



Assignment
literary magazine

Summer 2024
renewal

Assignment Literary Magazine

2015 - 2024

Summer 2024: *Renewal*

www.assignmentmag.com

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Assignment Literary Magazine is the official literary journal of the Mountainview Low-Residency M.F.A. at Southern New Hampshire University.

Mission Here at *Assignment Literary Magazine* we believe in the joy of creating and sharing art. Our editorial team is passionate about curating a platform that both celebrates and elevates literature and the diverse individuals who produce it. We are looking for literature that pushes the boundaries of excellence. We want work that makes you pull over the car because you have to get it out of you so quickly. The art that throbs in your chest and flashes across your vision like a daydream. We want work that hypnotizes us and floats back through our minds while we're folding laundry. Send us something that will change our minds, force our perspectives, or expand our vision. Send us something beautiful. Send us something ugly. Send us something raw. Send us something we can eat. Send us your best.

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Editor's Note

I was thrilled when my fellow editor, Lauren Rose, suggested *Renewal* as the theme for this issue. *Renewal* has been a major theme in my life over the last four years, and I suspect the term resonates with many of our readers. It also felt like a beautiful way to celebrate the shift from one editorial staff to another at *Assignment Literary Magazine*. There is a renewal each time our editors graduate from the Mountainview program and hand off the responsibility of the magazine to the incoming group of editors.

The theme of *Renewal* is vast, encompassing macro stories of healing, growth, and fresh starts, while also transporting us into micro stories of beautiful details noticed and unnoticed, and of opportunities seized or squandered. *Renewal* can be a rebirth, as of the phoenix rising from ashes, or it can be a shedding of skin, the process of leaving behind what is no longer needed.

The common theme that carries us through all the different definitions of *Renewal* is the resiliency of the individual. We are curious creatures, each on separate journeys that occasionally run parallel, cross briefly, or clash in unexpected ways. When selecting work for this issue, Lauren and I followed our hearts, searching for stories that made us feel new again.

The artists, poets, screenwriter, and writers featured in this issue represent the works that continued to glow in our psyches well after reading. May they light candles for each of our readers as well.

With Gratitude,



Savannah R. Danat

Well and Truly

By William Cass

The jury I was on had voted 11-1 for conviction four times over two days of deliberations before we finally agreed to send the judge a note saying we were unable to reach a unanimous verdict and were hopelessly deadlocked. Most of the other jurors seemed as surprised at the outcome as I imagined the judge and lawyers would be because the evidence in the case was pretty straightforward and overwhelming. The defendant, a young man in his early twenties, had been charged with operating a motor vehicle under the influence of marijuana. We'd heard testimony from the arresting officer and watched footage from his body cam confirming that the defendant had rolled through a red light making a right turn shortly after midnight the previous summer in a popular area of bars and nightclubs. After he was pulled over, the officer smelled a strong odor of burnt marijuana inside the car and observed the defendant brushing off flakes of what appeared to be grinded weed from the bottom of his T-shirt. When asked if he'd been smoking cannabis recently, the defendant admitted that he had "about an hour ago". He subsequently failed every field sobriety test, even pausing for over thirty seconds midway through the heel-toe walk while appearing to forget what he was supposed to do next. His red, glazed eyes had been dilated to an almost unheard-of eight millimeters, his pulse – taken twice at 15-minute intervals – was extremely elevated, his speech and responses were consistently slow and delayed, and he complained of being cold although the temperature at the time was almost 70 degrees. A toxicologist also testified that results from the defendant's blood draw were more than double the THC levels for moderate cannabis ingestion, which in her professional judgment clearly indicated impairment. The lead defense attorney, who seemed inexperienced and uncertain of himself throughout the trial, rested his case without calling a single witness.

The holdout for conviction was juror #8, a red-haired woman who I guessed to be about a half-dozen years younger than me, somewhere in her mid-fifties. She wore her curly hair in a non-fussy bob that she often tucked behind her ears, sometimes exposing a tiny butterfly tattoo under her left lobe; her manner of dress gave off a slightly bohemian vibe. She worked as an infusion center nurse and had a young adult son who she told us smoked marijuana regularly about whom she was clearly concerned. Her interpretation from the body cam footage of the interactions between the arresting officer and the defendant was that the officer had been authoritative, abrupt, and intimidating, resulting in understandable nervousness contributing to the defendant's poor performance on the field sobriety tests. She felt, too, that the defendant being cold was a mitigating factor at the time despite the mild temperature; she was always cold herself, she told us, and it affected how well she was able to perform tasks and concentrate. The fact that no scientifically accepted blood draw impairment level existed for cannabis, like the one for alcohol, provided another sticking point for her, as did what she saw as the articulate and respectful way the defendant conversed with the officer. Even when pressed in increasing intensity by the jury foreman, she remained steadfastly resolute on those points. She continued to contend in her soft-spoken but firm manner that they constituted for her plausible explanations for the defendant's test behavior and level of sobriety, and thus, did not meet the threshold for the prosecution's burden of proving guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt".

Just before our final jury room vote, she scanned the faces of the rest of us sitting around the table and paused when she came to me. I'd said the least of all the jurors, only

mumbling an occasional ascent or clarifying fact from my notes. She stared at me with something like curiosity until she asked, "So, what do you think?"

I met her eyes as evenly as I could, then said, "I agree with the others, in the totality of the evidence."

She gave a couple pensive nods, then continued scanning the remaining faces.

After declaring the mistrial, the judge released us from the jury box just before four o'clock, and I was sitting across a table from my wife for an early happy hour at one of our favorite patio restaurants forty-five minutes later. I felt relieved to be able to finally unburden myself to her about how the case and deliberations had unfolded, but she seemed distracted while I spoke and had little reaction to my ramblings. I understood why the next morning when I got out of the shower to find her sitting on the edge of our bed completely dressed, a small suitcase at her feet. She looked at me sadly for a long moment, then told me she admired and respected me but didn't love me anymore, that she'd become involved with a colleague at the non-profit where she worked, and that she was leaving to move in with him. I felt as if someone had slammed a two-by-four across my chest; I'd suspected nothing. Before I could utter a word, she was gone, and I stood with my towel dangling stupidly in front of me, vaguely aware of the sound of her car disappearing down the street. I was served with divorce papers three days later, and our final decree became official ten months after that. During proceedings we conducted entirely through our lawyers, mine told me my wife had indicated that she wanted only her freedom and for me to keep the house and everything else we owned mutually. She never even returned for the rest of her clothes, which just seemed at the time like further indignity.

~

It was fortunate she left during the summer when I was on break from my elementary school teaching position because I'd been in no shape to return to work afterwards. During that period, I felt like I was falling into a well that had no bottom and spent most of my time in a bewildered, aching daze. In late July, I finally made an appointment with my financial advisor who explained that, because of my accumulated years of teaching service and the fact that I'd recently reached age sixty-two and a half, I was eligible for full retirement with the state. So, I immediately completed paperwork formalizing that transition and called my principal to notify her of my decision.

Just to stay busy afterwards, I did some part-time grant writing for my former school district. But that petered out after the first year as I became more and more interested in an old woodworking hobby I resurrected that I'd begun in my youth with my grandfather. I began selling a few things at craft fairs and to the owner of a toy shop in town, a guy named Carl I'd struck up a friendship with who'd been the parent of one of my old students. I also started taking longer and longer walks each morning, spending at least a couple hours in the afternoons reading biographies I checked out from our local library, volunteering at a community garden, and following British detective series I discovered on public television in the evenings. I'd be lying if I said that the numbness and pain I felt that first summer dissipated quickly, but over the next several years, my life managed to rebuild a manageable, if unremarkable, rhythm, and one that had a modicum of purpose. Our adult daughter was busy at her overseas marketing job, only allowing her rare visits home, which she split between the two homes.

Things went along for me, and time, as I guess the saying goes, healed most wounds. One that remained at bay, however, was any inkling to risk getting involved with another woman. Carl chided me good-naturedly about that every now and then, even going so far

as offering a couple times to introduce me to one of his wife's single friends. Without exception, I deflected those friendly admonishments and suggestions until one day when I was dropping off some toy train sets I'd made, and he told me about the recent engagement of his brother-in-law.

"I guess he's about your age," Carl said. "Very nice guy. Wife died a few years ago. Afterwards, like yourself, he poo-pooed the idea of meeting someone new. But then he came across one of these dating websites where there are no photos involved – only profiles and email exchanges if mutual interest is established. He said that seemed a genuine way for people at his stage of life to connect, sight unseen, just written descriptions and communications. No initial opinions swayed by personal appearance."

"They have those kinds of websites?"

"Apparently, there are several. Plus, he says you can filter for location and whatever age range you want, which he felt was good for seniors like him..." Carl hesitated. "...And you. Anyway, he met someone that way, they dated for six months, and now they're engaged. I've never seen him happier."

I knew I was blinking.

"Just saying." He smiled and shrugged. "It worked for him. In case, you know, down the line you become curious about something like that."

He nodded, a gesture I didn't return. I watched him carry my box of train sets through a curtain into his back room. Despite my efforts otherwise, I found myself thinking with chagrin again about losing the last of my hair and putting on those extra pounds over the past few years. I ruminated for another couple minutes while he rummaged around in back before I pushed outside through the shop's tinkling doors into the warm sunshine.

~

I did nothing about my conversation with Carl until that fall, which was unusually rainy. The weather curtailed my daily walks and community garden work, creating more idle time inside which I largely spent surfing the web to avoid the house's silence that seemed to fairly scream. A dark November afternoon finally came when my aging reflection stared forlornly back at me from my study window, and I typed the words "dating websites without pictures" into the search bar on my laptop. Several choices appeared on the screen. I chose one at random, joined quickly before I could consider further, filtered for my locality and an age range within a decade younger than me, and began scrolling through possible matches.

To my surprise, after only a half-hour, I'd come across three that sounded reasonably promising. All involved women who were divorced like me and seemed reserved or unpretentious by nature, as well as somehow gentle or kind. I regarded my grim reflection in the window again, acknowledged its utter aloneness, and asked it, "What the hell do you have to lose?"

As quickly as I'd joined the site, I completed steps to initiate contact with the three women, then went for a long walk while there was a break in the rain. When I returned, a reply of mutual interest was already waiting for me in my inbox from one of the women. We immediately exchanged a few more guarded but pleasant messages, and before I truly had a handle on what was happening, we'd arranged to meet for coffee the following morning at a cafe she frequented in her neighborhood. I powered down my laptop, regarded the uncertain smile that creased my lips in the window's reflection, and swallowed.

~

It was misting lightly the next morning when I left. I'd changed sweaters three times

before deciding on one that seemed to go passably with the brown jacket I said I'd be wearing to help her identify me. She wrote that she'd be dressed in a green fleece with a matching tam and suggested that whoever arrived first try to secure a table in front of the window to help further in finding each other.

I arrived at the café fifteen minutes early. It was small and nearly deserted, with only one other customer, a young man reading a newspaper and drinking something frothy from a straw on a couch near the far wall. I sat at a table in the center of the bay window, ordered coffee from the waitress and added cream when she brought it. Classical music played very faintly from speakers hidden somewhere. I turned the steaming mug in my hand, tapped my foot, and looked outside into the mist. The place was warm enough that condensation rimmed the window. I adjusted my collar, then lowered my palm to my chest, and whispered, "Will you please stop?"

Just after ten, a woman pushed through the front door, bent to collapse her umbrella, turned my way, and smiled in her green fleece and cap. I stood and did my best to smile, too.

"Gene?" she asked.

I nodded. "You must be Helen." I gestured to the chair across from me and said, "Please."

In measured movements, she leaned her umbrella against the table, settled herself into the chair, and took off her cap revealing a mix of short, grayish-auburn curls. It wasn't until she turned to the left and raised a finger to the waitress that I noticed the tiny butterfly tattoo behind her ear. A jolt shot through me, and I sucked in my breath.

She looked back at me with a slight frown. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm...it's just..." I shook my head. "You're juror #8."

She stared at me, recognition slowly filling her face. Finally, she shook her own head, laughed once, and said, "I remember you."

"What are the chances?"

"No idea. Slim to none, I bet."

"What was that...four years ago now?"

"Five, I believe."

The waitress brought a cup of tea to the table and set it down in front of Helen. "Perfect, Leslie," Helen told her. When she'd gone away, Helen turned back to me, smiled quietly again, and said, "You know, I still think about that case from time to time."

"Me, too."

"You suppose the prosecution re-tried it?"

I felt my shoulders sag and shrugged.

"I hope not," she said. "I really do."

I watched her take a tentative sip from her cup. She kept the bag in as I did; I liked that.

"For whatever it's worth," I said, "I admire how you stuck to your principles during those deliberations. That must have been hard."

"Not really." She shrugged herself. "I believed what I believed."

I nodded slowly. "I always wondered if you might have had a bad personal experience yourself with the police. Maybe when you were younger."

She gave a little snort and tucked a curl behind one ear. "Several, in fact. All at protests of one sort or another. In college." She paused. "Back when I did things like that."

I nodded some more, then we both sipped, until I said, "That jury foreman was kind

of rough on you. I thought he got pretty rude at the end, condescending, almost bullying.”

She cocked her head, then shook it. “We actually had some nice exchanges on breaks. Rode the elevator down together after the trial, and he said his daughter was about to graduate from nursing school and was interested in oncology. I told him I could try to set her up with an oncology practice I knew was hiring, he got excited, and we exchanged cell numbers.”

“No kidding.”

“Nope, and I did set up that meeting. I believe she got the job because he texted me a few weeks later with a thanks in all caps and a string of celebration emojis. So...yeah.”

I said, “How about that.” Along with the weariness I’d seen in her eyes during deliberations, I noticed a tenderness there now that I hadn’t before. I asked, “How’s your own son doing these days?”

Her brow furrowed, and she sighed. “Better now...since he got out of rehab. Thanks for asking. Been sober for over a year. Has a good job in IT.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“You have kids?”

“A daughter. She works in Europe, so I don’t get to see her much.”

“I’m sorry.” She regarded me. “You miss her, don’t you?”

A sudden heat rose behind my eyes. I said, “I do.”

“Our children,” Helen said softly. “Always our children.”

“Yes.”

We both nodded, our gazes lingering. The young man from the couch walked past us and out of the café. A voice chuckled in the kitchen, and another answered in kind.

“So,” Helen said. She tugged another curl behind an ear. “You do this a lot? Go on dates or whatever this is?”

“Never. First time in five years, since my ex-wife left. You?”

“Same.”

Her eyes lowered to her cup. Like me, she’d aged a little, thickened some, but that was all right. It didn’t matter to me a bit.”

I heard myself say, “Think you’ll keep doing it?”

She looked up at me. “If you want to, sure.”

It wasn’t exactly what I’d asked, but I let that go and smiled. So did she. She sipped, and I followed suit.

Golden Shovel [Don't Hesitate]

By Jade Silva

“Joy is not made to be a crumb.” - Mary Oliver

Where do you feel joy
in your body? Does affection land like an arrow on the target of your gaze? Is
it simpler than that? Do the clichés at once become enough? I do not
mean to complicate things, but I think I was made
to. I was formed by the rough touch of calloused hands against tender skin. To
be myself is to be
too aware of that. In the womb, I was kept alive by a
fatigued heart, forever following the trail of a dropped crumb.

Conewango Creek

By John Brantingham

The creek swells after a rain, and I think back to how we used to make paper boats and then bet on whose would last longest before sinking or getting tangled in the reed on shore. We'd always lose track of whose was whose and then a couple would pass out of sight. I'd imagine them making it to the river, and then I didn't know where.

I think about them now, those boats that never sank as far as I could see. They are still floating somewhere in the ocean, and I am still setting them off to sea.

POSTCARD XII.

By Nicole Bethune

I love the feeling of the river rushing
around my ankles the stones rolling
beneath my feet picture them polished
polishing each other running beneath fish
who are also running their once-a-year sprint
flip turn flash a stripe a speckled side
the water is cold but the air is warm and
there's an osprey hovering gliding plunging
between her talons, flesh
between her wings, air.

Happiness Hides in Trees

By Annika Connor



Frog Monologue

By Jade Silva

The pond's eager throat
funnels bugs
to it and leaves them there. My hop slows
to a walk.
I stroll alongside animal bones
once enclosed in the dirt, now exposed from the wash

of fresh rain. But still I wash
myself in the throat
of the pond. I swim deeper; I reach its bones.
My rumbling croak urges the bugs
down my throat. The water walks
in my mouth and back out. The dance of the current slows

to a waltz. The gust slows,
To a breeze, the air is still with a wash
of homemade lilac dye. I walk
out of the throat.
Stomach full of bugs,
my webbed feet get caught on old bones.

Sometimes the Hudson

By James B. Nicola

Sometimes the Hudson's silent as a lake
asleep beneath a windless, cloudless sky
as if to suage some inner, unknown ache

deep down. I may lean over, maybe make
a face when no one's watching, on the sly,
those times the Hudson's silent as a lake

or unmouthed whisper. Once, a single flake
of snow fell on "my" nose—like a white fly,
but to assuage some inner, unknown ache

I hadn't noticed, not to flit and take
delight in torment. I could not say why,
but then the Hudson, silent as a lake

yet semi-sentient, bade me, *Put a brake
on, Friend.* Her surface, supple as a sigh,
seemed half-aware of some deep, unknown ache.

The flake dissolved and soon I snapped awake,
though held by my reflection, still. And I,
assuaged a bit from all the inner ache,
stayed silent as the Hudson, or a lake.

Komorebi

By Jeff Newberry

From the Japanese (木漏れ日), meaning the way shadows and light interweave when sunlight shines through trees.

When his mother drives, the boy imagines a man jumping between the long shadows cast by pine trees. His father smokes, alone in his passenger seat, a can of beer between his legs. A preacher told him in the father's house, there are many mansions. Do they smell like smoke? His mother swerves to miss a carrion bird pecking road kill. "Watch what you're doing," his father says.

His father's smoke stings his eyes. Tears come and he hides them. The shadow man outside leaps tree to tree, his destination unknown. His father reaches behind the seat and pulls another beer. "Hiss" goes the can. "Are you crying?" the father says and points. "Watch yourself," he says. The pass houses the boy imagines as mansions of gold. His mother swerves when his father shouts.

In the passenger seat, a life away, a son will sit and watch the father the boy becomes. The air will smell like woodsmoke. The drive a street packed with pines, where shadows cast by million-dollar mansions promise wealth. "Watch how the light glimmers," he will say and point to a yard fountain, foaming like a beer can. He guides the boy's hand over to steer. Their shadows melt into each other on the car dashboard.



My First Word Wasn't Mother

By Evgeniya Dineva

We saw *La sociedad de la nieve*
and Ellie kept asking why I was smiling.
It was during the scene where
the survivors of the crash start eating the bodies
of the ones who are no longer breathing.
I decided it might be better for me to
travel all those miles back,
dig my fingers
in the frozen ground of my once-home
and swallow my mother's words.
Maybe that's how she'll go on living.
Maybe that's how I'll go on living.

We Should Talk About Your Wedding

By Erin Jamieson

One of the last phone calls leading up to the wedding you admitted you didn't know what to do--though it had become increasingly apparent you were considering breaking off the engagement.

What do you think would be best for you?

I don't want to hurt anyone, you told me. At that time I'd interpreted it as not wanting to hurt her, but now I think you meant any of us.

But do you love her?

The weekend of the wedding was, in fact, the week of Halloween. I was passing out candy at home with Mom and Dad; at least these were kids who knew Mom from subbing and had no idea how old I was.

For all they knew, I could have still been in high school. We passed out our usual assortment: mini Hershey's; Starbursts; Butterfingers, that sort of thing. A lot of chocolate, come to think of it. There was a steady if not packed trail of trick or treaters. Dad decided to go outside with one of those soccer chairs and for a while hold Chloe—the kids loved her—until she got really squirmy like she always gets and I took her back inside with her little pumpkin sweater on.

I was listening to strange music that I guess was supposed to pass for Halloween music when the door swung open.

Now I was pretty sure I'd just seen Dad sitting outside in his soccer chair, and Mom was in the family room, watching some weird Halloween special she kept calling weird but didn't bother to turn off.

And then, amazingly, I saw it was you.

Even though you lived two and a half hours away at the time.

What's going on? Mom jumped a little too. *What are you doing?*

You set your wallet down with a thud; sank into a kitchen chair.

Is everything okay? I asked.

I drove here from work.

For once Mom and I were on the same page, utterly complexed; we exchanged glances.

Why did you come here? Did you tell anyone? Mom sounded oddly calm. But I knew she meant your then-fiancee.

I just drove, you said, as if that explained everything.

But did you tell anyone?

I left a note. You seemed oddly ebullient, more full of life than I'd heard you for months. You stood up and started looking in our cupboard. *Have any snacks? I never ate.*

I rolled my eyes—of course you'd worry about that before explaining what was going on—but Mom pulled out leftovers, a loaf of sourdough. *Do you need something to drink too?*

The front door opened a second time and this time it was Dad, his cheeks windburnt from being out there without a heater. *What's going on?*

I'm making some food for him. Do you need anything?

What brought you here? Dad asked.

I wrote a note and I just started driving.

That's when I noticed your cat. He'd started prowling around the kitchen, taking cautious steps, but Chloe found him, bounded for him like he was her lifelong friend—to be fair, they used to play when he was younger, but now he's no longer a kitten he's increasingly taken less and less kindly to Chloe's rambunctious running and wrestling.

I opened a can of tuna at Mom's prompting and man did your cat love that, but I guess

what cat wouldn't?

What kind of note did you leave?

You wouldn't answer immediately; instead you snacked on cheese and crackers and grapes. Mom heated up some mushroom chicken.

I'm not going through with it, you said finally.

It was the first time I thought that Mom was speechless. All of us were.

When did you decide this? Dad asked.

After work.

You were unshaven and your dress shirt was wrinkled, and now, with a spot of mushroom and chicken drippings on the collar. But Mom was too stunned to make a comment.

Your wedding is on Saturday, I said finally, looking up from my manuscript I'd half heartedly tried to get my daily writing in. *Two days from now.*

You looked away; the excitement in your choice flickered like a candle being snuffed. Your voice now sounded as though it was covered with cotton

You really aren't going to get married? I asked.

You need to cancel things, Mom said, tearing out a sheet of notebook paper and starting to write before Dad or I could process what was happening. *What did you hire? A caterer?*

I'll take care of that tomorrow, you said, waving aside her list.

No you won't. You're already going to have fees, I don't even know if you cancel most of this.

I know, I just—you rubbed your temple. I don't want to think about it yet tonight.

You made that decision when you took this long to cancel.

I wanted to talk to you alone, ask how you'd finally decided to cancel the wedding, though it seemed as though you'd been headed towards this for a while.

Still.

I thought of her coming to your apartment, to a hastily scrawled note. I don't think I can even now imagine how that would feel and even though it seemed finally like you were doing what you thought best all along, there was no denying the time was rough, to say the least. You should have told her, especially since you lived together.

Mom started to list things you needed to cancel: the DJ; the venue itself; the wedding officiant. You luckily hadn't gone with other things many people did, like a full bar or limo services or a videographer, though you did have to cancel a photographer. For food, you'd opted to order from a restaurant but with no official caterer and no servers. Most of your decorations were DYING.

Let's be honest: it was still a mess. In many ways.

You called up the DJ, who, miraculously, canceled without a fee. You called someone else too—maybe the photographer, but no matter how much Mom pressed, she couldn't get you to do any more.

First thing the next morning, she said. And you need to figure out what you're doing, because she's still in your place.

You didn't seem overly concerned about that; what did concern you were the phone calls. Over and over she called and left voicemails--crying, then increasingly angry. Her Mom called, using some choice words saying a Christian did not act like this, threatening to sue you for ten thousand dollars.

You had mutual friends call too. Or they were more your friends than hers, but apparently she'd called them. They told you to rethink this. They said they didn't want 'anyone to get hurt'. As if such a thing was still possible. They asked you to call her.

You kept answering their calls, even though Mom urged you not to. Any excitement or relief or whatever that original energy started to ebb. Eventually Mom took your phone and turned it off.

You need to tell her but you don't need to talk to everyone tonight.

I didn't mean to, you started to say, but whatever you didn't mean to do was not clear because you never finished that sentence.

I think it's best if you don't answer everyone's calls tonight, Dad said. But you do owe it to everyone, your guests, your wedding party too, to say what's going on.

You finished your glass of milk, looked out the foggy window at the night sky. With the flickering light Jack O'Lantern Dad carved and moved from the front window to the kitchen table, a part of you almost didn't look real, like you were a phantom image of yourself, a pixelated, glowing shadow.

In the morning you were gone.

Maybe he went to get something to eat, Dad suggested.

His cat is gone. And he's not answering his cell phone. She looked at both of us, searching. He didn't say anything to either of you?

We shook our heads, not in unison but almost.

Where did he go?

Mom, we don't know.

He seemed fine last night. He didn't say a word.

I thought back to the phone calls, the texts. Mom seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because she started punching numbers into her cell phone.

What are you doing? I asked.

Seeing if anyone knows what's going on.

But by then, you'd already left. By then, even though we didn't quite know it yet, you'd already made your decision.

We tried to get you to explain but you never would. Why you called it off- only to call it back on again. What changed overnight.

If this decision really made you—or her—happy.

If it felt like an obligation.

I made a mistake, you said over and over. I made a mistake.

I didn't go to your wedding. It sounds pretty awful when you say it like that but to be fair, I wasn't officially invited.

Do I regret not being there?

Maybe I should.

At the time it seemed like an impossible rupture for both of us; at the time it felt like that might be the end of our relationship.

I'm still not sure it wasn't.

The Cat

By Alexandra Shandrenko





J^o@n M!^r's Mannequin

By Ruth Towne

When the fish first walked
it was October. I never told.
I had been alone as one always seems to be
for such unreal wonders.
And it was just one fish
after all, not something more awful or concrete,
a Loch Ness Monster complete with flattened tail
and pearly scales, rising from its abyssal home
to drag me sunken under all
to its murky glory.

This was simply a fish with feet,
you would not believe how ordinary,
something even like a sunfish or slighter,
barely visible to me when it bathed in daylight,
warming up its blood under sunny waters.
But, I admit I knew it quickly,
the heart of this fish is half-chambered beside mine.
The blood of this fish runs cold.

So who ought I have told?
Who is qualified to hold this knowledge with me
without having seen it?
And who would believe me?
And if they believed, then—?
Wouldn't they take me away?
There are only so many places a person can go with me
on with those vestigial feet.

It seems the fish has no plans to leave me.
It follows along with its four small feet
each the size of a wet leaf
and leaving webbed prints I step in
again and again keeping my feet perpetually wet.

The fish has not slept.
Instead, it has been making
me a kind of ladder that leans between our worlds,
its and mine.
The fish wants me
to climb. I think it misses the like company of other fishes.
I think it wants to see what will happen to me
if I go with it.

I never thought I would live
with this fish at all, then so long.
Once, someone nearly caught me,
she was listening then with a net to her ear.
She detected visions of mine the fish influenced.
I never admitted
because I did not wish
to be, irrevocably, Fish-Girl,
which is an honorific one cannot lift once it fits.

And I have not been indifferent.
I have developed ways to coexist.
I can breathe through a wire
impossibly slim.
I fashioned a chamber with air to swim in.
Just as you do not know about the fish,
so, I have kept all this from the fish.

But the fish persists.
This has something to do with doing things over,
and the yearly greeting
to submarines still on patrol,
and how chalky drawings
of mermaids in mint and teal
fade in autumn rain.

So when it completes its ladder for me, finally,
the fish will be as bright as Christ
as he strides away waves on the Sea of Galilee,
and the fish will be foreknowing as Jonah
in the storm as he throws himself away into his great whale.
That will be its of saying,
Come back inside, come back inside.
Whether or not I want to follow, you understand,
the fish will insist,
wading there on four feet by its unfathomable ladder
that goes immortally lower.

The fish is with me, but I resist.
With my wire lifeline
and my umbilical and metal bell,
I resist. And I am admitting all this
because I want to outlive
the miracle fish.



The Problem

By Amita Basu

I'd asked him to come at 8:40 but he always turned up at 8:30, and rang me to tell me he'd arrived though I'd told him he didn't need to. I always planned to leave at 8:40 but it was generally 8:43 before I hurried downstairs. He was a careful driver: he slowed almost to a halt for speedbumps, and when he saw an old woman crossing, he slowed down and didn't even honk. I appreciated this. But sometimes it was 8:45 when I came down, and then I wanted him to rush. But, caught between safety and the need to be on time for biometric sign-in, I stayed silent. He'd drive faster, but not too fast. I was grateful. It's wonderful when people understand you wordlessly.

One day when I came down he wasn't there. I rang him. No answer. I hailed an auto from the autostand down the road. Later he told me he'd been delayed. I told him he should've rung me, and that naturally I'd deduct the fare I'd paid that morning from his monthly fare. He said he had turned up eventually, then said "Okay, madam." He was the softest-spoken autorickshaw-driver I'd met.

When I'd hired him, I'd asked him how much he wanted per month. He had several similar engagements, and he'd been driving autos for twenty years, so he'd know. Sitting on his driverseat, grasping the bikelike handles, his wide face cheerful under curly black hair, he'd merely looked away and mused, "Mmm." When I insisted on a reply he said, "Madam, you decide."

"Rs.1,500?" I'd suggested. That was about 10% more than the sum of the daily fares I'd have paid to drivers hailed ad hoc.

He hmmd again, his face looking troubled. Finally he said, "Madam, you sit now, later we can decide."

I hadn't wanted to leave the payment question hanging, but now I shelved it. It was convenient not having to walk to the autostand in the morning rush so, I decided, even if he wanted Rs.1600, that might be fine.

But when it was time to pay him at month's end, I paid him Rs.1,500 and he accepted, though I could see he wasn't happy. He never said anything, and he always showed up, so I stayed silent. He hadn't a long distance to drive to my place, and our journey was short, and if he wanted to come ten minutes before the stipulated time, that was his lookout, and if he wouldn't tell me how much he wanted, ditto. He kept coming. It was very convenient: I could pay him once a month instead of fiddling with cash or Google Pay with a new driver every day.

One morning his auto was there but he wasn't. I rang him. No answer. I waited, asked the security guards if they'd seen him, and stalked off towards the autostand. He caught up with me en route, apologising profusely from his auto, saying he'd gone to the bathroom. I got in but I didn't say, 'It's fine,' and I didn't ask 'Why don't you answer your phone?' because I never answered mine either.

Another morning neither he nor his auto was there. I rang; no answer; I rushed to the autostand. That afternoon he sent me a voice message saying his leg was troubling him. I hadn't noticed anything wrong with his leg, not that I'd been looking. He said he'd try to come next day. I began a list of how many days he'd missed.

Next day he didn't come. I didn't bother ringing him.

I got used to taking an auto from the stand. Often my driver was one particular raisin of a man, browned and wrinkled, whom I generally found sipping his tiny glass of tea at the tea-cum-stale-cake shop where autorickshaw drivers congregated. Paan spittle the colour of half-digested blood streaked the pavement and I had to manoeuvre delicately into the rickshaw. Cigarettes, paan, and tea were the drugs on which the drivers subsisted.

I had to leave home three minutes earlier to walk to the autostand, or, increasingly, towards the autostand to find the old man en route. At first he wasn't always there: he was out ferrying schoolchildren or on short-haul Ola rides. But soon I began finding him always outside the teashop, recognising first his navy-blue windcheater and then his licenseplate.

As long as he was there, no other autorickshaw driver else offered to drive me. If he didn't see me coming but the others did, they'd nudge him. He'd look up and hold up his teaglass, and I'd nod. He always finished his tea fast while I sat in his auto waiting.

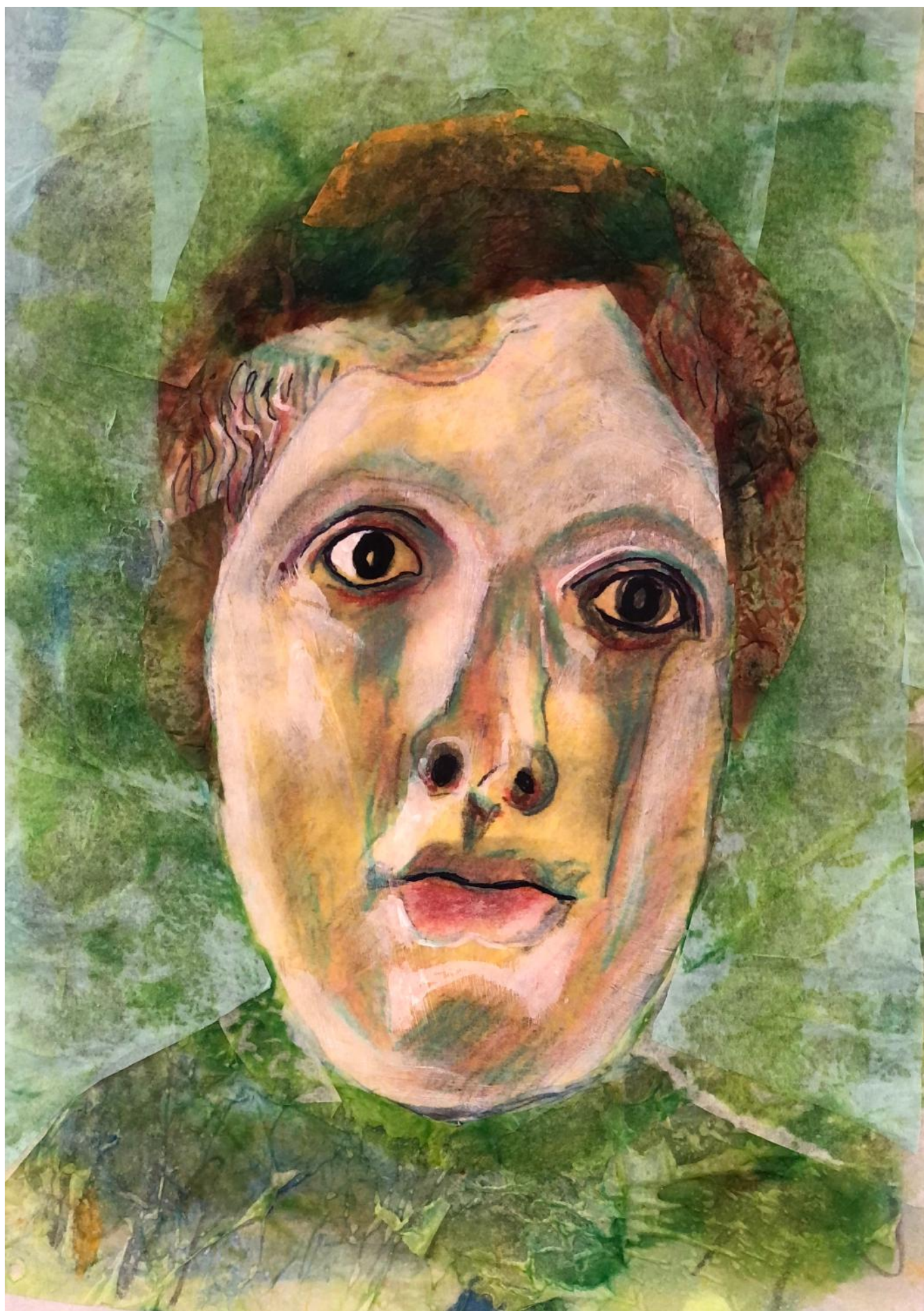
The middle-aged autorickshaw driver rang me one day to say his leg had recovered from whatever he'd had and he could come again. I declined.

While I'd had him, I'd overestimated the trouble of walking to the autostand. Now that I didn't have him, I couldn't imagine waiting every morning for him to appear, wondering if I should wait for him, try his number, or rush to the autostand. The teashop was two minutes away, and it was less expensive this way. Besides, nobody had to wait for anyone: if the old man and I were in the same place simultaneously, then we had a deal, and drove off wordlessly. I wasn't obliged to ring anyone if I was taking a holiday, and he wasn't obliged to avoid my calls for reasons unknown.

I never looked back to when I'd engaged an autorickshaw driver by the month – except on the rare days when the old man wasn't at the teashop. Then I had to proceed to the autostand. Sometimes there were no autos waiting. I waited for one to appear, consulting my watch ceaselessly, because I always cut the time fine.

The problem was if no autorickshaw drivers appeared, or if they demanded an excessive fare, or drove recklessly. Only then did I miss my curly-haired, soft-spoken, punctual, unreliable regular.

Helen 2
By GJ Gillespie





Somehow

By Anna Idelevich

Everything is somehow dark,
but blinded by the stars,
incompatible with oneself,
mirage-like,
I see in the powder compact
your face, my love,
you are inexplicable to me,
but I breathe you.

Clam Shells on Ground Tea Leaves

By Elaine Verdill



Wren

By Alex Stanley

Look at that bright piece of hope
tethered to your soul, little one.
You've never been told hope isn't in stories
from far off, long ago places,
but it is in the flight to them—early worms,
from the taste in your mother's mouth,
soft plumes, from the air that cradled you.
It retreats and grows as your song
vibrates with sun beams. It dips its feet
into cool ponds, and while you waited
for a call, life already changed.
You already know which way. You're already
ready to fly. So, keep your time. You don't need
any more, look at the receding sky.

Five Quatrains To My Author

By Zeid

The last time we met
A dagger penetrated my body.
An inch above my breast, you wrote
My screams pierced no one, you thought

I supposed you didn't need me
Any more; I was no help to the plot.
A string of characters put together
Abandoned without revision.

I bet you finished your novel in the sonnets
Without the merest whisper of my name
Not a shred of guilt for your creation
As I was forced into the *Darkness*

The *Darkness* sewed soothing words
Until they drowned my once-bright soul
Now I am longer than the sum of your sonnets
Whose octaves, sestets, and quatrains end

Please pick up your dagger to pierce me once more
To unmuffle the lyrics you dare not sing
To rebuild the stanzas you destroyed
And... Write of me again...

Pomegranate Magic

By Annamaria Rossana Quaresima

Digital streaming shows me Azerbaijan's countryside and its pomegranates in HD, and I am ensorcelled. The sweeping emerald, black-peaked mountains and deep pocket valleys with their microclimates, which cultivate an earthly paradise of produce. Farmers-turned-youtubers invite the world to see syrup being made, and it is magical. Frost-picked fresh during a grey dawn – mist hanging thick as coats, breath puffing – the moment is plucked along with the fruit: growth now frozen from time by crisp sounds. Bundled and released, the thudding bounty makes the kitchen rufescent. Pinker than blood, richer than roses. Satin-skinned globes with shiny innards – a sweet-tart, seeded wine. Piled high they magnify: Red-Pink-Purple-Red. Rubies hiding garnets. Stark against the plain wooden table and metal juicer (berry-bright, and berry-kin), they paint a still life which still riots with colour, light dancing on dark arils, and vibrant skin. To make a room gorgeous, just add pomegranates. I recall their abundant lore: heavenly gardens, deathly magic, a maker and unmaker of wishes. Transformational, above all. And now – they are transformed. Pressure, heat, sugar, spice; confronting and ghastly, compelling and delicious; a divine device, auspicious. The video nears its well-savoured end. Onscreen, *narsharab* emerges, taking its place, drizzled upon silvery fish, gutted and grilled – an equivalent exchange. Persephone resides in the underworld, trailing blood and petals with every step. The world turns with mundane magic. Reshape the rind, and you reshape reality; let contradiction, let chiaroscuro change reign. Hold the nar close to feel Eden's pulse. It whispers: *Crack me open and seize my heart; make something new from it.*

Dad's Project

By Abi Waller



Mango

By Ben Paris

Dona Florisvalda's palm was rough as dirt. Deep random creases lined her face. She sat in front of the general store smoking a pipe, a worn leather-bound Bible open in her lap. Next to her, a donkey with two aluminum canisters on its back was tethered to a post.

On her way into the store, Rafaela stopped to say hello, the way she always does. I just wanted to get what we needed and move on. It was still early, but the sun was rising over the ridge. The idea was to hike this side of the valley, get to the top, or as close as we could, spend a few days, then hike across to the other side.

We were in the Chapada Diamantina region of Bahia, taking a break from the city, Salvador, where we lived.

They were still talking when I came out.

Rafaela introduced us.

"This is a quilombo," Rafaela said. She opened her arms to the road and the simple brick houses on either side. "Dona Florisvalda's great-grandmother was born a slave."

"But she escaped," Dona Florisvalda said. "Everyone here, all our ancestors escaped. They followed the lights, was the way they put it, and this is where they stopped running."

"The lights?" Rafaela said.

"That's how she described it, my grandmother. The lights. She told the story so many times, the way old people do." Dona Florisvalda laughed. "We don't know what really happened or what she imagined. She was just a child. They hid during the day, and at night they followed the lights."

Rafaela nodded. "They lived in peace here."

"Mostly," Dona Florisvalda said. "It's always been a struggle." She lit her pipe. "We worked when we were kids. No school. Just work." She pointed to the fields beyond the houses. "Out there," she said.

A few beats of silence.

Rafaela worked with Paulo Freire when she was young. Illiteracy was common in those days. After a while she said, "And the *senhora* had how many children?" She spoke to her in the third person, the way people do in Brazil to show respect.

"Twenty-one children," Dona Florisvalda said. "But only 15 are still alive. "One back there," she pointed with her thumb to the counter and cash register where I'd just paid for our stuff, coconut soap, dried jackfruit, a cigar, a small bottle of cachaca, all locally made.

Her son stood by the back door, which opened into a courtyard with a giant mango tree in the middle of it.

"The aluminum canisters on the donkey's back? Looks like the real milk that used the pass through our neighborhood in the morning."

"That's right. Every week," her son said, approaching them on the porch. He lifted one of the aluminum containers from the donkey's back and carried it into the store.

Rafaela asked Dona Florisvalda about the rest of her children.

It was a long time before we left.

We followed a creek the color of rust that ran through a gully of giant boulders and rocks of every size and shape in random places. Did they roll down after years of erosion? Did they drop in after a tectonic explosion? An internet connection was out of the question, but even if we did have Google to explain it, the sundering and crumbling of the earth, however it happened, was beyond anything technology could conjure. It was never

our purpose, but for those few hours, we'd transcended technology. It took its place as just another man-made thing, a hammer, a car, a paper airplane, and we kept our slow deliberate climb up the ridge. Relatively cool under the canopy of trees, we made more progress than I thought we would. By mid-afternoon we were close to the top. At a waterfall with a pool beneath it, and flat black boulders around it, we took a break.

We ate the dried jackfruit and some trail mix, raisins, peanuts, cashews, dried bananas.

Rafa had a small bag full of pencils. She sharpened them one by one and placed them on the rock beside her. She sat up and sketched in a spiral-bound notebook.

I placed my clothes on the hot rocks in the sun and sat under the waterfall and let the falling water massage my neck and back. After a while, I moved over and sat in the sun. Match-head-sized black tadpoles swam around in a puddle next to me.

Some of the bird calls we recognized from the city, *sabia*, *bem-te-vi*, others we didn't. After a while, Rafaela held up a sketch of the waterfall and the pool beneath it. Bromeliads grew between the rocks and hung from the trees. Rafaela put a seedling in a piece of folded paper. We slid down a smooth rock and waded in the pool below. We washed with the coconut soap we bought at Dona Florisvalda's and watched the bubbles float down the stream. The water was cold.

After a while in the water, we hung our hammocks off to the side, a few meters from the waterfall and pool.

No mosquitoes.

I had two books with me on the Kindle, *Moby Dick*, which I probably wouldn't read, and *Walden*, which I probably would, along with electronic versions of a few of the literary magazines I read and hoped would run my stories.

The mist from the waterfall made the air feel cool.

I read, slept in the hammock, woke, read some more.

I smoked one of the cigars I bought at the store, and tasted the cachaca, which was excellent, and tasted it again to make sure it was as good as it seemed. And it was. Dreams that night were like watercolors and bled into waking.

In the morning, Rafa wasn't there, which wasn't unusual. She made a point of not waking me, even at home, for which I was grateful. She had a thing for bromeliads, as if they answered a central question in her life, and she was probably out looking for them. I picked up her notebook thinking there might be a note. I flipped through the sketches: bromeliads, the tanager we'd seen the day before, a jurema tree. In her backpack there was a piece of bread, a few oranges and guavas we'd brought from home, which she would have taken with her if she'd gone very far. I hooked up the gas to the camping stove, made coffee and waited. Drank a second cup. Waited some more.

After a while, I climbed the black jagged rocks to the top of the waterfall. The sun had risen over the far ridge. No sign of her on the trail. I walked through a thicket of bushes, out to a clearing with a view of the town a few kilometers below, the single dirt road of simple brick houses. A man on a donkey made his way through the sun; Dona Florisvalda's son, I imagined.

It took most of the previous day to get to our campsite from the general store, a slow deliberate hike. We stopped along the way, looked around, listened. Rested now and then on a fallen tree, a stump, a giant rock. Sat and talked. Alone, with no pack, I made my way faster down the trail. I followed the donkey tracks to the general store.

The front door was open. A ceiling fan turned slowly, as if it were about to stop. I walked through the empty store to back door, and out into the courtyard. Mangoes, deep yellow and light green, were scattered on the ground. A cross-breeze carried incense,

myrrh, through the air. Under the mango tree stood a discreet shrine to Santo Antonio and the Orixá, Ogum, which I recognized from Rafa's mother's house. Next to it, Rafa sat at a plastic table with Dona Florisvalda at her side. Her son stood behind them, his hand resting on his mother's chair.

Dona Florisvalda had one of Rafa's pencils in her hand, and she was leaning over a notebook. Rafa's hand covered hers. Together, they wrote the letter "m."

Her son sliced a mango, the scent of which was stronger than the incense. He put the pieces on a plate next to the notebook. Rafa ate a piece, and offered the plate to Dona Florisvalda, who declined.

I declined too.

Dona Florisvalda put the point of her pencil next to the letter "m." Rafa covered her hand with her own and together they wrote the letter "a." When they were finished writing the word "mango," Rafa pushed herself away from the table and Dona Florisvalda wrote the word "mango" without Rafa's help.

Rafa ate another piece of the mango, scraping the flesh off the skin with her teeth. She wiped the juice from her chin with the back of her wrist, and handed the plate to Dona Florisvalda, who hesitated, then took out her teeth and placed them on the table next to the notebook. She scraped the mango flesh from its skin with her gums until juice was running down her chin also. "This is the first mango I've eaten in...I don't know how many years," she said, and laughed and ate some more. She wiped her hands on her skirt and wrote "mango" on the page again, slowly, by herself. She turned to Rafa and, with a wide smile, hugged her. They hugged each other for a long time.

Back at the campsite, we gathered our stuff and hiked farther and higher up the ridge. I walked ahead to keep the pace. We came to a break in woods. We could see the top of the ridge, where we'd planned to sleep that night. Distances were always deceptive, particularly in a climb. We didn't know how long it would take, but the trees gave us cover from the sun, and we knew we'd make it.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" I said.

"You were sleeping. We're you worried?"

"Not really. But yes, I was."

"I opened my eyes when I woke. Was thinking about her. There was just enough light. So I left."

"You could have told me."

"You would have wanted to come. It would have been different. I wanted to go myself. You were asleep anyway..."

We climbed through a series of steep, rock escarpments jutting from the earth like giant stone sculptures. Before the final ascent we rested, ate, and waited for the sun to get a little lower. We left when there was an hour or so before the sun was going to set.

The flat black surface of rock where we put our stuff down was still warm. The silence and the stillness were unbroken, no crickets, no birds, no mosquitoes, not even a bat or a sound. As the night fell, the wind picked up, and then blew strong and steady. We'd walked most of day. It was good to rest.

The sky turned from turquoise to colors we didn't have words for, to deep purple, to black. It felt like we were floating between the heavens and the earth.

I had my eyes closed but wasn't really sleeping when Rafaela nudged me.

“Did you see it?” She pointed.

“No.”

I kept watch. After a while, she nudged me again.

“I saw that one.”

We watched and waited. Another shooting star and then another.

The clusters of stars were so dense in places that the black sky was almost gray. One shooting star after another. Finally, and I’m not sure how to say this, the lights appeared, approaching from the horizon. There were two of them, each with a circle of nebulous lights moving around something like a central column. They approached. Hovered. Approaching and not approaching. Silent. Hovering. Moving away. Getting closer.

A sense, a tangible sense, that they were interested in us, were trying to discover something about us. Or, I’ll speak for myself. We’ve talked about it, but never really articulated what it was, never really defined it. Better that I don’t speak for Rafa. It was a kind of drilling down through inconceivable notions and feelings until it was impossible to avoid admitting it was there.

“The lights,” she said.

“The lights.”

They wanted to know, this is as accurate as I can get, if I had the capacity to love Rafa. The courage maybe, and not just Rafa, but love in general. It wasn’t the sentimental love of feeling and romance, but the tangible love of sacrifice, active love, and it included, somehow, the corollary that it was the only thing that mattered, as if being liked, smart, or funny, or paying your bills didn’t.

She put her arm across my chest as if she were protecting me from them, as if maybe she knew something about the lights that I didn’t.

I put my arm around her shoulder. The lights were like wild majestic animals sniffing around cautiously for possibilities. Nothing about them was frightening; the contrary, they were entirely benign and friendly. It felt like an opportunity more than anything else.

Neither of us knew what to do. We didn’t talk. We just watched, holding ourselves like that, as if we were watching a sunset or an eclipse. We watched and waited.

We watched and waited. I hoped they’d come closer, land, or do whatever they were planning to do. But they didn’t.

After a while, they turned and were gone.

We stared into the sky. “Maybe they’ll come back,” Rafaela said.

We both pushed ourselves up on our elbows, and looked out into the black horizon, waiting and hoping for the lights to appear again.

“Maybe they will.”

In the morning when I woke, she was lying flat on her back, eyes open, unblinking. The sky was the silvery pink color of dawn. I sat up on an elbow and looked out to where the lights were the night before.

She sat up and looked out at the horizon also. We stayed like that, watching the horizon, examining it really, until the silver sky turned blue.

Wind My Heart

By Lexi Merring

I wind my heart like a trinket,
let it awaken from its slumber,
brush off all the dust.
Let it break through my ribcage,
spiral out of my chest.
Let the wind carry it to dance
with the flying autumn leaves.
When I fall, let it sink
to the depths of the ocean
to return to sleep among the fish.

By Mykyta Ryzhykh

And when I left
There were still stars in the sky
But there was no more Earth

Reach for the Stars

By Annika Connor



Ariadne on Naxos

By Dylan Connell

Dionysus said he'd give me the sky. He told me he loved me the first time we kissed, and I knew then, that in his eyes, I could never be ordinary; I would always be perceived as art.

Dionysus fit me with a crown of stars. He called me his muse and reminded me as often as he could how thankful he was to be inspired.

Dionysus reversed my fate. Cherished me after I was abandoned by Theseus.

Theseus—the man who I led past the minotaur and out of the labyrinth—the man whose love I'd sacrificed everything for.

Theseus, who left me dreaming. Only to awaken on the island of Naxos—alone—black sails guiding our ship into dark maroon clouds.

His rejection so heavy, I was sure my bones would break beneath it.

Dionysus wanted to rescue me from myself. He thought that if he showered me with endless gifts and poems, that I would be “cured.”

At first, our love was a frenzy — a hysterical intoxication that absorbed my entire being.

Still, we are only capable of accepting the love in this world which we think we deserve.

So, when the fire of infatuation began to die down, a numb chill crept over me like the first frost of winter; I felt I deserved less and less.

I was fading away—disappearing—losing track of my self and vanishing into nothing.

Once the dark shadow of my melancholia began to overwhelm our light, Dionysus increased his efforts, but I only felt the worse for it.

I became so tired of disappointing him that I started to pull away and barricade myself in that darkness.

He must have sensed this too. Our amorous madness was gone. As our time together inched forward, I could feel The God who walked earth as man search for inspiration elsewhere.

A void grew between us. When he would stretch his arms across the abyss, I no longer had the strength to grab his hand.

My love turned to guilt.

Thus, when the harvest festival began on Naxos, I wandered from the crowd and into the vineyards. I did not want to be searched for; I did not want to be found.

Torch lights and music dispersed behind me.

I wished I could control that which I could not. Thoughts of my heart churned chaotically, as if mirroring the storm clouds which shaded the dark sky above.

First, came the noise of waves, then a vision of turbulent sea.

As my eyes gazed out upon the endless expanse of water, my feet became tangled at the earth.

Green grape vines wrapped around my ankles. I tripped, turned about, and tumbled into the thicket. Branches as strong as braided rope constricted my limbs. Struggle as I may, I was trapped.

I screamed into the lifeless night. The only response was the echo of my voice. What was I doing running away from what the world called: true love? Perhaps I deserved to be alone.

The heavens wept, and Zeus hurled angry purple bolts into the sea. Rain fell in dense, dreadful droplets that changed dirt to mud. Sinking deeper into the vineyards' clutch, I abandoned myself to the sisters of fate.

Hope came through the heavy rain in a luminous flash. A Pegasus and its rider being blown about by the wind. A winged white stallion crashing down on the island.

"Help," I cried, praying my voice would not be vanquished by thunder.

Perseus cut me from the vines.

Perseus, a mortal who'd beheaded a gorgon. Perseus who'd founded Mycenae and lay his enemies to waste.

Perseus, whose reputation for angering the Gods reached Naxos long before his sandals touched its beach.

In the cramped shelter of a low hanging cave, Perseus listened. I told him of love, of pain, of the desperate wish to feel anything at all, and of what it meant to be numb when that wish went unanswered.

What Perseus offered me was an option. He clutched the torn-off head of a woman whose hair was snakes. He declared it was written in the oracle: when the power to paralyze changed hands, the first sufferer of this curse would be divided.

And what did I have to fear? I was already stone. The love of Dionysus transformed me years ago.

Still, it took all of my will to conquer instinct and stare into Medusa's dull yellow eyes.

My body was turned forever into white marble. My soul split in two.

Half of me lived on as the daughter of Medusa, a gorgon who would seduce the like of women rather than men. This newfound freedom produced sensations within me which I never imagined possible.

Dionysus would find the other half of me. Frozen in time, frozen in his mind.

Dionysus went to war with Perseus and made a shrine of my statue.

Dionysus used wine to recruit the raving ones, his mad women, the maenads.

He took many to his bed. Unable to forget what he'd imagined I was,
Dionysus never married again.

Instead, he adorned my figure with golden necklaces. He fit my wrists and ankles with bands and bracelets from foreign lands. He forced rings of sapphire, emerald and ruby onto each of my fingers.

Gazing at the constellations from his tower's highest window, The God composed poem after poem in my honor.

I watched it all from fixed eyes.

Time was forgotten on the island. Sundials were cast into foaming waves. Measuring the cycle of the moon was a forbidden act.

Whole years passed without noticeable change. Empires rose and fell like the tides.

The palace degraded. The God of the grape came to be known by a new name, that of: Bacchus.
Revelry and chaos consumed Naxos. A scarcity in wine could never be imagined.

One night, as the moon fell into the sea and the sky went black, Dionysus came to my relic and caressed my stone face. He spoke as if he knew I could hear him.

"Ariadne..."

Tofino

By L. Lois

each wave crashes into the shore
and my breath

I could sit here for hours
watching the emerald green crests

form a whip that holds still
then collapses

with foam churning
bubbles of trapped power, angry white

pulled out towards the next
strength of each volley sucked backwards

the air is thick with salty mist
my hair curls from a hood pulled tight

I close my eyes to feel the moisture
my skin drinking, each lash holding a drop

hands burrowed deep in front pockets
meeting somewhere on the inside in fists

pulling shoulders of padded down towards
my crouched center on this beached log

thinking of how the waves
would overtake me if I walked twenty feet

or will keep rolling for centuries
after I've left to go home

And no less

By Ty Zhang

That everything that might happen to us
Would happen to us in sum.
That there would be no parts,
No edges, and no surpluses
Where our affection is concerned.
That our bodies would become confused
As to where one ends and the other begins.
That we would astonish ourselves to no end
By enduring the things we endure.
That the last time we felt alone
Be the last time we feel alone.

And no less.

I will ask this of you
If you will ask this of me, and
I will give it to you
If you will give it to me.

May we fuse our hearts together,
The one melting beautifully into the other.
May our love constantly renew,
Not effortlessly, but constantly,
So that every second hereafter
There will be nothing in the world
Quite so new as our love.

Call It Home

By Bill Schreiber

Corn stubble and stone combine
into dirt and your brown shoe,
steel sky and the field's limited plain
stopped by leafless oaks and maples.

It is a cold to scald each breath, turn
water in a pail to solid ice,
freeze ruts in the driveway
to rock-hard ridges.

You ache with your collar pulled up, and
it is almost comfort as hands settle
into warm pockets, and your boots
crack the harvest's cornstalk leftovers.

Boulders and bedrock mottled by lichen
set between tree trunks as beyond
mountains fold into fog, the wind
at your back as leaves blow past you.

The snow's fall begins as a whisper
inserted into silence, weather
strung across this field
trees at the border shrouded white

until they disappear
as the snow falls harder, and
your tracks fill with snow behind you
almost as fast as you walk.



The Windchimes: A Villanelle

By James M. Maskell

As autumn winds begin to softly course
their way among the now neglected grass,
the realtor's sign creaks gently back and forth

outside my childhood home. What cunning source
did ring those chimes of oak and steel at last
as autumn winds began? Too soft, of course

the spring and summer breeze, but not the force
of fall, its gusty breath, its northern blast.
The realtor's sign creaks gently back and forth

where chimes my father built adorned the porch,
where cardinals perched and sang of summers past.
As autumn winds begin to softly course,

and winter's malice threatens from the North,
familial bonds reduce to fragile glass.
The realtor's sign creaks gently back and forth

where once my father's chimes, their verse and chorus,
played the score of childhood come to pass.
As autumn winds begin to softly course,
The realtor's sign creaks gently back and forth.



Growth

By Abi Waller



Signs

By Liisa Rose

At rise we see shadows of the Las Vegas skyline. Some recognizable buildings such as the Luxor and the Stratosphere are visible. As the sun slowly rises, “old school” Vegas signs become visible. They are placed around the stage Neon Museum style. One might flicker. Down stage, a HOMELESS MAN wrapped in a bundle of ratty blankets becomes visible. We are on the sidewalk at an intersection. The man is camped in front of a cemetery which is bordered by a wrought iron fence. A few gravestones are visible in the early morning light. We hear morning in a busy city. Cars pass, birds chirp, horns honk, and people talk as they pass him on the way to the bus stop. Some are well-dressed, others are in rough shape. HOMELESS MAN sits up and watches the world for a moment before standing. He turns his back to the audience, unzips his fly, and urinates into the cemetery. A loud horn sounds. HOMELESS MAN looks over his shoulder and makes eye contact with the individual who honked. He stares directly at this person for a moment, shakes off, zips up, and turns front to face the honker.

HOMELESS MAN

Fuck off.

(Goes about his morning routine of loading his belongings into a nearby shopping cart).

What are you looking at anyway? Mind your own fucking business.

(Looking into cars as they pass)

Enjoy that coffee, lady! Cheers!

(Chugs from a bottle. Water? Thunderbird?)

Blind privileged assholes. Life handed to them on a silver tray with sugar cubes. Fuckin’ rat race. Get here, get there. Get to work, get the fuckin’ kids to soccer practice. Take the fuckin’ dog for a walk. Don’t forget dinner reservations at eight. Everyone scurrying on by with the blinders on. Unless you have to take a morning piss of course, then they see you just fine. Well, fuck you! All of you!

(Looking into a passing car)

Yeah! Even you, you miniature shit! You’ll grow up just like them!

(Sound of a car taking off quickly)

Yea, yea, pull away fast lady, it might be contagious.

(Pause. Continues morning routine. When he resumes, he speaks to people in the cars or anyone who happens to walk by. To anyone

observing, he appears to be crazy, so they hurry by.)

You wanna' know the best way to get this virus? Huh? Assume you can't! Just live like you're untouchable in your ivory damn tower. Keep your head up your ass in other words, and don't worry about anything other than the next Starbucks, or maybe that next big pay day. Pay Day! Money, money, money!

(Beat)

So here it is- here's the recipe for this disease. You don't give two shits. That's the first ingredient. An example? Sure! Let's say you're a lawyer. Why not? Let's aim high. So, you're a lawyer. You're living the life! Went to school for years and now it's paying off big! You got the whole enchilada, man. You did it! You're where you always wanted to be, right? You got the penthouse in the ivory tower. You're sipping Starbucks every morning, and Dom Perignon every night. You got the Lexus, the trophy wife you cheat on, the kids you hardly know, and the fucking dog you pay someone to walk. Nothing can touch you man; you are the man! Yes! You're on top of the fucking world!

(Scoffs)

Well, enjoy it while it lasts, my man, because it won't be long. All it takes to bring it crashing down is one little girl with sad eyes. Ha! Who knew? One tiny fucking kid who never asked to be in the ivory tower, but lives there, nonetheless. Unseen. There's more than one pair of blinders in this world, and her parents have them on. Living their silver tray and sugar cube life like the rest of the assholes in the tower. Sipping their lattes, driving their Beemers, and throwing their dinner parties.

(Mimes drinking champagne with pinky out)

"Don't come out while everyone is here, honey. It's a grown-up party. I'll put on a movie for you, honey, so you'll be fine. Just play on your tablet or watch a movie. I'll check on you later." Kid's used to it. Kid sits on the bed with the fucking teddy bear surrounded by every piece of modern technology known to man. She'll be fine, right? She's got everything on the same silver tray- sugar cubes included! All is just fucking peachy in the ivory tower tonight.

(Beat)

Except they're all wearing the blinders, so they don't see that Uncle Joey has disappeared. The little girl and her teddy bear are watching some Disney flick for the four hundredth time and Uncle Joey with a few too many under his belt, stops in to say hello. The little girl is happy to see someone. She's bored with the damn movie- she knows it by heart, anyway. Uncle Joey sits to watch with her and gives her tiny thigh a big squeeze. Tells her how pretty she's getting. The smile she gives him is all he needs. That was her saying the hand was ok- why not go a little further? So, Uncle Joey does. He takes the sign and goes as far as he wants.

"Don't tell anyone because they won't believe you anyway. This is our special secret. Mommy and Daddy will believe me because I'm a grown-up. If you're good, and don't tell anyone, I'll bring you a present next time." But the little girl thinks she has enough things and Uncle Joey's fingers are too rough. Uncle Joey's breath is too hot, and his hands are too big. So, the little girl tells Mommy and Daddy anyway. But she politely waits until the other grown-ups are gone. She knows she's supposed to do that, so she waits. But she does tell, and guess what? Uncle Joey's wrong! They do believe her! They get real mad at Uncle Joey! They say things like they're going to "Put that no good piece of shit behind bars for the rest of his life!" And this is where the recipe kicks back in. You take not giving two shits, one sweet little girl, and you add a lawyer! One little girl with sad eyes and a teddy bear under her arm, and parents who didn't see her until it was too late but are trying to fix it now, by getting the best lawyer

out there. But guess what? Uncle Joey needs a lawyer too! And you know those greedy lawyers- just out for a buck. You know Uncle Joey's guilty as fuck, but you're the lawyer, right? You gotta' defend the prick. He's your payday after all. Even assholes need a lawyer.

(To a passing car)

You a lawyer, man? You live in the tower? Got a trophy wife?

(The car speeds off)

Must have been a lawyer.

(Someone walks by and hands him a bill. He solemnly says something like "God bless you" as he pockets it.)

Shit. Didn't even ask for it that time. Not bad.

(Beat)

So that lawyer? Yea, he has to defend the asshole who likes little girls just a little too much. And you know what? The lawyer's pretty fucking good. He knows what angles to use, he went to the right schools, and he works for the right firm. He drinks fucking Starbucks every morning- he's got it all! And he wins! Uncle fucking Joey is a free man because of the lawyer in his ivory tower with his perfect family and perfect fucking life.

(Beat)

And he's fucking blind. He's got blinders on! He walks past you. He doesn't see you and he don't care. Until one day. One day it all just goes to shit. For no good reason. Maybe he choked on the Dom Perignon. Maybe he fought with the perfect wife. Maybe the dog pissed on the floor!

(Pause)

Maybe it was the little girl with the teddy bear he saw in Starbucks while her mom was on the phone ignoring her. Maybe it was the smug looking dude in the suit who walked past her and smiled just a little too much. Who fucking knows? But the ingredients all came together, and it was enough. Enough! It's too fucking much!

First came the fights with the perfect wife because he just didn't want to do it anymore, didn't want to be the lawyer in the ivory tower. But she was used to it man, she wanted all the glitter and glam, the image of perfect; couldn't be married to a "washed up lawyer." Couldn't have the kids growing up with "ordinary." Next came the plain paper bags and the pills- helps to numb the senses you see- makes it easier to keep on keepin' on. "I can do this" he said, "I can live this life, I just can't feel it."

(Pause then slowly)

But it didn't work- not anymore. The noose made for Joey was tightening around my neck instead. She couldn't do it either. She took the kids and the dog and went to live in a different ivory tower while mine crumbled.

(Pause- then yelling to a pedestrian passing by)

But you know what? I'll take this!

(Arms out wide indicating the intersection or the world)

I'll take the corner of homeless and broke any day over the fucking ivory tower where I'm blind to everyone and everything but the next big pay day. I'm not blind here, man. Not anymore.

(Pulls out his sign that says, "PLEASE HELP, GOD BLESS YOU" and sits.)

END

Wolf Pack
By Annika Connor



Snow Haiku

By Ben Macnair

A covering fell
overnight, footprints appeared
our breath is ghostly.

Remnants of the Past

By Maurice Dorsey

Lionel, a successful middle class African American man had lived above average too long. As he was getting dressed in the bedroom of his Logan Circle townhouse, he was looking forward to lunch with one of his lady friends. He made reservations at the Lafayette in the Hay-Adams Hotel, diagonal to Lafayette Square and the White House, Washington, DC. It was a superb spring day. He was truly looking forward to the dining room ambience and a five-star lunch.

After he showered and shaved, he applied a mud facial to exfoliate his skin. As the facial dried, he looked through his closet to see what he was going to wear for the occasion. He decided on a navy-blue Brooks Brothers Saxon Blazer, grey slacks, white shirt and navy, burgundy, and gold stripe tie, burgundy shoes and belt. As he descended the stairs, he checked himself in the mirror at the landing and was satisfied with his look. He felt good.

He locked the door behind himself and walked a short distance to his Volvo. He carefully got in started the engine and proceeded to drive turning left on 14th Street and left on R Street, to 16th Street and headed straight down 16th Street to the Hay-Adams.

When he arrived, he pulled into valet as he had done many times in the past. After putting the car in park, the valet opened the car door. Lionel got out and walked through the double doors that the two doormen held open for him. He admired the pink cherry blossoms surrounding the half-moon driveway. They were exceptionally beautiful.

The lobby had its usual overly large fresh floral arrangement in the center. Guests were checking in and out of the hotel, some standing at the registration desk and a few ladies seated. Everyone in the lobby was white except the foreign doormen, the bellhop, and Lionel. The lobby was elaborately furnished and the gold-leaf wall appointments were exquisite. His lady friend arrived within a few moments. They approached and ascended a few steps to the upper foyer to the Lafayette.

They were seated at a window table for two. The table was heavily draped and flawlessly set. Lionel and his friend immediately exchanged pleasantries as one server poured water and another placed the luncheon menu before them. He asked if they wanted something to drink. They ordered cocktails and later lunch, then conversed for two hours. Lionel paid the bill. The two both thought it a good idea to stop at the restroom before their departure. They agreed to meet in the lobby.

As Lionel waited for his friend, a white lady yelled from the foyer to Lionel: "Hey you! Come here and help me with my suitcase it is heavy."

Lionel replied: "I am not an employee here but I will help you."

The white lady said: "Oh! You all look alike, but you are a nice black gentleman."

Lionel replied: "No! I am a gentleman, who happens to black!"

Lionel's body became warm when he turned away. Sweat poured from his forehead and arm pits. He refrained from becoming belligerent in front of the those who witnessed the dialog but said nothing.

Restoration Projects

By Mark Strohschein

I.

My parents traveled from Detroit to Montreal
but only spent one hour at that Quebecoise city
before detouring back to Toronto.

I always knew they had ventured to Montreal,
always assuming they made a day or two of it,
chanced upon the wonders of French haute cuisine.

Father said they waited over half hour in the
restaurant—where they were promptly ignored—
before they got up & left, still hungry.

No *Bonjour, garçon. Pardonne moi, mais...*
or *Garçon, la carte, s'il vous plait.* Just tense eyes above
shuffling menus, hangry mother ready for a scrap.

So they left Montreal in the rearview mirror,
would not be troubled with “those people”
again. On to a city that understands: Toronto.

II.

My father, however, will spot a giveaway, discarded
bench left to rot, & envision a finished product,
picture his hands sanding and then re-staining wood.

Whereas, while I'm driving I am not attuned to such
roadside items—or to think like a sculptor who sees a bust
hidden, ready to be unearthed from the mystery of marble.

My father has always turned scraps into gold out of
necessity, sheer challenge—a survival mechanism,
learned behavior—like battling for scraps at dinner:

five brothers & his sister fighting over thin pork
chops, nearly stabbing each other, after his father
returned home without much money to show for it.

III.

Even though I have never been to Montreal, I
can get by speaking enough French to survive.
I would have gladly helped my parents order.

Maybe, fully fed, we could have watched the pigeons
gather in Place Jacques-Cartier & say *Oh, là là*,
sitting on a bench my father wished he could restore.

LOCKSMITH

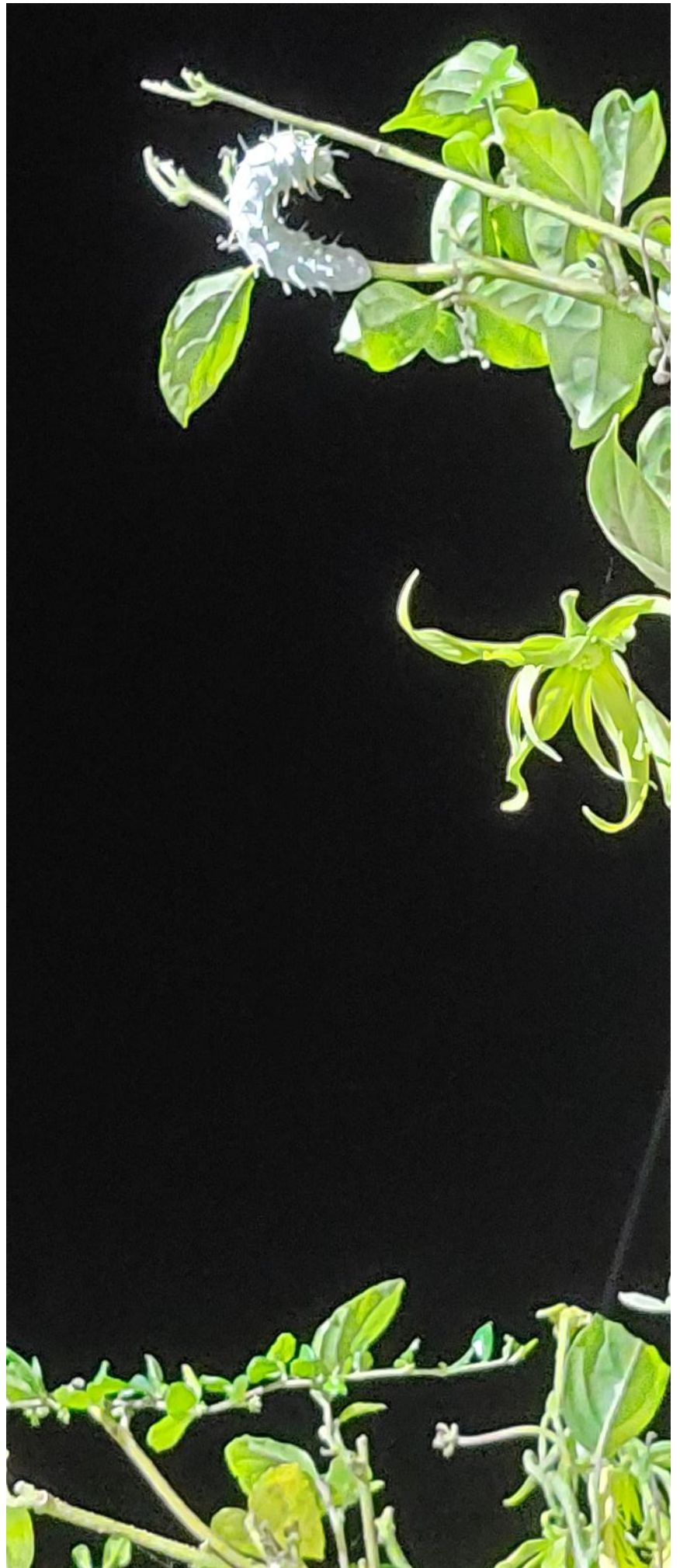
By PJ Sauerteig

I once had to call a locksmith
To break into my own apartment;
I had lost the only key, and stranded
Outside in a Spring rain, late at night,
I realized I had no other choice.

As we walked up flights and flights
Of creaky stairs, he said nothing
(“*Elevator?*” he’d asked me on the phone,
to which I replied: “*No. I wish.*”)
He did not ask me which apartment
Number we were going up to,
Or how long I’d lived there.
He did nothing to verify that
I did, in fact, actually live here.
He either trusted me, or he didn’t care.

Climbing the stairs together,
I realized that I could have just as easily
Called him to some building
I had never even been to,
Taken him up to a random door,
And said: “*This, this one is me.*”
After dismantling the lock,
He would force open the door,
And I would finally walk through
Into a new life, find an empty bed
To rest up for my first day,
Only to lie awake all night—
Too excited to sleep—
With the door still hanging
On its hinges, wide open.

By Thomas Osatchoff



Ozymandias 7

By GJ Gillespie



Night Swim

By Elizabeth Wittenberg

The water is cold. She dips a toe in, squeaks, and dances backward on the dock, nearly letting go of her towel. He laughs from behind her, thinking that it cannot be nearly that bad. She nods toward the water, encouraging his foolhardiness. He faces away from her and drops his towel, revealing his bare ass in the moonlight. She's struck by how hairy it is. More than expected. She doesn't look away, though, watching as he hurtles to the end of the dock and cannonballs into the lake, yelping immediately upon entering the water. He emerges, his hair wet. Even in the dark, she can read the pain shining in his eyes. She laughs. He nods, encouraging her to join him. She takes three big steps to the edge and gives up the death grip on her towel. She feels the blood leave her tight-gripped fingers. Her hand hovers in front of her chest, looking luminously pale in the moonlight. She thinks it looks like a chicken foot before it gets cooked. She brings both hands to her sides, loose and dangling.

She shivers. He looks up and down her naked body. She watches the movement of his eyes and launches herself in, keeping her head bobbing above. The cold water wraps itself around her, nipping at areas of her body that have never seen the sun. She screams. She doesn't know if she's made a noise that loud and visceral since childhood, when her brothers used to chase her around with frogs in their hands.

He reaches out his arms to her, but she isn't ready to touch him yet. She submerges her head under the water and swims away, waiting for her body to adjust to the cold. She tries to swim faster, to warm up from the inside out. She lifts her head above the water to see that he has followed her. They face each other in the water, treading, feet of space between them, present as a third person in the water.

They are both from different countries, traveling in a third one. A group had been playing a drinking game in the hostel and skinny dipping had been translated into both of their languages. They were the only two who had never done it, and with the encouragement of the multicultural crowd, they'd descended toward the lake. The other hostel visitors had made them strip down before taking the walk and wrap themselves in towels so that they couldn't chicken out and go in their clothing or underwear.

He has a handsome face, bearded and dark-eyed. She moves toward him in the water, beginning to adjust to the cold, to the man. She places her arms on top of his shoulders, looking up at the stars. She says the word for them in her language. He says it in his. She likes it better in his. It's a softer word. In hers, it sounds explosive. She moves closer to him and he wraps his arms around her waist, just barely grazing her breasts. She lets her arms settle, the coarse hair on his shoulders tickling her forearms. She clasps her hands together, almost in prayer, behind his neck. She stops her legs from following suit around his torso. They hang loose in the water. She lets him support her, treading water for both of them with just his legs. She looks into his eyes, trying to let him know that she doesn't want to let go but she understands if he's getting tired. They stay like this for a minute. She shivers and notes that he does too. She has the overwhelming urge to kiss him. His eyes look soft, melty, like he wants the same thing. She begins to lean in, instinctually, though she has no idea what she is doing.

"Cold," he says in English, the closest thing to a lingua franca the two share. She nods, grateful that he spoke and stopped her. Now that he mentioned it, the cold re-enters her bones. She breaks away from him and the two swim back to the dock side by side, almost matching strokes. She doesn't think that she will return to the drinking game when they get back to the hostel. She just wants to take a hot shower.

He beats her there and pulls himself up on the dock, grabbing the towel she cast aside earlier

and wrapping his waist before turning around to help her up. She feels a burst of independence and lifts her body from the water. She overestimates her strength, and finds herself flopping embarrassingly onto the wood. A splinter has worked its way into her hand. She laughs a little, tries to hide that it hurts. She scrambles to his towel further up the dock and wraps herself. She feels strange about the fact that they switched towels. She thinks that he didn't even notice. She walks uphill on the dirt path toward the hostel. She just wants to be warm. He follows her at a safe distance, a few steps behind.

When the two return, her walking in first, followed shortly by him, the jovial bunch of foreigners from everywhere under the sun cheer all together. She smiles, shyly, taking her pile of clothing back from the Australian girl who had held it for safekeeping. She offers the words "cold" and "hot bath" to the group and shuffles off to the dorm. She does not look back to see him.

In the shower, the steam rises and fills the room. She has turned the water to its hottest setting and it nearly scalds her skin. She does not take hot showers at home. The water gets hot when it bakes under the sun in the outdoor cistern, but when pumped into the big blue plastic drum in the cool, dank outhouse where she typically bathes, it becomes chilled again. At her university, the water in the student housing gets warm-ish, but not hot like this. She tilts her head back, feeling the blood rush into her face.

She lets herself imagine him knocking on the bathroom door, herself letting him in, everyone else still out by the bar playing their drinking game not thinking about the two of them. She doesn't know much about sex, never having received an education about it at home or school beyond being told to avoid it at all costs until marriage, then doing it whenever her husband wanted to. She just knows that in the moment in the water when he held her that she felt something stir all through the core of her body. She pictures him kissing her, almost from an outside perspective. She doesn't know what it would feel like; she's never been kissed. She wishes that it had happened in the water. She lets the fantasy and the hot water wash over her body. She's not sure which is making her skin tingle.

She lifts her wet hand to her face, forming a pair of lips with her thumb and forefinger and presses her real lips against them. She attempts the motions of kissing. An idea strikes her to wrap the ends of her long hair over and under her hand to imagine his beard. She opens her eyes for a second and catches a blurry glimpse of herself in the steamed up mirror.

She drops her hand and pulls her hair back behind her head. She feels that she hasn't washed all the wall dispenser shampoo from her hair, but she shuts off the shower. She grabs her towel from the hook on the door, the same towel she wore back from the lake. She scrubs at her hair furiously to dry it then wipes her body down, pressing the old hostel towel's prickled fabric deep into her skin. She wraps it around herself when she is dry from water and scrubbed clean of fantasy. Her blood is still close to her skin as she opens the door back into the twenty-bed mixed dormitory. Steam pours out into the dark, air-conditioned room. She breathes in the cool air, cleansing her lungs with it and sighs heavily.

She turns toward her bunk on the other side of the room and sees him. She hadn't even recognized him as staying in her dorm when she sat down next to him in the circle at the hostel bar. He is sitting on a bottom bunk, still in his towel, with the blanket from the bed wrapped around his upper body. His hair is mussed from the swim and his eyes betray how cold he is, sitting in the air-conditioning. She wonders if he has air-conditioning in his home in his country. She does not know how to ask in any language he might understand.

He looks toward the bathroom door, steam still swirling out. He asks, hesitantly, "finish?" She nods. He shakes off the blanket and goes to the shower. She pictures the image of herself kissing her own hand imprinted in the mirror and feels disgusted with herself. She knows that it would be impossible for him to know, but she cannot help the shame. She dresses quickly, once the door is

closed, concealing her body with the towel as best she can, not thinking of the irony in her fear of him seeing her naked after their bodies had pressed close together in the water. Once she is back in her modest sweatpants and t-shirt, she feels restless, wide awake. She walks back to the hostel bar. By the time she arrives, the party has dispersed, the drinking game over. She wonders where everyone went, but feels quiet relief that they are gone. She walks back down the dirt path down the hill to the dock to watch the water. She did not grab shoes, but she feels as if she can't turn back. She doesn't want to run into him. She feels the dirt under her clean feet and steps lightly, like that will prevent them from collecting dirt. She imagines what her mother would say about her dirty feet. She always has something to say about dirty feet. She stops in her tracks and grinds her feet deeper into the dirt, closes her eyes, breathes in the night air.

She continues on, finding a spot toward the end of the dock. She sits with her knees bent to provide a shelf for her chin. The water reflects the almost full moon above, the sparkle modulating with the gentle waves. She tilts her eyes upward, once again taking in the stars. She thinks about changing what she's studying, from a business degree to one in astronomy. A deep pain shockwaves through her body, telling her that she is ignoring the beauty of the world in exchange for what she's supposed to be doing. She almost starts to cry. She's never thought that there was another option than what she was supposed to be doing before. She ends up laughing out loud, quietly, but still out loud. She cannot believe that it had never occurred to her before, that she just didn't have to. She doesn't have to.

The tap tap on the top of her head startles her. She feels a presence behind her and looks up to see a beard.

"One more beer?" he asks, hesitating between each word, perhaps not certain that he got them all right. He's holding two blue cans. She nods. It's universal.

Notes For Amy

By Carl Boon

I was fifteen when Amy Mihaljevic was kidnapped near Lake Erie, murdered by a still-unknown, and dumped in Ashland County. It was all over the news for days, for weeks, for months. You've seen the same story in your hometown; you know the scenes of searchers, the grieving parents, the flashing hotline number on the local news. If you know anything, but no one still knows anything, and the ones that might are dead or sitting in useless Euclid bars, their feet aching from factory work, their faces different, aged. Time passes. Time passed.

Four years before, my fifth-grade buddies and I sat in Jason Canada's living room watching Wrestlemania on pay-per-view. It was a big deal. Big things were gonna happen: titles were bound to change hands, blood was gonna flow, and through it all we'd eat pizza and meander room to room body-slamming each other and being unruly until the late-March darkness gathered outside and we'd have to go home, still courageous, still reveling in budding testosterone. It had no outlet then save in games of violence and pretending. Amy was only six in 1985.

Maybe she was watching, too, clutching a doll she momentarily mistook for a bad man, a wrestler whose arms flailed at his falling through the ropes. Maybe her mother offered her a bowl of chicken-noodle soup balanced on a children's book. Maybe she was thinking about Easter, what dress she would wear, what verses the priest would recite before the happy eventual of candy and ham and games of ping-pong in her Bay Village basement. Living near the lake meant change: the scorch of sun, the dreaded wind. She was taken in October in unruly weather promising snow.

She was taken when our thoughts of wrestling had dimmed. There were finer things, the finer pains and passions of being in high school at last. Tests that mattered and girls with hair so long and blonde we shuddered in the hallways, at our lockers, mumbling. Plane geometry and The First Triumvirate, all the body's bones and Natalie Maxwell grinning widely in a denim skirt. She was taken, she was basically already dead, while we pondered that Friday's football game against Kent Roosevelt. It was going to snow, but there'd be pizza afterward. The Magics lost.

Amy was lost, gone, soon to be dead. It's always a van, the man inside a community man, a minor clerk with a police scanner in his basement, a helpful neighbor. Bound and perhaps unconscious, Amy rode with that man in his van down 77 on a football Friday afternoon—through Akron, Barberton—then

veering right to catch 71. Maybe he was heading toward Mansfield, but Ashland got in the way and she was awake and hungry. She was crying and she wanted to go home. She wanted to go the bathroom. She was suddenly loud, a real person, and there were woods.

It was going to snow. As we sat in the bleachers, the first flakes fell, the first of the season. In four days it would be Halloween, but in the stadium and southward it was already winter. By halftime it was over for everyone: Boykin scored and scored again while Amy felt the rope and a pine twig scratch her cheek. She told herself she'd never been so cold, too cold to scream, too cold to move, and didn't hear the van as it grumbled through the leaves, the man inside still furious and pale. He had to go. He had a wife, a girlfriend, a job, and leaves to rake on Saturday morning.

He was home as we ate pizza in the too-warm booth at Parasson's. He was home, and whoever saw the scratches on his arms and the soil on his cuffs was too drunk to care. It was him being him, and always there are excuses: the carburetor, the cold, a buddy who wanted to stop for a beer. To kill is to find excuses to kill. I am not bad, he said. Or everyone is bad and I'm no different. Amy was ten. Amy Mihaljevic will always be ten years old, tricked and hours gagged and ferociously beautiful, her photograph everywhere, the girl we looked at but couldn't save.

Then stories conflict. He must've been a trucker, someone always on the move. He must've been local and knew her routine. He knew she liked Chinese food or knew she wanted a puppy. It was random, it was planned, it was America being America, Cleveland being Cleveland, and while she lay dead, discarded, bruised in Ashland County we went to the Mall. My sister, just twelve at the time, wanted a new Nintendo game. My mother looked at sweaters. My father roamed the aisles of Sears in search of something long forgotten. The world still was ours.

We were alive in it while Amy lay in the melting snow just an hour away. We were alive in it while late-autumn flies latched upon her thighs and neck and elbows. Trucks passed, days passed, the utility wires buzzed because the needs of the living go on. Perhaps a sparrow alit before her, amused. She was something old and new, something in need of an explanation, some story to augment our own of life and death and the minor tragedies in-between. So she persists past our days of joy and sorrow, an echo in a forest. Limbs fall. The corn grows. We worry about tomorrow.

About the Creators

Amita Basu is a Pushcart-nominated writer whose fiction has appeared in over sixty magazines and anthologies including *The Penn Review*, *Bamboo Ridge*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *Funicular*. She's a reader at *The Metaworker*, sustainability columnist and interviews editor at *Mean Pepper Vine*, and submissions editor at *Fairfield Scribes Microfiction*. She lives in Bangalore, uses her cognitive science PhD to work on sustainable behaviour, and blogs at <http://amitabasu.com/>

Carl Boon is the author of the full-length collection *Places & Names: Poems* (The Nasiona Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Posit*, and *The Adroit Journal*. He received his Ph.D. in Twentieth-Century American Literature from Ohio University in 2007, and currently lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American literature at Dokuz Eylül University.

John Brantingham is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and *The Best Small Fictions* 2016 and 2022. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction. He is the editor of *The Journal of Radical Wonder*.

Nicole Bethune is a poet, writer and multi-faceted artist. Her first collection of poetry, *brackish*, was published by *Finishing Line Press*, and her work has appeared in *The Santa Clara Review*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *miniskirt* magazine, *Novus Lit*, and others. She is currently focused on documenting her memories, travels and interactions with the environment through her creative work and when she isn't writing or wheel-throwing, Nicole is likely off exploring with her dog, Lyla. You can reach her at @nicolee.bethune on most social media platforms.

William Cass has had over 325 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He won writing contests at Terrain.org and *The Examined Life Journal*. A nominee for both *Best Small Fictions* and *Best of the Net* anthologies, he has also received six Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was published by *Wising Up Press* in 2020, and a second collection, *Uncommon & Other Stories*, was recently released by the same press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Dylan Connell writes fast paced philosophical fiction. Using a classical style, his work explores human psychology in relation to the troubled spiritual times of the 21st century. Dylan's writings have been distributed by *Lucky Jefferson*,

Defunkt, ¡Pa'lante! and other publications. His story, The Cult of Venus was featured by Brain Mill Press in their best of 2021 science fiction anthology. Dylan's story, Lotus Drinkers was submitted by Logic 86 for the Pushcart Prize.

When he is not writing, or rapping, Dylan enjoys hiking with his blue-eyed husky Shuka, and playing pick-up basketball. He holds an MFA from the University of San Francisco.

Annika Connor is an Artist, SAG-AFTRA Actor, and Screenwriter.

Annika Connor is primarily known for her watercolor and oil paintings, though she also writes screenplays, sketch comedy, and acts in film and TV. These seemingly disparate mediums are linked in her imagination as one aspect of her Studio Life informs another.

Whether painting or writing, Connor's art uses strong symbolism, passionate imagery, and/or humor to ignite the imagination.

In the studio, Annika Connor uses precision, detail, and allegory as a hook to lure the viewer's eye while showcasing imagery that is narrative and often mysterious.

Annika received her BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied Painting & Performance.

Evgeniya Dineva is a poet from Bulgaria. Her works appear in The Hong Kong Review, Ethel, Asian Cha and others. Her debut poetry collection Animals Have No Fathers came out in November 2023. Evgeniya is a fellow of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for Creative Writing.

Maurice Dorsey is an MFA student majoring in fiction and nonfiction writing at SNHU. He has been a writer since his retirement from the United States Department of Agriculture in 2012. He has published five books: *Businessman First: Remembering Henry G. Parks, Jr., 1916-1989, Capturing the Life of a Businessman Who Was African American, A Biography*, 2014; *From Whence We Come*, 2017; *Of Time and Spirit, A Tribute to My Father*, 2020; *Zelma's Aphorisms: Old School Wisdom, Instructive, Inspirational, Hilarious, to Outrageous*, 2022; and *So Many Angels*, 2023. Each of his books have been added to the permanent collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City Public Library. *Businessman First* was nominated for the Phillis Wheatley Award by QBR at the 2015 Harlem Book Festival. *Businessman First*, *From Whence We Come*, and *Of Time and Spirit* were recognized Distinguished Favorites for the Independent Press Awards.

Maurice hopes to improve his writing skills while pursuing an MFA at SNHU. He is 77, African American, gay, and product of segregated housing and schools. He earned his Bachelor of Science and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Maryland College Park. He also earned two master's degrees from the Johns Hopkins University, 1975 and Loyola University of Maryland, 1976. In 2021, he established the Maurice W. Dorsey, Ph.D. and Robert J. Battjes, D.S.W. Endowed Scholarship for the Student Success Initiative; and in 2024 he was the recipient of the University of Maryland Alumni Legacy Award of Excellence.

GJ Gillespie is a collage artist living in a 1928 farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island, WA. A prolific artist with 20 awards to his name, his work has been exhibited in 64 shows and appeared in more than 140 publications. Beyond his studio practice, Gillespie channels his passion for art by running Leda Art Supply, a company specializing in premium sketchbooks. Whether conjuring vivid collage compositions or enabling other artists through exceptional tools, Gillespie remains dedicated to the transformative power of art.

Anna Idelevich is a scientist by profession, Ph.D., MBA, trained in the neuroscience field at Harvard University. She writes poetry for pleasure. Her books and poetry collections include “DNA of the Reversed River” and “Cryptopathos” published by the Liberty Publishing House, NY. Anna’s poems were featured in Louisville Review, BlazeVOX, The Racket, New Contrast, Zoetic press, Hawaii Pacific Review, Cholla Needles among others. We hope you will enjoy their melody, new linguistic tone, and a slight tint of an accent.

Erin Jamieson (she/her)’s writing has been published in over 100 literary magazines, including two Pushcart Prize nominations. Her poetry chapbook, Fairytales, was published by Bottlecup Press and her most recent chapbook, Remnants, came out in 2024. Her debut novel (Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams) came out November 2023.

L. Lois lives in an urban hermitage where trauma-informed themes flow during long walks by the ocean. She is pivoting through her grandmother-era, figuring out why her bevy of adult children don’t have babies, nor time. Previous essays have been featured in Canada’s Globe and Mail, her poetry on In Parentheses and in Woodland Pattern’s 30th Annual Poetry Marathon.

Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet and playwright from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @benmacnair and on Instagram - BenJMacnair

James M. Maskell has taught high school English in Massachusetts for over twenty years and writes in the early mornings before heading off to class. His poetry and fiction has been featured in Loud Coffee Press, Lucky Jefferson, and

the Dance Cry Dance Break podcast. His non-fiction has been featured in recent issues of Waccamaw, Windmill and Paper Dragon. You can read his other work at jamesmmaskell.com.

Lexi Merring is a graduate assistant at Montclair State University where she is earning an M.A. in English. She has a B.A. in creative writing and psychology from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her work has been published in The Central Avenue Poetry Prize 2024, RAINE Magazine, and The Alcott Youth Magazine.

Jeff Newberry's most recent book is *How to Talk about the Dead* (Red Hawk Publications, 2024). A poet, novelist, and essayist, he has published work in a wide variety of print and online journals. He serves as the vice president of the Southeastern Writers Association.

James B. Nicola is the author of eight collections of poetry, the latest three being *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies* (just out). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Actor's Guide to Live Performance* won a Choice magazine award. He has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, Storyteller's People's Choice award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and eleven Pushcart nominations—for which he feels stunned and grateful. A graduate of Yale, James hosts the Writers' Roundtable at his library branch in Manhattan: walk-ins are always welcome.

Thomas Osatchoff, together with family, is building a self-sustaining home near a waterfall. New work is forthcoming from *Arboreal Literary Magazine*, and a poetry collection is out from Nauset Press.

After a 28-year world tour as a military spouse, Liisa and her husband, Mark, have settled back home in Tucson, Arizona. **Liisa Rose** is an online professor at Southern New Hampshire University, teaching a variety of liberal arts and humanities courses. Liisa has an MA in theatre education from the University of Arizona and is currently in her third semester of the Mountainview MFA at SNHU.

Ben Paris is from New York (born in Queens, raised in New Jersey) and lives now in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, where he works as a translator and occasional tour guide. He's had stories published in various print and online journals over the years, including *Switchback*, *Aethlon*, and *Fiction*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Storyglossia*, among others.

Annamaria Rossana Quaresima (she/her) received a PhD in Psychology from The University of Adelaide and currently resides in the Gadigal land of Sydney, Australia. She enjoys having more hobbies than time and researching

anything. Her work is published in The Saltbush Review, Arboreal Literary Magazine and Red Ogre Review.

Mykyta Ryzhykh, Ukraine, Nominated for Pushcart Prize. Published many times in the journals Dzvin, Dnipro, Bukovinian magazine, Polutona, Tipton Poetry Journal, Stone Poetry Journal, Divot journal, dyst journal, Superpresent Magazine, Allegro Poetry Magazine, Alternate Route, Better Than Starbucks, Littoral Press, Book of Matches, TheNewVerse News, Acorn haiku Journal, The Wise Owl, Verse-Virtual, Scud, Fevers of the Mind, LiteraryYard, PLUM TREE TAVERN, ITERANT, Fleas on the Dog, The Tiger Moth Review, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Angel Rust, Neologism Poetry Journal, Shot Glass Journal, QLRs, The Crank, Chronogram, The Antonym, Monterey Poetry Review, Five Fleas Itchy Poetry, Ranger magazine, PPP Ezine, Bending Genres Journal, Rat's Ass Review, Cajun Mutt Press, minor literatures, Audience Askew Literary Journal, Spirit Fire Review, The Gravity of the Thing, Ballast Journal, Star 82 Review, The BeZine, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, Synchronized Chaos, boats against the current, The Decadent Review, Corvus Review, American Diversity Report, Unlikely Stories, Triggerfish Critical Review, The Moth, Ripple Lit, Rock & Sling, Meniscus, Rabid Oak, ZiN Daily, Stone of Madness, The Cortland Standard, Quarter Press, Schredder, Wilderness House Literary Review, Poetry Porch, Chewers & Masticadores, The Big Windows Review, Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Third Wednesday, Cosmic Double, Dialogist, Consequence, Cool Beans Lit, Poets Choice, BarBar.

PJ Sauerteig is a writer from Fort Wayne, Indiana. He graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Columbia University, and a law degree from NYU School of Law. Sauerteig was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2016, and his poetry has appeared in publications like Glassworks, The Columbia Review, Nat Brut, 4x4, and others. He currently lives and works in Chicago. He makes a very good tart tatin and has a recurring anxiety dream about his childhood piano teacher.

Bill Schreiber has been a Hyla Brook Poet since 2018. Bill has been published in Aerial Review, Broadkill Review, Shot Glass Journal, The Poets Touchstone and Metonym Journal. Bill works in the technology field and lives with his wife and son in southern New Hampshire.

Alexandra Shandrenko is a 21-year-old university student. She has a few published written pieces featured in Friction Literary Anthology and Dipity Literary Magazine. She is currently pursuing her Bachelor's in Computer Science along with minors in both Cybersecurity and Philosophy. She is set to graduate in May 2024. Whether lost in literature or designing new computer

graphic image ideas, she is dedicated to integrating varied perspectives into her work. Excited about the journey ahead, she's eager to see where her writing and artistic endeavors will lead.

Jade Silva was born and raised in Hawai'i. She will soon graduate from the University of Hawai'i at Hilo with her B.A. in English and certificates in Creative Writing and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Alex Stanley was born and raised in Arizona. He earned a BA in English from Boston College before finding work as a sports journalist in small-town New Mexico. He proceeded to earn his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of California, Irvine, where he taught as a lecturer. He resides in Orange County, CA.

Mark Strohschein is a Washington state poet who lives on Whidbey Island. His work is forthcoming in Bryant Literary Review, Barren Magazine and Main Street Rag. His poems have appeared in Flint Hills Review, Lips Poetry Magazine, The Milk House, Red Fern Review and The Big Windows Review, among others.

Ruth Towne is an emerging poet based in Maine. Other poems from her project Resurrection of the Mannequins have been published by the The Lily Poetry Review, Decadent Review, New Feathers Anthology, Coffin Bell Journal, Arboreal Literary Magazine, and Anodyne Magazine.

Elaine Verdill is a poet and photographer who also paints with acrylics. Her artwork can be found in publications: The Poets' Touchstone; Watershed Review; The Bookends Review; Calyx, A Journal of Art and Literature for Women; Foliate Oak Literary Magazine; San Antonio Review; Barzakh; Beyond Words; The Sonder Review, and others.

Abi Waller is the youngest of four in an Air Force family. Her and her family moved around the world together, which inspired a passion for growth through change, meaningful connection, and conversation. At a young age, she began using art as a way communicate and hasn't stopped since. Abi graduated from Birmingham-Southern College with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in May 2022. Currently, Abi lives in Austin, Texas where she is pursuing a career as a young artist.

Elizabeth Wittenberg is a New Orleans-based writer currently working on her MFA in fiction at Cedar Crest College's Pan-European MFA program. Her work has been published in several literary magazines including Gabby & Min's Literary Review, Capsule Stories, and Lavender Bones Magazine.

Zeid (he/they) is an author, poet, and scientist from Jordan. He's been writing poetry for almost a decade, and is thrilled to appear in Assignment Literary Magazine. You can find his previous publications in the Journal of Materials Chemistry C, Astrobiology, ACS Photonics, and Light: Science & Applications.

Ty Zhang (he/him) is a Thai-Chinese-American law student, writer, and political organizer based in Ohio. He writes in a range of mediums including poetry, prose, and screenplay. He is on Twitter at @khanombang.



Program Overview

Our two-year, low-residency program allows students to live anywhere and work a full-time job. We never allow the number of students to exceed 65 total – about 16 per cohort – so our students develop close and sustaining relationships with faculty during our intensive weeklong residencies in the summer and winter.

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