

LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 1 • JUNE 2023

# LIT SHARK

*magazine*



SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO



## CONTENT

Dear readers, we always want to support you and give you the information you need to have the best reading experience possible. Please note that Issue 1 contains some content pertaining to child loss, depression, and drug use. There is one illusion to suicide, 2-3 illusions to sexual activity, and a few uses of expletives. Thank you again for your support. We hope you will enjoy our inaugural issue.

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Editor-in-Chief: McKenzie Lynn Tozan

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

To say that this first issue is a long time coming would be an understatement of epic, ten-thousand leagues under the sea—plus the jellyfish scene from *Sphere* thrown in—proportions.

Okay, maybe that's an overstatement—especially that last addition (if you know, you know). That all said, puns and dramatics aside, I've been dreaming of getting Lit Shark Magazine and the writing community it entails, off the ground since 2015. I was on my lunch break, still at my desk at my (insert an adjective here) corporate job and peering over my creative writing notebook. In it, I had just written the words, "Shark Literary Magazine," and from that blue ink poured countless possibilities. I imagined having a magazine for emerging and established writers, another magazine for teens and children who were interested in creative writing, writing prompts, a writing community who welcomed open mics, writing workshops, and MFA-level courses, and of course, increased awareness about marine life (especially debunking the horror myths around the shark) and donations and involvement to conservation efforts.

This giant, sudden dream was explored deeply that lunch break, until that lunch break ended and the notebook closed—and then

the concept was left to tread water for another 8 years. I had a few-month-old daughter at the time and went on to have two little boys, I started freelance writing full-time, and I started accepting clients who needed writing, editing, marketing, and publishing services (which I call "Book Strategy") and now offer through the Shiver Collective, partnered with Lit Shark, and I moved countries!

I don't regret all of those efforts and the amount of time that's passed, but I'm grateful I never let the concept of Lit Shark go and am chasing it now—but I'm even more grateful for the reception it's had so far. For Issue 1 alone, I received more than 350 unique submissions (and that's not including the 5 to 10 pieces each of those 350 writers sent me!), and I have already chosen several pieces for Issues 2 (the Shark Week Edition) and 3 (the Spooky Edition). They've ranged from conservation and marine-centric stories and poems, to self-discovery, to pain, to love and heartbreak, and more, and reading this wealth of talent and formulating my favorites (not the pieces I *liked*, but my *favorites*) was a blessing. I'm still floored.

I deeply hope that you feel the passion contained in these pages that I felt while reading these writers' works—and which I also poured in myself while formulating it. From naturalist, ecopoetic pieces to new love to the concept of letting go, I believe there are stories and poems for everyone contained in these pages.

And for full transparency—there is one poem by yours truly in here. This will only occur in Issue 1; when I first came up with Shark, I wrote a large batch of poems about marine life, and the poem I've included is a revised edition of one of those poems. I thought it would be fun to share a piece from the time the magazine was first dreamed of, and to celebrate Issue 1 by living on both sides of the desk as Editor-in-Chief and Poet.

Thank you all so much for your support. I hope you love all of these words as much as I do.

Until Issue 2,  
McKenzie  
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan  
June 2023

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**ONE:  
NATURE**

STEPHEN MEAD

## GUMPTION

Again come the turtles, every year  
little hatchlings turning themselves  
over, making their way from the eggs,  
this sand, a testing ground the sea  
gives birth to and reclaims.

We too are homing.

Crawl, stumble, learn to float.

Brutality has to answer. It's been here  
from the start, a cannibal galaxy  
gentled somewhere, every second,  
somewhere . . .

Keep duality in mind, the headlights  
of a funeral procession, these faithful  
imprints driving, driven.

Spawned thus, we do what we are able:  
use dreams to raise truth and stand  
prepared for surprise, be it these circling  
vultures or laughter's lightning  
cracking darkness,  
a shell surviving by splitting  
from the inside on out.

ASHLEY KNOWLTON

## AGATE

agate on the beach  
no, it's green sea glass no, it's  
worn neon plastic

URSULA MCCABE

## TIDAL MOUTH OF THE SHORE

*"When you die," her father told her,  
"all the elements of your body wash  
into the stream of living things."*

—Kathleen Dean Moore

I am picked up  
with webbed paws  
by a whiskered otter who  
meanders down a stream.  
This old body is headed  
for the sea.  
All the cells, tissues  
and organs are molting,  
they surrender with no grace.  
Algae begins to grow,  
there is moss on my face  
and so the sea keeps me  
at the estuary  
and allows my grizzled edges  
to scrape the river bank.  
Edible plants rock loose  
and ride the current—  
for anyone else  
who awaits death  
with their green desires.  
Cattail reeds  
entangle me up in their roots.  
There is still enough of me  
to hold my breath



ALAN COHEN

## **STOPPING BY POND IN JAPANESE GARDEN**

so the marsh wren will  
use me for firm footing,  
and open its beak.  
My goodbye will be a  
liquid song  
spilling into a misty morning.

We stop  
Go completely still  
There is a greater stillness ahead  
But this stillness satisfies  
Something busier in us  
Than hunger or blood

EDWARD AHERN

## THE DOGFISHERMAN

The thigh-deep tide rip pushed his right leg into his left, teetering him. He braced himself with each step, waddling out bandy legged, further and deeper.

Danny pushed into the ebbing tide to stretch his time at the end of the shoal. He knew without looking at shore lights where he was by the bottom—sand, then gravel and stones, then mussel beds, then round rocks covered in weeds. Sometimes it helped to try and count the sluggish paces, but he always lost track, diverted by a fish splash, or another fisherman, or his own inward twisting thoughts.

The shoal grabbed toward the Penfield lighthouse but never reached it, knuckling southward into boulders and deeper water where fish sometimes lay. Danny had about four hours to fish before slack low water. He fished the ebb and not the incoming—several fishermen had stayed out too long on an incoming tide, been washed off the slimy rocks, and drowned.

His favorite hours were between midnight and 4 A.M., the dark still when striped bass were active. There was rarely anyone else at the tip of the reef, except, from time to time, for Ralph. Danny worried that he and Ralph were too much alike, given that Ralph was at least eccentric if not a little crazy. Ralph was there that night. And that night, he showed Danny something.

“Ralph.”

“Danny.”

The moon’s crescent was emptying out, but there was enough light to see Ralph’s face. Concave cheeks sloped into wrinkled lips and missing teeth. Danny thought again that if Ralph wasn’t a meth

addict, he should have been.

“Any luck?” A politely meaningless question, Ralph’s rod was bent in an arc indicating a fish of perhaps four or five pounds.

Danny stopped two yards shallower than Ralph, not wanting to interfere with his playing of the fish.

The striper splattered water as Ralph reeled it in. Then, uncharacteristically, Ralph gave the fish slack and it was off.

“Not like you to lose a fish Ralph.”

“How long have we seen each other on the reef, Danny?”

“Maybe five, six years, now and then.”

“You fish like I do. Live like I do, too. Ex-wife, kids gone. Still no job?”

“Not yet. Surviving on workman’s comp. Why the hell else would I be out here at one in the morning trying to catch dinner?”

“Yeah. Dunno about you, but this time of night, when I can’t sleep, it’s better for me to be up to my ass in water with nothing to abuse.”

“Something like that. Not many people are stupid enough to be out here with us.”

Ralph paused. “I think I need to show you something, Danny, but you have to keep your mouth shut.”

“About what?”

“Easier if I show you. Stick with me.”

The instruction wasn’t necessary. Ralph had a peculiar way of fishing, but he was usually into stripers or blues and Danny shadowed him. Ralph studied the mottled surface of the water for a minute, then shifted twenty yards to his left and cast.

He hooked up immediately with another small striper and reeled it in. With smooth, unconscious motions, he tucked his rod under his right arm, grabbed the fish’s mouth with his left hand, and twisted out the lure with his right.

Dropping the lure into the surf, Ralph fisted a knife slung on a lanyard around his neck, slashed the little striper's gills and tossed it back out.

The fish didn't live long enough to bleed to death. Three and four foot blue-black ribbons surged at the fish and tore it apart.

"Jesus, Ralph, what the hell was that?"

"Dogfish, spiny dogfish."

"Did you know they were there?"

"They're out here a lot of nights when I'm alone. I was surprised they hung around when you arrived. When somebody else shows up, they disappear. When they stayed, I figured they wanted me to show you."

"Holy shit. And you feed them?"

"Yeah. I keep a big fish to eat, but toss out maybe a dozen small fish during one tide swing."

Danny had caught dogfish when he fished with bait at night, and had worried every time he had to reel one in. Over three feet long, snake skinny, with mildly poisonous spines, shark teeth, and black, shiny eyes. Sometimes other sharks in the school would follow their pack mate in, waiting. Even with pliers, Danny had never tried to take out the hook, and had just cut the leader.

"How many stripers tonight, Ralph?"

"One for me, maybe six or seven for my friends."

"They never bother you, or the fish on the stringer?"

"Never. If I watch close, I can see them in the water. There's one old shark that's easier to spot. He swirls so I can see him, then sets up at an angle, like a hand on a clock face. If I wade toward where he's pointing, I'm almost always into fish. He gets what I don't keep."

"That's crazy."

"Come stand next to me. Look where I'm pointing. Really look. Look through the surface, into the water, it's dark blue on black,

but when he moves, you get a glimpse of his belly. There, see it?"

"God damn. That's a shark?"

"See where he's pointing?"

They both brought fish ashore that night. Danny came back to the reef two or three nights that week, but only saw Ralph once. And the fishing while Ralph was there was good. Danny had tried to get Ralph to tell him in advance when he was going to the reef, but Ralph claimed not to know until just before he left his little apartment.

"I just get an urge, a feeling, and I come out to the reef."

Once when the fishing had slowed, Danny moved closer to Ralph. "I don't care, but why do you feed the sharks? They just scare away the other fish."

"No, it's the opposite. The sharks are here because the other fish are." Ralph cast and slowly retrieved his swimming lure. "What do you know about dogfish?"

"Nothing, other than I don't like catching them."

"They'd probably be in the top five most successful species—men. rats, cockroaches, then maybe dogfish. There are more dogfish than any other shark, despite that they're heavily fished—their fins get shipped off to the Asians and the rest is processed into pet food and fertilizer. They give birth to live babies, like we do, and their pregnancy is way longer than an elephant's, longer than any other animal with a backbone. They hang out together. A small pack is a hundred sharks, a big one is maybe a thousand. Some live to be fifty. Survivors.

"I, I rely on them—they tell me where to go, where to fish. And I pay them back."

Danny and Ralph sporadically talked as they fished, mostly about the obvious—divorce, lack of money, health problems—but not about everything. Like many men, they hinted at their short-

comings by the absence of information, and over time, in weaving together what had been left unsaid, they sensed the shape of each other's demons, the ones neither wanted to be ashore with after midnight.

They fished together perhaps once a week. Ralph got skinnier and weaker that summer, and Danny, in an unobtrusive way began helping him on and off the reef, started towing Ralph's fish behind him along with his own.

And then Ralph stopped coming. After a week, Danny checked with the landlord, who opened up the flat. Nothing. A half a dozen changes of clothes, paperwork from Medicare and Social Security, a few family pictures. Old textbooks on chemistry and a framed diploma- in another life Ralph had been a chemist. Nothing else. Danny called the cops, who grudgingly filled out a missing person's report.

Danny fished for another two weeks with poor results, occasionally with other fishermen who knew nothing about Ralph. One night, fishing alone at the knuckle of the shoal, he saw the swirl of a big fish in the shallow water in front of him. Close in, maybe ten yards away. The fish didn't move. Neither did Danny.

The fish seemed motionless but in an eye blink had closed the distance between them to inches. It lay, all of five feet long, at the height of Danny's hips, snout to crotch, but Danny didn't back up. Instead he reached out, avoiding the spines on the dorsal fins, and stroked the fish's flanks, felt its skin rasp his palm. Then, without volition, he put his hand against its snout. The dogfish opened its jaws and gently closed them on the meaty ball of Danny's palm. Danny felt its teeth snick through skin.

The shark, jaws still closed, slowly waved Danny's hand back and forth in the water, churning blood into it. Around them were swirls and splashes as other sharks, many other sharks, swam

through the blood cloud.

It's their picture of me, Danny thought, their recognition. After three minutes the splashing subsided and Danny's hand was released. The big dogfish, again without seeming to move, had backed off twenty feet and turned to face away from him.

Danny stood in the water motionless, numbed by what had happened.

The big dogfish swirled again, almost impatiently, and steadied back down, pointing in the same direction as before.

Danny realized that it was pointing toward fish, toward where he should cast. As best he could, he mimicked Ralph's actions in moving to the fish point. On his third cast, he was into a twenty-pound striper.

Danny fished through that tide, ignoring the blood that seeped into the cork handle of his fishing rod. The next night, despite feeling none of the urge that Ralph had described, he was back on the reef. He caught nothing, and saw no sharks.

Three nights later, though, he awoke, feeling the pressure of salt water on his legs, almost hearing the broken stone growl of surf. He reached the end of the shoal at 2 A.M. at dead low water, a notoriously bad time to fish. But the sharks were there. In the shallow, calm water, they flowed like long black hair. His big dogfish was also there, swirling and pointing out to his left.

Danny lost track of the stripers he slashed and threw out into the water, perhaps 25, maybe 30. Around a hundred pounds of fish. Images came to him—a royal executioner, a holocaust prison guard, a priest giving out communion, blood and body all in one. He left satisfied, without a fish of his own.

After August had cooled into September, Danny got a call from the Bridgeport police to come to the station and see a Lieutenant Hopkins. About Ralph.

MICHAEL ESTABROOK

“Have you heard from Ralph Loomis?”

“Nothing. Has something happened?”

“Was he into something for money? A bad drug deal?”

“He never said anything like that. Maybe. I dunno.”

“You filed the Missing Persons. He must have been a friend.”

“Yeah, as much as he had one. The first time I saw his place is when the landlord let me in to check on him. What’s happened?”

“We pulled a pair of pants off the breakwater in St. Mary’s. His pants. He ever go skinny-dipping?”

“I don’t think so. He wore his waders like panty hose. I never saw him in the water without them on.”

“Was he all right mentally?”

“Crazy? No. Weird for sure. He had cancer pretty bad.”

“That’s what the VA said. Painful kind. So how come his pants wash up on the breakwater? Not torn, belt in its loops, wallet in the back pocket, money in the wallet. Like he undressed for bed.”

“Jesus. Did you find anything else, any remains?”

“Nothing. If you hear something, anything, give me a call.”

“Sure.”

Danny had the urge again that night and waded out to the waiting pack. Fog was drifting in from mid-sound, and he would soon lose sight of his sharks. The wind was down, the chop was soft against his waders. He could not quite see where he was fishing into.

As he cast and retrieved, cast and retrieved, he visualized Ralph, dying from cancer, shucking his waders and then his shirt, pants and underwear. He wondered if Ralph had taken off his socks before wading out into the pack, grasping the knife still lanyarded around his neck, and beginning to cut himself, a communion sacrifice to his dogfish.

**WAITING**

*. . . they warn you sharks patrol  
the surf at dusk,  
but you go in anyway . . .*

That’ll be me someday (unless of course  
I have a damn coronary  
or am run down by one of those  
big yellow buses)  
an old slow-moving man  
white hair bandy legs and all  
way out there in a waveless ocean  
during early morning low tide  
the cool salty water caressing  
my dried-out wrinkled skin waiting  
for I don’t know what—  
for a mermaid perhaps  
or even a shark.



JAMES B. NICOLA

## IF THE GOD.

If the God  
of sky is named  
I Am That I Am  
then the God  
of earth is who?—  
I was that I was? Ah!  
What's the ocean  
then but calling,  
calling, calling, calling? Oh—  
And we are three-fourths water,  
one-fourth substance, the rest  
breath, made  
in the image  
of all Three  
pulsing, throbbing, rushing  
suffering Divine  
Heaven and Holy Hell  
of the human, ecstatic  
Proportion, perpetuated  
not by their interaction  
but intermittent  
Fire!  
The very you of you  
has made me think

of this, and see  
the universe at last  
clearly  
You who call  
from beyond the Sky  
beneath the Sea  
and deep in me  
with the simply ignited warmth  
of sheer being  
to-  
-get-  
-her.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

## WILLOW TREE POEM

Wind dancers  
dancing to the  
willow wind,  
lance-shaped leaves  
swaying right to left  
all day long.  
I'm depressed.  
Birds hanging on—  
bleaching feathers  
out into  
the sun.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

## TINNITUS

A miserable day. The wind blows tears  
off the bur oak who stands stoic  
as a recurring dream. I fear the end  
of the dream when it forgets the street  
it lives on, and I peek around the corner,  
see the dream is lost in conversation  
with someone I don't know but recognize  
as someone I should remember. Always  
is a calendar without dates. Sometimes misses  
all its appointments. Never whispers clichés  
in my ear, if a brook can babble, a star point  
north, a cat have nine lives, it all makes sense.

**TWO:  
SELF**

CAROLYN MARTIN

## DREAMSCAPING

this morning after tossing through the fourth  
episode of the same perturbing dream  
the one where I'm the teacher who can't remember  
what or how to teach I woke up to the dogs  
are barking and the caravan moves on  
yesterday dawned with life is a good idea  
the day before if we're meant to fall  
make the landing soft funny how lines  
sitting in my snippets file wind their way  
into wake-up time I understand soft landings  
are a good idea but dogs and caravans mystify  
so I track the proverb down to progress  
moves on despite critics' rants and raves  
which reminded me of what the Buddha said  
people with opinions bother everyone  
tonight I hope my dream will lounge  
me beneath a plumeria where a sea turtle  
stops by to complain about graying coral reefs  
she's the one I freed from a fishing line once  
upon a time I like this dream a lot I don't have  
to know anything except turtle-speak a language  
with few syllables fish sharks air sand  
seaweed humans waste bags lines fear  
and I hope after the turtle calms down  
and strolls away the waking dawn will ask  
which side of the horizon did you sleep on

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE

## THE GIRL INSIDE MY HEAD

Her mind is a crystal ball  
with cloudy reception.  
As if her thoughts are Yahtzee dice  
that turned to pixie dust when shaken.  
She remembers the smell of mountain laurel  
because of its taste.  
She sees the flight of a dove  
in the sound of its wings.  
She listens to the darkness and  
feels its loneliness.  
She whispers comfort  
as she drinks its sweet tears.  
She touches her lover's sigh  
and keeps it in a bottle.  
The sound of rain tastes of midnight.  
King James wrote the word of God  
with his revisions...  
...she got it from the source.  
When Notre Dame burned, she cried.  
Her thoughts are sharp as razors.  
Once upon a time,  
she wanted to be a detective  
and solve mysteries like Nancy Drew.  
That went tits up fairly quickly.  
Maybe she failed because  
girl detectives have to be pretty.  
You know what the kids say:  
"If my sandcastle drowns, can I live with you?"  
The runaway go-cart of reality  
can be a bitch at times.

This year the first robin of spring  
sang a song of death.  
She hopes it isn't the end of the world...  
she's got things to do.  
She sings along to every song on every station—  
pitch perfect—  
and knows every word.  
In her dreams.  
When she was a kid they called her Adie  
but Rie combines much cooler with other words—  
RieViews, RieWrites, RieFlections...you get the gist.  
There will come a time when she is known  
to more than a handful.  
She really believes this...  
even if it's taking longer than anticipated.  
Her supercalifragilisticexpialidocious house  
is a gleaming monument to Marie Kondo...  
(also in her dreams...)  
She timidly thrashes to grant her bindings  
the freedom they deserve.  
Je ne sais quoi...  
Her best friend, the telephone, follows  
like a puppy on her daily walks.  
They are inseparable.  
She loves that mountain laurel smell...



GLEN ARMSTRONG

## INVITATION TO SHAKE

The singer invites the audience to shake its collective body, to dance, to carve crazy circles in the atmosphere, to change the weather. Oh, hive mind! The dancer knows what the fire ant knows. I trust Otis Redding more than I trust the government. For three minutes, I experience real change, and then I experience it again.

The wine may be cheap, but there is enough for everyone. Love comes and goes like a horn section, answering, punctuating, accelerating the same breath that it lets us catch.

JOEL SAVISHINSKY

## EXTREMITIES

No man is an island on *Survivor*. Not only are there women, but also other competitors and a crew large enough to fill the jumbo jet they all must have flown on to get to the set with their cameras, lights, make-up, editing console, sound board, toiletries, wardrobes, caterers, security guards, and enough concocted angst and PR playbooks to make hardship look real and yet not unduly tax the nearby resorts, bars and clubs sitting just out of frame.

A few coastal bays away, against a backdrop of towering trees and carefully curated vegetation, the host of a travel show records for cable that moments before she had been the first white woman to ever witness the sacred initiation rites of the remote Notlih-Darnoc tribe. The director calls “cut,” and the staff pack their gear, leaving behind the now-empty garden of Pago Pago’s Grand Hotel.

The morning after these programs aired, I showed my class a film about the !Kung, South African hunter-gatherers who, in their nomadic life, carry all they own across the Kalahari in animal hide slings the size of backpacks. Their contents weigh less than the textbooks of my pre-law students.

RUSSELL RICHARDSON

## A GOON SQUAD IN THE RESTROOM

The desert community is a network of kin whose elders tell tales uninterrupted by commercials. Their pronouncements are public service announcements. Sitting around evening fires, each generation adds its stories. No one is silenced. There is no process of elimination. In this desert, no man or woman is an island. The seasons of life do repeat themselves, but there are no re-runs.

Rick was perched on the throne in the restroom when he saw a paperback copy of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* on the floor beneath the next stall. The edge of the book touched against a stranger's pair of black Doc Martens. After a minute, the owner of the boots rose, flushed, and clomped away, banging the bathroom door behind him.

After finishing his own business, Rick hoisted his khakis and grabbed *Goon Squad* on his way out. Back in the candlelit glow of their table, he showed the book to his date, Janine. The paperback was, in the parlance of online merchants, *lightly used*. Almost *like new*. The spine showed just a hint of a crack. All four corners remained pointy.

"The guy in the next bathroom stall had it," Rick explained.

"You stole this?" asked Janine while examining the book in her hands. This was their third date, but Rick knew her well enough already to detect reproach.

"Of course not." Rick scowled and craned his neck to scan the restaurant. "The guy left it behind."

"But why take it?" She flipped to a page in the book, and her finger traced some text. "Actually, I heard good things about this. It won awards, I think."

"It raised a stir when it came out," said the distracted Rick. "That was years ago." He pointed at a far table, where two men sipped from wine glasses. "There. Those are the boots I saw."

Janine stretched for a better vantage, squinting against the dim light. They were adrift in a sea of tables, and the room was quite busy. "Are you sure? It's hard to see."

Snatching up the book, Rick rose from his chair. "I'll be back."

"Don't make a scene," cautioned Janine from behind, causing his shoulders to tense. He repeated her words under his breath,

sourly, as he passed their server bringing their plates. Rick weaved through the dining room, muttering, "Make a scene? Why would she even say that? She doesn't know me at all!"

Rick reached the table, and the men looked up, expecting their waiter. "Hello?" asked the owner of the boots, a slight fellow who wore a silvery shirt and black jeans. A feathered earring hung from his left lobe. His partner had a perfectly trimmed goatee and big eyes that swelled behind gold-rimmed glasses.

"You forgot this in the bathroom," said Rick, setting the book on the table and expecting gratitude.

"That's not mine," said the man with a crooked smile. He swept one hand through his lustrous hair and, with the other, pushed back the paperback. The *Goon Squad* teetered on the edge before Rick caught it.

Rick stood for a moment, confused to be in possession of the book again. He bent to squint at the man's footwear and stood once more. "Those are your boots. This is your book. I was in the stall next to yours."

The man furrowed his brow at his companion and then gazed at Rick. "Sure, Okay. Fine. It was mine, but not now. I don't want it."

"Don't want it?"

"Yes, I left it for a reason. The book is boring."

"Boring?"

"Boring and repetitive, yes. The characters are unlikeable. I'd give it two stars for decent sentences, though. You know, *craft*."

Rick was flabbergasted. "You can't just leave stuff behind. That is littering."

The man in the boots leaned back with his wine glass cupped in his palm and chuckled. "I assumed someone else might want to read it. Maybe that's you."

"It's a bathroom, not a doctor's waiting room. Not a library!"

The men at the table stopped smiling. "What does it matter to you?" asked Mr. Boots, setting down his drink.

"You littered."

"I didn't."

"You did. You left something behind for someone else to pick up."

"I left it for someone else to *read*. That's different."

"So you're just made of money, then?" asked Rick. His voice had escalated, and other diners watched them now. "You can afford to buy a book and just discard it in a bathroom if it's boring? Must be nice."

"You should leave," said Mr. Boots, folding his arms.

Rick swiveled to the bearded guy, who looked like an underfed Sigmund Freud. "Do you condone littering?"

The man raised his hands as if protecting himself. "I didn't like the book, either."

Stunned, Rick thrust the *Goon Squad* forward for their inspection. "You two barely read it! The spine's not even cracked!"

"I had my *own* copy," snapped the bearded man.

"Oh? And where's yours?" asked Rick.

"Threw it away, as I recall."

"*Threw it away?* You people." Appalled, Rick turned back to the first man. "How can you fairly judge something you barely read?"

"I read enough," said Mr. Boots. "I skimmed. Now, won't you please leave?"

Their server appeared, showing concern. "*Monsieurs*, is there a problem?"

"Yes," said the bearded gentleman. "This person is harassing us."

"Ha-ha-harassing?" stammered Rick. He smacked the table, and the items upon it leaped and clattered. "These men are litterbugs!"

Mr. Boots broke into uncomfortable laughter. Incensed, Rick reached for his shirt collar, but the waiter grabbed his arm and, alarmed, Rick jerked and backhanded the waiter's face, throwing him into the table behind. The table collapsed under the waiter's weight, its diners dove for safety, and plates of food smashed on the floor.

Rick tried to apologize to the waiter and help him up, but was swatted away. Other staff members were rushing over. Dinner, Rick saw, was over.

A few minutes later, Janine carried their coats through the front door. She threw his at Rick, which caught him by surprise, and it fell to the slushy sidewalk. He said nothing, knowing he was in no

DALE E. COTTINGHAM

position to act offended.

"I've never been so embarrassed," she hissed.

"I'm sorry. Things got out of hand." After a pause, he shook his fist at the restaurant's wide front window and bellowed, "Big jerks! Stupid goons!"

After that, they stood on the corner without speaking, awaiting their Uber.

"Maybe you are meant to read the book," said Janine, nodding to the paperback in the crook of Rick's elbow. He could tell she was trying to be the better person. "The universe brought you together," she said.

"Actually, I read it when it came out," said Rick, flatly. He stared at the traffic that motored past.

"You did?" she asked. "Why didn't you say so? What did you think of it?"

"Eh. Pretty boring."

She gave him a long, hostile look.

"What?" asked Rick. He rolled his eyes. "Okay, I admit that I understand why he left it on the floor."

Janine took out her phone and began pressing icons on the screen.

"What are you doing?" he asked, sensing trouble.

"Getting an Uber for myself."

Rick's shoulders slumped. "Are we breaking up?"

Janine turned her back to him and remained that way until the first Uber arrived. Rick tried giving the book to her as a parting gift, but she stepped away from him, so he climbed into the car without saying goodbye.

The ride was quiet. Rick offered the book to the driver, who said that she didn't read, and weren't books dead? When Rick reached his apartment building, he left the paperback behind on the seat. He didn't need it, anyway. He still had a copy.

## MISSIVE FROM MY COMMUTE

And when, on my commute, strive-huffed,  
coffee-jigged, my most riven song  
ringing my mind, that I spew  
on the shout of the Interstate,  
tunnel of ghosting, I wept . . .  
Where I negotiate among others,  
not one looking at me, each needing,  
bearing hard faces, scourged by tweedled  
problems that foist them,  
I too bear my need on the commute . . .  
Past strip malls too early to open,  
yet ready, their goods I'm told I want,  
their goods they say everyone has,  
what I trade my breath for,  
that will not come back.  
Past factories shuddered,  
once self-important,  
now haunted by those  
who claimed they'd live on—  
but did not.  
Past street after street anonymous,  
where in houses, men, women,  
boiled, ragged, worn through,  
bring their bodies eye to eye,  
for better or worse.  
Past a woman, rough sister,  
her skin once lithe,  
now leathery, exposed to ill-mannered elements,  
who pushes a shopping cart  
revealing the mite of her life.

O Interstate, you are an open course,  
like a whore, accepting all comers,  
who drive you smooth,  
take their measure of torque,  
will pay your freight.

Your lanes a deception.  
Your lanes say I'm free  
but I bend myself  
to your curves,  
I am not on the road to freedom.  
I smell of shower,  
the soap, it exudes me,  
my shaven face. The smell  
of shower my calling card,  
one of the snared population,  
burning but not consumed,  
my core smoldering  
with each lane change,  
to coals sending up smoke  
smothering to ash.  
My mind's eye sees cities  
where I am not, where others  
not me drive flats  
or hills, making curves  
to a workplace  
where they spend their  
time offering words harsh,  
then making trying smiles,

but these others, they could be me,  
driving the commute,  
your otherness a made way,  
it is like death, it exhausts me,  
like looking at stars  
that seem to hold hope,  
but cannot be reached.  
If only prayer, uttered in misty tones,  
an attitude contrite,  
like singing hymns  
under a simple light,  
held some promise,  
but those prayers, like hymns,  
are offered in uncaring air,  
they extrude and do not return,  
but you commute,  
remain like a grinding stone.

On the level, I try to be me,  
on downhills, I try to be me,  
in the grudging stops, in the jams,  
I try to be me.  
But I'm not.  
The lines on my face  
are surely because of you, my  
fading eyes.  
You do not calculate,  
you wait, knowing I'll come.  
The lines on my face will deepen,



as my expression  
sets itself  
for troubles ahead,  
burdened by cares unseen.  
My mind, scabbed engine,  
that sees, wants to say,  
so I write little lines  
under my lamp,  
early and late, no one else awake,  
thinking my oeuvre  
would be elegant, intelligent,  
that I'd be roundly hailed,  
hoisted on shoulders, declared victor,  
thinking I'd be known.  
But I won't be known: I'm the one  
in the throng, my mind  
flailed because of you. A slave,  
I bow at your curbs, the hopes  
I had for myself, are driven off on your lanes.  
Do not look for me  
in shining places,  
or as one lifted up,  
held as example  
and guide.  
You'll find me among the craven,  
those strung out like litter  
along the beveled road, searching  
the lowlands, one who drinks  
and still thirsts.

You'll find me in the fissures  
of the cleft, darkened,  
doubled over, knowing  
my need leads me from shaded dirt roads  
to this commute's baking pavement.  
I am one of the grinding mass,  
mouth numb,  
that crosses Eliot's bridge,  
entering the strange city,  
up to and past the end.  
On this commute my sound  
is as a hurry,  
a shadow flitting from here to here,  
my breath comes in, escapes,  
not knowing not knowing not meaning.  
No finger touches me.  
I am not the person seen at work.  
I am not the person seen at home.  
I am not in the mags.  
I am everywhere. I am nowhere.  
At night I lie  
twisted by what got said,  
or the way it got said,  
by what didn't get said:  
these take away my life.  
Am I strong enough  
to escape,  
to run the veil,

LARRY SCHUG

## ONCE MORE, LIKE THRUSHES

find another way  
other than this way.  
Will I wander again  
dirt roads,  
under an open sky,  
search bar ditches  
for a crumbled word.  
Will I make myself smaller,  
to escape the hard fist  
of the culture I've found,  
and in this way  
care for the earth.

Will I look in the mirror,  
see swollen eyes for what they are,  
weeping in these hinterlands  
that are mine  
and turn.  
But that's not what I've done.  
I did not curb my exhaust.  
I did not make myself less.  
I kept on this commute.  
I've sought what seemed my advantage.  
I fear this will be true:  
those who come later, and later still,  
will judge me,  
for what I did,  
what I failed not to do.

The world is on fire.  
But here I go once more,  
Trying to douse the flames  
With a little riff on a cheap guitar  
And the water  
Harmony takes from my eyes.  
Will you sing with me?  
Would you?  
Once more, singing like thrushes at dawn,  
A melody at sunrise  
Just to see if a song can work magic,  
Become a three day rain in a burning world.

JAMES B. NICOLA

## A SNAPSHOT SPEAKS FROM THE BACK OF A BOOK

The photo's forged of Siamese-twinning faces,  
Dark and Bright, who have learned to get along  
like Janus's. Like yang and yin. Like races  
in places like New York. So, in a song,  
our words combine with melody to make  
each stronger, worthier, for the whole's sake.  
When ink spurts, or is drawn out of a pen,  
the black is tapped as from a well of light;  
when frothy wit wafts from our lips again,  
the foam of it will only seem pure white.  
Well wed the two, as base instinct with reason,  
or bridled humor with desire and drive,  
their tugs to and fro strengthen while they season  
the single soul, as if we were alive.

JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS

## TEN OF SWORDS

*Inspired by the Dark Wood Tarot*

Body on the rocks: ten swords in flesh: what's your handle?  
We sword ourselves really. Even in sleep we ride hills, climb  
board game ladders, our invisible horses know the way.  
Already a couple of souls caught a virus, my compass  
couldn't catch them, spin them around. I held her love  
inside of me, the other love, I never knew, but people said  
he was kind. This murder scene in this fake game tells me  
she ended the story on her own terms: we enshrine this  
candy body with raven pecked dreams, brain catalysts, day-  
to-day breakfasts. A shimmer isn't good enough to describe  
thoughts, maybe beetles. Tiny hands gesture in the air, tell  
us to fight or flee, turn on our headlamps in the woods,  
look for more bodies, that is the point of these swords. We  
say goodnight to our day of the dead, the car, in a field, the  
elevator, in bed, a string of yarn: cut. So mortal. So plagued  
with the past. A new day is always a new day but is it.

A spider traipses up the sword to the body, walks the plank,  
an opening discovered, wanting to spin, nothing to snip, all  
to weave.

**THREE:  
COMPANY**

J.D. GEVRY

## ALL THAT CAN'T BE SAID

It hung there, in the humid air  
adhered to every vaporized droplet:  
Magnetism  
Attachment  
Intimacy  
Love.  
We circled each other in silence—  
sharks surrounding prey we couldn't  
see, but could  
smell  
through the waves  
Sullen, adrift, searching  
for a voice to carry our song  
for relief from the tension we couldn't  
name  
but had known her whole life  
for a way to hold each other tightly  
under the riptide of our guilt

K.B. BALLENTINE

## BLUE PERSISTENCE

Wave pursues wave, and wind spirals,  
lashing hair across my face.  
One, two, no, three vessels linger on the horizon,  
seeming specks in spite of their large truth.  
Sand gives way to pebbles and sheared shells—  
foam skittering toward the dunes.  
Spray stains my legs as peach, then a searing  
orange, purges twilight's remains  
Farther down the shore, a man wobbles  
in a shuffling run, a woman throws a ball  
for her collie. But they are far from me.  
Here I have the sandpipers rushing my feet,  
the gulls screaming overhead.

You in my heart.

CAROLYN MARTIN

## SHALL I?

Shall I compare you to a summer's day?  
I better not. You'd boil at the trope.  
Maybe early spring when squirrels and stellar jays  
strut around our yard and ferals tightrope  
along the backyard fence? You could burst free  
from thaw like crocuses and daffodils  
or like the white star-burst magnolia tree  
that blooms before cherry and plum. You'd thrill  
at arriving first. (I know firsthand,  
my dear, that second place does not appeal.)  
Of course, if garden images don't stand  
a chance of pleasing you, I will repeal  
my strategy: you could be the first glow  
light years away or that first star's echo.

STEPHANIE L. ERDMAN

## AUBADE IN VIOLET

This seeded plain  
of wild waking  
startled, stripped—this  
new beginning where  
I need nothing,  
know nothing. How  
my bruises are  
beautiful in evening  
sunlight just like  
there is hope  
in a cowslip  
or twilit monkshood.  
The blinking nausea  
and gamboled heart  
of my unknowing.  
Swallow, pave it  
over, watch traffic  
tread it down.  
This city, myself,  
sings like flurried  
wings or ill-mannered  
chewing.

ALYSSA HARMON

## WE AGREED TO COMMENSALISM

*“The remora and shark have a  
commensalism relationship. This  
is when two species live together,  
but one benefits while the other  
is not harmed or helped.”*

—SaveOurSeas.com

somehow i ended up with a parasitic relationship,  
swimming with a remora  
suctioned to my back, and  
even though he promised not to get in my way,  
he gradually ate more than just my scraps,  
stealing my main food source.  
i learned to love the absence of loneliness  
and convinced myself that  
i could live without food if it meant keeping him,  
but he sucked so much of my soul  
that i almost dissolved  
into the vast sea.

## KATIE HUDSON

July in Tennessee is hot, there is no doubt about it, and she hated that her mother sent her to the South for the summer more than anything. Lyra was a New Yorker, in her appearance and demeanor, she was a city girl, destined to become a principal ballet dancer, but as she looks at her injured knee, she wonders what is even left for her when she returns to Manhattan in August. Headlights tear her away from her thoughts as she lays in her uncle's empty field waiting for fireworks to light up the sky.

"You're Ray's niece, aren't you?" A boy who seems around her age cuts off his truck, making his way to the haybale Lyra lays on. "I watch the fireworks here every year, mind if I join you?"

"I prefer the quiet," she says, staring up at the stars.

"I won't bother you too much." He lays on the bale beside her, "I'm Thomas, pleasure to meet you this evening."

"Lyra." She doesn't look at him, but she has seen Thomas McCoy plenty of times since she arrived in Alabama and thought he was the most attractive person she had ever seen.

"Never heard that name, but you're from the city." He laughs a bit to himself.

*So much for the quiet*, she thinks, propping herself up on her elbows. "It's a constellation," she finally looks at him, "my father was an astronomer."

"Do you like the stars, Lyra?"

"I do, the only thing I like about being here is that I can see them. You can't see stars in New York."

"How is he an astronomer in Manhattan without any stars?" His southern accent is thick as he talks to her, making him even more attractive.

"I didn't move to the city until I was ten. We lived

everywhere. My father said the world is the most important and beautiful thing a person can see." Lyra stops herself, having never really shared much about herself, but the hot Fourth of July night begins to become intoxicating. "The sky in Alaska is the prettiest, and my father is Russian. We visited once to see my grandparents there, those stars are huge."

"Does he like New York?"

She finds the Big Dipper in the sky, a tear falling slowly. "No, he died when I was nine. That's when my mother moved us to New York. That whole city is basically the world, full of so many different people, and I could finally take dancing seriously." She turns her head to face Thomas, "I'm telling a stranger my entire life story."

"I don't mind, I've found you interesting all summer, the girl from New York, always dancing in the old studio at the art center."

"How do you know about that?"

"My mom teaches painting there. I heard music coming from the studio one day and saw you, you're really good, actually."

"I want to be great; Dad had his stars, and my mom has her books, I want ballet. I want to finally become the great dancer my dad believed I could be." She focuses next on the North Star, "What's your passion, Thomas?"

"This place, I love it here."

"I know I shouldn't judge someone's passion, but why McEwen, Tennessee? This place is in the middle of nowhere with nothing but cow fields."

"I love it, it's my home. It's not like I have to stay in my home, but I want to. I can't imagine living anywhere else but right here."

"But don't you want to see the world?"

"I have my world here, it's no bigger, no smaller, and it's mine."

"I want to go everywhere." The first firework sparkles over the sky and is followed by a dozen more. "I don't know, if my entire world were this town, I think I would feel empty. I want to see everything with the time I have, everything I'm allowed."

"What do you mean by allowed?" He asks, another firework



popping.

“People say they want to see the entire world, but I don’t think we need to see everything, because if I saw all there is on this planet to see, every country, every island, I would feel hopeless. At the end of my days, I still want to have hope, I want to dream of the places I didn’t get to see and die happy imagining them.” Children laughing at the house overfills the air as more fireworks are sent into the sky, bringing the small backcountry of Tennessee to life.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a philosophical person?”

“Philosophical?” She laughs, “No, no one ever has.”

“The girl named after a cluster of stars; I’ll remember you by that.” She wanted to tell him that her namesake is more than a cluster, but a beautiful arrangement in the heavens, but he kissed her before she could say another word. They would spend the rest of July like that, intertwined together in his old truck, swimming in the lake that was freezing but she couldn’t feel the cold with his arms around her. Those hot summer days went by fast, and when the second week of August came, she regretted how fast she loaded her suitcases into his truck.

“Just stay here with me, Lyra, go to college or something around here instead of wasting your time up there auditioning.”

“Wasting my time?” She gets in the truck, slamming the door shut as he speeds down the winding backroad into town. “You know how much I love dancing, and this audition could get me in a company.”

“And if you don’t?” He turns onto the highway, not even checking for cars.

“Then I’ll know I tried, and then I can go see the world. I can live and do whatever I want without being tied down to one place.”

“I’m here, Lyra. We could have a life together.”

“You could go with me.” He yells at her the entire drive into the city, the Nashville skyline is all she stares at as he tells her how he could never leave, and it is her job to stay with him.

“You will be happy with someone who wants your boring, predictable life, and I will be happy floating around and doing

what I want to do for mine. You were never mine, Thomas, it was a fit of passion.”

She closes the truck door, grabbing her suitcases from the back and walking as fast as she can into the airport. For the hour she sits at her gate, she doesn’t think about him. She doesn’t think about him for the next six years she spends dancing in New York as a soloist, and later a principal dancer. It’s after those years, after the pain in her feet can’t take it anymore that she lets the next dancer take her place, when she passes over Tennessee on her flight to Atlanta, and then to Rome, Italy. Only for a moment does she think about the time they shared, all the happy memories. She never loved him, though. She could never love someone without passion for the world outside of their small corner, for someone who called a beautiful constellation her father awed over “a cluster.”

DOUG VAN HOOSER

## COTTONWOOD COTTON

I was just a fling.  
A ball tossed in the air not to be caught,  
simply to watch its arc.  
Where I landed didn't matter.  
A bee engulfed in your corolla  
that would kiss your nectar

and leave for another bloom.  
But the hum turned into intoxicated buzz,  
a story end that eludes,  
a finish line that moves.

I admit, I was a loose handle.

A valve that would not close.  
A steady drip that disturbs sleep,  
stains the sink.

I was supposed to fold,  
think the cards would not win.  
Blow away, a burst cottonwood catkin.  
Disappear in a mat of other silken seeds.  
Never touch the ground,  
never root, grow a trunk, branches, leaves.  
Birth our own seed.

MATT HENRY

## 62105

If I grow up  
then I lose you.

16 can't function properly  
at 33  
when teenage grief is still  
calling off from work  
and everything has an expiry date  
except mourning:  
even dementia  
can't forget the dead.

The melancholy  
was romanticized  
before the crash  
and now  
it's only crushed metal  
and broken glass.

A.J. ORTEGA

## IT'S ABOUT YOU AND THE HIGHWAY

We go in separate directions  
but function together  
perfectly in sync  
I am cylinders one and three  
you are two and four.  
I count the mile markers, and know that  
there are approximately 990 of  
you  
for every mile.  
523,710 of you left to go.  
I ride over the reflectors  
in the middle of the highway,  
two lanes  
one you  
one me,  
on purpose. They remind me  
of tracing the bumps of your  
spine.  
You never gave me the chance to count  
them all, but now I have miles of  
you.  
Miles of your back.

And my gloved hands can't wipe away  
the tears.  
I lift my visor and close me eyes.  
At triple digit speeds, the wind  
dries them.  
Human eyes don't function here. So  
I trust  
you  
and rely on the sensation of the bumps of your  
spine  
under me  
to take me home.  
522,720.

## KEEP, DONATE, THROW AWAY

Sarah crawled into the closet and found the box with the bright yellow shopping bag peeking out of it, crammed into the far corner. She pulled it out. The contents were covered in tissue paper which she carefully removed, and there was the quilt. Sarah stared at it for a minute, and then carefully took it out of the bag. It was exquisite, made up of 5"x5" squares of gold and blue and white and mint filled with delicate flowers and baby animals. Her eyes filled with tears. When the package from her Aunt Daisy had arrived, Sarah had found it too difficult to take the quilt out, unwilling to deal with all that it represented.

Her hands began to shake. Her beloved aunt had made the beautiful quilt, hoping that one day, in spite of everything, there would be a sweet baby to be comforted by it. Her aunt had passed away shortly after finishing the quilt, so she had never learned the truth. About how lives fall apart, even when everything is done with the best of intentions.

After all, Sarah and Myles had entered into their marriage with eyes wide open. Or so she had thought. After living through the bitter divorce between her parents when she was in high school, Sarah had taken her time when it came to finding a life partner. And once she met Myles, she was amazed at how he checked off all of the boxes in what she was looking for in a man. She never expected to find anyone who was as in sync with her as Myles was. They had met one day when she was trying to balance two pizzas and five soft drinks (in a drink holder, but still...) as she got on the elevator in the high-rise where she worked. A man in a hurry was so busy yelling into his cell phone as he charged off the elevator that he nearly knocked her over. Just as the drinks were about to crash onto the floor, a man behind her suddenly leapt forward like

Superman and grabbed the drink holder with one hand and steadied her with the other. Sarah had mumbled a thank you to him as she tried not to succumb to the hypnotic intensity of his gaze. It turned out that he worked for the architecture firm one floor above the ad agency where she worked. His name was Myles and he insisted on escorting Sarah to her office to make sure she was in no further danger of being knocked over on the way. She felt compelled to explain that the food was for several of her coworkers who were celebrating the first day of spring. Myles thought that was a charming idea and asked her to go out to dinner with him that night so he could celebrate spring with her, too.

One date turned into many dates and their love deepened with each new season. It turned out they both loved the same historical fiction novels. And they were both big action-adventure movie fans, always going to the theater the first weekend of new releases so they could form their own opinions before the reviews came out. And most enticing to Sarah was when she discovered Myles was a picnic guy. He loved bringing gourmet sandwiches and salads and a bottle of wine on their hikes and finding a place by the water where they could just sit and eat and talk. Or lie down on a blanket and make love in secluded spaces away from the rest of the world, listening to the music of the birds and the water bubbling past them. Their conversations went on for hours, always finding something to discuss. Even the silences were easy. The following spring, he proposed.

"Are you sure?" Sarah's mother had fretted upon hearing the news.

"Mom!" Sarah had said. "Can't you be happy for me?"

"Oh, honey, it's not that I don't like Myles. I like him very much," her mother insisted, even though she had never actually met him. "It's just that love never seems to last. And I don't want you to get hurt. We get sold a bill of goods that there's always a happily ever after like in the fairy tales. But life is tough, and the reality is, there is no happily ever after. You're just lucky if you can tolerate each other after the sex goes stale."

Sarah's mother didn't have any filters. After so many years of

dealing with a mother who never had an unspoken thought, Sarah was no longer taken aback by her mother's bizarre utterances. But she didn't want to be pummeled by that constant stream of negativity again. She knew the downside of marriage. She had watched her parents tear each other apart. She knew what she was getting into. She told this to herself repeatedly. She did know what she was getting into, she was sure of it.

And maybe if they had been dealt a different hand, things wouldn't have fallen apart. If her damn body had worked like it was supposed to, like everyone else she knew, maybe their lives could have been perfect. Or at least better. Having a baby was a natural act, wasn't it? You have sex, no birth control, and at some point, the pregnancy test has a plus sign. And nine months later, there's your little bundle of joy. But instead, test after test had a minus sign, month after month, year after year. The hormones she was on made her moods swing so erratically, knocking her completely off balance until she was sure she would never find her way back to equilibrium again.

"I love you," Myles would say after every trip to the fertility doctor. And he would repeat "I love you," after every single negative pregnancy test.

"How can you possibly love me?" Sarah would cry. "I'm broken and defective. I'm a pitiful excuse for a woman."

Myles would hold her as she sobbed, murmuring that she was all he wanted. That it was fine with him if they never had a baby. "We can have a great life with just the two of us," he once assured her. "We wouldn't be tied down. We could travel, we could go out whenever we want, it could just be us. Would that be so terrible?"

Sarah had looked at him, dumbfounded as his words reverberated through her head. Never have a baby? What was he saying? But she was too afraid to ask, to find out it had all only been her dream. But later that night when they were lying in bed and she was staring at the ceiling as Miles snored softly, she began to wonder. Was this why he never blamed her, never fell apart? That having a baby wasn't really what he had ever wanted at all? She thought back to the sweet moment in time after they got engaged and before

they were married. When everything seemed possible and the love they had could conquer any possible roadblocks in their way. She remembered talking with Myles about having children. She was sure they had been on the same page as they sat on a park bench, her hand in his.

"Do you definitely want to have kids?" Sarah had asked, searching the depths of his eyes.

"Of course I want a family," Myles had assured her.

"How many kids?" Sarah had murmured, nuzzling his neck.

Myles had chuckled. "Let's start with one and see how it goes," he had teased. "Or we might change our minds and get a dog. Dogs are pretty easy."

Sarah remembered she had been startled, but had decided he was joking. "Or a cat," she had smiled. "Cats are even easier."

They had both laughed. But now she wondered what he had been trying to say. And if his real meaning had flown right over her head.

As time passed and there was no baby and she felt herself getting more depressed, more desperate, she saw something new in Myles's eyes. The eyes that had once been full of fun and adoration had become veiled. She saw the momentary flash of avoidance when she'd mention that she was ovulating, and it would be a good time to try again. After all the disappointment and heartache, she felt all hopes slowly wither away until she was an empty shell.

And she not only pulled away from Myles, but it had become too hard for her to be with her friends anymore. Her happy, fertile friends. The friends who had still tried to include her and Myles in their gatherings. But they were the only childless couple in their group, and it was like getting stabbed in the gut every time they were surrounded by adorable babies and rambunctious toddlers calling for Mommy or Daddy. The final break had happened at lunch one day with her closest friend, Katie. Katie and her husband Zach had also been trying to get pregnant for almost the same number of years as Sarah and Myles. Sarah and Katie had become even closer with their shared pain. Sarah knew that Katie was the only one of her friends who could truly understand what she was going through.

"I hate the way everyone always looks at me like I'm the most pitiful woman on the planet," Sarah had said as she bit into her bagel and lox with extra cream cheese at their favorite deli. "Damaged goods."

Katie looked uncomfortable as she took a small bite of her salad. "I know," she said.

"It's like they don't know what to do with themselves," Sarah continued. "Like they feel sorry for me but they don't want to look like they're pitying me so they say things like maybe we should adopt or maybe we should stop trying and a baby will magically appear..."

Katie nodded as she put a tomato in her mouth.

"I know you understand, and I thank goodness every day that I have you to talk about this with," Sarah said. "I couldn't imagine trying to get through this all alone. I mean, not *really* alone since it's me and Myles trying to get through this together, but we're not really together since he could have a child with anyone he wanted, you know? He doesn't really get it either."

Katie started crying.

"Katie, what is it? What's wrong?" Sarah asked.

Katie shook her head.

"Tell me!" Sarah insisted, a sickening lump forming in her stomach.

"I don't know how," Katie began. Then she started crying again.

"Just say it," Sarah whispered, as she realized that she already knew.

"I'm pregnant, Sarah," Katie said softly. "I'm sorry."

Sarah felt the shock rattle her body. But she couldn't ruin this for Katie. This should be happy news. Wonderful news. "Katie, that's amazing! That's fantastic! I'm so happy for you!"

And she was. But she also knew she was losing her best friend that day. And the gender-reveal party the following month just amplified how alone she was and how awkward it was to be around the people who used to be her friends now. Everyone cheered when the center of the cupcakes was revealed to be pink, including Sarah. But inside she wanted to die.

And after that, Sarah found ways to say no to any invitation, and told Myles to go hiking with his friends on the weekends and that no, his overnight camping trips didn't bother her. And she stayed home, not answering the phone, not making plans, just curled up on the couch with their two rescue cats, Artemis and Tiger Lily for company. And eventually, friends stopped calling, even Katie who continued to try to keep Sarah in her life. But it hurt too much and Sarah wasn't up for the charade of being fine anymore. And at some point, Myles and Sarah stopped talking about anything that mattered. Sarah retreated further and further into herself until one day, Myles didn't come home. He texted her to tell her he needed a break and was staying with a friend for a while, but he couldn't do "this" anymore. She knew what "this" meant, and she didn't even blame him. Except for telling her by text.

"Coward!" she had shouted, flinging the phone across the room. Artemis and Tiger Lily had jumped, but then settled right back down next to her on the couch. Sarah started to sob. "Why would he want to stay with me?" she cried. "He never really wanted kids in the first place, did he?" And Sarah suddenly gasped. Was that true? Did Myles ever really want kids or had she ignored the blaring red flags along the way? Had she been so sure that their love could conquer any problem, even when he tried to tell her? "This whole marriage was about me and the baby I wanted," she whispered. "I ruined everything." Artemis and Tiger Lily gingerly climbed on top of her and settled onto her stomach. She stroked the cats as they purred, with tears streaming silently down her face. "I became my mother," she said dully. "I swore I wouldn't, but I did. And I pushed Myles away just like she pushed my dad away."

Now, one year later, Sarah was going through the detritus of her life as she prepared to move out of what had once been *their* apartment—alone. Myles had filed for divorce shortly after that fateful day when he told her he couldn't do "it" anymore. At least the divorce hadn't been nasty like her parents' divorce. After all, there was nothing to argue about and no children to fight over, so everything was very civilized. And Sarah's mother could practically be heard biting her tongue every time they spoke, trying not to say,

“I told you so,” even though Sarah could hear those words coming through the ether, unspoken, yet clear as a bell.

And as she now tried to decide what she was keeping, what she was throwing out, and what she was donating, studying the three boxes that she had labeled for each option, there was the quilt, bringing back all those longings and feelings and anguish in a flood that engulfed her as she sank into the floor. Tiger Lily and Artemis were trying to fit into the same empty box that Sarah had labeled “Keep,” and she watched them play. Thank goodness for her sweet babies—without them, she would have dissolved into nothingness. They were what had tethered her to the world during this past year of solitude.

Sarah turned around and started pulling more bags out from the bottom of the closet. She found luxurious sheets and towels she had forgotten about. And then several cut-glass bowls and teak serving trays with handles that were wedding presents that had never been used. There were two blenders that they had never bothered to return in unopened boxes. She put all of these into the large cardboard box labeled “Donate.”

And then she stopped. Once she finished, what was next for her? This was not a future she had foreseen. Divorced, alone, her life barreling like a train that had jumped the tracks towards her 40s. No real friends anymore, a job that no longer brought her any joy, a mother who made her crazy, and an absent father who now lived in California with his new family and who texted her every Sunday after his weekly golf game to say hello and ease his guilt about abandoning her.

Sarah curled up on the floor with her head in her hands. Artemis and Tiger Lily rubbed against her legs, trying to cheer her up. Their loud purrs were motorboats, and Sarah stroked their silky fur as she thought of floating away out on the ocean. Then she looked down at the quilt. She knew she couldn’t go on like this. It was untenable to constantly be so alone and so miserable.

She tried to remember who she had been before meeting Myles. She had been happy, hadn’t she? Content? And she had had friends then. And fun. Her favorite thing had been to dance. When

she was young, she had begged her parents for dance lessons and finally, they had given in as long as she kept up her with her homework and brought home straight A’s. And once she was older, she loved going out with friends to clubs and dancing the night away. She’d have a few glasses of white wine, shake off her self-imposed shackles, and feel freer than she ever felt at any other time in her life. Her body would move to the beat, and she’d close her eyes as men would come up to her and start dancing in rhythm with her. She’d move with them, sensing their desire for her, until the next guy would come along and she’d find herself with him, dancing to his beat, feeling beautiful and desirable. And so the nights would go. Eventually her friends would pull her away, her dance partners pleading with her to stay for one more dance, but she’d promise she’d see them next time, and she and her friends would leave, exhausted and exhilarated. She had sworn no more one-night stands after several disastrous encounters with different men, so she had made her friends promise to never let her do that again. And they had all promised to watch out for each other and leave together whenever they went out.

Sarah missed those days. When her body wasn’t the enemy. She and Myles would dance occasionally if they were at events such as weddings, and they’d have fun when they did. But they didn’t go to clubs on a weekly basis. Or really ever. Clubs had been reserved for her single days and it became more and more clear that in so many ways she was saying good-bye to the person she had been before she and Myles married. But wasn’t that what happened to everyone at some point?

Sarah had blamed Myles for the divorce, for not understanding the pain she was feeling, for shutting down. But she was finally taking responsibility as well. And she realized that maybe things weren’t so one-sided after all.

Just then, her phone buzzed. She looked at the Caller ID and saw that it was her mother. She sighed and then answered it.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, trying to sound cheery.

“Hi, dear,” her mom said. “I just wanted to see how the packing is going.”



Sarah surveyed the mess all over the floor. "It's going fine, Mom."

"When do you have to be out of your apartment?"

"At the end of next month, Mom," she repeated for what seemed to be the millionth time.

"Do you have a place to live yet?" her mother asked, an edge to her voice.

"Not yet," Sarah admitted. "I'm not even sure where I want to live." She paused. "Geographically, I mean."

"What are you talking about, Sarah?" her mother said sharply. "You have to be out of your apartment in less than two months, you gave notice at your job, and you're thinking of moving to another city just like that?"

Sarah counted to ten silently. "I don't know what I want, Mom, I just don't know. Maybe it's time for me to start over completely. I've been thinking about California maybe," she said, bracing herself.

"California!" her mother practically shrieked. "Did your father talk you into this? Now it all is starting to make sense. He'd do anything to hurt me, including taking you away from me!"

"Mom, Dad didn't talk me into anything. It's something I've been thinking about for a long time, getting a new start. I haven't even talked to him about it yet. And how would he be taking me away from you when you live in Florida and I'm in New York?"

"We're still on the same coast, Sarah," her mother sniffed, as if the answer was obvious. "If you move to California, you'll be on the other coast, across the country, on *his* coast."

Sarah smacked her head in frustration. "Mom, do you realize how ridiculous you sound?" she asked. "No one owns a coast. I only see you a few times a year as it is. If I move to California, nothing will change."

"Except you'll see *him* all the time," her mother muttered.

"Doubtful," Sarah said. "But even if I did, that doesn't mean I'm on anyone's side, Mom, please. I don't even know if I'm going to move there. But I'd like to get a fresh start, and that's a pretty good place to do that. I'm stuck, Mom. I can't seem to move on. Not just from Myles, but from everything. It's like I'm standing in quicksand. I need to go somewhere else, where no one knows me, where I can

drop all the things holding me back and get away from the person I've become. I want to be happy again." She suddenly realized she was crying. "Mom, I need you to understand, this is nothing against you, I need to find someplace, something in my life to help me change. Can you please try to understand this?"

She heard her mother sigh, but then there was silence. Sarah sniffled and tried to stop crying.

"And you haven't said a word to your father about any of this?" her mother finally asked.

"Only that I'm moving out of the apartment next month," Sarah told her.

"Well, you need to let him know what you're thinking of doing," her mother said icily.

"I'm not really sure what I want to do," Sarah said, trying to remain calm. "But I know something needs to change."

"Moving won't change who you are," her mom said firmly.

"True," Sarah said. "I just need time to figure things out."

"And moving certainly won't bring you any closer to having a baby," her mother declared.

Sarah inhaled sharply. "Mom! I'm divorced. I'm about to be on my own without a job. I'm getting closer to 40 now. The odds don't seem to be stacking up in my favor at this point for adding a child to the mix."

"You need to find another man," her mother insisted.

"Mom, I'm not looking for a man so that I can find a baby daddy!" Sarah practically shouted. "I mean, if I really want a baby, I can do it on my own. I can adopt and raise a baby on my own." Sarah suddenly stopped talking. Why hadn't she ever considered that option before? If she still wanted a baby—and she did—why not adopt? And why not consider raising a baby on her own? Plenty of women did it.

"Well, good luck with everything," her mother said brusquely. "I'll talk to you later this week and you'll let me know what you've decided. Unless you decide to keep me out of the loop."

"Mom, I promise you that won't happen. I love you," Sarah said. But her mother had already hung up.



She put the phone down and picked up the quilt, staring at the three boxes in front of her. “Keep.” “Donate.” “Throw Away.” Where did the quilt belong? She suddenly realized where it belonged. And the idea of adoption started swimming around in her head. Could she do it? Should she do it?

She thought about the love she and Myles had once shared. It had felt so real. Had it been? Was everything in life just temporary like a cloud that disappears after you look at it too long? Or could feelings be permanent like the smooth granite boulders they used to climb at the state park?

Sarah hugged the quilt to her chest and rocked back and forth. Finally, she picked up her phone again and scrolled through her list of contacts. She took a deep breath and tapped a number. She held her breath for a moment, until she heard his voice. “Myles? It’s me.” Her heart pounded, but she plunged ahead. “Do you think we can talk? Like in person? There’s so much that needs to be said, don’t you think?” She listened. “Because I feel like we never had the conversations we should have had. And we didn’t really try to work things out after a while, we just let it all dissolve. Maybe we should have fought harder for us. And I’m not blaming you—or me. It’s just what happened. But maybe it didn’t need to happen that way, you know?” She listened for a moment. “Yes, dinner tomorrow is great, thank you. See you then.” She put the phone down and realized she was shaking. She didn’t know what would happen when they finally got together, but she knew there were several possibilities. And hopefully whichever one ended up happening, it would lead to healing and a knowledge of where her next steps should lead. She knew it was way past time to get closure. And hopefully she would understand what she should end up putting in each of the three boxes on the floor so she could finally move forward with her life. It was time. She hugged the quilt one more time and laid it gently in the first box.

## LISTING

1

kayak heavy in water  
lists to side paddle drips  
cool water over warm  
skin baked in sun’s oven  
even egrets onshore stand  
still awaiting a breeze

2

shopping planting reading  
a list set aside in wait  
distracted cardinal bright  
red on a branch listing  
sways a thin bough high above  
porch whitewashed railing

3

cannot recall mind overfull  
details duties activities  
no list to remember thoughts  
obscured browse memory  
blank page unwritten page  
head listing try to recall

GLEN ARMSTRONG

## SHARK WEEK

We settle in for shark.  
Week.  
T.S. Eliot would have no.  
Doubt done the same.  
There's a name for what we feel.  
When we see that mouth.  
Alien and deadly.  
Twisting through waters.  
That twist through the world.  
We settle for.  
These images on a screen.  
While something preexists.  
Defying its name.  
And its offspring and its appetite.  
We hold hands and dim the lights.  
We readjust our bodies.  
And wonder what will happen next.  
We have never been.  
To the ocean.  
This is how the world begins.

**FOUR:  
FAMILY**

MICHAEL ESTABROOK

## CLASS HEXACTINELLIDA

After 2 weeks  
on the beach in  
the salt air and sun,  
my return to work  
wasn't easy.  
Fluorescent lights  
made my eyes water;  
the pounding of computer  
printers and  
photocopy machines,  
like waves pushing  
at a sinking ship,  
made my head ache.  
I had to close  
the door, closing my world  
in even smaller.  
I wished I was back  
in college again  
listening seriously this  
time to Dr. Brenowitz  
preach about the pleasures  
of being a marine biologist,  
out to sea for weeks collecting  
phytoplankton and zooplankton  
and rare specimens of the  
Class Hexactinellida.  
(The ocean crested and  
lapped at me more now that  
it was far away,  
so far far away.)

FRANK C. MODICA

## THE QUEEN OF CHICAGO

For Mother's Day Mike  
and I picked only  
the biggest and brightest  
dandelions from neighborhood yards,  
braided our treasures  
into extravagant tiaras  
as we hurried three short blocks  
from baseball practice  
to our crowded South Side  
two-bedroom duplex,  
watched our blossoms wilt  
in our hands before we could  
make it to the front door.

A.J. ORTEGA

## EL BIGOTON, OR: WHAT I THINK OF WHEN I SMELL FRESHLY CUT GRASS

It's almost eleven  
and the Mexican guy who  
could  
be my father, is here.  
He comes by every three weeks.  
*¿Oye, te corto la yarda?*  
The only reason I say yes  
is because I feel guilty.  
*Ándale.*  
Dark blue jeans. A green GMC.  
Boots. Cowboy kind. *Bigote.*  
A pressed western shirt.  
Baseball cap.  
Like he's going to  
church for mass.  
I can't tell him I have my own lawnmower  
brand new  
in my garage.  
*Ya estuvo.*  
And I hand him the cash.  
And I shut the door  
before he counts the money  
because it fucks me up  
when he reaches  
into his wallet

KEITH HOERNER

## HISSTORY

to give me the five dollars in change  
that he thinks he owes me.  
I shut the door.

We don't know each other's names.  
And I don't want to know. I don't want to  
hear that he has my grandfather's name, or  
my father's name, or my name.  
Every three weeks  
he cuts the grass  
and my lawnmower  
sits in my garage  
and the man with the mustache,  
with the grass clippings clinging  
to his blue jeans,  
leaves.  
And I want to follow those grass clippings  
all the way to church  
for the twelve o'clock mass.

Waffen-SS blood types are tattooed in black—on the white  
flesh of underarms (eight inches above the elbow): A, B, AB,  
or O. This lesser known secret sits unnoticed in dark, chalky  
corners of holding cells, aside piles of gold fillings, eyeless  
eyeglasses, and other pilfered parts 'n' parcels of so-called  
Rats. But these shadows split on given days, when the sun-  
shine lays way to stray, hopeful seeds bearing bounties of  
weedy flowers from the likes of creeping speedwell, broad-  
leaved dock, and bittercress... the soft, hard color of memory;  
the color of hiSStory; the color of blood.

KELLY PINER

## MOMMY-TO-BE

*Pregnant? We can help.*

Whitney must have passed the building over a hundred times, but had never noticed the sign until now. She was squinting at the phone number when the car behind her honked, prompting her to turn onto Western Avenue, filled with hope, like she'd been given a second chance. She hadn't expected to find such a facility in her small hometown. Except for her boyfriend, Eli, she'd kept the pregnancy all to herself and not even her best friend knew. But Eli had made it clear that he never wanted children, and he didn't even like his younger brother and sister. After Whitney had broken the news to him, he'd quit taking her calls. And heaven forbid that her parents, both fundamentalist ministers, ever found out...

In less than a month, she'd graduate high school and had already been accepted into Duke University, a prestigious college where she'd major in theology. From there, she'd earn her Masters of Divinity and fulfill her childhood dream of being a minister. Nothing would make her parents more proud. But how could she attend school expecting a child, unwed, and with no money? And now way would her parents let her live at home as an unwed mother, especially when her father had recently given a sermon on the growing immorality of society.

The oldest of three girls, Whitney was the golden-haired child of the family; she played the flute and had won first place in the state finals, and she'd made the honor roll every semester. She couldn't throw away her future and shame her family in the process. This was the only way.

She circled the block and cruised up to the worn two-story building, *Solutions*, and punched its number into her cell. She hadn't stopped to think of what she would say.

"Solutions. May I help you?"

Whitney's pulse quickened as she spoke over the swelling in her throat. "I'd like to make an appointment."

"Name?"

She froze. "Karen Jackson," she heard herself lie. She wouldn't risk giving her real name since her parents were so well-known around town. "I'll need a late afternoon appointment," she added.

"We can see you Monday at four. Do you know where we're located?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you." Whitney shut off her phone and leaned her head back against the cushioned seat. Now, she just had to make it through the weekend, until Monday, when all her problems would be solved.

\*

Whitney tossed and turned all through Sunday night, and on Monday, she sleep-walked through her classes; she hadn't bothered to finish her assignments. At 3pm, she phoned her mother. "Hi Mom. I'll be home late. I have play practice."

"Okay, honey. Be safe."

Whitney cringed at the lie and attempted to force her mind blank as she drove her used Chevy the twenty miles to *Solutions*, over the railroad tracks and past the vacant stockyards. Never again, she promised herself, would she be pressured into sex. After this experience, she'd wait until marriage or at least until she was engaged. But she couldn't quiet the gnawing guilt. Would God judge her and banish her to hell? How many times had she heard her parents speak of the ills of abortion? But they weren't in her predicament, young and unwed with no one to turn to. When she became a minister, she'd be more understanding of other people's situations, not harsh and judgmental. But her parents were old-school and only preached what had been handed down to them. If she handled this on her own, she would emerge a better person, wiser and more tolerant.

She pulled into the overgrown drive in back of *Solutions* and

was staring at the dilapidated two-story structure when a blurry face came into view, peeking out the window, perhaps another pregnant teenager who feared her family finding out. Whitney climbed three creaky steps to a screened-in porch that reminded her of summer camp, where she'd slept on a bunkbed. "Hello," she gently called out.

When no one answered, she stuck her head inside a dusty, cluttered office and was searching for someone to help when a grandmotherly figure emerged from a back room.

Whitney relaxed a little as the woman introduced herself as Marjorie and handed Whitney a clipboard.

"Just fill out these forms, Karen. I'll need a copy of your driver's license and proof of insurance."

Whitney gulped. She hadn't counted on this. But what did she expect? That she'd come in with no identification, lie back on a table and an hour later would go home and have dinner? "I don't have any insurance. I brought cash." She'd tucked away \$900 in her purse that she'd saved from her weekend job at Jerry's Diner.

"Cash is fine," Marjorie said. "License?"

For a second, Whitney thought of saying she didn't drive, but worried that someone might have seen her pull up. She looked into the old lady's face. "My name's not Karen." She relinquished her license.

Marjorie looked down at it. "Whitney, this happens a lot. It can't be easy, coming here alone."

"I'm glad someone understands."

"Take a seat and Dr. Young will be with you shortly."

Inside the tiny waiting room, Whitney slumped onto a cushy love seat and took deep breaths. From a distance, she stared at black and white photos of smiling couples clutching babies. Dates were posted underneath. Odd, she thought for an abortion clinic.

"What's with all these pictures?" she asked Marjorie.

"Photos of parents who have adopted babies over the years."

Whitney didn't respond, and what did she know about abortion clinics? She didn't exactly hang out at one. Maybe some of the girls opted for adoption.

She had just leaned her head back when a door opened and a woman wearing blue scrubs called her name. When Whitney rose, the woman smiled. "Last door on the right."

Inside the homey office, Whitney sat in an oversized armchair and pressed her hand against the fluttering in her gut. She wondered if the tiny life inside her knew she'd come here to rid herself of it.

"I'm Dr. Young. How can I help you?" She leaned back in her chair and smiled. Her twinkling blue eyes suggested kindness and wisdom.

Whitney felt a strange connection to her, and wondered how many young women she'd helped over the years.

"I saw your sign outside. 'Pregnant? We can help.'"

"You've come to the right place. How far along are you?"

"Six weeks."

An awkward silence passed between them. "Have you thought of adoption?"

"Adoption? No. I'd die if my parents found out."

Dr. Young leaned forward and spoke softly. "Families can be a lot more understanding than we give them credit for. You have parents, don't you? Maybe they'd adopt the child."

"My parents?" Whitney's voice rose in alarm. She hadn't come here to be coaxed into an adoption. "No way can I tell my parents. They'd kill me."

"And the father?"

"He won't even take my calls."

The doctor tapped her fingers to her lips. "What if I found a family to adopt the baby so that no one would ever know?"

Whitney's earlier relief was quickly turning into panic. From her internet search, she figured she'd be examined, lie back and end the worst nightmare of her life. Her voice cracked when she spoke. "I know this sounds awful, but I just want it over. I can't carry a baby to full-term without people noticing." She sobbed into her hands.

The doctor handed her a box of tissues. "You wouldn't have to carry it to full-term. There are ways."



“What ways?” Whitney dabbed her eyes.

“Just like our name, we offer solutions, not just an abortion. Follow me.”

Both confused and intrigued, Whitney followed the doctor upstairs, to the second floor. Dr. Young unlocked a door and motioned with her head.

Inside the room, the scent of fresh baby lotion filled the air, and Whitney half-expected to see infants, swaddled in blankets. An inviting table layered in white blankets rested against the wall, and in the corner, glass bubbles were stacked on top of one another. Whitney couldn't make any sense of what she saw. “What is all this?”

“Have a seat.”

Whitney sat onto the edge of a sofa, all the time fearing what the doctor would tell her. And how long before she'd get to go home? She hadn't expected this kink.

“What I'm about to tell you will be shocking, but first, I'll have you sign confidentiality agreements.”

Sensing that this was the only way the doctor would help her, Whitney heard herself agreeing, but to what? She signed the necessary papers, filled with legal jargon that she barely understood, and then Dr. Young sat down next to her.

“I'd like to take you inside the next room, the orb room.”

Whitney frowned, confused, but nevertheless followed the doctor inside a large, expansive room filled with shimmering, frosted glass balls, like giant snow globes. From a distance, she couldn't make out what was inside them. Mozart played gently in the background.

“Step closer,” Dr. Young said.

When Whitney looked inside the first orb, she gasped at a tiny embryo, small enough to be a baby mouse. A tube ran from its body to an opening at the top of the ball, where fluid ran from an IV.

She didn't speak at first. She examined the other orbs, maybe 50 in all, each containing embryos and fetuses in various stages of development, from a few weeks to nearly nine months, all floating in clear fluid, as if suspended in space. Their tiny bodies moved about, as if eager to burst into the real world. Stunned, Whitney turned to the doctor.

“Incredible, isn't it?” Dr. Young said.

“How is any of this possible? And how come I've never heard about it?”

“I've been blessed with a special ability to transfer fetuses to the orbs where they fully develop. But it's our secret. I can't share it with the world as the technology would no doubt be misused. It's the agreement I made with the Universe.”

“I can't wrap my mind around it,” Whitney said. She hadn't prepared herself for such a revelation. People would think she'd gone insane if she ever spoke of this.

“It's the best of both worlds. Scared, young girls don't have to choose between their futures or being unprepared mothers. And the babies emerge happy and healthy.”

“What happens to the babies?”

“I belong to an organization which places them with the perfect families, good families.”

Whitney's mind raced with questions. “But how are they born?”

“At full-term, I open the pod and deliver each one. From there, they reside in the nursery next door until the right family shows up to adopt them. Would you like to see?”

So filled with curiosity, and without another living soul to confide in, Whitney followed the doctor into a back room where an orb holding a full-term baby rested on top soft white blankets. Whitney gazed at him and could have sworn he stared back at her as he sucked on his thumb.

Dr. Young carried the orb to a nearby table where she lifted a metal instrument and gently tapped the top. There, the orb broke open, like a massive egg, and the baby spilled out into the doctor's hands. She slapped his bottom, and he exploded with life, his cries filling the entire room. Dr. Young recorded his height and weight, and then she wrapped him in a blanket and lay him in a nearby bassinette.

Whitney's whole body trembled with emotion. “It's a miracle. I just can't believe it. It's like something from a science fiction movie.”

"I know it's hard to believe. That's the miracle of it. Orb babies are the best babies. They're raised in a completely controlled environment with a perfect diet. They're not exposed to the stress and strains of the mother's daily life. They emerge more intelligent, healthier and more capable."

"But why not just say you performed an abortion and secretly move the fetuses to the orbs? The girls would never know the difference."

Dr. Young shook her head. "This is a spiritual practice, and each girl or woman must give her full consent. No deception allowed. You have the right to decline."

Sensing that God had led her to *Solutions*, Whitney met the doctor's gaze. "So what'll I have to do?" It really was the best of both worlds, Whitney thought. She could attend college and at the same time, her baby would be delivered without anyone ever knowing.

"Let's go back to the other room." Once near the comfortable table, Dr. Young handed Whitney a blue gown. "Put this on and lie back on the table."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. I'll give you something to relax you."

Once Whitney had crawled under the soft cotton blanket, Dr. Young placed a mask over her face. "Breathe deeply."

A floral aroma flooded Whitney's lungs with each breath. She wondered how her baby would look within a few months, inside the orb. Could the blurry face at the window she'd seen earlier have been an orb child? As she inhaled the gas, she slipped further and further out of consciousness. At one point, Whitney thought she heard another voice in the room. And when Dr. Young leaned over her, she looked different somehow, not quite human. Whitney couldn't put her finger on it, but the pretty doctor's head appeared elongated, and her eyes had an inhuman look, distant and otherworldly. Whitney wondered briefly if she had fallen prey to some alien experiment where fetuses were being shipped to some faraway galaxy, but even before she could dismiss the idea as ludicrous, the thought floated away with the effect of the gas.

She struggled to speak, but no words came. No longer in

the examination room, she stood at the end of a tunnel at dusk. She reached into her pocket and pulled out an orb. A fetus swam around inside it. Then she found herself inside an orb, a tiny fetus, peering through the fluid at the outside world as Dr. Young stared in at her. Whitney fought to hold her eyes open, but the room spun and went dark.

\*

When Whitney opened her eyes inside the darkened clinic, she sat up from the cushioned love seat in the waiting room. A red exit sign flashed over the back door, and there wasn't a single sign of life other than herself. Marjorie's cluttered desk was stark, as if it hadn't been used in years. Afraid and disoriented, just how had she ended up back in the waiting room when she had a fuzzy memory of lying on a birthing table? The rest of the visit was foggy at best. Could she have dreamt the entire incident? But they wouldn't have just left her napping on the sofa and gone home for the night. Of that, Whitney was sure.

She pressed her hand against her stomach. It now felt empty and void of life. But wasn't that what she'd come here for? On unsteady legs, she walked to the back office and knocked. "Dr. Young. Dr. Young."

When no one answered, Whitney devised an explanation for her parents. It was now 10:00 pm. Somehow, she had lost six hours. And she'd never be at play practice this long. She'd go home and tell her mom that she'd gone out afterwards for a burger with her friend, Laura, and that they had lost track of time. Tomorrow, she'd call the clinic to ask what had happened. And she'd never mention this night to another living soul. Ever.

Whitney slung her purse over her shoulder, and in the glare of the full moon, she turned to glance at one last photo. In it, her much younger parents clutched a smiling baby, eighteen years ago.

HELGA KIDDER

## THE WISHBONE

We finally broke it  
three months after Thanksgiving,  
left you with the short end.  
Last year we fattened ourselves,  
watched crocus, roses, asters  
push through the seasons.  
This year we murder crepe myrtles,  
cut liriope to the quick,  
leave behind iPad and TV.  
Our bones ready to stretch and bend,  
to visit foreign languages,  
the filigree of turrets, the palaces.  
We want to see and live the song,  
'What a Wonderful World,'  
forget the black and white of politics.  
As the hourglass drizzles through  
an opening so thin, at first  
it seems the sand lies still.

SUSAN CASTILLO STREET

## MOTHERLAND

Berehynia, goddess of mothers, women.  
Protector of homes and hearths.  
She stretches gilded wings  
stands tall in Maidan,  
Independence Square, Kyiv.  
I think of all the mothers  
mothers sheltering from bombs  
huddled underground  
holding their children close  
mothers packed into trains  
babies handed through windows  
fleeing from destruction  
mothers thinking of their sons  
lied to by their leaders  
sent off to fight a war they don't believe in  
Over Berehynia's head a flame of yellow flowers  
arches golden in the sun. If petals fall  
in enemy fire they'll spiral down  
to earth, rise up again  
in whirlwinds, lay waste  
to those who threaten motherlands.

## RED SKY AT MORNING

The only thing Caroline remembers about her first week at work is how bad her mastitis was. The pimply kid from IT taught her how to log on to the filing system and she gritted her teeth when the clacking of his keyboard synced up with the throbbing beneath her sternum; the gray-haired secretary taught her how to forward a call and Caroline wondered if she could feel how feverish she was when she leaned over to her to point at the correct buttons.

The week was a marathon of surreptitiously changing cold compresses, the haze that comes with running a sustained temperature, and praying to God that she'd remember some of what they taught her.

"How's work?" her husband, Dean, asked at the end of the week. They were eating spaghetti with jarred sauce because standing at the stove had felt too difficult.

"I don't know," she confessed. She was leaking because her doctor had told her that calling the whole thing off and switching to formula would make the mastitis worse, even though she couldn't think of anything she'd rather do less than add the affront of a pump to the angry redness on her chest. "I think it went fine."

"That's good," he said. Half of her wanted him to prod her for more information, to be interested in this particular misery of new parenthood that he could not share, but the other half of her was relieved to be left alone. She spun a mouthful of noodles around her fork.

"I'll get up with Jake tonight," Dean promised when she chewed instead of responding.

He didn't, even though the baby preferred him. He

rolled over when the baby cried, somehow not hearing his wails from the other room even though she could hear them vibrating around in her skull like a thousand tiny hammers.

Caroline picked him up, like she always did, and he looked at her with his scrunched-up face and inscrutable eyes and she wondered if maybe he had a diaper rash because maybe she picked the wrong diaper brand or maybe because she didn't change him soon enough at some wet point the day before. She wondered if, worse, maybe he was hungry, thinking that maybe she could try to present him with a swollen, aching breast while she waited on a bottle to warm so that he could definitely, definitely refuse to latch.

K.B. BALLENTINE

## NAMELESS INTO THE SEA

My heart is a wandering stone  
like the pebbles plunged  
and tugged by ocean tides,  
its direction seemingly aimless,  
but it always searches for shore.  
Sometimes it lands on sand so soft  
it never wants to leave. Sometimes  
it flings itself against shingles, ricochets  
to the spindrift that carries it away.  
Most often it finds itself tumbling  
over itself, polished through fathoms  
to land in a dark so dark it can't find  
its way out—the pressure so strong  
it hardens and condenses—memories  
of light and warmth distant and yearning.

**FIVE:  
LIFE**

LARRY SCHUG

## I'M TOAST

I wake in a large bed covered with thick blankets,  
my head on a soft pillow.  
I rise from this bed,  
dress in clothing I choose,  
venture into a house that does not allow cold wind to enter,  
a house that has windows that let in light,  
give me a view of aspen trees, bee balm turning sunrise red,  
chickadees and mourning doves singing,  
a house that has a door  
that I can lock or unlock at my discretion.  
I eat a breakfast, I call it my breakfast  
though I share it with a yellow dog.  
I eat a wheat field  
Slathered with a dairy farm, a maple tree or cherry bushes  
without even thinking of apple pickers and farmers with sore backs.  
I eat books, write poems on trees, hoping someone will eat them.  
I am privileged.  
I look in a mirror at my old face haloed with white hair,  
Realize I have been privileged a long time.  
A thought enters my mind.  
You know what that thought is.  
You think it, too.

ROY ADAMS

## SIDES OF WHITE

White is hospital wards  
hiding death, coaxing life;  
the grief of granny hair  
au naturel or disguised.

White is fair objects  
of slim utility:  
a lunar chill,  
a polar night,  
a pearl.

Once an ascendancy  
of goods and guns,  
cargo and shark—  
pure, high, fearsome  
and apart.

Erstwhile master of the seas  
now, as rainbow rises,  
white reels.

ANTHONY DIRK RAY

## DEEP SOCKETS

everyone is familiar with  
the presence of innocence and  
grace in the eyes of a child  
but if you look hard enough  
you can find elegance  
in the eyes of a junkie  
or a janitor  
even a madman  
and if you really concentrate  
look at just the right angle  
at the perfect time  
you can observe the entire  
beauty of the whole world  
in the eyes of the dying



MICHAEL FLANAGAN

sunlight  
on old snow  
pause  
snap a picture  
in my mind

aha  
I finally see that feeling sorry for yourself  
is different than grief  
now I can see  
a light in the darkness

soda bread  
so simple a recipe  
what could go wrong  
then I found out  
a lot

CASSANDRA O'SULLIVAN SACHAR

## TRAPPED IN A STUDIO APARTMENT FOR ETERNITY

As Arthur stared out the window of the tiny apartment, he wondered, *Why did I have to die here, of all places?*

After attempting to leave through the door and via the window on multiple occasions only to be repelled back, he realized he was confined to this singular location: a dull, cramped studio apartment in Brooklyn, roughly 500 square feet, if his rough measurements and math were accurate.

He didn't have his cell phone on his person when he passed, so everything was only an estimate, and he had forgotten most of his math skills, having not used them in decades despite the empty promises of his junior high algebra teachers.

His ghostly form wouldn't move when he tried to stick his head or body out the door or window, passageways that led to anywhere else he could have spent his eternity.

He wished he had his phone. Could a ghost tap into Wi-Fi? If only he had a ghostly phone!

Maybe that would have given him a better idea of how to spend his spare time, a luxury that failed to exist when he was an actual breather, a man of flesh and blood who spent most of his hours working. Without access to Google or any handbook to the spiritual realm, he had no clue how to proceed. His future stretched out in front of him, an interminable road with nowhere to go.

While he could somehow perch on the couch rather than sink through it, as he could with walls and doors, Arthur had no method of touching anything else or contacting a creature in the living realm. He was a bystander, an invisible voyeur. It was confusing being trapped here with

no purpose, it seemed, just a million unanswered questions.

Was this temporary? Would he flit away to another place someday, a version of heaven or hell? He hadn't been particularly saintly or evil in life, so this seemed unlikely.

If the building burned down, heaven forbid, would he remain trapped in a cubicle of air? Would he meet other spectral residents?

And the main question: If one needed to remain in the walled space where one died, why couldn't he have perished in a cathedral? Back in his living days, as a single man with a decent income, he enjoyed traveling. He remembered the lofty ceiling and illuminated stained glass of Notre-Dame. He imagined that others must have expired there, as well, over hundreds of years of the cathedral's existence—a heart attack, or maybe a stroke. Had he died there, he might have met other cultured travelers who were worthy of a stimulating conversation every year or so. Maybe every decade—Arthur wasn't one for small talk.

But when he remembered being alive, Arthur couldn't help but recall how he died in Aunt Ethel's shabby apartment.

A kind woman who sent birthday cards with five-dollar bills from age one until fifty-three, the age at which he'd had his final birthday, Aunt Ethel loved her odd nephew and appreciated his monthly visits despite the stilted conversation.

He remembered the saccharine, chemical taste of the candy. She was always forcing the damned things on him. He had accepted to be polite. The price he paid for his manners!

It revolted him, and he desperately desired to spit it out, yet he dared not behave in such a crass way. He sucked for a while, trying to make it minuscule enough to pass down his gullet. Arthur wanted to rid his mouth of that awful taste.

But it hadn't shrunk enough to swallow and thus lodged in his throat. He realized he was in trouble and tried to cough it out. When that failed, he attempted the Heimlich maneuver on himself on the back of a chair. In his panic, his technique left much to be desired.

Aunt Ethel screamed and wailed, hitting him in what she thought was his diaphragm.

But it was too late.

Then, suddenly, Arthur was staring at himself, prone and lifeless on the floor. He felt fine, far from the agony of mere moments before, but it soon became apparent that he was not fine. Far from it.

Poor Aunt Ethel. He observed her as she dealt with the aftermath of his death: the look of horror on her face as she shook his lifeless body, the gut-wrenching sobs while she called 9-1-1, her bloodshot eyes when the paramedics carted him out.

Her guilt was so severe that she moved out, denying him the comfort of a familiar, if not close, companion. He would never know what became of her other than that she went to a senior citizen living facility, which he learned from overhearing her on the phone.

Aunt Ethel left, but Arthur remained trapped in this minuscule apartment in the same light blue sweater with fraying sleeves. Once, years before the fateful day on which he unknowingly selected this final outfit, his co-worker Susan had mentioned that it brought out his eyes. After spilling these words, she flushed bright pink and walked away.

The sweater became his favorite after that, and he wondered what would have happened if he had made more of an effort. Shy Susan with her wild mane of hair and parade of cardigan sweaters, buttoned all the way up to her throat, had intrigued him. What if he'd had the courage to invite her for a coffee?

It was another "what if" in the life that was no longer his, a quiet, solitary existence with missed opportunities. Too much of an introvert to feel comfortable attending a company happy hour, Arthur's Friday nights usually involved treating himself to a single finger of whiskey while watching a World War II documentary, or, if he really wanted to unwind, he might pour himself a cognac and listen to NPR in his study, looking out the window at the Manhattan skyline. He was fortunate to have invested well in his youth, so he had splurged, buying an apartment with this breathtaking amenity.

It might have been nice to share that fabulous view with someone else.

But it was too late.

All he had was his afterlife now. The fraying sleeve would

never worsen—he had tried to pull the yarn to see what would happen, but it sprang back, completely unharmed. Likewise, the crinkles around his eyes would never deepen, nor would the gray creep up and overtake his light brown hair. Like his sweater, he was stuck in time, never to change, a middle-aged man for eternity.

At times he'd rummage through his wallet just to feel something in his hand and remind himself that he had once been a living man who drove a car and used credit cards. In his pocket when he died, his wallet had traveled with him to the afterlife.

Arthur wished he could retrieve the books in his study, items likely boxed up and sold at a thrift shop by now. How he would love to read the complete works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Austen. He was quite well-read but had not read everything.

Now, with an ocean of time, he had no access to those masterpieces. He'd even attempt to read a romance novel, a cringeworthy Danielle Steel or Nicholas Sparks if he could get his hands on one, but there were no options.

After Aunt Ethel moved out, a man named Gerald moved in. A fortyish, unkempt slob, Gerald worked from home as an automobile insurance agent.

Gerald gave minimal effort to this career. With little else to occupy his time, Arthur quickly memorized Gerald's pitch and would yell feedback to him to increase his sales, but, as always, it remained unheard.

Unambitious, Gerald remained disinterested in becoming promoted or earning employee of the month. He clocked his hours, and, when completed, focused on his real passions: video games and pornography.

These pastimes were equally repugnant in terms of Gerald's actions and sounds. Once the headset went on or a certain type of music played, Arthur knew it was time to give Gerald space.

Sadly, there was nowhere to go. Perhaps Arthur *was* in hell, after all.

Arthur's entertainment mostly consisted of looking out the window to avoid seeing Gerald scratch himself all day. There was nothing he could do to block out the incessant sound of Gerald's

grating voice or the death metal "music" he blasted.

It was only on rare occasions, it seemed, when he was low on Miller Lite, Mountain Dew, and pork rinds, his staple groceries, that Gerald left the apartment and provided Arthur with some much-needed alone time. He would have preferred to watch a program or listen to a CD, maybe The Beatles or David Bowie, or, perhaps, some classical music, but silence was preferable to Gerald's noise.

Luckily, at least in Arthur's experience, ghosts couldn't smell. Gerald's diet of fried food and Domino's pizza made him produce copious sounds which Arthur imagined to be accompanied by fetid odors from which he was blessedly spared. Arthur's repeated cries for Gerald to take better care of himself were in vain.

And the state of the apartment! Gerald seemed to revel in his own filth, often forgetting trash day and allowing his takeout rubbish to pile up into a Leaning Tower of Pizza Boxes. Gerald threw can after can in the trash, not recycling.

It was *sickening*. He didn't even own a broom.

If he could, Arthur would have happily helped with the apartment upkeep, but none of his efforts were successful.

It was all quite dull, really, but it was his reality.

Thank goodness for the window. It wasn't quite the Manhattan skyline, but it was *something*, an escape from this studio apartment imprisonment.

While the window, this portal to a different world, faced a seedy liquor store that serviced a great number of neighborhood degenerates, he could view the sky in the morning, day, dusk, and night, and thus observe nature's wonder as the sky metamorphosed. He watched as winter shed her icy cloak to make way for joyous rebirth in spring, saw fireflies blink their cheerful fairy lights in summer, beheld the leaves on the lone tree in his sight transform to brilliant colors and descend to the ground in autumn, and rejoiced when the first snowflakes fell, purifying the dirty street in a blanket of fresh snow.

This window allowed him to see life in his death.

\*

Once, out of curiosity and boredom, Arthur tried to meld himself into Gerald to see if possession were possible. While the thought of *being* Gerald repulsed him, he longed for the simple pleasures of using the remote control or opening a book. Not that there were any books here, but he could order some if he had the power to touch a computer or phone.

It didn't work, and Arthur felt inappropriate for having tried.

\*

Several years into Arthur's afterlife, Gerald showed up one day with a dog, a great mammoth of an adult German Shepherd.

It was completely unexpected; he hadn't gleaned a hint of this before it happened. In general, Arthur attempted to respect Gerald's privacy, as well as his own need for personal space, by not snooping at his text messages. Whenever anything seemed private, Arthur left Gerald do his thing, however abhorrent it might be, such as leaving the bathroom door completely open when he did his business.

In Gerald's defense, he didn't realize he had company.

But Arthur couldn't help but overhear his phone calls. Except for the work calls, they were few and far between.

When this lumbering oaf of a dog ambled into the apartment, Arthur's first thought was that everything would be so much dirtier than it already was.

Dogs were disgusting creatures, shedding hair, ruining furniture, and making messes. This dog might even be worse than Gerald.

He soon discovered that the dog was called Roger, a name more often yelled than spoken. Arthur pieced the clues together from words Gerald screamed into his headset as he played his video games. Roger had belonged to Gerald's brother, and now Gerald had to take him... something about separating from the wife and moving to an apartment that couldn't take dogs, maybe?

Poor Roger, abandoned by both of his humans, now to reside with the delinquent Gerald, a man barely able to care for himself. No wonder Roger kept his tail down and sighed throughout the night.

Arthur wanted to help this depressed dog, to comfort him in this difficult time. He remembered reading an article about animals being able to see the dead, so he tried to make his presence known.

He failed. Roger was as aware of Arthur as he was of the symbolism of the green light in *The Great Gatsby*—not at all. It was a myth, apparently, that living animals could perceive ghosts.

At least Gerald bought Roger tennis balls and what appeared to be the proper food. He didn't take the dog outside enough and raged when Roger made a mess, but Arthur felt that was Gerald's fault, not Roger's. Twice a day wasn't enough for a human, so how could it suffice for a dog?

With nothing else to do, against his own wishes, Arthur mentally clocked Gerald's bathroom visits at an average of eleven times per day. How was it fair to take Roger out only twice?

But Roger seemed to thrive outside. If Arthur was lucky, Gerald would take the German Shepherd to the small patch of grass and tree by the liquor store. Arthur smiled as he watched the serious dog take joy in his life, jumping with his two front paws on the tree or sniffing the trail of a mysterious, now departed animal.

Gerald always looked bored and pulled on the leash, eager to go back inside. The "walk" usually lasted all of ten minutes.

Arthur hoped Roger's previous owners had shown more enthusiasm, but, then again, they were willing to part with him. Why would one leave one's companion?

\*

Time passed, as it does. Roger appeared hopeful every day, treating Gerald as a god, forever approaching his master with a tennis ball in his mouth. Roger would chew and ceremoniously plop the ball in front of Gerald, waiting for a throw, but Gerald usually

ignored him. Eventually, Roger would give up.

Once in a hundred times, Gerald would throw the slimy mass across the room, swearing while he did. Happy for even a shred of attention, Roger would run like a maniac to fetch it, rarely rewarded with a second toss.

As *if* a dog's saliva was more disgusting than Gerald's menagerie of filthy habits. As *if* Gerald had a reason for depriving a simple pleasure to this poor, broken animal.

How Arthur longed to toss Roger that ball, to give attention to this lonely creature.

\*

One night, after repeatedly being ignored, Roger slunk off to chew his ball.

Gerald was busy—headset on, f-words aplenty—engaged with his “gamer” community.

After several Miller Lites, Gerald passed out on the couch. He forgot to take Roger outside, so the German Shepherd stayed on the floor, chewing away, at least somewhat content.

In the silence, Arthur heard a wretched sound, a squeaking, whistling noise.

It was Roger. The ball was stuck in his throat. Arthur could see it still, lodged there—Roger hadn't swallowed it, thank God, but he was struggling, gasping for air.

The whistling increased. Arthur watched helplessly as Roger tried to expel the offending object.

He coughed. He gagged.

Arthur rushed to Roger and tried to pull the ball out, but his hand went right through it, as it always did with objects in the living world.

Arthur screamed at Gerald to wake up, roared at him, but it was useless. He simply couldn't make himself heard.

Finally, Roger shuddered and lay still.

Arthur felt hot tears streaming down his face. He didn't know his ghostly self was capable of even producing tears—after

all, he didn't have any other bodily functions and couldn't sense heat or cold, always dapper in his blue sweater while Gerald sweated buckets in ratty old tee-shirts and boxers.

Were these really tears? He had never cried as a ghost before, and he couldn't remember when he had last felt such strong emotion even in life.

And then he felt something else.

A cold, wet touch on his hand, a sensation he had seldom experienced in life and never in death.

He looked down. There, to the left of his now vacant body, Roger stood in his brand-new ghostly form, licking Arthur's hand.

Roger cocked his head at Arthur, questioning.

Arthur reached out to place his hand on Roger's head and caress his coarse fur. As he scratched around his ears, Roger's tongue lolled out the side of his mouth. He grinned at this new human, and he leaned in, close.

Indeed, Roger seemed to adjust easily to this ghostly existence and looked nonchalant about his own corpse beside him.

Arthur, already squatting, reached out to the now sitting dog, drawing him into a hug.

“You're a good boy,” he tried, having very few encounters with animals. “You're safe with me now.”

Roger felt solid, substantial, and warm in Arthur's arms. He knew that Roger's literal heart was no longer beating, but he was pretty sure he heard the rhythm of a ghost heart. He couldn't remember, even in life, the last time he had embraced or been embraced, the last time he had been close enough, if ever, to hear a heartbeat.

Tears pricked his eyes for the second time that night.

Gerald snored away on the couch, unaware of the tragedy he would unearth when he woke. Maybe Gerald wasn't the best dog owner, but he cared about Roger in his own lazy way. Arthur dreaded witnessing the discovery.

Yet now *Arthur* was Roger's person, a fact the dog seemed to understand. He ignored his living, sleeping master and looked with devotion at his dead one, as if he knew he and Gerald were no

longer existing on the same plane.

Still, Arthur worried. Would Roger be content trapped in here with him, no longer able to chase squirrels up trees or bask in the sun? While Roger had spent little time outdoors, at least in his tenure with Gerald, Arthur knew he adored those fleeting moments; he had seen it all from the window. Would Roger understand that his new master couldn't provide him with outings, food, and toys? What else did dogs desire if not those things?

He had never owned a dog, or any pet for that matter. He didn't know what to *do* to make a dog happy.

He pondered this as he stroked Roger's head. While the dog seemed a worthy companion, would this new development make Arthur's afterlife more complicated? Would he make this poor dog miserable? Arthur didn't want to disappoint him.

Roger wandered away, seemingly already tired of Arthur.

"Sorry, buddy, you're stuck with me, and there's not much to do here."

And then he felt it, a gentle touch on his foot. He looked down to see a tennis ball.

He picked it up, feeling the sliminess.

Of course! Just as Arthur had entered death with his wallet, Roger entered with his ball. A quick glimpse of the poor dog's corpse solidified the knowledge that Roger had died with the tennis ball in his mouth. While it failed to dislodge in life, it had slid out in death.

A grin on his face, Arthur threw the ball across the room. Roger took off like a shot, retrieving the ball and delivering it to Arthur's feet.

Arthur stared into the deep brown eyes. "I love you, Roger," he said.

It was the first time he had ever uttered those words.

"You're such a good boy." He drew Roger in for another hug. Roger licked Arthur right on his face.

An eternity in this apartment suddenly felt much more bearable.

\*

Gerald's grief was short-lived. While surprised at the outcome, he failed to show much sadness.

He brought home a snake within a week.

Arthur wondered, *Would a snake become a ghost?*

He looked back at Roger, who also seemed skeptical.

They hoped not.

KEITH HOERNER

## SWIMMING THROUGH SHADOWLANDS

Deep below the lake's murky surface, there sits—intact—a house. A two-story structure of Carpenter Gothic details like elaborate wooden trim bloated to bursting. Its front yard: purple loosestrife. Its inhabitants: alligator gar, bull trout, and pupfish. All glide past languidly—out of window sashes and back inside door frames. It is serene, and it is foreboding. Curtains of algae float gossamer to and fro. Pictures rest clustered atop credenzas. A chandelier is lit, intermittently, by freshwater electric eels. And near a Victrola, white to the bone, a man and a woman waltz in a floating embrace.

ASHLEY KNOWLTON

## FROM A PLANE HIGH ABOVE CALIFORNIA

the clouds below are vast rolling hills  
lined with crops upon crops of  
braided cottontails  
colliding with billowing silver mountains  
jointed with deep furrows and  
dark narrow valleys  
where weathermen's "atmospheric rivers" must hurry along  
sending streams and streams of so much rain  
you can't tell which water belongs to what world  
muddling the firmament.



TAYLOR SCOTT

## THIS IS ME BEGGING GOD TO TRY AGAIN WITH ME

I want to preface this by stating these feelings are sporadic, at best. Maybe I can't write anymore because I have nothing profound left to say, or maybe I am so at peace that I cannot possibly complain or whine about anything. Perhaps everything is perfectly fine—oh, but how could that ever be true? Although a depressive note, it is far more likely that I have squandered my abilities. I often wonder if I ever possessed any such skill. As quickly as I recover emotionally and my bloodstream embraces the euphoria of an inebriated leader of a pack of drunks, even quicker my brain is infected with bitter biting reminders: blunt truths like I am lost and I am broke or I will never feel at home again or I will always be a victim of any given deranged man. Sometimes my downward spiral prompts are less forward, like the picture-perfect shock of bloodied hands and bathroom sinks after breaking the skin of a semi-closed piercing. Sometimes it's dull and aching, like the creeping fear that I'm just agoraphobic. This is all equally unpleasant. I could be the Madonna and never the mistress; life could become stable and I could live in a quaint saltbox house in a quiet, coastal town; my heart could never break—I worry these are only dreams. I crave support; I would die to hear call me whenever you need. I need it to be true. I need to be thrown a rope, pulled from this soul-crushing, energy-sucking well I fell into, and I need my liberator to be happy to see me when the silence returns. I foresee less fantastical things. If I drank or smoked or did whatever we force the rejected to do, I would be normal. Instead, my only coping mechanism is repeating the mantra: everyone feels exactly this erratic every day.

JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS

## THE HERMIT

*Inspired by The Dark Wood Tarot*

the opposite / of a healthy human / tapping sounds signify a  
connection to others

Or shadow self: sequestered in a room / lips sewn shut

One buries one's head in the sand. pg. 81

symbols on the cave : guide to inner thought if we could break our  
own brains

in red, this wood witch holds the lantern, looks inward first, her  
insides a notice-

me color, not hermit-like

the shadow witch

Reads a spider web language / circular thought

Groundwork: why she hermits, why she earns for plague, pg. 79

cave walls : a solace

or a prison, stomp down death a cold breeze is coming by the  
stream or in the woods / stomp down intrusive thoughts

wearing a blindfold, the portal to the world opens in silence, /  
closes, we

see the labyrinth / say goodbye to our loved ones / hunger for  
them in the cave

it was never there, or there forever and we just didn't see / the  
cold ones, the cold

air, the cold ones beckon us every night / gallops into our dreams /  
pockets full



CAROL LYNN STEPHENSON GRELLAS

**EVEN SO**

of promises broken / a sentence, a secret, a code.

Outer landscape / but alive pg. 80

do we know our alphabet / disintegration begins small /  
missing the last two lines of a note /  
questions stampede / lists / punctuation  
she voices every thought in the cave / finds this problematic

multi-step problems  
an end to that end to that end to that ends somewhere,  
who was I before this? pg. \_\_

Does that person think I'm different?  
micro errors lead to larger spiders in the cave  
This cave can't protect you.  
This pretending to be busy cannot, cannot  
cannot... spider / cave / door / blindfold / no blindfold /  
blindfold

*"The world of dew is, yes,  
a world of dew, but even so"*  
—Issa

When I go to the senior center, I am trying not to think of my father his last days before he passed. As I walk through the door with the music blaring for a jazzercise class, sweet old ladies with canes swinging their hips to the beat of drums, rows, and rows of them uninhibited, smiling and turning in circles, carefree as if they were young or unworried about what life has in store for them. My father would have been making advances at them if he were here if he were still alive; he was a smooth talker at 75, a charmer to the ladies. I am still trying to understand that he's gone, that he isn't standing beside me waiting for his 3-dollar lunch, complaining about the amount of food being spooned on his plate and laughing under his breath as I try to sneak an extra muffin for him, his hand opens under the booth's railing, my fingers touching the tips of his as I slip him the counterfeit treat. But today, it's just me offering to volunteer to teach a class on poetry, trying to give something back to the community, a place he used to belong, and love that doesn't feel whole anymore, as if his shadow has emptied, and I'm waiting for the sky to fill it up again. A lady named Patricia guides me through to the director's office where we sit and discuss my plan. I pretend to be unaffected by my memories, as I tell the director, I used to bring my dad here. He has me fill out some paperwork. I shake his hand, and he says

ALYSSA HARMON

## 52 BLUE

I'll be hearing from him soon. But I don't look back when I say I hope so. These three words are often left unanswered: in fact, you can go an entire lifetime saying I hope so, never really thinking about it, and then one day, your dad says he hopes he'll get better, and you say, I hope so, and just like that, he feels safe even though hope has nothing to do with it.

when someone asks you what  
mental illness feels like  
tell them that  
the 52-hertz whale  
is the only one of his species that  
has a cry that is too high of a pitch  
for other whales to hear,  
so he travels alone.

**SIX:**  
**NATURE**

DOUG VAN HOOSER

## RUBY-THROATED

You hum as you hover,

dart like a karate punch,  
retreat, observe, and dive.  
You inspect the abutilon bells,

canna's red mittens, even the heirloom  
pink carnation geranium.  
Somehow you wend a way

into the greenhouse where  
blooms beckon. Glass captures the heat  
and you. Blind to windowpanes  
you knock and knock,  
but no door opens to the white oaks and blue sky.  
I retrieve a fishing net,

try to scoop you from the glass,  
the pain of failed escapes.  
But I am inept, you elusive

until you tire, seek to hide  
behind the flowers' batting eyes  
and sheepish smiles that enticed you.  
I move two pots expecting you

ALAN COHEN

VISIT

to sprint, but your wings are spread  
like two hands on the knees, grasping breath.  
I take you in hand, a vibrating alarm,

and bring you out into the summer's hot hug.  
Open my hand, you launch,  
a firework that blasts into the sky.

My anxiety takes flight and disappears  
with you high in an oak's leaf sanctum.

The past has habits  
Has, like the hummingbird  
Been away awhile  
But now, just when you are crazy busy  
Hums a few bars  
And, hovering suddenly in memory  
Seems as close as sometimes  
The perfect word, the right job  
Heaven; then, as you grow accustomed  
Begin to measure  
The ruby on its throat  
It shifts, hovers askance  
Owing you nothing  
And is gone again  
It may be for weeks, forever  
No more yours, what you saw  
And said and did  
Than your house or your car  
Or your life  
Things you have for a time  
That lose something  
When they lose you  
But go on

JULIE A. DICKSON

## EARTH SADLY

I am the earth sadly waiting to die  
below a vast canopy of green leaves;  
flee from here into expansive blue,  
revel in the view, expanse of kestrel  
wings, shimmer of sun in knowing eyes;  
he sends me back, time not yet over.  
Sit upon my rocks far out on sea  
island, jagged edges biting flesh, raw  
memories run marathon, overlap,  
collide, reality crashes—the past  
cannot separate until a whale breach  
sends spray, sea mist awakens; stand  
high on melting glacier, feet frozen, boots  
rated for below zero don't cut it, won't  
feel toes nor fingers, numb like each time  
gunshots heard, screams of children, knives  
slice silent shouts of protest, unappeased  
masses, more weapons amassed to destroy  
what semblance of calm remains as blood  
drains, rivulets careen down streets, footprints  
mark paths of humanity, destined to  
destroy species without habitats, elephants  
perform under duress, bears feast as birds  
peer down from a canopy of leaves, I expire  
slowly, painful floating waves of plastic,  
discarded refuse in the belly of sharks, oil  
slick pelicans suffocate, death on sand—  
no matter ancient commands of worship,  
humans once knew my worth; still progress  
into state of ruination, await my demise.

H.K.G. LOWERY

## PATHOS FOR A BEE

dead  
on a sunlit windowsill, I was  
petrified of carcass  
near coffee,  
winged & withering; honey  
poured over  
porridge, paranoid sugar  
might resurrect this spawn of Satan—  
but then, there was pathos  
for the perished pollinator: I know  
there is Rembrandt, Monet  
& da Vinci,  
but Nature is my favourite artist

ASHLEY KNOWLTON

## CRESCENT CITY AT DUSK

The sun sinks into the ocean,  
dimming the sky and  
slowing the streets just enough to  
eavesdrop on the sea lions, who  
bellow-on about  
what not and  
who knows.

STEPHEN MEAD

## SEA, MOST TRANQUIL

Tear from eye, chin-trickle, the droplet caught:  
one gem in hand...  
Off of Milan & deep into Sicily sparkle such sapphires.  
Know them—  
Planes without a waving current,  
& I have experienced water akin to asphalt, akin to glass  
& doesn't that come closest to this dew in a palm?  
Dew, the shades of one-hundred huskies' gazes  
is also the Italian sea of such streams running,  
naming legacies of froth along sandy coasts.  
Yes, so much sand amounts to little but fathoms  
of memory perhaps as I go ahead & pour fragments  
of beach from my shore & onto the tile,  
this kitchen off of the Plymouth,  
off of the Baltic,  
off of all provinces marshes & aqueducts funnel  
the still swept millennia of against boulders  
back into spray upon faces  
where some certain tenderness catches  
the clearest Atlantic.  
Yes, whole travelogues are there in quiet's descent.

## SWIMMING WITH THE SHADOW

She floated on her stomach, lazily kicking her legs to stay afloat. She'd always had trouble with swimming fins, finding them awkward and unnatural. Instead, she preferred to wear simple water shoes, and stayed close to the water's surface, breathing through her snorkel and mask.

The water in the Mexican lagoon was clear, showing the sandy bottom and the dark tangle of rock on its edges. A few bright fish swam in front of the rock, rays of sunlight hitting the white sand and swaying ocean kelp.

Salt and fresh water from the nearby cenote mixed in the shallow pools of the lagoon, and the water was not always clear. The surrounding land protected it from rough waves and wind.

Today the water was clear, and she named some of the fish swimming with her. Parrotfish. Tang. Sergeant Major. Chub. It was good to know names.

To know the way they lived, how they interacted with their surroundings. Life was simpler here—stepping down a craggy rock stairway to slip into the warm water. Another world, shedding the life behind her.

The fish largely ignored her, and she gave them space. She floated on, spreading her fingers in the warm water.

A shadow appeared near the bottom of the lagoon, black across the bright swath of sand. A form, moving its head and tail sleek and dark.

There was no reason to be afraid.

She had seen other sharks, although never in the shallow pools. She wondered briefly what brought it here—food, environment, danger. In deeper waters, she had seen the nurse sharks, whale shark, and the reef

shark. She didn't recognize the shape below her, but it was small, and guessing by its size, a juvenile.

Kicking to stay afloat, she watched the shadow move across the sandy bottom, heading toward the deeper ocean waters. Her questions of why it was here unanswered.

In a moment, it was gone.



JAMES B. NICOLA

## ESCAPE FROM CODEPENDENCE CASTLE

The manor of the monarch is a mess,  
the moat all muck and mire, foreboding, full  
of stinging, biting creatures. But I swam it.  
And if you were to spy me from some turret  
you would confuse the distance with my size  
to think me small. But I am stronger, taller,  
a giant!—among no one but myself,  
but that is the first step I stand to take.

The castle of the capitalist is crumbling.  
And all the soggy waterlogging vines  
seem sweet and new as not-you valentines,  
the very stench of guck and grime on me  
enwrapping as a wreath of victory.

The palace of the posh has been polluted.  
So I'll not even turn around to wave  
till your imposing parapets are gone,  
but rise and go ahead as weeds fall off—  
until, in fact, this dream of conversation  
with you is done and I can see again.

The realm of royals lies at last in ruins.  
And now should I, could I, do I report  
how green it is here. Green and light. And green!

G.TIMOTHY GORDON

## L'AUBE SONG

*Monsoon Season  
(September-October 2022)*

Hiking in from pour-black-night  
owning the heavens before melding  
into ether, before I reach desert ridge  
at Coyote Springs, Boulders' Green,  
exotic dank, musty orange blossom and iris,  
snake molt, fresh scat cellar smell,  
before first light-strike-glow through Organ Notch,  
the coming-in black as the going-out,  
as in a dream, spent, yet again,  
wet with wonder, clutching nothing  
but dawn, before all-blue-clear.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

## SEARCHING TIDE POOLS FOR SHORE CRABS

*Crab* is such an ugly word—  
the hard *k*, its suddenness. I'm steeped

in these small pools, perched  
on the rim of rocks & sand, peering

into one hole after the next, searching  
for shore crabs, *carcinus maenas*. I find

them, gray & tan & slick with the tide,  
watch them slide from rock

to water. For the few I pick up & return, they seem  
harmless, but I've seen

what they can do. They hunt in packs. Whoever  
unsuspecting enters here will be buried

beneath a collection of pinchers & sharp  
frames, held by the sheer weight

of them. The act is louder & longer  
than you would expect.

We've come so far from home.

CAROL LYNN STEPHENSON GRELLAS

## GAMBLE AT A RAMBLE

They ate flowers for breakfast and drank  
the sky in the afternoon, they told each  
other stories about catching bees  
in an hourglass and marking time  
with honey, how every day they chased  
seeds of dandelions past broken  
clouds that hung like billowing sheets  
on a clothesline, they said there's a chant  
in every word that finds its way to breathe,  
and singing is the only means to hear  
an honest voice. I watched them play  
in the garden, they were like fairies  
flying in and out of birdhouses, following  
one after the other into an Alice-sized  
world. I wanted to ask them what it was  
like to live in that kind of wonder, to inhale  
magic and blow a thousand breaths  
of rainbows through trees, but this was just  
a dream, and there was no one  
there to answer.

**THANK YOU FOR READING**

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to all of our lovely, imaginative contributors in Issue 1!  
Here's more about each of them and where to find them.

### **ROY ADAMS—he/him—Poetry**

After a rewarding career as a professor of labour studies, Roy J. Adams resumed the literary career he had begun as a teenager. Since 2010, his creative work has appeared in literary magazines in several countries, including Canada, U.S., U.K., Ireland, India, and Australia. He is the author of *Critical Mass*, a full book of poetry and the chapbook, *Bebop at Beau's Caboose*. He is a full member of the League of Canadian Poets.

### **EDWARD AHERN—he/him—Fiction**

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had four hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and seven books. Ed works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories*, where he manages a posse of eight review editors. He's also lead editor at *The Scribes Micro Fiction* magazine. His story, "The Dogfisherman," first appeared in *Bewildering Stories*, issue 493, September 3, 2012.

**GLEN ARMSTRONG—he/him—Poetry**

Glen Armstrong holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters*. His latest book is *Night School: Selected Early Poems*.

**K.B. BALLENTINE—she/her—Poetry**

KB Ballentine loves to travel and practice sword fighting and Irish step dancing; those Scottish and Irish roots run deep! Her latest collection, *Spirit of Wild*, is available now on Amazon. When not tucked in a corner reading or writing, she makes daily classroom appearances to her students. Learn more at [www.kballentine.com](http://www.kballentine.com).

**ALAN COHEN—he/him—Poetry**

Alan Cohen's first publication as a poet was in the PTA Newsletter when he was 10 years old. He graduated Farmingdale High School (where he was Poetry Editor of the magazine, *The Bard*), Vassar College (with a BA in English), and University of California at Davis Medical School, where he did his internship in Boston and his residency in Hawaii. Then he was then a Primary Care physician, teacher, and Chief of Primary Care at the VA, first in Fresno, CA and later in Roseburg, OR. He has been writing poems for 60 years and, now retired from medicine, is beginning to share some of his works. He has had a poem ("Autopsy") and a medical letter to the editor in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and, more recently, an article called "Annals of Communication: Giving a Patient a Diagnosis and Other Idioms In Development" and another about COVID19 in the *American Journal of Medicine*; and has had poems published in dozens of other publications. He now lives with his wife of 42 years in Eugene, OR.

**DALE E. COTTINGHAM—he/him—Poetry**

Dale Cottingham has published poems and reviews of poetry collections in many journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Ashville Poetry Review*, and *Rain Taxi*. He is a Pushcart Nominee, a Best of Net Nominee, the winner of the 2019 New Millennium Award for Poem of the Year, and was a finalist in the 2022 Great Midwest Poetry Contest. His debut collection, *Midwest Hymns*, launched in April 2023 (Kelsay Books). He lives in Edmond, Oklahoma.

**JULIE A. DICKSON—she/her—Poetry**

Julie A. Dickson is a poet and writer of YA fiction, whose full-length works are on Amazon, most recently *Village Girl: A Story in Verse*, from Sunrise Press (2023). Her work appears in journals including *Misfit*, *Uppagus*, *Ekphrastic Review*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. Dickson holds a BPS in Behavioral Science, is a past poetry board member and has been a guest editor at two publications. She shares her home with two rescued feral cats.

**STEPHANIE L. ERDMAN—she/her/they/them—Poetry**

Born in Fruitdale, Indiana and growing up in Indianapolis, Stephanie L. Erdman graduated Purdue University and received her master's degree through Indiana University South Bend. Her first poetry collection based on her graduate thesis, *Pyrrhonic*, is available through Dos Madres Press and her second collection, *Sankhara*, is searching for a home. The collection focuses on themes within Buddhist cycle of becoming. It seeks to tell the story of grief and the mortification of worldviews into self-realization.

Very much a poet from and of the Midwest and recently relocated to Southwest Georgia, Stephanie works as an Assistant Professor of English at Albany State University, editor, and professional tutor. She lives with her dog, cat, and persistent impostor syndrome.

**MICHAEL ESTABROOK—he/him—Poetry**

Michael Estabrook has been publishing his poetry in the small press since the 1980s. He has published over 20 collections, a recent one being *Controlling Chaos: A Hybrid Poem* (Atmosphere Press, 2022). He lives in Acton, Massachusetts. See more at <https://michaelestabrook.org/>

**MICHAEL FLANAGAN—he/him—Poetry**

Mike Flanagan lives in Minnesota with Lady, his mutt of dubious lineage. He fly fishes with no great skill but believes that walking with Lady, fly fishing, and writing short poetry keep him going.

**J.D. GEVRY—they/them/he/him—Poetry**

J.D. Gevry (they/them; he/him; fae/faer) is an emerging poet from Vermont, writing from their lens as a queer, polyamorous, non-

binary, and trans person with a disability. Their work has appeared in *Flush Left*, *The Write Launch*, and *Spillwords*. J.D. is currently writing a book of poetry chronicling the accidental development of a queer romantic affair. Fae has a Bachelor's degree in Human Sexuality and Master of Public Health in Community Health Education. J.D. resides in Massachusetts with their husband and several slowly dying plants.

**G.TIMOTHY GORDON—he/him—Poetry**

G.Timothy Gordon's *Dream Wind* was published 2020 (Spirit-of-the-Ram), *Ground of This Blue Earth* (Mellen), while *Everything Speaking Chinese* received the Riverstone P. Poetry Prize (AZ). Work appears in *AGNI*, *American Literary Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Louisville Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Phoebe*, *RHINO*, *Sonora Review*, and *Texas Observer*, among others. Recognitions include three Pushcart nominations and NEA and NEH Fellowships. *Empty Heaven/Empty Earth*, his eighth book, is expected spring 2023. He divides lives between Asia and the Desert Southwest Organ Mountains.

**ALYSSA HARMON—she/her—Poetry**

Alyssa Harmon is the author of *seven years*, a poetry book on heart-break and healing. Currently, she is working on publishing a second poetry book on mental health. She has a Master's degree in English Creative Writing from the University of West Florida. In addition to her book publication, she has also published poems in several print and online publications, including *Merrimack Review*, *Minerva Rising*, *Shaking the Sheets Magazine*, and *Odette Journal*. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling, reading, swimming, and helping other poets edit their collections. Find more at [alyssa-harmon.com](http://alyssa-harmon.com)

**TAYLOR MCKAY HATHORN—she/her—Fiction**

Taylor McKay Hathorn is a 2019 summa cum laude graduate of the Mississippi College Writing program, where she was awarded the Sarah A. Rouse and Psi Zeta Chapter awards for outstanding English majors and the University's Perry Medal. Taylor returned to her alma mater and completed an MA in English in 2023,

winning the Graduate Research Symposium for her work on *Anne of Green Gables*. Taylor works in higher education and as a freelance journalist, and when she's not on a college campus or interviewing the subject of her next article, she chairs the worship committee at Broadmeadow United Methodist Church in the Fondren neighborhood in Jackson, Mississippi, the city of her heart—and where she makes her home. Taylor is happiest when she has a good book, dinner plans with her friends, and a ticket to an upcoming theatre show. This is her first fiction publication ever (!) with her next story, "Entreat Me Not," appearing in *Otherwise Engaged Literary and Arts Journal* later in summer 2023.

**MATT HENRY—he/him—Poetry**

2017 Graduate of Indiana University, Master of Arts in English. Likes ice hockey, guitar, writing/reading poetry, and video games. Dislikes cockroaches and dust mites.

**KEITH HOERNER—he/him—Fiction**

Keith Hoerner (BS, MFA) is founding editor of the Webby Award recognized *Dribble Drabble Review*, an online literary ezine and print anthology series of all things "little-ature." A Best of the Net nominee, his own writing has been featured in 150+ lit mags, anthologies, and other venues across five continents.

**KATIE HUDSON—she/her—Fiction**

Katie is a travel and fiction writer from Tennessee, currently based out of the Appalachia region but soon traveling and living in Rome, Italy.

**MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON—he/him—Poetry**

Michael Lee Johnson is a song lyricist and an internationally published poet in 44 countries. and he has been nominated for six Pushcart Prize awards and six Best of the Net awards. He has published several poetry collections and anthologies, and he has created over 285 YouTube poetry videos as of April 2023.

**HELGA KIDDER—she/her—Poetry**

Helga Kidder lives in the Tennessee hills with her husband.

She loves to look on nature and find the connection to her surroundings. Her poems have recently been published in *Bloodroot*, *Salvation South*, *Kakalak*, and others. She has five collections of poetry. Her fifth collection, *Learning Curve*, includes poems about immigration and assimilation.

**ASHLEY KNOWLTON—she/her—Poetry**

Ashley Knowlton teaches English and writes poetry for enjoyment. Her work has been published in *Pomona Valley Review*, *DASH*, *Abandoned Mine*, and *Cobra Lily*, with work to be published in upcoming issues of *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Trajectory*, *Evening Street Review*, and *The Waiting Room*. She lives in California with her husband and sons.

**H.K.G. LOWERY—he/him—Poetry**

H. K. G. Lowery is a writer & musician from Gateshead. He gained a Distinction in his Masters in Creative Writing from Graduate College, Lancaster University. The Department of English Literature & Creative Writing awarded him with the 2021/2022 Portfolio Prize for his work which received the highest mark in the faculty. Lowery has recently been published in *Poetry Salzburg*, *Amsterdam Quarterly* and *Pennine Platform*. He's also been short-listed for The Bedford International Award & The Terry Kelly Poetry Prize, & longlisted for The Fiction Factory Flash Competition.

**JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS—she/her—Poetry**

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens went to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and now lives in Iowa where she is landlocked. Her fifth, full length poetry collection, *Pool Parties*, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press in 2023. She is the author of fifteen chapbooks. Some of her work appears in *The Pinch*, *South Broadway Ghost Society*, *Cleaver*, *Dream Pop*, *Slant*, *Yalobusha Review*, and *Grist*. She is the director of the monthly reading series *Today You are Perfect*, sponsored by the non-profit Iowa City Poetry. Find her online at <http://jennifermacbainstephens.com/>

**CAROLYN MARTIN—she/her—Poetry**

Blissfully retired in Clackamas, Oregon, Carolyn Martin is a lover of gardening and snorkeling, feral cats and backyard birds, writing,

and photography. Since the only poem she wrote in high school was red-penciled "extremely maudlin," she is amazed she has continued to write. Her poems have appeared in more than 175 journals throughout North America, Australia, and the UK, and her latest collection, *It's in the Cards*, was just released by Kelsay Books. See more at [www.carolynmartinpoet.com](http://www.carolynmartinpoet.com)

**BETH MATHISON—she/her—Fiction**

Beth Mathison has work published in *The Foliate Oak* (including the 2008 and 2009 annual "Best Of" print editions), 365Tomorrows.com, MysteryAuthors.com, *Drops of Crimson*, *Colored Chalk*, and *The Citron Review*. Stories published with Untreed Reads include the *Mobsters for the Holidays; Criminally Hilarious Short Stories* (currently being made into an audio book) and the short story romance series, *Young at Heart*. Beth lives with her family in the Upper Midwest, and during the cold winter months, she dreams of snorkeling in the Riviera Maya.

**URSULA MCCABE—she/her—Poetry**

Ursula McCabe lives in Portland Oregon where she enjoys wild-life refuges and easy drives west to the Pacific Ocean. Her poet father, Robert Huff, taught at Western Washington State University until his death in 1993. Ursula's poems can be seen in Oregon Poetry Association's *Verseweavers*, Academy of the Heart & Mind, Piker Press, *Bluebird World*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, and *Lit Shark Magazine*.

**STEPHEN MEAD—he/him—Poetry**

Stephen Mead is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s, he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. Recently his work has appeared in *ValleyxValley*, *The Manilla Magnolia*, *Crow Name*, *WORDPEACE*, and *DuckDuckMongoose*. Currently, he is resident artist and curator for The Chroma Museum, focusing on artistic renderings of LGBTQI historical figures, organizations, and allies predominantly before Stonewall.

**FRANK MODICA—he/him—Poetry**

Frank C. Modica is a retired teacher who taught children with



special needs for over 34 years. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *New Square*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and *Euphemism*. Frank's first chapbook, *What We Harvest*, nominated for an Eric Hoffer book award, was published in Fall 2021 by Kelsay Books. His second chapbook, *Old Friends*, was published this past December by Cyberwit Press.

**JAMES B. NICOLA—he/him—Poetry**

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared in the Antioch, Southwest and Atlanta Reviews; Rattle; and Barrow Street. His seven full-length collections (2014-22) are *Manhattan Plaza*, *Stage to Page*, *Wind in the Cave*, *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists*, *Quickening*, *Fires of Heaven*, and *Turns & Twists*. His nonfiction book, *Playing the Audience*, won a Choice award. He has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, Storyteller's People's Choice award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and ten Pushcart nominations—for which he feels both stunned and grateful. A graduate of Yale, he hosts the Hell's Kitchen International Writers' Round Table at his library branch in Manhattan: walk-ins welcome.

**A.J. ORTEGA—he/him/his/él—Poetry**

A.J. Ortega is a writer from Texas. His writing has appeared in *Rat's Ass Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Door is a Jar Magazine*, *American Book Review*, *Dreich Magazine*, *The Loch Raven Review*, and others. He is an active member of the Popular Culture Association, where his presentations focus on combat sports and Mexican American identity. A.J. produces and hosts *Writers and Fighters: A Podcast*.

**KELLY PINER—she/her—Fiction**

Kelly Piner is a Clinical Psychologist who in her free time, tends to feral cats and searches for Bigfoot in nearby forests. Her writing is inspired by Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*. Ms. Piner's short stories have appeared in *Litro Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *The Last Girl's Club/Wicked News*, *Rebellion Lit Review*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Drunken Pen Writing*, *Storgy Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Weirdbook*, *Written Tales*, and others. Her stories have also appeared in multiple anthologies.

**ANTHONY DIRK RAY—he/him—Poetry**

Anthony Dirk Ray resides, works, and writes in the sweltering southern portion of the United States near the Gulf of Mexico. After years of writing off and on, merely for sanity, he is now sharing some lines. His work can be seen on multiple sites online and has also been featured in numerous print releases. His site, *Gloomy Forebodings... poems, stories, and mediocre musings*, can be found online at [anthonydirkray.com](http://anthonydirkray.com)

**NANCY MACHLIS RECHTMAN—she/her—Fiction**

Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in *Your Daily Poem*, *Writing In A Woman's Voice*, *Grande Dame*, *Impspired*, *Paper Dragon*, *Fresh Words*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Young Ravens*, and more. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She writes a blog called *Inanities* at <https://nancywriteon.wordpress.com>.

**RUSSELL RICHARDSON—he/him—Fiction**

Russell Richardson is a writer with over two dozen published short stories, an illustrator, and the creator of children's books to benefit kids with cancer. His YA novel, *Level Up and Die!*, and short story collection, *Nocturnal Medley: Fourteen Weird Tales*, are available on Amazon. He is also a staff writer and editor at *Posting & Toasting*, a New York Knicks community. Russell resides in Binghamton, NY with his family.

**RIE SHERIDAN ROSE—she/her—Poetry**

Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. A lot. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *Nightmare Stalkers and Dream Walkers: Vols 1 and 2*, and *Killing It Softly*. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs. Find more info on [www.riewriter.com](http://www.riewriter.com).

**CASSANDRA O'SULLIVAN SACHAR—she/her—Fiction**

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar is a writer and associate English professor in Pennsylvania. Her creative work has appeared in over thirty publications, including *Montana Mouthful*, *The*



*Dillydoun Review*, *Ink Stains: A Dark Fiction Literary Anthology*, *The Pine Cone Review*, *Quagmire Literary Magazine*, and *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. She holds a Doctorate of Education with a Literacy Specialization from the University of Delaware and is working toward an MFA in Creative Writing at Wilkes University. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association and the current fiction editor of *River and South Review*.

**JOEL SAVISHINSKY—he/him—Poetry**

Joel Savishinsky is a retired gerontologist and environmental anthropologist. His books include *The Trail of The Hare: Life and Stress in An Arctic Community* and *Breaking the Watch: The Meanings of Retirement in America*; the latter won the Gerontological Society of America's Kalish Award, its book-of-the-year prize. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Beyond Words*, *California Quarterly*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *SLANT*, and *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*. In 2023, The Poetry Box published his collection, *Our Aching Bones, Our Breaking Hearts: Poems on Aging*. He lives in Seattle, helping to raise his five grandchildren, and considers himself a recovering academic and unrepentant activist. Find him at <https://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/savishin>

**LARRY SCHUG—he/him—Poetry**

Larry Schug is retired after a life of various kinds of physical labor. He is currently a volunteer writing tutor at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University. He lives with his wife and one cat in a little house on 55 acres of permanently preserved land in St. Wendel, Twp., Minnesota. He has published eight books of poems, the latest being *A Blanket of Raven Feathers* with North Star Press. His website is [www.larryschugpoet.com](http://www.larryschugpoet.com)

**TAYLOR SCOTT—she/her—Poetry**

Taylor Scott is an undergraduate at Johnson & Wales University. She is majoring in Cyber Threat Intelligence and Defense and aspires to work in the United States Department of Homeland Security, promoting public safety. Originally from

California, she enjoys travelling, as well as collecting classic novels in hopes of building a personal library. Her poems are inspired by her experiences with human nature.

**CAROL LYNN STEVENSON GRELLAS—she/her—Poetry**

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas is a recent graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts, MFA in Writing program. She is the author of sixteen poetry collections, including several chapbooks. Her latest collection, *Alice in Ruby Slippers*, was short-listed for the 2021 Eric Hoffer Grand Prize and awarded an honorable mention in the Poetry category. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in some of the following journals: *The Comstock Review*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, *Redactions*, *Verse Daily*, and many more. She has served as editor-in-chief for both *The Orchards Poetry Journal* and *Tule Review*. An eleven-time Pushcart Prize nominee and seven-time Best of the Net nominee, according to family lore, she is a direct descendant of Robert Louis Stevenson.

**SUSAN CASTILLO STREET—she/her—Poetry**

Susan Castillo Street is Harriet Beecher Stowe Professor Emerita at King's College London. A Southern expat, she has lived in the UK for many years. She has published four previous collections of poems, including *The Candlewoman's Trade* (2003), *Abiding Chemistry* (2015), *The Gun-Runner's Daughter* (2018), and *Cloak* (2020), as well as a pamphlet, *Constellations* (2016). Her poetry has appeared in leading journals and anthologies. Her fifth poetry collection, *Braiding*, was published in 2022.

**MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN—she/her—Poetry**

McKenzie Lynn Tozan is an international writer dividing her time between Croatia and Chicago. She is a published poet and novelist, the Editor-in-Chief of *Lit Shark* and the *Banned Book Review*. Her poems, essays, and book reviews have been featured in *The Rumpus*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Rogue Agent*, *POPSUGAR*, *Motherly*, and *Encore Magazine*. Her short horror story collection, *What We Find in the Dark*, and her horror novella, *Black As Black*, are both forthcoming from The Shiver Collective in 2023. Find more at [www.mckenzielynntozan.com](http://www.mckenzielynntozan.com)

**DOUG VAN HOOSER—he/him—Poetry**

Doug Van Hooser's poetry has appeared in *Roanoke Review*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *After Hours*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *Poetry Quarterly*, among other publications. His fiction can be found in *Red Earth Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Bending Genres Journal*. Doug's plays have received readings at Chicago Dramatist Theatre and Three Cat Productions. Find more at [dougvanhooser.com](http://dougvanhooser.com)

## **SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!**

Thank you again to everyone who submitted for the inaugural issue of *Lit Shark Magazine*. It was honestly such a lovely process, and I'm so grateful for your support and continuing this journey.

**If you're interested in submitting for Issue 2 and beyond, here is the most pertinent information (and you can always look at our website, too—[www.litshark.com](http://www.litshark.com)).**

We have three more issues being published in 2023 (yay!): one for Shark Week, one for spooky season, and one more general issue like Issue 1. Your submissions do not specifically have to follow the themes, but if you're working on something that's more suitable to one theme over another, that might be something for you to think about.

### **Issue 2 Deadline to Submit: August 1, 2023**

Poetry: Up to 5 poems or 10 pages

Fiction and Nonfiction: Up to 15 pages or 4500 words

General submissions are ALWAYS welcome, but this issue's deadline comes right after Shark Week in July for a reason! For this issue, we're especially interested in seeing pieces centered around

summer or warmer weather, marine life, and all things Shark Week—whatever that means to you!

Also, if you need inspiration for responding to Shark Week, we'll be doing a watch party each day on our website, including writing prompts after each episode (what we thought, what we learned, and fiction/poetry/journaling prompts to get viewers started).

### **Issue 3 Deadline to Submit: October 21, 2023**

Poetry: Up to 5 poems or 10 pages

Fiction and Nonfiction: Up to 15 pages or 4500 words

Just like Issue 2, general submissions are ALWAYS welcome, but Issue 3 centers around spooky season and will be released just in time for Halloween in the United States. More importantly, though, Issue 3 is your opportunity to let loose your wildest, campiest, and creepiest renditions of the shark genre; we're talking *Jaws* and *Sharknado* and *The Meg* and *Black Demon* here. *Lit Shark* is deeply committed to conservation, preserving marine life, and **debunking myths** that are harming marine life (especially sharks, who generally are just giant sea pups, let's be honest), but our team also understands the fun of sitting back with a giant bowl of popcorn and spilling half of it during the scary parts of some of these horror films. Let your imagination run wild, and send us your best!

### **Issue 4 Deadline to Submit: December 11, 2023**

Poetry: Up to 5 poems or 10 pages

Fiction and Nonfiction: Up to 15 pages or 4500 words

If you didn't find your place in our Shark Week issue or our Spooky issue, our final issue of the year is open to general submissions. We just ask for minimal sexual content and expletives (and sharks portrayed as villains will be considered, but they'll primarily appear in our annual spooky editions).

### **That brings us up through the end of 2023. How exciting?!**

Now, if you're more of a nonfiction writer, interested in writing essays, theory pieces, book reviews, and the like, this next section is for you:

### **How to Write for Us as a Regular Contributor at Lit Shark:**

In addition to the work our Editor-in-Chief is doing on the site, we've also welcomed to the Shark family several regular contributors. Each one enjoys writing book reviews, but their interests vary wonderfully beyond that, ranging from intuitive creativity, current conservation efforts, nature and ecopoetics, audio ecology, and green living and conservation for families.

If you identify with one or more of these subjects, or if you enjoy another subject that could relate, we would love to hear from you. A range of writing experience is welcome, as are those with some background in biology, conservation and sustainability, and of course, teaching. As long as you love our mission and believe you could positively contribute to it, we would love to hear from you.

### **How Do You Submit?**

On our website, we have submission portals for *Lit Shark* (emerging and established writers), *Lit Pup* (children and teen writers), and our Shiver team.

But if you have any technical difficulties, no worries! You can send McKenzie an email at [mckenzie@litshark.com](mailto:mckenzie@litshark.com).

Contributors can send all of their information in the body of an email, including their pitch concepts.

Creative writers should put all of their identifying information in the body of the email, but their creative submission should be attached as a Word docx. or PDF (one document!) with no identifying information, so we can ensure you receive a fair, blind reading.

Thank you all for your support! Happy writing and happy submitting! And thank you again for reading Issue 1.

**FIN.**  
**(UNTIL ISSUE #2...)**



# POETRY & PROSE

*contributed by*

• ROY ADAMS • EDWARD AHERN • GLEN  
ARMSTRONG • K.B. BALLENTINE • ALAN COHEN •  
DALE E. COTTINGHAM • JULIE A. DICKSON •  
STEPHANIE L. ERDMAN • MICHAEL ESTABROOK •  
MICHAEL FLANAGAN • G.TIMOTHY GORDON •  
J.D. GEVRY • ALYSSA HARMON • TAYLOR MCKAY  
HATHORN • MATT HENRY • KEITH HOERNER • KATIE  
HUDSON • MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON • HELGA KIDDER  
• ASHLEY KNOWLTON • H.K.G. LOWERY • JENNIFER  
MACBAIN-STEPHENS • CAROLYN MARTIN • BETH  
MATHISON • URSULA MCCABE • STEPHEN MEAD •  
FRANK MODICA • JAMES B. NICOLA • A.J. ORTEGA •  
KELLY PINER • ANTHONY DIRK RAY • NANCY  
MACHLIS RECHTMAN • RUSSELL RICHARDSON • RIE  
SHERIDAN ROSE • CASSANDRA O'SULLIVAN SACHAR  
• JOEL SAVISHINSKY • LARRY SCHUG • TAYLOR  
SCOTT • CAROL LYNN STEVENSON GRELLAS •  
SUSAN CASTILLO STREET • MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN  
• DOUG VAN HOOSER •