sit down with a red pen and see what everyone else is thinking.



Airstream Dreams

by Christa Fairbrother

Useless Barbie, too tall for the dollhouse,
too stiff for sports, too poor for the perfect
outfit. Doesn't belong here, but the Lite Brite
held holey templates. The train chugged in
red and blue, bursts of steam-propelled, wheels swirled,
the little engine that could leave. Nana
asks the mirror to put her face on. Which
is the fairest Caucasian concealer
to cover a cheek's birthmark, darker splash
over dark skin. Aqua Net, Revlon, pale
perfection pinned. Icy pumps size Seven
and Seven for happy hour. KOA blacktop
sizzles as we, Shrinky Dink butterflies,
emerge from our aluminum cocoon.



*In Which We Leave the Places
Where We Were Born*

by Lora Berg

I easily packed
and took my words with me.
No one said, settle down.
There were no graves to visit.
In the metropole's arcades,
I sought my flames:
Rimbaud. Anaïs Nin.
Tandoori. Persimmons. Twist and Tango.
I sent postcards home
as one did then,
until they were returned.
Wherever I live now,
my garden of words
keeps growing.

He left home carrying within
the lighter fluid of himself.
Every little while, he would
strike a match and burn.
His country angered him,
the marabout, graves
he hadn't visited,
spindly strands of pedigree,
feuds, corruption, generations
like a paperweight
holding down the ream
of him, his mama waiting,
all that tumbled him away
from the sea of his belonging.
what pulls us to our Paris
what do we find when we arrive
what do we write down
what do we set aflame
what embers do we sit by then
what homes do we imagine



Three Museums

by Fanny Koelbl

2014

I am in the Museum of Art History in Vienna with my best friend Raphaela when we are not yet grown. On the ground floor of the museum are artifacts and sculptures of gods and women. A wide marble staircase leads up to the first floor where pictures of peasants and cold winters are on display. There is also *The Tower of Babel* by Bruegel which Raphaela and I know from our history books. Small copies of the great misunderstanding are everywhere. God is everywhere, too.

What Raphaela and I are most interested in are the portraits of young men and especially women on the first floor. My mother, who is presently sitting in the café inside the museum drinking a cappuccino and reading Donna Leon, has written a riddle for Raphaela and me. We have a map, and a piece of paper with names of paintings we are to find.

"We are detectives," I say to my friend. "And I'm sure we'll get some chocolate when we have found all of the paintings my mother has written down for us."

Raphaela smiles at me. "Well, what is the name of the next painting? We've been standing in front of the *Infantin Margarita Teresa* for a while now."

"You have to admit, her blue dress is really beautiful," I say.

"*Young Woman With Fan*," Raphaela reads from the sheet of paper my mother has given us. Then she starts walking on into the next room. I follow.

"You know they painted the infanta and then sent her picture to the Kaiser who was

supposed to marry her. The portrait was to assure the Kaiser of her beauty," I tell Raphaela. That's what was written underneath the painting.

Raphaela shakes her head. She is more occupied with solving the task my mother has given us. I am not as ambitious as my friend, and I am also not as ambitious as the writer of the riddle. For my part, I know that we will never find all the paintings, and I know that we will still get chocolate croissants and apricot doughnuts in the end. My mother has brought the pastries in her bag, and they're already waiting for our return.

"It's strange," Raphaela says. She has stopped in front of the painting of a pretty blonde woman with pearls strung around her neck and hanging from her ears. In her right hand she is holding a fan. "This lady doesn't have a name."

Raphaela notes the room number and the painter, Peter Paul Rubens. I look over her shoulder. Every tableaux we've come across so far has been painted by a man. "I think we've found everything we can find," I say and stroll towards the exit of the gallery.

"But we haven't answered all the questions..."

"We never will," I shrug.

"Maybe we'll find another painting of an infanta," Raphaela says.

"My mother has sweets..."

Raphaela doesn't care about the croissants and the doughnuts; she wants to find more portraits, and she wants to understand something I am uninterested in



at the age of thirteen. I see her longing when I look at her, but I prevail, and we return to my mother.

Everything then happens just as I have predicted it. My mother closes Donna Leon, and the detective story is over. She offers us pastries and I bite into it with relish. Raphaella hands my mother the unfinished paper, and eventually stops looking for answers and marries a man who does not encourage her to ever ask again about why women are drawn, hung, and looked at.



2022

I look at the *Mona Lisa* and still wonder. A crowd of people is shuffling beside me, and most of them speak a foreign language – English, Italian, German. They are tourists just passing by.

Sandor is standing next to me holding a map of the Louvre. He is a friend of a friend just visiting, and I have agreed to show him around. I am myself discovering new parts of the city every day, and this is the first time I see the *Mona Lisa*. She is very small, I think, and also pretty.

“Next we could go see the relics of the Egyptian pharaohs,” Sandor says. “The sarcophagus, you know?”

He is not looking at the *Mona Lisa* anymore even though he is still in line. Sandor has taken his picture of her and is ready to move on. I am not. Yet I follow him downstairs through rooms with immensely large paintings of war and God. My companion is looking neither right nor left. Someone is knifed right next to us, and a naked woman is crying to the sky and to whoever she believes is up there.

When we arrive at the Pharaonic Circuit the hallways are almost empty. Nothing is alive here but everything is golden. Sandor folds the map together and puts it in his pocket. For a while I trail after him. Then I say, “There are some paintings I want to look at.”

He absentmindedly nods while inspecting a brooch decorated with rubies. It becomes very apparent to me that the Paris he wants to see is different to the one that I live in. I hurry back through the long corridors and get lost without a map to guide me. Finally, I arrive back at the foot of the marble staircase we went down earlier. I climb the steps and enter the red hall with the large paintings. A little out of breath I sit down on the sofa and tilt my head to be able to take in the tableaux in its entirety.

Dimmed sunlight is streaming in through a covered ceiling window. For some time I look at the horses and soldiers crying out in pain, and at the nude lady stretching on a fauteuil. It’s war and sex and God, except for the portraits. The portraits are just people. The portraits can be just a small woman. *Mona Lisa* must have inspired some kind of love in the painter to make him sit with her for years, and to study her in great detail. In the end, however, she became nothing but a face that is passed by millions in a museum.

“That is her?” a tourist asks in front of the *Mona Lisa*. “I thought she would be... grander somehow. Not so simple. She’s not even smiling.”

But that’s not even her, I think, that’s just what Da Vinci saw and what he chose

to draw. No one can know if she really looked like that. *And why*, and I glare at the tourist in shorts and sandals, *should she want to smile at you?*

I don't find Sandor again that day; we have gone off into different directions. The following summer he graduates from a private business school in London.

2023

This is another kind of museum. It is inside my cousin Sophie-Marlen's apartment in Vienna. The entrance area is bare. White walls connect to grey stone floors that run down a long corridor.

"The baby is sleeping," she says, and I slip out of my shoes quietly. Then I follow my cousin into the living room that I find in a wild disarray. Spread all over the floor is paper. Used paintbrushes are scattered on the chairs and some have rolled under the table. There is a palette for mixing colors. Four easels are standing in the room, and on each sits a canvas.

The paintings strike me as strange. One is what I assume a bloody beast, another is a meadow with detailed flowers – poppies, dandelions, and marigolds. The third canvas is white except for six unorganized brushstrokes. I stop in front of the last painting.

"Who is that?" I ask my cousin. A distorted face stares at me, the dimensions all off. One eye is bigger than the other and the mouth is agape as if saying something or screaming. "Do you want coffee?" Sophie-Marlen asks from the kitchen.

"Yes, please."

I move some brushes aside and sit down at the table. While she is waiting for the coffee to brew, I ask her about her husband, and she says he is always working. What is she doing in the meantime, I want to know. My cousin used to have a job at a travel agency before she married at twenty-seven. I don't know if the

work made her happy, but she got employee discounts for her own vacations.

"I spend the day cooking and painting," she says. "Paul makes fun of me for it. He says that I am not good at either."

Sophie-Marlen smiles, but I don't understand why.

"Your field of flowers are true to nature, I think."

"Thank you." She puts down a cup of coffee in front of me.

"What are you going to do with the paintings once you're done?" I ask.

She sighs. "I'll throw them away."

I stare at her. "Why?"

"You see, there is no place for them here, nor anywhere else."

For a moment I want to argue with her, but then I remember that in the museums I went to as a child and adult, I never once saw a woman painter credited underneath a portrait. The most famous women were always drawn by men.

Sophie-Marlen and I drink the coffee, and there are no croissants or doughnuts because my cousin is on a diet. The baby wakes up crying, and I say goodbye and leave. On the icy sidewalk I hurry to the subway station. The crystals crunch under my snow boots.

On the underground train I look out of the window. There is only my face reflected back at me surrounded by the darkness of the tunnel. This could be a portrait too, I think. A fleeting impression of what I might have looked like at one point in time, from one specific angle. From another one my face may be completely distorted, one eye bigger than the other.



After Georgia O'Keeffe's "Spring" 1923/24

by Cynthia Gallaher

The weathervane pointed west,
but we never left Chicago
that spring after father died.

My mother hand-scraped, whitewashed
garage and clothesline posts herself.
There was never such splendor as

lilac bushes in our alley.
I remember autumns more,
burning bushels full of leaves and

mother raking ashes.



Artwork titled 'Spring' by Georgia O'Keeffe

© 2018 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Beyond Absolute Power: The Miracle of Art at the Louvre

by Simon Oliai

“So long as the artist pays no heed to him, a conqueror is a mere victorious soldier; Caesar’s relatively small conquests mean more to us than all of Genghis Khan’s far-flung triumphs. It is not the historian who confers immortality; it is the artist with his power over men’s dreams.”

(André Malraux)

It is simply impossible to visit the uniquely imposing Louvre Museum in Paris without remembering its royal history. The adjective “*royal*” here evokes a complex set of possible meanings. For instance, it could denote that before metamorphosing into the largest public art museum in the world, the Louvre had been a royal palace. One at which such remarkable French monarchs as Henry IV who claimed to rule their ancient kingdom by the “*Grace of God*” once resided. A palace whose occupation by rebellious factions of an unruly French nobility in the context of recurrent challenging of central authority known as “*La Fronde*” in 17th Century France (“*Le Grand Siècle*”), underscored the fragility of historically exercised sovereignty in Europe. Yet, “*royal*” could also mean the fact that long before it morphed into a major source of inspiration for artistic creativity, the Louvre had been the “*theater*” of royal power in France. A “*theater*” whose “*actors*” have indelibly marked the history of one of Europe’s oldest nations.

But how could such a history influence the presentation of its magnificent collections of artworks spanning five millennia? The answer might seem simple. To wit, the Louvre remains an ideal “*stage*” on which the “*extra-ordinary*” can be

displayed. For within its walls a divinely sanctioned sovereign once displayed himself not just to his court but, as the eminent French historian Patrick Boucheron underscores in the catalogue² of the highly instructive 2018 exhibition, “**Théâtre Du Pouvoir**” (organized at “**La Petite Galerie**”), his subjects. Subjects who saw in the person and the deeds of their royal sovereign a perfect “*mirror*” in which they themselves were reflected. As a royal palace and an art museum, the Louvre had been a “*stage*” on which the public expression of royal power and prestige in France was thus produced. A “*theater*” on whose “*stage*” man’s “*highest possibilities*” were not just lived by one man for himself but represented to all. Today, at the Louvre, could such “*possibilities*” still be represented to those who, as George Bataille memorably put it, “*possess and have never quite lost the value once attributed to the gods and dignitaries*”? What could “*man’s highest possibilities*” signify in our homogenized, intolerant and conformist world? In a world such as ours, how could one still, to borrow Martin Heidegger’s concept, “*re-appropriate*” (“*Wiederholen*”) the value once attributed to those thought of as more than mere men? Visiting the aforementioned 2018

1 André Malraux, “**The Voices of Silence**”, Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1978
2 “**Théâtre du Pouvoir**”, Patrick Boucheron, Paul Mironneau, Jean-Luc Martinez, Louvre Édition-Seuil, Paris 2017

exhibition at the Louvre enabled to me better reflect on such questions.



Figure 1 Louis XIII Crowned by Victory, Philippe de Champagne, 1628

Noteworthy therein was that its venue, “**La Petite Galerie**”, has an important pedagogical function in the Louvre’s contemporary life as a cultural institution. This means its exhibitions strive, first and foremost, to introduce its rich collections to a large enough public. One which should hopefully imbibe elements of a crucial artistic-cultural education. Education of the sort whose social value has clearly diminished in our post-1968 and “globalized” world. Hence, beyond the display of impressive royal portraits and other representations of significant French Kings such as Charlemagne, Louis IX, (Saint Louis), Francis I, Henry IV, Louis XIII, Louis XVI and Napoléon I, “**Le Théâtre du Pouvoir**” introduced its visitors to several royal portraits as well as the complex relations which have bound political power to art since the dawn of history.

Of such relations, the ones “re-presenting” royal power to its subjects through the medium of the visual arts have played a politically decisive role. As the

ex-director of the Louvre and author of an important study on the nexus between power and art in France, Jean-Luc Martinez, underscores in his foreword to the exhibition’s catalogue, the creation of images of the absent royal sovereign enabled him to be present and affirm his legitimacy (“*L’absent se fait présent. Miroirs du prince, ces images représentent l’autorité et le pouvoir*”³). Given that portraiture has historically legitimated the exercise of power by its holders, it was not surprising that the exhibition’s primary goal was that of reflecting on the “mystery” of all representation as such. As Patrick Bucheron rightly emphasizes, all representation in history has entailed two entwined and distinct aspects. This means that representation in a social order is accomplished through representation in the order of visible reality which is that of the visual arts.

In each of these domains, the visual depiction of the ruler is tasked with “deputation”. Hence, it acts as the minister of the absent holder of power. An absent authority whose presence it makes possible by acting as, the late Jacques Derrida would say, its indispensable “supplement”. Be it the portrait of an absolute monarch such as Louis XIV or the symbol of the nascent and embattled French republic in the aftermath of the fall of Louis XVI, a work of art reminds its viewers that true sovereignty lay in an absent body (“corps”). One whose chief characteristic was its consecrated transcendence of the chaotic world of human affairs. A body whose uninterrupted transcendence of man’s finitude was memorably encapsulated, as the great German historian of the Middle Ages, Ernst Kantorowicz pointed out in his influential “**The King’s Two Bodies**”⁴, by the famous French chant-slogan “**The King is Dead, Long Live the King!**” (“*Le Roy est mort, Vive le Roy !*”).

3 « **Théâtre du Pouvoir** », Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2017

4 Ernst Kantorowicz, « **The King’s Two Bodies, A Study in Medieval Political Theology** », Princeton Classics, 1957

A chant-slogan whose English origins Kantorowicz emphasizes whilst highlighting its role in legitimizing late medieval English pretensions to the French crown in the conflict-stricken context of the 15th Century. Given that royal sovereignty was a concept which has had a universally formative past, the exhibition's organizers decided to highlight its daunting variety and complexity. Thus, they provided the visitors with an overview of a fascinating history. One which began in Mesopotamia and the indisputably African Kingdom of Egypt. As the exhibition clearly illustrated, the king's function had originally been that of linking the world of men to that of the gods. As such, the royal function was that of an intermediary. A function whose fulfillment invariably presupposed the mediation of its visible representations. In other words, it required its "re-presentations" in the world of "art" in the broadest sense of the term which subsumes sculpture, as well as literature and mythology. In this respect, one could have felt both satisfied with and critical of the omissions that beset the presentation of such an history by the exhibition's organizers.

Omissions that perhaps reflect the historical-cultural limits within which both the division of the Louvre's various collections as well as a typically French conception of kingship, influenced by classical Greco-Roman antiquity, have arisen. Thus, for example, whilst such significant "Oriental" monarchies as the Sumerian and the Egyptian have been featured, the Persian dynasty of the Achaemenids was neglected. One needed not be a great theorist of history such as Hegel to acknowledge the fact that the very idea of monarchy underwent a profound change in the aftermath of the emergence of this historically unique dynasty in ancient Persia. For not only Persian kings such as Cyrus I and Darius I ruled over history's first truly universal empire, but they conceived of their royal function as that of a just administrator.

An administrator who no longer regarded himself as the indisputable scion of a divinity and the owner of his realm. As Michel Foucault memorably pointed out,⁵ the state was born in Iran at the dawn of history since Persian kings regarded themselves as the administrators of a domain entrusted to them by the lord of the Zoroastrian universe, *Ahura Mazda*. A domain whose independent reality was distinguished not just from the king's glorified attributes but, more radically, from his person and possessions.



Figure 2 The Persian Monarch, Fath Ali Shah, by Mir Ali, 1805

That domain was the state whose continuity the king strove to ensure through his actions such as construction of various monuments and inscriptions. Whilst it is true that the figure of Shulgi, the sovereign of the Mesopotamian Kingdoms of Ur, Akkad and Sumer, well predates the rise of the Achaemenids, it reminded the visitor that building and protecting sacred temples to the glory of gods such as Inshushinak was the king's chief royal duty in Mesopotamia.

(cont'd. on page 84)

5 « Le Nouvel Observateur », Paris, October 16th, 1978

Celestial Bodies

by Atreyee Gupta

Teach me how to belong
I ask the double-star
blinking
through the looking glass.
*you are made of us, wink Albireo,
you are home.*
I cannot believe them;
their silence – bright, clear – is all I hear.

I too am weary of wearing
one skin, I tell grandmother Moon
shedding under the convex lens,
show me how to soar.
*you are multitude, she thrums,
trust the air and rise.*
I flap my arms in vain
feet spinning me dizzy to the ground.

Untether me from ghosts
bruising my future
I plead to the satin stained
musk melon in the cross-hairs.
*you are talisman, ringed Saturn whirs,
weave yourself from noisy pasts.*
I plait the knotted histories
tangling between clumsy thumbs.

Stumbling out of the observatory
I search for answers with naked eyes.

Above:
seeds freckle the inky canvas –
incalculable as microbes.

Below:
my pores mirror galaxy dust –
scuttling to join their foggy home.



Voices From Abroad

Conversations with international students by Kirsty Anne Richards

In September 2022, I moved to London to pursue my master's degree and found myself living in a post-graduate student accommodation called Goodenough College in Bloomsbury. (Fun fact: Bloomsbury was also home to literary giants such as Virginia Woolf - her old house is part of the university I attended, - Charles Dickens, William Butler Yeats, James Matthew Barrie, and the economist John Maynard Keynes.)

Goodenough College began as a collegiate college to serve those coming from the commonwealth, or the dominions, to study in London. To this day, the college provides post-graduate students with not only a place to stay but a community of social, intellectual, and cultural activities aimed to provide students with a global outlook, and where they can foster an international network. It is now open to any citizen and welcomes students' partners and families to all congregate together within two blocks and a square.

While I lived here, I was surrounded by people from 100 countries, and it was my experience of moving abroad for the second time that partly inspired the theme for this publication: *'home/belonging'*. I wanted to include the voices of our global society within this edition and asked the Goodenough members to answer a few questions about their concept of home and belonging. Alas, my survey garnered little attention and I thought of scrapping this idea entirely.

Though through all the conversations I've had with dozens of people from our diverse global society, I was reminded that none of them gave up on their dreams or goals to attain their education because of a hostile political climate, spewing out hatred to all those coming to these shores for a better opportunity.

So, why should I omit the handful of voices who took the time to help me realise a vision?

I posed a few questions intending to demonstrate that regardless of where we are from, we all want to live in a society that is safe, accepting, and provides us with the freedom to express ourselves while exploring the wonders this world has to offer. Our home is this planet and all corners of the globe have the right to showcase our myriad of differences. I am eternally blessed and grateful that Goodenough offered each of us just that: a reflection of how the world could be.



WHAT DOES THE CONCEPT OF 'HOME' MEAN FOR YOU?

A place I can recharge, express myself, renew my energy, explore. ~ *Anonymous, from England*

Home is the place where I feel safe, relaxed and loved. It's the place where my people are. It's the place I look forward to and come to after a long exhausting day. Once I see the walls and lights of Willy G, for example, I let out a sigh of relief and feel like everything's gonna be okay. ~ *Joy*

My concept of home is very simple. It is where I have a space to sleep and recharge through doing my hobbies. ~ *Tony, from Hong Kong*



WHAT CREATES A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR YOU? AND/OR WHERE DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU 'BELONG' THE MOST?

I belong where I laugh the most and I feel relax the most. This can be a group of friends, a place I enjoy spending time in and I can feel I belong by myself. ~ *Tony*

It is possible to love and be loved. Where I am surrounded by individuals I care about and who care about me. ~ *Hansen*

HOW DO YOU INCREASE YOUR SENSE OF BELONGING? FOR EXAMPLE, DO YOU CHANGE ASPECTS OF YOURSELF TO FIT INTO CERTAIN ENVIRONMENTS?

An opportunity for growth! You can either a) adapt yourself to fit in or b) create the environment you want by sourcing other like-minded people/ setting up your own groups societies. Both are a chance for growth and learning. Reflecting on core values and asking yourself what and who would help you achieve that. ~ *Anonymous*



I try to be as vulnerable and open with the people around me as possible so that they're not receiving a single dimension to me or I of them. I seek out people and spaces which align with my values and interests. I try my best to relate to people on the basis of mutual interest and try to be as open as possible to learning about them and their interests - this genuine engagement often allows us to be more comfortable and enjoy the company of each other. ~ *Joy, from South Africa*

When they need assistance, they support and aid one another. I don't adjust things to match the situation. I suppose the best thing to do is to attempt to be helpful and provide assistance to those who require it. ~ *Hansen, from Indonesia*

The Hairless & Tattooed Cat

by Tyson Higel

There was a hairless cat
that'd been tattooed
by the dude
who last took care of it.

All it wanted was love,
but most everyone
(including my mum)
had had enough of it.

Gross, they'd felt,
sheltering the thing
until each spring—
snow melted for travel.

"Neighborhood begone,
long away forever;
do us that pleasure!"
A not-so-fond farewell.

The cat didn't understand
man's aversive nature
to its lack of fur,
and lots of damned tattoos.

It'd been born that way,
nay of any hair.
But the people didn't care.
The cat was no bae to them.

As for the markings:
part of the cat
sure wished that
they didn't snark at them.

The inflictions were from
someone else, after all.
Yet they were appalled
by what had been done to it.



This cat had no control
over what had happened.
But like a dirty napkin,
they wanted to throw it out.

Unfortunately, its looks
took precedence
over the acceptance
of its love, mistook for hostility.

It often tried to rub
up against their legs
in an attempt to beg
for some sliver of favor.

But favorable it never was,
because the people,
community in whole,
chose to judge the different cat.

The cat's name was Fisker—
mister to a lovely spouse,
only now without a house
for his sister and them.

Today they move on,
gone from that place
where they'd gotten a taste
of cruel and dominating hate.





Garden Witch in Her Element

by Janis Butler Holm

Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

Belonging at 40

by Naomi Rozak

I turned 40 this year. It crept up on me, a mild awareness turned abrupt realization when my birthday was only six weeks away. This birthday had the potential to make me feel old - after all, 40 is halfway to 80. Added to the high number were the webbing of faint wrinkles stretching across my cheeks that I had noticed only weeks before, and the skin above my eyes that has sagged marginally lower in the past year.

It is not that I fear ageing; I have seen the beauty and wisdom that accompanies growing older. In many ways, I feel spiritually, mentally, and emotionally better than I ever have, and the grey hairs that have winked through my brown waves for over a decade do not haunt me. I think my unease comes from the speed with which physical evidence of age is compiling, the loss of softness in my features and the skin that, once fallen, will not climb back to its previous place. Youth as I knew it is no longer there, and so there is a grief to be laid to rest - that no matter how young I feel inside, this internal state will never again match the outside of my body.

In the slight discomfort of these realizations, I wondered how I could celebrate turning 40, this milestone birthday, and I reflected on my last milestone birthday, one I wish I could forget. When I turned 30 in March of 2013, I had left my church, *The Message of the Hour*, only one month earlier. Overnight, relationships fell away. My husband and I faced overwhelming censure from the congregation and our friends and family, and my heart had been crushed by the loss of other's respect. While some people had made half-hearted efforts to reach out to us, their doctrinal viewpoints kept us from feeling supported. Still, my mom and brother planned a 30th birthday party for me, inviting friends both from the church and from those who had left it when we had.

I remember little beyond sitting frozen on the couch while making stilted efforts at conversation. The air at the party pricked my senses like shards of glass, underlying tensions unexpressed while each person attempted to celebrate me, the person they loved but no longer understood and





"And here, out on my own, I missed having a circle of friends who knew each other and me well enough to come together."

because of whom they were hurting. The people-pleaser that I was could not imagine a worse situation in which to find myself. I had been taught to wear long skirts and have uncut hair and still wore both of those things, but there was one glaring sign that showed I was no longer one of them: my Essie nail polish, the palest Ballet Slipper pink announcing itself as the mark of a church-leaver. I watched the gazes of past friends drift over my nails, emotional distance growing between us, and I left the house feeling hollow. An event that should

have been a celebration of a significant year was one more symptom of the trauma of leaving the only life I had ever known, the only place I had ever belonged.

As years passed and birthday after birthday slipped by, I noticed a hole in my heart, a little something missing from each celebration. My mother or in-laws or husband would throw a family party, with cake and cards and simple presents, and while I was grateful, I missed celebrating with friends. When I had been in *The Message*, friends were a matter-of-course. Every woman who went to church, and was near my age, was my friend. We saw each other weekly, both at church and elsewhere. All my friendships were within that community, so that if one friend hosted an event, all my other friends were invited. Back then, friends remembered my birthday.

And here, out on my own, I missed having a circle of friends who knew each other and me well enough to come together. I missed having friends who knew when my birthday was. In the years since leaving, I had picked up a friend here and there but until recently would have had only two or three people come to mind when asked who my friends were. I grieved the loss of community. I grieved not having a circle of friends on the birthdays that highlighted this loss.

So, in this 40th year of my life, I looked around and took account. Somehow, in the last couple of years, my friend circle has widened. I have opened my own heart, learning to live with more vulnerability, more authenticity. Pieces of myself that I used to hide in shame are no longer hidden. Suddenly, friends are crawling out of the woodwork, and with them I feel open, laughing, alive. We click. We get each other in ways I have rarely experienced.

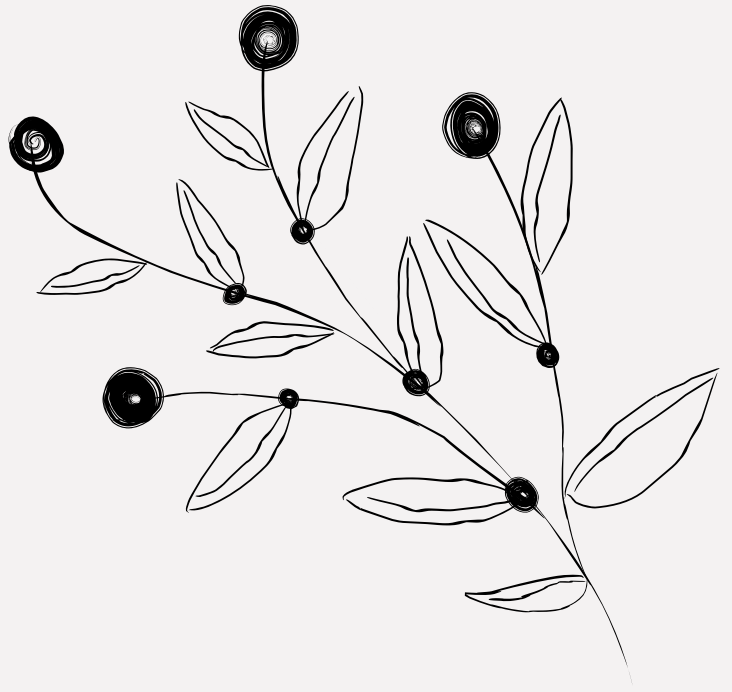
I did not have that in *The Message*. There, I admired my friends. We socialized, we shared our laughter and woes. Still, it was our beliefs that drew us together, not our personalities. Below the surface, I carried a feeling buried so deep that I did not put it into words until long after I had left the church: "I am not good enough. One day someone will find out that I am not good enough." Our collective emphasis on toeing the church's doctrinal line meant I did not feel one hundred percent safe, seen, like I belonged. If I ever did something wrong, these friendships would have disappeared.

Now, my friends accept me for who I am. I am fully human, fully present. In these friendships, I do not have to pretend that I have life handled or know it all. I do not have the unspoken worry that I am not good enough. There are no pieces of me I cannot share. I am seen and loved no matter what. And this year, as my birthday drew closer, I knew what I wanted to do.

I would plan my own birthday party, and I would celebrate us. I would celebrate the people who make me feel alive. In recent years, not only had I stepped into authenticity, but also into my personal power, the kind that showed me I could choose to fill the hole in my own heart and throw the kind of birthday party I wanted. For this birthday I could celebrate the community I had - the loving circle of mismatched, diverse women who see me as I am.

I made a list of whom I would invite and where we could go for dinner, but my mind began to argue. *What if they don't come?* it said. *What if you invite all these people, and only one or two can make it? Spring Break is a bad time to have a birthday party; some of them will probably be away with family. What if this doesn't work out and you are left embarrassed?*

I very nearly nixed the whole plan.



In a journaling session one morning, I recognized that these thoughts were designed to distract me from my real fear. I was not worried that people would not come. I was worried that they would not come for me, that I would not be seen as worthy enough to celebrate or for them to brave an evening with strangers. Few of my friends are from the same communities. We have found each other through homeschooling, public school, my past church, neurodivergent parenting, and more. Would my separate friends value me enough to come together in a socially awkward situation, to become a community for me?

Turns out, they would. On that chilly March evening, five friends and I met around a restaurant table for four hours. Five others could not make it and were missed. We talked about religion and spirituality and parenting and neurodivergence and diversity and laughed and cried and took pictures. I will treasure those photos forever. These women, each shining their authentic inner light, have filled my heart, have held me, have healed a hole I did not know could be healed.

It seems that the lessons and growth of the last ten years, particularly how to belong with myself and others, have been truthful and have my back. At 40 years old, I have a group of women around me who see me completely. They laugh at my weirdness and get weird with me. We belly laugh over each other's extreme parenting moments. They tell me how happy they are to see me, and they do not flinch at my rawness, at pain. They sit with me in the dark and the light. They give me honest feedback, without judgement, when I ask for it.

What is 40? It is only a number. I celebrate at 40 and feel ten years younger than at 30, when I dragged myself to an event held in my honour and felt older in spirit than one should ever feel. My wrinkles, my pale after-winter skin cease to matter when I can look at a friend's face and see the light in her eyes. The sag of my body does not matter when I am held with such love.

In our hearts, we all seek belonging. At 40, fully seen by myself and my friends, I am grateful to have it.

Here, I am loved. Here, I belong.



Salt

by Avi Goldberg

After "Inside-Bird and Outside-Bird (안새와 밖새)" by Kim Hyesoon

after long nights of battling the moon, the waves thrum on shore like the tender tune of a violin
a delta breathes her body into the ocean, and fulfills her duty as river

i met the sardines pecking at the pacific shore, above
a sky dusted with clouds like ice
dusts a winter's day, somewhere far from here. here, where the cove curves in like a window
showed me the brilliant salt-stained tears of my mother's happiness, like a symptom of
lasting gratitude. her teeth, with lips curved upward, white like sunrise, herring, milk

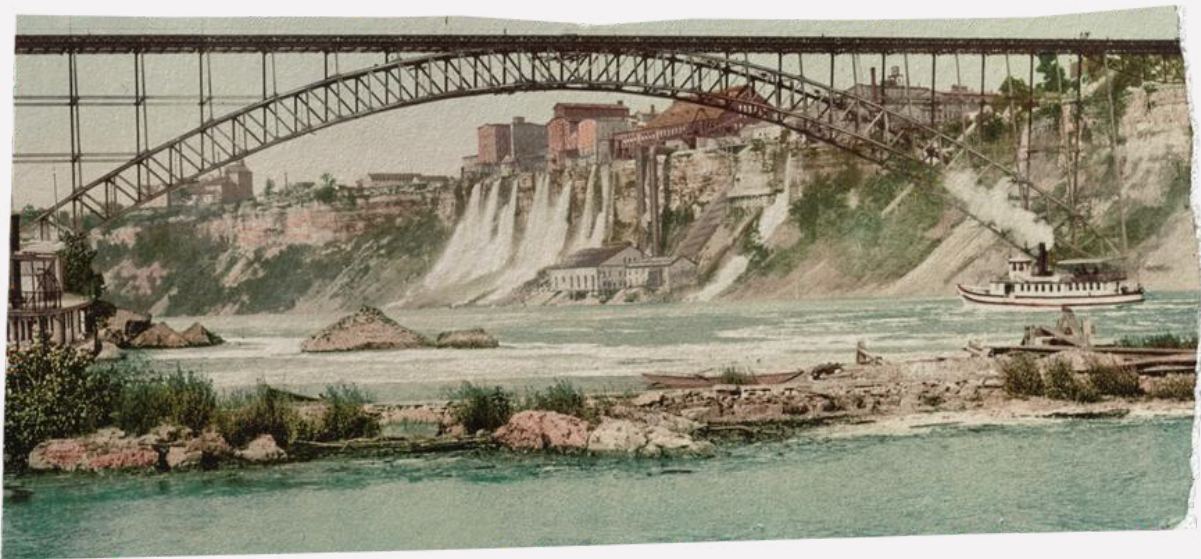
fish have school & a town square
i was carried to the beach, and witnessed it first hand, seaside
and babbling. it
was a funny thing, i was sure i would sink in those waves, no
help from parents until i was scooped out at the last moment, cradle
in my mother's arms, closing
off the danger that coats the ocean who wanted to consume me,
but to spend eternity alive
among coral and sea bass appealed to me like bird
to nectar, and those sweet sappy things. if i'd been touched
to tears i would've said a prayer to the above
and god's glorious light would shine down upon me, casting my bundled body from seaside
right down shore line

but the blessed page
was nothing to me but words and a painkiller
for the vulnerables around me, fish don't have a holy book. sailboats consume the world
yet god's ocean remains mysterious, it
beads off that strip of california sand, of homeland, and i fly
straight to that bay i bathe beside, all to sleep
at its banks because it's healthy to be near water. again
as i grasp for water at my bedside, a symptom
of leaving the riverbanks and shorelines, i see
a clear picture of the common carp, walking
with fellow fish
toward me on the california coast, where ice cannot fog,
and where the waves cannot reach.

Home Again

by Rex Eloquens

On my way home, I've wondered why and where the wind blows. Taking me closer and closer to the door, I hear the roars of planes, and cannot help but remember that home signifies much pain. The memories are too much to bear, and it's getting dark, I have to make arrangements to stay somewhere. But before I go back from whence I came, I look to the small house that I've always blamed. Maybe the house does not deserve its share, and I take one more step forward for fresh air. The lights from inside invite me in, and as it turns out, I'm home again.



Mother

by Nadia Wisley



Dear Mother,

It has been a while since I addressed you. Since I acknowledged the sweet nourishing your heart shares, the bountiful harvest your field's yield. I need not mention the importance of our cultivation of your gracious fruits, for you are more than our health. No, Mother, you are a goddess.

One we often underestimate.

Yes, you give us life. A birth we will always be indebted for. A home we could never afford. Your molten core and gratifying love are mere wonders of what your power possesses. Your beauty is undeniable, just look around. Even when marred by our structures, your presence still shines. From roaring waterfalls high in mountains to bellowing sandstorms in deserts to the mighty ants who trample through your soil.

But it is your capacity for life, that despite how much harm we bring, that you still provide sanctuary for all your children.

I write to say thank you. Thank you, for not being the best mother, but for being our world. It's nature that molded us, the same you graciously shared. Look at a field of flowers, how each one is just as beautiful, if not more than the next. Look at reefs below the waves, where colors and schools thrive among all that blue. We might love each passing golden sunset or each colorful rainbow. Or we might fear each lightning strike, each quake that trembles.

But Mother, we don't just love you. We need you. In fact, we fear you. We see your rage, the wrath you can unleash with each passing storm. But we see the signs of mercy, evidence of your compassion.

You are our life. Our master, the ruler of our fate.

And we are nothing without you; we worship you. Even idolize. Each day, you break the record for what is impossible. Each day, you age like fine wine. Each day, we grow closer to losing you.

One day, mothers do die.

So, I write to thank you, Mother.



A Lack of Stars

by Tinamarie Cox

There are so many skies I didn't fit into.
And I remember this one night in the city well,
out with a group of friends that faded away quicker than a black shirt washed in bleach.
We were a bunch of kids from different boroughs
wandering some streets in Manhattan carefree
(and also, a bit lost)
on our way to some comedy club, a destination we never reached.
It was supposed to be a date,
for me,
but going in blind always seemed to bring about an act of Fate.
(She likes to cover Her mouth with Her hand as She snickers at me)
Because the boy from Brooklyn couldn't feign even a small amount of interest
in the shy girl from Staten Island.
And under all the colorful lights big cities have to offer, I was left in the dark.
This group of friends laughed and smiled at inside jokes birthed before my membership.
So, I accepted another Joker from the deck the Universe played to my hand.
Our distracted ringleader looked at overpriced Coach purses in glass cages as I
searched the open air for the stars
(even though I knew she'd have more luck within her reach).
The night sky hovering over New York City
was a washed-out scene above the beaming skyscrapers
and nobody else seemed to mind the lack of stars.
People's heads were aimed at their hands,
wondering what else they could fill them with to better ignore their dreaming hearts.
I watched these friends buzzing like bees up and down streets that all felt the same,
each corner blooming with fake flowers and fallacies more interesting than me.
Because I was more like a beetle trying to keep up, using my short legs like they could be wings.
I didn't understand what they all loved about this concrete forest.
And I thought about pausing and falling behind further
(just giving up there),
to see if I'd be missed if I got lost among the other insects.
But I focused on what I did best instead,
believing this was yet another place I did not belong,
that I was an accidental extra piece for a puzzle, or
a spare part that's unnecessarily kept in the bottom of a junk drawer.



The Breath of Life

by Beth Horton

Beth Horton holds a degree in creative arts therapy and majored in health science at Niagara University, located in Lewiston, New York. Her love for art began as a small child, watching her father paint into the wee hours of the morning. She currently enjoys photography, mixed-media composition and graphite pencil sketches. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including: Arkana, Aji Magazine, Blood Orange Review, Olit, and Pensive.



His Body of Art

by Thomas Beckwith

Layered and inscribed on his melanin skin,
is calligraphy with subtle reminders
of the past.

Never Forget is imprinted on the inside
of his lower left forearm.

Never Forget
the inner strength his mom endured
about her newborn's skin tone.

Never Forget
his namesake called him a faggot
before he ever knew
what that meant.

Never Forget
his namesake would have rather
taken him out of this world
than say he loved him.

Never Forget
he was fondled and violated
on more than one occasion by a loved one.

Never Forget
he was God's Gift
to his mom.

God's Gift is an impressed
raised scar on the inside of his
right lower forearm.

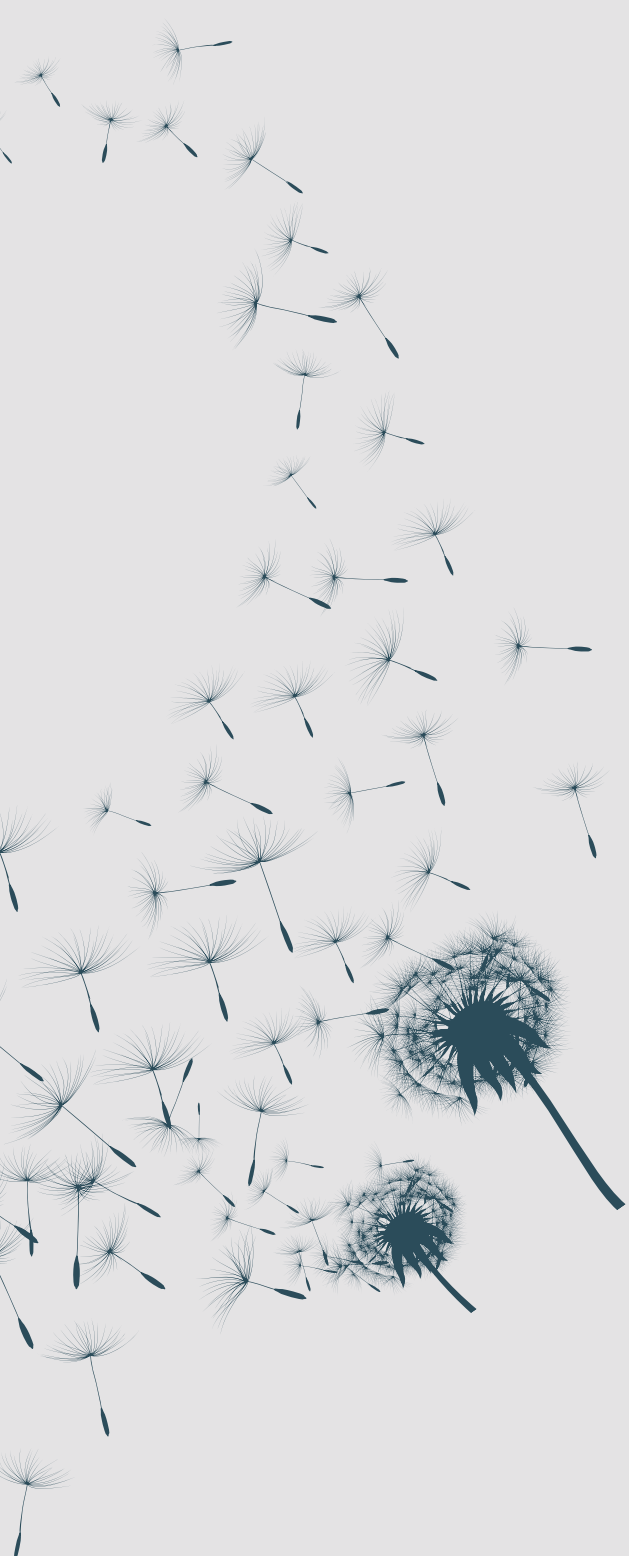
God's Gift
him, the one who used to love
to follow his mom everywhere.

God's Gift
him, the one who used to love to read
and spell words out loud.

God's Gift
him, the nappy headed little boy
who has a speech impediment.

God's Gift
him, the one who lived in public housing
and would cry when
he was hungry.





God's Gift

him, the one who was arrested
for truancy and disappointed
his dad by fate.

God's Gift

him, the one who you play cards,
shoot dice and stand
on the corner with the drug dealers.

God's Gift

him, the one who was ridiculed, bullied,
criticized, considered ominous,
and used to feel like he did not belong.

God's Gift

him, the one who used to be
afraid of success.

God's Gift

him, the one who barely finished high
school, but now has 4 college degrees.

God's Gift

him, the one believes in the words
to thine own self be true.

To Thine Own self be true,
the words printed on his
outer left forearm for the world
to see.

To Thine Own self be true,
a vow he made to never repeat
the mishaps of the past.

To Thine Own self to true,
he is full energy and unapologetic,
but sometimes he is so depressed
until he cannot get out of bed.

To Thine Own self be true, only
tells part of his story.

To Thine Own self be true,
his body is his temple,
he matters and belongs.

*To Thine Own self be
true, Never Forget
God's Gift.*

(cont'd. from page 63)

In contrast, in Achaemenid Persia, the king or the first high-ranking civil servant of history was expected to rule with wisdom and moderation in a state ruled in accordance with abstract principles of justice. Similarly, one could reproach the exhibition for its strange neglect of such Hellenistic monarchs as Alexander the Great or the overemphasis on the socio-cultural role of Roman emperors and the artworks that celebrated them until the reign of Constantine the Great. Whilst it is true that in the Middle Ages France was Europe's most influential kingdom, it was not the only one.

For even though Charlemagne occupies a unique place in European history, he was far from the only great European monarch. Nor was the great Saint Louis the only king whose representations had a political impact beyond the boundaries of his kingdom. King Richard I of England (The Lionheart) or the great German Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I (Barbarossa) could have also been referenced in the exhibition. Perhaps the most unjustified omission was that of the figure of Henry VIII of England who was a contemporary of Francis I.

A more exhaustive presentation of the politically legitimizing role of art in Renaissance Europe could have hardly neglected him. That he was not French should not have meant that a portrait by Hans Holbein could not have been, at least digitally, featured especially since the Louvre has a very rich collection of British art. Despite all its shortcomings, the exhibition impressively featured portraits and other visual reminders of the deeds of great French monarchs such as Henry IV, the founder of the Bourbon dynasty. During his reign, France's bloody religious-civil war came to an end with the institution of the Edict of Nantes which granted French protestants the right to practice their reformed Christianity. Among the memorable portraits of this pivotal

French ruler whose vast popularity survived the overthrow of the monarchy in France, one stood out in multiple ways. Borrowing the vocabulary of the Francophile British theorist of absolute royal sovereignty, Thomas Hobbes, one could say that the portrait of Henry IV crushing the hydra of civil strife (dated 1561 to 1602 and attributed to Toussaint Debreuil's entourage) was simply "*exceptional*". It was "*exceptional*" since it illustrated the profound impact of Greco-Roman antiquity on classical French art and political thought. More importantly, it provided the viewer with a poignant reminder of the emergence of a novel conception of royal sovereignty in Europe in the 17th Century.



Figure 3 Henry IV as Hercules by Toussaint Debreuil & Co, 1561-1602

Dressed as Hercules, the Bourbon monarch crushes a multi-headed hydra and appears as the architect-guardian of the tranquil city in which his power actively prevails even when his subjects sleep. Truly "*exceptional*" here is that the king's vigilant repression of the hideous monster of civil discord is depicted as the crushing

feet and the moving ground of the nocturnal peace of his realm. As historians of the French monarchy such as the late Arlette Jouanna⁶ have argued, in the aftermath of the religious wars and the decline of the ideological monopoly of the Catholic church, the creation of a stable socio-political order could no longer be achieved through conformance to an unchanging model. Creating an enduring order required no less than the active mastery of the chaos whose literally monstrous omnipresence needed “*re-presentation*” to those subjected to royal authority. The king’s subject had to be memorably reminded of the superhuman character of his royal power. Yet, the precise sense of the king’s divinely hallowed role exceeded visual references to such illustrious cultural precedents as Hercules in Greek mythology or Roman emperors such as Marcus Aurelius. Indeed, the mystery of power remained irreducible to its particular “*re-presentations*” even though its evocation could never dispense with “*re-presentation*” of royal power. As divinely awe-inspiring as the exercise of royal authority was, it clearly belonged to one man. One whose “*exceptional*” action would endlessly impart the requisite energy to the process of preserving a fragile order. How had such an “*exceptional*” situation been dispensed by God? Moreover, why had God chosen the physical person of the king as the vehicle of the realization of his eternal will on earth?

No portrait, no artwork, not even such powerful treatises as Thomas Hobbes’ “**Leviathan**” or Jean Bodin’s seminal “**Six Livres de la République**”⁷ could explain this state of affairs as anything other than an “*exceptional*” contingency. In contrast, the king’s spiritual body and divinely sanctioned authority seemed truly “*exceptional*” since it manifestly overcame the ordinary chaos and violence of the ugly world of men. As Jacques Derrida

judiciously notes,⁸ the establishment of effective royal authority itself appeared as nothing other than the creation of a divine “*prosth-static*”. An artificial construct, that is, which could not be found in nature where the lack of a well-defined “*commonwealth*” could have only left every man to protect himself from insecurity and chaos.

Only art and, particularly, portraiture, could convey this profound truth clearly enough to its viewers since the preservation of sovereign royal authority itself amounted to a princely “*art*”. A truly able prince performed the divine “*miracle*” of conferring form, harmony and beauty on that which, left to itself, would have been no more than formless and directionless matter. Even after the fall of the French monarchy in 1792, the chief attribute of enduring state sovereignty was its “*exceptional*” and perfectible ordering of the chaotic world of human affairs. Hence, the organizers’ choice of such rubrics as “The King as The Master of the Arts” or “The Images of Liberty and The Republic” in dividing the exhibition were as historically justified as they were aesthetically enlightening. For they enabled the visitor to better grasp the ultimate ambition of such powerful and historically “*exceptional*” sovereigns as Louis XIV or the Persian Safavid emperor, Shah Abbas I.

To wit, the creation of art objects as enduringly beautiful as the tapestry representing “Le Jardin des Plantes” made in the workshop of Jean de la Croix or the refined binding covers from Northeastern Iran lent by “**Musée des Arts Decoratifs**” to the Louvre. Art objects whose beauty would not only dazzle its viewers but, more importantly, survive the inevitable disappearance of the monarch’s physical body.

6 Arlette Jouanna, « **Le Prince Absolu, Apogée et déclin de l’imaginaire monarchique** », Collection L’Esprit de la cité, Gallimard, Paris, 2013.

7 Jean Bodin, « **Les Six Livres de la République** », Gérard Mairet (éd), Paris, Le Livre de poche, 1993

8 Jacques Derrida, « **Séminaire : la bête et le souverain** », Volume I (2001-2003), Paris Galilée, 2008



Figure 4 Napoleon I, Jean-Dominique Auguste Ingres, 1806

After visiting this exhibition, one could undoubtedly better grasp why, since the reign of Akhenaton I in Egypt, the supreme ambition of all great monarchs had been the creation of a lasting order of harmony and beauty in their kingdoms. As with Napoleon's famous "*hand of justice*" designed by Martin-Guillaume Biennais, the monarch's power had to create and preserve an order. One that could vanquish the ultimate enemy of all royal sovereignty as such. A formidable enemy whose omnipresence has too often made the time spent on the exercise of power amount to loss of precious time and opportunity. Even if such a power were that of the revolutionary French republic poignantly symbolized in the works of Joseph Chinard and Jean-François Soitoux.

A powerful enemy against whom only art could "*exceptionally*" struggle since the fruit of its "*sovereign*" practice miraculously disrupted the servile routine of human life. Only the "*miracle*" of art could defy death in a world in which the greatness of all power shall ultimately be judged by the lasting freedom from chaos and suffering it might underpin, albeit temporarily. Radically free from eternal bondage to all finite political power, only art could pretend to immortality. Today, remembering this profound "*miracle*" of art is indispensable. Against the backdrop of widespread disheartening ignorance of the past in our confused age, only "*art*" could still remind the truly "*exceptional*" individual that the ultimate value of all great power can be "*never more than an effort aimed at freeing human existence from the bonds of necessity*"? Miraculously enough, its quintessentially "*royal*" examples were on display in Paris at the Louvre's "**Petite Galerie**".





Your Home My Home

by Pulkita Anand

My home shifted, and I came to your home
I now mix and started forgetting about my home
Started considering your home my home
Your kitchen my kitchen, your dining my dining
Your roof my roof, your floor my floor
Your walls my walls
Oh! but the walls are different
You have not dissolved your walls for me
There is always a wall that comes when I want
To enter into a relationship, will I be always
Alien to get confused about my home your home
Your home my home
Whenever I make any changes why the eyes
Are raised, why the voices raised
Why not love be raised, why not respect be raised
Why do I sing alone, why don't you sing along with me
Oh! I am sorry it's your home

The Warmest Place in the World

by Boyd Bauman

is found off a back road
in Northeast Kansas,
pinpointed in the days before GPS
as Rural Route #1.

It's located on the south side
of a barn of orange and red
structural terra cotta
exactly 10 years younger
than the farmer who fell off the roof
and dusted himself off
during construction.

It's accessible on one of the coldest
days of the year,
perhaps branding day
when the cows are rounded up
from the north pasture
to wait their turn for the chute
and the too-hot iron of lazy J into B.

Stand against the barn
for windbreak from the frigid north.
Let the sun soak into your coveralls
while your backside leans against the heat
absorbed and radiating from the bricks.

Warm yourself also by a job well done,
a stoic father's approving gaze.

Reader, you easily surmise
this poem is half metaphorical,
yet I wish you someplace just as real
that you may travel to
on the backroads of memory,

a place to dwell for a bit
on the coldest days,
that deep in your bones
feels like home,
where for a blessed moment
you are warmed.



Okema - All Come Home

by Jessica Guica

Innocence, beauty, and an untouched softness that protects the ground from violent cold, so it seems. Snow can be deceiving. It can hide the underneath in a way that the naked eye is oblivious to the ugliness of the dirt, dead flowers that would never see their potential, nasty biting insects who nefariously wait for a thaw to start creeping about seeking victims. I wanted to scream at the flatlanders who would ooo and ahh over the aesthetic of Vermont landscapes. They didn't know. It was superficial. Rushing in from New York, Connecticut or New Jersey for the long holiday weekends, they pack cars with LL Bean and North Face gear and expensive skiing equipment to be used twice per year. I'd see them in the stores with their better haircuts and clothes. My mother would stop at the IGA on her way home from work to pick up milk or Pepsi, her hands stained black from forklift grease or working the line. Her defeated yet defensive gait and downturned mouth never invited warmth, so she'd get exactly what she expected every time. She'd return to the car, "Those fucking flatlanders think they're so much better than me, huh?! I saw that one in the fur coat staring. I said, 'Why don't you try workin' for a living!' so she could hear me. Guess I'm just a dirty ol' worker piece of crap to them. They should go fucking home, assholes."

Everyone is staring. My mother's mind recycles these truths or untruths endlessly each time she is in public, forever. Even the snow, the cold, the ice, the frozen car at 5 a.m. treats her this way. It is violent. She will endure the violence, the abuse, whether she created it in her own mind or Mother Nature bestowed it upon the entire state as if she deserved it. She deserved to suffer. And anyone who is not suffering in this way thinks they are better than she.

So, she'll stay at the factory, lug me into the car on freezing mornings up the hill when the car won't make it in a white out, with fingers blue and permanently numb from frost bite. It's her cross to bear, Vermont. She's made up her mind a long time ago. A different life does not exist.

I'm four months old, and I don't sleep. It's the dead of winter, Vermont winter, a season that dips farther into perpetual dark and cold than the body and psyche can prepare for. Even the toughest of north-country souls grip tight these months, many with near blackened fingertips numb with frostbite leftover from years past. Everything is hardened in the streets, the tree branches stiffen with ice, the road crackles underneath tires as they struggle to navigate tracks atop inches or feet of snow. Vehicles appear heavier from the ice-covered frame of their steel ribcages; house and trailer doors rarely open, and the only sign of life is the smoke that breaks through the air from rooftops and car exhausts. The snow could give the winter integrity if it wasn't piled in dirty heaps like a prison wall on each side of the road. You'll never see this reality in a quintessential Vermont scene, only virgin snow sitting like icing draping a naive landscape.

Our Pinto strains to make it up North Hill to my babysitter Joe's (Josephine) house on mornings like these when the car door lock is sealed with ice, and Mom's hands, paralyzed by sub-zero wind-chills, try to force the key, and force it, and force it again, until it breaks through. My mother breathes smoke into the air with each heavy breath as she is relieved it won't be necessary to run the extension cord



outside to plug in the hairdryer and unfreeze the locks today. She sighs after setting my bassinet on the backseat as she does each dark morning at five o'clock. And we begin the journey. There is only one bottle, and it lies next to me in the bassinet, as the others are at Joe's where she cleans them well and fills them for me. The Pinto is blue, darker than baby blue, and worn from these winters.

I kept my mother up all night, compounding her lack of sleep with constant awakenings. My wailing, crying, needing and wanting stretched her tolerance until she couldn't take it anymore and would throw the bottle against the wall for release. She'd cry, needing and wanting so many things. She was tired already from working hard all day lugging, racing around the factory floor, doing what they said, then rushing back up North Hill to thank Joe for watching me. The next day would recur, and the calluses on her fingers would become rougher and thicker from work and wind. Her baby girl was difficult with a restless spirit, often seeming as though her baby arms and legs wished to wiggle out of their own skin. They still do.

"...the only sign of life is the smoke that breaks through the air from rooftops and car exhausts."

At this hour the black veil of darkness is still pulled tight over the town of Ludlow. There are no streetlights on North Hill, light pollution doesn't exist in Vermont, and the sun won't rise for some time. As the Pinto climbs the hill my bassinet slides

up against the back of the seat. It is a cumbersome hand-me-down relic of white wicker, too big for the seat. I fall in and out of sleep with eyelids like a baby doll when she is lifted up and put down. My mother brings her hand to her mouth and yawns. She shivers under her thin polyester jacket, keeping her elbows close to her sides as she holds the wheel with both hands for security. She doesn't move much, her body held stiff from the uncomfortable cold. A hat might help salvage warmth for her body, but she has no time for hats and never thinks to cover herself much. I am wrapped three layers deep in blankets.

North Hill is steep as a mountain road. It is located within walking distance to Okemo. Some cars make it, some cars don't. We climb at a slow pace as the transmission whines from strain and cold. Tree branches hang over us in the black air, some breaking off from the weight of heavy ice. She holds her hands over the heating vents as though to will the heat to work. Though she warmed up the car before we left Gram and Gramp's house, it is only a few degrees warmer than outside, even so, without the wind-chill, she will be grateful. The first quarter-mile uphill is the hardest. If the car makes it to the plateau after all the sliding from one side of the road to the other, the tire spinning, and overworking of the transmission, the next half-mile is easy.

Mom's exhaustion can't be fought today. Today the sleep deprivation, workload, and pressures shut her down. With the green tree dangling from the rearview mirror symbolizing the normalcy and everydayness of our daily routine, today is different. Her eyes may have closed after mine or I may have been wide awake staring at the ceiling, my nose pink from cold. My mother needed sleep, a rest, to recharge herself and the need attacked her just as we triumphantly reached the top of North Hill. The straightaway leading to Joe's house should've been the easy part of my drop-off, but not today.



Head-on she hits a sturdy Vermont pine, hard with icicles and snow. My bassinet is violently jostled to the floor. She is unconscious with blood pouring out of her face. My mother slept, finally, driving North Hill.

"Jessie! Jessie! Where's Jessie?!" Mom is hysterical in the hospital this morning, her bottom front teeth now gone. She doesn't know where her baby is or if her baby is alive. The tree we hit totaled the Pinto and left scars on her face. Her sweater is in the garbage can in the corner of the emergency room, wet with blood. The concussion will last a day, maybe two, stitches are needed, false teeth will be ordered. They tell her I'm okay. She doesn't believe them. They are lying because I can't be ok in an unlatched bassinet in the backseat of our car that just crashed. But I am. She cries and cries, then calls Joe from the hospital, and cries less.

In three years, we will have a different car, an Oldsmobile the color of sand. It won't like North Hill and will become stubborn in the winter. At five o'clock my mother will carry my sleeping body on her

hip to the car, lay me in the backseat and start the engine. On a routine day, the snow on the roads will be icy, making the Hill a slippery mess. The Oldsmobile will begin the climb with a nasty grunt, barely covering any ground. It will slide backwards down the Hill until we end up where we began. Determined not to lose her perfect attendance at work, Mom will turn off the ignition, leaving the Oldsmobile temporarily abandoned, throw me on her hip and begin the climb on foot. I'm heavy and she bears my weight with her right hand under my butt and her left hand gripping my thigh. I lay my head on her shoulder to brace myself from wind gusts. My older cousin's mittens cover my hands which I hang around her neck, holding on tight. Her fingers no longer feel cold as they are "dead", she says. The tips of her fingers turn a shade between purple and black in the winter. Despite wisps of black hair frozen to her cheek and wind cutting through her thin nylon jacket, she will do what she has to do. Who does she think she is to think it should be any easier than this?

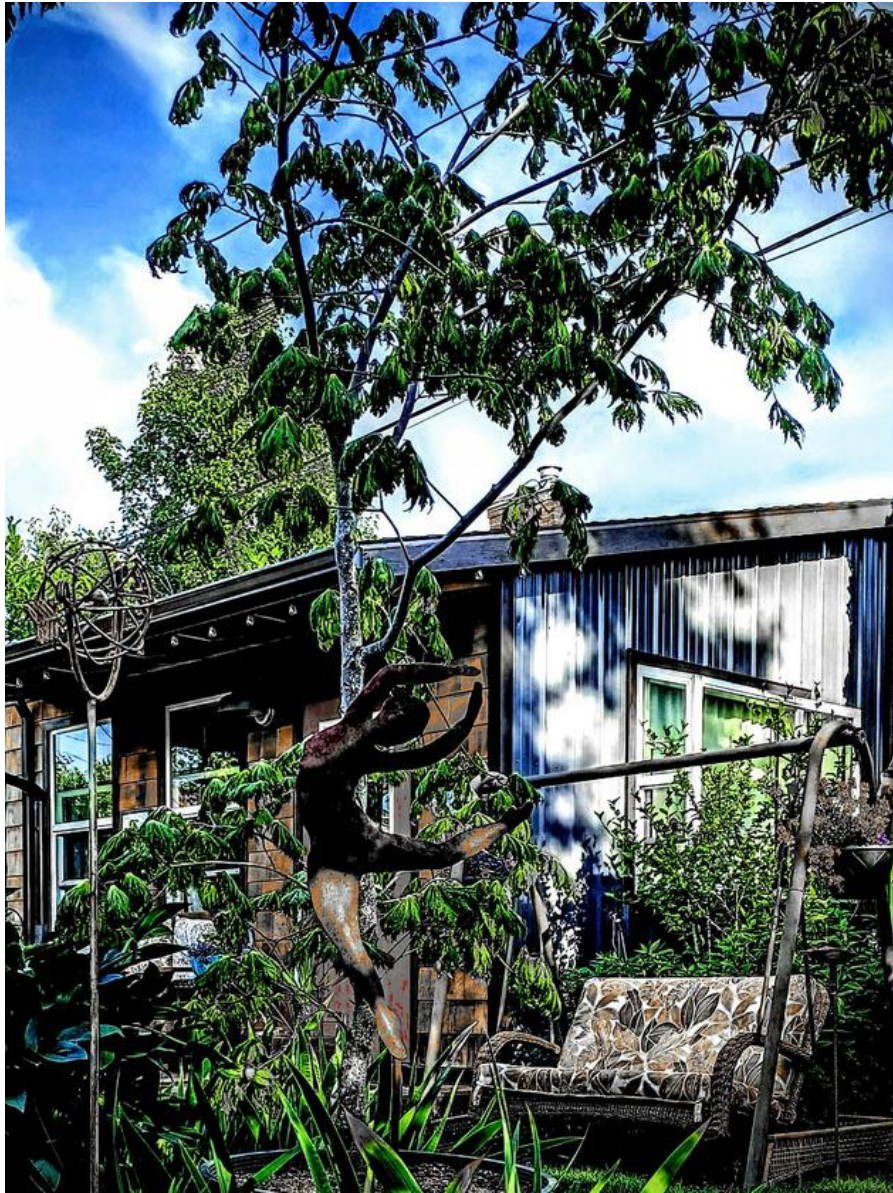
Okemo Mountain is land of the Abenaki Indians. It was pure once, now littered with skiers and machinery to carry them. Okemo means "all come home" in Abenaki. I visit now and then, although the trails lead down the mountain like veins on my mother's arms. The mountain is stable and reassuring. The trails and what happens on them are ever-changing and unpredictable.

A Flock of Butterflies

by Dmitry Blizniuk

They dance in a half-lit room.
A blindfolded desk-lamp
is motionless like a hostage.
A melody from the battered stereo
is pasted all over them like a silky flock of butterflies.
He steps on her toes,
And she laughs, tossing her hair.
A minute passes, and her flesh is like melting ice-cream already,
it oozes out through her underwear and jeans.
His hands caress the bends and curves of her body.
And suddenly they are inside the skin.
They wrestle like grass snakes inside a blanket cover, trying to find a way out.
Her moles fly off like rivets.
The music lingers and lingers.
Like a clumsy dirigible,
it ousts everything,
leaving only the lithe ikebana of their breath,
tobacco leaves, bubblegum mint, and the red fat of her lipstick.
The butterflies become heavier
and sink into the pale dough of the flesh.
A vortex of passion grows. It devours
inch after inch
part of the carpet,
the crumpled bedsheet,
a fragment of the bra, someone's little finger.
The cannibal's lips carefully suck the meat from vertebrae;
he tastes the barbequed neck of his love.
The bone bells of the back chime.
The music suddenly stops.
And the silence, like an embarrassed dog
that finds its master making love with a stranger,
jumps onto his back, scratches him with its clumsy claws.
Its warm saliva drips in his ear;
a narrow stream of blood runs down his neck, mixed with sweat,
but still, he keeps impaling, victoriously,
the little origami boats on his sword
again and again, one after another.

(Translated by Sergey Gerasimov from Russian)



Garden of the Muse

by Lindsey Morrison Grant

Self-identifying as a neurodivergent, two-spirit, elder storyteller and contrarian deeply rooted in the roar and lore that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, Lindsey Morrison Grant attributes success and survival (if not salvation) to superlative supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds and images. Currently their visual works are represented by The Siy Gallery of San Francisco.

Ollie's Garden

by Bruce Snyder

Chick cautiously rolls the barrow down the wood ramps he laid on his bumper. His boots sink into the pile of flaking compost warm to the touch and alive with hard-working red nightcrawlers that hustle out of sight as he forks the load onto the garden plot. He rakes it out, knocking lumps down to size, pitching the occasional stone at the fence corner. His mind turns the pages of the seed catalogue: new Russian tomatoes, early and fast maturing; waxy yellow pole beans. He'll set out the stakes for them. Maybe some collards, radishes, lettuce of course, and a couple of pumpkin vines for fun.

When Ollie was alive they'd sit together in the coffee shop around the corner and read seed catalogues while warming their hands on steaming mugs. She liked the big cookies they had there. They'd look out the windows at the gray snow crusts dripping in the early spring sun and plan their garden. Marigolds, cosmos, dahlias, and daylilies, but first, the crocus and tulips would pop through and take your eye off the peeling pink paint on the garage.

After Ollie passed a couple of years ago Chick sat out the next growing season. He lay around on the green sofa, watched out the back window as the grass grew first tall and then brown. He saw twigs and stalks droop and twist together like hair on a barber's floor until it matted most of the yard. He felt as though the want, the hunger in him had died along with her. He drank instant coffee, warmed up instant meals.

At night, though, his dreams were busy; weeks and months of broken tools, empty rooms in houses with blown out walls, busted windows. Then more months of

tunnels, ladders up and down to nowhere, stuck in traffic with a flat tire and no gas. Chick would wake up three times a night to pee and wash his face and sometimes to get away from himself with a bottle. Didn't help.

A second lonely Spring poked through the snow. Cold rains touched up the rust finish on the snow shovels. Ollie showed up in his dream, finally, and cooked him a good meal. Told him to remember that he was hungry and for *God's sake go out and get a decent cup of coffee with a chocolate chip cookie. Course I will*, he dreamt back with a sigh and in the night his body softened and unknotted like the greening of the climbing rose on the back fence.

So here he is, Memorial Day weekend, with the barrow and his tools and a new sign he's made, *Ollie's Garden*, cut it out of pine, painted it red and blue, looks like Ollie stooping over, picking a flower, coffee mug sitting at her knee.



Ain't Nothing Like Family

by Sandra Rivers–Gill

At the table we plant our hips,
spread roots deep into the soil,
gather and grow bony plates
from country fried chatter.

Something good
is always cooking.

The gospel of generous dessert
spoons our appetites
heaped all over hallelujahs.

It tests our mettle,
stirs up a season of wait;

gives us a bold flavor to chew.
We ask for second helpings,
because we thirst for more
than pot liquor and cornbread.

Family is like leftover stew,
hearty as God's honest truth.
It's what Mama places on the table.

Before our prayers rise up
we come together –

churn homemade ice cream.
We are a culture of ripened fruit
consuming what is not always easy.
We learn to appreciate our fullness –
savor our sweet and spice.

On our tongues we crave living water;
well done like ribs on a summer grill
perfected in the smoke of fire.

We are marinated in love,
seasoned with salt for our journey.



Perfect Porcelain

by Viola Boleman

She paints the window in dripping watercolor. The dawn beyond it exists as sweeping strokes of pale blue. She swirls the brush in brown but hesitates to detail the windowpane. "Leave it open," I suggest. "Add some curtains flowing in the wind."

Her attention diverts to me, and the plastic palette in her hand tilts. Pastel splashes mingle on the hardwood. "Are you—" She chews her lip and studies her ruby-painted toenails. "Did you pack your toothbrush?"

I laugh, throw my arms around her neck, and touch my nose to hers. She steals a kiss. I say, "I'm not *that* forgetful."

Her brows push inward. She grasps her elbow and avoids my eyes. "Do you feel ready?"

Upon the canvas, her unframed window cries blue tears. "I have to go soon."

I escape her forlorn look and lock myself in the bathroom. My face in the mirror is pale, bumpy, and splotched red. My bangs are the exact shade of purple seen in a rainbow. The ring in my septum matches. Three sets of earrings trail up the cartilage—pink, white, orange. My shaved right temple is fuzzy to the touch, a usual comfort now manifesting a deluge of imagined underhanded commentary.

My breaths quicken. I grip the sides of the sink. I can't do this, I can, I must, this painful pirouette executed by necessity in every visit. Just a visit, I tell myself. A compromise.

All solid relationships entail compromise, do they not?



"...I imagine a world where everyone sheds their outer layers."

I plunge my fingers into my face. My eyes roll back. The epidermis is the consistency of clay. I peel it off but the pulsating red beneath clings to it and stretches into a string. Ripping away the skin snaps the cord. Liquid splatters on the tiles. She's crying outside. Her pillow muffles the sobs but I'd hear them from the Moon. I remove the skin of my scalp, hair follicles still sunk into the lifeless gray sludge. I ball it up and throw it into the trash. The floor is a murder scene the same color as her lovely toenails.

The mirror reflects a mosaic of sinew. The movements of my eyes are surreal, the entire sphere rotating as my focus darts around. Every square millimeter of my stained-yellow teeth is visible. I open my mouth wide and watch the muscles strung from jaw to cheek stretch like chewed bubblegum.

For a moment I imagine a world where everyone sheds their outer layers. My mother would criticize the color of my teeth and my father would call my head shape too masculine. I bury my head in my hands but flinch back. Oily wetness dampens my palms. I wash them off and reach for a box teetering on the edge of the bath.

Drawn in purple gel pen in the bubbly letter style of a college freshman are the words STUFF FROM HOME. Several black lines cross through the word "HOME." I ease open the top and look only at a tub of cream called "Porcelain." Objects are in my periphery - my first razor long since rusted, a manga volume once soaked now unreadable, a ballerina broken off a music box, and one-half of a pair of hair shears.

I dip my fingers into the soft lotion. The tips come away newborn pink and free from the callouses I'd earned in the warehouse.

I wonder where I would be if I had the type of mother who'd buy me manga without declaring it "for boys," threatening it whenever I did anything "too tomboy," and following through on those threats. If I'd had a mother who'd take me to the salon and allow a professional to cut my hair short. I wonder who I would be if those scissors hadn't earned a blossoming bruise, if I'd never used the razor on my hair and pits, if I'd shattered the hand-me-down music box like I'd wanted to instead of my pitiful act of vandalism.

Maybe all girls want to be clean-shaven, long-haired ballerinas. I'm not sure what that makes me. My soul acts as sparring grounds for competing logic: A woman can be anything. I cannot be a woman.

I smooth Porcelain over my face. The cream molds into smooth, ivory skin permanently dusted with blush the color of dawn. The bright, red lipstick tattooed on the Porcelain cupid's bow lips have not a smear out of place.

From the bathroom closet I produce a package with a gift note: "For when you finally come home. -Mom"

The flowing white dress hides my stomach and masks my curves. The visage in the mirror resembles a '50s poster girl. When I flash a dazzling smile, the stretching of the plastered-on skin aches.

What I first notice upon leaving the bathroom is how she hasn't made further progress on the watercolor. When our eyes meet, her lips part ever so slightly. She lowers her head and threads her fingers together over and over.

"I can't wait to see you again," she says.

Her emphasis on "you" stabs.

"And you," I say with a curtsy. The corner of her mouth twists. For what? The disgust and shame I was born into?

"I hope you have a good time. Take lots of pictures. Tell your mom I..."

But we both know I won't dare bring her up.

"I'm going," I say.

A tense silence ensues for the missing third word, the scratched-out four letters upon the box in the bathroom, the ever-open wound.

I'm at the threshold when she says, "You don't have to."

"I know."

What more can I say? I am perfect porcelain, and I'll stand on display. Complacency, my poison, stands immune to mithridatism. I know my flaws and waltz with them.

"Good-bye."

She's facing the watercolor; she's painting the window shut.



Home

by Marisa Gedgaudas

Sometime - without noticing exactly when - I gave up my former notion of the word "home." Now, I live in many places, and sometimes between them.

My current home was last occupied by a cult.

They came to these woods with the promise of more and built a home the size of their belief. They said, *come to us, come and you will not be alone.*

As these things often do, their end came as quickly as the beginning. There was a rattlesnake, a mailbox.

Now there are no friends here, only those who come and go.

Each day I wind my way through the pines, calling them all by name. *Cedar, Monterey, Bishop, Shore.* I greet winter blooms, knowing that they too are temporary. I vow to make friends with the ravens, and hares, and the Kingfisher below the hill. When the loneliness finally feels too big I fill my mouth with ripe oranges that taste like warm summer sun.

Sometimes, I think of those that came before me. Imagine them still here.

I have no desire to be a part of such things. But I feel - now more than ever - a longing for the words they once spoke, *you belong here, this is home.*

Surprise

by Jennifer Gauthier

Denuded, razed
I returned home after a few days
to find an empty field
where trees and bushes once stood.

Incensed, outraged, maybe I'm crazed
thinking of the rabbits, birds, deer and groundhogs
who called it home
and were evicted without warning
one morning.

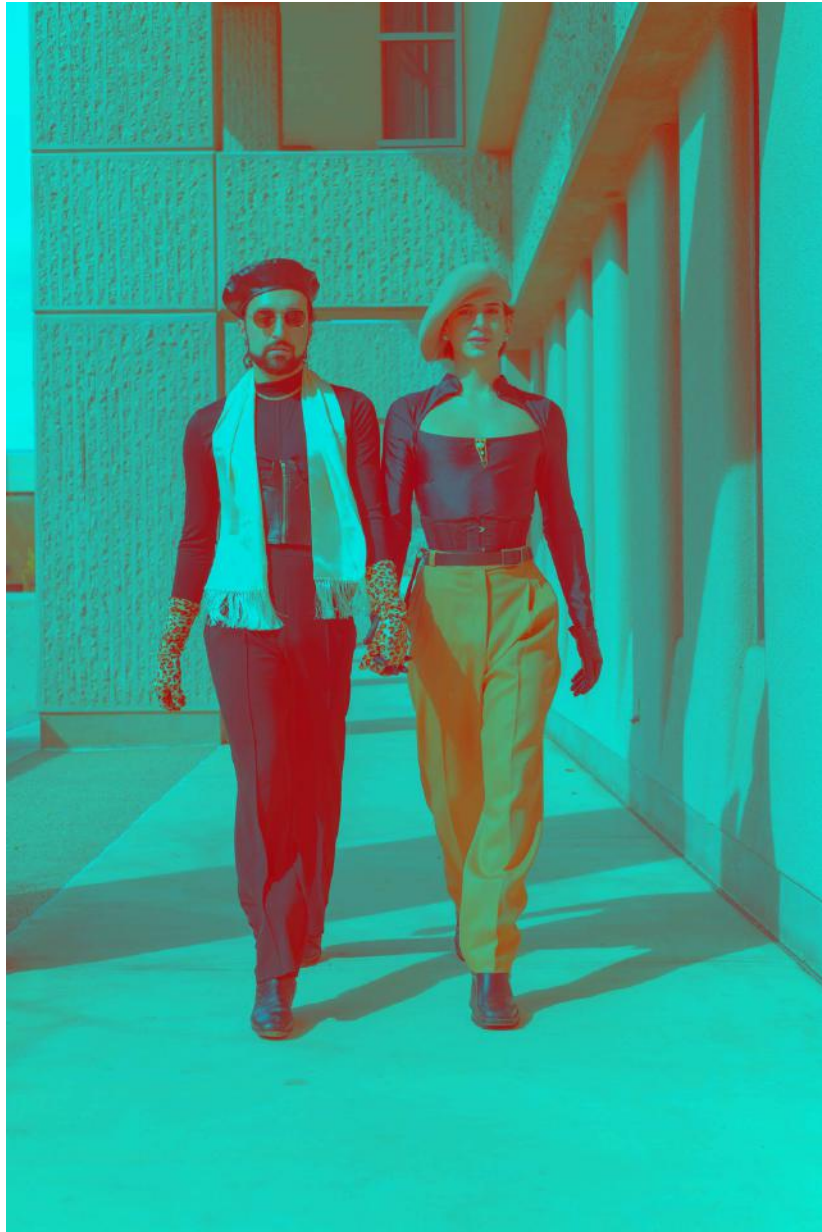
A big yellow cat (the mechanical kind)
with a mind of its own, bent on destruction
following no rules, no detailed instructions
dug up the roots and every last vine,
trampled the Earth,
leaving nothing but sticks and a pile of dirt:
evidence of the crime.

Why did he do it?
The man
has a plan to build a new home
for himself,
a small one, he says,
but still.

Out the window it looks like a wound
gaping
screaming its pain
and my house cringes in shame,
for now it's exposed
from that direction
the foliage formerly gave
some protection from sun and from wind
from stray prying eyes.

Here we sit,
the house and me
facing the glare
of late afternoon and
wishing
we still had
trees.





Strut

by Andrew Roibal

(models: Evan Chavez and Lassen Paul)

Andrew Roibal is a Native American fine arts photographer, painter, and digital designer based in the United States. After spending many years doing artwork as a hobby, he pursued art in college to develop his skills across a variety of mediums. His preferred medium is photography, with a focus in high-contrast portraits with vivid chromatic lightning.

Summer Scabs

by Ava O'Malley

Bonfires in Chicago
are hard to come by.

Back home, I let the smoke soak my bones
and carry my silhouette up the stairs
into the thick heat of my princess bedroom.
The flames my mother made outside were fed by
dry twigs and last month's *Plain Dealer*; a full meal.

The embers that floated up
always came back down.

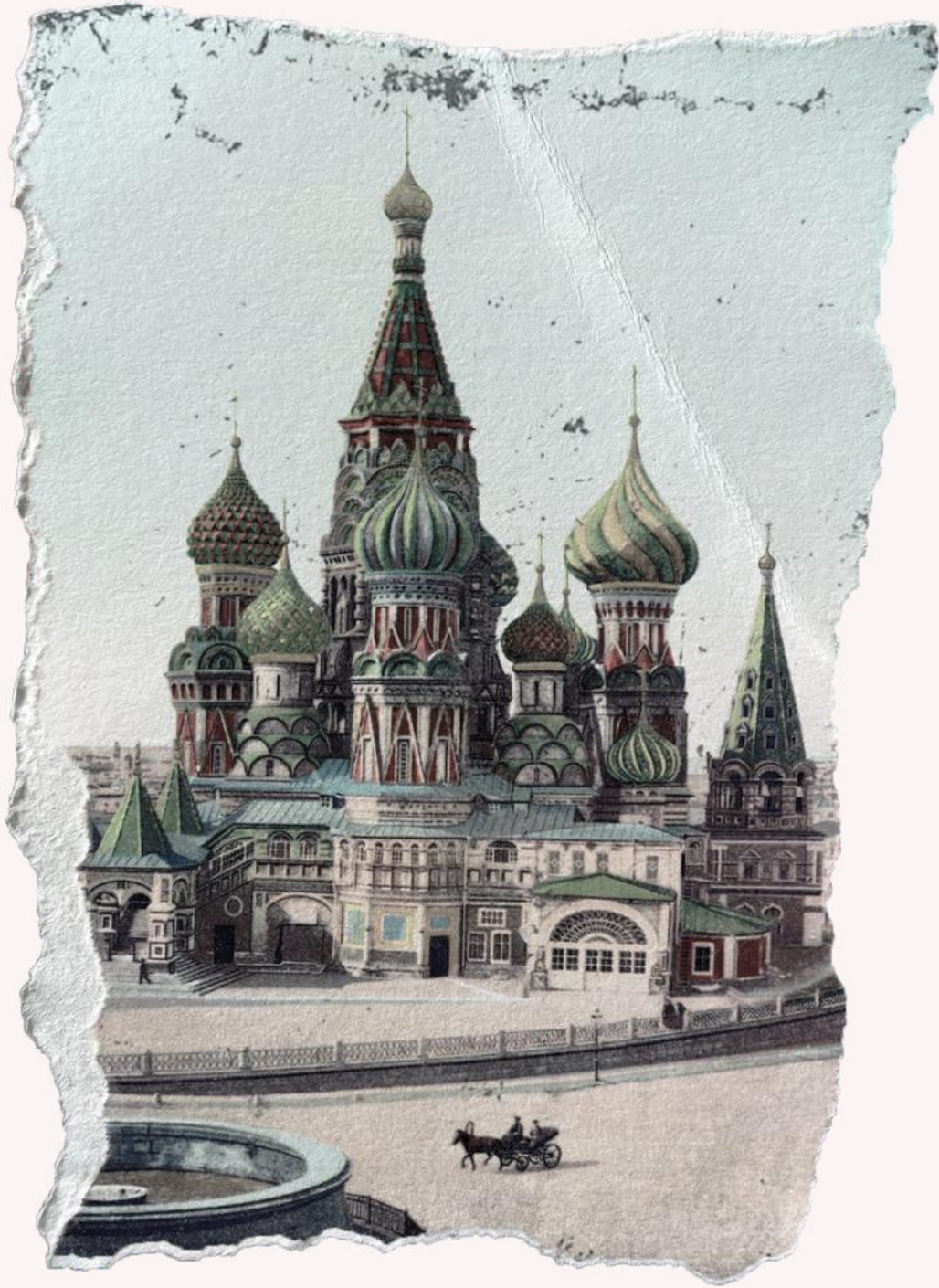
Now, similar sparks spray overhead,
but these ones are angry, conducted by the violent
screech of steel against wheels, creating celestial
sparkles of industry as the red line drumrolls, skybound
in a city that does not know me.

I asked my sister what it feels like
to grow old in a place that didn't hold
branches of our family, those weary droves of fishermen
turned day laborers, given three dimes to wash down with their whiskey.
How do I grow roots into concrete?

Edifices rise up and the folks here say
their *a*'s even harder than we do.

Among lightning rods and scummy dumpsters,
I search for the sweet orange glow of man-made fire,
of an outdoor hearth eating up wood and charred nature.
I light candles and pray that the miniscule heat won't
set off the fire alarms and get us evicted.

Bonfires from Ohio
are hard to replicate.



Deep in the Dark

by Sara Laboe

I won't sleep tonight. This is probably my last night here anyway. I can feel the unyielding metal bar on the frame under the thin, twin-size mattress on the tile floor. The hunger is a dull ache in my peach-pit stomach, as distant to my consciousness as my will to stand up and move. I'm shaking for a number of reasons, detoxing not the least of them. 'The DTs,' everyone keeps calling them; a process all the women here seem intimately familiar with. My heart feels heavy, beating too hard and oddly slow. I can see it pounding through my T-shirt. I count using the ticks from the wall clock - 34 beats in one minute. My body is no longer mine; this fact was hammered home at the hospital, the final piece of a puzzle that seemed random until it was completely assembled. The sickening violation of the assault kit - performed by a young male doctor, a series of photographs taken of my injuries, the nurse touching me and moving my limbs like a posable toy, and an ill-fitting set of clothes. Now I understand. (Intruding sounds and images: his unyielding fists, his vile words.)

Most of my roommates at the Sojourn Women's Shelter leave me be, but one woman keeps trying gently to get me to eat something. She has her little girl with her, still babydoll tiny. She cries at night, but it doesn't bother me. I pity the baby girl. The last thing I ate was some peanut butter crackers that the Kind Officer gave me at the police station. He also wrapped a big blanket around my shoulders to try to soothe my shaking body. The Indifferent Officer was judging and abrupt, annoyed that he had to work on New Year's Eve, but I get that. Before that, I hadn't eaten in over 24 hours. I couldn't. I can't. The thought of putting anything into my mouth and feeding my body makes me retch.

My favorite thing about the shelter is my blanket. The blankets here are handmade, donated I assume. They're also much too small, so each woman is issued two of them. I like to feel the way the yarn weaves in and out of itself in intricate patterns. The extra blanket is something to hold. I wish I could carry it out with me, but maybe the next woman will need it, too. Or the one after that. (My frozen body, my frozen mind.)

Time has passed, and it's morning now. Ashley is here to pick me up and take me back to the house to get my dogs, as well as what I can carry of my things, before we go to the airport. She carefully hugs my ruined form, and I tolerate the contact. I'm worried I'll never find a way to express the gratitude I feel for her. She had to drive halfway across the country, but I had no one else to call. We go first to the Litchfield Police Station. I am explaining that the Kind Officer said someone would go to the house with me to get my stuff, but this Other Officer says that he's sorry someone told me that, but it's not something they can do. I stand frozen, stuck, a solid block of ice. He looks at me for a moment and then offers to go with us to speak to him before Ashley and I go inside, but makes it clear he won't stay while I get what I need.

I'm shaking uncontrollably, a nuisance I could do without just now, as I find my backpack and turn in a slow circle, trying to think. My brain is a rabbit bouncing chaotically around my skull in a panic, and I can't seem to reel it in. I can feel his presence: a black cloud radiating towards me from his room across the house, where he cruelly keeps the door open to prove a point to me. What's the point? I can't organize my thoughts or shove down this



visceral terror enough to explain it to myself. With uncooperative shaking hands, I get one clean set of clothes and line the bottom of my bag with it, then carefully stack all my notebooks on top. Fourteen identical green notebooks, satisfying in their uniformity. I slide my old laptop down the inside of the bag.

Not much room left. I'll need my toothbrush. Now I need to choose which of my books to take. I pause to stare at my modest collection, whittled down over the past few years to only the most sentimental ones and those which weren't valuable enough to be sold. I can fit maybe five or six books. I cram eight into my bag and shove one more in the front pocket, pushing and pulling the zippers to their absolute limits as they groan in protest. We get my dogs, who Ashley is taking back to Michigan with her, where she has worked with a local rescue to find a temporary foster home for them for a few months. As long as I have a place to live by then, I can have them back. I need to get them back more than anything I've ever needed, even as we aren't yet apart. Finally, we're driving to St. Louis, to the airport.

I'm on the plane, not thinking, not thinking, not thinking. I'm in New Hampshire, in my dad's car for a tense, quiet ride. At my parents' house - my childhood home - sitting on the bed in the small guest room in the basement. I need a drink. (The knife under my pillow.)

My eyes are burning but I won't try to sleep. I can't cope with the dreams just now, and it's hard to pull myself out of them once I've fallen in. Best to just sit and wait. Finally, mom and dad have gone to bed, and I tiptoe up the stairs to the kitchen. Quietly, quietly opening and closing cabinets, searching for relief. And then there it is. I take the bottles out one by one and line them reverently along the counter. I gauge the level of liquid in each bottle to determine how much I can take without it being noticed. I feel the smooth glass and the different shapes of the



bottles in my hands, hear the whisper of the twist-off caps or the lethargic pop of the corks as they talk to me, - comforting me - smell the sharp bite that makes my mouth water. Soon I'll be free of myself for a while. I pour a little from each bottle into a large, round-handled mug, and soon I have a full cup. I softly set the bottles back in their exact places and positions, taking care not to let them clink together, and slip back downstairs. (His fury, his eyes.)

I think longingly of the pills and cocaine we had just a couple weeks ago. Gone, all

gone. "Don't you want to know what these are?" But I didn't - just take, swallow, chase with whiskey, wait for relief while I roll up a \$1 bill. Being Regular Drunk will have to suffice for tonight. As is always the case with my first sip, I wonder how I can hate the taste of something so much but also need it so badly. It tastes like a blessed escape, masked in poison. Then again, the taste and negative side effects feel like a well-deserved penance. I look at the clock when I start drinking, as I always do when I have less than "enough" to drink. I need to be sure to drink it at the right pace.

My breath screams in as I inhale sharply and at length, my head thrown back against the pillow, kicking and thrashing. I reach up to grab for my neck and feel my pulse pounding through the distended veins. I can't sit up and go turn on the light for quite some time. Knowing, knowing I'm too weak to protect my own life if anyone else chooses to take it has stolen the last of my self-worth. Gone. It's both a tragedy and a relief; although the result is grim, I no longer need to be so confused all the time, unable to ask the right questions. I have the answer now. I'm bathed in sweat, gasping for air, sobbing into a blanket to muffle the noise. (My body is not mine.)

At last, I gain an acceptable amount of control over my body and take it upstairs, through the garage, and out onto the driveway. I need a distraction, a cigarette. He texted me again in the night while he was drinking and God knows what else. Calling me a liar, saying I made it up and threatening to have me arrested, then telling me I deserved it. Then, changing tone: begging me to come back, swearing he doesn't remember anything that happened that night because he was blacked out, pleading with me to agree that he would never hurt me that badly. I genuinely wonder if he remembers what happened. We were pretty wasted. It's somehow worse to think he doesn't remember - that I'm the only one with the memory of what happened. The only one in the world with the burden of living with it.

Back in the living room, I have the TV on the lowest volume possible. Still, mom soon comes down the stairs and asks, "Why are you up so early." Like that, so it's more of an accusation than a question.

"I had a nightmare," I explain. She sighs loudly and turns to step heavily back up the stairs. I sink lower into the worn couch cushions. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be anywhere.

It turns out you cannot receive any kind of counseling, therapy, or mental health services unless you have money or are actively trying to kill yourself or someone else (in which case you can take yourself to the emergency room). However, I found a counselor last night at a local self-pay clinic who is willing to see me later today and let me pay when I have a job, which will be as soon as possible. This feels like an emergency to me, although I understand why it doesn't qualify as one technically.

I've never been to therapy, but I need to do something to get myself back into my body before the separation becomes permanent and I can't see any other options. The desperation I'm feeling is devastatingly persistent. As it is, I kind of hover nearby, circling around my body and feeling any physical sensations from a muffled distance. Except for the sounds of eating, chewing, silverware on plates. Those sounds and certain others are louder than reality, drilling into my ears and invading my brain. I don't know why. I keep having a hard time changing my expression to the appropriate arrangement of features at any given time. Usually, I have a very low regard for my life or safety and am ambivalent to any risk. But, now, I simply don't want to be here anymore, and for the first time that scares me. (Stop thinking. Stop thinking.)

Empty Nest

by Shannon Kelly

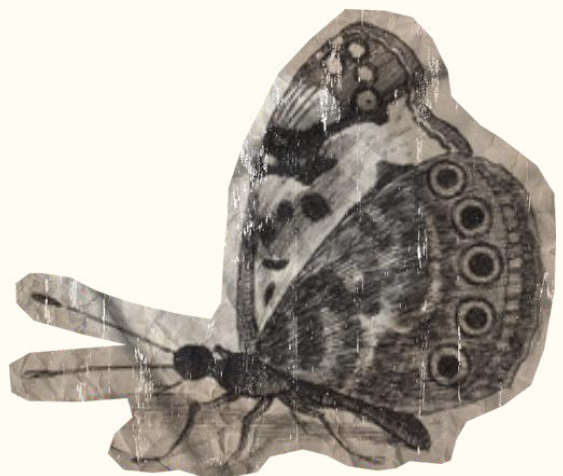
Don't cry dear child
Can I even call you that anymore
Your growth is forever etched in my frame
Neither of us can forget

For the first time in a decade
My walls are naked
Devoid of posters and pictures
Stripped of personality
Until another little girl calls me home

I haven't seen my own carpet in years
Not since the last time you rearranged
But no matter how they try to remove it
I'll hold on to your stains and indentations
Your bed, your bookcase, your dresser
The shape of you until my walls fall down

Was there really so much space
Box after box after box
You removed the soul within my walls
Until I'm left a heartless, cold, empty nest

I hope you'll miss me
That you'll look back fondly
And remember the purple room
That watched a girl become a woman





A Window to the World

by Elvis Alves

A window in the room opens to the street. I hear voices of people but don't always know what they are saying. Cars make noises, blowing their horns as they move along the way. Trucks too big get stuck on the street, especially when cars are double parked. Fire trucks blast their horns and flash their lights on the way to extinguish fires. You are out of luck if you are trapped in a fire. Ambulances, too, pass through, on the way to Bellevue or some other hospital in the city. I look out into a busy world and claim it as my own.

My Favorite Story

by Milena de Avila

Everyone has favorite memories, favorite days, things they wish they could relive; I can, and I do it every day.

I liked to play a game as I walked to my favorite place. I would jump every two to three steps, I wouldn't dare step on the cracks in the pavement. I smiled, I imagined, I was out of breath from running, I had a sharp pain in my lungs; but most importantly, a sense of being was something I couldn't wait to feel. I felt these things every time I walked through those big wooden doors, my hands tingled even when thinking of those metal handles I would grab and be suddenly embraced in the smell of old books, it would itch as it filled my nose. I felt warm, safe, as I picked which life I would live that day. My favorite part was I never had to say goodbye, I could relive these memories whenever I wanted to. They were my friends, they were my family, I was them and they were me. Today I was sad, but I was important, I was vital, I was Pecola Breedlove.

I'm eleven years old, black, and I reside in Loraine, Ohio in 1940. My story is hard, but it's important, and it's all I know, at this moment. Pecola Breedlove is all I know. I've been here before, more times than I can count, and yet I don't let myself recall what will happen.

I still smell the old books.

I'm walking along the street, everyone talks to me, about me, at me, for me. I don't say much. My father resides with me, his name is Cholly. I keep walking.

The smell of old books becomes less.



I carry a lot with me when I walk, and yet nothing is in my hands. I walk through the community I reside in, but it's not my community, as much as I wish it was.

The people I live around have blue eyes; I have brown eyes.

The people around me are pretty, I am ugly.

Before I know it, tears are streaming down my face, Pecola is being taken from me. I was just about to find out what she was carrying, why it was so heavy. I was just about to relive it all again.

Pecola was left with the bluest eyes.

Pecola had lost touch with reality.

A woman is looking right at me, she is also crying. Her shoes are brown with a short but thick heel, her pants dark navy - they're dress pants. She looks nice with a gentle yellow blouse and glasses around her neck, the type of glasses old people wear, but she's young. Her hair in a bun and brown eyes, she sits down next to me.

I realize she's the librarian; and there Pecola is, just lying in my hands, her fate rested in my lap.

"I'm sorry" she whispers.

"They're here to collect the books"

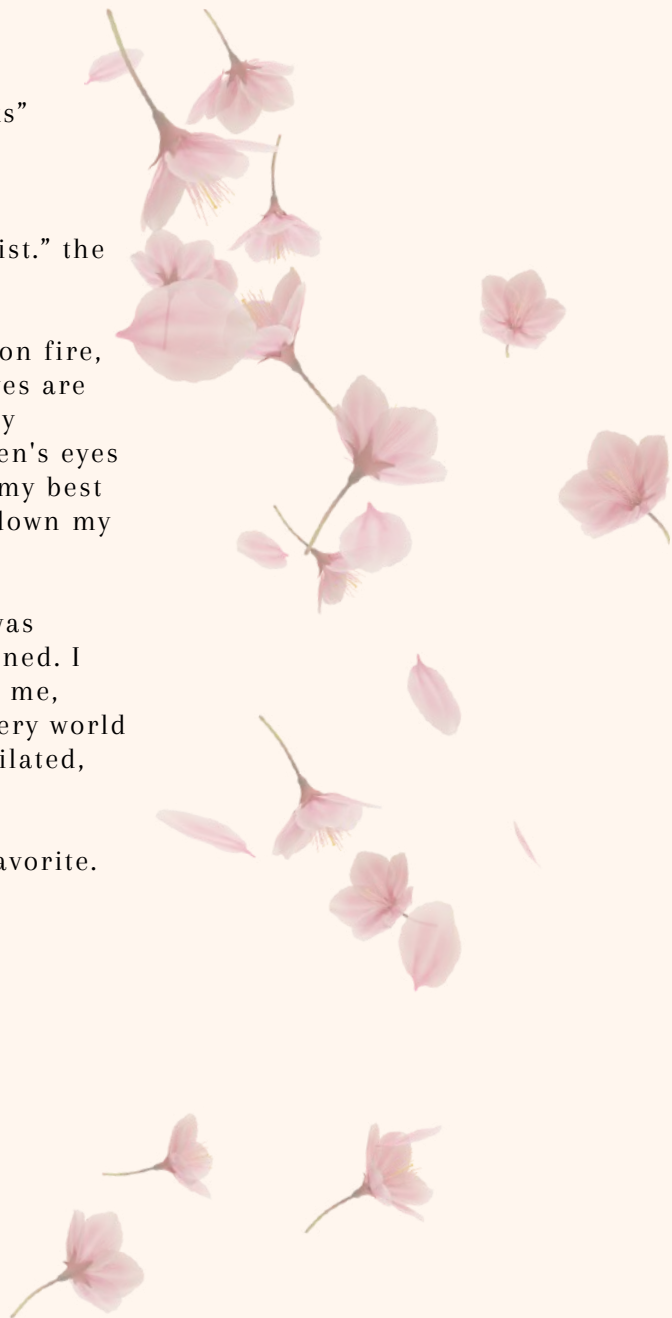
"Which books?" I question

"The ones that didn't make the list." the librarian replies.

I look around and everything is on fire, and yet everyone is still. The shelves are empty, and boxes are filled with my friends. I investigate one of the men's eyes who are walking out with some of my best friends, his blue eyes send chills down my spine.

I was in my library, everything was burning, everything was being banned. I was screaming, nobody could hear me, nobody wanted to hear me, and every world worth jumping into was being mutilated, page by page.

Pecola, I'm sorry, you were my favorite. Goodbye.





The Final Piece

by Kim Moes

We used to fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Like we were made for each other.
Just like the puzzles we'd buy at yard sales for pennies and build together on Sunday afternoons.

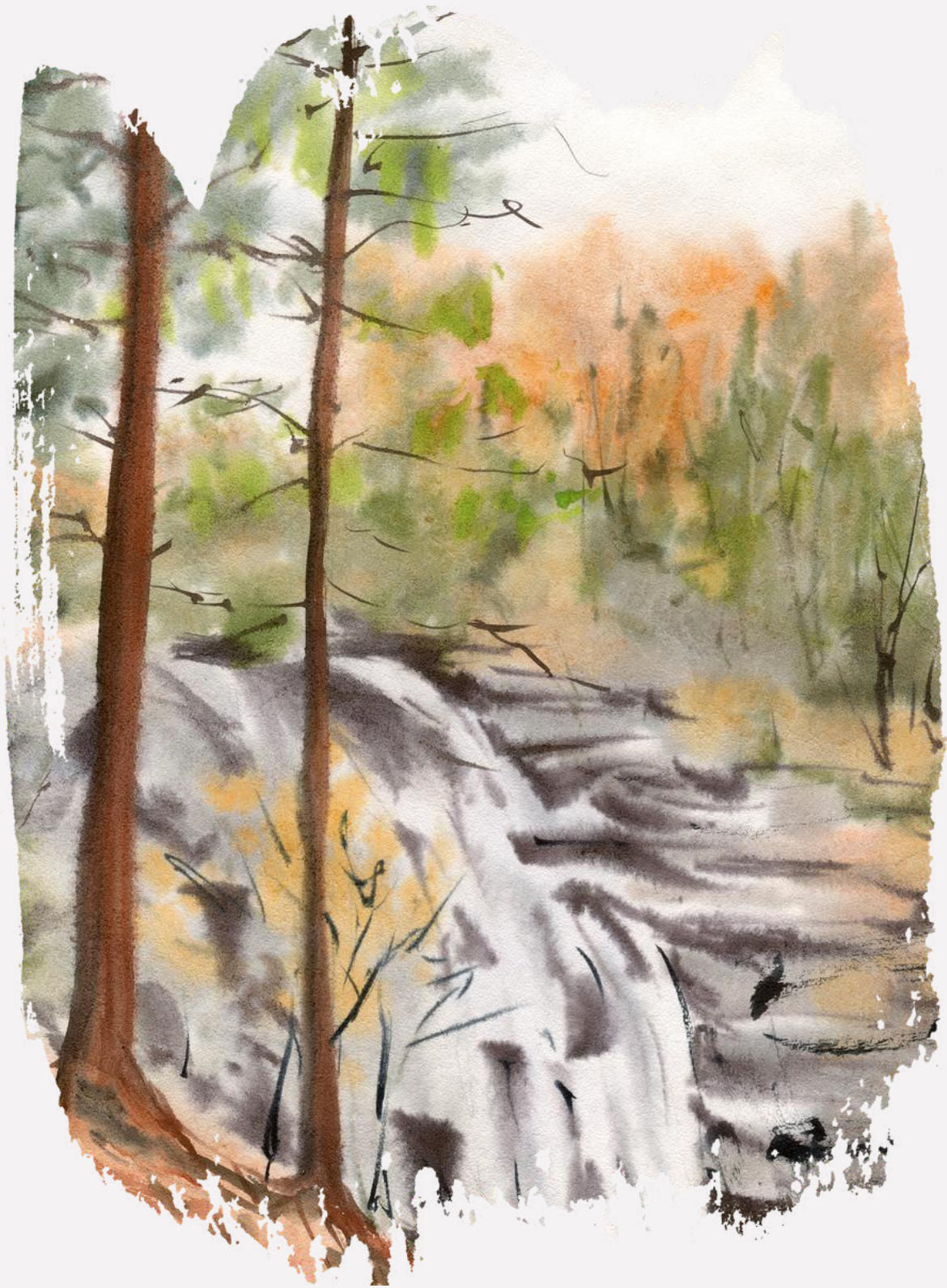
Remember that puzzle we bought from the flea market, with the magnificent ice sculpture?
It reminded me of you with its transparency, nothing to hide, full of hope.

And how the falling snow in the background was like stars waiting to be wished upon.
Not unlike how you are often waiting for things to happen, too.

But when we were almost finished, and we got to the last piece, we were puzzled?
Remember how that piece could fit the last spot, but it didn't belong?

The piece showed a crackling fire, with its sparks rising, to meet the snow and taste the sky.
That one reminded me of who I used to be. Before us. Before the jigsaw puzzle afternoons.

I no longer belong, and this is not my home. No one has to melt or be extinguished.
I place a sticker on the box: "One missing piece" and add it to our moving out sale.





Desert Garden

by Michal Mahgerefteh

Michal Mitak is a poet and artist from Virginia. Her artwork has been included in many art shows, published on the cover of poetry books and literary magazines. Mitak is developing a new series titled:

Transcendent Terrains: It's the way nature moves! Visit her art and poetry: www.Mitak-Art.com

Returns Accepted

by Janice Egry

Returning to the past may not be what it seems.

Return 1:

Coming Home

Brambles cling to brick steps leading to the front door—steps where my dog, Skippy, and I sat in 1942 when a soldier asked to take our picture.

No one lives here anymore. Weeds rule the front lawn my father carefully maintained with his mechanical hand mower. Honed and well-oiled blades made it easy for me to push the machine if I wanted to help. The clatter of the churning blades resounds in my mind.

I was ill when my parents died in the accident. How long has it been? I don't remember. I only know my brown hair is gray. They tell me I'm seventy-eight years old. I don't remember being sixty.

I slide prickly vines aside with my foot and sit on the crumbling stoop. Houses fill the field across the road. In 1942, tents covered that meadow. Young infantry men practiced maneuvers there in preparation for war. I remember *that*.

The storm door behind me creaks. I rise and turn. A sign nailed to the once-blue door declares the house condemned. But this is not right. This house belongs to me.

Yet, I choose not to go in.



Instead, I venture around the side, wading through weeds and brush. Are these the rhubarb plants that sprang up on their own when I was small? I break off a stalk and peel down its tough skin. The flesh is sour - more than I remembered. Mom's hollyhocks, crowded against the siding, tall and pink, overwhelm me. Moving on, I blink back tears.

Flagstone slabs peek through the moss-covered walk to the back door. I climb a bank to view the property behind the house. All that remains of the chicken coop, the pig barn, and the rabbit pen are piles of rotting lumber.

There's no sign of my father's rose garden - his pride and joy. Only hay and scrubby bushes thrive there. His flourishing vegetable garden has vanished.

I *think* I want to enter the house - yet I don't. I'd rather remember it as it was. But curiosity overcomes me. So, I open the back door that hangs by its top hinge. I step into the entryway.

Stairs straight ahead lead into the cellar that housed a cistern, a coal furnace, and a coal bin. From a delivery truck, the coal would whoosh and clang down a long chute through the foundation's small window, creating a mountain inside the room-sized bin. As a child, I selected chunks of anthracite to make eyes, nose, mouth, and buttons for my winter snowmen.

Something rustles and scratches down in the dark. A musty smell of dirt floor fills my nostrils. I shudder and turn away.

To my left, I climb three steps to the kitchen. With one hand, I push the door ajar. Light pours through the windows onto the linoleum floor. Cracked and broken, pale green patches of the original floor covering show through the grime.

I step inside. Dishes rattle; stew simmers on the old stove's glowing burner. Skippy lies on his blanket by the refrigerator, his feet twitching in the business of dreams.

Our wooden table and chairs from the Forties materialize before me. Their original white and red enamel paint gleams. Matching red and white checkered oilcloth covers the table. Three place settings are complete with glasses of iced lemonade. A round butter dish holds a mound of freshly colored oleo margarine.

My mother's annoyed voice rings out strong and loud, but I see no one. "My dear daughter, where have you been? Don't you know supper is ready? Why are you *always* late?"

My father, without a word, shuffles to his chair at the end of the table. He folds his hands and waits for my mother to place a bowl of stew on his plate.

I sit in my usual place. I am home. I belong to this house.

**



Return 2:

The Farm

I do not like crossing this cold, cold swamp - having to stretch my legs wide and balance on patches of granular, half melted ice. These small mounds of crystals perched atop clumps of coarse grasses are certainly unstable at best.

Although I fear the possible necessity of setting one foot in the black water between these icy patches, I lurch on, trying to succeed in my quest for solid ground on the other side.

Because I have to reach the farm.

It is the farm I need, the place I desire above all else.

You have said you'll wait, preferring not to cross the treacherous marshes. So, I go alone, leaving you behind on the wooded side where it is secure and warm.

This black water - how deep is it? I see no bottom, no rocks or stones below. What lives here? What *could* live here? I shudder at the thought, nearly losing my footing before landing with both feet on a small pedestal of crushed ice. For some reason, it is not slippery, and I come to a steady balance.

I do not look back at you for fear of falling - no, more than that - fear that you might be gone, that you would no longer wait, tiring of my determination.

*

I don't remember leaving the boggy area nor crossing over the meadow to the dirt road. But now I am here. Here on the sloping front lawn of the farmhouse,



trudging toward the long porch lining the building. I have not been here for thirty years, yet nothing has changed. No. *Everything* has changed.

The tool shed that my uncle tore down years ago is back. I am curious. How could it be there? I venture around the side of the house to see if it's my imagination. But it is real. Solid and straight. I enter and find the whetstone wheel and all the other tools still there, at first looking like they had been recently used. A second look finds them rusted and cobweb covered.

No cows are in the pasture. It is midday. They should be there, wading in the muddy pond. I hear no barnyard sounds - no pigs oinking, no chickens clucking, not even a rooster crowing. Everything is dead still, as if time had stopped and never started up again.

And the horses. Where are my beloved horses? No sign of them in the pasture or the meadow. I run to the horse barn. The stalls are empty of hay or straw or even a mouse. No halter or bridle hangs on the wall.

The little roof-covered well is intact, its bucket hanging from a frayed rope. Even the old outhouse still stands erect by the chicken coop.

Hurrying back around, I ascend the steps of the front porch. I worry that I will fall through the rotting boards. Fortunately, my feet seem light, almost as if they are not touching the aging wood. My great-great-grandmother built this house, but even strongly constructed buildings eventually break down.

Why is no one here? Why haven't they done repairs that are so badly needed? The porch floor sighs and creaks under my step. And then all is quiet. The last I knew, my uncle had a new dog. I have not seen it. No animal barked or greeted me in any way.

Stressed, sad, and confused, I plop down on the old sofa bed my grandfather insisted on having outside. This porch used to have screens. Only a tattered piece remains hanging from one corner.

The porch swing hangs from the ceiling on rusted chains. One has come apart, letting one side of the swing droop nearly to the floor.



This is not what I remember. I am not happy here. It is not what I imagined - what I've wanted for so long. I need to leave, get back to you, waiting, still waiting on the opposite side. But I cannot bear to think of crossing the ice-filled swamp again.

Inner turmoil causes me to rise, to try to understand what to do. I stand immobile. My uncle appears, coming toward me on the lawn, my aunt close to his side. Surprised out of my reverie, I run to him, eager to embrace his tall, sturdy frame.

But wait! How can this be? My uncle died nearly twenty years ago, my aunt shortly after.

Now, my grandfather comes into view. No longer using two canes to shuffle forward, he walks briskly to me. His face is young, and his once-balding head is covered with dark hair.

He smiles.

"Welcome, child," he says, "We've been waiting for you."

Home

by Kaylin Weir

home is a feeling
warm waves undulating
below skin surface
"you are safe"
come as you are
shoes off
or on, if you prefer
bare your soul
or smother it in throw blankets,
downy, plush, fleece forgiveness
turn it off, your mind
no buzzing here, home is calm
home is a promise
that no matter what roof,
wherever feet,
feelings, worries, and fears wander
you will always find
 your
 way back

home





Hi

by Edward Michael Supranowicz

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.



The Synanthrope

by Ania Payne

I'm not sure how he decided to park in front of our house – maybe he was intrigued by our native garden, or perhaps the piles of leaves behind the wheels of my husband's Volkswagen Vanagon signaled that this is a welcoming street for vehicles that never move, or it's possible that our chicken coop in the front yard provided him with a daily egg. Either way, his green Corolla parked on the street outside of our house one morning, and it didn't move for two weeks.

I can't imagine streets without squirrels. Squirrels have been my neighbors as I've moved through the southwest, the delta, the great lakes, and the great plains. Americans almost eradicated all squirrels from our cities during the Industrial Revolution,¹ but we re-introduced them in the mid-1800s when we noticed that our parks were empty and devoid of life without squirrels jumping from tree to tree, mocking our shoes and our dogs and our worries over the evening's menu.

The green Corolla's owner spent most afternoons working on his vehicle, hammering or unscrewing underneath the hood. Almost once a day, I'd look up from

my laptop to watch him lug the car's battery down the street where he carried it, on foot, somewhere. Neighbors started to speculate about where he came from and if he would ever leave and if it was actually legal to live in a car on our street like that. One neighbor said she didn't mind him being here since he wasn't dealing drugs like the neighbors in the tan duplex, and another neighbor wrote daily complaints to the police.

Squirrels have caused over 900 electrical outages in the United States. Some researchers have hypothesized that squirrels are the greatest threat to our internet infrastructure, even more dangerous than cyber-attackers.

The green Corolla offered a steady stream of entertainment as I graded papers on our thrifted couch. Sometimes a girlfriend in a white tank top would visit the Corolla's driver. She'd apply red lipstick through the sun visor's mirrors, which made the driver smile. Occasionally she'd scream at the driver while he worked underneath the car's hood, and he'd scream back before slamming his wrench on the ground and storming down the street.

1 Stein, S. (2019, April 11). A history of squirrels in New York -- New York Magazine - Nymag. New York Magazine. <https://nymag.com/news/features/squirrels-2014-2/>

Squirrels are synanthropes; they thrive in human environments. We've all seen squirrels scavenging in bird feeders or snacking on the teeth of our jack-o-lanterns or digging through our compost piles. The squirrel depends so much on the human environment that it can become aggressive when we stop leaving food outside, driving these herbivores to become chicken-stalking carnivores. Whose environment is it really?

After a week of watching him through our windows, my husband decided to talk to the Corolla driver. He was starting to feel guilty because he knew that his grandfather would have been helping the driver work on his car every evening until it was fixed, rather than watching the driver from inside an air-conditioned house or gossiping about him with neighbors over the fence. I rationalized my apathy by telling myself that it's safer for a brown woman to not approach a strange white man in the street. After about twenty minutes of talking to the driver, my husband came back to report that his name was Lee, and that he'd just been kicked out of his apartment when his landlord abruptly sold the property. Lee promised that he'd move his Corolla as soon as he could get it working again. He said that he didn't need any help from my husband, or maybe he thought that my husband, in his

navy polo shirt, wouldn't have any useful skills. My husband shared these details with neighbors over the fence, and their frowns softened. *Maybe I'll bring Lee some lemonade*, said Jan. *Maybe I'll bring Lee a tin of cookies*, I thought to myself.

In 1908, Marian Longfellow published "The Pensioner in Gray," a poem that compares the squirrel with elderly dependents. Around this same time, people were equating the feeding and care of municipal squirrels with a sense of social responsibility to the poor. Others blamed the squirrels, saying that they had become "lazy" and "pauperized" by their "unnatural dependence" on humans.

One afternoon, I was pulling weeds between the beebalms and yarrow, when I noticed a squirrel peering intensely at Lee's car. After a few inquisitive moments, the squirrel jumped down from its branch and climbed in through the open driver's seat window. The squirrel crawled across the steering wheel, then dug through a pile of clothes before emerging gleefully with a bag of bread clutched between its teeth. The squirrel sat in the driver's seat, ripping the bag apart and pulling out slices of bread with its primitive thumbs. Since Lee wasn't there to stop the squirrel and neither was my husband, who would've certainly felt bad to see the squirrel eating Lee's food, I thought about intervening, but instead marveled at this intersection of the human and animal world, and contemplated which native plants might attract hummingbirds - perhaps columbine or purple coneflowers - and watched the squirrel eat Lee's bread until it was full.

The tin of chocolate chip cookies still sits on my counter, but Lee left the neighborhood several weeks ago.



The Deer Path

by Maureen Hossbacher

On their way through the path
that is my backyard, the does
ignore me, poop on my grass
munch my rhododendrons,
flinch at the screen door's creak.

A tamer doe lifts her head
stares in that hopeful way
for a bit of apple or carrot
her speckled twins learning
my insignificance.

She doesn't know the law:
No Feeding! — public
safety first on the chance
of a tick. Never mind the fences
expunging all deer routes
but roads and my backyard.

A rare buck appears
keeping his distance
with a trophy's instinct
unlike the babies
on the News this morning
shot to pieces at school

I recall bomb scares;
we hid under desks
as if that would save us
from a conflagration
that was only illusion

You're lucky, I tell the deer
(the cull voted down,
tasty spring aflower)
their apathy all but disdainful
as if to remind me
there used to be blackberries
along the vanished deer paths





My Resolution

by Carolyn Chilton Casas

If the earth becomes a place
where we are not all
 wanted,
 taken care of,
 needed, and
 accepted,
I will change myself to light.

Light that colors your face
a rosy hue,
heals the wound,
helps plants grow,
allows all to perceive
the beauty of our world.

Light that shows the way,
dries up floods,
illuminates the golden specks
in your eyes.

I will make my way
into every darkened space,
inside the tiniest of seeds,
filter myself through leaves,
create rainbows,
be your greatest friend.



My Love

by Kirsty Anne Richards

A Very Special Thank you!

First, we would like to extend our gratitude to all those who submitted to our second edition of redrosethorns magazine. This year we received 400+ submissions and are humbled by all those who trusted us with their powerful stories.

Second, we must thank all of those who shared about our publication. We had only posted a handful of advertisements, though dozens of people shared that they found us on platforms we had not yet heard of. It was truly astounding to watch this publication grow so quickly. Thank you to all those who shared the news regarding this year's annual publication.

And last but certainly not least, a big thank you for the kindness we received. The beautiful and thoughtful compliments that came through via email or our social media kept us motivated on those hard days. We are truly blessed to be held by so many wonderful people.

redrosethorns publications a little over a year ago, at a time when we were ready to give up on this business. We are still small but gradually growing and it is all due to each of you who have submitted, told others about us, and of course read/viewed the work from amazing authors and artists, both on our online journal publication (*redrosethorns journal*) and our print magazine (*redrosethorns magazine*). We are very proud of this year's magazine edition and hope that you have enjoyed the stories that gave a glimpse into what home/belonging means to others.

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