

**WRITE
LIKE
YOU'RE
ALIVE
2019**

Wendy Brown-Baez
Chella Courington
Kelly Hanwright
Michael K. Hill
Jennifer E. Hudgens
Jamal H. Iqbal
April Jones
Marie C Lecrivain
John C. Mannone
Sydney Meeker
Leah Mueller
Michael H. Payne
Margaret D. Saraco
Darcy J. Scholts
Shloka Shankar
Robin Anna Smith
Marianne Szlyk
Peggy Turnbull
Dawn Vogel
Alicia Cerra Waters

Edited by

Michael K. Hill



Write Like You're Alive
2019

A 31/31 Celebration of Creativity

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Edited by Michael K. Hill



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August

Jennifer E. Hudgens

The electricity buzzes & mumbles against ozone alerts
lights go out completely—I stop breathing
An hour later the dogs are growling at the Hoodoo candles
sizzling on the nightstand & I try to write a poem
not about my dead father

My gut riddled with guilt & shame
we carry it in the bones, milk & marrow
splintered—keeping the mouths fed
tongues bristling like gods in the middle
of nowhere of my body

it is the frivolity of curse & hum
childhood intricately withdrawn
in the thick—unapologetic—bloodied lips
mind does not quiet but screams
alongside cicadas on hot August nights

Tiny Tornadoes

Dawn Vogel

The only paper left,
in scraps,
traveling on gusts of wind,
swirling in tiny tornadoes.

No matter how small,
run to catch them,
save them,
hoard them.

Read them,
fragments though they may be,
commit the words to memory,
keep minds sharp.

Somewhere
there are entire books
filled with words,
meaningful sentences.

Find them,
hoard them too,
like a dragon librarian,
full of knowledge.

sea-reach (n.)

Shloka Shankar



Source: An erasure culled out from an excerpt of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

The Dame Who Marks Time

Marie C Lecrivain

She holds the level (and the cord),
in her hands and watches the ocean
wear away the shore.

It's impossible to lay the foundation
of a temple on shifting sands.
She tried many times, as a child,
with her trowel and bucket,
to execute the image burned
in her brain, a sanctum that could
hold all the love in the universe.

What she thought was love has turned
into something she can't name. It fills
the cold heavy spaces within,
and tests the boundaries of her resolve.

She wraps the cord, three times, around
her left wrist and then balances the level
on her right index finger.

She takes one slow step forward,
and then another, until the sun sets
and the sands have cooled
beneath her feet.

10 Shoes Every Man Must Own

Sydney Meeker

The size 2 oxfords
For being a dapper little man.

The red converse,
for the stylish youngster.

The black docs,
for the musical teenager.

Steel-toed paratrooper boots
To help you in the war.

Well-shined work boots
To keep the boss happy.

The padded boots
For the hiking gentlemen.

A pair of dockers
to keep the husband happy.

The Leather slippers
to keep the dog from chewing.

A pair of athletic shoes
to keep the ol' heart pumping

Those old steel-toed paratrooper boots
For revolution.

Sketches of Rockville

Marianne Szlyk

Summer storms gather at five.
Bulging clouds turn the color
of sweat-stained t-shirts
as the first commuters
press up the hill.

Men in shirtsleeves, women
with bare legs, kid themselves
about the cooling breeze
and the clammy stillness
that follows.

They push on, pretending
that the rain will hold off,
that the first drops felt
are just sweat.

Spurred on by the rumble
of thunder somewhere,
anywhere, not here,
they scatter down side streets
where trees behind fences
refuse to give shelter.

Strangers

April Jones

I am a displaced Georgia peach
pinning for cicada songs to
lull me slowly to sleep
I'm not built for Michigan's long cold
it coats my bones, branches barren
grayness that lingers to madness

I'm just another southern girl
I left my twang where the cornbread's dry
and I feel homeless
lonely in the land of lakes, surrounded
by dreams of tall green summer maples
but all I see is snow

Sure, people are people
until they're not
then they're strangers
like me.

Payback

Michael K. Hill

Dean sat on the edge of the twin bed mattress with the phone in his lap. The pale Las Vegas sun cast the motel room in a dusty glow. He lifted the receiver and dialed the number, well-memorized by now. It rang twice, followed by a click.

"Hello?" said a frail voice through the static of long-distance.

"Hi, Pearl!" he said.

"Is that you, Peter?"

Dean smiled. "It sure is. And I have great news, Pearl. It's official."

A weak, but audible gasp whispered across the line. "Really?"

"Yes, Pearl. You won the Las Vegas Lottery!" he shouted and chuckled, the sound reverberating in the small room.

"I can't believe it," she cried. "It's a miracle." Her voice faded into sobs.

"Sure is. Too bad your son isn't here to see this special day."

"It is," she said. "But you are my Peter, now!"

"It's so amazing we had the same name!"

"It's a sign from heaven," she said, and sobbed again.

"So the only thing we need to do now is secure the transaction fees, okay? It costs a lot of money to transfer over a million dollars, Pearl. So you need to deposit that check we talked about, okay?"

"For ten-thousand dollars?"

"Yes, but what's ten-thousand when you're about to get a million, right?" He laughed again.

"I guess you're right, Peter."

"You bet I am, Pearl. I'm driving over to the bank now to confirm the transfer," he said, glancing at his watch. "Once it's through, we'll wire the money right into your account. So what's the first thing you will do with all that money, Pearl?"

"I-I-I don't know," she said with a laugh. "It's so overwhelming."

"Oh, you ain't seen nothin' yet, Pearl!"

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. You will lead a pampered life."

"I was just going to donate some to the animal shelter in town."

"Oh, that's sweet, Pearl. You are such a doll. Okay! Gotta run! Make that payment, Pearl!"

"Okay, Peter, I—"

And he hung up on her. He dropped the phone on the night table, stepped over the rumpled sheets, and opened the door. The morning sun blasted his eyes, and he squinted, not seeing the figure standing outside the door.

"Peter?" asked a male voice, the figure blurred by the glare.

"Nah, man. Sorry. My name is Dean."

"I know."

"You do?" he said, shuffling back a step.

"Yes. I know things."

"Yeah? Listen pal, I'm late for a—"

"I know about the femoral artery. Do you know where it is?"

"No," Dean said.

And the figure stepped forward and buried a blade in his thigh. Dean squealed.

"It's right there," said the man. He yanked out the knife and a jet of blood erupted from the wound and puddled onto the filthy floor. "You should probably call an ambulance. I bet you're very charming on the phone. Better ask them to hurry."

He turned and left.

Dean collapsed on the floor, clutched his leg and turned pale.

Waterfall

Peggy Turnbull

Silken over rocks
braided by currents
you travel like a voice
that trills and laughs
its way to freedom

after a tumble
through nothingness,
you pool a moment
calm as the reflection
of a pastel sky

change things
by being
grab a bit of mineral
for your journey
through countless tomorrows

at times your banks expand
and torrents ensue

you recede
take on a new form
join earth and air
remember yourself

return
again
to water

Flooded

Alicia Cerra Waters

Water was frothing at the metal mouths of the gutters that lined the street, blurred with rain. From the first floor, Alexa watched the gray swirl descend, pool, and rise. A storm siren wailed in the distance, blending with the music from the TV, where Cassie played a video game in her pajamas. Cassie moved in last year after the landlord raised the rent. They both smoked and Cassie said she liked cats. It seemed like that was good enough.

“Should we go to the sub-basement or something?” said Alexa.

Cassie shook her head. “That’s tornados. Besides, they say there’s no way the city can hold all of this rain. Didn’t you hear?” The hot pink race car she was controlling blasted through a rainbow cube.

“Yeah, they said something about catastrophic flood conditions,” said Alexa. She yawned. Somehow, it was only Tuesday. She was getting hungry.

“It’ll never happen. If they didn’t scare people, no one would watch the weather.”

Alexa made a noise of agreement as she walked over to the kitchen. Groceries had been getting more and more expensive, and the cupboards didn’t have much in them besides an economy-sized bag of rice and spilled coffee grounds. Alexa frowned and dug around in one of the old kitchen drawers, where she unearthed an old pop tart. She peeled it from its silver wrapper and started to chew on the thin pastry, spilling bright red shards of sugar onto the linoleum. She glanced over to the cat food, which was still full from the morning.

“Where’s Mr. Whiskers?” Alexa asked. Sometimes he went out onto the patio to sun himself and watch the tree that rose over the building.

Cassie shrugged. “Check the bedrooms.”

Alexa did. She searched her room and Cassie’s. She looked under the beds, pushing aside wispy strands of the underside of the box spring, sifted through piles of laundry discarded on the downtrodden beige carpet, rifled through the closets, opened every drawer, and pulled out every desk chair. The rain battered the glass. When she

came back into the living room, she saw the water had risen to the curb in the street outside. A car was stranded, its lights casting two yellow cones into the gray gloom. A figure rushed from it, covering its head with a jacket as the wind and rain savaged the neighborhood.

“Bitch, that was my pop tart,” said Cassie.

“Mr. Whiskers isn’t here,” said Alexa.

“He’s here, you’re just not looking hard enough.” Cassie launched a mushroom at another cartoon character and laughed when its blue paraglider spun into the ocean.

Alexa rattled around the cans of cat food under the sink, clicked the can opener onto the edge of one of them, and twisted. She scanned the apartment, waiting for the thud of his paws as he jumped from wherever he was hiding to hurry to his food. Wind ripped a tree branch out of the sky and the lights flickered.

“Shit!” said Cassie, as the TV went back to the game’s home screen.

“Mr. Whiskers?” Alexa called. Sometimes he didn’t come when she called, even though Alexa was sure he knew his own name. If he got comfortable in a nook of her closet where the Christmas sweaters had fallen, somewhere dark, warm, and quiet, he might ignore her. He might ignore her if she called him. It was totally possible. But he wouldn’t have ignored the can opener.

“Cassie, help me look.”

Cassie sighed. “Okay okay. Don’t freak out.” She turned off the TV and started digging through her peeling knockoff leather purse.

The lights flickered again. Alexa felt a rising sickness in her stomach, like the time she found out that her birth father had another daughter her age living in Illinois. Alexa found out on Facebook, #takeyourdaughtertowork. The other girl had her hair, and was sitting next to her father on a forklift wearing a yellow hardhat. Alexa’s mother hadn’t told her. She shook her head and said it wouldn’t last, that he would be back before Alexa’s next birthday. He couldn’t stay away, she said, as she dug her fingernails into the steering wheel.

“Cassie, come on!” Alexa sat on the couch. She wondered if pop tarts could expire. She felt like throwing up.

Cassie canvassed the apartment, turning over the same piles of laundry Alexa had turned over, looking in the same corners and crevices that Alexa had already searched. She chewed her lip as she entered the living room and shook her head.

“Is the carpet wet?” Cassie said, lifting her foot.

Alexa looked down and noticed it too. She was standing on a damp patch of floor, and the longer her weight pressed down, the more water began to seep into her skin.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the wall. The white paint bubbled beneath a small river emptying into the living room. Alexa ran her hand around the edge of the sliding glass door and it came away wet. Outside, the water was rising. When lightning flashed, Alexa could see the green tips of the grass swaying in the new lake that had formed over the front lawn. Cassie opened a window. “Mr. Whiskers!” She shouted. Her voice was swallowed by a thunderclap.

“Oh my god,” Alexa said. She was out of cigarettes, so she went to Cassie’s ravaged leather purse, pulled out a pack of Newports, the paper trembling beneath her fingers. A few tobacco flakes fell onto the couch.

“Tried that,” said Cassie. “We’re out of cigarettes.” She sat back down on the couch and turned on the TV. “Listen, Mr. Whiskers will be back. He has one of those microchip things. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Alexa stood. She could see something floating across the water rippling over the street outside, a dark, shapeless form. The street lights were out, it was hard to see much through the steady pummel of the rain. She turned away. “I’m going upstairs.”

Cassie snorted. “To see that guy you used to hang out with on the third floor? Seriously?”

Alexa slung her purse over her shoulders and grabbed a pair of shoes. The socks she was wearing were soaked through, so she took them off and put her bare feet into her sneakers. “Yeah,” she said. “You should probably come too.”

Outside the window behind Cassie, the tree Mr. Whiskers liked to watch was illuminated for a moment, electric as lightning knifed through its middle. Half of it crashed, smoking, into the water. Video game music started up. “Maybe,” said Cassie. “I’m going to play one more round. We’ll see if the storm stops.”

Aquaphilia

Sydney Meeker

I want to fall in love with a benevolent sea monster,
spend a life cradling the idea of her,
the matronly and the beloved;
the simplicity and the conceptuality;

I want her kindness on the shores and seas;
and in every well and every glass,
all pipes and bottles, all snow and rain,
to know that every drop is a drop
of her.

One day I'll fall overboard.
She'll take me ashore and push
her water from my lungs.

All to tell me
to breathe on
my own.

The Loneliness of Water

Darcy Scholts

Water, the prisoner, flows fevered
in the chasm below the cathedral
locked under ponderous stone,
the brightness of blue
in the high windows
reflecting its sorrow and pain
trapped away from the light.

Brave divers in the deep
were made heroes below:
an underground pilgrimage
shored up foundations
beyond the world's reach
in and out of centuries.

New towers built
to perch on ancient bone,
their youth defined in millennia,
aligned to a new sun.
The oldest deeps point
to the oldest east,
aligned in their own
deepest selves.

The rising song of the humans
behind the beautiful walls of stone,
the bronze toll of eternity,
cannot slake unending
murmurs of the
thirst of dark water left behind.

Delicate

Jennifer E. Hudgens

It is possible to find
love in splintered bones
& shadowy eaves--
Thick song & somber
eyes tell me to wait
until the time changes
or harvest fails
or I am reborn into sparrow--
I am not delicate
not rugged or wanton
I barely move
not hurricane
not any meteorologist warning
flickers beneath my skin
I am reaching for holy
in the middle of my stomach
Holy oak or capsized canoe
to save me
I will stay free of these waters.

In August Company

Jamal H. Iqbal

They sold tickets to heaven, they did. Touting the flog, “In August Company!”
Those married on the Florida keys. In August Company.

Yesterday was much like today, they said. Just another symphony.
Comb-overs ruling with bent knees. In August Company?

But who were we to question? We had, chorusing our soliloquy.
Under cloudy trees, with Netflix breeze—chilly; In August Company.

At times crossing a heathen mind, instead, so last century
the thought of free will, unshackled, appeased, at one In August Company

that perhaps had answers in a bind, inbred. Serving a Stockholm penitentiary.
Of my own creation, begging for release. In August Company.

Moments filled with life, dance in puddles, inept. Gut feels are premonitory
slouched shoulders, where spellcasters sign treaties, In August Company.

Unicorns in lattes, coffee machine huddles, appraisals aren’t just monitory.
They point fingers, compliance decretory, employees all, In August Company.

Hell hath no church belonged, on earth your grief prolonged, Caesar you were not,
cease.

“Cynicism”, Agastya, sans Vedic rhymes. Reduxed. Lynched. Sage. In August Company.

The Never-Ending Script

Leah Mueller

the all of
reasons list
why endless
I that
shouldn't, everything:
and forget
then I
I you,
have to
to talk
start I
the time
process goddamn
over every
again. because
I place,
go first
round the
in in
circles, you
trying from
to wanted
remember
what ever
in have
the could
holy hell I

The Trip

Kelly C. Hanwright

We said we'd make the trip every year,
you'd show me the country.
That year, we saw everyone –
family and friends.
You marveled over the dogwoods,
told me the exact times when they bloomed, showed me
droves of them along the curve at Big Island Road
just before you get to Deville.

Hot season was just beginning.
How could we know the disturbance in your stomach
which you fended off with Tums
was burning up your body,
lapping at organs,
gnawing bones
like a brush fire out of control.

The next year, at that exact time
in the August heat, this fire
would be licking up the last remains.
Cremation was a fitting finish.
Afterward, we packed
precious ashes into the travel chest
replica I purchased from Hobby Lobby.

Forgive me, Daddy.
I could not bury you

in French cemetery with our kin;
had to bring you home with me
for one last trip.

You never had seen this home in Tennessee.
My fault—still afraid
of being on a long trip alone with you.
Still confused, uncertain,
I let our last chance pass.
But now, in your new-found form
you were not able to cause harm to anyone
from inside that box.

Secret Gladiolus

Dawn Vogel

Eight flowers stitched into my skin,
gladiolus, blooming eternally.
We joked about them being for when
I haven't another stitch to wear.

The memory of the sting and burn
of the machine, pulling, poking,
embedding the ink, my blood as red
as their petals, as you looked on.

Two years later, you were gone.
Two years later, I had changed.
From such pain comes beauty,
and something unexpected too.

The flowers burst forth,
their petals emerge from my flesh.
I have bouquets every morning,
leaving wilted stems every evening.

But only for August, the month of the gladiolus,
then hidden within my skin the rest of the year.
Unknown by all those who see my ink,
and a secret you'll never learn.

La Celestina, 1904

Marie C Lecrivain

“You’re a darkness gathered,” you whisper as you make a small adjustment to the mantilla in my hair. I close my eyes, as a reflex. Not many people come as close to me as you are now, and no one’s been as respectful as you. With hands like sable brushes, you rearrange a wisp of hair, tilt my head to the left, and straighten the folds of my black collar.

A rush of air hits my face as you move back to admire your handiwork. I open my eyes: on the left, you’re a luminous blur of motion, and on the right, your gaze meets mine, and smiles. You’re comfortable with me, which makes me uncomfortable. I know you understand, and this makes me smile, a little, on the inside. I don’t like to smile, except when it suits me, like on nights where, from my perch, I sense violence in the men who wish to do more than seek release at the gateway to the brothel. That’s when I smile, a great big wolfish grin, which, along with my milky eye, wards off the worst of visitors.

Now, you’re behind your easel. I can hear the brushstrokes against the canvas; long sinuous whirls, like rivers pushing into hard-packed earth. I wonder, again, why you chose to paint me when there are so many beautiful women in Paris. You could’ve had your pick of prostitutes, like the ones you painted in Montmartre.

“That time,” you confessed, “is over. Now, is what matters, and art, like music, must be birthed in whatever circumstance it finds itself.”

I’m no artist, or art lover, as most of my days are spent trying to survive. There are few opportunities for a half blind woman, and afternoons in museums aren’t afforded to me.

It’s difficult to maintain this pose, perched on this stool, in the middle of this room. The pain rises along my spine, inch by inch, until it radiates across my shoulders, into my arms, and then my hands, already swollen with arthritis. I strive to hold still. I do this every day, but I’m able to move, and stretch as needed. I still don’t know what you see in me, but I’m going to stay still until you’re done.

There's a lot to see, and hear in our shared space, like the way you furrow your brow as you paint faster, as though you're a predator chasing after prey. Or the way lean back on your left foot at certain moments, and your eyes sweep over the canvas to make sure you're not missing a crucial detail. Paint. Pause. Paint faster. Pause. Paint faster. It becomes a strange rhythm that runs counterpoint to my rising pain. The longer I sit, the deeper I sink into the music.

Finally, you step away from the easel. You come over to me, take my hands in yours, and massage the agony away. You then help me down and hold me up as I work the circulation back into my limbs. The pain subsides to a dull ache, and you offer me a drink of water. Though I wish it were wine, I gratefully imbibe the beverage. Modeling is thirsty work. I look up to see you smiling at me, but this time, almost like you're afraid of me. My heart sinks, but then, you take me by the hand, and gently lead me to the easel.

My face emerges from the color of a night that never appears in Paris. It's the blue hue of a soul in deep torment, moments before madness. It's the color of which I'm all too familiar. My right eye is a waxing moon, my left a pool of darkness. A slight smile appears, the inward smile I keep to myself. How did you know it was there?

I stand in front of the painting, nonplussed. I've no idea what to say. I feel naked, trapped, and exhilarated, all at once. Maybe there's nothing to be said. Maybe you understand, even though I don't.

My hand reaches out to touch the still wet canvas. I'm afraid, as one would be afraid, to discover the key to immortality.

You've given me a great gift... the gift of myself.

broken

Wendy Brown-Baez

it was just a child

 a sunny happy child

it was just a bullet

 it was just a heart

 broken heart

 mother's heart

 (she survived)

it was just an outing at a garlic festival

 it was just a nightclub a school a concert a theater

 a mall a public place

 a message and a warning

after all

we are free to carry arms

 free to be gunned down

 free to buy a semi-automatic

 free to be buried

it was just a gay a friend a coworker a church member a mother a son a husband a lover

a teacher a student a sister a child

it was just America

 we bow our heads and weep and curse

 and yet nothing changes

but that's the way they want it,

 don't they?

Superheroes

John C. Mannone

When I was ten, the only superhero I knew
was Superman on a black & white TV set
and the one, in color, in Marvel comic books.
No resemblance to me, and I couldn't fly
(except in dreams where I hovered over treetops
and built rocket ships to the moon from
junkyard salvage). I couldn't jump high either
unless something scared the shit out of me.
But I could run faster than a speeding bullet
and was more powerful than a locomotive
despite my skinny ass back then.

I ran parallel to the beach, accelerating
with each stride; committed to the plunge,
I pivoted as I rotated into an offshore wind,
my feet trenching the runway-sand toward
the bay's lackluster water, my arms folding
forward acting as a canard wing. I sprang
from my feet, my body lifted over smoother,
wetter sand leading to the surf while screaming
Shark (that super villain I planned to batter)!
I kept the beach safe, though nobody was there
to protect that early—the sun only a cool glare.

My head pierced the rising wave, its icy teeth
raked over my whole body, before tumbling
then spitting me out toward the pebbly shore

of the Chesapeake. I shivered in the foamy flow,
resolved not to be beaten. Shaky-kneed, I flexed
my imagined muscles bulging through the wet
T-shirt, shook my fist at the hissing waves
and prepared to attack again, but a little weaker
coming out of the swells. The last time I dove
headlong into unmerciful waves that day, people
started coming on the beach to catch the zenith sun.

I didn't yell, I simply resigned to nonchalance,
no grudge apparent in my self-composure. After all,
I couldn't even doggy-paddle. I didn't know
it then, but my father watched from where the beach
turned to sandy grass to thickening scrub brush
and loblolly pines overlooked the field where he
would toss a baseball to me later like he often did
before a Baltimore Orioles game. I didn't know
about mechanics of swimming or the physics
of longing to be thinking about that then,
all I knew was that I was a little tired.

So after a while in waste-deep water, I rested.
The wet beach near the ebb yielded to my
imagination (influenced by my father's
mathematical mind) and a plastic bucket
& shovel letting me build castles from moist
sand. And oyster shells found in the shallows
cobbled an escarpment I had planed smooth
with a piece of cardboard that washed up
and dried. I built the castle on a dune,
but the tide took down its walls, pooled
crumbled turrets that had rooked the slurry-sand.

The sun, heavy with ultraviolet air,
soon burned my skin. I ambled back
to the picnic area. By white oak table,
set with real dishes, my mother labored
over a charcoal grill. Marinated chicken
sizzled over ashen coals. The citrus smoke
kept the yellow jackets away. She smiled
at me while she sang *La Traviata* along with
Anna Maria Alberghetti on the FM radio.
Stopping for a moment, she asked in Sicilian,
Hai fame? I said, Yes, I'm starved!

I sat by my father comfortable in his lounge chair.
He toasted me, raising a glass of Dago red poured
from a grape juice jar—to not bring any suspicion
to the beach patrol. He had a different expression,
not that typical stern look from a life-tired man
pushing 72; his brown eyes had a glint of approval.
I didn't understand then, but I do now.
Dad may have yelled, but never deflated
my confidence. There would never be enough
kryptonite to weaken him, to keep him from
lifting me up
with all my heavy dreams.

Backstory: My father was far from being a perfect man or a perfect father, but he loved me. Today, August 1, marks his birthday, so I wrote this poem to honor him perhaps in ways he never knew. He was quite older than my mother (by 34 years), which explains the age reference in the poem. Both my parents (and their parents) were born in Sicily. In the poem, I use a few Italian references. One of them is *Hai fame?* (pronounced *aye*

fá-mě?). It translates to *Are you hungry?* The narrative is basically true and is a collage of numerous childhood visits to Maryland Beach on the Chesapeake Bay; some parts are arguably imaginative nonfiction.

Honeymoon in America

Marianne Szlyk

Riding the bus past Chancellorsville,
the site of the old town overgrown,
I remember that my parents
honeymooned here in July 1961.

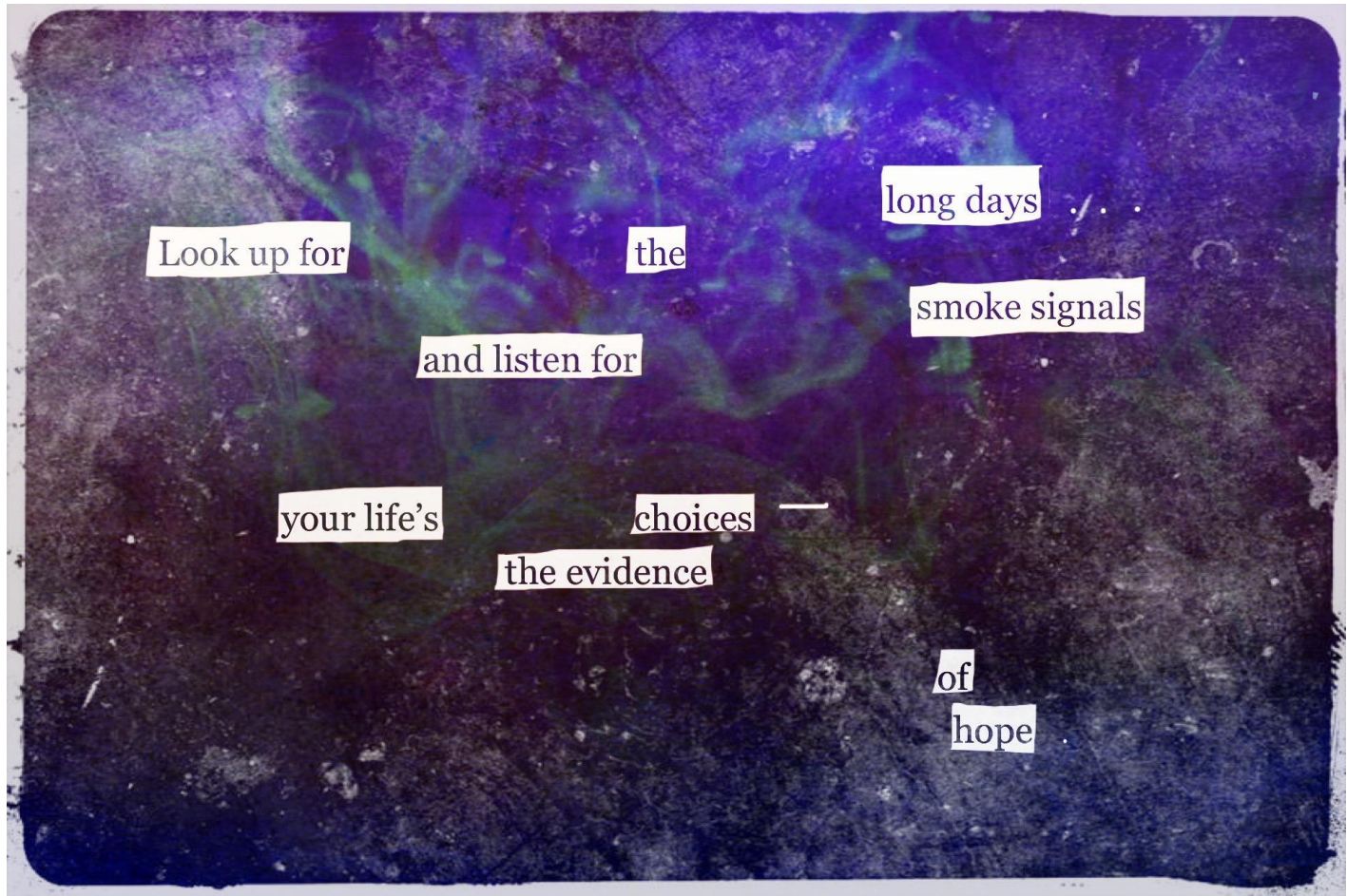
I imagine the quick trips
from battlefield to battlefield,
top down, windows open.
My father's crewcut resisted the wind.
My mother knotted a scarf
beneath her chin.

I wonder if they noticed
the colored fountains
or drank from the white ones.
Perhaps they bought soda
or sweet tea, a splurge
for the honeymoon.

I wonder what they heard
at the little stores
where they bought gas
and lunch. In the car,
my mother peeled off cheese,
scraped off butter or mayonnaise
from the soft bread, not
the Hollywood dark
she bought up north
to make ham sandwiches
while watching the news.

Long Days

Robin Anna Smith



Source: Erasure of *Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale* by Dan Albergotti.

Dragonfly #11

Marie C Lecrivain

As I drag my weary self back from lunch, the swampy heat rises from the pavement on Wilshire Blvd, A large gold dragonfly drops right in front of me, its translucent wings vibrate as steady as a heartbeat. It flits back and forth in front of the glass doors of the mega-building, as if trying to make a decision. I step to the right, and it follows me. I step back, and it almost collides with my face. A woman approaches from my left, her arms filled with bags. She spots the dragonfly as it hovers before the doors, and stops. We watch it fly in place, and wonder how did it get there, why is it here in this space, how come it's so large, and why, in this moment? Before our questions are answered, it rises above our heads, and darts away.

summer, like freedom
passes me by
too fast to hold
& too ephemeral
to remain

Patching the Leak

Darcy Scholts

Damn. A wriggle and slap.
I wake, swimming over backwater mud.
Did I fall, awkward spiral trail of oil and bubbles
in twisting fur, or was I pushed
into fluency in flow,
coursing in an ever-bending drift
on beloved byways?
This is not a nowhere road.
It's more than home: mom turf.

Damn,
I sigh.
What can I repair? First, inventory:
lively eyes longing east and west,
sleek sliding bullet-wedge
pouring brownly through the waters in the great dance,
celebration of tangled earthen shoreline.
I see the grumble of thorny thickets,
hear militant march of holly,
smell the dance of blossoming lace,
catch a glimpse of my earthy musk.

Mama is crying.
She's in trouble.

There is a crack in the water.
Beyond, darkness opens to buzzing knife lines,

glowing sound beyond sound,
whispering, cajoling, waiting.

Mama is crying.
She's in trouble. The dark is hunting her,
light-not-light is stabbing.

I find my teeth.
I must chew on this problem.
I reach with all my length.
I set name to trees: alder!
stalwart lines of buried secret fires
robed in victorious green.
None as powerful as I.

I reach and pull, drag and float.
Leaves crash and flip,
wood piles on wet wood.
I delve, and delve again,
deliver salve in screen,
pat mud into sylvan deeps,
cover Mama with protection
so the knives cannot get in,
so true light can dance on the water,
silencing the enemy clamor.

Roll, thwack, clap:
Mama is safe, the world
is protected in waltzing green:
Dam, I say.

Arizona Homecoming

Leah Mueller

The Greyhound bus pulled into Reno
twelve hours late, during a blizzard.
My three-year-old son and I started our tour
in Port Orchard, escaping to Arizona
for an unplanned midwinter vacation.

The brake drums froze in Klamath Falls,
and our driver thawed them with a hair dryer.
Two men fought in the center aisle
about the bathroom smell, while another
entertained riders with a monologue
about robbing banks and convenience stores.

He and his compatriots wore
opaque pantyhose over their heads,
so the illustrious band of thieves
was known throughout Nevada
as “The Silver Stocking Gang.”

My son and I spent the night at Circus Circus,
watched bored clowns sway on ragged trapezes
for minimum wage plus tips.

Nolan didn't mention the obvious:
we'd fled his dad and escaped south,
just like all the other losers.
Unlike them, someone would meet us

at our destination. My mother

hovered in the corner smoking section
of the Tucson Greyhound station,
cigarette blazing in one hand, ready
to take us to breakfast at the Congress Hotel.

The next day we watched Bill Clinton's
inauguration on television, and my mother said,
"This is the beginning of real change in our country."

It almost makes me glad she died
before she had the chance to be disappointed.

Two: In My Geekitude

Michael H. Payne

When asked, "Invisibility or flight?"
"Invisible," I answer every time.
Unnoticed, overlooked, and out-of-sight
Remain my goals. Consider how sublime

To vanish, insubstantial, more than gone.
Experience has shown I bother folks
Like sandy socks or someone else's yawn.
My very breathing seemingly provokes.

Which isn't true. My relatives and friends
Declare enjoyment, having me around.
And yet the sticky tongue of doubt extends
Throughout my thoughts until I'm nearly drowned.

But truth is secondary. What I feel,
However false, is carved in stone and real.

A Quiet Weekend in the City

Margaret R. Sáraco

It was a beautiful fall Saturday that beguiled my senses with colored leaves, rippling breezes and temperatures that beckoned me to the outdoors. The coffee pot was clean, the bed was made. It was time to take a walk. I tried enlisting the usual suspect friends but they all passed with excuses—no to a museum, no show, no movie. Instead, I grabbed a book and walked thirty-six blocks to Central Park with my step-counter strapped to my wrist. I was determined to at least get my steps in. At sixty-third street I found a bench and watched young families running after their kids, couples walking hand-in-hand, others arguing, older people accompanied by their aides—silent, teenagers skating and moping, running and laughing shouting obscenities—a typical weekend in the park.

Amidst all the drama, I finished my novel, *In This Grave Hour* by Jacqueline Winspear, a mystery about Maisie Dobbs, a British female detective, at the beginning of World War II. At dusk it was time to go home and thirty-six blocks later, I unlocked the door to my one-bedroom rent-controlled apartment in Chelsea made dinner, chose another book and checked my library request queue online. Not a bad day, a little lonely but not terrible.

Today is Sunday. I have no plans but I am always hopeful. After all, the best part is that I don't have to go to work nor think about it either. Don't get me wrong, I am one of the few that actually like my job teaching middle school, but I don't have many friends at work. They are really nice people but they're either married or busy with family. If they have young kids, they're hauling them to parties and playdates, meals with other families and always exhausted. If they have high school kids, their athletic games, tutoring sessions and college planning generally keeps them busy with family. The singles are too young and I don't fit in with their partying personas. They're work friends. I would rather find others my age that aren't in education. Still, on this gorgeous Sunday I could use some company.

When I was younger, I read all those articles about middle-aged women being alone and the ridiculous statistics about finding a husband. I have always been so curious about that because 1) I never wanted children and 2) I didn't really care if I had a steady anyone, but mostly 3) I never wanted to get married.

As a child, I watched my parents, aunts and uncles fight constantly. When they got too old, they gave up the fight but their anger festered, simmering like my Grandmother's Sunday gravy. Even my siblings argued with their partners too much but their kids turned out surprisingly great and well-adjusted. I absolutely love my nieces and nephews, but they live all over the country and scheduling time to visit is a major undertaking in planning. (I tap a reminder on my phone to call them and arrange auntie visits.) Anyway, I dated here and there but teaching usurped all my time. My social life declined rapidly after I got my first job. I was never very good at balancing life and career. I became a teacher so I could get lost in my work.

After breakfast I am ready to set out on my adventure. I know that I didn't want to do what I did yesterday. I want to have a great day today but as I am walking out the door I find myself slogging back to Central Park. I have my book and snacks—farm Gala apple, dried fruit and nut trail mix, homemade pumpkin muffin and a hot thermos of coffee.

I enter the park and see a crowd hovering. My usual bench is occupied so I wander over to take a look and see what all the commotion is about. A local city animal shelter has set up a pet adoption site. With my cloth poetry bag slung over my shoulder I can't help but wander into the fray. Kittens and puppies galore are in cages, some slumbering others clamoring to get noticed meowing or yipping for attention. A few of the pups are making funny noises and one older cat hisses so loudly I think air is being let out of a very large balloon.

A woman around my age seems to be in control of the entire situation; her take-charge attitude is infectious. I find her enthralling and can't stop staring at her.

Of course she catches my eye and asks if I need a closer look. Her short cropped blond hair is accented by a beautiful black scarf with dancing colorful leaves. She wears pearl earrings and blue jeans. I wonder if the pearls are real but it is her smile that takes my breath away. At first I don't respond, then smiling I come closer—drawn to her, the kittens and puppies. She is cradling a dachshund pup who is licking her face. A small

black and white kitty with a small black moustache in the corner under her nose is meowing in one of the cages. The woman says “she’s calling you,” with a twinkle in her eye.

“I know,” I say nodding.

“Want a closer look?” she asks.

I approach the cage. Now the kitten and I lock eyes. She rubs her body against the mesh.

“Do you live in the city?” she asks me.

“Yes, in Chelsea,” now captivated by the kitten and the woman.

“Nice. Lucky.”

“Rent-controlled,” I smile, lest she thinks I am a woman of means.

“Does your building allow pets?”

“As a matter of fact they do. The building is pretty ancient and the rules very lax. You can’t have more than two dogs, four cats and no ferrets,” I recite the policy.

“Okay,” she laughs. “Don’t go away,” she hands the puppy to one of the young volunteers instructing another to help me and turns to take care of someone ready to adopt.

“You can hold her if you like,” the young man says.

“I would,” I say. “Wait, are there are two in the cage? Are they related?”

“Brother and sister,” he says.

I know I will be going home with two cats, not just one.

The adoption takes time to process. They do a background check on me. Someone finds paper cups and I share my coffee with the volunteers and the woman running the shelter. In between adoptions she and I make small talk. Her name is Maggie. The young man who helps me formalize the adoption papers turns out to be a former student. I didn’t recognize his face but I never forget a voice or handwriting. He smiles when we make the connection waiting to see if I remember him. “Darcy, right?” I ask.

There is an extra clause for the adoption—I have to consent to an on-site visit from one of the agency’s volunteers to see how things are going. I am happy to have visitors and tell them weekends or after four o’clock is best. Darcy tells me that one of the volunteers will stop by next week. Everything is arranged and I leave to hail a cab, the kittens sleeping in their cage.

It's too bad I didn't get to talk to the owner of the shelter anymore but figure I have two babies in my care and am delighted. My nieces and nephews will be excited to meet them. Instead of making auntie visits, the kids will come to me.

On the way home I stop at a pet store in my neighborhood with a coupon I received from the adoption agency. I purchase a litter box, dried food, wet food, two food bowls, a scratching post, cat litter and a few small toys. A whopping \$150 later I am the proud owner of cat stuff. I'll have to make two trips to get everything home. Everyone at the store is so nice as we linger over my kittens who are very sociable. I tell them I'll come by tomorrow after work to pick up the rest but the manager walks me home helping me haul my goodies.

Back in the apartment, I make sure there is nothing dangerous they can get into. I had cats growing up so I know what to look for. Next, I shut several doors so they can explore slowly. I set up the litter box, pick them up together and put them in the box.

They begin to wander the apartment together. I watch them sitting on the floor. They come back to check on me purring the entire time.

"What should I call you?" They both meow. "Oh, you talk too?" I say to the one who was silent in the park.

"Are you hungry? I am." I call them into the kitchen and set a bowl of dried food for them as I make dinner for me.

As I watch them I know Monday afternoon I will be running home after work to spend time with my kittens. Tonight, I happily eat my dinner with them asleep on my lap. After I clean up, they yin and yang, curling up like one.

"Maggie, Darcy or someone else will visit next week to check on us. Either way, we're getting some visitors," I say to the two sleeping beauties before picking up my book, *To Die But Once*, another Winspear novel that will take me on yet another adventure. I mull over the character's names Maisie Dobb's and her mentor Dr. Maurice Blanche. Good names for the cats—Maisie and Maurice. We settle ourselves on the sofa.

I think of my good fortune today and all I had to do was walk out my apartment door.

Debts

Alicia Cerra Waters

I saw myself at nineteen yesterday.
I thought I deleted her,
but there she was.
Drunk, laughing, untagged.

Get out of here, I said.
I used the voice I use
when a student won't stop talking
or my cat claws at the couch.
I think it's pretty authoritative.

She was harder to scare than I remembered.
Why are there so many pictures of cats? She demanded
And no pictures of Paris? Or Bangkok?

I reached for my migraine medication.
Don't get me started on Bangkok.
Your bra is showing.
We can't afford
the fun you're having
so stop it right now.

She sat down and hugged herself.
I guess I'll be you
before I know it.

Just don't take out any more student loans.

I fucking mean it.
They cost a fortune.
I'm losing my shirt here.

She moved towards me.
She held my face
in her ghostly hands.
Honey, she said
You'll always be naked.

Blue Dream

After the digital art of Steve Johnson

John C. Mannone

There's a ghost
blue tint
to my dreams

where the kitchen table
morphs to desk
to bathtub

Dixie cups pass over
to faucets and
the fridge to books

to towel rack
and I'm stretched
out below the horizon

of porcelain
I'm breathing
water but not

ocean yet I'm drifting
in and out of memory
in between the seams

of now and afterlife
I am haunted
by you I hope

to wake before
I disappear
into the blue ether

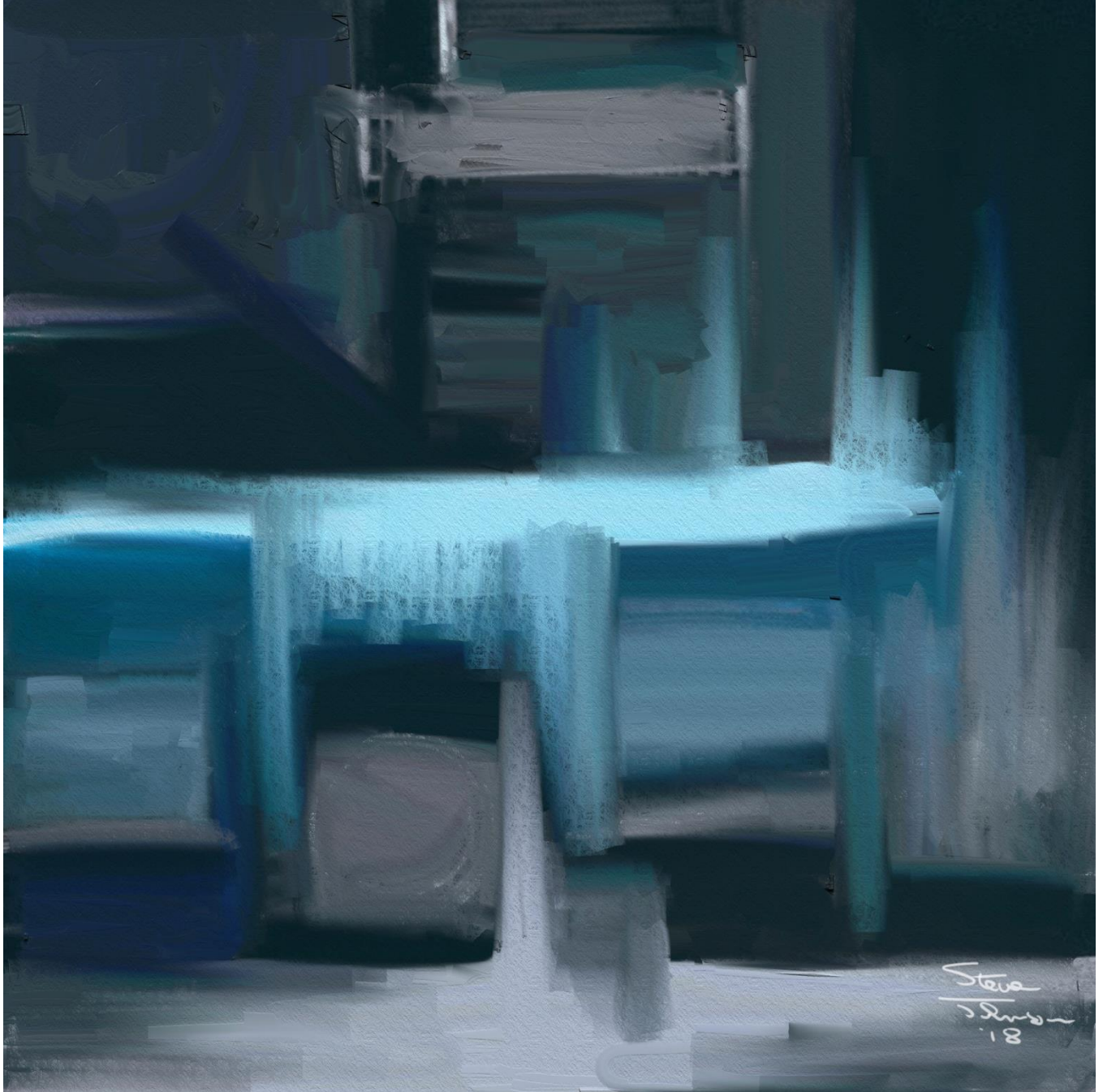
I am that ghost
bluer than my
coffin-shape

tub or the blue cover
of books the deep blue
paint of my desk

I am now
just blue
just a whisper

of mist
of soul
of what used to be me

Backstory: With this piece of Steve Johnson’s semi-abstract digital art (<https://www.patreon.com/stevejohnson>), I sense something dark and visceral, while at the same time it is softened by pastel strokes suggesting a dream-state. In this ekphrastic poem, I deliberately use no standard punctuation and effective line breaks to blur meaning and I stagger the verses to suggest something is in a state of disarray and doesn’t quite line up with reality—the surreal images echo that, while setting an ethereal tone to complement the ghost-like feel.



Original art by Steve Johnson

30

April Jones

I think I thought thirty would be meaningful even though 20 wasn't. I thought I'd somehow be different. It's not even disappointment in the way I am now, but rather I keep looking for an experience to define what this life should look like, but there isn't one.

There isn't one thing that says, this is who you were meant to be so I wonder if I'm doing this all wrong, is there one right way to live this singular life I've been given? If so, would I even notice?

Tucson

Wendy Brown-Baez

What I remember about Tucson is that I read about it in a National Geographic magazine—I had never been there. I knew I wanted to return to the Southwest but Santa Fe seemed out of reach financially and the idea of going somewhere where I didn't know anyone appealed to me. I didn't know how I'd do it with two pre-teen boys, scraping by week to week, but as soon as I realized that I was longing for the desert and for change, I knew it had to happen.

Tucson has a university, a large Jewish community, a vibrant Latinx community, artists and poets, warm winters, and a relaxed ambiance. It seemed large enough to find work and easy-going enough to make new friends. I wanted to reinvent myself, forge a new beginning and a new identity, not hide from the world.

What I remember is that my grandmother died and left me enough money to buy a station wagon and enough left over to pay first, last and deposit wherever I landed. My older son was invited to stay at the home of a friend for the summer and my younger son decided to go back to his dad. The fighting between them was unbearable. Wouldn't he be happier with his dad than struggling along with us? I was more than frustrated by our poverty and inability to afford the entertainment that might keep them apart.

So I sold the furniture that had once been my parents', painted the apartment so I could get the deposit back, loaded up the station wagon with kitchen gear and clothes and my word processor and pages and pages of stories and poems, and headed to the Southwest with my Israeli boyfriend. He already had a ticket back to his country after a disappointing year together.

What I remember is that we arrived around July 4th and went to a campground outside of town because the cheap hotels were filled. We strung sheets over the top of our tent for additional shade. Even under the trees, the heat was unbelievable. It was so hot my chapstick melted. It was so hot we wore bedsheets around our heads just to cross the road to the car and wrapped them around our hands before pulling on the car door handle so we wouldn't get burned.

Three days later I got a job with three families who wanted to hire one nanny for all their kids. I found a tiny apartment that I would move out of after a month because it was just too small.

What I remember is that winter was wonderful. One of the moms loaned me her bike, and I biked all over town. People gave me furniture, or I picked things up second-hand; we had a yard with a wide-opened sky, a view of palm trees and mountains without electrical lines crossing it. I would sit in the yard after work watching the brilliant pinks and oranges of sunset.

In the summer I would get ready for work by taking a cold shower. The wind as I sped through the quiet streets kept me cool until I arrived. But it was so hot in the afternoon, the families wouldn't allow me to bike home. They were afraid I'd get heat stroke, and they were right. We couldn't even splash in the pool in the yard. Ten minutes outside made our faces red and sweat pour down our backs. It felt like you couldn't breathe.

What I remember is that for my birthday the mothers brought us up into the mountains to cool off. The chill green forest was an amazing contrast to baked streets. My younger son came to spend the summer with us and the night before, my two boys had been arrested. They were just visiting a girl they knew, so the story goes; her dad told her to go inside and they hung around outside her bedroom window. The neighbors became alarmed and called the police. The police arrived with dogs and helicopters.

Little did I know that the city was rife with gangs and gang warfare. Gangs had moved from LA to Tucson, there were drive bys on weekends, and juvie was filled to the brim. When my son started high school, I was shocked to be told at the parent information meeting: If you see cops chasing after someone across school grounds, don't worry. It's not student they are after—it's gang members.

So Santa Fe was the better option after all.

What I remember is lightning flashing long jagged purple across the sky and down to the ground and feeling terrified as I sped home on my bike. A deluge. Flooded arroyos separating parts of town.

What I remember is that when it came time to move, it was no decision at all. My son was running around with teens in gangs, the court wanted to put an ankle bracelet

on him, the cops were advising me to crack down (as if I hadn't tried!) because they said, The guys inside will eat him alive.

Later he told me all his friends were either dead or in jail.

Now he's an accountant, owns his third home, has three boys, has been married 17 years to the same woman.

I think of the heat and the challenges of living in it. The north pole has melted, they say. The glaciers are melting, too, the temperatures in Europe are reaching 115 ° and my friend in Arizona told me they reached 120 last year. How will we survive, I wonder?

What I remember is that kind of heat is no place to live.

Dame of the West

Marie C Lecrivain

My sabbatical continues.

Sundays are mine - again.

No longer astride
the summit of the earth,
my spine aligns itself
to the profane path
of age and gravity.

I won't lie: it's difficult
to live adjacent to ecstasy,
to ignore the love
that flowed between us.

The door is ajar.

It would be so easy
to slip through
and find my way back,
but at the expense
of my soul, it's too
great a cost.

Wildflowers

Michael K. Hill

At first, he thought he saw double.

Outside the convenience store, two identical girls sat side by side on a folded red blanket by the roadside. They shared a candy bar. One took a tiny bite and smiled, then handed it back to the other. Though their ragged clothes had slight tears, their skin and hair looked radiant.

"Hello," he called out to them, raising a hand to wave.

One girl nudged the other and pointed in his direction.

He couldn't believe his eyes, they were gorgeous.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

They each shook their head.

"You look hungry," he said to them. "Could I buy you something to eat?"

The girls glanced at each other and nodded in unison.

"It's a nice day for a picnic," he said.

"We know the perfect spot," the girls said in perfect harmony.

He ran into the store and bought three pre-made sandwiches and sodas. For a moment he felt sure the girls wouldn't be there he returned. But he was wrong.

They led him down a path behind the store, through a dense growth of bushes, to a clearing that overlooked a pond encircled by lush grass and weeds.

"This is the spot," said one girl, spreading out their bright red blanket, as the other smoothed it out.

"What are your names," he asked.

"I'm Ella," said one.

"I'm Emma," said the other.

The young man smiled. "So, are you two sisters?"

"What gave it away?" asked Ella.

"Maybe the fact we're identical?" asked Emma.

Then both girls giggled at their sarcasm.

“My god, you two are beautiful,” he said, shifting his gaze between them.

The summer sun beamed down, making their golden hair glow. They each scrunched up their faces in embarrassment.

“She's the beautiful one,” Emma said, pointing at Ella.

“No! You are!” Ella said.

“I think you're both gorgeous. That's why I offered to buy you lunch.”

“It's kind of you,” Ella said.

“Yes. It's hard to find nice people,” Emma said.

They both looked at him with their piercing blue eyes and batted their lashes.

“Thank you,” they said in unison and giggled again.

The young man settled on the blanket. “Do you live around here?” he asked, touching Ella on the arm.

“No,” Ella said.

“Just passing through,” said Emma.

“But it is beautiful here,” said Ella. “Look at all the wildflowers.”

“Be careful,” the young man said. “Some of those wildflowers can be dangerous.”

“I don't believe that. They're so enchanting,” said Emma.

“And so colorful,” added Ella.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But some can cause rashes or worse. At least that's what my momma told me, a long time ago.”

“She did?” asked Ella.

“Yes,” he said. “Be careful of beautiful things, is what she said. It's nature's way of warning you to keep away.”

“I wish we still had our momma to offer us advice,” said Emma.

“Sure do,” agreed Ella.

“Did she pass away?” he asked, turning his attention to Emma and caressing her leg.

The girls both nodded with somber expressions.

“Sorry to hear,” he said. “Was she sick?”

“She was pregnant with our sister,” Ella said.

“Six months along,” said Emma.

“Then daddy got angry one night at supper.”

“He shoved the table against her belly. Hard.”

“That’s awful,” the young man said.

“She was hurting real bad,” said Ella

“But daddy wouldn’t let her go to the hospital,” said Emma.

“She lost the baby that night.”

“And died the next morning.”

“Daddy got arrested.”

“He’s still in jail.”

“How old are you,” he asked.

“Fifteen,” they responded in unison.

“And you have no one taking care of you?”

They each shook their head.

“Maybe I could take care of you,” he said, and again touched Emma’s leg. “Would you like that? Wouldn't it be nice to have someone take care of you? Does that sound good?”

“I guess,” Ella said.

“Sure does,” Emma said.

He crawled closer to Emma on the blanket, pressing against her, and he smiled. “I could be nice to you. Buy new clothes for you. Make a home-cooked meal. Give you a clean bed to sleep. How does that sound? Would you like to come home with me?” He leaned in and kissed Emma on the neck.

Then he felt a sharp pain in his back.

Ella shoved a blade just below his shoulders. He winced as she yanked it out and pushed it in again, this time lower.

“What the fuck?” he yelled, as he spun around to face Ella, giving her a chance to plunge the next strike into his chest. That one went deep, and with it, he gasped, dropped back onto the blanket and struggled to pull the blade out. “Bitch,” he managed before Emma stabbed him from the other side.

Blood spurted from his wounds, and he found it difficult to keep his eyes open. They each stabbed him again, and again. He stopped moving, and his blank eyes stared into the blue summer sky.

The girls rummaged through his pockets until they located his wallet. They pulled out the cash and credit cards, along with his identification. Then they rolled him up in the blanket and pushed him into a dense growth of thickets by the edge of the pond.

Real Fake News

Darcy Scholts

Composed, calm, unruffled soul
setting about its duties, methodical, unhurried:

Her organized mind is awake
and gathering all things needful

In steady deliberate step,
the day's plans laid out, like clothing to put on

Made well in advance, unstoppable, generating
ripples scouting ahead.

Even the chaotic, anxious, crisis-riven souls
all around will give way to her rational,
well thought plans.

Remind me one of these days
to point out what we all know to be

An eternal truth: The above description
is a complete fiction, an elaborate, enticing
illusion.

Shifting Course

Margaret R. Sáraco

I am sitting at a table outside the Bar and Café in Lower Manhattan beneath its red and white striped canopy waiting for the show to begin. I have made a mistake. Instead of going inside and getting a table I decided to get some air. The line was long, and the café packed with young people. I wonder if I am the only patron in this establishment over twenty-five.

I order a double espresso and some water which is not coming soon enough. Disappointed that I won't get a chance to hear the reading or the musician, I fiddle around with nothing in my purse then empty the contents on the table looking for my small journal. My bag is black, my journal is black therefore I can't find it.

If they keep the door open I could hear a snippet of music emanating from the stage. My embroidered scarf keeps me comfortable on this almost chilly fall evening; I keep my jacket on to keep warm.

The waiter delivers my coffee. As I sip it I am feeling sorrier and sorrier for myself. There is a waning sliver of a moon. I should write about that. How many people write about the moon? A tall man walks over and stands next to me. His gray hair matches mine.

"Hello again," he says. I just stare at him as my eyebrows twitch because I have no idea who he is. My guard is up.

Interrupting my silence he says, "hello again," and in typical New Yorker form I say, "I heard you the first time." That makes him laugh and I smile.

"Might I sit down?"

"You might," and wonder where this was going as I quickly put all my stuff back in my pocketbook finally locating my journal.

"I take it you don't remember me," he says smiling again. I push my glasses further up my nose to take a better look.

"You are correct," I agree drinking the last of my coffee in case I have to exit this scene quickly.

“I invited you to my reading,” he said taking off his brown, short-brimmed fedora and setting it on the table, sitting down. Instinctively, I take my purse and put it back in my lap.

“Don’t you remember?” he repeats.

The wheels, the ones that make up my brain fibers, begin to turn slowly, I feel rusty, so rusty I can hear the gears squawking, and then I blurt out, “Oh my god, yes, I do remember you.”

In fact the two of us had met in the park around the corner a few days ago. How could I have forgotten? I was having one of those lazy days, lolling in the park for a few hours, trying to think, walk, listen, and watch the crowds ebb and flow when mister tall gray handsome guy, with the brown, short-brimmed, fedora came along. He did invite me to this reading. I didn’t write it down but somehow I am here.

“I’m Martin, in case you forgot,” he says.

“And I’m Abigail,” I say.

“Nice to meet you again, Abigail.” We shake hands.

“Good. That’s done. Let’s go inside.”

“Sorry, no room for me. Did you see the crowd?” I frown.

“Nonsense, we’ll fix that,” he stands up and offers me his arm.

“Chivalry or chauvinism?” I ask. Either choice is not good.

“That’s why I like you,” he smiles. “Your choice.”

I take his arm so that I can steady myself, my legs are cramping, then drop his arm. He pushes and excuses himself through the jammed doorway like a pro. The two of us barrel through the crowd like iced popsicles, the artificially flavored kind wrapped in plastic, squeezing through until we end up inside at the bar. I couldn’t recall the last time I was so close to strangers and told him so.

I used to get so exhilarated being in a crowded bar, tonight all I can think about is if it were even possible to make it to the bathroom and how long it was going to take me to get out of the bar.

The bartender recognizes my new friend and notifies the owner the poet has arrived. He’s a regular act here. A four-piece rock band is playing loudly and poorly. I remember when I used to review music for some small magazines and would sit in these smoky bars watching performer after performer. Some of the patrons think that if the

music is loud it will sound good. I know this generally is not true. My head starts to pound.

I watch him. Martin is a distinguished name for a poet I think to myself.

“ANYONE EVER CALL YOU ABBY?” he shouts above the din.

“ONLY MY HUSBAND,” I shout back.

“DEAD OR DIVORCED?” he yells near my ear.

“DEAD” I yell back just as the musicians stop playing so DEAD reverberates throughout the bar. Some laugh. I frown. Martin laughs too. The New York crowd doesn’t flinch.

“YOU?” I shout forgetting the place has quieted down.

“Divorced,” he says in a normal tone and offers me a drink.

I order a gin and tonic. He has a glass of seltzer and promises to join me after his set for a drink if I decide it is still okay to stick around.

He gets some laughs for his funny poems and finger snaps for the more somber ones. The crowd mostly is attentive and quiet save for a drunken group of four who continue to talk during his set. No one hushes them. Martin makes fun of them at the mic and they good-naturedly shut up eventually, returning to the quiet glow of their phones and messages.

After his set, about twenty minutes later, he rejoins me at the bar. I am tired, but don’t want to leave but I still have to catch my train. I live only about twenty miles from Manhattan. I don’t have money to take a car service so it’s public transportation all the way.

“Do you write, too?” Martin asks. “I saw you writing in a notebook the other day.”

“For years,” I say.

“Really,” he says. “I thought so. You’ve got the look, and more so, the demeanor.”

“What was your other clue?” I ask.

“That you’d consent to come and hear me read,” he says as we watch the eleven o’clock metal band setting up. I hate metal bands.

“Time to go,” I say and get up. Leaving a sizeable tip for the bartender who comped our drinks. He picks up his brown fedora he rarely keeps on his head leaves just as the screeching, head-banging music started.

“That is close,” I say. “Too much of that noise and I will have a headache into tomorrow.”

Martin laughs. “Now what?” he asks.

“Time to go home,” I smile. “Martin, it was nice to talk to you, to hear your poetry, to have a drink or two, but it’s time for me to go home.”

“I agree Abigail. Which way are you walking?”

“To the subway, I say, “and back to Penn Station.”

“No,” he gasps, “at this hour? Why not stay at my place? I live a few blocks from here.”

“Nope,” I say. “Too soon. You might be a poet but you could also sideline as an axe murderer. I wouldn’t know until it was too late,” I couldn’t help smiling. There was no way in hell I was going to a man’s apartment I just met. On the other hand I am sure he is not an axe murderer.

“Well, at least let me take you up to Penn Station in a cab. The old-fashioned yellow ones. What do you say?”

“Okay,” I say, “I wasn’t looking forward to the subway at this hour either. I’ll give you my MetroCard in exchange. Deal?”

Martin laughs. “Deal. I really like you Abigail.”

After we hail a cab, traveling north to Penn, we chat for a bit. I don’t give him my phone number though I take his. He takes a few minutes to scribble something on the paper, and I wonder if he forgot his own phone number

We quickly say goodbye with the meter running. I lumber out of the cab to make my train. I don’t turn back until the last moment when I notice Martin hasn’t turned back and watch the cab wind its way up the avenue.

I am going home alone. I could have stayed with Martin but I am not that adventurous anymore. On the train I pull my sweater around me. The car is chilly and I feel a little buzz from my two drinks. Tired but happy. I will call him. I stick my hand in my purse to look for the paper with his name on it. No! Dammit. I’ve lost it!

I slump down in my seat on the train. I could show up at the café again next weekend. Maybe the bartender will remember me. Maybe the bartender knows where to find him. Maybe I can hang out at the park again, or maybe that’s it. Maybe I have to leave it at that. My heart sinks.

When I get to my stop I pick my tired self-up and walk to the car, look in my bag for the keys. There it is, crumpled in my bottomless black bag, I unfold the paper. Martin has scratched his name, phone number, his address and one line, Having met, we've changed the course of everything.

I smile unlock the door, climb in the car, start the engine and drive home to my ordinary neighborhood which, tonight, is looking predictable and plain. If I call tonight would that be too soon? I feel a bit giddy though the alcohol should have worn off by now. Should I call tomorrow morning or better yet in the afternoon? I'll call tomorrow at a decent hour and set up a time to meet Martin again. Perhaps a sensible lunch.

Indeed. Life was shifting its course.

The Trophies

Sydney Meeker

It was the trophies, first, that embittered us
That soured the ties between joy and adoration;
that adoration spoiled to approval-seeking and invalidation
that even now in these goddamn words I host the fear; in each of every words
I've written, in each of every world I've rendered, in each of every room I've entered
you have been there to rot me.

I do not want it; but you have taught me I am without choice!
Rot me more; drive me to hatred and malcontent!
Embitter me so none may prey on me!
Rend me into poison so I may control that which matters most!

It was you who soured me;
that drove from me the joy and good-will present
in all things;
It was you who embittered me;
who took the hints of love I harbored and shoved them out of my reach
who pushed my hate into my heart; it was you.

All of it was me.

Encroaching Sorrow

Chella Courington

“Do you ever worry about death?” Adele asked.

Tom made a noise, a grunt mixed with a sigh, and continued reading.

“Tom.”

As someone aroused from an unexpected nap, he looked at Adele. Confusion and anger competed with each other.

“What?” he asked.

“Do you worry about death?”

“No. It seems pointless,” Tom said. “I focus on tomorrow.”

Nearly fifty, she was seven years older than he. They had been married almost fifteen years.

“Have I always been this way?” she asked.

“Which way?” he asked. “Want part of a beer?”

Tom’s usual response to her unease. He knew Adele loved to split everything. Halving was a communal ritual. If we share our food, that’s the beginning: we’ll share our love, our interests, our life. With each year together, she grew more dependent. Saying they were Plato’s soul mates destined to find their other on earth though it took Tom and Adele longer to search through the mingling parts. And there he was in his jeans and white Oxford shirt, sleeves rolled up, hair reminding her of a Romantic poet. Thick, curly and shoulder length.

Neither imagined his losing it, but like the rest of their lives, attrition became inevitable and one November day she noticed a bald spot on his crown. It appeared without warning when she leaned over him in bed. A monk’s tonsure. A circle the diameter of her thumb touching her index finger. Half of an obscene gesture. She felt the skin, surprised at its smoothness.

“Tom, your hair is gone,” as if the utterance was the cause, the curse.

The clock went askew. Its hour hand flying from two to seven to twelve and around again and again. They could hear the clicking, the warning, the sign that life

would be different now. Minutes turned into hours so quickly that months obscured days then years. The tell-tell promise they would not be here forever. Like their parents and their parents before them, Tom and Adele joined the fold edging closer to the cliff. If Tom and Adele were lucky, they would be stopped by a stand of bamboo, giving them the time and space to take it all in, their life their love their loss, and would slow down so they could enjoy each moment, each day without being trapped in what might happen. That night, however, was not one of those moments.

After the Shadow Dance Workshop

Leah Mueller

Let yourself be
washed out to sea.

A cluster of bodies
unwinds, turning
inward and outward.

Tremble at the center.
Allow yourself to fall apart.

Your feet refuse to hold you.
Lie face-down on the floor,
cry as hard as you are able.

Sorrow forms the largest puddle
your eyes have seen,
but none of it will stay.

Move to fugues
you have not heard before
and can never hear again.

It is unnecessary for you
to remember anything.

Your body already knows.

For My Sisters, A Bequest

Dawn Vogel

What can I give you
that you don't already have?
Your lives are filled
with treasures of love and luxury.
Gold or jewels would pale amongst the rest.
A dragon or unicorn would only occupy more of your time.

Fleeting things are more your speed.
Experiences and memories
to go with those you've already made.
A trip to places you've never been
(though the list grows shorter each year).
An indescribable vintage of enchanted wine.

Immortality perhaps, to match my own?
But no, the years would weigh
on you, as they do on me.
You would have everything,
more memories than you can dream of,
until these things have no more value than dust.

But time,
time is what I'd give you,
time to do more, see more,
taste more life,
time to collect memories aplenty,
time to enjoy the love that surrounds you.

Longevity,
rather than immortality,
exactly the right amount of time,
time enough to enjoy the best,
before your life
becomes sorrow and loss.

Apollo 11

John C. Mannone

Saturn C5 thrusters rumble
the kettledrum of my ribs—the percussion
of my thoughts trying to keep beat
with my wild heart. It's shaking

the instrument panel and I'm pressed
twelve g's into the soft leather
of my thoughts of you... and of the moon
with my stomach in my throat.

Will I ever see you again? I wonder
at the view of Earth and the boosters
already fallen into the ocean, I am now
weightless, but my heart is heavy.

I see Luna, the sun-kissed edge, luminous
like your smile. Soon I will walk gently,
no, leap into the bosom of the moon,
but in tranquility, I'll be thinking of you.

Backstory: The commemoration of the momentous achievement of man walking on the moon on July 20, 1969 is still blazoning in my mind—those remarkable images of the launch, the view from space, and of course, the walk by Neil Armstrong and subsequently Buzz Aldrin. [See Apollo 11 Mission Gallery: <https://history.nasa.gov/ap11ann/kippsphotos/apollo.html>]

This could arguably be a persona poem written in the voice of Neil Armstrong, but more likely, it is an imaginative poem where I envision myself on that mission. Also, it is as much a love poem as one of adventure with much at risk.

Nine: Rarity

Michael H. Payne

Immaculate, projecting style and grace—
Possessing both those qualities as well—
She weeps, mascara running down her face,
Alone within her private carousel.

Perfection beckons, always unachieved
But always sought, a shining, distant star.
She wants its constant pressure unrelieved,
Demands the target move however far.

The others keep her grounded, let her know
They hear her when she cries: she's not alone.
Assisting with her businesses, they grow
And help her stretch her narrow comfort zone.

Artistic, still she expedites her plan.
I've watched approving since the show began.

Flirting with the Emcee After a Poetry Reading

Leah Mueller

Handsome with his trimmed
grey beard and fidgety eyes
that avoid my oversized breasts.

15 years younger, midlife crisis,
wife at home on the couch.

Like a nervous passenger
stuck in a train station waiting room,
demanding an arrival time
from the bewildered clerk,

he props his feet on the bench,
waits for the sound of the whistle,
drums his fingers on the ledge.

At sixty, I still palpitate
at his display of fading virility,
that low voice used to issuing orders
and asking questions no one can answer.

During our time of departure,
he hugs me longer than one
might reasonably expect, but I don't
pull away. I could have him, I think,

if I wanted. A couple more beers

would do the trick. He jots down
his private email, tells me to send him
some poetry, but I don't think

I'll show him this one. We move
in separate directions, north and south,
and lose each other in the crowd.
I'm sure it's just as well.

Resurfacing

Kelly C. Hanwright

The day I allowed myself to admit to me
that you were schizophrenic,
the world stopped as I knew it.

My mind blanked.
Recollections of our time together
disintegrated.
The bedrock beneath me
melted.
A black tidal wave
sunk those memories.

Remember the good times,
my therapist advised.
If you think back, you will see
moments in which she was really herself,
and not the disease.

My psyche made the endeavor impossible –
packed everything into a padlocked box,
watched it sink into my ocean
of forgetfulness where 10 years
it remained.

Still, the thought of your spirit
somewhere, watching,
sent me diving for the fort I built

from overtime and hunger,
immersion in research and knowledge
of anything *other*.

Brain on overload –
No room for you to steal
back into my consciousness.

Finally, graduation day.
I sat waiting
to receive my second degree –
the fruit of many hours spent
swimming against a clock.

Your memory bubbled against the surface of
my consciousness, recently liberated from her box-prison
following a tsunami of prayers
and enough tears to fill an ocean.

With it came a thought,
sown in my mind by another mother-figure –
Mama, I hope if it's possible
you are watching,
and proud of me.

It was then that I knew
I had forgiven you.

'60s

Wendy Brown-Baez

We hung out at the elementary school playground and traded records
we smoked cigarettes behind the church
we let our hair grow long & stopped shaving our legs, our armpits
we let our sideburns grow & wore fringed vests
we held hands when we marched
we yelled at the cops & called them pigs until we started getting shot at
we knocked off school & went skinny dipping at Chicky's Beach
we didn't have any rules so we made ourselves a family
we cooked brown rice & passed one big bowl
we passed the joint & giggled until we lost our breath
we got lost in school hallways, terrified of the winds of change we had set into motion
we took photos—we had no selfies—
we were present in the moment
we were brave and looking for America
we played music loudly & moved our bodies with joy
we let Dylan be our conscience and Morrison our rocket ship
we carried guitars & drums & flutes & jammed on street corners
we painted peace signs on our faces & on our converted buses
we dropped out & tuned in
we learned TM & breathed in & out in meditation
we borrowed clothes from the closets of our brothers & the attics of our grandmothers
we shopped at Sally Ann & Army-Navy stores
we baked bread & learned recipes for tofu
we stuck out our thumbs & went on adventures
we let Hendrix lead the way
we drank Boone's Farm
we fell in love, we hooked up

we fell in love, we broke up
we fell in love, we lost our virginity
we fell in love, we hitched to Woodstock
we ran away from home, from everything we knew
we were longing for home
we had to find out what we were made of
we really hoped to give peace a chance

City

Jennifer E. Hudgens

It's funny how many times
a man will pretend to love me--
just to crawl.

No, slither his way beneath my skin
this game has always been well-crafted
since my heart was still single digits.

How many times will a man claim
I am magic, am spellbound, ethereal
though banishes in ash & wreckage?

He tells me *I could fuck my way through this city, if I wanted to.*
As though this makes me feel special.
I am no longer a city.

Or tomato shaped pin cushion,
too soft to approach but not to ruin.

Not poppet with his will sewn in.
Not blood and bone.

There is little to knowing
I love myself more than any actor
Playing a sonofabitch
That claims to.

Rhaegar

Alicia Cerra Waters

Your voice is a thunderstorm.

I am not always ready
to weather your rain.

Your hunger is an abyss.

Always begging to absorb
More.

Your silence is a river.

I watch the waves of your breath
rise, crest, vanish.

Your body is a little brown egg.

I wrap myself around you
to make a nest.

Ghost Story

Margaret R. Sáraco

Walking angry and crying, by the lake on a moonlit night in open-toed red stiletto heels was difficult as you would imagine. And while Lacey's manicure was going to survive this walk, her pedicure probably would not. She was pissed at her friends for being such jerks. Lacey wore her grown-up shoes to the party, and they all made fun of her so she left in a hurry before she started to cry.

Why did they have to be so mean?

All the girl's parents were in town for a wedding. Lacey's parents had made a last-minute decision to attend so rather than staying all together in one house, for which there was not enough room, her parents rented a cottage about a quarter mile away. If she continued walking towards the lake, she could easily find their cottage.

She remembered her parents telling her the lake was dangerous at night and not to roam the grounds. Too late. In between sobs, Lacey tried to calculate the number of steps in a quarter mile. If there are 5280 feet in one mile, about 2640 feet in a half mile, there are 1320 feet in a quarter mile. Is that actual steps? Close enough, she thought and started counting. Lacey heard a weird raspy bark coming through the trees. She stopped counting to listen more carefully but didn't stop moving, her heart was pounding. She felt it in her ears. Was it a stray dog or wolf? Oh my god, she thought. She lost count of her steps.

She started to run and snapped a twig underfoot. The sound of the barking dog was closer and louder. She didn't like the sound. There was something else she could hear—music, in the distance. It sounded like one of the instruments in their high school band though she decided she wasn't sure what she heard anymore. Maybe it was the sound of a breeze brushing across the water but there was no wind. Could it be a bat? She stopped and thought of going back to her friends. She was closer to her parent's cottage, but no one was there. She could call her friends on her cell; her parents were at the reception in the next county. They would never get to her in time. Frightened of

being heard or seen, she turned the cell phone to vibrate and shielded the light with her dress, texting the group. *Scared. Come quick. Something in the trees.*

Lacey waited. No answer. She knew they would come if they saw her message.

She stood still and waited. Even if they did see her text could they find her? What if she got dragged into the woods? She faced the trees with her back to the lake. Lacey had to run or wait for help.

It felt darker tonight, the stars brighter, the water murkier, the sound of the raspy, barking dog more ominous, auspicious and foreboding. Lacey had been studying SAT words all summer and was working on grouping them to remember them better. She tried to keep herself alert by reciting them to herself—ominous, auspicious, foreboding lingering over the s sounds.

She looked at her phone again, hiding the screen discreetly. Still no answer from the group.

Were they drunk? Listening to music loudly? Did they invite those cute boys from one of the other cottages they'd met this afternoon over? A twinge of jealousy crept in.

She heard music again. What was that sound?! And that dog!

She took another step forward, two steps, three steps on the dirt path, the spikes of her heels digging in deeper each time. There was that barking again. Where is that coming from, she thought.

Something blocked her path. It barked that raspy voice, that thing wasn't a dog. It growled and Lacey winced. It seemed to be missing its skin, kind of translucent with a weird bluish sheen she could see in the moonlight. The thing had a bony tail and it was wagging it; Lacey could hear the bones clicking.

She slowly bent down to pick up a stick, the dog-thing crouched with her barking excitedly. Lacey threw the stick. "Fetch," she tried to shout, it came out as a whisper. The thing ran after the stick. Lacey took exactly one second to shake herself, adrenaline pumping and ran. She felt something drop by her feet. The stick. The thing was back. The hell with waiting for her friends she had to get out of here.

"Okay, doggy," Lacey picked up the stick again took a deep breath and this time shouted, "FETCH."

This time, as soon as she let it go she ran but tripped over a fallen tree. Stilettos were not designed for running. Her feet bent oddly and her muscles in her ankles were screaming as they turned in different directions.

“Oh, no,” she said aloud. Down she went. Her phone was now buzzing in her hand. Text messages were popping up on her screen from her friends.

where r u???

RUOK?

ru there?

UOK?

Can you get back here????

Lacey couldn't do much. She texted one word in response: *HELP*.

She was scared and crying when the dog-thing came back a third time. He was whimpering, crouched down next to her. “Oh, are you protecting me?” she tried to giggle, it was spooky-funny, like starring in her own ghost story.

Lacey took a deep breath, rested her head on some leaves for a second when she noticed the ghostly creature had a dog tag on his collar that kept lopping around its neck with no flesh to keep it steady. She turned her head, on the ground, to look at it but she couldn't read it upside down. She pulled herself up to a sitting position delicately turning the tag hoping the dog-thing wouldn't bite her. “Chester,” she said. Chester wagged his boney tail again and barked.

“So what are you? A ghost dog?” He sat down across from her. She was no longer scared of the him but he heard something and was in his dog-alert stance. “What is it boy?” She heard cracking branches like someone was walking. It couldn't be her friends, they were never quiet. Her ankles throbbing, Lacey tried to stand up. Chester growled at whoever was approaching.

Out of the trees came a man carrying an instrument.

“I see that Chester found you.” Immediately, the dog got up and ran to the man, bony tail wagging. “Sorry if he scared you,” he said, patting the dog's skull.

“That's okay,” she was shaking uncontrollably, more scared of this...whatever, “Is...is he a ghost or something,” she paused. “Are you?”

“Something,” he said.

Lacey could barely see this guy in the dark. He stood in shadow. He appeared to be wearing with a wide-brimmed hat, large dark coat, and chewing, something, maybe a twig. His clothes hung loosely on him.

“Chester only comes to see people he thinks are in need, you know distressed. He wants to help,” he said. “You were crying,” he explained. Lacey swallowed—how did he know that? The man’s face looked hollow.

“What kind of instrument is that?” she asked, hoping her friends would show up soon.

“Oh, this? It’s a clarinet. You play?” he seemed jovial, she thought—another SAT word. She made a mental note.

“No,” she said.

“Your friends should be on their way to come get you. You know Lacey, you shouldn’t be out here by yourself at night and liquor is probably not a good idea for a 16-year-old but I get it. I was your age once. C’mon Chester.” The dog didn’t move, looked back at Lacey whimpering again. “She’ll be okay, Chester, her friends are coming. I hear them. We can’t be here when they get here,” he turned to Lacey. “You understand.”

Lacey nodded not sure how she felt about being alone again.

They were walking back into the woods. “Sorry if we scared you.”

“Hey,” she yelled after them, “How come you can’t be here?” but they were gone.

How did he know about the champagne? How did he know her name? How did he hear her friends on the path? How did they disappear so quickly? No one was coming, she thought. Then she heard Tessa’s voice calling her name in the distance. Lacey screamed, “I’M HERE! I’M HERE!”

Tessa appeared and yelled to the others, “I FOUND HER!” Kneeling next to her, she hugged her friend. “Are you okay? Lace, I’m SO sorry.”

“It’s a long story. I twisted both ankles. Can you help me stand up? I have to get out of here!”

“Okay, let’s get you up.” Tessa held her arms while Betsy and Cara rescued her shoes and bag. “We’re going to take you to your house.”

“Wait!” she screamed, then spoke so softly they all had to lean in. “Did you hear a dog barking and a...a...a...clarinet?” Lacey asked.

They stared at her. “No, Lace, you must be in shock. We didn’t see a dog with a clarinet. We’re going to carry you back. Okay?” Betsy said.

“No! No. Did you see a man with a hat? He was holding a clarinet.”

“No, Lacey,” Cara said, “we didn’t see anybody.”

The girls were getting fidgety. The blood drained from Lacey’s face. They had to get her and themselves out of the woods.

They tried various ways of carrying her finally deciding to make a human stretcher. The girls in their fancy dresses, their muddy friend. It was quite a sight by the moonlit lake.

Back at her cottage Lacey told the girls what happened as they sat around eating an extra-large box of chocolate they found, downing it with a half-gallon of orange juice. They asked tons of questions. Cara, who wanted to be an artist, pulled out her sketchpad that she always had at the ready. She drew while Lacey described what she saw. They all stared at it.

“They had to be ghosts. Both of them,” Tessa said

“Maybe,” said Lacey. “BTW, that’s a really nice drawing, Cara!”

“I can’t wait to leave this lake,” said Betsy biting her fingernails. “I’m totally creeped out.”

“Agreed. Have some more chocolate,” Lacey said.

The girls all texted their parents to let them know they were having a sleepover at Lacey’s cottage.

Betsy, Cara, Tessa and Lacey all stayed in one room, badminton rackets by their sides in case the ghost and his dog came back.

Lacey dreamt about Chester and the mystery clarinet man.

When everyone woke up the next morning Tessa, Betsy and Cara were chatting about all kinds of things except for the dog and the man. Lacey, the last to get up walked into the bathroom. She looked down at her feet, remembered she hurt her ankles last night because they were wrapped in bandages but they didn’t hurt. Before she went to bed they were red and swollen. “That’s funny,” she said, “they don’t hurt at all.” She sat down on the edge of the tub and removed the wrappings, surprised to see there was nothing wrong with her ankles. “This is really odd,” she said.

Tessa knocked on the bathroom door.

“You okay Lace? Sorry again about last night. How are your ankles feeling?”

“I’m okay,” Lacey said opening the door showing Tessa.

“Wow, that’s pretty miraculous,” Tessa examined them carefully. “The pedicure looks okay too! I’m hungry. Your parents are making breakfast.” The scent of pancakes, maple syrup and bacon permeated the house.

Lacey and Tessa joined Cara and Betsy. The girls marveled at her quick recovery each taking a turn to look at her ankles.

Lacey whispered, “Can we talk about Chester again and the clarinet man?”

“Who? What?” Tessa asked munching a piece of crispy bacon.

“Cut it out Tess. Cara and Betsy, you know what I’m talking about, right?”

Nobody remembered anything except for Lacey.

“Maybe you had a nightmare and it seemed real,” Cara said pouring maple syrup on her pancakes.

“Maybe you’re making fun of me again,” Lacey frowned remembering the events that led up to her walking in the woods by herself. The girls exchanged worried looks.

“What’s that?” Lacey asked.

“My sketchbook, silly,” Cara responded.

Lacey flipped it open to Cara’s drawing from last night of the man and Chester.

Cara looked at Lacey, “I don’t remember drawing this,” she said. Cara looked at it more carefully. “No, that’s strange, I don’t remember. It is my work and my signature. I sign everything I draw.”

The girls looked at each other. “How come I’m the only one that remembers?” Lacey asked.

“Well, Lacey, you’re the only one that saw them. If you are telling the truth, I drew this from your description last night except I don’t remember you telling us this story or sketching this,” Cara frowned. “Something strange is going on here.”

Lacey’s parents carried in plates of food and set them out on the table, “Mom, dad, can we go home after breakfast?” Lacey asked a full-blown anxiety attack mounting. “Actually, PLEASE, can we go home NOW?” They all stopped and stared at her.

Her parents were confused and a little embarrassed by the unexpected outburst. The girls looked on. Lacey blurted out the entire story. Her parents examined her ankles which were fine.

“You probably had a nightmare,” Lacey’s mom said.

“We’re leaving at three today. Give mom and I a few hours to get ourselves together and enjoy the lake” her dad said.

Lacey was known to be overly dramatic. Maybe she was just embarrassed from the argument between the girls last night. This was her immature teenage response—go home, the same way she made the decision to walk out into the forest last night.

Lacey couldn’t do much more to convince them. Her skin was still crawling from terror. Cara’s drawing was proof.

“You know, you girls were lucky last night. It can be dangerous around here in the dark,” Lacey’s dad said. “We heard stories…” he trailed off.

The day had been unremarkable and her parents kept their promise to leave early. Lacey made sure she wasn’t alone even after her friends went back to their cottage.

She wondered if she imagined everything. But what about that drawing? They all thought she was crazy—even Cara.

Lacey went back into the living room to retrieve her phone cord. She hadn’t noticed it before—a painting of a man and his dog hung over the fireplace. The man was holding a clarinet standing with a dog—who looked a lot like Chester with his skin on. Did she really just dream this whole thing? Did Cara see the painting last night and sketch that? They were a bit tipsy from the champagne but sobered up from all the chocolate they ate. But that didn’t explain why Cara couldn’t remember her own sketch. The man and his dog looked really kind. Had she imagined the entire evening?

As Lacey and her parents were pulling out of the gravel driveway, she couldn’t help turning around to look out the rear car window one more time. Near the front door was the man with his clarinet and Chester without his skin, no longer in shadow. He was waving at her chewing on a twig and Chester was wagging his boney tail. She closed her eyes tightly and opened them again.

They were still there, waving, waiting. A cold chill coursed through her as she shut her eyes tightly, thinking of home.

The Final Winter (Glosa)

Dawn Vogel

"Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay."

- "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost

We see the dwindling
of the light, feel the chill
that seeps into our bones.
The days have grown shorter,
the nights have grown longer,
and the leaves have begun
their bursts of new color.
They are turning golden,
orange, and russet red.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.

We call it autumn, but
there's something more this year.
It shouldn't be this cold,
not yet at least, we think.
The darkness lingers like
a shroud upon the trees.
It rips the leaves from branch
and stem, none left to crunch
upon the barren ground.

So Eden sank to grief,

and fluttering around,
are moths with flimsy wings.

To double grief, they eat
the last that's in the fields.

No harvest, the farmers
tell us, no seed to put
away. A cold quiet
winter to come, broken
only by sobbing babes.
So dawn goes down to day.

A glimmer of coming
spring on the horizon
grows farther and farther
each passing day, until
they tell us the spring will
not come this year or next.
We are locked within this
eternal winter and
eternal night of no sun.
Nothing gold can stay.

The Last Poem

April Jones

This is it. The end. Roll the credits and clap
don't forget your jacket. Or your purse
I can't wait to hear your thoughts
or grab another drink before I ditch my nice clothes
for yoga pants and Netflix, leftovers my love
handles don't need. I'll eat them anyway because
who forgets day old Chinese? Still, let's do this again
soon. Maybe next time you can choose
or I heard your favorite band is coming to town, and
it's been forever since I went out.

The Writers



Wendy Brown-Baez

Wendy Brown-Baez is the author of *Heart on the Page: A Portable Writing Workshop*, a novel *Catch a Dream*, and two books of poetry. She facilitates writing workshops in community spaces such as libraries, schools, churches, state prisons, yoga studios, and healing centers. To read more about her work: www.wendybrownaez.com



Chella Courington

Chella Courington is a writer and teacher with a Ph.D. in American and British Literature and an MFA in Poetry. Her poetry and fiction appear or are forthcoming in numerous anthologies and journals including *Spillway*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and *The Los Angeles Review*. Originally from the Appalachian South, Courington lives in California with another writer and two cats.



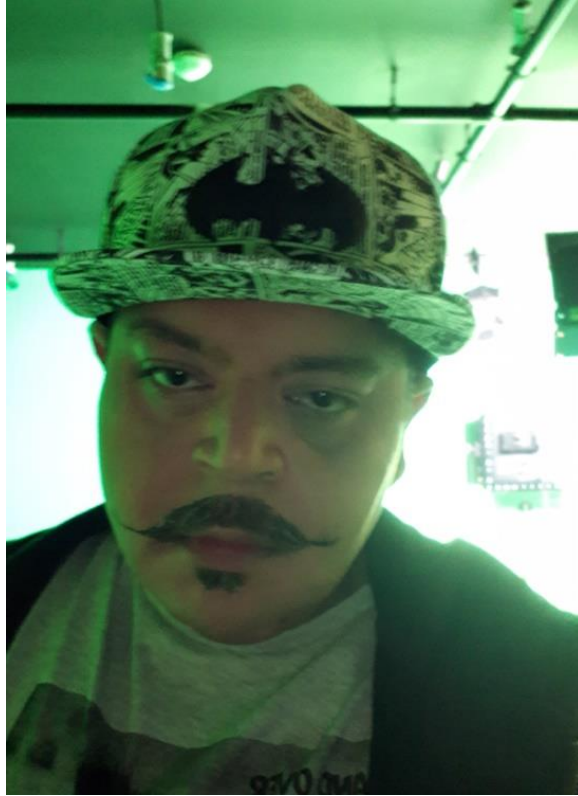
Kelly Hanwright

Kelly Hanwright is a poet, teacher, and dog trainer living in the beautiful Smoky Mountains. She is a Pushcart nominee whose work has appeared in various venues including *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Lady Literary Magazine*, and *American Diversity Report*. Her poetic memoir on growing up with a mentally ill parent is in progress.



Jennifer E. Hudgens

Jennifer E. Hudgens (she/her/they/them) is an Oklahoma poet, currently an MFA candidate at Oklahoma State University. Jennifer has been published in some stuff and sincerely hopes you enjoy her poems.



Jamal H. Iqbal

Jamal H. Iqbal is a RETIRED actorwriterpoetcomicartistentrepreneursingerproducercreativestrategist whose poetry, flash, essays and art were once published in journals across various countries. A philomath he now walks free seeking UNRETIREMENT or Valhalla; whichever comes first.



April Jones

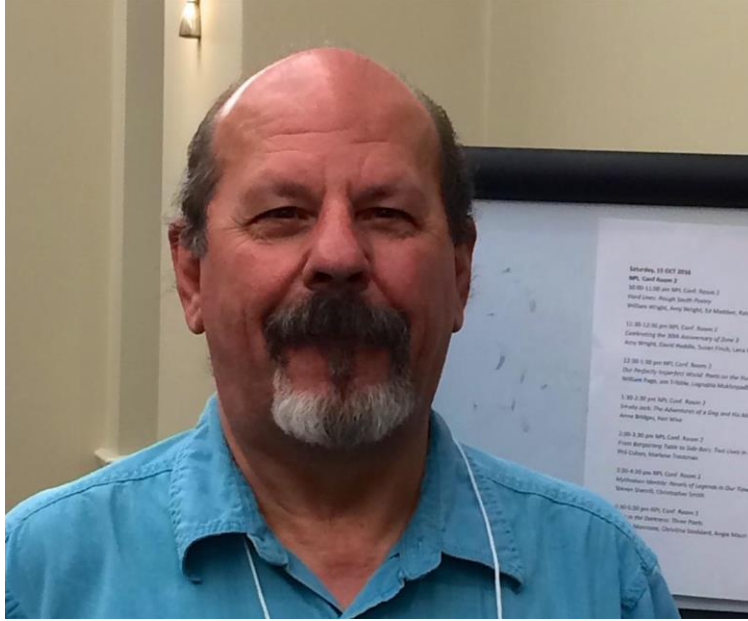
April Jones has read, written, or edited her way through dozens of fictional worlds. When she's not teaching or writing, she spends her time trying to learn other languages or keeping her mischievous cat from eating the pet fish. She received her bachelor's in English and her M.F.A. in creative writing.

A Tennessee native, April currently lives in Michigan with her husband and three children. You can find her poems and short stories published in various literary magazines across the internet and in print. You can also check out her debut novel, *The Curse Breaker*. For more information visit her website thepathstory.com



Marie C Lecrivain

Marie C Lecrivain is a poet, publisher, and ordained priestess in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the ecclesiastical arm of Ordo Templi Orientis. Her work has been published in *Nonbinary Review*, *Orbis*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and many other journals. She's the author of several books of poetry and fiction, and recent editor of *Gondal Heights: A Bronte Tribute Anthology* (copyright 2019 Sybaritic Press, www.sybpress.com).



John C. Mannone

John C. Mannone has work in or forthcoming in the *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Anacua Literary Arts Journal*, *Adanna Literary Review*, *Nthanda Review*, *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, *New England Journal of Medicine* and others. He won the Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as the contest's celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). His third collection, *Flux Lines*, is forthcoming (2020). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals, and is a retired physics professor living in east Tennessee. <http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>

Sydney Meeker

Sydney Meeker is a Portland, Oregon-based writer of interactive fiction, short stories, and poetry. His work has appeared in *Zoetic Press*, *Entropy Mag*, *Prismatica Mag*, and others. He currently works as a full-time interactive novelist. When he's not writing, he can be found playing video games, getting lost in the woods, or sometimes doing both at the same time. You can find him on Twitter @SydMeeker.



Michael H. Payne

Michael H. Payne's novels have been published by Tor Books and Sofawolf Press, his short stories have appeared in *Asimov's* and 11 of the last 12 volumes of *Sword & Sorceress*, and his poems can be found in *Silver Blade* and the 2019 *Rhysling Award* anthology.



Margaret R. Sáraco

Margaret R Sáraco's poetry and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies, including *The Paterson Literary Review Peregrine*, *Lips*, *Exit 13*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Poeming Pigeon's Love and Sports*, *Write Like You're Alive 2018*, *The Write Group Sampler*, *Shalom*, *New Jersey Peace Poems* and *Show us your Papers*.



Darcy Scholts

Darcy J. Scholts is a children's representation attorney working with juvenile offenders and youth in the foster care system. She is a transplant from the Southwest to the Pacific Northwest, a folklore and mythology enthusiast, and generally finds herself managed by and in the company of one or two cats. She has written poetry since her teens.



Shloka Shankar

Shloka Shankar is a freelance writer and visual artist from Bangalore, India. She loves experimenting with Japanese short-forms and found poetry alike. A Best of the Net nominee, her poems have most recently appeared/forthcoming in *Silver Blade*, *Moonchild Magazine*, *Bones*, *Burning House Press*, *NOON: journal of the short poem*, *UnLost Journal*, and elsewhere. Shloka is the founding editor of *Sonic Boom*, its imprint Yavanika Press, and Senior Editor at *Human/Kind Journal*.



Robin Anna Smith

Robin Anna Smith (they/them/Mx) is a chronically ill and disabled nonbinary trans femme who writes and creates visual art. Their work focuses on disability, gender, trauma, and systems from a neurodiverse perspective. They are the managing editor of *Human/Kind Journal* and associate editor at both *Sonic Boom* and Yavanika Press.



Marianne Szlyk

Marianne Szlyk is a professor of English and Reading at Montgomery College. She also edits *The Song Is...* a blog-zine for poetry and prose inspired by music (especially jazz). Her book, [*On the Other Side of the Window*](#), is now available on Amazon. Another book, *Poetry en Plein Air*, will be available soon from Pony One Dog Press. Her poems have also appeared in *of/with*, *bird's thumb*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Bourgeon*, *Nixes Mate*, *One Sentence Poems*, *Red Bird Chapbook's Weekly Read*, and *Music of the Aztecs*. She lives near Washington, DC with her husband, environmental writer and wry poet Ethan Goffman as well as the cats Callie and Thelma.



Dawn Vogel

Dawn Vogel's academic background is in history, so it's not surprising that much of her fiction is set in earlier times. By day, she edits reports for historians and archaeologists. In her alleged spare time, she runs a craft business, co-edits *Mad Scientist Journal*, and tries to find time for writing. Her steampunk adventure series, *Brass and Glass*, is available from DefCon One Publishing. She is a member of Broad Universe, SFWA, and Codex Writers. She lives in Seattle with her husband, author Jeremy Zimmerman, and their herd of cats. Visit her at <http://historythatneverwas.com>.



Alicia Cerra Waters

Alicia Cerra Waters is a writer and educator. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and son. She has been published in *365 Tomorrows*, *Writers Resist*, and the *Write Like You're Alive* anthologies.



Michael K. Hill

Beginning as a sketch comedy writer for American television, [Michael K. Hill](#) switched to freelance fiction and non-fiction writing. His debut novel, *[A Different Time](#)*, is available now. He lives in Connecticut with his wife, kids, and 8 rescued animals.

