

# FLORA FICTION

A LITERARY MAGAZINE  
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# Table of Contents

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## POETRY

<i>In the Magic Time</i>	8	Steven Otlowski
<i>Winter Light</i>	9	Lynn White
<i>Winter Solstice</i>	10	Joan McNerney
<i>A Glacier's Longing</i>	14	Ben Ward
<i>Leaving the Cabin &amp; Heading South</i>	17	Kevin Miller
<i>Avoiding Mt. Hood</i>	17	Kevin Miller
<i>Looking West</i>	19	Kevin Miller
<i>Walks Along Orirase Gorge</i>	26	Mervyn Seivwright
<i>How Far Away Is Home?</i>	35	Sal Quickly
<i>Overburden #4</i>	38	Dane Ritter
<i>Alone with my whiskey</i>	40	Surakshya Kiju
<i>Silence</i>	41	Lorraine Caputo
<i>Winter Days</i>	44	Kelli Lage
<i>Winter Nights</i>	45	Kieron P. Baird
<i>Hope in Snowflakes</i>	46	Julie Creasey
<i>I always think of you when it's cold</i>	47	Penny Devine
<i>Blue Rhymes</i>	49	Maria do Sameiro Barroso
<i>Saturday Morning</i>	51	Monty Vern
<i>Small Potatoes, For the Mouse in My Kitchen</i>	52	Chaz Scala
<i>As You Read Shahid to Me</i>	54	Jagari Mukherjee
<i>Beach Feast</i>	58	Emily Dexter
<i>Riding on The Red Line</i>	61	John Grey
<i>Playgrounds</i>	63	Melody Wang
<i>White Lights Mid-City</i>	64	John Lambremont, Sr.
<i>Once a City</i>	65	Fabrice Poussin
<i>Shadows</i>	67	Eva Wal
<i>A Bootleg Biography, Edward Hopper's Automat</i>	71	Michael Brockley
<i>The Highwayman</i>	72	Michael Brockley
<i>living still</i>	77	Samantha Martin
<i>simplicity</i>	78	Samantha Martin
<i>That's All There Is</i>	80	E.H. Davis
<i>Cold, Cold, Cold</i>	86	John Lambremont, Sr.
<i>Winter's Whispering</i>	88	Mervyn Seivwright
<i>Love catapults me</i>	91	Mark Andrew Heathcote
<i>North-Country Night</i>	92	Gregory Lucas

## SHORT STORY

<i>Omen</i>	11	E. H. Davis
<i>At the Writers' House</i>	21	Thaddeus Rutkowski
<i>Bloom</i>	32	Samantha Denniston
<i>Strawberry Mold</i>	55	Inez Beeson
<i>Helen's Boutique For Modern Ladies</i>	59	Zack Taft
<i>Sick Headache</i>	75	Thomas Elson
<i>Snowfall on Pine Ridge</i>	83	Steve Carr
<i>A Guessing Game</i>	94	Katherine Yeh
<i>Standing Still</i>	95	Ashley Wilson

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## ILLUSTRATION

<i>Brambles</i>	<b>34</b>	Belinda Subraman
<i>Mr. Grumbles</i>	<b>37</b>	Marjory Leposky
<i>How Impatiently</i>	<b>41</b>	Melusine Brosse
<i>Bare</i>	<b>42</b>	Kadiejra O'Neal
<i>Snow Globe</i>	<b>50</b>	Ann Marie Sekeres
<i>Claus on Vacation</i>	<b>57</b>	Bianca Paladini
<i>Work Healthy Selfish</i>	<b>62</b>	Yohanes Soubirius De Santo
<i>Snow's Calligraphy</i>	<b>73</b>	Lois Bender
<i>Snow Globe</i>	<b>74</b>	Ann Marie Sekeres
<i>Dysmorphia</i>	<b>79</b>	Mélody Thomasson
<i>From the Bottom of My Heart</i>	<b>82</b>	Mélody Thomasson
<i>Breughel's Hunters Hearth</i>	<b>97</b>	Lois Bender

## PHOTOGRAPHY

<i>Red Light</i>	<b>0</b>	Tatia Nikvashvili
<i>First Snow no.2</i>	<b>6</b>	Anne-Julie Hynes
<i>Fall Leaves</i>	<b>7</b>	Ellen Pliskin
<i>Stranded</i>	<b>13</b>	Brenna Rietmann
<i>Stairs in Snow</i>	<b>15</b>	Jay Waters
<i>Snowfall</i>	<b>18</b>	Shiela Scott
<i>Snowfall on side of house</i>	<b>19</b>	Shiela Scott
<i>Snow in back of house</i>	<b>20</b>	Shiela Scott
<i>Stairs in Snow</i>	<b>23</b>	Jay Waters
<i>Brrr-ittle Cedar</i>	<b>25</b>	Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier
<i>Metanoia</i>	<b>28</b>	Shaelynn Tredenick
<i>Cabin</i>	<b>36</b>	Brenna Rietmann
<i>Noel</i>	<b>39</b>	Annalyn Miller
<i>Wanderer</i>	<b>43</b>	Tatia Nikvashvili
<i>Moon Bathing</i>	<b>45</b>	Tatia Nikvashvili
<i>Untitled1311</i>	<b>47</b>	Jana Kacar
<i>Pawprint,</i>	<b>49</b>	Annalyn Miller
<i>Glittered Kiss</i>	<b>53</b>	Annalyn Miller
<i>Stillness</i>	<b>67</b>	Ana Chikovani
<i>Solitude</i>	<b>69</b>	Ana Chikovani
<i>In the mountainous borderland area #8</i>	<b>85</b>	Stephan Weixler
<i>In the mountainous borderland area #10</i>	<b>87</b>	Stephan Weixler
<i>Self-Sufficient</i>	<b>89</b>	Brenna Rietmann
<i>by the lake</i>	<b>89</b>	Mai Neko
<i>Lost II</i>	<b>93</b>	Samantha Lucchetta

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# EDITORIAL STAFF

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## FICTION

Amber Valois  
Prince Quamina

## POETRY

Ana Surguladze  
Melanie Han  
Veronica Valerakis

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Please visit our website for more information. [florafiction.com/contribute](http://florafiction.com/contribute)

## INTERESTED IN SUBMITTING

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

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Most of the world has spent this year in solitude, separated from the ones we love and removed from the simple joys in life, only to be replaced by fear. Fear of dying, change, and being perpetually stuck doing nothing with no one, alone. We've been standing still, waiting for the establishment to tell us how to act and what to say because our lack of power to fix the situation leaves us reliant on an answer.

It's human nature to seek answers, reasons, or something to blame for the things we don't understand and are beyond our control. Truth is, most of life is beyond our control. The amount of time we've all been forced into isolation has given us an opportunity to reflect on ourselves, whether we like it or not. 2020 has universally affected all of us causing us to realize we are all the same. According to the Smithsonian, "The genetic difference between individual humans today is minuscule – about 0.1%, on average."

We've been forced to confront the way we think, how we feel, and accept that people need people. Our differences from one another are beautiful and necessary. What separates us as individuals inspires others to be their authentic selves. What brings us together advances mankind. Together, we experience compassion, understanding, joy, and happiness.

*Stillness & Solitude* is the theme for this Winter issue. As the final issue of Volume 1. We couldn't be more blessed than to have so many talented artists contribute and share their work with us. As we move into the holidays, be present with the people you love, even if it's just yourself. Be safe and kind for we are all human. Let's move into the new year together.

xoxo  
Flora Ashe





**Anne-Julie Hynes** is a multidisciplinary artist from Montreal, Canada. Her work reflects a strong and powerful relationship to landscape and nature. She works with different mediums such as painting, photography, collage and sculpture.



**Ellen Pliskin** organizes the elements in her landscapes to satisfy and engage the viewer while still retaining the overall essence of the scene.





# Vision

BY: STEVE OTLOWSKI

In the magic time,  
when the mind isn't sure  
of the things that it hears or sees,

When setting sun  
Gilds the woods  
Light combed by barren trees

And every sound  
of bird and beast  
rings loud in the evening's hush.

Phantoms drift  
across the dell  
braid trails through tangled brush.

Slow and soft  
on silent hooves,  
they float at the edge of sight

From daytime beds  
to feeding grounds  
where they will spend the night.

A stubbled field  
freshly fallen snow  
sharp gaze of the frost-ringed moon.

Browsing whitetails  
glean a meal,  
hearts scribing ancient runes

In winter's keen crust,  
as Orion looks down  
the hunter now turned watcher.

Long cold nights,  
season's dark heart,  
each day imperceptibly longer.

Antler-shed bucks  
with gravid does wait  
for the starving time coming in spring.

**Steve** is retired and writing.

# Winter Light

BY: LYNN WHITE

When the winter light hits the trees  
the blue disappears in a spectrum  
of bright white and gold  
shooting out like a beaming star  
from a brilliant diamond  
and then fades away  
fades with the sinking feeling  
of an endgame approaching  
as the blue disappears  
swallowed by winter dark  
eaten up by blackness  
all too soon.

**Lynn White** lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award

# Winter Solstice

BY: JOAN MCNERNEY

Ice blue mountains  
Wind swept skies.  
There are always these...

And you standing  
silent as the sun  
burning through  
this day.  
You are my sun  
my heaven on earth.

You bring bright ribbons  
handfuls of crystal  
to fasten my hair.

Stay with me this  
long evening. I will  
hide in your arms away  
from ice blue winds.  
We will be warm together.

**Joan McNeerney's** poetry is found in many literary magazines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Poet Warriors, Blueline, and Halcyon Days. She has four Best of the Net nominations. Her latest title is The Muse in Miniature available on Amazon.com and Cyberwit.net

# Omen

BY: E.H. DAVIS

Jens stepped cautiously onto the carpet of pine needles that led into the woods like a door to new worlds. Inhaling deeply, he absorbed the riot of color from the overhead branches sheltering his path from the midday sun. He felt his face awash in a balm, smoothing away the worry furrows on his forehead, lifting the sour curve of his mouth into a smile. Reminding him of previous occasions when if he entered the woods with the right attitude he'd exit changed for the better.

Walking in a trance, he took delight in the jays swooping to pester nesting swallows. He basked in the wind bearing the smell of clover mixed with danker odors, of moss and igneous dirt. He delighted in the interminable rustle of small creatures he couldn't see but sensed. And he savored the rhythmic suspiration of the woods, the wind in the trees, the clicks and chirps of cicadas and crickets rising in cacophonous harmony. He was awash in timelessness, carried away by it all.

He trekked past burbling streams and grassy vales; climbed steep grades gouged by seasonal torrents; dug in his heels against shale polished smooth by spring rains.

He walked for hours, ecstatic, carrying on a silent exchange with the spirits of the woods as they entered his consciousness; impressing themselves not as objects apart from him but as shapes, textures, colors, smells, and tones that had always resided within him with a life of their own. Deeper into the woods was he drawn, comforted, caressed, and deeper into his joy.

At first, he did not register the gray mule deer browsing the flowered shrubs in the copse ahead. Alerted, he noticed the pale-teated underbelly identifying her as a mare. She pricked up her velvet ears. Round sad eyes scanned the woods, her pert muzzle sniffing the wind, still not seeing him. He stood motionless. Willing himself invisible.

Then she saw him, her head fixed in his direction, ears poised. She did not run. They stared at each other. For a miraculous second, it seemed to him that her eyes registered a self-awareness at once alien and familiar. She blinked and leapt away, her yellow tail raised in flight.

Afterward, the image of her—unbowed, curious—haunted him pleasantly as he drove back to civilization. He carried it away like something indefinably precious, tinged with awe and mystery.

---

Later, when he tried to tell his fiancé Viviane about it, he faltered, leaving her with a mundane account of a deer sighting, his secret joy untouched.

The day before, Vivian had phoned him at his apartment in West Hollywood asking him obtusely, repeatedly, "Where are you?" There was an extra thrill in her voice, alerting him that something extraordinary had happened or was happening or was about to happen.

He endured her bated-breath questions: "Are you in the bedroom? ... No. The living room? No. The kitchen? Bingo!" - until he realized that she was really asking him, in her charming if limited, French-accented English, if he was sitting down.

"Yes, yes! I'm sitting down—at the kitchen table."

That's when it dawned on him.

Then she told him that he was going to be a father.

When he didn't answer right away, she prompted: "Nothing to say?"

He laughed nervously. "For once, I'm speechless... how do you know?"

It was her turn to laugh. "I took the home pregnancy test—three times—all positive." Pause. "You are ... excited, no?"

He thought for a moment before answering. He was going to be a father. Finally. At nearly forty years old. Good Lord. Yes, he was excited. Very.

Images of how his life was about to change, drastically, at warp speed, flashed through his mind.

"That's fantastic, honey," he answered. "I am very excited."

"Good!" she screamed with joy. "Me, too!".

Without understanding it, he sensed that his deer sighting, a moment out of time, was connected to the news that he was going to be a father. Their lives would never be the same, his and this lovely, sophisticated young woman who had planted herself in his life with her earthy laugh, naiveté, and impeccable manners—who was willing to join her destiny with his.

He and Viviane would marry; they would find an apartment together. The thought was dizzying. He was still finding his way in life, trying to make a name for himself in the precarious discipline of screenwriting in a town that revered only fame, youth, and power. A father. How did it parse with his life's ambition - of making a living as a writer?

He tried to hold onto his earlier image of the deer, her naked curiosity, her opaque creaturehood, as a positive sign for his upcoming marriage and fatherhood. But now she stared back mutely, her eyes fathomless dark orbs sensing the fear and uncertainty in his own - that he'd tried to hide from himself.



Photography: **Brenna Rietmann** grew up in Eastern Oregon and attended the University of Montana. You can find her outside, pretty much any day of the year.



# A Glacier's Longing

BY: BEN WARD

In summer they hum with waterfowl and  
buzz of bloodsuckers, alive with tireless munching  
of beavers and loon song.  
Minnesota lakes—bountiful, dispersed  
and 10,000 strong.

But in winter those waters are  
returned to glacial origin and to  
their former selves, however diminutive.

In the darkened north, do they  
relish their seasonal dominion?  
Do they crunch and grind with  
pleasure in their shallows,  
recalling eons past when they  
scraped, polished, and pulverized?

For now, they employ shadows like wolves  
awaiting their fortunes to manifest,  
savoring a future time of dominion,  
a day when a thick chisel of ice can again  
dispatch the heart of Yosemite and  
shovel the soils of Canada into the Plains.

These glacial longings quietly await,  
patient for future glories, renewed.

**Ben Ward** is a biologist living in Oregon. He enjoys both  
good company and the quiet of aloneness.

---



Photography: Jay Waters





## Leaving the Cabin

BY: KEVIN MILLER

*sleep tight, ya morons*

—J.D. Salinger

*hey, that's no way to say good-bye*

—Leonard Cohen

A stellar jay hassles the Douglas squirrel  
in the pine at the edge of Ranch Cabin Lane.

Seasonal fall mixes rusty needles with green  
in the days before a windstorm completes

renewal. This is us leaving, this ginger blend  
with healthy pine, those who stay, those

on the verge. One adventure leads to another,  
the vocabulary of what keeps us alive, say

bitterbrush, say rabbitbrush gone to seed  
and turned to stars in the black dog's back.

Farewell days we fix on aspen, last year's  
black leaf plague finds us eyeing the turn.

We know no staying songs, these old feet  
move too often for slippers under the bed.

No one's burning sage or putting our numbers  
in their phones, we are slow-moving targets,


snow-capped, and hobbling north to sea level.

## Heading South Avoiding Mt. Hood

BY: KEVIN MILLER

We head upriver to avoid snow,  
our run east, wind chop increases,  
the big one's width between banks  
where state lines are so much  
cartographer water. Unincorporated  
Wyeth earns a sign without the participle  
and brings you to mind before White Salmon  
calls White Swan, the other whites build  
without reservation at the edge of the cliffs.  
Something about living between states  
keeps me drinking coffee and longing  
for Guinness, toss-up days a face-off,  
manic and depressive. After hairpins  
in and out of Maupin, miles of empty hills,  
sage and tumbleweed, two false passes,  
and flurries posing as fog. Some days  
it seems we drive to create enough  
distance to send a postcard.

**Kevin Miller's** *Vanish* won the *Wandering Aengus Press* Publication Award in 2019. Miller taught thirty-nine years in the public schools of Washington State.



**Shiela Denise Scott.** Creative has multiple publications in the Poetry and Photography genre. Her Artistic ways compliment pages of many Anthologies, Magazines, and Journals. She lights up the room with the pleasure of expressing her style to others.



## Looking West

BY: KEVIN MILLER

today it's kinglets, golden  
crowned and ruby,  
a feather-load of royal

gems, these spirits rise on a day  
with no wind, they appear  
at this glass, sky-dropped

from the Katsura's heart  
its crooked bits outline shade's  
skeleton open and arced.

we speak nothing of sleep after  
October steals the light, staying  
keen is our daily practice.

bushtits appear later as if gray  
were an attempt to disappear  
they are like ideas.

if you wait, they come, and no  
corny entry or baseball necessary  
they lite in a sequence.

twenty synaptic blips on the suet  
before the chickadee descends,  
a noisy might makes right.

the feeder politics, I refrain  
from the omnipotent tap, this  
plays as it is written.



# At the Writer's House

BY: THADDEUS RUTKOWSK

My room in the writers' house was on the top floor in what had been the attic. The room had a slanted roof with a window at one end. From the window, I could see the church next door. Under one eave I had a desk where I could do my work, and under the opposite eave was a walk-in closet with a chair someone had put in there. I could sit on the chair and read if I wanted.

My new room was fine, but I wasn't used to it. On previous visits, I'd been given a more standard room on the second floor. Now, however, I would get so caught up in my thoughts that I would automatically go to my former room, now occupied by a young woman. One time, when I was returning from the shared bathroom, I turned her doorknob and walked in. The woman was in her bed, reading. She wanted to say something but was speechless. All she could do was make exclamations like "Upp!" and "Nupp!"

\*\*\*

An older woman from the house gave me a ride to a grocery store in the nearby town. She called the ride a "mitzvah." At the store, called Price Killer, I purchased a bottle of soy sauce. The bottle was quite large, but there were no small bottles. The price per ounce of sauce was low, but the size of the bottle jacked up the total cost.

I brought the bottle back to our house and put it in the kitchen. A colleague found it and asked, "Who bought this? It will last for years!"

I decided to use the soy sauce liberally. I started by pouring the condiment over chow mein from a can I'd heated on the stove. Everyone prepared their own food, and I planned to make rice dishes often.

\*\*\*

I found a couple of bicycles stacked behind the house. When I inspected them, I saw they all had flat tires. I took a bike that had one flat instead of two and walked it to a service station. The station also sold hardware, so I bought a small item—a hook and eye latch—for later use.

The station had an air compressor in its parking area. I picked up the hose, attached the tip, and filled the flat. When the tire felt hard to the touch I started riding again. I covered a couple of hundred yards before I heard and felt a rhythmic thudding—a sign the tire was flat again. I walked the bike back to the house.

\*\*\*

I brought the hook and latch to the room of the woman I'd intruded on. I screwed the eyes into the door frame and panel. "This should help," I said to her. "Just click the hook to keep the door shut."

---

"I'll do that," she said.

"Maybe we can meet once we're back in the city," I offered.

She didn't reply.

\*\*\*

In the evening, I talked about my book. I had only one book, and it was small. It could fit in the palm of a hand. "I call it a novel," I said.

"What is it about?" the man who had commented on the soy sauce asked.

"It's fiction, based on my experiences."

"May I borrow it?"

I lent him the book, and he took it to his room.

\*\*\*

Later, the woman who'd taken me to the store said to me, "Someone called you on the phone."

There was only one phone in the house which we took turn using. During the day, it usually didn't ring.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"She wouldn't give her name, but she wanted me to come and get you."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'We can't disturb people in their studios.'"

\*\*\*

The call, I knew, was from my off-and-on girlfriend who lived near me in the city. I wanted to invite her to visit me. I would show her my room—and the walk-in closet, with the chair inside. One of us could sit in the chair and read, while the other sat at the desk. I wouldn't mind taking the chair; I could appreciate a book. At other times, we could share my narrow mattress and look out the window at the church next door.

But I put off calling her. I doubted that having a guest would be appropriate in the house, anyway. People were supposed to be alone in their studios.

\*\*\*

The man who had borrowed my book returned it. I expected him to say something about the subject matter, to say he found the content interesting, maybe even to say he liked it. But all he said was, "It's not a novel; it's a novella. And it's not fiction; it's a memoir."

\*\*\*

At night, half-asleep, I automatically tried to go into my former room. I wasn't thinking about the new occupant, the young woman who might be reading in her bed. I came out of the bathroom, stumbled to the door, and turned the knob. But she had latched the hook I'd installed, and the door wouldn't open more than a crack. The room was dark inside. I called, "Sorry!" through the crack, shut the door, and walked carefully upstairs to my attic room.



Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of seven books, most recently *Tricks of Light*, a poetry collection. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.







**Jay Waters** is a photographer and writer from McCalla, Alabama. My emphasis is on simplicity and serendipity, so all of my photos are from my phone, with minimal processing. I look for the happy coincidence of life, light and camera. Jay's photos have been published a number of print and online journals. More work at [noodlePhotos.com](http://noodlePhotos.com)



**Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier** is a visual artist, writer and photographer. Most recently she's been a cover artist for Arachne Press, Pretty Owl Poetry, Wild Musette, Existere Journal, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Gigantic Sequins, Ottawa Arts Journal and more. When she's not walking her two huskies, she's also designing with Art of Where. Karen now uses some of her artwork on non-medical face masks. See [www.kcbgphoto.com](http://www.kcbgphoto.com) to find out more.



## Walks Along Oirase Gorge

I miss walking in Towada valley, distance  
in kilometers, the lines of a sonnet.  
At spring, I would drift through raining  
pink cherry blossom flakes, pausing—smelling  
birthed life released from winter's grasp.

The summer brings green prism hues  
to Oirase Gorge where rivers converge,  
snakes intertwining, water carving its path  
while feeding moss partners with each stone.

Centuries of forest growth finds careful steps  
of onlookers and I counting waterfalls  
with mist drips or thundering white rapids—  
sounds harsh enough for closed eye meditation.

Opening my eyes at autumn, sunset  
leaf tints find the brushes of painters  
quietly at the river's edge. I find  
my pen to create a picture of words.

**Mervyn R. Seivwright** has appeared in *AGNI Literary Magazine*, *The Trinity Review* (Canada), *African American Review*, *Griffel Literature Review* (Norway), *Cape Cod Poetry Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *INNSÆI Journal* (India), *Mount Island's Lucy Terry Prince* poetry contest 2nd Runner-Up, and *Santa Fe Literary Review* 2021 Pushcart Nominee.



Photography: Shaelynn Tredenick







**Shaelynn Tredenick** is an emerging photo-based artist in Ottawa. She recently graduated from SPAO and previously from the photography program at Algonquin in 2018. She brings style and movement from her past in competitive dance to her work. Tredenick's practices involves scanography of still life and botanicals.





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# Bloom

BY: SAMANTHA DENNISTON

She'd inherited a garden: two geraniums in terracotta pots, a collection of ferns with fronds that spilled out of their baskets and brushed the floor, a spiky bromeliad the color of flame—more varieties of succulents than she could name. Atta moved slowly throughout the house, caressing every leaf, every bloom. The weight of this gift was overwhelming. It was a parting gift from her friend Phil, who'd died two weeks earlier. Atta hadn't wanted anything. No item, no matter how expensive or sentimental, can warm the cold place that forms when someone you love dies. Atta would never again stroll arm-in-arm with Phil to the tea shop. She'd never hear his screeching wail of a laugh. But the plants were thriving, stubbornly, despite being uncared for; it made her feel as though Phil were still close by, waiting for the house to clear before filling the watering can.

People trickled in and out, chattering softly as they claimed bits and pieces of what had been Phil's life. Some Atta recognized from pictures, or from brief exchanges at dinner parties. Others were strangers to her. Everyone seemed to have been entrusted with one of Phil's treasures. His porcelain elephant figurines, souvenirs from a trip to Thailand, walked off in the arms of a woman Atta had seen before but couldn't name. His silver champagne flutes went to an old college roommate. A heaviness settled in Atta's chest at the sight of the bare mantle, the empty bookshelf. The house that Phil had taken such care to furnish and decorate, was quickly becoming unrecognizable.

Atta considered lingering there. She thought of joining the others in revisiting the Best of Phil memories but decided she didn't have the heart for it. Instead, she hoisted up one of the geraniums and made her way toward the driveway. Her two-door was completely surrounded by other cars. After carefully squeezing herself through, she popped the trunk and lowered the plant inside.

It alone took up most of the space.

She hadn't the slightest clue how its companions would fit. She puffed and looked around. Phil's old yellow Chevy was parked along the street. A familiar face stood nearby, trailing a finger down its rusted body.

"Hey. Wallace, right?"

Phil's childhood friend was startled. He hadn't seen her approach. "Yeah, that's right," he said, stuffing his hand back in his coat pocket.

Atta nodded. "How ya holding up?"

"Y'know. Sad, I guess. I miss him..."

Atta noticed the look of grief on his face and cut in. "That's okay. I miss him too."

A quiet moment passed between them. Atta exhaled, a cloud of breath billowing in the winter air. She gestured to the truck. "Is this...?"

"Mine now," he confirmed.

"Wow. Sweet ride."

---

"It's a piece of shit," Wallace laughed darkly. "He could've afforded something better."

"It's not much to look at," Atta agreed, "but it's reliable."

"Yeah, the damn thing outlived him."

He must have seen her smile fall because he seemed to regret the statement instantly saying, "sorry."

Silence again.

"What did you get?" he asked finally.

"Enough plants to fill a greenhouse," she chuckled. She looked over her shoulder at her car. "I think I'm gonna have leaves coming out of the exhaust pipe."

He considered this. "I mean, I could give you a ride. If you wanted."

"Are you sure? You definitely don't have to."

Wallace shrugged. "I don't mind."

It took several trips to retrieve all the plants. After they were secured in the truck bed, Atta inquired about the rest of Phil's friends inside.

"Did you want to say goodbye?"

"Honestly? That's okay." He bit his lip. "It's a little much for me. Unless you...?"

"I'm good too," said Atta, relieved.

She dashed to her car, still trapped between a dozen others, and pulled the geranium from the trunk. She set it at her feet in the Chevy and pulled the heavy door shut. She glanced at Wallace in the driver's seat.

"Weird," she said.

"Weird," he echoed.

There was still an empty coffee cup in the holder. Crumpled receipts dotted the dashboard. The upholstery smelled faintly of Phil's Irish Spring shampoo. Atta reached for the temperature controls and turned the heat up. It clanked and sputtered and spat out freezing air. She and Wallace exchanged a worried look.

The quiet grew weighty as they turned onto the highway. Wallace was Phil's oldest friend, but he and Atta had only truly interacted a handful of times. Atta suddenly felt regretful for not knowing him better. She drummed her fingers on the seat, contemplating.

"You've known Phil since middle school?" she tried.

"Yeah."

"Oh." Her brow furrowed.

"In gym class," Wallace added, sensing her effort. "We ran the mile together. We always came last."

Atta grinned. They rode like that for a while, listening to the warm hum of the engine.

"What about you?"

"I was a new friend," Atta told him. She turned her gaze to the window. "Met him at work. We traded lunches every day, like kids in the cafeteria. My chips for his juice, that kinda thing." Her throat tightened. "I thought we'd be friends for a long time."

Wallace wanted to offer a word of comfort but had trouble summoning one. Soon they were pulling into Atta's neighborhood and it became clear that the moment had passed. He put the truck into the park in front of her house. Neither of them immediately spoke. Then they both started at the same time. They shared a laugh at the awkward timing.

Wallace rubbed the back of his neck. "I know it wouldn't be the same, but we could grab lunch sometime. If you wanted. I don't usually have good things to trade, though."

Atta gave a wry smile. Then she reached for the geranium at her feet and plucked off a length of it. She dropped it into the coffee cup. "That sounds great," she said and slid out onto the pavement.

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



BE  
:)

## How Far Away Is Home?

BY: SAL QUICKLY

They say home is about three hours away  
five if you count the airport commute  
and maybe seven if you count the waiting around  
but the last time I was at home was a year ago  
and the last time I felt even slightly homely  
was about ten years before that  
but even then, only a bit  
perhaps by the gentle hand of late autumn  
so I guess real home, heart home  
song thrush and coffee home  
is even further back still  
in small pools of sunlight  
cast through patio windows  
and dogs now dead, lying in them  
and the smell of bonfires and treacle toffee  
my sentiment burns and blows away  
with the winds of time  
and there are worlds between me now  
and me deliciously unburdened  
hands in pockets and sunburned cheeks  
without so much as a freckle, pip  
eyelash or sigh of concern

so how far away is home then, really?

**Sal** is a writer from Chorley, UK, currently based in Oslo, Norway.



Photography: Brenna Rietmann



**Ella Kate Dewees** is an illustrator based in Baltimore, Maryland. She currently attends the Maryland Institute College of Art as a Junior where she is working towards a BFA as an Illustration major with a studio concentration in Book Arts.

She specializes in creating illustrations of animal characters and natural environments. She enjoys blending traditional mediums with digital techniques to create polished images that retain the charm of traditional mediums.

She is currently making illustrations of Mr. Grumbles, a black cat character created by author Marjory E. Leposky. Mr. Grumbles is a chapter book about an abandoned kitten who has to find his way. Visit: [ellakatedewees.myportfolio.com](http://ellakatedewees.myportfolio.com)



Illustration: Ella Kate Dewees

## Overburden #4

Christmastime in the Holler. Papa and Santa be damned if there's any mention of coal on Christmas day – “bad chil'n get nuthin' and that's the way it'll stay, come Hell or a ris'n crick,” I was told. After ham dinner and gifts, I watch the snowfall through pine branches against the backdrop of our scarred mountains, stripped raw. Grandpa follows me out. He gives me a hand-wrapped box smaller than the sandwich ma packs daily in papa's lunchbox. Tearing through the ribbon, the paper, I unearth a hunk of coal, painted auburn by dirt. He smiles, and glistens that he “min'd it muhself.”

**Dane Ritter** is a poet and environmentalist born and raised in Kentucky, currently teaching freshman English. His work has previously appeared in the Cortland Review, the Transylvanian, and Anthology of Appalachian Writers.



**Photography:** Annalyn Miller is a recent UW Graduate, Full-time Mama, and some kind of artist who's trying to put some beauty back into the world.



# Alone with my whiskey

BY: SURAKSHYA KIJU

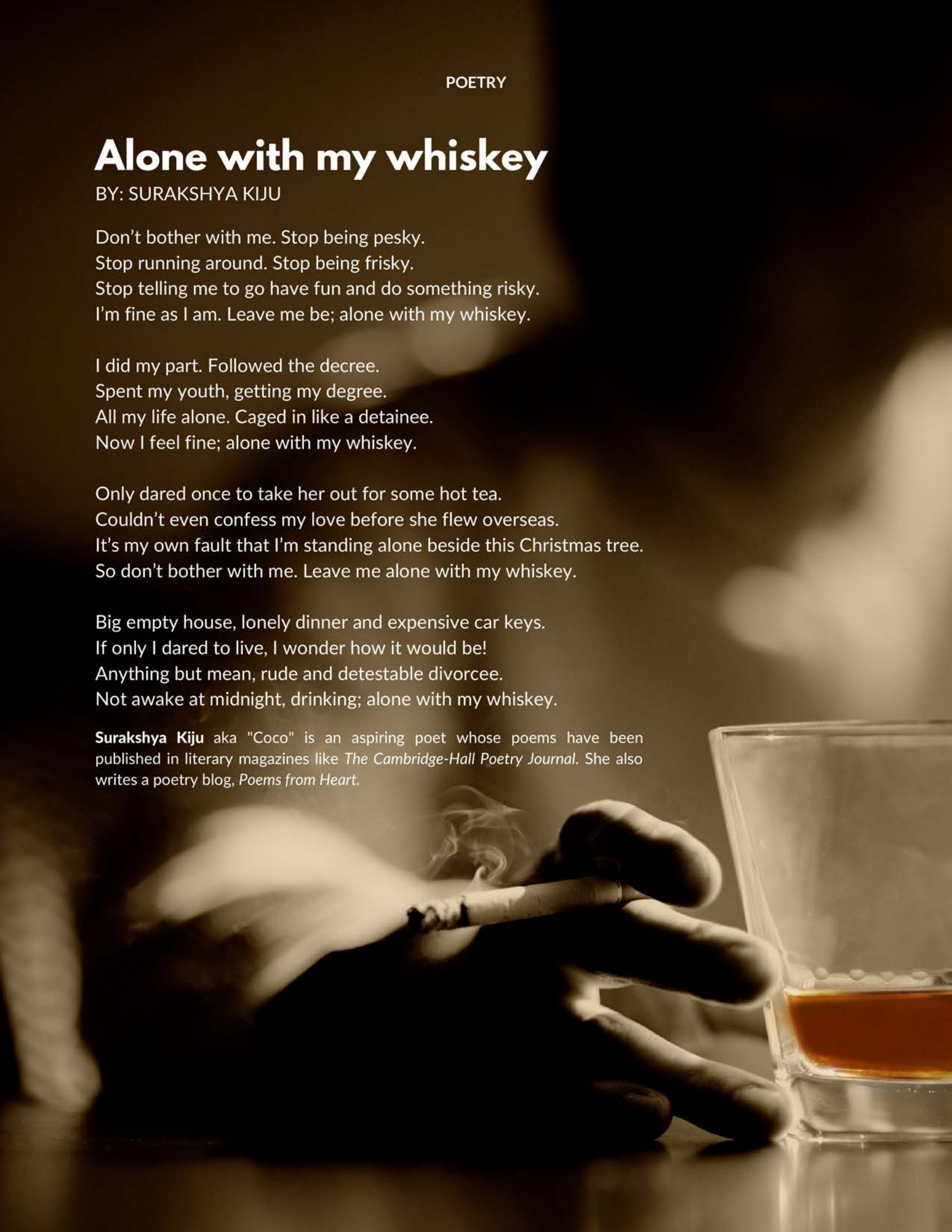
Don't bother with me. Stop being pesky.  
Stop running around. Stop being frisky.  
Stop telling me to go have fun and do something risky.  
I'm fine as I am. Leave me be; alone with my whiskey.

I did my part. Followed the decree.  
Spent my youth, getting my degree.  
All my life alone. Caged in like a detainee.  
Now I feel fine; alone with my whiskey.

Only dared once to take her out for some hot tea.  
Couldn't even confess my love before she flew overseas.  
It's my own fault that I'm standing alone beside this Christmas tree.  
So don't bother with me. Leave me alone with my whiskey.

Big empty house, lonely dinner and expensive car keys.  
If only I dared to live, I wonder how it would be!  
Anything but mean, rude and detestable divorcee.  
Not awake at midnight, drinking; alone with my whiskey.

**Surakshya Kiju** aka "Coco" is an aspiring poet whose poems have been published in literary magazines like *The Cambridge-Hall Poetry Journal*. She also writes a poetry blog, *Poems from Heart*.



## Silence

BY: LORRAINE CAPUTO

Silence,  
a sound  
that hangs, like  
a thousand threads weaving

unravelling in the  
pale dawn  
light.

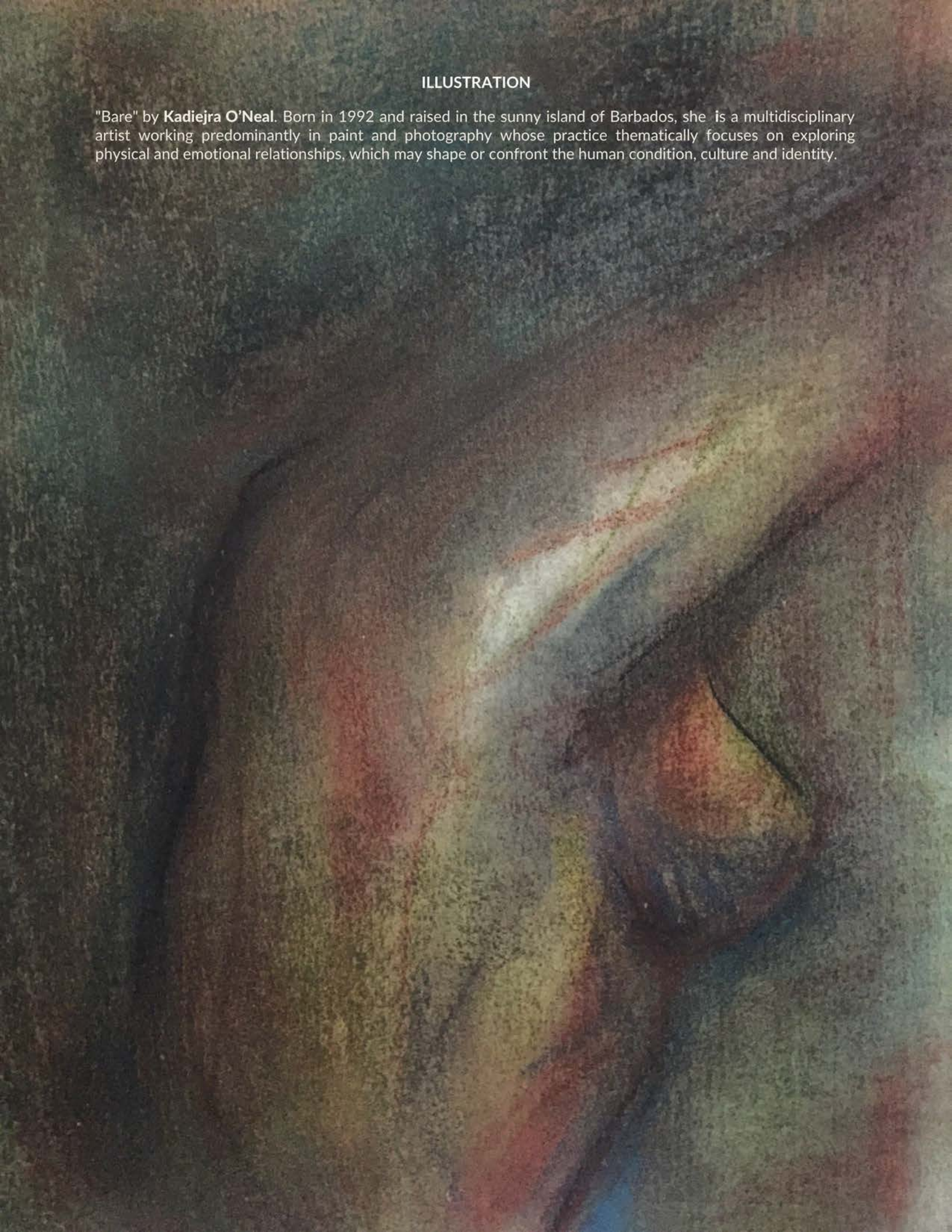
**Lorraine Caputo** is a documentary poet, translator and travel writer, whose works have appeared in over 180 journals on six continents



"How Impatiently" by **Melusine Brosse**. A French artist based in Strasbourg, trying to reconcile her wild spirit with the urban lifestyle, with little success so far.

## ILLUSTRATION

"Bare" by **Kadiejra O'Neal**. Born in 1992 and raised in the sunny island of Barbados, she is a multidisciplinary artist working predominantly in paint and photography whose practice thematically focuses on exploring physical and emotional relationships, which may shape or confront the human condition, culture and identity.



**Tatia Nikvashvili** 22-year-old freelance artist, a lawyer from Georgia.



# Winter Days

BY: KELLI LAGE

Ashen winged birds sing  
lullabies of departure,  
gliding as if they were the ones chosen  
to lay down blankets of snow.  
upon sleeping earth.  
Barren months, the twiddle of thumbs.  
Marks of soil,  
vanish the ground and etch my mind.  
Hoos and hums creak through midnight.  
Winter's breath crystallizes  
on my living room window.  
The golden dog  
nosedives into the raw pits  
of the first snow.  
Scents of creatures who passed in nightfall  
stir the air.  
Her rose snout meets the remnants of sap  
carried by the Northwind.  
Whistles heard from shaky evergreens.  
Chill on bare paws,  
her fur doesn't shudder.  
The skeletal wind can be heard  
tapping on the front door,  
with hopes of being invited home  
to warm up by burning logs.  
Branches bare in their truth.  
Fire paints the evening horizon.  
By the rising buttery moon,  
quiet returns.

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

# Winter Nights

BY: KIERON P. BAIRD

Still is this night; I could be the last person on Earth.  
Nothing breaks the silence except the crackle of snow.  
Only my shadow pursues me on this moonlit night.  
Wary from the cold, I begin to venture homeward.  
Your surface was unmarred but now my footprints wander.

**Kieron P. Baird** is a published writer, on a personal journey of self-discovery and improved mental well-being. He has a First-Class Honours Degree in Animal Biology and lives in Central Scotland, UK.

Photography: Tatia Nikvashvili



# Hope in Snowflakes

BY: JULIE CREASEY

Drifting, gliding, no arranged path  
No destination required  
Riding on chance.  
Careful of unseen forces,  
Hexagons pulled together  
Attracted, attractive,

Additive motion, falling, absorbing  
Gaining speed, collisions create  
Seemingly impossible  
Randomness formed intricate patterns.  
Once assembled, never again  
Milligrams of singular beauty.

Nature's haphazard perfection  
In miniature pieces,  
If only to say  
Our imperfect actions matter.  
Assemble, form, and build  
Lasting changes to lift us up  
And not melt away.

**Julie Creasey** lives and writes in Ottawa, Canada where she explores nature and bakes with her two young daughters.

# I always think of you when it's cold

BY: PENNY DEVINE

Crisp, chilly,  
almost-Christmas,  
hand-holding,  
nose-nuzzling,  
kiss-stealing,  
fire-building,  
cocoa-drinking,  
love-making winter days...

...will always remind me of that perfect winter when I took that leap and I told you how I felt and I thought I would faint because I didn't know if you felt the same and you held my face with both your hands and changed everything I thought I knew about the world with one perfect kiss.

**Penny Devine** is a Psychology professor by day, poet by night.





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



# Blue Rhymes for a Merry Christmas

BY: MARIA DO SAMEIRO BARROSO

I am the sum  
of all the silences,  
a gesture, a smile, a face,  
a song, a fragrance,  
a dried fruit, a memory,  
a heavenly delicacy,  
a clear crystal river,  
a tear shed  
in a Christmas night.  
I'm a golden star,  
a green vertex,  
a feverish tree,  
and my face lies  
on the path of an angel  
that ripped out my flesh  
when he went by.

**Maria do Sameiro Barroso** (Portugal) is a medical doctor and a multilingual poet, translator, essayist and researcher in Portuguese and German Literature, translations studies and History of Medicine. She has authored over 40 books of poetry, published in Portugal, Brazil, Spain, France, Serbia, Belgium, Albany, USA, and translations and essays.



**Ann Marie Sekeres's** work has appeared in numerous publications worldwide. Her first book cover, for "The Samurai" by Linda M. Crate, has just been published by Yellow Arrow Press of Baltimore, MD. Currently, she is trying to make it through 2020 in one piece.

# Saturday Morning

BY: MONTY VERN

Waking to snow pattering against  
the window glass  
Creaking of the wooden floor  
under stockinged feet  
Scraping of the fire poker  
coaxing new flames  
Soft crunch of milk softened  
cereal munching  
White noise from the radio across  
every frequency  
A sigh.

**Monty Vern** is a creator of written stuff - an aspiring writer, shameless illustrator, and a fallible editor. Monty was born out of the brain of a work-in-progress human that has just recently discovered a passion for writing and illustrating. Monty's human grew up in Vermont, USA and currently resides in Shanghai, China.

## Small Potatoes

BY: CHAZ SCALA

I've been struggling to feel much of anything lately, but I do feel stillness. When I braid my hair or preset the coffee pot, I feel a little better. Or pluck my eyebrows, cross-legged on the floor in front of the mirror, or slice bell peppers and portion them into containers for the week. There is comfort in the things we can control, the world roiling and heaving outside my apartment. I can't keep my mom safe, but I can scrub the floors and spray mint in the corners to keep the mice away. I can't hire myself, but I can throw away my kitchen sponge. I can't guarantee that I'll feel alright tomorrow, but I can measure peanut butter and oatmeal and chicken. I can replace the batteries in my smoke detector; I can avert tiny disasters, the ones that can be averted. My therapist once told me that I cope so gracefully with the big things in life, that I misplace my worry on so-called small potatoes, but she was wrong and I'm a wreck and I wish I could stop sweeping my bedroom floor, do something useful for god's sake.

## For the Mouse in My Kitchen

BY: CHAZ SCALA

It's a blessing and a curse to be this small. A curse because it's not in the endearing way, like when you wrap your arms around me and marvel at how insubstantial I seem. I mean, small enough to be swallowed whole by this world and wander around in its gut, to sleep nestled in the sheetrock around the hot water pipes. My birthday doesn't burn a hole in your calendar. I know; I'm not the brightest of flames. Fifteen years isn't so long. The glint of my eyes, softness of my skin. Scrubbed from your mind; I blame the drinking, the drugs, the passage of time. I blame everyone but you. I cried today because I can't remember the last time I felt a song shiver through me, and I can't feel joy as more than a glimmer. When you're this small, the world turns and you scarcely feel it; we scarcely belong in such a place.



# As You Read Shahid To Me

BY: JAGARI MUKHERJEE

*For Inam Hussain Mullick*

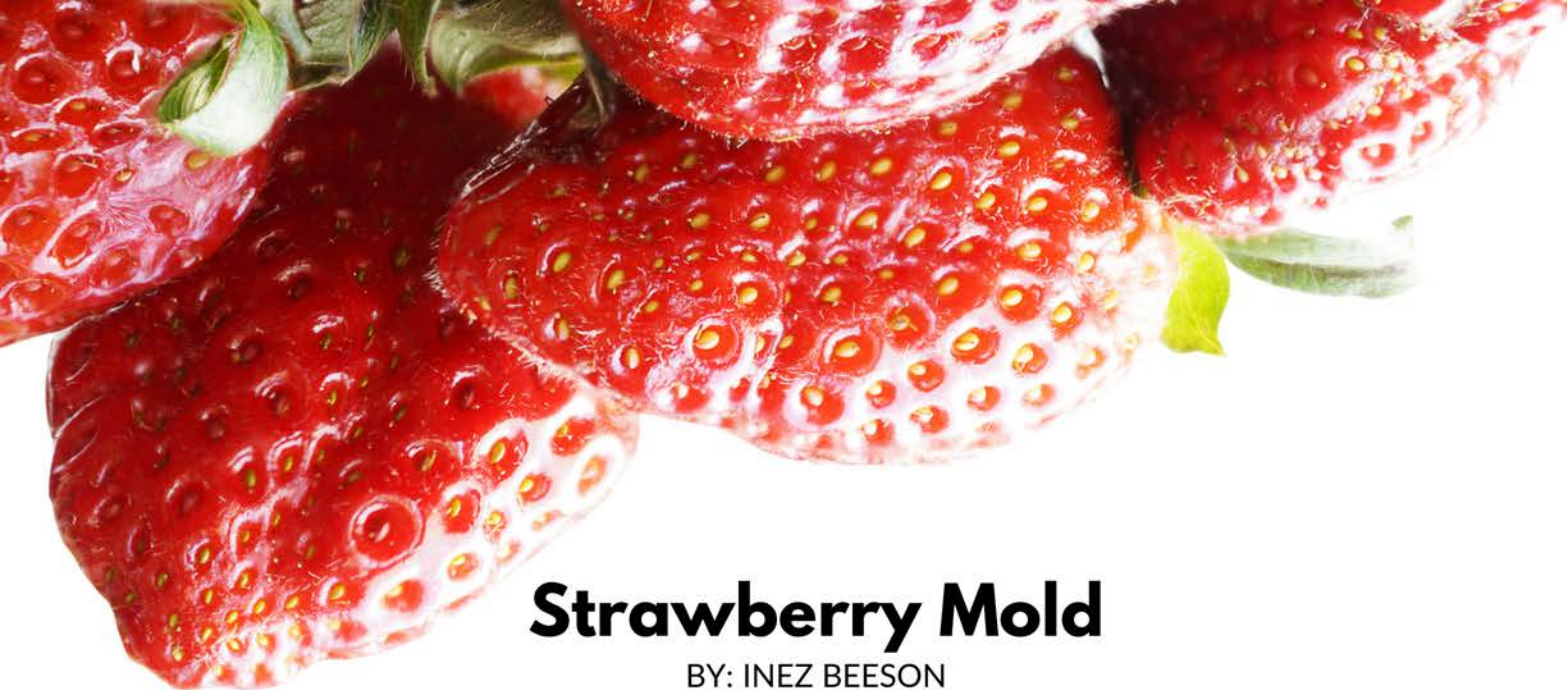
One winter evening  
listening to you read  
Shahid to me, I light a candle  
that smells of floral bouquets.  
There is no snow in the city.  
I, unwell in the absent frost,  
dream of your body's blanket  
as you feed me words  
like trees whose leaves turn  
emerald and onyx.

(I have no strength in my limbs.)  
I am yours to sketch in an old journal;  
you blend me in watercolors while  
the brushes mix gold and green  
to stir up shimmer—  
your Aphrodite, your concubine.  
Your woman of emerald and onyx.  
Your winter evening is where the sky  
is cold like Shahid's ice palace;  
you warm me like a fireplace  
of logs and ancient stone.  
I, reassured, sleep in the soft bed  
of your voice.

\*Note: Shahid - Celebrated Indian-American poet Agha Shahid Ali

**Jagari Mukherjee** is an award-winning poet and reviewer. She is the Founder and Managing Editor of EKL Review





# Strawberry Mold

BY: INEZ BEESON

It's halfway to her lips before Margaret notices the mold, halfway out before she processes it. A shock of white on the side of a strawberry from the carton she'd just bought that morning. It resembles a child's crayon drawing, what was drawn now indecipherable where she'd bitten into the flesh. Maybe it had been a man, or an attempt at a knife.

"This strawberry has mold on it," she says, to no one in particular. No one in particular answers. It's 10:57 p.m. and people, most of them strangers, hover around the small secondhand television, watching with an intensely practiced inattentiveness. Soon the ball will drop (or lower, as Margaret had once pointed out to Richard, who had rolled his eyes and told her not to be picky), but for now drinks slosh and laughter festers. She picks up a cocktail napkin and carefully prepares the fruit for burial. Happy New Years', reads the shroud.

Richard is in the kitchen when she walks in, his arms moving as he tells a raucous story to a crowd of ruddy-faced listeners. With a dull surprise, she recognizes it as her own: the time her mother had left her behind at a Wal-Mart, on purpose, to teach her a lesson. Something about gratitude. She was eleven. The clang of the trash can lid as she throws out the strawberry neatly echoes the clang of the shopping cart that night as her mother slammed it into the corral.

He grins when he sees her, moving out of the way so she can wash her hands.

"You finish the story, Margaret. You tell it so much better than me." This is largely because it is not a story she made for telling, but she swallows. That doesn't matter now. Her confessions somehow always became his party favors, and if she wanted this one to be otherwise, she should have thought of it earlier. The old clock in the hallway strikes eleven. Too late now.

She turns around and purses her lips. "As if you'd give up the spotlight." He's wearing the turtleneck she loves, beige and elegant, although now there's a suggestion of spilled red wine on his chest. His wire-rimmed glasses have been replaced by a cheap novelty pair, the filmy lenses awkwardly jammed into the upcoming year. The more time goes on, the less it makes sense to Margaret that everyone was still trying to force such a stupid gimmick to work. "Is it bad I just ate a moldy strawberry?"

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"Oh, dear God," he says, crossing himself solemnly. "You're done for." Once again this earns a laugh.

"Did you swallow it?" asks a woman from Richard's office, whose name she can never remember. "Because if you just bit it you mi—"

"You'll be fine. You might not fee—"

"Why would you eat it if it wasn't go—"

"Wait, finish the story, I don't get it," cuts in her college roommate. "Was your mom just crazy, or like, drunk, or what?"

"It's complicated," says Margaret.

"Let's hope whatever it is, it isn't genetic," says Richard.

She rolls her eyes and gives him her most polished laugh, irritated yet graceful yet casual, making a show of shoving his shoulder when she scoots by him. It works as intended, the conversation continuing without stress fractures. As she leaves the kitchen, she hears someone ask Richard how they first met. Her stomach begins to churn.

By the time the ball has begun its maddeningly slow descent, Margaret cannot wait any longer. The roar of the frenzied countdown grows dimmer and dimmer as she escapes into the bathroom, locks the door, lifts up the lid, kneels over the rim.

Nothing happens. Her insides roil and writhe, but the retching she'd assumed would start when she felt the cool tile on her knees does not come. She imagines it as she stares at the water, convinces herself it's only a matter of seconds. For a half-moment she considers forcing it, but the idea is too unpleasant, and she blanches at the thought of following through.

It's the mold, she's sure of it. Margaret shivers as she hears the muffled bassline of celebration, billowing against the door like smoke. It's the mold and it will have to come out of her eventually, but for now she sits and she breathes, eyes shut tight. The ache even a small rot can cause is impressive.

Knuckles rap on the door, so much closer than the rumbling of the party that she jumps. "Honey? Are you all right?"

She imagines Richard, his head tilted towards the knob, not merely ready to burst in but relishing in the possibility of such high drama. It would be a great story for next New Year's.

"I'm fine." Her voice rings off the porcelain. "You sure?"

Maybe she will throw up. She wonders what he would do if he actually came in, if he remembers when she told him about her mother if she'll still feel like this tomorrow.

"Yes," she answers. His receding footsteps meld with the party quicker than anticipated. She loved strawberries.



**Inez Beeson** is a recent college graduate, currently living in Massachusetts with her family but mostly with her two dogs. She works as a freelance writer. When not hunched over her laptop, she can be found eating blackberries or taking photos of skylines.

# Claus on Vacation



**Illustration: Bianca Paladin.** Architect, born in Brazil, self-taught watercolor artist.

# Beach Feast

BY: EMILY DEXTER

Let's gorge ourselves on ocean waves  
That gleam like Jell-O, and on leftover  
Chocolate cake straight from the Tupperware.  
Give us salt air, and clouds scattered soft  
As powdered sugar. Give us watermelon,  
A wet dripping slice, and we'll fly our  
Kites whose colors outshine the sunset.  
We'll drive our stakes deep into sand,  
And pitch our screen tents—you know  
The ones, with magnets on the doors  
To keep the insects out. Let's stay there  
In the shade, or bask in the honeyed warmth  
Until our skin wears stripes like Neopolitan.  
Then we can catch each star as it appears,  
Rearrange the sky like we're frosting  
Gingerbread men. We'll set their buttons  
In a line, and craft queerer constellations.  
Later we can blaze our brightest lights,  
And spot the crabs skittering between  
The stones; let's lure them out, with all  
The sugary cereals our moms never  
Bought us when we were young. Give us  
The sand between our toes, the echo  
Of the gulls, and plate after plate of whatever  
They've denied us. Give us strawberries  
Dipped in caramel; give us moonlight  
Marshmallow-drenched. Let us have this  
One night, this place we can call our own.

**Emily Dexter** is an undergraduate student pursuing English and writing degrees from Indiana Wesleyan University. She is an aspiring writer with a passion for poetry and short fiction.



# Helen's Boutique For Modern Ladies

BY: ZACK TAFT

The dress shop is called 'Helen's'. Though its display windows faced the street, its entrance was almost hidden in an alleyway, some thirty feet from the street, unseen by passersby, with its single door closed. The owner is a seventy-eight-year-old grandmother who sits alone at an old metal desk located in the back of the showroom.

It was there she kept her old sewing machine, which she used for brief spells until her hands began to ache. This little desk is her home from seven in the morning until just before dark in the evening. She hasn't sold anything in over thirty years. The dresses, handbags, belts, slippers, pantsuits, costume jewelry, all of her outdated and faded inventory remained in the same exact displays as when they were first placed. Her last visitors were gypsies coming to steal from her. She chased them away with a broom which she still kept beside her chair.

She enjoyed sitting behind the large desk. It was perfect for cutting fabric and belonged to her husband when he was still alive. Under its glass top were several pictures of her as a young woman. One of them showed her standing in front of her shop when it was first opened. She was smiling as the mannequins dressed in their best finery looked down upon her through the display window.

In this picture, there was a reflection in the glass of a slim handsome man wearing a hat and holding a camera to his eye. This was her favorite photograph and the only one she had of the man she had spent so many years with. She often glanced at it as she fastened under the single bulb which hung on a wire above her head.

At the end of a narrow dark hallway—where the ceiling is warped and the walls are covered with peeling paper, where no one ever goes and nothing ever stirs except an occasional rat or mouse—is the door to the back alley. People live in the alleyway. She believes they are inmates of a compound of some sort and they are her closest companions, though she has never seen them.

Sometimes someone knocks on the back door. She hears the knocks, gets up from her chair, dragging some fabric with her (as a child might), and places her ear to the door, whispering, "Who's there? Who's there?"

Maybe it is someone I know', she sometimes considers. An old companion, someone who knew her sister when she was alive, or an old school friend coming to pay a visit.

No one ever answers her inquiries. Eventually, the knocking stops and she returns to her seat at the desk.

---

She thinks maybe they are just accidental things, these knocks. The result of someone in deep discussion with another, leaning with their elbow against the door, so lost in conversation that they do not realize that they might be disturbing another or that there is a door behind them at all.

Or maybe, she imagines out of politeness, they are hoping to include her in their little talks, knocking on her door as a signal that this little dialogue might be of interest to her; hinting with their gentle knocks that she is welcome to open the door, step out into the sun and join them. Maybe they aren't knocks at all, just the movement of the wind or the rain, or the scratching of animals—cats, or dogs, or even rats—trying to break into her store for food. She listens for a while, then picks up her cloth blanket and returns to her chair.

The truth is, she is seldom sure she hears these knocks, and when she does, she mostly ignores them.

She sits at her desk again, looking at the fabric draped over her sewing machine falling in a cascade to the floor and spreading out before her feet like it was being poured from a bottle. The old timepiece on the wall chimed. It is twelve o'clock. She pulled the photograph out from under the glass top. She smiled to herself, adjusted her glasses, and held it close to her face.

There was something she had never noticed before. Behind her in the picture, beside the reflection of her young husband, behind the window glass, and behind the blind eyes of the mannequins, was the gypsy woman standing inside the store.

Though younger and thinner, it was the same one she would see thirty years later on the day of the store's closing—the day after her husband had died—robbing the store of who knows what?

The gypsy's arms were draped in dangling jewelry and she was posing, dancing for the camera. She was smiling as if to say, 'Look at what I am about to steal from you,' as she held up a flowered hat that the old woman had purchased to sell in her store so many years ago.

At that moment, she heard a knock at the back door. This one was loud, as if someone was kicking it. Helen quickly gathered up the fabric in her arms and walked through the dark passageway to the door, pressing her ear to the cold metal.

"Who is it?" she whispered, barely moving her lips, still thinking about the gypsy woman who had been there on her first day and on her last.

"The gypsy stole everything she could, and danced inside my store without a sound or a worry," she said to herself. "And all of it...all of it... in just one day; my whole life has passed beneath the shadow of this one unknown gypsy woman."

That's when there was another knock at the door, louder and even more insistent.

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**Zack** is a wormhole traveler with extensive experience with hostile intergalactic lawyers from distant galaxies. Thus his reason for hiding out on this forsaken little planet.

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**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest book, "Leaves On Pages" is available through Amazon.

## Riding on the Red Line

Curious, these people drawn out  
of some commuter hat  
to fill all the available spaces.  
Odd, the faces and the bodies  
chosen by circumstance  
to share the red line  
from Downtown Crossing  
to Harvard Square with me.  
I'm by myself and yet, on either side,  
some students, nose rings  
wriggling to the jiggle of the rail,  
knocking against my knees,  
an older man with a beard,  
maybe a professor and  
a couple of tourists  
with heavily marked-up maps.  
Across from me is  
an intellectual type,  
head buried in Spinoza  
and a couple of black kids  
singing under their breath  
and a Spanish woman,  
and a man with a thick Russian accent  
talking to himself.  
The ones in my life  
are chosen deliberately  
compared to this.  
The lovers and the friends,  
I open my door very carefully,  
after much thought and feeling say,  
"Yes, you can ride this train."  
But every stop, some leaves,  
some more get on so randomly.  
Company is never this busy,  
never this loud.  
My solitude surprises me sometimes  
with the sheer number  
and variety of people  
who ride it.



"Expression is one of the necessities of human life as a cultural person, the internal reality of our spiritual life needs a channel so that we can achieve a healthy spiritual balance. The process of helping, asking, trying, reasoning, and presenting is an activation process that is objective in nature. By applying subjective internal reality with an objective approach, we are expected to gain valuable experiences, namely harmony between life and outer life. From this process of expression, it is hoped that our artistic potential will develop, and our works are tangible objects of what we hope for, want, and are definitely important documents for our psychological life."

-Yohanes Soubirius De Santo

# Playgrounds

BY: MELODY WANG

we hung upside down from bars worn  
with age and strangers' regrets—things  
we were not yet acquainted with

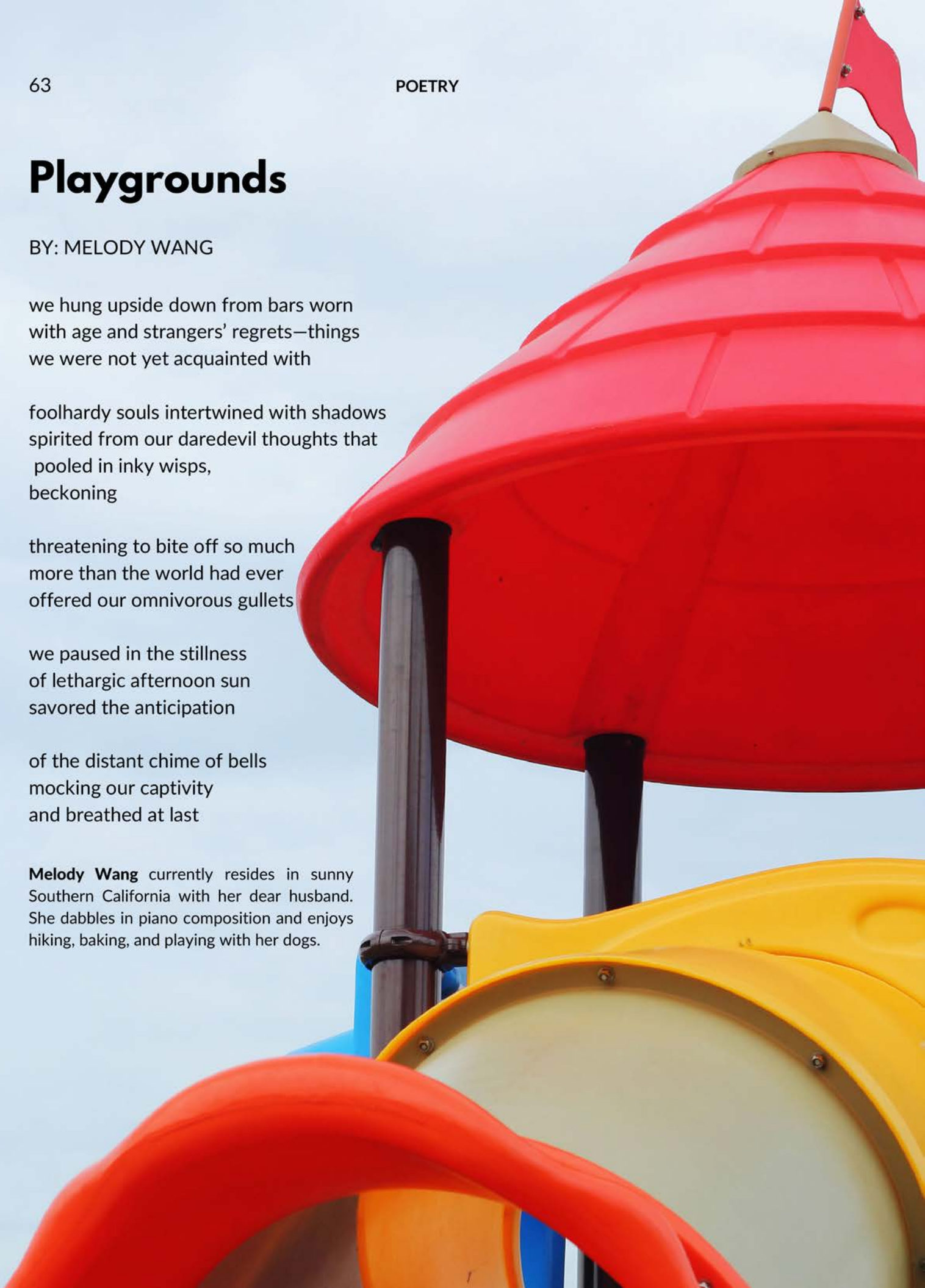
foolhardy souls intertwined with shadows  
spirited from our daredevil thoughts that  
pooled in inky wisps,  
beckoning

threatening to bite off so much  
more than the world had ever  
offered our omnivorous gullets

we paused in the stillness  
of lethargic afternoon sun  
savored the anticipation

of the distant chime of bells  
mocking our captivity  
and breathed at last

**Melody Wang** currently resides in sunny  
Southern California with her dear husband.  
She dabbles in piano composition and enjoys  
hiking, baking, and playing with her dogs.





# White Lights Mid-City

BY: JOHN LAMBREMONT, SR.

We stroll along the avenue  
Hands held in the winter wind  
In hopes of deals and bargains  
Tonight at the Merchants' Market held  
Each Thursday in December

Looking at price tag numbers  
I sense a pre-sale mark-up  
Gouging in the name of savings  
Have not mentioned this to the wife  
Try not to spoil her good time  
Smile and nod in agreement

My love's eyes reflect the white lights  
Iridescent like a child's mind  
Discovering new joys each Christmas

Can't help but feel contented  
In watching her buy sundries  
This night her wallet empties  
You can hear the registers ring

**John Lambremont, Sr.** is from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. John's poems have been published in many journals, including *Pacific Review*, *The Louisiana Review*, and *The Minetta Review*. John's collections include two published in 2018: "Old Blues, New Blues," by Pski's Porch Publishing, and "The Book Of Acrostics," by Truth Serum Press.

# Once a City

BY: FABRICE POUSSIN

I traveled through the old zone  
in the gown of former evenings  
thinking myself an amazon warrior.

Darkness prevailed in the early dawn  
held by the stronghold of mistaken dreams  
I walked against the storm on icy pavements.

Skeletons of ancient lives surrounded my breath  
trying to capture the essence of my breast  
threatening with their oozing darkness.

The ghosts of those distant pasts assaulted my bones  
trembling within the paleness of their fears  
ss the eyes of desolate murals spied upon my days.

I could see no glass in the broken visions  
only gaping memories of deathly sorrows  
appealing to my remaining hours for salvation.

I continued on the desert paths of the city  
seeking the beat of another life only  
to fall on my knees on the edge of an abyss.

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



Photography: Ana Chikovani

# Shadows

BY: EVA WAL

We don't need bears  
lingering at the poles or  
wandering through wooded  
mountains

Away with trees and their earthy claws  
The ground has not  
offered them any hold

Away with bees flowers' leaves  
We do not need them anymore!

We don't need morning dew

Through cloudless space  
tumble children  
stark naked

Skies augment  
revolving doors into nothingness

Humans are silhouettes  
shadows of the past

We don't need us anymore.

**Eva Wal** is a visual and multimedia artist as well as a poet and writer of short prose. In 2009 she published her first poetry collection "Marmorsee" (marble lake). Since she has lived in England for several years she also writes in English.





Photography: **Ana Chikovani**. 22 years-old photography lover from Georgia, Tbilisi. Taking photos feels like therapy for her. She feels indescribable calmness and comfortable solitude while capturing a beautiful moment. These captured moments then become her memories filled with the same feelings she felt back then.



## **A Bootleg Biography of Loneliness**

BY: MICHAEL BROCKLEY

You come from scorpion winters and the four hundred ninety synonyms for no. Late in the journey, you jettisoned confession in favor of a funhouse image of truth. What were the words you used to choose the love songs you wrote to Saint Rita? For decades, you traveled the backroads that led through Balbec. Through Bobo with its orchards of nomad fruit. Once attended a wedding in a one-church town with a widow who lived at the center of fog ice. After a year of persimmons and copycat valentines, the ghosts of runaways crossed your path as you steered through dreamless undergrounds. In your season, you stopped to watch Amish horses mate in their dawn pastures, and you chased snipes through the loblolly while feral pigs squealed in the culverts along I-27. Who else would read a poem hexed with solitude? Who else would eat the sins that adhere to arthritic bones? A Confederacy of Dunces lies dogeared in your lap. You wake up in a Believe It or Not diorama of the Last Supper among housewolves as astray as yourself.

## **Edward Hopper's Automat**

BY: MICHAEL BROCKLEY

A blue flame, a kitchen match just struck, flickers across the street from the automat. The half worlds of ceiling lights foray into the sky with its litmus of history that once was rain. Inside, a woman leans forward from an oak chair, her back turned against the cysts and moles of time. Against the bowl of apples, bananas and oranges decorating the counter behind her. She finishes a cup of coffee, lifting the white mug above its saucer in her bare right hand. An empty plate has been pushed to the center of the marble tabletop. As if she has eaten a cold sandwich. She crosses her bare legs for warmth. The chairs around her mist the room with the sour odor of people who have eaten alone for too many winters. The brim of her tan hat covers her dark eyes with purple shadow. The low neckline of a red party dress. Night fur collars and cuffs her green overcoat. No lipstick prints on the cup. The crumbs and napkins from the repast already removed. By the doorway, a gold-plated radiator casts a blue triangle on the unscuffed floor. An exit sign pointing east. Her left hand, gloved, curls as if concealing a coin. A key. The fragile color of hope.

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# An Oral History of the Apocalypse: The Highwayman

BY: MICHAEL BROCKLEY

I plot our ambushes in an abandoned church where sermons about who earned the right to throw stones hang over my shoulders. We steal our holdup maps from Chevy vans that ran out of gas along the ghost road where mausoleums and mansions have been reduced to salt. I learned my lesson about posting lookouts with myopic vision. About using too much dynamite. We waylay old men who cannot afford the loss of a lopsided egg. And widows who squawk over our interpretation of justice. Children envy us because we survived the death clouds with our hair. We who are their rough and hungry gods. Our Most-Wanted posters serve as coasters in saloons named for red-haired harlots. If we fire our bullets at the sun, we never risk the shame of missing what we aim at. All of us dance with fear. With loneliness. After our forays, I scratch future felonies in the dirt. Every path before me sidewinds through a landscape as cursed as Gomorrah. I wonder what phoenix lays the eggs we eat.

**Michael Brockley** is a retired school psychologist who lives in Muncie, Indiana. Recent poems have appeared in *The Thieving Magpie*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, and *the Spirit and Place Anthology: What Was and What Will Be*.

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**Illustration: Lois Bender.** As a lifelong New Yorker and artist, She focuses on Gardens and Nature in her work. Lois produced commercial designs under her brand GardenSpiritsNY Art & Design and teach art tools in Newark and the Hamptons. As the daughter of Flora Bloom, she inherited her mother's love of gardens and paints them.





Illustration: Ann Marie Sekeres

# Sick Headache

BY: THOMAS ELSON

Look closely.

You are where it began: a time before polio shots, seat belts, and television. A time when visitors entered houses through unlocked kitchen doors.

And, after all these years, is it as you remember?

It's early November, just past dusk. You stop at the corner two blocks east of a grand neighborhood concealed by trees. Look. On your left is the old basement house with dirt walls and next to it the two-story house of your grade school friend. But it's the house two doors down at 507 West Blaine you came to see, beige and weathered, one of the many shotgun houses thrown up at the end of World War II.

You park and, in an instant, you are inside—small and almost silent. A harsh light from the pole lamp casts a shadow across the living room with a divan, a chair, a clock, and you—a four-year-old child, still eager and open to the world—sitting on the floor next to the record player your mother bought and encourages you to use.

The two of you have just finished playing outside and now she kneels on the living room floor, inserting a new sapphire needle into the tip of the cumbersome, curved metal arm to replace the needle that skipped and scratched. She smiles, her face opening as she refocuses your question, then she answers and strokes your upper back. This evening she also brought home a few spoken word records, the big 78 rpm kind. You choose the one about Columbus that tells of his ships and his voyage.

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Then, as if on cue, your mother's eyes shoot toward the clock. She checks her watch, twists her wrist, then shakes it as if hoping for some misreading. Her eyes grow flat. You watch. She presses her right hand against her stomach. Her shoulders curl, once again her eyes lock onto the clock. She sways slightly and shrinks. Rising from the floor, she says nothing as she trudges toward the bedroom and closes the door.

Evenings weren't like this when you were a family of two.

Alone in the living room, you hear the kitchen door slam. Your father, recently discharged from the Army, traipses past without looking down. He glares at the closed bedroom door and opens it. You feel the shudder of door against frame.

Voices.

Silence.

Shouting.

You flinch.

Silence.

One or two loud shouts, then nothing.

You listen but hear only the wind, some creaks, and the record player. After a moment, the bedroom door opens. You tilt your head toward the hallway. Your left hand hovers over the arm of the record player as the narrative of Columbus' travels continues.

You look to your right. You see your father, partially hidden behind the bedroom doorway, with only his right hand and half his face visible.

"Turn it off. It bothers your mother. She has a sick headache."

**Thomas Elson's** short stories, poetry, and flash fiction have been published in numerous venues such as *Calliope*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Flora Fiction*, *Pinyon*, *Lunaris*, *New Ulster*, *Lampeter*, *Selkie*, and *Adelaide*. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

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## Living Still

BY: SAMANTHA MARTIN  
there is comfort in disruption—  
in having your heart torn out,  
taken away,  
no longer a bother.  
no more burning heat,  
confusion of choice,  
speed or lack.

you become more like a desert  
than a fire set to consume.

and you watch the grains of sand, these parts of you,  
timid on the slightest wind,  
and you watch so softly  
that you can hear their whistling,  
feel their raptures,  
their joy which flows from them  
as naturally as a cloud disappears once the rain slows

but in fact, they are not timid.  
in fact, you've nothing but heart left,  
nothing to do but live—

and revel in it  
even as you are upended.

and what better way to live  
than living still?



## simplicity

BY: SAMANTHA MARTIN

nothing yet understands itself  
and yet here we are.  
may gratitude be our fortress  
may we stop our worry  
and our tears.  
we ache for the unconscious things,  
the life-givers,  
the surfaces of time,  
hanging branches and fragrant fruits,  
that feeling when we drink your words.  
you didn't want to be then  
and you wouldn't want to be here,  
where these many mute eyes see us  
and are bewildered  
and are promptly snuffed out.  
so many things that a mind can understand—  
except itself.  
may we stop our worry  
and our tears.

**Samantha Martin** is a writer from Michigan. Her poetic meditations are experimental, abstract, and often surreal. She lives in Jakarta, Indonesia, with her partner and two cats.



**Illustration: Mélody Thomasson.** French paper collagist based in Berlin, she creates each artwork with a mix of vintage and contemporary magazines.



# That's All There Is

BY: E.H. DAVIS

I.

There's sadness in the world and blessed little joy.  
Happiness ripped from the maw of death,  
Skived in flesh, seared in memory  
Against the onslaught of Time -  
Aye, the mystery of Love.  
Is that all there is?

Here's a keepsake-memory of you my darling,  
Of a shared summer storm,  
You, I. twenty-year-olds.  
Thrilling to lightning and thunder  
Glimpsed from our sooted window  
Onto College Town circa 1969,  
Watching students zigzag for shelter from the deluge,  
Our smug eyes gleaming, bodies sweaty from love-making -  
One flesh, one mind, one soul...  
Forever.

It was the apotheosis of our love.  
Only sad to say, we knew it not  
But took it for granted.  
Aye, foolhardy youth,  
Not to vouchsafe the precious moments,  
As laired, entwined, we rose and fell  
Like quicksilver gods.

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II.

Dearest darling girl,  
 You who embodied all the treasures and dreams  
 I aspired to – gone – already three years?  
 Gone, forever, before I knew to say goodbye  
 That balmy summer's eve in the oh, oh, oh  
 Distant ache of youth.

Now, on another summer's eve  
 I stand before your grave,  
 Speechless and benumbed,  
 A stranger to the dusky green north  
 Where you spent our years apart,  
 While I roamed the world far and wide,  
 Restless... unfulfilled;  
 Ever ruing the road not taken,  
 Thinking all the while of you –  
 Of what might have been.

Aye, the world is a lonely place  
 Even in the throes of Life  
 Charged with the duties of marriage,  
 The fleeting joys of parenthood,  
 The rewards of work and career –  
 All are mixed with tears.

And what my "mighty pen" doth carve  
 In the tree of memory  
 Barks bittersweet –  
 Scarce relief for the pain of losing you,  
 Then – and now.

Love...  
 Captured –  
 Moldering like a scented handkerchief  
 In the bottom drawer –  
 No anodyne for the finality of death.

III.

In a sealed glassine bag  
 I keep a golden lock of your hair  
 Surrendered in romantic pique,  
 Never knowing it's all of you  
 I would live to cherish –  
 Preserved like a relic of old,  
 Redolent of you yet, imbued  
 With the power of resurrection.

Oh holy love, love, love,  
 I marvel still at your touch,  
 Sip at your cherry lips.  
 Aye, with my last breath  
 I call your name  
 Down the ragged runnels of time  
 And all Eternity, aye,  
 I call your name,  
 My Soul ...  
 And you will come.

Aye, for the mystery of Love –  
 That's all there is.

**E.H. Davis**, M.A. in Creative Writing, worked as a screenwriter, film reviewer, and editor in Los Angeles and Europe. His short stories, poems, and memoirs have appeared in online and print literary journals, a teleplay was produced in Germany, and his film reviews have appeared in *Magill's Cinema Annual*. He is the author of *My Wife's Husband: A Family Thriller* (Amazon).



Illustration: Mélody Thomasson

CAVIER  
DAVID

# Snowfall on Pine Ridge

BY: STEVE CARR

Wind rattles the sheet of plastic covering the broken window. Seated at the kitchen table, Ellen looks up from the coloring book in front of her and tries to remember the Lakota word for wind. It's on the tip of her tongue but she can't recall the word her mother taught her. As she does with anything that frustrates her, she gets angry. She looks down at the mostly colored in a picture of a little girl standing in a garden and holding a watering. She wishes she had a dress like the girl in the book, but she knows it does no good to wish for things. She makes a large x across the page with a dark blue crayon.

She gets up from the table and goes into the living room. She opens the front door just enough to peer out to see if Pansy has fallen drunk in the yard as she had done before. Cold air rushes in bringing color quickly to Ellen's pale brown cheeks. In the yard there are two crows fighting over a chicken bone that her mother tossed out before leaving for work.

"Kohn' gay," she says aloud, pleased that she remembers how to say crow.

Beyond the bare, rocky ground of the front yard lies the road leading into Pine Ridge and beyond that the rolling hills at the edge of the flat prairie. The dead prairie grass on the hills is beige and mustard yellow and covers the earth like a dreary carpet. The sky is dark gray with clouds so thick and heavy that they appear ready to fall to the ground.

She closes the door and sits on the sofa. The television no longer works and its screen stares at her like a blank, square eyeball. While pushing protruding stuffing back into a cushion through a rip in the cloth, she props her feet up on the rickety coffee table and stares at the top of her white moccasins. The bright red beads that had been sewn there are gone. Her mother has taught her how to sew. She knows the sewing basket is kept on the floor next to her mother's bed and that there are boxes of beads on the floor in her mother's closet, but she leans back and closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep quickly.

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The banging of a loose piece of aluminum siding reverberates through the trailer. Ellen wakes with a start, thinking it's Pansy knocking on the door but then quickly realizes it wouldn't be Pansy arriving at last. She has a key and never knocks.

"Never answer the door while I'm not here," her mother told her many times.

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Realizing what's causing the sound, she gets up from the sofa and returns to the kitchen. At the kitchen table, she stares at the big blue x across the page in the coloring book. She gets back in the chair and flips through the pages. Most have been colored, either by her or whoever owned the book before her mother bought it for her at the thrift shop. The edges of the pages have turned yellow and several of them are ripped. She stops at the page where a woman is standing at a cash register. Her mother does the same thing at the local grocery store. Ellen doesn't know the Lakota word for the cashier. It remains uncolored.

When she hears the front door open she jumps up from the table and hides in the broom closet, just as her mother told her to do.

"It's me," Pansy calls out as she closes the door.

Ellen comes out of the closet and is standing with her arms crossed when Pansy comes into the kitchen.

"You're late again," Ellen says. "I thought you got drunk and forgot about me."

"I'm not drunk. That only happened once. My car wouldn't start so I had to walk here," Pansy says. "But don't tell your mom I was late. She wouldn't let me babysit you anymore."

"I'm not an oke-shee-chah'-lah, I'm five years old. I'll be going to school next year."

Pansy takes off her gloves and coat and places them on a chair. "I know you're not a baby," she says. "Your Lakota is improving. Not everyone on the reservation knows the old form of Lakota but it's good that you're mom is teaching you how to speak it. It's important that we hold onto our traditions."

"I forget words sometimes," Ellen says.

Pansy opens the refrigerator and pulls out a plate covered with aluminum foil. She places it on the sink draining board and removes the foil. "Frybread and chicken," she says. "Sit down and we can have lunch and you can tell me about your morning."

Ellen sits in her chair and closes the coloring book. As Pansy places a dish of fry bread and chicken in front of her, Ellen says, "I took a nap and had a dream I was an eagle."

\*\*\*

Pansy lies stretched out on the sofa. She has her hand outstretched and plays with a strand of Ellen's long black hair as the girl sits cross-legged on the floor next to the sofa.

Ellen is writing her name on a torn brown paper bag. Ellen Hawk Wing is scrawled all over one side of the bag. She holds it up, showing it to Pansy. "I know the alphabet and numbers up to one hundred," she says. "Mom is teaching me."

"You're a very smart little girl," Pansy says. "You're going to grow up to be a great woman."

Ellen puts the bag aside and gets up and goes to the door. She opens it enough to gaze out at the landscape. A thin layer of snow blankets the ground, turning it white. Large flakes of snow are being blown sideways.

"Tah-tay," she says with a smile as the cold wind brushes her cheeks.

**Steve Carr**, from Richmond, Virginia, has had over 430 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews, and anthologies since June 2016. He has had seven collections of his short stories, *Sand*, *Rain*, *Heat*, *The Tales of Talker Knock* and *50 Short Stories: The Very Best of Steve Carr*, and *LGBTQ: 33 Stories*, and *The Theory of Existence: 50 Short Stories*, published. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice.



**Photography: Stephan Weixler.** He uses both digital and analog photography and, depending on the concept, different materials, and technique in his work. With his diploma (Linguistics) thesis he examined the communication of images in combination with language, using linguistic description methods. After completing his studies, he attended the Academy for Applied Photography in Graz.

# Cold, Cold, Cold

BY: JOHN LAMBREMONT, SR.

The icy arctic blast  
has gotten the best of me.

My fingers are icicles,  
my veins mini-glaciers;  
my thoughts are frozen,  
the flame of desire extinguished;  
my aching testicles shiver and want  
to crawl into my belly to hide  
and hibernate.

I long so to live  
in a place always temperate,  
but this state is my rock  
and my anchor,  
and here I stay, chained  
to changing seasons.

The sun sends down  
a wintry smile,  
the ineffectual snob  
of this day.



# Winter's Whispering

BY: MERVYN R. SEIVWRIGHT

Winter's stillness brings whispering  
winds without leaves as sails

whistling. Winter whispers  
quicken movements of field mice

not cuddled from cooling  
earth wandering for leftover grain. Winter

whispers ice forming as we sleep  
snuggled in heat warming

blankets, hot water bottles wishing  
not to wake for work. We whisper

in our morning bed wrestling  
eyes while listening to humming

whispers of the refrigerator, central  
heater's moans and our breaths.

Photography: Stephan Weixler







Photography: Brenna Rietmann

# By the Lake





**Photography: Mai Neko.** "Half anxiety, half coffee-fueled planning machine. Trying to navigate life between the need to be an observer and the wish to experience new things."

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# Love Catapults Me

BY: MARK HEATHCOTE

Love catapults me like a seed into the wind  
Here I am without feet, without roots  
Here I am jettisoned alone and yet entwined.  
But I know there are flowers in my hair.  
Yes violas' smiling with tints the shade of tears  
In the shape of a tiara ice-dried frozen in solitude.  
And know I wear your breath like a perfume  
Bathe in its condensed trembling dew.

Know that I am melting, that a shell is opening,  
That a fig-root is delving into your soul,  
That a camouflaged moth is crimsoning inside.  
First blush red-bronze then sticky honey gold.  
Then like a moonflower spun white  
Whirled around like a snowflake translucent  
I feel myself melting letting go  
Joined by a butterfly; all the colours of a rainbow.

Love catapults me to a waterfall—I surrender  
I do not leap to find another shore I just, fall  
Nor do I comet across the universe, the solar system,  
I am a salmon with no resistance, dancing silver  
Only to stay without feet, without roots another day.  
Maybe the wind will hold me in her shawl  
Take me to her bosom and never let me go  
Love catapults me to you, darling, that's all I know.

**Mark Andrew Heathcote** is adult learning difficulties support worker, his poetry has been published in many journals, magazines and anthologies, he resides in the UK, from Manchester, he is the author of *In Perpetuity* and *Back on Earth*, two poetry books published by the publishing group Creative Talents Unleashed (CTU).

# North-Country Night

BY: GREGORY LUCAS

Never forget, my love, how the glowing  
frost crystals, as blue as the mountain peaks,  
and the snow that fell from the Adirondack sky  
this winter night printed on the windows  
the flowers of our summers squandered.

And look, my love, at how the evergreens bend  
their branches, as if burdened by regrets,  
like they too know the sadness of lost time;  
see how their shadows lengthen through the night –  
trembling shadows, depictions of our fears.

Listen, listen to the utter stillness  
between gusts, between our breaths, between  
cries from out of the dark surrounding woodland  
which canopies the brooks that gushed silver  
and white during seasons we spent apart.

Wind seeps through the bedroom's cedar walls.  
We count every chime of the grandfather clock.  
Let the mysterious mingling of our dreams  
of what you and I might have been begin  
again, while drifts deepen in the wilderness.

**Gregory E. Lucas** writes fiction and poetry. His short stories and poems have appeared in magazines such as *Miller's Pond*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Horror Zine*, and *Blue Unicorn*.



**Samantha Lucchetta** is an emerging writer and photographer from Toronto, Canada. She recently graduated with a degree in Anthropology and Environmental Studies.

# If a Tree Falls and Only One Person Hears, Did It Really Happen: A Guessing Game

BY: KATHERINE YEH

Chittering and invasive were how she would have described the sound outside the window. At all hours, without any discernible pattern, the squeaking permeated her existence. She remembered when it first started— minutes after checking for messages on her phone with the same response three weeks in a row: none.

A sound like that isn't easily ignored. She heard it and knew she'd never heard it before. It resisted classification. She first likened it to the stutter of a broken motor as its cord revved to start, the motor never starting. But it was not of a metallic quality. She tried using earplugs when she slept, but the sound trickled in.

Just when she thought it stopped, she noticed it again. That's when it evolved, became more like a small rodent in its death throes as it is crushed by a feline adversary. She sympathized with their helplessness. Her search for the sound in the garden only turned up a garden gnome and the spade she lost last year. It is caked and faded. The tittering followed her to the grocery store, or she imagined it did. None of the other shoppers seemed to notice. She wondered at its persistence, as if her presence kept it alive, which couldn't possibly be true. Her therapist said it might exist only in her head, recommending meditation. Above the running water and chimes, the chitter continued. It elongated and slowed to match her breathing, but it did not stop. When her session ended, the sound increased in tempo. Her work suffered. Her eyes blurred from lack of sleep. A defined roundness circled her chin. Her mother admonished her eating habits, but in truth, she'd started eating at all hours because she could not sleep, and chewing drowned out the noise.

Eventually, she put the house on the market, saying goodbye to the cherry tomatoes she wouldn't have a chance to harvest. She found a place where someone was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They listed her limited freedoms. As long as someone would be there to tell her the noise wasn't real, she happily signed herself in.

**Katherine Yeh** is an MFA Candidate at Emerson College. Her flash stories have been published in *Blind Corner Lit* and *Boston Accent Lit*. She is working on a novel.

## Standing Still

Under the stars, Kiara was alive. She stared beyond herself, to the Gods. They often spoke to her through falling souls in the sky. It's been a while though, and her heart yearned. She needed faith more than ever. The world around her was crumbling and she no longer wanted to be apart of it.

She was a tortured soul who hid behind her waist-long hair like a curtain of safety. Between the destructive words left behind by her father and the reminisce of her own failure, she wanted nothing more than to disappear from the life she knew.

On such a night, the moon was hidden, yet the constellations still shined. Kiara wore jeans that had already lost their starch from overuse and under washing. A large sweatshirt engulfed her body, protecting it from the cold chill of a Winter night.

Kiara's feet sluggishly pulled her along the lonely trail that traveled to parallel the road crossing over St. John's river. She was alone, a few blocks from her house, standing on the same bridge she saw anglers fish regularly. With each step, she reminded herself of her worthlessness. From her menial office job to her failure to finish her novel-in-progress, there wasn't a point anymore.

An intermittent melody of lights and cars whooshed by. She succumbed to the negativity spiraling in her mind. The family she had known wasn't what she thought they were. Dad used her for fraud by abuse and coercion. Mom, so broken herself, was unable to protect her. Sisters, whom she considered her whole world, truly didn't know her as a person. The only thing consistent in her life was her husband, Guy.

He was sweet and unbelievably caring. He knew her favorite meals, favorite songs, and shows. He adorned her in the love she never received. Therefore, she didn't know what to do with it. Like an animal who had been abused for so long, when they finally get the love they deserve, they can't get enough. It'll never be enough. She wasn't enough.

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Kiara looked over the rail and down at the water. She researched from various sources that the most painful way to die is by drowning. The water fills the lungs. You choke and cough with no way to escape. It would be easier to fall to death, but that wouldn't be so pretty. She looked back at the stream of traffic behind her. Perhaps step in front of a moving vehicle, but then the driver would have to live with that.

The easiest, simplest way was to shoot herself, yet that scared her and the only gun they had was a pistol locked in the nightstand on her husband's side. What if she missed her brain and was still alive? Once, when she was in middle school, an ex-meth addict came to speak to the students. His face was deformed and scarred. He was high and shot himself from the bottom of his chin and somehow survived because the bullet went straight through. Kiara wouldn't want that to happen, so the best option would be to shoot herself in the heart, but then her brain would remain alive and she might regret it. It was quite a predicament.

A large gust of wind brushed through her profusely, scaring her. The cold December air numbed her. Guy was working late tonight to make more money for them both, to support her dream of being a writer. What a pain she must be to him.

"Kiara." Her name was called through the night sky, traveling through her. She kept her face forward.

"Kiara!" It repeated. She turns to face the direction in which her name was spoken. Guy ran toward her. His truck was parked halfway on the sidewalk next to the bridge. Traffic honked angrily despite him having hazard lights on.

"What are you doing?" He said. His voice was a beacon. She remained frozen until he caught her. His hands gripped her arms.

Kiara shrugged.

"Don't lie to me."

"I thought I've been getting better... Still, I get sad and it hurts too much. I've been sad for so long."

"That's normal to feel that way," He said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you," She replied.

"I want you to tell me every time you feel that way."

"Why?"

"So I can help you."

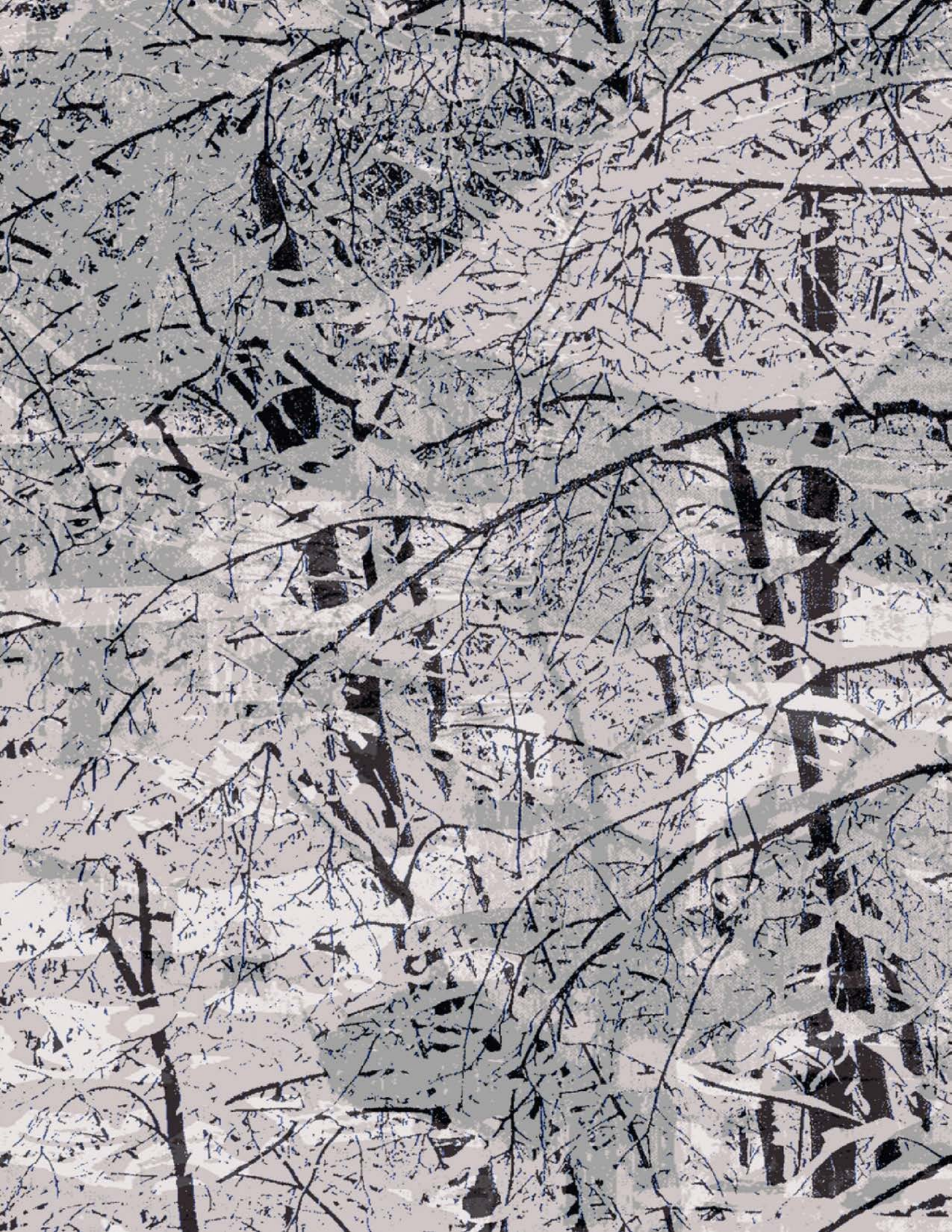
"Every time?"

"Every time."

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**Ashley Wilson** is a 26 year-old writer from St. Augustine, Florida. She graduated from University of Florida with a Bachelors in English.

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