

LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO.4 • DECEMBER 2023

LIT SHARK

magazine



SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO



CONTENT

LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 4 • DEC-JAN 2024

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 4 contains some content pertaining to mental health, child loss, and animal death. There are also multiple allusions to sexual activity and a few uses of expletives. Thank you again for your support. We hope you will enjoy our fourth issue.

LIT SHARK *magazine*

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2024 by Lit Shark Magazine. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact McKenzie Lynn Tozan at Lit Shark Magazine.

The stories, poems, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Editor-in-Chief: McKenzie Lynn Tozan

Book Cover and Interior Design: McKenzie Lynn Tozan

Works By: Various Writers (credited)

Cover Image By: Michael Worden

Cover Spine Image By: Slaveika Aladjova

First Edition 2024

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

First, I want to tell you all Happy New Year, here's to a wonderful 2024, and thank you endlessly for the support that you've shown me and the growing entity that is Lit Shark.

Like any brand new publication, there were certainly hiccups, mistakes, learning curves, missed deadlines, and a few more hiccups along the way during our first year together... but with them came joy, beautiful writing, new friends, and a growing community of people who love stories and poems about sharks and fellow marine life, not to mention making a difference for our oceans and our planet. The community that has grown from welcoming Lit Shark with open arms is beautiful, and I love it endlessly.

I came into this idea knowing that I wanted Lit Shark to be double-sided: part a literary community that would be openly accessible and supportive of writers (LIT) and part conservation-focused, volunteering, contributing money and time, and making information about how to help more accessible than ever before (SHARK). What I didn't expect was not only how warmly my idea

would be accepted, but also just how many people out there unapologetically want to write about marine life—fish! sharks! swimming! whales! whale calls! birdsong! What I've always found to be fascinating and formative, I was pleasantly surprised to find in others, and it's made the journey all the sweeter.

The best part, to me at least, is that there's still so much more to do; I have so many more ideas! As I've already told some of you:

**2023 was the year of saying, "Lit Shark is here."
But 2024 is the year that Lit Shark grows into a Megalodon.**

A gentle giant, not something vicious like what's been portrayed in films—I'm referring to the size and breath of it, the power it would inevitably wield. And by power, I mean energy to do good in the world and the influence to make the difference. To look in awe at the world and be able to share that wonder with others ("wonder" is one of Issue 4's section titles *and* one of our words of the year for a reason!). I unapologetically want Lit Shark to grow so that our writing community can grow, yes, and for our future of being able to start our own press to begin, but I also want Lit Shark to fulfill its name this year and give back to the planet—to the waters that made me want to start this journey in the first place.

That's enough rambling from me for now. If you take anything from this, know how much I appreciate you and your support of Lit Shark. Know that I see you and understand your love for marine life, for nature poetry, and wild stories. This community is growing, and fast, and I am immensely grateful for all of you. Let's make 2024 a giant, beautiful, word-filled year.

Excited for what 2024 will bring,
McKenzie
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan
January 2024

CONTENTS

Letter from the Editor: The Year of the Megalodon 04

APEX

Shearwater - Patrick Druggan	11
Zipolite - Lorraine Caputo	13
Opponent Process Theory - Matt Henry	17
His Prey - Julie A. Dickson	19
Easy Prey - Terry Sanville	20
The Anarchy of Patriarchy - G. Timothy Gordon	27
In Praise of Paper and Pen - Jennifer Schomburg Kanke	29
Egg Head - Mark Blickley	30
First Steps into the Ocean - Beth Mathison	40
Blooming Detritus - Carol Edwards	42
Ekphrasis for the Salmon - Shilo Niziolek	43
Bruce - Steve Zisson	45
The Dead of Winter - Steve Denehen	58
Spindrift - Mandy Schiffrin	59

PREY

Morning at the Beach - Beth Mathison	63
Meditation: Galápagos Seas - Lorraine Caputo	64
Force - Mark Connors	65
Surfing His Trauma - Sandra Noel	66
The Antelope Do Not Have Ears, Here - McKenzie Lynn Tozan	67
On Finding a Dead Deer in My Backyard - Nolo Segundo	68
It Nearly Happened One Morning - Mark Connors	70
I see / a thread - Michael Flanagan	71
Life in Hollywood - Alan Swyer	72
The Walking Wounded - Nolo Segundo	84
Every Time I Said I Was Fine - Frankie A. Soto	86
How to Buy a Toilet - Victoria M. Johnson	88
The Self-Reliant Woman - Maggie Bayne	90
Sisters and Jade - Victoria M. Johnson	99
Cleaning the House - Jennifer Schomburg Kanke	101
Yeah, Kick Everything to the Curb - Doug Van Hooser	102

TOPAZ

At the Frog Park - Shilo Niziolek	107
After Storm in Cloak-Black Dawn - Sandra Noel	110

Poem for My Unborn Daughter - Jess L. Parker	111
In Your Favourite Pub - Sandra Noel	113
I Will Bury My Love in Topaz - Rie Sheridan Rose	114
I Wish I Could Write Myself Away - Jenica Amalita	118
Before Us, There Was Them - Taylor Hathorn	120
Suspension - Annette Gagliardi	121
Two Months Out - Emily Kerlin	122
A Cool Winter's Eve - Lynette Esposito	124
Wind Chill - Doug Van Hooser	125
Last Words - Frankie A. Soto	127
November, December - Patrick Druggan	129
The Air is Filled with Meadowsweet - Lauren Nixon	130
Guy on the Appalachian Trail - Emily Kerlin	132
Just Another Poem about the Moon - Shannon Frost Greenstein	134
The Curious Octopus - Carol Edwards	136
Anthropocene Love - Catherine Broadwall	137
From Lightning to the Earth - Beth Marquez	139

WONDER

Ecology - Catherine Broadwall	143
When the Katydid's Stop Singing - Shilo Niziolek	145
Ovis - Lauren Nixon	146
My Dentist Diagnosed Geographic Tongue and I Don't Know What That Is but I Think It Means It Wants to Talk About How We Used to Travel the World - Emily Kerlin	147
Driftwood Dryad - Carol Edwards	149
Bioluminescence Flashes in the Pull - Sandra Noel	150
War of the Weeds - Mandy Schiffrin	151
An Octopus Hug - Doug Van Hooser	152
Do Not Open - Ingrid Bruck	153
Guide to a Foreign Country - Patrick Druggan	154
Unfinished Business - Julian Matthews	155
Deep Swim - Karin Doucette	157
Warm Mineral Springs - Ingrid Black	161
The Sea of Our Lives - Lorraine Caputo	163

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	169
<i>About Our Contributors: Bios</i>	173
<i>Submit to Lit Shark and Write for Us: Info</i>	183

APEX

PATRICK DRUGGAN

SHEARWATER

We stand on the beach, an August storm
is gathering over Wales, dark as rage.

*We can't stay long.
It will rain soon.*

Waves, waves, the children,
of the unseen Moon and wind.

Suddenly,
the water rises up
and crashes
as the world takes its toll.

His hands flutter by his eyes,
flocks of shearwaters
among the waves,
as he amazes at the chaos in the foam.

He pulls his hair.
I don't know why.
I never do.
Some hidden
unseen effect
of space
and time,
his capacity
to cope eroded.

LORRAINE CAPUTO

ZIPOLITE

My mind tenses.
My body stiffens,
against his wind.

Large drops,
Enough change
to distract him.
Tears camouflaged in the sand
as the rain breaks.

I.

What is it with this place?
Why has it awakened my inner voice—
even before I arrived? . . .

This Place of the Dead . . .

Why do I feel quiet?
Why do I want
to quiet my Self
to the world of man around
to listen to the World of Mother?

All I hear
is the thundering surf
All I see
is the ocean
churning white, ripping the beach
carrying sand towards the far horizon
churning, ripping around
the cragged heaps of rock . . .

My eyes
follow the butterflies among the triangular-box
spine-scalloped stems of cactus trees
My eyes
follow the cats among the drying scrub brush

My eyes
follow the slow passing naval ship
on this side of the horizon
My eyes
follow the nude bathers wading into that
churning, ripping ocean

I am hoping this Place of the Dead
won't claim another
I am wondering why the hell
they enter those deadly waters
My mind answers:
TO FACE DEATH

An iguana
appears on the stone wall below
then disappears over the edge
A buzzard
flies high from the cliffs above the sea
its wide black *zopilote* wings
cast a shadow below

I wonder at
the force of these waves
the conflicting currents
ripping them apart, making them
slam into one another
I wonder at
my stillness in the face
in the place of death

– *Zipolite*
Zopilote
Zipolite –

II.

The sea here is
Xonaxi Queculla
the destroyer
the goddess of Death

I watch her wild dance of the waves
I hear her wild angry, thundering voice

Mother
O, Mother Xonaxi Queculla
I shall respect your strength, your force here
I only ask
that you wash my feet, my ankles
with your warm, salty waters
Please, Mother Xonaxi Queculla
touch me gently, caress me

– *Zipolite*
Zopilote
Zipolite –

III.

Even at the Bay of Love
upon the ancient humped volcanic flows
the waves rise, leaping over the rocks
towards the heavens

MATT HENRY

OPPONENT PROCESS THEORY

I wonder
how many forgotten lovers
have walked into these blue-green waters
foaming at the mouth of this bay
crushed upon the ragged rocks
tossed, pulled, ripped by the currents
flying towards the heavens
on the great white leaps of waves
salt spray falling, falling upon the crags
back into the sea

I found
the sole of a woman's once-spike-heeled shoe
washed up on the rocks, lying amongst
the bleached shatters of shells

– *Zipolite*
Zopilote
. . . *Zipolite* . . .

I.

She was screaming terror
of a shadow
dark

like a warbling choir.

All the while,
she makes life
less violent

but is unable to be called upon
this autumn

away

by the shores
of a distant
narrow channel.

II.

Awake
one gets tired of reliving
every empty dilapidated apartment

JULIE A. DICKSON

HIS PREY

with cat-piss soaked carpets
and off-white walls.

Asleep,
I'm dreaming
of a scorpion
in the sky

and my heart
is a helium balloon

drifting towards the sun.

As through glassy water
she glides through her existence
arm raised as dorsal fin upward,
never breaches the surface,
floating beneath the radar, unseen.

Better to remain hidden, vigilant
watching for danger, unbidden
anger, words flung—harpooned,
hitting her vitals until she sinks
even deeper into the depths.

Realizes that she is not the shark,
he is. She is but his prey, daily
target, in vain she swims madly
camouflaging herself, waits until
he is sated on and moves past her.

TERRY SANVILLE

EASY PREY

Heading east on Interstate 10, Matt watched the dashed lane-lines fly by the produce truck, its headlights barely making a dent in the darkness.

"I can drop you at the exit," Emilio said. "But you sure you don't wanna go into Tonopah? It's gonna get cold out there, below freezing."

"Thanks but no. I've got to get east. I'm supposed to meet someone in Dallas in a couple days and they won't wait."

Matt smiled to himself. He didn't know anybody in Dallas and he'd probably try crossing the border at El Paso. They shouldn't be looking for him there.

Emilio clicked on the truck's ancient AM radio and dialed in a Latino station, the signal full of static. "Dallas, that's a long way, man. You'd better get yourself a waterproof jacket. It's gonna rain like hell."

"Don't care. I just need to get there."

"But tonight . . . you gonna sleep out on the desert?"

"If I have to."

"Don't. You'll freeze."

"Thanks for the tip. Wake me when we get to Tonopah."

"Sure, buddy, sure."

Matt slumped in the seat, pulled the brim of his cap down to keep the glare from oncoming headlights out of his eyes, and fell asleep. In what felt like only a few minutes the driver shook him awake.

"We're here, buddy." Emilio pointed to the Exxon station, convenience store and truck stop next to the off-ramp. "They've got coffee in the store. But they close at midnight."

"Thanks for the ride." Matt cranked the ancient handle and

climbed out, slamming the door with a hollow metallic crash. Smoking, the truck turned south toward the few scattered buildings and a 1950s-style motel, its parking lot empty.

He stood at the mouth of the Interstate's onramp, his jacket zipped tight and collar turned up. A frigid wind blew strands of shoulder-length hair back in his face. He stuffed it inside his jacket and stomped the ground, trying to keep the feeling in his feet. A few semis passed him on their way to Phoenix and points east. But traffic died, the truck stop quieted, occupied by only a few long-haul rigs overnighing in the back parking area. *This is stupid*, he thought. *Nobody's gonna give me a ride this time of night. This whole thing is nuts.*

*

Matt thought back over the afternoon's events. He'd cased the Beverly Hills house for two weeks, knew when the husband and wife came home from work. Knew when the nanny left to take the kids to school and returned with them in mid-afternoon. Knew when the housekeeper arrived and departed. Knew everything about them. It should have been easy, easy pickin's. Break in, disarm the alarm, ransack the joint at his leisure, then fence whatever he could carry away and use any cash to buy a steak dinner, some coke, and the best bottle of single-malt scotch he could find and share it with a hooker after screwing her brains out.

But the whole deal had gone south when the couple came home early, found him on the sofa watching TV and drinking some of their fancy imported beer. The giant husband charged, looking to tear him to pieces. Matt pulled his piece and dropped him with two quick shots to the chest. The wife screamed and screamed and screamed, wouldn't shut up. Matt shut her up with a blast to the head. It happened quickly. Even with all the ruckus and mess—they had white carpets—Matt had stayed calm.

The TV continued to mutter in the background. Matt listened. The neighborhood dogs stayed quiet. The huge

houses along the street stood mostly empty—everybody away making those big bucks. Matt left the mark's house and casually loaded the van with loot, taking his time, out of sight from the street. It would have been a clean getaway except the place had security cameras. Then his van crapped out before he could get on the Interstate. He stuffed the jewelry and cash in his pockets and ditched the van on a back street before catching a ride with Emilio.

*

Matt thought about what had gone wrong, what he should have done differently, would do differently the next time. Maybe the ski mask hadn't hidden his identity enough? *Should have checked the damn van before using it or stolen something better. This is totally stupid.*

The lights at the convenience store flickered then went dark. The cockroach motel looked locked up tight or maybe even abandoned. Matt turned north, walked under the freeway bridge and headed into open desert along an asphalt road. The wind died and the cold seeped into his bones. Light traffic on the Interstate barely whispered. Across the desert plain a light flickered. He turned onto a dirt track. The mysterious light drew him onward, stumbling over rocks and roots in the night.

As he approached, fuzzy images resolved into a campfire next to a huge camper with its levelers and awning in place, as if it had been there a while. An old man grasping a glass sat next to the fire. A rifle lay across his lap. Matt shoved a hand in the pocket that held his pistol and fingered its familiar grip.

"If you're a crook, you're a stupid one," the old guy called. "You're making enough noise to scare away the scorpions."

"I didn't mean to disturb you," Matt said and approached slowly while slipping the pistol's safety off.

The old guy laid a hand on his rifle. "What the hell you doing out here?"

"I got stuck at the exit. Nothing's going on. The market shut

down and—"

"You're freezing your ass off." The old guy chuckled. "Come near the fire. Here, drink this." He handed Matt the glass of booze, his other hand never leaving the rifle.

"Thanks. I was hoping I could hitch a ride east from some trucker at the Exxon."

"Not this late. My name's George by the way."

"I'm . . . I'm Nate."

"You don't sound sure of that."

"Just cold, that's all."

George disappeared into the camper and returned with a lawn chair. The two sat as close as possible to the crackling fire, the burning creosote bush sending out a strong, almost toxic odor.

"You want more?" George asked and retrieved a square unlabeled bottle from next to his chair.

"Yeah. Whoa, that's enough."

"So why you out here in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere?" George asked.

"My car blew up. I'm trying to get to Dallas to meet a friend."

George whistled. "That's a long way."

"Don't I know it. I figured I'd bum rides from truckers."

"Good luck with that. I'm surprised that truck stop stays open. Santiago and his wife manage the place, work for Pilot. They're barely scraping by and the corporation must be propping that place up."

The fire warmed Matt, the booze loosened his muscles and his mouth. "So why are *you* out here?"

"I'm from Seattle. I leave when it starts raining and come here. Like the quiet. I'm far enough from the highway that my old ears don't hear the noise."

"But doesn't the heat and cold get to you? This place must cook during the day."

George laughed. "Yeah, some folks say my brain is fully baked. But I still got some smarts—like I know that bulge in your jacket pocket isn't your Gideon's Bible."

Matt smiled. "So that's why you keep ahold of that deer rifle."

"Can't be too careful. The trick is to not let it harden you. I avoid becoming a jerk by avoiding people. But I still try . . . to be kind, ya know, when I do meet them."

Matt took another swallow of booze and leaned back in his chair. "Good for you. I'm afraid I see people differently. They're either trying to take me down or they're my prey."

George leaned forward. "Prey?"

"Yeah, you know, like a gazelle being chased by a lion."

"That sounds brutal, like words from a . . . what do they call 'em . . . a sociopath."

Matt threw his head and shoulders back and laughed, almost tipping the chair over. "That's me, George, that's me." He noticed that the old man's grip on the rifle tightened.

"Did you always want to be a game hunter?"

"Don't really know. I just grew into it and nobody could show me anything better."

"Really?" George asked. "You never had anybody show you a different way of thinking . . . a less brutal way?"

"I've always done my own thinking."

"Huh. So . . . so when was the last time you went after prey?" George murmured.

"This afternoon."

"So you're runnin' from the . . . the game wardens."

"Yeah."

"I won't tell anybody. But you know, you'll eventually become prey yourself."

"Yeah, so?"

"That's a hard life, don't you think?"

"Sure, but sometimes it's good. You shoulda seen the sexy gal I was with last night."

"But it's not good now, is it? "

"No, not now."

George poured more booze into Matt's glass from the square bottle. It had a strange metallic aftertaste but properly kicked his

ass. Matt tossed it down.

"You like my booze?" George asked.

"Yeah, it's kinda strange, but . . ."

"I make it myself from saguaro cactus and my own special ingredients. But watch it. Drink too much and it'll take you to a place you won't like."

"Most booze does." Matt offered his glass for another double shot.

George handed him the half-full bottle. "Take it and enjoy. I'm gonna turn in. I'll bring you a couple blankets and you can sleep by the fire." He retrieved two worn Army blankets from the camper and handed them to Matt. "Be sure to shake your covers in the morning and keep your shoes on. The snakes and scorpions like to hide there overnight."

"Thanks for the tip."

The camper door crunched shut behind George followed by a rattle of chains and locks. Matt threw more wood on the fire, wrapped the blankets around himself and leaned back in the rickety lawn chair. He sipped his drink, then took swigs directly from the bottle. A golden moon the size of a pizza hung low in the night sky. Matt smiled to himself. *In the morning, I'll be on my way to Mexico . . . go down to Cancun and lie on a beach, plenty of rich tourists to prey on. My life will be good again. I'll let George skate—lucky for him, he doesn't have anything I want, except maybe the recipe for his fake tequila.*

Matt took a final swig from the bottle and let it slip to the ground. He inhaled the pungent odors from the fire. Without warning, blackness closed in.

*

A white-hot sun woke him. Matt stared upward into a dusty yellow sky. The air smelled different, free of vehicle exhaust. *Probably just the booze messing with my senses*, he thought. He rubbed his eyes and pushed himself up. What the fuck! George's

G.TIMOTHY GORDON

THE ANARCHY OF PATRIARCHY

camper, the fire pit and everything he remembered from the night before had disappeared.

Matt turned in a circle and stared across a vast plain covered in knee-high grass and studded with strange-looking trees and shrubs. In the distance something loud and angry trumpeted, raising clouds of dust. A herd of weird-looking cattle mixed in with zebras grazed nearby. They seemed oblivious to his presence. Wait. ZEBRAS!

Matt again scanned the plain, looking for the Interstate and the Exxon station. They too had disappeared. A herd of gazelles with long pointed horns rocketed past. Off to his right, a low guttural growl almost stopped his heart. He turned and watched a pride of lions advance, the shaggy-maned males holding back, yawning, the sleek females focused on the kill, their amber eyes glowing, lips quivering.

Matt fumbled in his pocket for the pistol, the fear turning him cold. But the first lioness toppled him, her jaws closing on his neck and jugular. A thunder of pain and the light faded. The lions had found easy prey.

“Whatever you say, say nothing.”

—Séamus Heaney

Pre-woke late blonde life,
exuberant blue fall chill,
sport cap, Banlon polo,
Sans-a-belt Bermudas,
tasseled saddle, when everything
used to be something else,
descend from EV carts
beside back-nine trap,
bunker, iron and wood club
in-hand among Red Hawk rough
for Titleist tangled up
in Tex-Mex bluebell,
prickly-pear crown,
thorn-and-briar cacti,
groping muck and brush
for all scuttled, lost,
beds of bad lies,
far from scraped fairways,

JENNIFER SCHOMBURG KANKE

IN PRAISE OF PAPER AND PEN

Snow Moon icing the Organs,
glistening parched greens,
no 19th-hole Sunset Grille loo toot,
bump, dimpled *Haig* neat,
post-mod twitch
upon this thread,
hush *you* think
they almost feel
everything last light touches,
enfolds.

I used to carry
ideas around
in my head
like a part of me
that could never
be taken away.
If I forgot them,
I forgot them.
They weren't meant to be.
The world was not
made for their kind.
If I believed that now,
I'd never write,
nothing would be meant
for me, a gray empty mess
of forgetfulness.

MARK BLICKLEY

EGG HEAD

My initial exposure to the New York art scene came during the mid-seventies while sipping hot chocolate in a mid-town coffee shop. Directly in front of my booth was a xeroxed theater advertisement of a nude woman. Her lovely back was facing me. Underneath the squatting beauty, in bold back letters, I read the words NAKED LUNCH.

Hours later I was sitting in a gloomy East Village basement, anxiously awaiting a full-frontal evaluation of the lead actress. A ticket only cost a few dollars.

Turns out the poster that enticed me into the world of drama was an old and famous Penelope Ashley photograph. And not only wasn't there anyone naked in the play, it had absolutely nothing to do with food. Although I didn't really understand a lot of what was being said and enacted on stage, I was intrigued. I've always loved puzzles. NAKED LUNCH addicted me to off-off Broadway.

I threw myself into the New York art scene. It was exhilarating. The more I didn't understand a subject matter, the harder I fought not to lose my concentration, enthusiasm, or respect for the creators and their creations. Because of a romantic liaison with a dancer, I attended numerous modern dance recitals where I absorbed the conceit of movement being as important as dance.

Performance art baffled me. Quite often I couldn't offer up a sentence about the artist's intent. This would bother me, but usually the presentations were so beautifully crafted, layered with such exquisite sound and lights and words and sets that I shrugged off the obscure meanings in favor of a kind of obsessive energy that exploded into artistic anarchy.

I had a head-on collision with the plastic arts in Morocco.

I met an entire summer school of painters in Tangier, ranging in age from eighteen to seventy. Their skill level varied greatly, but their dedication to their art was inspiring. I was amused and somewhat baffled over their excitement of North African light.

New York's School of Visual Arts had leased work space and living quarters inside a large, protected compound. Many nights I would visit up to a dozen artists as they toiled inside their studios. Some artists attacked their canvasses joyously; others worked with a seriousness that approached anger.

I became infatuated with, and later married, an exotic looking woman who made small collages from objects she found in the street—cigarette packages, pieces of fabric, coins, glass, etc. She introduced me to process as well as product.

When I returned to the states I did an exhaustive reconnaissance of most of the art galleries and museums in New York. I got a crash course in art history when I discovered the German expressionists and pointed individuals like Alice Neel and Milton Avery. Joseph Cornell's busy boxes enchanted me and I didn't know why. By chance I walked into a 57th Street gallery and was thrilled by the work of a man named Soutine. I later read that he smelled quite foul.

Contemporary artists, I was having a problem with. SoHo was peaking. Mary Boone replaced Castelli as the art dealer. Most of the work I viewed left me feeling empty, stupid and somewhat intimidated. I didn't get it. By the time the East Village "Bad Art" exploded on the scene, I was more angry than confused.

In the interim I had become friendly with quite a few artists, artists who had spent tens of thousands of dollars on prestigious art school educations. Every year a handful of these artists would submit pieces—you're allowed up to three—to the annual Small Works Show. And each year they'd get uniformly rejected.

I participated in the annual rejection lament for three consecutive years. The lament was usually held at Bradley's in the Village, and in between the bass lines of a jazz trio and disappearing pitchers of beer, we'd all rage on about the

corruption and commercialization of the art world.

But I was changing. A decade of fervent art following and worship started to sour me. I taught myself to rely on my own powers of expectation and introspection, and most of the artists I knew and the products they created left me disgusted. I thought that joy and human understanding had been totally excluded from the work of the majority of my friends and peers.

At the age of thirty-one in 1984, I wrote a play that was produced in New York after winning a theater contest, and around the time of the February 21 1985 Small Works opening, I had a short story anthologized in a book. So you see, I was honestly trying to implement my ideas; I was attempting to build something, not to simply knock a thing down.

Late in 1984 the girlfriend I met in Morocco and I viewed an exhibit in an upscale SoHo space that was so boring and amateurish I asked the gallery sitter if he could explain why the work was being exhibited. He left his desk in a huff and disappeared into a back room. He returned clutching a thick pamphlet that he shoved at us and told us to read. It would explain everything, he said.

We read it. It was such a convoluted muck of art-speak that it confused me even more than the work it was trying to describe. When I returned the pamphlet with my observations, the gallery sitter's face turned purple with rage. He informed me that he had written the pamphlet himself, and if we couldn't understand his words, we were the deficient ones, not the works of art.

Well, a couple of years earlier I would have been intimidated and shuffled off with my head bowed. I insisted he explain the value of the work to me, in his own words. He insisted I reread his writing on the subject. I told him I could spend a day reading his words and still wouldn't have a clue as to why the exhibit was produced. Just give me a few sentences, simple sentences, about your feelings and reasons for the work's importance, I pleaded.

The gallery sitter stormed off into the back room and

stayed there until my girlfriend and I left. I was furious. I wasted years and years being intimidated and misled by a contemporary court of the Emperor's New Clothes.

When I returned home that evening, I was upset. My girlfriend immediately began to put the finishing touches on one of the pieces she was submitting to the 1985 Small Works jury. It was her fourth attempt at gaining acceptance.

"I'm going to enter the competition," I announced.

"But you're not an artist," she replied. "You draw like a kid. Even your handwriting never evolved past the third grade."

"That's because I'm left-handed," I said defensively.

"And because I'm not an artist is why I'll have a better chance of getting in than you and your friends. I bet the curator will be starved for ideas. Technique and talent I don't have, but ideas, unobscured ideas—no problem. It'll be revolutionary."

She smirked and returned to her art work. I walked into the next room and removed a small drawer from an ancient roll top desk I had rescued from the street. Then I grabbed a hammer and some tiny nails.

Because of a clerk's job at an Upper Westside chi-chi toy store, I had a small arsenal of weird and wonderful stuff with which to entertain the many children in my life. I emptied my bag of fun onto the floor and awaited artistic inspiration.

The Muse spoke. Eggs. Rubber eggs. Perfectly crafted rubber eggs peeked up at me from the colorful heap. I plucked a half-dozen of them out of the pile. Then I noticed tiny babies from Italy that were exquisitely made from hard plastic. I scooped up a handful of naked infants and smiled. I had found a theme.

The last ingredient I pulled from the colorful pile was two sets of soft plastic contortionists known as Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Molded to look like a stereotypical 1950's mother and father, these little dolls were renowned for their elasticity. My co-workers used to thrill in twisting Mr. and Mrs. Smith into some very explicit and compromising positions.

I thumbed through a few of my girlfriend's food magazines

that she used for still lifes and cut out two symbolic pictures that I pasted inside the upper left- and lower right hand corners of the drawer. One photograph was of cherries; the other was eggplants. Because of the egg/food theme I also pasted 1950's railroad dining car promotional postcards across all four sides of the drawer. I took a razor blade and slit open four rubber eggs, placing a protruding baby inside each perforation. Then I nailed a pagoda of four baby emerging eggs to the lower left corner of the drawer.

Next came the two Mr. and Mrs. Smiths. I had one couple facing each other in the lower right-hand corner hoisting the other couple on their shoulders. The top couple balanced two intact rubber eggs stacked in their outstretched arms.

The final and crowning achievement of the piece was naming the art work. I asked my girlfriend for one of the extra entry forms she always kept and penned in Procreation above the word title. She was shocked that I had completed an original work of art in thirty-eight minutes, and quite confident that it would be dismissed by the curator, Alan Stone of New York's Alan Stone Gallery.

The next day we left together to drop off our artwork at the Grey Gallery. She took the maximum allowance of three works. I had Procreation. As we were about to leave the apartment my eye caught a piece of paper I had recently taped to the wall above my desk. It was a distorted photocopied page from a recent short story of mine based on my experiences at Tennessee Williams wake, "Visiting Tennessee."

The copy machine had spewed out a grayish piece of paper with floating lines of type that swept across the page. Each sentence snaked into a blur. It so happened that particular page in the story contained some titillating words and phrases—erection, masturbating, penis, sweet sweat soaked,—that were still visible to the reader.

I kept the page because I loved the paper's gray color

degradations as well as the roller coaster movement of the lines of type. But as I read each sentence for the first time, I was struck by how gracefully each line slid into extinction, how each thought literally disappeared before my eyes. I snatched the misfit xerox off my wall and proclaimed it to be my second entry into the Small Works show.

"I shall title it Writer's Block," I proclaimed.

"You're crazy," said my girlfriend as I locked the door behind us. "Don't embarrass yourself by submitting it."

I shrugged off her criticism. "What's wrong with it? It's a found object. The color is lovely. And my interpretation makes perfect sense. If any of these pieces has a chance of getting into the show, this one does." And I believed it, figuring the less an artist had to do with a work the better his chances of success in modern art.

She laughed all the way to the gallery.

A few weeks later we received our notification in the mail. My girlfriend got her answer first. A miracle! After years of trying, two of her three pieces were selected. The following day I got the word—one of my works was in the show.

I was ecstatic! I had proved that a non-artist could gain artistic acceptance because the art world was so bereft and hungry for something tangible, something with some recognizable thought behind it despite the simplicity of the idea and subject matter.

The selection announcement did not state which works were chosen. A pick-up date was issued for artists to retrieve their rejected pieces. My girlfriend and I had the same retrieval date. I couldn't wait to learn which of my masterpieces had scaled the art world barrier.

My success had the effect of dampening my girlfriend's joy. After all, my foray into the art world was to prove that real artists need not apply. If I was accepted into the show I had planned to write a series of scathing articles denouncing the current state of the art. I was going to strike a blow for true, frustrated artists everywhere.

But now my girlfriend made it into the show and she was upset with me. My acceptance effectively devalued her work. I had already written her a mock bio that she loved. I was going to publish it. But now that she was going to show her work in New York she forbade me to use it. It suddenly wasn't so funny or biting anymore. I constructed this false bio as if it were a press release:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

TYRONE HEMHOLTZ GALLERY

“fine arts forever”

*The paintings of Gaye Bastedo (1956-2023) reinforce the premise that everything transitory is merely a smile. Everything we see is a proposal, a possibility, an expedient. The real truth, to begin with, remains invisible beneath the surface. The colors that captivate us are not lighting, but light. The graphic universe consists of light and shadow. The diffused clarity of slightly overcast weather is richer in phenomena than a sunny day. It is difficult to capture and represent this, because the moment is so fleeting. Ms. Bastedo has penetrated our soul with the formal fuse of *THOUGH I'M SCAT I STILL LOVE LITTER BOXES*, using organic materials (ugh!) on canvass.*

*Simple motion strikes us as banal. Bastedo's work eliminates the time element. Yesterday and tomorrow are simultaneous. Her *FRIS-BEE AS CHOCOLATE CHIP* and *UP THE SCHOZZIN NOZZIN* overcomes the time element by a retrograde motion that would penetrate consciousness, reassuring us that a renaissance might still be thinkable.*

Early works indicate her demonical visions melt with the celestial. This dualism shall not be treated as such, but in its complementary oneness. The conviction is already and always present. The demonical is already peeking through here and

*there and can't be kept down. For truth asks that all elements be presented at once, as is exemplified by the artist's *ORGASM SEEPS FROM DAMAGED BOOT* and damned near didactic with the completion of her last canvass, *NEW ENGLAND NEUTERS*, as well as conveyed through the lesser sculptures commemorating her period of Buddhist fanaticism of the late '90s.*

Gaye Bastedo was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1956. Her first contact with the art world came at an early age. In 1957, at the height of the bohemian “BEAT” tradition, Mrs. Donna Bastedo was changing the future painter's diapers in the Women's Room at Crotona Park when Allen Ginsberg and Jackson Pollock, both in drag, each asked the artist's mother for a dime and admired the streak-stained diaper Gaye had created.

After a period of twenty-two years during which time Gaye did not create art because of her paralyzing fear that ferrets would seek her out and defecate on her paint brushes, Ms. Bastedo went into a frenzied period of work that lasted until her death at age sixty-seven, when she was bitten by a rabid woodchuck while collecting organic materials for an environmental collage.

Not only was Ms. Bastedo a prolific painter and sculptress, she also published many articles and essays of art history and criticism, as well as an acclaimed autobiography, ‘I'm Not Paranoid Because My Fears Are Real’, and a novella, ‘Stories I Stole From My Father.’

This novella led to a thirty -year court battle with her brother, Ezra, when he discovered that the book was pirated from the uncopyrighted Catalanian fiction of their late father. The case was still in litigation at the time of the artist's death and was said to be a major reason for renewed interest in Bastedo among art critics, who cited the novella title as the ultimate statement in truth, thus earning Gaye Bastedo a new and deeper examination of her work.

Tyrone Hemholtz is proud of being the first gallery sponsoring a Bastedo retrospective, and reminds patrons that the Bastedo Bon Bons, like the ones depicted in her gastronomical collage, GUILT, are on sale in the lobby.

My girlfriend and I went together to pick up our rejected art works. I secretly hoped that WRITER'S BLOCK was the one that made it in.

She handed the clerk her ticket first. A moment later she was handed her banished painting. When I gave my ticket to the clerk, I waited a good twenty minutes until the clerk reappeared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blickley," he said, "but I can't seem to find your piece."

"Will you continue your search and please hurry?" I said, "I have to be at work in fifteen minutes." The suspense over which piece had made it in was killing me.

The clerk returned in about five minutes. "I'm sorry, sir. There seems to have been a mistake."

My face dropped and I look over at Gaye, who was beaming. The clerk cleared the embarrassment out of his voice. "Both of your pieces have been accepted," he said.

Gaye looked like she was about to cry. She later told me that she expected the mistake to be that none of my works had been selected for the exhibition. She admitted feeling crushed that I had aced my two pieces.

I had a lot of fun the day of the opening. I dressed totally in black, complete with a black beret loaned to me by a retired jazz musician who had worn it proudly during gigs in the 1950's.

My footwear was a pair of old boots that I dripped paint on to. I also hard boiled two dozen eggs and wrote on them: Mark Blickley, 1952–, A Retrospective. I passed out these edible works of art to people on the subway and at the Opening.

The humor of the event evaporated for me when my artist

friends, who had so recently applauded my attempt to prove that the art world discriminated against "real" artists, viewed my work hanging on the gallery walls and collectively proclaimed that, "I indeed did have an incredible intuitive talent for the plastic arts."

That statement is totally false. And I have the proof that it's untrue; it's packed away in a suitcase at the bottom of my closet.

My righteous artist comrades, instead of taking encouragement and comfort from my "success," massaged their bruised egos by perpetrating a lie. Much to my surprise they turned out to be as fake as the institutions I was lampooning.

As a result of this experience, I penned a play entitled THE WORLD'S GREATEST SAXOPHONE PLAYER. It's a monodrama that chronicles the rise and fall of one Eric Tesler, a renowned saxophonist who plays his instrument without using a reed.

BETH MATHISON

FIRST STEPS INTO THE OCEAN

a foot in the water, warm, baby white bubbles like a bath but no
not like a bath at all, it's big
it goes out and out and out so far she can't even see the end
so big and dark and scary

*

back to the sand, hot under her feet
waiting
under the hot sun,
thinking

*

the water, it whispers to her
even so big, its voice is small like a lullaby and her fear goes away
another step in the water
and it's good
the wet sand moves over her feet and cools them
here in the sand and water and her hat stopping the sun from
shining on her face, it's good standing on the edge of this big
water, not knowing what is in front of her. the fear, it comes
again, almost like a whisper, the dark reaching out to where
she can't even see.

but then she reaches out to grab her mother's hand, who knows
good and bad and will always take care of her. not even thinking
about it, just reaching out
they take step together
the water whispering to them both.

CAROL EDWARDS

BLOOMING DETRITUS

What magic has she
To make flowers grow
Right there on the beach?
From the palms of her hands
They spring, blooms neon blue
Unnatural leaves and shimmering seeds
Greener than the grass
Of manicured landscapes,

Effortless she sleeps
Perhaps dreams them to life
Crowned about her hair
Her heart
Rooting her to sand
A creature half of land and half of sea.

The surf curls its claim
A grumbling madness
Grasping ever up, ever in
White bones tossed in restless waves
Iridescent sheen glittering between
Jagged glass pounded smooth
Blinding glare of synthetic tubes,
Brightly colored caps roll and clack
Through rings of plastic—

Evidence of humanity's audacity
Slow strangling worlds we've never seen
Murder and neglect
Prices of convenience, progress
Socially conditioned
To never care, or even ask
If the ocean creatures scream.

SHILO NIZIOLEK

Winner of Lit Shark's 2023 November Poem of the Month

EKPHRASIS FOR THE SALMON

*"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together
today to look into the face of the river."*

—Mary Ruefle

Whenever a friend goes walking, she stumbles, eyes wide, upon the uninhabited body of a wild thing. She wrote a story, never love a wild thing, and when I told her I wrote an essay that said, "I've always loved a wild thing," she said "Of course you did." And I am still trying to puzzle out what that means, but never mind that here, all you need to know is yes, I was jealous of her finding the dead, yes, I am a unwild thing and I need love. Yes, I went into the drenched-gray of the woods hoping to see the dead, ghost or holy being, it didn't matter to me. The hush that fell over me when I spotted her, tucked out from that long and arduous swim upstream, like a body in illness. The constant hum-thrum-pushing up off the couch, body sidling between the rocks. And didn't I know, shouldn't I have known how sharp the teeth would be on a creature like that who has to spend her last moments fighting? I couldn't touch teeth, the mouth agape, barely there in the river, her face the face of the river, her eyes held no terror only purity of purpose, such singularity in her form, nearly as long as my leg. And didn't I imagine how earlier this summer, my body floated, dived, divested of the earth for a few moments to feel fluid like the salmon in the beating sun? How I shivered now, out here in the rain, looking into the face of the river like Mary Ruefle told me to, my pants getting soaked the longer I crouched toward her face in wonder, the more I imagine the

STEVE ZISSON

brush of her body against my leg, my legs salmon-finned and thrashing. I left her to decay, to be eaten by the crows as we all end up, but here is her love letter; I wrote it just for me. You know how it is, when you are all salmon, the hunger in you shark-toothed hang-nailed effervescent. You're all smoke now, all mist hanging over the river in late November. Your scales sludge off, become part of the silt. Dear Salmon, we are gathered here together today. Dear Salmon, this is the pacific northwest, where you used to thrive, you are the moss and the ferns and the bark of the trees. Dear Salmon, I am sorry for the hunger in us. I am sorry for the take and take and take with no stand still, no long and grateful pause. I am sorry Salmon, for what is lost, that we no longer see our faces in you, the river.

BRUCE

The newly mated pair of eastern coyotes is trotting toward the creek way at the back of my property. They bound up out of the long, late summer grass every few strides, yipping and yapping and trying to spot prey on each leap above the seed heads.

I'm nodding in awe at the sight of them as I talk on the phone, just a bit distracted.

"Everything's perfectly safe, Marie. It's foolproof. I've got a state-of-the-art electric fence. She'll love it," I tell my ex-wife as I look out from my kitchen window across my newly re-imagined backyard landscape.

She says she'll have to think about it after she gets more data and she hangs up abruptly. All hang-ups come without warning from Marie.

Still, I sense softening. I've made some progress with my ex-wife to allow our daughter to come to my house. Marie will be sending a drone to do a week's worth of surveillance, day and night, just to make sure it's safe. I'm okay with that. Science is observation.

Once the hurdle of her mother is cleared, I'm sure Ames will love it here. She's a real nature lover. Even Marie might like it, stay for a while, though she's an avowed city person. I thought we would've balanced each other out when we got married. But I guess we were too far apart. City and country. Nature seeks a balance but we couldn't find it.

She needs the city and person-to-person contact. My research and I can work anywhere.

My backyard is almost a back forty acres, widening out from my farmhouse positioned near the road. My neighbors aren't really thrilled with what I'm doing with the backyard. The town's approved it up until now so the neighbors can just take me to court.

I should sketch a hand-drawn map of the backyard and send a copy to Ames. She'll love it and she'll want to come *all* the time. She used to stay over every other weekend until my backyard went wild. Until I encouraged the wilding. I did it mostly for her because I knew she couldn't resist being here more.

But Marie, of course, didn't see it that way. She thinks my backyard is dangerous and so anti-city. Cities are the future, she says, so confidently as a city planner in Boston. A city that was never planned and sprouted randomly along winding cow paths.

The two coyotes stop in mid-frolic and I scan the area to spot what froze them. A young deer is the proverbial deer in the headlights. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner for hungry coyotes.

I revel in the beauty of the coyotes out in daytime, not confined to the night hours like they are in urban environments, where they avoid us to hunt.

The deer and the coyotes stare each other down and the greyer coyote crouches and begins to circle until it's behind the deer, staring at its puffy white tail.

The deer is motionless. It eyes the tan coyote still in front of it. It needs eyes on its rear too.

The grey coyote lunges at its tail and comes away with a mouthful of white fur. It furiously spits it out.

The deer whirls around so its rear faces the second coyote.

As if infuriated by the near miss, the coyote with the mouthful goes for the neck but the deer lowers its head and butts him away. The coyote tumbles into a bush before righting itself. The deer drops its head again for another charge but the coyote at the rear takes the opening and dives in, burying its jaw into its anus. And it holds on as the deer whips around and around. Blood leaks from a tear in its rear and is wicked up by its flicking white tail as if it's a cotton ball.

Should I stop the carnage? No. All must be as natural as possible in my backyard.

*

The next morning, I find the deer carcass, just bones and fur and blood stains in the matted grass where the coyotes alternately gorged and slept with their meal.

Such is the circle of life in my new backyard. It feels so alive. I won't protect Ames from seeing any of it. She already loves animals and nature shows and ecosystems. She certainly understands how a key predator can cause a trophic cascade. She informed me what a trophic cascade was just last year!

I take another sip from my coffee thermos even as I realize my bladder's full. I look around to check if a neighbor can see me as I unzip. It's a vulnerable position and I'm far from a neighbor but Tremblay spies on me with a telescope. He's got a drone too but he knows not to violate my backyard airspace.

Stepping behind a scrub pine, I crouch and let it all out. Tremblay would charge me with indecent exposure if he spotted me. On my own property! Tremblay of perfect lawn who hates my backyard, demanding that I mow it. He's complained to the town about it a hundred times.

The Conservation Commission has been out for a half dozen site visits as have the police. The ConCom has mostly been concerned about the creek that has grown in width, depth and saltiness as the ocean, almost three miles away has pushed the brackish water west of my property. And all kinds of sea creatures have ventured to my backyard where I've built a small creek-side beach.

First come the herring in the spring and behind them even a couple of lost Atlantic Salmon. Larger predators to follow.

Ames will just love the beach. I had to truck in sand because so much gets washed away each flood tide. The sand is tan, local sand, not bleached bright white like it was from the Caribbean.

I head down to the beach to see what's washed up or washed away. I've worn a path to the beach and there's a wind blowing up the creek pushing a strong thick salt sting into my nose. But it's

more than that as I approach. It's a salty thickness in the air. A big black lump half out of the water is the source of the stench. Herring gulls and crows and crabs scramble over it, pecking away at the flesh.

I've got to get it removed now. Marie won't like the look of it. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not going to be easy. It's a leaden lump of hundreds of pounds of dead weight.

I feel another presence from above and it's a drone. It must be Marie's and not Tremblay's. She's already probably seen the carcass on her feed so the chance that Ames can come is evaporating.

Shit, it smells like...shit. Is it a dead seal? None of the horseheads have ever come this far up the creek. But they do like to haul out their nine-hundred pounds on beaches to rest and avoid great whites.

I scan the water for a fin. Marie won't ever let Ames come if her drone spies a great white shark.

The drone peels off down the creek toward the sea. Returning my attention to the rotting mound of blubber, I watch as the swarm of crabs and insistent squawking crows jockey for position. Something huge must have taken off this gray horsehead seal's head. Something very big. A boat propeller?

It'll be a long time before the crabs and coyotes and crows and turkey vultures eat through that much flesh. I will return with my tractor to push it back into the creek, flushing it out to sea on the high tide.

*

The next morning, I drive the John Deere to the beach and not much stink greets me as I crest the dune.

The carcass is gone. Not a scrap left. No crabs or crows either. The overnight tide wasn't unusually high so something must have dragged it away.

I look for drag marks but it's like the sand has been raked

smooth by a gentle tide. Nine-hundred pounds just vanished.

The neat look of the beach makes me think of my long-term plan of building a marsh as a buffer from storms. Ames would love to help with the planning. As I'm daydreaming, another drone hovers above me and then over the spot the seal was, before it's zipping north up the creek.

*

Ames is coming! I've got to get ready and make everything perfect!

Can nature be perfect? A perfect balance? Is it achievable? Maybe in my backyard. Maybe not in your backyard.

Ames will never want to leave.

Ames is perfect at age twelve but so different as I see her for the first time in six months. Stepping out of the shuttle with just a weekend bag, she seems to have sprouted six inches, her dark hair a foot longer too, down to the small of her back. Can she stay longer than her little bag portends? I will get her anything she needs, to keep her with me as long as possible.

I bounce down the porch like a big dog, arms and legs flailing.

"I miss this porch!" she says, hugging me. "And you too, Pauline, I mean, Mom, of course. I could sit in this very spot all afternoon with a book."

"I've got so much more to show you. It's all for you," I whisper into her hair. "It's out back. I've built a new porch off the kitchen for viewing. You can read there afternoons if you can keep your eyes off the landscape."

We stop in the kitchen just long enough for Ames to toss her bag on the island and grab a couple lemonades.

On the back porch I can see Ames eyes widen as she slugs down her lemonade.

"I was so thirsty! There's no green lawn anymore!"

"Isn't it beautiful? So brown."

"And long."

I take her glass and mine and put them on the grill. "I've got a

big surprise for you. Let's go down the path to the creek."

She's off the porch before me and it's so hot I can't wait to show her the beach. And maybe go in for a dip. Two drones zip in from the left and right of my property. Are both Marie's? Or is one Tremblay's?

She's skipping ahead like a young coyote on her own for the first time. How can she ever leave and go back to the city?

She's over the hill before the path plunges toward the creek in its little valley and I'm running after her to make sure there's nothing out of the ordinary, like a big dead animal, or even something dangerous.

And she's yelling, screeching before I can emerge from the marsh reeds blocking my view.

She's alone when I finally spot her near where the seal beached itself or floated there already dead. "Look what I found!"

It glints in the sun at me. "What... is... it?" I ask, out of breath. "It's a tooth. A big one."

I'm still catching my breath as I reach her.

"It's huge," she says, holding it up to me. "I think it's a shark's tooth. A very big one."

"Let me see," I say, holding out my hand.

It has the shape of a shark's tooth. Triangular, and the edges are serrated. For cutting hunks of flesh. Efficiently. It looks like an arrowhead.

I flip it over a couple times in my hand, which it almost fills. "It seems like it's fake or something. A hard plastic. Like it was made."

"Like it didn't come from nature? We could get it tested, couldn't we?"

I study it closer. Definitely feels like plastic but also alive. "We could. But for right now, you've got a great keepsake. We'll mount it and hang it on the wall in your room." To help keep her here.

Ames smiles so wide that I know she'll stay forever. Her visit couldn't be going any better.

*

Ames comes down for breakfast, all bleary-eyed. She's in shorts and her Dinosaur Jr. band T-shirt I gave her. She's holding the shark tooth with two hands above her head like she's a priest raising it to the heavens. "I was doing some research. All night really. It's got to be a megalodon tooth!"

"Around the Cape? No one's found their teeth in Massachusetts waters before."

"Maybe it was brought up on the Gulf Stream. The current's getting so much stronger every day as the ice sheet melts. It's pulling stuff right up off the ocean floor."

She does do her research.

"I've made you a vegan breakfast sandwich. Just like you like," I say, holding out a plate.

"Great," she says, lunging for it. She doesn't take a bite though. "Let's wrap it up and take it with us on the kayak. I want to explore down the creek."

"I don't know, Ames. We should get the drone up first to take a look. I didn't tell you about—"

She's digging in the kitchen drawer for aluminum foil and rips off a sheet with a metal-on-metal fingernails on blackboard sound. "Didn't tell me what, Mom?"

"I didn't tell you about the huge dead seal I found on the beach the other day. It had a big bite out of it."

"Could've been hit by a boat."

I point to the tooth on the countertop. "This was no boat."

"But we've been kayaking a million times on the creek and open ocean. We'll have the drone out in front of us to see if anything is coming our way."

I can't disappoint her if I want her to keep coming back. To stay. More than a weekend.

*

We're in our two-person kayak and at least it's a cloudy day so the morning sun isn't beating down on us. We're not much past Tremblay's frontage but the creek is already widening and deepening as we approach the ocean.

"Real shark's teeth are made of calcium phosphate," Ames says from behind me. She's still in research mode while also operating the drone. I'm the muscle, paddling against the current as the tide swells into our creek. The water's clear enough that I can see schoolie stripers foraging for crabs and bait fish.

"Full disclosure, Ames. I did see a mako shark swimming up the creek a few weeks ago. I couldn't believe it. Following the stripers. Makos aren't as dangerous as great whites. But—"

"There's a boat coming, Mom. Fast!" Ames says.

It's got to be that asshole Tremblay in his cigarette boat. Steaming up the creek like he's some president Bush on a fast ride off Kennebunkport. Or thinking he's in Miami Vice.

Before I can pull out of the channel over to the creek side, he's churning past us not ten feet away. The wake rocks us over almost one way and then the other on the return but we seem to right ourselves. And I'm yelling at him but I'm sure he can't hear us over his dual outboard engines.

He circles us and the second wake flips us. I'm flailing and out of the kayak, trying instinctively to find Ames.

The first time I surface I see the two drones. Ames will never be allowed back is all I can think for a second. Marie'll have it all on video.

No Ames in sight. I dive again.

When I come up, I spot Ames swimming back to the kayak and a shark fin not twenty yards behind her. It's as big as a boat's sail from water level. And it's gaining on her.

There's nothing I can do. Just watch.

And I'm amazed as the fin goes right past her, headed toward Tremblay's boat.

Even if the water were murky, you couldn't miss how huge this thing is. It's at least twice the length of the kayak, maybe thirty

feet. It fills the creek, a dark shadow under the water, creating its own wake above. A wave rushes toward Tremblay's boat that he's backing up to dock at his pier.

Two drones pause over us and then head toward the shark and Tremblay.

"Ames, hurry," I say and we swim the kayak to shore, each of us hanging onto a side.

As we stand up in knee deep water near the bank, the shark rises up next to Tremblay's boat. It looks almost mechanical in weird slow motion. Its open jaws crash onto the stern and take off the back of the boat. Tremblay goes skyward, lands, and slides toward the hole in the back headed for the snapping jaws and shark eyes rolling back in its head.

"He should've gotten a bigger boat and not a fast flashy one," I mutter to myself.

"What?" Ames asks.

"Nothing."

I grab Ames and turn her away when the shark's bite severs Tremblay's body in half, the blood draining out of him and into the creek.

I can't help but gasp but think to pull Ames up onto the marsh grass for good measure in case the shark turns to us next.

But the shark is busy, thrashing Tremblay's fiberglass boat into so many pieces.

*

We're only a hundred yards up the path toward home when Marie calls, as expected.

"I'm all right Mom. You should have seen it. It was massive," Ames says to her. "I know you saw it. But from a drone. We were in the water with it!"

I'm proud that Ames is unfazed. I probably could've let her watch Tremblay succumb but it probably would be too much for anyone. Poor Tremblay. I wouldn't wish that death on my worst

enemy. It was quick at least. He wasn't my worst enemy, just maybe a bitter rival.

"No Mom," Ames says calmly, like a scientist I know she'll become. "There'll be an investigation and all. A man is dead! I'll have to stay for a few days. And we have to find out more about this mega shark."

Ames looks over to me and I can see her excitement in her nodding eyes. She's going to be staying a few more days!

The swampy ground never felt so solid under my feet.

As we walk toward the house, Tremblay's Pitbull mix howls from his property like he's sensed the loss of his owner. I never really took to that dog but I feel for him now.

*

"Mom says you did a good job getting me out of the water."

"She did?"

"She did."

Maybe there's hope after all.

We're sitting on the back porch and Ames is reviewing the drone footage.

"Look at this! It's not a long lost megalodon," she says. "It's Bruce."

"Bruce who?"

She brings over her screen to me. "No silly, the shark is Bruce."

She's always giving wild animals names. Like the abandoned baby squirrel she found that time. Or the opossum.

"The shark?"

She sits in close to me and pulls up a split screen. "It's what Spielberg named the mechanical sharks he built for his *Jaws* movie. He named them Bruce. Look, they're the same."

"What?"

Damn, they do look similar though the one in the water looked so much more real when it was right next to you.

"Wow. I remember when they filmed that movie over on the Vineyard. Robert Shaw starred in it. Dreyfus and that other guy, Schneider. Roy I think. I loved that movie but I never understood why anyone could be scared by that fake-looking shark."

"*Scheider*, not Schneider. There's no 'n' in his name," Ames corrects me, then quickly moves on and points to our drone footage. "This one definitely looks more shark-like. Like it's adapted to nature. Spielberg built a half dozen of them but four or five just disappeared like movie props sometimes do. One was displayed at Universal studios for a while."

My eyes go wide. I'm buying into her thinking. Sometimes we get like this with wild theories. Science often springs from out-there theories. "Maybe they just dumped the mechanical sharks in the ocean like they did everything else in the 70s," I say.

"And real great white sharks used Bruce as an enhancement!"

"As if great whites need any enhancement."

"I don't think a typical great white could do what Bruce did to Mr. Tremblay and his boat. It's something beyond the usual."

We both sit back and take a breather from our speculating.

"We'll see what Harbormaster Tuck thinks," I say.

"There's one more unusual thing," says Ames, rewinding the video. "Look it, I think it's something like merfolk in the shadows swimming behind Bruce and they're directing him."

Somehow it isn't too much for me on this day. Merfolk directing Bruce like they're half-human, half-fish Spielbergs. Okay.

Bruce.

*

Falmouth Police Sgt. Stan "I Don't Give A" Tuck was pushed into the role of harbormaster after he became "overzealous" during a student disciplinary incident aka "melee" at the high school. Harbormaster was a pretty safe spot for him to ease into his pension since he spent all of his free time on his own boat, mostly drunk.

A drunk overseeing drunken recreational boaters. Just perfect. He sets quite an example for the town's youth.

I want to offer him a beer as we all sit on the back porch looking at the drone video but I don't want to tempt him. So we're drinking lemonade.

"I've never seen one that big. And I've been on the water since a kid. Back in the 70s, you could swim anywhere. There were no great whites in these waters. Protecting the seals brought them to us. Now they're everywhere and e-nor-mous. The fishing industry's gone after the seals gobbled all the fish. I guess we'll have to close the beaches for Labor Day weekend. Well, at least the tourist season is about over. Good thing it isn't Fourth of July. No biggie," he says.

He's talkative, even without a beer in him.

"We're going to need you two in this jurisdiction for a while," Sgt. Tuck says as he hitches his belt.

I look at Ames and she at me. "How long?" I ask, trying to hold back hope.

"I don't know. At least through the end of great white season."

"How long is that?"

"By the end of October, they're starting to migrate south," Ames chimes in, jumping back into research mode.

Sgt. Tuck looks her over again. "Yeah. That's about right. Halloween. You, young lady can be very helpful with research. We don't really have the budget for it in my department of one."

Or the aptitude, I think. But I get the sense for the first time in a long time Sgt. Tuck gives a shit. He's got a new purpose before he floats off into the sunset, retirement.

And he's on our side. Because Ames will be staying at least until November. Per order of the harbormaster.

There's nothing Marie can say about that. Ames will be with me, doing what she loves to do. She can keep up with school remotely; she's so smart she's three lessons ahead anyway.

And Sgt. Tuck, he's going to need a bigger boat to replace

his flimsy Boston Whaler as we all figure out exactly how this great white or whatever it is got so damn big, gorging on horsehead seals and Tremblay or whoever. Whatever it is, we'll also need to identify the merfolk who may be directing Bruce.

Squinting at Tuck, I see a bit of Robert Shaw in him. It was *Shaw, right?* I start to sing to myself: *Stick him in a scupper with a hosepipe bottom. Early in the morning!*

It will be such an adventure. But best of all, Ames will be staying for a while longer.

STEVE DENEHAM

THE DEAD OF WINTER

The clouds have fallen into the city
damp, grey buildings appear slowly
bleeding into existence through the mist
I walk among them
trying to avoid people, ghosts
the dead of winter

blurred neon lights crystallise with every step
I stop to look in a shop window
it is framed by Christmas lights
that blink on and off
on and off

when they blink on
there is a winter scene
a sleigh filled with presents
wrapped in deep red paper
trimmed with velvet bows
it rests on snow that is not real
but could be

when they blink off
all that I can see
is my reflection and I find myself
wishing
not that the mist might dissipate
but that it might thicken

MANDY SCHIFFRIN

SPINDRIFT

With each breath,
the sand shifts:
slowly, minusculely,
rolling, grain over grain;

then sifted by ghostly
fingers in the air,
lifted in a filtered mist,
scattered, here and there.

Silicate stings my eyes,
and whitens my hair;
it scratches at my skin.
The change wants to come in.

PREY

BETH MATHISON

MORNING AT THE BEACH

Wood planks,
edges rounded and smooth
from their days at sea
lay scattered among the sand and rocks,
bits of seaweed and splayed crab shells,
detritus of the long night.
All drying under the hot sun
the tide exposes
these long wood bones
that have found their way back to land,
and in the process, have changed
forever

LORRAINE CAPUTO

MEDITATION: GALÁPAGOS SEAS

Surrounded by
 shattered coral
 & sea-burnished lava
I sit in the warm
 late-afternoon sun
 listening
to the tide rising, waves
 leaping over fractured
 boulders, waves rising
translucent green-blue
 to break, frothing, arriving
 to shore, before
relaxing

Red crabs cling
 to those black crags,
 the surge breaking &
 foaming over them
& out yonder
 two boobies skim
 the waters, back & forth
 along this ragged coast
one flies near, its
 turquoise feet tucked
 against its white belly

MARK CONNORS

FORCE

There is water
cascading down
from rock it has
smoothed, gushing
forth in that masculine
way water does.
You are beneath,
edging ever closer,
aware it can sink you,
hold you in place
till you drown.
It's for sale now.
you can buy it,
and the ancient
wood whose
inhabitants listen
to its music,
aware of the trace
of a teenage boy
who the water
sunk and held fast
two summers back.
You can't help
remember him
the moment
you feel spray
on your face,
how close you are
to turning back
for the safely
of the shale bed.

SANDRA NOEL

SURFING HIS TRAUMA

Pulled by a slight swell, he trips
into sinking sand before lunch, falls

into another tomorrow, scoured to the bone.
A life with no soul after-party.

He tries to write *little shit* and *dirty* into the mud,
but the lugworms have no place for his shame.

So the tide pushes his pain into the current,
carries him out on another rip.

His metronome counts each wave
until the recoil heaves him back;

inside out, like the air, smashed
in the weight of a wave.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

THE ANTELOPE DO NOT HAVE EARS, HERE

Every time I dream of you,
there is

an antelope—

standing off the curb like
camouflaged silk.

A YIELD sign
reflects

off its hindquarters.

A breeze—and the fur
glows yellow.

The area seems to whimper.

I blink, as if to say
I looked that way, too, once.

ON FINDING A DEAD DEER IN MY BACKYARD

I saw them a few weeks ago. My wife called me, something urgent—so I left the computer and went to see what so excited her.

Three deer, 3 young deer meandering around our ¼ acre backyard. They look thin, she said—I agreed (not saying it was not a good sign with winter coming near).

We enjoyed watching them through our plate glass door, their casual grace, that elegance of walk deer have when unafraid. They were special, even more than the occasional cardinal alighting in our yard like a breathing ruby with wings—so we stayed as still as possible. I told her that deer can only see what moves, so we held ourselves tight like insensate statues.

Two of these white-tailed beauties grazed daintily on the ground but the third was drawn to our giant holly tree, resplendent with its myriad red berries, like necklaces thrown capricious. I was concerned—something alarming about even deer drawn like the proverbial moth—safe, I wondered, for deer or tree?

The triplets soon left our yard, as casually as they had come, and a week went by—then one day a single deer came back. I say back because she went straight for the holly tree, and I banged on the plate glass door and yelled as fierce as an old man can yell to scare off the now unwanted intruder, for something told me the holly tree would be death to the deer.

She fled, but the next day came back again, again alone, and again with eyes only for that tree, an Eve that could not say no to the forbidden fruit—or berries or leaves it appears. Again I chased her away, and for a few days saw no return.

Then one brisk morning our neighbor called—he saw what we could not see in the deep green thickness of that holly tree. The doe lay sleeping under its canopy (so death always seems with animals, unlike a human corpse where something is gone), killed it seemed by berries or the leaves of the innocent tree.

I called my township—they said, put the carcass by the street, we'll send someone to pick it up—but I couldn't, or wouldn't. Not just because I walk with a cane, and am old and unsure how such a moving would be done—no, no, it was more—when I saw the deer lying sheltered beneath the tree it loved, the tree it died for, it seemed a sacred place, consecrated—and I could not bring myself to violate nature's holy ground.

Fortunately I have a neighbor who is not sentimental, and he dragged the dead doe roughly to the curb, and I knew, by its pungent unearthly smell of death, it was the only answer.

MARK CONNORS

IT NEARLY HAPPENED ONE MORNING

She said she nearly ran me over once;
no malice—a long shift in A & E.
I'm on Cononley Lane End now,
the setting of the almost accident.

It was difficult at first, still is really,
her mother with another man.
A bloody poet too. But we grew
closer through odd favours

and kids painted me well,
despite letting Theo watch *Die Hard*
when he was 10, teaching them
The Ghosty Song. And on our last

weekend in Robin Hood's Bay,
I showed them the Public Fart Man
on YouTube. They started copying
him, much to my embarrassment.

Sometimes the undads and step grampas
are forgotten. They know I love them.
It wasn't hard for me. They're 12,000 miles away
and no one has a clue how I feel.

MICHAEL FLANAGAN

I SEE / A THREAD

I see
a thread
so give it a tug
to find a poem

behind the smoke
I sooth and charm the bees
as I rapp their hive

even the black ewe
is snowy white on this
Christmas Eve

grandma's china
entrusted to me, the youngest . . .
what was she thinking?

watching the koi
sip at the rain drops
do they hear the thunder?

he begs
don't let me die
then I wake again

ALAN SWYER

LIFE IN HOLLYWOOD

In Hollywood, screenwriters' careers rarely end dramatically. Unless an A-lister stabs a producer, totals a movie star's Lamborghini, or takes the fall for a \$200,000,000 turkey that capsizes a studio, even a five-, ten-, or twenty-year run almost invariably ends not with a bang, but with a whimper. The name on a studio parking space is painted over. Emails and texts stop arriving. Calls are no longer returned. Reservations at the trendiest restaurants become unavailable except at 5:30 or 11.

Worse than becoming pariahs, which would suggest a measure of notoriety, writers who have fallen out of fashion well before retirement age become the showbiz equivalent of zombies, roaming Silverlake, Culver City, Beverly Hills, and Malibu with little relevance or purpose.

When he first arrived in Los Angeles, Lenny Kaplan heard tales about legendary screenwriters, including Oscar winners, who were consigned to filling their days telling each other tales of Bogart, Bacall, and Howard Hawks. As he gained a foothold in the business, Lenny grew to understand that it wasn't just geriatrics, but also writers in their fifties, forties, and sometimes even late thirties, who were consigned to whiling away hour after hour at the Farmer's Market, Caffe Roma, or Musso & Frank's.

Those out-of-work scribes, Lenny realized, were the privileged ones, who hadn't blown their nest eggs on cocaine, multiple divorces, or rotten investments.

As chilling as that seemed, Lenny never considered that one day their plight might also be his.

Lenny's entrance into the movie biz came not through connections, but thanks to a Saturday morning basketball game. While trudging back to his car after an hour-and-a-half of full-court action, another player caught up to him, then asked what he

did when not playing hoops. Never much of a networker, Lenny joked that he wrote unproduced screenplays.

"Can I read one?" asked the guy, who introduced himself as Marvin Burns.

"Why?" asked Lenny.

"Because I'm an agent."

Fearing that future Saturdays might prove awkward if Marvin hated what he read, it was with a combination of hope and trepidation that Lenny dropped off a hard copy of a script.

Two days later, he was surprised by an early morning call. "I think I call sell the fucker," the agent announced.

"You like it?"

"Which would you prefer?" teased Marvin. "I love it, but don't know what to do with it? Or it's so-so, but I can make you some bucks?"

"Welcome to Hollywood?" responded Lenny.

"Afraid so," affirmed Marvin. "And for the record, I do like it."

Lenny got a wallop of movie business insanity when Marvin called again ten days later. "Good news and bad," Marvin exclaimed.

"Let's start with good," Lenny requested.

"Fox wants to option it."

"And the bad?"

"They want to bring in somebody to change it."

"Change it how?"

"Instead of a white kid growing up in a Black neighborhood—"

"Which happens to be autobiographical—"

"They want a Black kid in a white neighborhood."

"That makes no sense."

"Which is why, though I wouldn't advise it, you can always tell 'em to go fuck themselves."

*

Lenny's career from that point on became a rollercoaster ride with a good amount of "ups," plus a fair share of "downs." It grew to encompass "pitches," successful and otherwise, an adaptation of a novel, rewrites of scripts done by others, revisions by others of his own work, an occasional original screenplay written "on spec," plus, every so often, a two- or three-month dry spell.

It also yielded two screenwriting awards, a position as Adjunct Professor of Screenwriting at the American Film Institute, plus the financial means to move from a Pico-Union basement studio, where every night was filled with gunshots, into a one-bedroom apartment in Echo Park.. A couple of years later came another move upward, to a cottage overlooking the Silverlake Reservoir.

Lenny's experiences resulted in a greater awareness of the ins and outs of showbiz. A screenwriter, he came to understand, was the single most important person on a project until the moment a finished script was handed in. Then, suddenly, the array of meetings, phone calls, emails, and texts—plus periodic lunches—ended. The "single most important person" became only the writer, merely the writer, nothing but the writer, then often no longer the writer.

Those trials and tribulations confirmed for Lenny that it wasn't only old-time screenwriters who ran the risk of becoming persona non grata. It was happening to some of his contemporaries.

Then one night, while lying in bed, Lenny realized that it hadn't been just a day, or a week, or even a few months since he last heard from his agent. Or his manager. Or any of the producers accustomed to reaching out to him. Or from a studio, streaming service, or network development exec.

The sound of Lenny's iPhone not ringing became haunting, inescapable, almost nightmarish. So did the emptiness in his email inbox, plus the absence of texts, except for unwanted solicitations. Worse, calls to his agent and manager went from unanswered to

unreturned.

For the first time in his life, Lenny found himself feeling invisible, obsolete, discarded.

Because he had often explained to his AFI students that screenwriting was quintessentially existential, Lenny knew full well that within the Hollywood food chain, only screenwriters could be self-sufficient. Unlike producers or directors, they didn't need financing, a cast, or a crew in order to start working. Hope sprang eternal, since a brand new original screenplay could breath life into a career that hadn't yet gotten underway, or had ground to a halt.

Yet unlike his previous dry spells, this time Lenny found himself frozen, immobilized, totally blocked. As days turned to weeks, then to months, with his finances dwindling, he found himself in a cycle of sleepless nights and frustrating days. Fearing that someone might ask what he'd been up to, or what what project he was working on, he rarely left his house other than to buy provisions, or to teach his one-morning-a-week screenwriting course.

*

On a Wednesday morning in October, when he could barely manage to face a new day, Lenny was surprised by an early call from Marvin Burns. "How's the hottest writer in town?" he asked.

"Not funny," responded Lenny.

"No joke," countered Marvin. "Remember that script you wrote for Norman Steinberg?"

"The one you said would never get made?"

"I never said that."

"Then who claimed there was no market for a comedy about a crook from New Jersey who bluffs his way into the Witness Relocation Program, then scams his way to success?"

"That was then," Marvin admitted ruefully. "But this is now, and Netflix just bought it from that slimeball."

“The slimeball that you fixed me up with.”

Marvin sighed. “Best of all, they want to greenlight it.”

“If you’re making this up—”

“Lenny, please! Know how you’ve always wanted to direct?”

“Yeah?”

“They like your writing so much, they’re open to you directing your next one if you come in with a pitch that wows ‘em.”

“Who’s they?” asked Lenny.

“Maggie Fields.”

*

Once he hung up, Lenny found himself unable to sit still. His funk at last dissipating, he grabbed his basketball for the first time in ages, then drove to a nearby playground. After working up a sweat, he headed home and called Marvin.

“You’re really serious?” Lenny asked.

“No, I make shit up to taunt you. You bet, I’m serious. Maggie wants to know when you’re coming in to pitch.”

“Soon as I come up with something irresistible.”

*

Nothing remotely irresistible—or even mildly interesting—emerged in the days that followed. Lenny scoured notes he’d made over the years, all the while wracking his brain, desperate to shake his extended doldrums.

In search of inspiration, he ignored the daily onslaught of calls, texts, and emails from Marvin.

Growing desperate, Lenny availed himself of every trick he’d ever imparted to his students. He tried jump starting his imagination by hiking in Griffith Park. He closed the shades and turned off the lights to meditate in darkness. He attempted what he called “automatic writing” by typing whatever came into his head. He crawled into bed, hoping for a daydream.

Everything that resulted seemed forced, cliched, or contrived.

Could it be, Lenny began to fear, that his imagination had somehow atrophied or deserted him?

*

Had he been a drinker, Lenny might have tried drowning his sorrows. Had he been a stoner, he might have popped into a cannabis dispensary. Nor was he about to take out his frustrations by hitting a massage parlor, or texting an escort service.

Beyond frustrated, Lenny climbed into his car and started listening to an old Richard Pryor routine, then drove aimlessly until something caught his eye. Pulling over, he watched a guy in checkered shorts try to coax an intransigent mutt, who clearly didn’t want to budge, to cross the street.

For the first time in far too long, Lenny smiled.

*

“A detective movie where the star is a talking dog?” bellowed Marvin Burns.

“With an attitude and voice like Richard Pryor,” stated Lenny proudly.

“Not Chris Tucker? Or Dave Chappelle?”

“Somebody trying to fiddle with my idea?”

“Let me get this straight,” said Marvin. “My client who wrote award-winning films about a pioneer rock & roller and a Harlem playground basketball legend—and is known for having a social conscience—wants to pitch a detective movie starring a four-legged Richard Pryor?”

“You don’t like it?”

Marvin snickered. “Actually, I think it’s kind of fun.”

“Only kind of?”

“What do you want me to say?” asked Marvin. “That it’s

Citizen Kane meets *Casablanca* or *Children Of Paradise*?"

"More importantly," wondered Lenny, "you think Maggie Fields will go for it?"

"Let's set up a meeting and see."

*

After several minutes of small talk in Maggie Field's tastefully appointed office adorned with movie posters plus photos of her travels, the executive nodded to Lenny.

"Enough chit-chat," she said with a smile. "Since Marvin thinks I'll like your pitch even more than the script we bought, dazzle me."

"Imagine a detective the likes of which you've never seen before," Lenny began. "Different how?' you might ask. To begin with, he's got four legs and a tail. But what makes him even more different? He's a talking dog with Richard Pryor's attitude."

To the surprise of both Marvin Burns and Lenny, Maggie held up a hand. "I better stop you there."

"But when I told you that—" uttered Marvin.

"That," interrupted Maggie, "was before we greenlit an animated film about the talking animals on Noah's ark, with the voices of Chris Tucker, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Beyoncé."

"B-but—" mumbled a crestfallen Marvin Burns.

Ignoring the agent, Maggie faced Lenny. "But we want an ongoing relationship with you, so if you've got something else—"

"What if," offered Lenny, "a smart, tenacious New York cop with a record of bending the rules is demoted to the rubber gun squad."

Suddenly Maggie lit up. "Where they stash cops the union won't let 'em fire, but don't trust to be out on the street?"

"Exactly!" said Lenny. "With what a suspected serial killer on the loose, our guy—"

"Brad Pitt? Affleck? Leo?" wondered Maggie.

Lenny nodded. "—is stuck fielding crank calls."

Maggie smiled. "From people who claim to have been abducted by aliens, and getting secret messages about JFK's murder, and warning of plots to implant chips to control us?"

"Bingo!" said Lenny. "Then one day he gets a call about a killing that's about to take place."

"And it actually happens?" exclaimed Maggie.

"Yup. Then a week later, another call from the same woman."

"And another murder follows?"

"You got it."

"So he has to find the woman who called," presumed Maggie. "And she turns out to be?"

"In a mental ward," answered Lenny.

"Tell me more about her," demanded Maggie.

"She was a promising ballet dancer—"

"Jessica Chastain? Anne Hathaway? Jennifer Lawrence?"

"They'd all be great."

"Go on," urged Maggie. "Together the two of them find the killer?"

Lenny nodded.

"And fall in love?" asked Maggie.

"You read my mind."

"Fan-fucking-tastic!" gushed Maggie. "I want it!"

*

The moment he and Lenny stepped outside, Marvin Burns patted his client on the back. "Outstanding!" he shouted. "Only why didn't you tell me you had two pitches?"

"I didn't," replied Lenny.

"What're you talking about? When Maggie stopped the first, you blew her away with other one you had ready."

"But I didn't."

"Didn't what?" asked Marvin.

"Have it ready."

Perplexed, Marvin eyed Lenny. “What in hell are you saying?”

“It suddenly came to me.”

Stunned, it took Marvin a moment before he responded. “Well then,” he said, “halle-fucking-lujah!”

*

Though Lenny should have been in a celebratory mood, there were two separate fears he couldn't quite shake. First was the possibility that the director hired for his New Jersey film might want to have his script rewritten, or worse reconceived. That worry was eliminated after an introduction to Nigel Cayzer, an Englishman whose primary request, other than minor tweaks necessitated by budget and casting, was for Lenny to explain to him bits of dialogue filled with what he called “Jerseyisms.”

Lenny's other concern, as the deal for his new screenplay was being negotiated, was where the serial killer story came from. Still stunned that in a moment of need it popped into his head, Lenny tried his best to figure out who or what provided the spark, impetus, or genesis for what could be his directing debut.

Even once he started writing—a process interrupted occasionally by questions from Nigel—Lenny again and again found himself wondering whether there had been a source he couldn't quite remember or place. And if so, what in the world could it have been?

Though historically Lenny had always been a morning writer, using time after lunch to fiddle, edit, and brainstorm for the next day, he was pleased to discover that his adrenaline level propelled him to make progress every afternoon. He attributed the added energy in part to the hope of directing, plus the fact that both his career and his life had been reinvigorated.

In record time, Lenny was able to submit a treatment that drew raves from Maggie, who not only gave him the go-ahead to start scripting, but also discussed bringing a producer on-board to

work with him.

Lenny's sense of excitement grew even greater when he found that the screenplay seemed to be writing itself. Yet still he had the gnawing angst that the idea, or notion, or springboard for it must have, or at least might have, come either from someone or from somewhere.

Only when he found himself anxiously waiting for a response after submitting the first draft of the screenplay did that fear become an obsession.

Though he suspected that his mind might be playing tricks on him, no matter what he was doing – eating breakfast, shooting baskets, or watching episodes of the French series “Spiral”—the question about where the idea came from was never completely out of his mind.

On a sleepless Friday night, while hoping that his new draft would be part of Maggie's weekend reading, Lenny sprang up in bed when a name flashed into his mind: Jane Yamamoto!

Tossing on a pair of sweatpants, Lenny started searching for contact information on his former AFI student. Then he waited impatiently until it was no longer too early to call her.

*

“What a nice surprise!” Jane Yamamoto said when Lenny reached her.

After a bit of catching up, Lenny finally got to the reason for his call. “Do I remember correctly that in class you wrote about a woman with psychic powers?”

“Actually,” replied Jane, “a fortune teller in an old-time carnival.”

“Not someone who could see murders before they happened?”

“No,” answered Jane. “That was your idea, not mine.”

“Really?”

Jane laughed. “When I was frustrated and came to you

for help, you suggested as an alternative a cop investigating a serial killer who teams up with a woman with those kinds of powers. Want to know what's funny?"

"Sure," said Lenny.

"If I'd used your notion instead of mine," lamented Jane, "I might have sold the fucker instead of being stuck reading scripts for \$100 a pop."

*

Relieved that the idea that had popped into his head hadn't been stolen, even if inadvertently, Lenny finally allowed a bit of contentment to sink into his consciousness. He had a film that was in active preproduction, as well as a development deal on what looked like an opportunity to fulfill his hope of directing.

Lenny's spirits were buoyed even higher while having a coffee with Nigel Cayzer. Maggie Fields, the director reported, was so hot on the Jersey script that she was willing to give it a greenlight with unknowns who were right for the parts, rather searching for stars who might not be right for the parts. In Maggie's words, it was the film itself—not DiCaprio or Ryan Gosling—that should be the star. Further, being made at a modest budget could mean that his profit participation could actually be worth something.

So why, Lenny wondered, did he still find himself hit with occasional twinges of anxiety? Was it life in Hollywood? Too many hopes and dreams that crashed and burned? Or simply a case of 3,000 years of genetic programming?

How come, though Nigel Cayzer, Maggie Fields, and even Marvin Burns kept insisting that he was the flavor of the month, he still felt like the same Lenny Kaplan?

*

Despite the fact that San Pedro, California was substituting for

Elizabeth, New Jersey, Lenny was excited to drive to location for the first day of shooting.

Yet he still couldn't quite shake the sense that somehow, some way, a shoe might drop.

Lenny was waiting, almost anticipating, something negative when a call came in from Marvin Burns. "Driving home from the set?" the agent asked.

"Yup."

"Happy?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because I know you," said Marvin. "You're a guy who can pull despair out of delight."

"So what's the bad news?"

"Why would you think there'd be bad news instead of congratulations?"

"Because," answered Lenny, "you didn't say congratulations."

"Know why Maggie Fields didn't join you today?"

"No idea," said Lenny.

"She was fired."

"Shit!"

"Shit because you liked her?" wondered Marvin. "Or shit because of your directing deal?"

"Both."

"It doesn't make this a disaster," said Marvin. "You can still celebrate."

"Right. And I can still wake up 6'7" and play for the Lakers."

Marvin sighed. "Life in Hollywood."

"Yeah," replied Lenny. "Life in Hollywood."

THE WALKING WOUNDED

I see us everywhere anymore,
at the supermarket or the mall,
moving slowly, often cane-less
(old folks can be vain too) along
a sidewalk like lost zombies, and
of course every time I visit one
of the plethora of doctors I rely
upon to keep my cracking body
and creaking heart working . . .

Why did I not see old people
when I was young?
They must have been there,
in my world of swiftness and
sex, of sprawling on a beach or
dancing under the boardwalk
or driving fast enough to
challenge death itself—but
when I saw old people—and it
seemed rare back then—it was
like watching a scene from an
old black-and-white movie,
not quite real, even quaint—

I liked old people and I loved
my Nana and Pop-Pop, but only
now in my 8th decade do I know
how much they had to put up with
in living a long life, how time has

a tendency to whittle away your
strength and confidence and grace,
shrinking your bones, drying out
your joints, slowing your brain
and poking holes—oh, so many
holes in your memory . . .

I am not as fond of old people
now I am one—it is the young
I now see fondly—
but they can't see me . . .

FRANKIE A. SOTO

EVERY TIME I SAID I WAS FINE

I meant I have this recurring dream,
I am placed in an adult spelling bee
& I am asked
by the pronouncer to spell, How are you feeling?

I take a deep breath and proceed, Feeling, F E E L I N G.

Heads tilt to comprehend if they heard right & I quickly shout
out like I was chasing down an ice cream truck

Okay, O K A Y. Fine, F I N E

uncertain if these responses are adequate. I never stay asleep long
enough to know if I am booed offstage or if this crippling doubt
prefers me full of adrenaline, blood and belief.

Every time I said I was fine

I mean, I might have given up too many times to count, but
my pulse is steady and I am not yet dead.

I have called you to talk but I didn't dial or press send.

I vented,
I sought advice
& I argued with the perspectives I never gave room to enter.

Psychology will say fine is a word that conveys more meaning than
just the word itself. I don't know if anyone is truly ever okay, or if

admitting they aren't just makes us feel less alive.

I have asked this body to be a chameleon.

To be strong. To be stilts walking over hot coal. To keep our feet
above the problems that can spread like ames on dead things.

I am notorious for saying to myself,
Did this kill us?

when anything hurts. As if that should be the pendulum I swing
from.

As if God will stack my I'm ne into a diagram of healthy and un-
healthy consumption.

I could tell you what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but some-
times death doesn't want to get dragged into a shit it won't win.

Sometimes a shadow doesn't want to compete with the sun. It just
wants to be a silhouette against a graffiti wall.

What if pain is similar?

If it gets tired of riding the coattails of I'm fine and wants to scream
like the rest,

drop off a roller coaster and say I exist, here, in these hazel brown
eyes. Every time I said I was fine, I thought I really meant it.

VICTORIA M. JOHNSON

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's 2023 December-January Poem of the Month

HOW TO BUY A TOILET

A soft-close seat means the lid is silent when it closes.
The neighbors hear banging doors and crashing dishes,
why put them through slamming toilet seats, too?

Comfort height means the toilet is taller than standard.
All your life you bent over,
why crouch every time you use the head?

Elongated front means there's more space to sit.
You're already crammed into a waste of a marriage,
why feel wedged-in when you relieve yourself?

Self-cleaning means shit has no place to hide
and the toilet cleans itself at the push of a button.
Unlike your spouse who has excrement hidden everywhere
and every scant utterance from you pushes his buttons.

Disposal included means the plumber takes your old toilet
for no additional fee.
Aren't you hanging onto enough useless things?
Let someone take a chunk of crap off your hands.

Eco-flush means you conserve the planet's water supply
and help keep the oceans toxic free.

You know all about toxic.

Press 1 if you pee

Press 2 if you poop

Press 3 if you want out of this shitshow

Warranty and Return Policy means you're not stuck
with something that doesn't work.
If only, if only.

THE SELF-RELIANT WOMAN

Jim and Sandy Gardner had been married for five years. Jim used to tease friends, saying that it felt like they had been married forever.

He wasn't kidding.

Jim and Sandy had become friends in college, sharing good times and common interests. They progressed smoothly along the path to marriage. It was the logical next step. The decision had been low key, almost nonchalant. Within the first few weeks, their relationship began to cool.

"Sandy, when are we going to discuss the baby topic again?"

Jim was pouring wine for their nightly pre-dinner conversation. He approached the sofa smiling, holding two glasses of chardonnay. "What do you think?" He sat one glass on the table and handed one glass to his wife.

Sandy turned her head toward Jim, then stopped, tilted her head, and flashed her eyes toward him. "Do you really think I want to have children?"

Jim sat down gently on the sofa next to her. "I've been thinking about our plans. I realize that we have only been married a few years. But I thought perhaps we could at least talk about when a plan to have kids."

"Well, think again, fella. It's one of the last things on my list. I like my job at the college and don't plan on leaving. Kids would mean taking care of the house, working at my job, and caring for the kids. How can I possibly do everything? We would have to pay for daycare. Do you know how much that costs?"

"Look, I merely brought up the subject so we could talk. Calm down."

The subject was dropped. Sandy kept her job and Jim received continuing raises. Life moved forward for the two of them.

It was boring but uncomplicated.

Their evening conversation times had deteriorated to grunts, groans, and occasional courteous exchanges.

On a few occasions, Jim had dinner with a girl from his office. Diane had been his secretary for some time and their mutual attraction was obvious. Of course, they were ill-advised to continue their relationship, in view of corporate regulations. But Jim rediscovered the pleasure of being with someone who participated in conversation and made him feel important.

When he was provided time alone, he would imagine his life without Sandy.

One morning at breakfast, Jim announced, "You know, we have an anniversary coming up."

"Yea, I guess so."

"Let's have an adventure. What would you like to do? Go to Hawaii? Go on a shopping spree and buy things we don't need and can't afford?" He smiled. "You decide what you want and we will do it."

"Jim, I don't care about anything anymore." Sandy laid her head on the sofa. "Just leave me alone. If you want to do something by yourself, I'm fine with that."

"Oh, Sandy. This is a special time. Please help me make a plan." He took her hand. I think this might be a great opportunity to refresh our marriage."

There was something in the tone of his voice that caught Sandy's attention. "You mean it?"

"Sure. You decide. If you want my input, I'd prefer somewhere remote. Like the mountains, maybe camping."

Sandy seemed to be enthusiastic for the first time in months. "Camping? We haven't been camping in a long time!"

Jim was stunned. "The tent is still in the garage." He paused. "You know, we would have to plan meals, shop for groceries, things like that."

Sandy was on her feet now. "Oh, I know. But if we plan, it makes everything easier. Oh my gosh. It sounds like fun!"

They grabbed a calendar and began to search for a time that worked for both of them.

“Let’s give ourselves a week, or at least several days.” Jim was looking at late April. “Weather is bound to be good, just about wherever we choose.”

“Let’s pick a date and re-work our schedules to fit. We are both devoted to our jobs and deserve this.”

“I can’t believe you are agreeing to that,” Jim chuckled.

The week they chose for the trip was about five weeks off. Both agreed on a camping trip to the Adirondacks, an expansive wilderness area in upstate New York. The mountainous area is known for its remote location and glorious beauty. It sounded ideal.

Jim was pleased to see they were jointly enthusiastic. He recognized that Sandy was excited, at times almost giddy, about the trip.

The atmosphere in the house became magical.

They had been gathering information about the Adirondacks. Available maps showed camping sites which could be reserved. Planning gave them a common purpose.

Jim began to believe this adventure might heal the rift between them. Perhaps on some romantic peak in the middle of nowhere they could revisit the issue of having children.

Time drew closed for the big adventure. The Jeep was packed and they headed into the unknown, filled with optimism.

They checked into the park and found their way to their chosen campsite. They arrived in late afternoon to pitch the tent and locate the essentials, leaving the rest to organize in the morning.

It was a glorious spot, perched on an east-facing bluff near a small pond. No other campsite was nearby, assuring complete privacy and a wondrous sunrise each morning. Jim imagined frolicking to the pond to bathe with Sandy.

Jim was tired from driving and a full day of fresh air. He opened his sleeping bag and crawled in. “Sandy, I’m going to bed.

We can enjoy tomorrow more after a nice sleep.”

“What? There is plenty to do. I hope you don’t expect a big breakfast. I thought there would be at least a diner near here. The tent must be sitting on a rock bed. It’s lumpy everywhere. Do you think it’s safe out here? What about bears?”

Jim sat up. “I’m too tired to discuss this now. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“It’s just like you to build up a trip like this and then leave me in the lurch.” Sandy zipped the tent closed and crawled into her sleeping bag, turning her back toward Jim. Under her breath, she uttered, “Some happy anniversary gift.”

Jim drifted off to sleep with these final words ringing in his ears.

The camp was very quiet all night. Jim woke occasionally, stirring because of the intense lack of sounds. There were a few owls exchanging greetings, but no traffic, wind or even insects.

By morning, life began to stir again. The anticipated sunrise appeared, abruptly, like a beacon, lighting the tent and waking the sleepers.

Jim rose to his elbow and glanced at his watch. “It’s 5:30 and the sun is shining bright. Want to get up? We can eat something quick, like a protein bar and big glass of water, then go for a nice, early walk. What do you think?”

Sandy rolled over toward him and spoke slowly, not opening her eyes. “You have to be kidding.”

“No, come on. It will be exhilarating.”

Sandy sat up. “You know, I hoped we would be down the road from a nice family diner. Eggs, bacon, hash browns, fresh coffee. Nothing fancy but a touch of luxury in the wilderness.”

“Hon, I don’t think there is a restaurant for 30 miles.”

She turned away, facing the back of the tent. “No.”

Jim was now awake, stirring to pull on jeans and a jacket. He said nothing, but took his boots and disappeared through the flap. He went to the ring of rocks where they briefly watched the stars the night before, poured a cup of water and sat down.

Jim had a bad feeling about this trip. He imagined enjoying time with his wife, not the woman now sleeping inside the tent. But rather the old Sandy, who shared his enjoyment of the outdoors.

Fumbling through the collection of Adirondack information provided by the park ranger, he found a list of restaurants. The closest was Coffee & More, about a half hour away. He remained sitting on the rocks for some time.

Slowly he re-entered the tent and knelt by Sandy.

"How does this sound? There is an eatery about 30 minutes away. I don't know anything about it—whether it will meet your expectations—but I imagine they have eggs and coffee. Do you want to try it? I need to know."

Sandy did not move, but whispered, "OK." She began to stir. "Give me five minutes."

Jim said nothing but returned to his seat outside.

A few minutes later, Sandy emerged wearing jeans, a jacket and a baseball cap, her hair in a ponytail. She smiled weakly. "Let's go."

They climbed into their Jeep and headed for the restaurant. Jim turned on the heater to warm the air slightly but mostly so that the fan would break the icy silence of the trip.

After a few miles, they began to see signs of a small community. There were two gas stations and a convenience store.

Jim pointed ahead toward the right lane. "There's the restaurant." He headed for it and parked the car. Several other vehicles filled the parking lot. "That's a good sign," Jim smiled.

The café was a busy place, filled with the odors of coffee and fried food, darting waitstaff and chattering voices. They found a booth near a window.

Jim was beyond asking Sandy how she was doing or whether this choice pleased her. He recognized that he had done far more than his share to keep life in this tedious marriage.

The smiling waitress approached with a carafe of hot coffee and politely took their orders.

Finally, Sandy sat back on her bench seat and removed her

jacket. Jim saw these gestures as signs of approval.

He placed his hands around the hot cup of coffee. "Sandy, I think we should talk."

"About what?"

"About how we are doing." He paused. "Are you happy?"

"You mean about breakfast or the trip?"

"In general, I guess."

"Because I merely wanted to have a nice breakfast?"

"You just seem so unhappy all the time."

"I think I'm just—bored."

"Bored about what?"

"Everything."

"Your job?"

"No. My work is one of the few bright spots. I enjoy every minute at the office. But everything else is boring."

"You mean being married to me."

"Yes."

"Why did you seem so eager to come on this trip? You seemed to enjoy making plans."

Sandy shrugged. "I thought it might be fun. I remember how you always enjoyed camping and being outdoors before we got married. Maybe I wanted to see the trip through your eyes." She dropped her eyes to the coffee. "Obviously, it was the wrong decision."

"How do you feel about me? I would like to know."

She looked at him with surprise. Then began, "You are too controlling. You want me to fix meals and take care of things at the house. All I really want to do is focus on my job. I like being alone. You know, I have always been very self-reliant."

"But what do you think about me?"

Sandy sat still. "I'm much happier when you are not around."

It seemed to Jim that the noise in the restaurant suddenly stopped. He sat there, stricken by what he had just heard. After a few minutes, he said, "I think I agree with you. I can't believe I'm saying that, but you are right. We made the wrong decision five

years ago. A bad pairing that has been decaying ever since.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“I think we should divorce. At least we haven’t wasted any more time than necessary and there aren’t any children to consider.”

“You’re right. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time.”

Breakfast arrived and they both ate heartily. They dined and chatted easily.

As they prepared to leave, Jim said, “I feel like a huge burden has been lifted.”

Sandy smiled. “Me, too. Let’s make the most of the trip.”

Jim turned on the ignition. “We have lots to discuss. But not right now.”

Driving back to the campsite, Jim realized that the collapse of his marriage would offer him a new lease on life.

Over a lunch of baloney sandwiches and corn chips, they calmly discussed the details of dividing up their marriage properties.

They began a list of what items each would need or want. Jim wanted the sofa, which he brought into the house and Sandy never liked it. She wanted the dining room set—a family heirloom—and a cedar chest of her grandmother’s. They could easily split things like cookware and linens. They each had a car and separate retirement accounts.

Then there was the house.

Sandy said, “I don’t like the house. I’ve never liked the house. Not my style and way too much work for one person. So, you can have it. I’ll find a nice apartment somewhere. You will remember that I’m very self-reliant.”

“I always thought you liked the house.”

“See, Jim. You don’t really know who I am. When people meet and begin a relationship, they are on their best behavior. They care how they look and make an effort. Maybe it’s just that girls care more about appearance, I don’t know. But no one can keep up that initial level of effort for long. Sooner or later, one or both people in

the relationship are bound to let down their guard, be themselves. That’s when the true person surfaces. It’s tough to keep at it for very long. I think it’s a good idea to live together first. Like dress rehearsal. So, you know what lies beneath the surface.” She paused, waiting for a response. “Jim, I really don’t like you. You should have a housekeeper, not a wife. You are a nice enough guy, but you are a little boy, a slob.”

In mid-afternoon, they went for a long hike, speaking little and basking in the beauty of the path. When they returned to the campsite, Jim walked to the Jeep, opened the tailgate, and retrieved a bottle of chardonnay. He turned and smiled, waving the bottle in his hands. “It’s not cold, but I can pour it over ice. Wine fanciers would not approve, but I’ll bet it would be refreshing.”

They sat by the freshly-lit fire and began to sip.

Jim said, “Why should we feel so pleased about deciding to divorce? I mean, we both tried but somehow it didn’t work. So, let’s be honest. What was it about me that you didn’t like?”

“How long have you got?”

“Well, go ahead. You go first.”

Sandy smiled. “Marriage is just plain difficult. But I think I got the dirtier end of the stick. Every day I have meals to plan, cooking to do, tidying the house, and doing laundry on top of my full-time job. Plus, I mean really, your family has been no picnic. Marriage means adding a spouse plus the whole package, their family, and their friends. So, the spouse immediately has to like, or pretend to like, all of it.”

“What’s wrong with my family?”

“Well, they never were friendly, although I think they tried sometimes. But your brother Jerry and Cathy, that horrible, fat wife of his. She was always whining and complaining about everything. They both made my skin crawl. When they came to visit, I wanted to run away.”

“What else?”

“OK. Here goes. You are cheap. You leave pitiful tips. You have awful taste. You have that old blue sweater from college and

VICTORIA M. JOHNSON

SISTERS AND JADE

My sister, Anne, always did things better than me: make her bed, get good grades, obey our parents, boyfriend selection, hold a job, and just about everything else. My sister had named her beloved jade plant, Jade, and entrusted me to watch her, care for her, and feed her, while she traveled for 30 days in southeast Asia. I never could care for plants, not like Anne could. Under her watch, all living things thrived.

"If you die, my sister will never speak to me again," I said, frowning at Jade.

The plant didn't reply. Obviously.

*

Tokyo was Anne's first stop. Jade must've known I had no idea how to raise houseplants. Her color seemed less vibrant. By Shanghai, it seemed Jade began losing hope, her once green leaves developed brown spots, just a few, at first. I followed the instructions, how much water, and when, how much vitamins, and when, how much sunlight, etc. But we were experiencing record-setting heat waves in Northern California: no rain, stifling air, and no relief in sight.

"Come on Jade, try harder," I said, cursing under my breath. Nothing.

By Thailand Jade was definitely wilted, her leaf edges had turned completely brown. I called the local nursery. "It's nearly impossible to kill a Jade plant," he said. "Jade plants can thrive in neglect for weeks." *Just like me*, I thought. I watched YouTube videos. "Avoid overwatering" they warned. "Don't splash the leaves when you water." *How could a plain, uninspiring plant be so high-maintenance?*

still wear it. It's a rag! I can barely stand to see you in some of your clothes. You should just burn them all and start over. You hold a grudge and pout like a little boy. You never pitch in to help me with tasks. You leave the seat up. You snore. You seem often to be looking at other women. But I'm only getting started. How's that?"

Jim took another sip of wine. "Well, you must have compiled quite a list. Thanks for being honest."

"Your turn. Give me your comments."

"No. I think that is enough honesty for now."

They remained at the fire for quite a while, watching the stars and not speaking.

Jim said, "Well, I think I'll turn in. It has been an eventful day. I just want to put some dirty clothes and trash in the Jeep." He carried a few bags to the car, locked it and went into the tent.

Jim got into his sleeping bag and moved it near the tent flap. "I may want to get up and go for a hike in the morning before you are awake, just so you know."

It was another silent night at the campsite, worsened by the day's huge decision. There was little that could be said and enough had transpired already. Both just wanted to sleep.

In the morning, that beacon-like sun again shone into the tent shortly after 5:00. Sandy opened her eyes and saw that Jim had left. She peeked out the flap and saw that the car was gone.

She began to look around. The tent was there, along with her sleeping bag, some food staples, the flashlight, and her suitcase of clothes. But Jim was gone and the car was gone and she was completely alone. She was more shocked than panicked at first. The panic would set in soon enough.

Jim had taken the Jeep, his car, and was on his way home to his house. He had always liked that house and it would be his now. What a relief to be starting a new chapter of his life. He turned on the radio, found a suitable station and sang along with the radio as he drove back through the Adirondacks.

He didn't worry about Sandy. She was very self-reliant.

“Knock it off,” I scolded Jade. “Get with it.”

*

By Hong Kong I knew Jade—and I—were in trouble. Nothing I did helped Jade. In desperation, I called the public library. A nice librarian informed me I was only to water once every two to three weeks in the spring and summer months. I thought I was supposed to water every two to three days! Jade began shriveling, she must have shrunk five inches. Jade was on a downward spiral along with my hopes. What excuse could I give my sister? *The one time she asked me for a favor.* Out of the hundred times I asked her for favors: Bail me out of jail. Loan me money. Let me move in for three months, I just got fired. Now here I was failing her. All because of a stupid plant. Why would she give me her prized plant when she knew I couldn't even care for myself? Why would *she* set me up for failure? “How could *she* do that to me?” I glared at Jade, and I swear, I saw her brittle leaves shudder, and a few fell to the floor.

CLEANING THE HOUSE

Her wedding ring stayed lost under a pile of white underwear for six months. Cleaning the house has not been easy. Thirty-five years of fabric scraps, pictures from high school, no one we recognize. Two thousand dollars in twenties that may turn out to be more by the end of this. My husband's birth certificate, proving he will always be hers. Squirrels defiantly urinate on year-old peanut shells. Tomorrow, I will take down her old trellis, but for now, I will rest here drinking what's left of her wine in a room smelling of mint and marigolds drying out for future use.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

YEAH, KICK EVERYTHING TO THE CURB

Start over.

 All nests are built from debris
 broken twigs, grass clippings
leaves green and brown
 mud for mortar
 lichen for décor.

It's a restart

 after jumping the gun
 trying to break away
leave whatever error
 in the air,
 a fog
opaque vapor
 that's a trillion tears
 that won't evaporate
won't be wiped into
 a glossy surface.

How many times

 can you turn the key
 be greeted by a gentle purr
think the other road
 is smooth
 shoulders wide
hills a docile roll
 descents simple sighs.

The curb runs to a sewer

 that cannot swallow
 grievances too large
failures too sharp
 regrets too swollen.
 You've broken
your foot before
 doing this.

Heavy stones

 both real and imagined
 block the opening
to the cave
 where you try to hide.
 It's a dark refuge
filled with stalactite
 mistakes
 stalagmite excuses.

A bundle of pupae

 hang under
 the leftover leaves.
Transform one life
 to another.
 This one winged
ready to flit
 bob, weave
 dance away
and away
 and never
 look back.

TOPAZ

SHILO NIZIOLEK

AT THE FROG PARK

“What we love we must consume wholly.”
—Kelly Webster, *We Are Changed*
To Deer At The Broken Places

Frogs the size of dimes
scatter as we near the shore
of Frog Lake, light and
dark brown bodies hold vital
organs in a hollow space.

Frogs like stones, like mud
until they reach the water
and kick gracefully
away, like my body held
under the blue at the pool.

My niece darts out quick,
frog-tongued to capture her prey.
In her pre-teen hands,
small web of toes spread before
launching into the unknown.

At the frog park as
children, my sister and I

would slide our fragile
lean bodies down the mouth of
a large frog, our mother, pool-

side, waiting for the
splash at the other end. At
Frog Lake, we find one
lone emerald body, I scoop
it and place it gentle, gently

now, I say, hand pressed
to my nieces, and watch the
catapult. She walks,
ankles deep in the sinking,
mud slurping our feet with each

step, making our way
down shore, our eyes peeled for more
leaping bodies, an
abstraction of light. I tell her
she's too deep in the water

for the tiny life
in her hands, but she doesn't
release. Suddenly,
we see the dart as he thrusts
from her hands, falls into deep

water, alabaster
belly to the sky, body
still and we scramble
to lift it from the depths of
shallows, unfathomable;

resurrect it from
almost death, place it ashore.
I worry for her then,
not the frog, my niece, already
holding too tight, things she loves.

SANDRA NOEL

AFTER STORM IN CLOCK-BLACK DAWN

A man ponders dry sheet web; the spider underneath,
a hair's breadth from rain-froth pooling into soil.
Kneeling by a spill of sea campion
he wipes the epitaph on his love's headstone;
tells her he took the dinghy out in last night's gale,
saved seven adults and three children stranded on rocks
in the surging waves. How he wishes
it had been her; if he could turn the tide
back, stayed home that day
she'd said she was done.

JESS L. PARKER

POEM FOR MY UNBORN DAUGHTER

1

Rocking my son to sleep again one night
I count the many, wooly sheep of things

I might have done throughout the day . . .
I might have boiled a pot of eucalyptus

water. I might have written a poem
for my unborn daughter . . . I might have

climbed the backyard tree and dangled
happily. I might have gazed in the mirror

at the green-eyed woman becoming me.
Instead, I count these many sheep with

wool so knotted, these many sheep with
eyes so grey. I count and sing and shush

my son. I rock the night away.

SANDRA NOEL

2

I love how long he has been two
and I want it longer. *Two-and-a-half*,
he corrects me in the Sunday blue
of our backyard, his eyes closed
as the *f* at the end lingers between
two front teeth a little longer

than necessary. He plucks a
fallen maple leaf from overgrown
grass and asks, *what kind of dinosaur*
this one's gonna be, mommy? Then
swiftly answers, *a tyrannosaurus rex.*

This, he whispers furtively, eyeing me
beneath a furrowed brow and too long lashes.
There is poetry in the way he speaks, snapping
words together like an unplanned city

of magna tiles. *How can you tell it's a T-Rex,*
I wonder. He clicks his tongue, buying a beat
and twirls the yellowing leaf between two
fingers on a rigid stem. *Because . . .*
she's havin' a very long tail.

IN YOUR FAVOURITE PUB

Your five-year-old tells me
you said sausage rolls are for parties,
asks when Mummy is coming down.
Your eldest has a face of slab-concrete,
reaches for her new daughter's hand.

In a hundred breaths, we talk the good times,
replay the recent: your proud face
from your hospice bed,
middle child's first day at secondary.

Cake-sticky in camp circle,
they share treats from your kitchen cupboard.
We order another round,
raise a glass to one of our gang.

I WILL BURY MY LOVE IN TOPAZ

Some . . . many . . . will call my story mad. To claim a love as hot as the stars—that lasted merely seven days. They’ll scoff, but those who doubt are wrong.

My poor village nestled on a hillside. Too far from the market road to receive traffic, and too close to the summit to encourage newcomers. My father was a blacksmith; my mother a baker. I was most often found on the hilltop with book in hand, sitting beneath my favorite tree.

That Moonday was no exception. My book had led me to another world, much brighter than my own. I was deep in its pages when a voice above me startled me back to reality.

“The writer must be a master indeed to coax you such a distance.”

I jumped, dropping the book and losing my place. Looking up, I saw the most intriguing girl. She was dressed in filmy white, like the moon had come to earth—hardly the costume for climbing trees—and leaves twined in her hair. A moonstone hung about her neck.

“Shall I join you, or will you come up?” she queried, and my heart was hers. I know how ridiculous that sounds . . . but it doesn’t make it false.

“I’ll come up, if you please.”

“Indeed I do.” She patted the branch beside her and I scrambled up.

“I’ve never seen you before,” I said, rather breathlessly. “Are you new to the village?”

Her eyes were silver as she gazed at me. “I’ve been here always.”

“I’m Corwyn.” I extended a hand, and she took it. Energy

spiked through me—as if I had been grazed by lightning—and I almost fell from the tree. She steadied me, deceptively strong.

“My name is Elara. Show me your world.”

And so it began.

The rest of Moonday passed in a blur. I didn’t want to share her with the village, fearing censure and ridicule, so I showed her the rest of my world—the comforting wood nestling on the hill above us; the whispering brook that provided water and recreation; the crest of the hill with its broken crown. I showed her everything *but* the village.

As the sun began to sink, she sighed. “I must go.”

“Will I see you again?” I cried in dismay, already bereft.

“Look for me at sunrise.” She stepped away from me, and I gasped, as a pair of iridescent wings unfolded from her back and lifted her into the darkening sky.

Elara laughed. “You must learn to be more observant, my love,” she teased. She blew me a kiss and darted away into the twilight.

I slept not a wink that night, my head filled with questions. Who was Elara? Goddess or sprite? Did she mean those last words? Did I return them?

The sun peeped in my window on Tiwesday, and I was out of the hut before anyone else awoke. My footsteps turned instinctively toward the tree where we’d met. My heart thundered in my ears—would she be there, or was it all a dream?

She waited beneath the tree. “Today, I’ll show you my world,” she said with a smile. Her gown was of shimmering red today, and a ruby hung about her neck. “Take my hand.”

I did as she asked, and she lifted into the air. I gave a startled cry as my feet left the ground.

“You’ll get used to it, beloved. Do not fear.”

I gripped her hand tightly as we rose higher and higher. I could see people stirring in the village now. They looked so small and ordinary . . .

The things she showed me that day! A cavern deep inside

the hillside with gleaming crystals embedded in its walls. A golden aspen grove, buried like a cathedral in the forest. Secret things I had never seen, though I had lived beside them all my life. By the end of the day, we were no longer flying, but walking hand in hand, lost in each other's eyes.

Elara looked tired. Carrying me about all day must have been draining.

"You should go rest, my dearest," I scolded her. "We'll speak more tomorrow."

She nodded, biting her lip. "You're right. Tomorrow, then."

Wednesday, she dressed in purple, amethyst at her throat. Her dress matched the circles under her eyes.

We sat together under the tree, talking of our lives. She told me she was of the fay who dwelt within the wood. Spying me as I wandered there one day, she'd followed me home and vowed we should meet.

I told her of my secret dream to go away to study and make something of my life that didn't involve laboring over some sort of hot fire all day.

When the sun began to set, she flew away. I wondered if I'd see her again, as ill as she appeared.

But she was there next morning, dressed in sapphire, with matching pendant. I asked her about her jewels, and she explained how each related to a day of the week, and their significance.

Frigeday, she wore green, with an emerald. Most of the day, she napped upon my lap. I knew I was losing her, and it broke my heart.

On Saeternesday, I feared she wouldn't come, but she did. Her gown was the color of a cloudless sky, and her necklet of turquoise. Her face was wan—its sparkle of life leached away.

"I fear we'll not meet again, my dearest," she whispered. "Your world has drained me. I want you to have something to remember me by—or use to go away. Whatever you desire." She pressed a box into my hand. Within it tangled her pendants on their golden chains.

Hands trembling, she added the turquoise. "These are all I have to give you, except my love. That is yours eternally."

I kissed her then, for the first and last time. She slipped away in my arms.

Our love was brief . . . but beautiful. When she's safe within the sheltering ground, I'll take her final gift and leave this place. I'll make something of my life—spread her teaching about the stones and their properties.

My mother has a dress of butter yellow. Tonight, I'll dress Elara in it. Tomorrow, I'll place the topaz about her neck and bury her beneath our tree. Fitting for a Sunnanday.

JENICA AMALITA

I WISH I COULD WRITE MYSELF AWAY

I wish I could write myself away
I wish I could empty myself
 But I know it will not work
 I am like the sea
That knows not how to give itself up

 I wish I could spill and overflow
Like the beaches of the world
 But not lose a drop of myself
 Unless I am carried away
By something outside of me

I wish I could cut out my history
 And drown it in the sands of time
And let it be touched by passing feet
Who care not
 At the imprint left behind

I wish I could voyage over the tempest
 That is my life
Knowing that no matter how wild the storm
 I can and will be as steady
As the anchor when it has hit the sea bed

I wish I could write myself away
 I wish I could become what I want to be
Like the sunrise and sunset of everyday
 Like the perfect clouds that cease to be
The moment you look away

I wish I could change with the seasons
And return to being myself
To fly through time
And find myself
Right where I began

I wish I could throb with the heat
Of the fiery sun in its wake
 And return to cool in the stream of light
 That the moon tries always
To shed my way

I wish I could flit like a bird
 And perch on branches high
And look down at the world
As it goes around
 And laugh at the *dizzzy* sky

I wish I could write myself away
I wish I could journey beyond what I know,
 To step out of grandiose delirium,

And to see myself
Just as I am already known.

TAYLOR HATHORN

BEFORE US, THERE WAS THEM

In the very few photos he still has of her, she has long blonde hair and legs that go on for days, and she was his wife for eleven years.

I try not to think about her too much, try not to ask questions for which there are no answers, like *how much did you love her* and *what did you do when she left?*

I don't ask about her anymore—there is nothing more for him to tell—but I know that her birthday is the sixteenth of January and that their wedding anniversary was March tenth, even though they did not take a honeymoon because they were both in college.

We were adults when we married on a hot July afternoon, on a day untainted by a calendar that only I paid attention to, with paid leave and offices that gave us wedding showers. We went to Ireland on our honeymoon and stood on the cliffs, and with the fanaticism that led to the crusades, I thought to myself that I would leap off if he asked me to.

He wouldn't, and it's one of the reasons I love him, but the impulse is still there: to give my life for his.

I wonder if she felt it, too.

ANNETTE GAGLIARDI

SUSPENSION

The space between
you and me
vibrates;

dawn's burnished
light exhales from
somewhere close.

I smell roses—
the air's caress
that announces the sun

with a clear, high C
that floats through
the garden—and we

take flight,
that same moment
the sun slips into view;

our wings spread
to lift us skyward.

EMILY KERLIN

TWO MONTHS OUT

your death
has taught me
to speak the
tongue of
mourning

passive,
softvoiced verbs,
coos like sobs,
the long-leaning
aches of pause at
dusk and dawn,
where I listen

sometimes to the
voicemail you left
last year about
slowed blood, low
platelets and a
cancer so small as to
be trivial

and the real culprit,
your surly liver,
lame and scarred
from the bitter,
senseless war
waged upon it

still
it's hard to
think of you,
not laughing

harder still to
think of you
not here

doves perch on the
power lines
overhead, and
quietly recite the
small sad poems I
have been meaning
to write

LYNETTE ESPOSITO

A COOL WINTER'S EVE

The indigo night
lays a garden of stars
across the landscape
that bloom like magic
against the dark—
silver petals expand
and shrink
as if the sky is breathing.

It takes my breath away.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

WIND CHILL

the sky mouse gray
the cold paws at me
snow crunches like cereal

the hemlocks saddened
by short days and long nights
droop from the snow's weight

the arborvitaes wear
dunce caps carved
by hungry deer

a few snowflakes wander
beckoned by snowdrifts
lost to gravity

sparrows slalom through
the bird feeders and suet
pilfer seeds in sudden stops

a flash of poker chip red
a male cardinal's bad bet
a bluff against migration

a white sheet tucks the lake
ice thicker than iron I-beams
pickup trucks squat on like ducks

a crossword puzzle of
snow mobile tracks
filled with two stroke whine

the cracking ice belches
from the open mouth of
the chain sawed fishing hole

my line in dark water
bobber bobbing
something nibbling

FRANKIE A. SOTO

LAST WORDS

There are far too many men
whose first time kissing their fathers are at their funerals.

The first thing I did when the nurse told me my son had arrived, was
cry loud enough that daughter would hear comfort in a man's tears. I
held that cry for his health & maybe even for my healing.

I stood there with plastic over my air force ones, snatching every
ghost that tried to run away from this huddle.

I gathered the dead like apples during a fall harvest. Summoned all
the burials that ended with heads sobbing on a cold body. Called on
all hands stuck

on TV remotes where the applause for pinstripes are louder
than the ones for sons who wanted to feel like a standing ovation,
living rooms have their own monument parks.

Called on all the confessions we tell the living can wait until
tomorrow. Until that day is a cracked voice biting down on chapped
bloody lips waiting for a casket to respond.

I apologize for the spoiler, *they don't*.

I told these entities I have no time

to wait. His blood is coursing but I know it has an expiration date.

I palmed my face with my stubby hairy fingers. Demanded them

PATRICK DRUGGAN

all to pay attention.

Heaven isn't where you are going
it is what you begin building while you are here.

I widened my grip enough that the light could pass through
them.

I pointed to each ghost
& said this face is a cemetery.
It is a row of tombs.
It is a church.
& It will one day be a departure.

It will always be a landing strip my son can safely fly into.

Many men kiss their fathers for the first time at their funerals.

I pressed his lips to my forehead at 2:16am while the hospital room
rested & told him here love starts early.

NOVEMBER

Twin pylons black
against the racing light
a flock of gulls plays games
with the air, spellbound,
golden leaves take flight
like dreams, in the wind.

DECEMBER

Rime is bright white
on the red roof tiles.
My face is numb
as the old moon
waning over Wales
like a first day.

LAUREN NIXON

THE AIR IS FILLED WITH MEADOWSWEET

the air is filled with it
sticky, sickly, in a way that will never leave her
she lays her grandmother on the cot
the old woman has used to treat their neighbours
for sixty long years

the men are cutting wood and brush
teaching the boys how to prepare
the portal to the other world
the girls are sent to gather herbs
to fill pots with food for the journey
one they all must take, in time

the women are here, with clean cloth
the silken, honey-sweetness of freshwater
to wash blood and bile clean
to free the dead of the grime of the end of their living
and release them back to fire and ash and water
back to earth and stone
they dress her in her travelling clothes

later, the air is filled with smoke
the meadowsweet not quite enough
to disguise that other scent

they pour a libation into the earth
gift the girl her grandmother's staff, her healer's bag
at thirteen, she holds their lives in her hands
as steady as she can make them
steady like her grandmother's
cutting herbs like meadowsweet

EMILY KERLIN

GUY ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

It was strange that he was holed up in his
sleeping bag at the Walter Mountain
shelter with plenty of good daylight left,

perfectly still as we lowered our packs,
pulled out water bottles and started
collecting wood for a fire.

Beat-up boots beneath his bunk,
tongues askew and, on the wooden peg
above him, a filthy canvas coat,

polyester spilling from one arm. As
he began to stir, I spooked and
whisked the kids off to get water

and when we returned a while later my
husband was kneeling next to him,
their voices too soft to make out words.

In the morning, as we headed down
the trail, I took it all in as though it
was me with just weeks to live,

how the birds learned new songs
that day, how the taste of water
embellished itself

like a hearty meal, how the sky spoke
like perfectly composed poems, how
the trail became a warm bed

and the forest became the open arms
of a mother, holding me close until
I fell asleep.

SHANNON FROST GREENSTEIN

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's 2023 October Poem of the Month

JUST ANOTHER POEM ABOUT THE MOON

I wanted to write a happy poem,
but is that an oxymoron?

After all, I don't really have much to say
about things like the moon.

*A glimmering orb, brimming with radiance, pregnant with
sunlight, leading me through the darkness like a prophet just
descended from some heavenly heights, its beauty imbuing me with
hope for the future of humanity and I smile, grateful I am alive for
another night to bear witness.*

I have a lot to say about trauma
and the injustice of mental illness;
but this is a happy poem
and I'm guessing there needs to be
flowers or something.

*A spectrum, a rainbow, a palette of Crayola-infused shades,
splashes of color in neon and matte, hues of magenta and
chartreuse and indigo and green, wildflowers dotting the rolling
fields as far as the eye can see, and I lay in the grass among the
blossoms, glad for the sun on my face.*

I wanted to write a happy poem
because life is actually a gift.
But I had a rough go of it
for quite some time
and I'm more accustomed to writing about pain.

*Happiness like a promise, like a present, like a dream;
happiness like something elusive, happiness like something reserved
for everyone else. Decades of struggle to build a life worth living,
bare hands constructing a new self from the ruins of CPTSD, and
now that I've found happiness, is it any wonder I don't fully trust it
to stay?*

Now I have a family
and a temperamental cat;

Now I know the value of contentment
because I have endured life without it.

*My children, my light, my redemption, my worth, compelling me
like a quest to seek out light in this damaged world, rousing me to
provide for them a childhood of value, playing on the floor as the
cat, an asshole, a reason to smile, purrs from the depths of my lap,
and I take a moment to reflect on evolution and joy; I take a moment
to reflect on gratitude.*

I wanted to write a happy poem
that has nothing to do with the moon;
but when I finally found serenity—
among the moon and the flowers and the children and the cat,
among the remnants and the struggle and the progress and the
growth—
I was just unabashedly gleeful
to have even discovered happiness at all.
*So I guess this did turn out to be just another poem about the moon,
after all.*

CAROL EDWARDS

THE CURIOUS OCTOPUS

For Shawn Gorriz

1

Shy eyes
Dart, hide, peer up
At me
From coral bones
One arm curling.

2

With eight long arms quite nimble
No bigger than a thimble
Strong as a crab
It glomps and grabs
My slow, clumsy fingertips
Mighty suckers pinching skin

CATHERINE BROADWALL

ANTHROPOCENE LOVE

In the plastic vat of salad greens,
a tiny yellow blossom. Gold petals
bright as spangled prom shoes.

I pluck the spiraled tendril
out from lettuce leaves
and hold it toward you. Say,

for you. I mean it as a joke,
but your face illuminates,
a Northern Light on the horizon.

And who ever said that boys don't
like flowers? You place it in tap water
and keep it for a week. Say you

are glad our dystopia comes
wrapped in suburbs, parks
we can walk to. Love, you're not

wrong. The first time we stayed up
all night talking tasting notes,
that day we had wandered the

aisles of a grocery store
swaddled in cellophane.
The ratcheted summer had shot

refrigeration; the market

just wasn't prepared. Faithfully
masked and holding your hand,

I reached past the clear tarps
to pull out a yogurt and
thought, *We may be living*

in end times. But still, O you
whose face I trace with my gaze
as if it were a sixth sense – still,

I would still butterfly-tongue
the nectar from this small
and improbable bloom.

BETH MARQUEZ

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's 2023 October Poem of the Month

FROM LIGHTNING TO THE EARTH

My magnetic other, veins to the blood
of me. Heart I am honored to beat,
I am the light stretched thin around
you. I find you 44 times a second,

our far-flung speed our wild communion,
a rhythm that none but perhaps some gods
can follow. I seek you in a kind of madness,
as though there is some part of me buried

in you that I always, always fail to find and yet
I still thrill in the seeking. My thunder calling
my percussive 'yes' – the air my throat, your
throat. I reach into your soft thighs of sand,

your shoulders and knees of rock
and you sometimes fuse my image there, holding
the photograph of my finger in crystal. You – fulsome
bride, shameless queen of my white fire.

Let us go to the lake again.
Let us blind the blushing world.

WONDER

CATHERINE BROADWALL

Winner of Lit Shark's 2023 October Poem of the Month

ECOLOGY

Having trained myself on poison,
the melon tastes especially sweet,

pinned with bright tines to the
good dishes. Soft fruit oozing

its creamsicle juice. Sky that
reflects in its puddle.

Everything sugared and miracle
light. Wind hardly rattling

the table. I want to be a wife.
I want to be an artist. I hope

these impulses
are not a contradiction,

will not quarrel like
territorial foxes

chancing an encounter
in a wood.

To wife: to comb out
the snarls of life (?). To write:

to roll down a grass hill (?).
I want to be smooth. I want

to be rough. I want to be
moonlight and shelter.

And what is the natural enemy of
the woman who wants to do both?

My heart pumps blood into
my seesaw head

until all of my hair
is fire-red.

SHILO NIZIOLEK

WHEN THE KATYDIDS STOP SINGING

After Claire Wahmanholm

Mostly, I'll miss the sounds: warblers warbling,
katydids playing the symphony, how wind blowing
through forest sounds like a rushing river or waterfall
nearby, my niece's laughter, the memory of mouths parting.

I can't shrink my desires by pretending they don't exist.

When the world ends, when we choke on the remnants
of the burning wood, the ash thick in our throats like
sarcophagus dust, like mummification, when we scorch
to death under an unrelenting sun, when the waves swallow
us, the ice all gone, starves us, the bees line the asphalt,
drop dead, even you will curl, crust up, your love a mass
extinction, your love an avocado seed, no water left to plant it.

You, who take for granted all that you see before you.

Only I, half-embodied, feel the small feet of the dragonfly on my leg
without brushing it away, holy arbiter of loss denying what is sacred,
watch the katydid draw its strings gracefully against one another,
point to the kingfisher that follows us as we float down the river,
preserve your name, ice-crusting, shell-shocked.

LAUREN NIXON

OVIS

It's in those first months of nuzzling,
soft and babyish, when it settles into your bones;
an elemental journal made of the oxygen, the nitrogen
in the water – your water, your mother's, yours by inheritance.
By the milk you drink. By the soft grass you nibble.
Up it comes through the rock, a holdfast to the earth.

Soon, it will be strontium in your teeth, when you're
not an infant, not a yearling, but in that in-between space
biologically liminal, laying down enamel, echoing the mineral,
gambolling.

Your mother will be gone.
You, down in the meadow, growing fat; up on the hillside,
growing fleece.
Isotopes weaving into protein tapestries, ready to be made into
something new.

My pasture is a clean room, where I follow the thread
of your thread
in this rich gift of warmth laid into the grave of an ancestor,
and read this record of transit, pause, origin, belonging.
A dance of destinations. I phantoms in the mass spec,
sticking pins in the map.

EMILY KERLIN

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's 2023 November Poem of the Month

MY DENTIST DIAGNOSED GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE AND I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS BUT I THINK IT MEANS IT WANTS TO TALK ABOUT HOW WE USED TO TRAVEL THE WORLD

my tongue licks
white icing off
Dover's cliffs
washes it down
with Black Sea
cold brew

my tongue disembarks in
Prague then complains in
perfect Czech of a
chatterbox seatmate to
no one in particular

my tongue prefers
fufu hot, follows
a chef to
Kinshasa, sits
alone in a small
café

my tongue traipses
Appalachian trails,

CAROL EDWARDS

DRIFTWOOD DRYAD

wears through lug
soles, knows to
drink the water
from the source

my tongue takes
pickaxe to rock in
the Kalymnos
applies chalk for
friction, bags
another peak

my tongue tells about
the mangrove in
Honiara that sat like a
meditating monk
ankle deep in
dark water

my tongue pulls at
my sleeve, leads us
to the last plank of a
long dock, halyards
slapping under
Southern Cross

look, tongue hisses, is
there anything more
important than where we
have been, what we have
seen, all we have tasted?

I hold the sky and see in my hands,
feel the heartbeat of Earth in sands.
I hear the song of your raging,
bend to the power of your wind,
my skin scraped clean,
my green
long since dimmed.
Your salt spray scours my bones,
twisted, gnarled, stripped;
beautiful I am not,
save on nights
when I and my sisters tripped
whispered steps in silv'ry light
your waves glimmering,
gossamer veils both gowns and shrouds,
stone-pale tresses billowed crowns
until daybreak, when the spell drowns.

SANDRA NOEL

Winner of Lit Shark's 2023 December-January Poem of the Month

BIOLUMINESCENCE FLASHES IN THE PULL

where blackened sea sleeps.
We wait at low water's lace
for the fullness of moon
to release its tide hold.

Racing the hurrying hairline
we swag up the bay in shadow-light.
Liquid silver licks into corners,
quickness over night-white sand.

Salten spray spins its witchery.
I swim under the cellophane skin,
a trail of clothes left in silk dark.
The sea raises all boats.

MANDY SCHIFFRIN

WAR OF THE WEEDS

Ground Elder was
well established
when I moved in;
its seven blades
defeated me.

Then, like Hercules,
I backed my task,
and undermined
the mat of brown
mycelial roots.

The pile of bodies
testified my triumph;
but underground
a secret rebellion
swelled and grew.

And year on year
the battle raged,
till the only way to win
was giving ground
to Mint, or Sage.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

Honorable Mention for Lit Shark's 2023 December-January Poem of the Month

AN OCTOPUS HUG

I am empty.
It's four-thirty in the afternoon,
My thoughts are cut out paper dolls
that unfold accordion style.
Why am I thinking
of you? Every day I commute
over the same tracks, in the same seat,
no one next me.
I should move on.
Board a train in the opposite direction.
Spin a cocoon, pupate, emerge, gather
the breeze under new wings,
sally through the air.
But no. Water spreads a gas fueled fire.
A ravenous appetite steers me.
Ineffable. Ridiculous.
Addictive.
I chew on you like a wad of gum,
but you never lose taste.
I sink in the moat
I've dug around you.
Drown in limerence.

INGRID BRUCK

DO NOT OPEN

Imagine a celestial event that you see
and your granddaughter, now four,
is alive in this world to see it.
Write a poem, take a photo or draw a picture
that celebrates star beauty.
When you complete the homage in art,
place it in a sealed envelope
Addresss it to the child
with these instructions:
Do Not Open Until 2048.
That's 25 years in the future:
you'll be gone, the little one's a grown-up.
Let's say the event you share
is the super moon of August 1, 2023.
Your grandchild will open the envelope
on August 1, 2048.
Imagine her, a young woman,
alive in the world to see it
and you'll be together again
in the bright amber light
of the sturgeon moon.

PATRICK DRUGGAN

GUIDE TO A FOREIGN COUNTRY

These symbols
on this page
catch
a moment.

A technology
newer than
summer rain,
fingerprints,
the hush
of the barley
ripening
in the field.

This.
That you read
in your mind
is beyond space
and the limits
imposed
by time.

It is a record.
It is history.
It is a pillar
of civilisation,
that starts
on towering city walls
and ends,
everywhere,
spilled
with blood and piss
in the gutter.

JULIAN MATTHEWS

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Look at this desk:
I could've been the paper. You, the paperweight.
Pin me down.

I could've been this sturdy shelf. You, the books.
Held you up, when you slid.

Or maybe that one bookend of your to-be-reads.
Lean on me slanted like so many fallen dominos.

All these unfinished novels. The one story
you were so invested in that left you hanging.

The sequel you found wanting. The fiction of this life.
The weight of the unread world.

Follow the trail of unreadable cues. This abandoned journal.
The hobby that turned into a chore.

These gel pens that dried up. The fading colors
of all these precious memories.
Of you. The stationery we left stationary.

KARIN DOUCETTE

Frozen in time like the burn that turned into ashes
in my mouth the minute it was spoken.
And regretted.

All the words left unsaid after. Like dust
that now finds its way into every crevice
of this heart.

The poem that crawled into its own nook,
and never got sent. Folded and tucked
in the unreturned book.

Like a patient bookmark
caught between two pages:
Forgive and forget.

Both overdue.

DEEP SWIM

I am held by the water. Held by its face, its breath. Held by its broad
bosom. Held by its knees and its wide, heavy thighs.

In my mind, I have returned to my childhood home, the sea.
Water is where I'd felt the brine tingle my tongue, sting my eyes,
frown my fingertips. Here, in the belly of the water, the sound of
my knee joints clicking is like the snapping of birch twigs in the
still forest on a cold day.

But this water smells of chlorine. The air is humid. It's hard
to see. Sounds echo. No, I'm in a manmade pool, not the sea.

I go to the edge of the five-foot line, walk forward tippy toe,
then feel the cement ground swoop away snidely beneath me. I flip
my feet up behind me out of fear, twist around, and backstroke to
safety in the shallow end.

Later, my teacher draws me back to this deeper part of the
pool. She is young and has the beautiful body of an athlete. At
this time, I am exactly 46 years and 1 month old. I am waking up to
truths in my life and I want relief. I want to dissolve my fear of deep
water.

She encourages me to cling to the pool ledge and shift my
body to the left, out into the deep space of the pool, out into those
black depths. My legs are dangling. I trust my teacher. She is beside
me; she sees my aura and she knows it is time for me to come back
into the water. With her, I'm not afraid that something will rise up
from the deep to destroy me.

Using her goggles, I peer dimly into the clean white pool
depths, see the black kelp-like lines drawn on its belly. I take my
time to see what is under the water. I don't see giant jaws that would

harm me, I don't see stinging jellies. Also, I see nothing that helps me understand what is holding me up in this transparent medium.

Finally, I relax my legs and naturally suspend. Cupped safely by the water I feel a broad smile open my face wide, like theatre curtains. Out pours the light. It's my child smile. I feel awakened in the water, by the water, and back to where I need to be.

My teacher asks me to move back and forth, back and forth several times. I cling to the ledge and stretch my body out behind me and float on my stomach. The deep water feels heavier than the shallow end. It is a Presence. But it does not want to harm me. Someone deep inside me feels it is ok to have fun this way again. This time I am not threatened. This time I will not die.

Will NOT die.

*

One day, one summer, when I was eleven or so, I moved too far into the water.

My sister, Teresa, and I had played at the seashore, running in and out of the water that had been warmed under the blazing sun. It was so delicious on our lithe bodies. We paid no attention to the tide rolling in.

When we started our play, the water was very shallow. Now, a couple of hours later, we are cold, drained, and hungry. Looking around, we see that we're standing on the sand bar. Dark water stretches between us and the frothy shoreline; we can't see the sandy bottom. The beach is vacant.

I had convinced mother that I could take care of Teresa and myself if she left us alone. I can tell from the sun that she will come back for us soon.

The waves have little caps. There's a light breeze. Our teeth are chattering. Let's go, I say. We step off, me first, and after a few

paces there is no land to touch with our feet. Only the cold water. It seems to reach up and suck our feet.

I squeal. So does Teresa. We start to dog paddle and then we start to pant because it is hard work. My neck hurts from keeping my head above the water. I hear Teresa's tired voice behind me say, *I can't*. She sounds miles away. My heart clenches with fear that my sister will drown and the shore still so far away.

To scare her, I get angry and shout, *do it*, and push myself, too. What will I do if she gives up and I need to save her? I picture in my mind what the Deadman's float looks like. I'll tell her to make her body relax that way.

Then I'll grip her under the chin with the crook of my arm, grip her right under her V-shaped jaw. Then I'll do half a breaststroke with one arm and kick my feet for both of us. I'll probably kick her legs when I do, maybe scratch her with my toenails, but I will pull us to shore.

Our eyeglasses are on the blanket on the beach. I squint fuzzily through the water at the shore so far away. Try to guess how far I must go.

Now the fear grips us both and we scream together. The black from below reaches up and brushes my ankles. The cold, cold water sucks at my toes. Teresa is quiet.

I feel weak. We both scream again as the black rises up. Oh god, we will die now. It is all my fault.

Then, then, THEN. Two men appear on the beach. They rush in and pull us out of the water. One grabs me and I hear the other thrashing with Teresa. We all wade in and I feel the cool sand crumble under my cold feet. Teresa and I lie on the beach, trembling and etched with goosebumps.

I feel like a chick who has spent all its energy to break through the egg then flops, waiting to recharge. No, we will not die today.

INGRID BRUCK

WARM MINERAL SPRINGS

A fountain features dancing girls
at Warm Mineral Springs.
Since Coronado discovered these mythic springs,
seekers of youth have bathed here.
Healing waters spray skyward,
flow into the Myakka River, then out to sea.

Sulfur makes water heavy,
swimmers drift like colored leaves.
Coral reefs grow in the deeps
of a bottomless crater.
Ancient gar, with saw-blade teeth,
inhabit the shallows like sharks.

Wrinkled bathers swim with fish and gators.
They coexist in peace into the 60s
when owners fence out the alligators.
In the 70s, a new fountain appears:
brass imps romp in jets of water.

Some ladies in North Port object:
only shameless hussies swim naked.
Their verdict: unseemly & immodest.
A hubbub roars for months,
management refuses to concede.

Later I learn that these men are angels. When mother arrives, they tell her they have never gone to the beach before; they never went to any beach, in fact. They don't swim.

For some reason they turned off the highway and drove down the dirt road to this one. When they first heard us cry, way in the distance, they thought it was gulls.

Memory fades and I'm brought back to where I am now, here, in this big clear pool, in the city, far away from that salty shore. It is not time for me to die today either.

My teacher has reintroduced me to the joy in the water. I sob. The tears run hot, and I cannot see, as I know the sea has returned to me this day. It holds me again and welcomes me. It is safe again to keep the deep water by me, around me, within me, and to let it hold me, cup me, celebrate me. My fear drains away as my strength once did.

The water rises inside my body as I write this. It lifts me up. My tears, like the sea, show me to the moon, my friend. Show me to Jupiter, my guardian. Telling you this I am swept back, back by my heart tide, back home down inside the water.

Since that day with my teacher in the pool in the city, my feet have touched the oceans that touch all the poles. Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic, and Southern. I've flown or sailed over nearly all the seas on all the continents.

Each time, I stand in the water's presence for a long time. I remember its heavy embrace, its heavy breath, its seductive pull.

But I rarely swim. It's as if I tucked away that part of me in a shell, or deeper inside some part of my self.

Telling you this now, a sharp lump rises high and sudden in my throat. My eyes prickle with hot fat tears. Someone deep inside craves to come out of that water tomb.

LORRAINE CAPUTO

My grandparents drive me to Warm Mineral Springs.
The old biddies make us laugh, says Nana.
Protestors have sewn a statement:
Each girl wears a yellow skirt,
their modesty is protected.

In August, Nana chuckles on the phone,
That first hurricane was all it took,
the fabric blew away.
Ever since, the fountain cherubs
bask in sunshine and rain.

THE SEA OF OUR LIVES

I hear the voices
of women in the markets
of men calling destinations
of children swimming

I hear
a father holding a baby
a mother in the fields
a child scrubbing clothes

I hear the voice of
Sandburg
proclaiming our power

I hear the voice of
Neruda
bespeaking our exile

I hear the voice of
Silvio, of Violeta
singing our new world

I hear the mountains
rasping clouds
& sunlight upon
a river's water

I hear the full moon
upon a jungle
 & green waves of parrots
flying in the dawn

I hear my voice
spilling upon
 these leaves

I listen to our voices
Swirling, uniting
 towards

The sea of our lives

THANK YOU FOR READING

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the publications in which some of these works previously appeared. We appreciate your hard work in getting these pieces out into the world, and we're thrilled to have had the opportunity to share them again.

These entries are organized in the order in which they appear in Issue 4 of Lit Shark Magazine:

"Zipolite" by Lorraine Caputo, penned at the famous beach on Mexico's Pacific coast, was originally published in *North of Oxford* (15 August 2021).

"Meditation: Galápagos Seas" by Lorraine Caputo first appeared in her chapbook, *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019).

"Blooming Detritus" by Carol Edwards was first published in *Beyond the Sand and Sea* by Southern Arizona Press (2023).

"The Curious Octopus" by Carol Edwards was first published in *Beyond the Sand and Sea* by Southern Arizona Press (2023).

"Driftwood Dryad" by Carol Edwards was originally printed in *the ocean waves* (Red Penguin Books, 2021) and was reprinted in

Beyond the Sand and Sea by Southern Arizona Press (2023).

We also want to take a moment to shout out the winners and honorable mentions of Lit Shark Magazine's Poem of the Month contest. We're so grateful they shared their work with us and that we now get to share it with you.

Lit Shark Magazine's October Poem of the Month

Winner: Catherine Broadwall, "Ecology"

Honorable Mention: Shannon Grost Greenstein, "Just Another Poem about the Moon"

Honorable Mention: Beth Marquez, "From Lightning to the Earth"

Lit Shark Magazine's November Poem of the Month

Winner: Shilo Niziolek, "Ekphrasis for the Salmon"

Honorable Mention: Emily Kerlin, "My Dentist Diagnosed Geographic Tongue and I Don't Know What That Is But I Think It Means It Wants to Talk About How We Used to Travel the World"

Lit Shark Magazine's December-January Poem of the Month

Winner: Sandra Noel, "Bioluminescence Flashes in the Pull"

Honorable Mention: Victoria M. Johnson, "How to Buy a Toilet"

Honorable Mention: Doug Van Hooser, "An Octopus Hug"

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to all of our lovely, imaginative contributors in Issue 4! Here's more about each of them and where to find them.

JENICA AMALITA—she/her—Poetry

Born and brought up in Bangalore, India, Jenica Amalita has grown up taking in the cityscape and its many complexities. She loves reading, writing and binge-watching sitcoms. She is currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Communicative English at St. Joseph's University, Bangalore. She also maintains a personal blog, A Sun Ray's Dance (jenicaamalita.wordpress.com). You can find her on Instagram @amalita123.4

MAGGIE BAYNE—she/her—Fiction

Maggie Bayne is a fiction writer who lives in upstate New York. Her lifelong habit of writing has shifted to a more serious pursuit since retirement. A dedicated fan of the short story, she has found that a well-crafted adventure rarely needs more than 3,500 words to grab and satisfy the readers. She has had the following published: "The Blizzard" in *October Hill Magazine*, Winter 2022, Volume 6, Issue 4; "Rescuing Addie Stiles" in *Remington Review*, Spring 2023; and "Gourmet Delight" in *ASP Literary Journal* #9, July 8, 2023.

MARK BLICKLEY—he/him—Fiction

Mark Blickley grew up within walking distance of New York's Bronx Zoo. He is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and PEN American Center. His latest book is the flash fiction collection, *Hunger Pains* (Buttonhook Press).

CATHERINE BROADWALL—she/her—Poetry

Catherine Broadwall is the author of *Water Spell* (Cornerstone Press, forthcoming 2025), *Fulgurite* (Cornerstone Press, 2023), *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She was the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award and a finalist for the 2021 Mississippi Review Prize in poetry. She is an assistant professor at DigiPen Institute of Technology, where she teaches creative writing and literature. Her website is www.catherinebroadwall.com.

INGRID BRUCK—she/her—Poetry

Self-taught, Ingrid Bruck enjoys writing haiku forms and hybrid fiction. A public library director by profession, she's been writing poetry seriously for the ten years since she retired. Recent work appears in *Verse-Virtual*, *Poetry Hall*, *Your Daily Poem*, *The Skinny* and *Literary Cocktail*. Poetry website: www.ingridbruck.com

LORRAINE CAPUTO—she/her—Poetry

Wandering troubadour Lorraine Caputo is a documentary poet, translator and travel writer. Her works appear in over 400 journals on six continents; and 23 collections of poetry – including *In the Jaguar Valley* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Caribbean Interludes* (Origami Poems Project, 2022). She also authors travel narratives, articles and guidebooks. Her writing has been honored by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada (2011) and thrice nominated for the Best of the Net. Caputo has done literary readings from Alaska to the Patagonia. She journeys through Latin America with her faithful knapsack Rocinante, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.

MARK CONNORS—he/him—Poetry

Mark Connors is a widely published poet from Leeds. His debut, *Life is a Long Song* was published by OWF Press in 2015. *Nothing is Meant to be Broken* was published by Stairwell Books in 2017. *Optics* was published by YAFFLE in 2019. After was published by YAFFLE in 2021. www.markconnors.co.uk. He is a managing editor and co-founder of Yaffle Press and Yaffle's Nest.

STEVE DENEHEN—he/him—Poetry

'Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the author of two chapbooks and four poetry collections. Winner of the Anthony Cronin Poetry Award and twice winner of Irish Times' New Irish Writing, his numerous publication credits include *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Westerly*.'

JULIE A. DICKSON—she/her—Poetry

Julie A. Dickson writes poetry of the macabre, nature and from prompts. Her poems appear in *Ekphrastic Review*, *Misfit*, *Open Door* and *Lit Shark*, among other journals. She has served as guest editor in several publications and on two poetry boards. A push cart nominee, Dickson holds a BPS in Behavioral Science, advocates for captive elephants and feral cats.

KARIN DOUCETTE—she/her—Nonfiction

Karin Doucette's short stories, nonfiction, and squibs appear in *The Antigoneish Review*, thewritelaunch.com, and fiftywordstories.com. She reached the quarter-finals of ScreenCraft's 2023 international Stage Play and Cinematic Short Story competitions and the finals of UK's 2023 Page Turner Awards. A nomad raised on a small island in Canada, Karin has lived, worked, or travelled on every continent for over fifty years.

PATRICK DRUGGAN—he/him—Poetry

Patrick grew up in Glasgow and went to university there. He is a scientist and has worked on diagnostic tests for cancers and infections on and off for the past 35 years. He is dyslexic. He learned to write poetry when no-one was looking. He has been published in *Dreich*, *Culture Matters*, *Black Nore*, the *Full Circle Anthology of Chester Poets*, and in Yaffle Press' *Whirlagust IV*.

CAROL EDWARDS—she/her—Poetry

Carol Edwards is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. She grew up reading fantasy and classic novels, climbing trees, and acquiring frequent grass stains. She currently enjoys a coffee addiction and raising her succulent army. Her favorite shark is the whale shark.

Her poetry has been published in numerous publications, both online and print, including *Space & Time*, *Uproar* literary blog, Southern Arizona Press, White Stag Publishing, *The Post Grad Journal*, *Written Tales Magazine*, and *The Wild Word*, and is forthcoming in Black Spot Books. Her debut poetry collection, *The World Eats Love*, released on April 25, 2023 from The Ravens Quoth Press. You can follow her on Instagram at @practicallypoetical, as well as Twitter/X and FB at @practicallypoet. Her website is www.practicallypoetical.wordpress.com.

LYNETTE ESPOSITO—she/her—Poetry

Lynette G. Esposito, MA Rutgers, has been published in *North of Oxford*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Front Porch*, *Deep Overstock*, *Reader's Digest*, *Self*, *Fox Chase Review*, and others. She is mostly a poet but also a cat lover. She was married to Attilio J. Esposito and lives in Southern NJ.

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.

ANNETTE GAGLIARDI—she/her—Poetry

Annette Gagliardi looks at the dimly tinted shadows and morphed illusions that becomes life and finds illumination. She sees what others do not and grasps the fruit hiding there, then squeezes all the juice that life has to offer and serves it up as poetry – or jelly, depending on the day. Her work has appeared in many literary journals in Canada, England and the USA, including *Motherwell*, *St. Paul Almanac*, *Wisconsin Review*, *American Diversity Report*, *Origami Poems Project*, *Amethyst Review*, *Door IS A Jar*, *Trouble Among the Stars*, *Sylvia Magazine*, *Lit Shark*, and others. Her first

poetry collection, titled: *A Short Supply of Viability*. In addition, her first historical fiction, titled: *Ponderosa Pines: Days of the Deadwood Forest Fire* were both published in 2022 which won the Pen-Craft Book Award for Fall, 2023. Visit her author website at: <https://annette-gagliardi.com>

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

SHANNON FROST GREENSTEIN—she/her—Poetry

Shannon Frost Greenstein (she/her) resides in Philadelphia with her children and soulmate. She is a former Ph.D. candidate in Continental Philosophy and a multi-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Shannon is the author of "Pray for Us Sinners" and "These Are a Few of My Least Favorite Things," two full-length collections of fiction and poetry, respectively. She was recently a finalist for the 2023 Ohio State University Press Journal Non/Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared in McSweeney's *Internet Tendency*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Bending Genres*, *Parentheses Journal*, and elsewhere. Follow Shannon at shannonfrostgreenstein.com or on Twitter at @ShannonFrostGre. Insta: @zarathustra_speaks

TAYLOR 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.

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.

VICTORIA M. JOHNSON—she/her—Poetry and Flash Fiction

Victoria M. Johnson is the author of four books and two mini books. Her poetry, memoir, and flash stories appear in online literary journals and print anthologies. When she is not writing, Victoria is a reiki master, meditation teacher, zumba instructor, and writing coach. Victoria is the founder of Creative Breath, a supportive, enriching, and valuable place for writers.

JENNIFER SCHOMBURG KANKE—she/her—Poetry

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke, originally from Ohio, currently lives in Florida. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Shenandoah* and *Salamander*. She is the winner of the Sheila-Na-Gig Editions Editor's Choice Award for Fiction. Her zine about her experiences undergoing chemotherapy for ovarian cancer, *Fine, Considering*, is available from Rinky Dink Press (2019). She serves as a reader for *The Dodge* and as a Meter Mentor in Annie Finch's Poetry Witch Community.

EMILY KERLIN—she/her—Poetry

Emily Kerlin has published poems in journals such as Cider Press Review, Sheila-Na-Gig, Blue Mountain Review, Storm Cellar, Split Rock Review and the MacGuffin. Her book, *Twenty-One Farewells*, won Minerva Rising's 2023 chapbook contest. She lives with her family in Urbana, Illinois where she teaches the difference between

“chicken” and “kitchen” to English learners. Find her at emilykerlin.com

BETH MARQUEZ—she/her—Poetry

BETH MARQUEZ (she/her) has been published in Moontide Press, Valley of the Contemporary Poets, and Ugly Mug anthologies. Her poems were selected for Damfino's debut issue and the Like a Girl anthology from Lucid Moose Press, which nominated her poem *Shedding* for a Pushcart Prize. She is a 2017 Pink Door Fellow.

BETH MATHISON—she/her—Poetry

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.

JULIAN MATTHEWS—he/him—Poetry

Julian Matthews is a mixed-race minority poet and writer from Malaysia published in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Live Encounters* and *New Verse News*, among other journals and anthologies. He stumbled upon a creative writing workshop by accident six years ago. That happy accident has turned into a rabid compulsion. He is still extricating himself from the crash. If you wish to support his recovery, Paypal him at trinetizen@gmail.com or send him Wordle answers at <https://linktr.ee/julianmatthews>

LAUREN K. NIXON—she/her—Poetry

An ex-archaeologist who swapped the past for the present, Lauren K. Nixon is the author of numerous short stories, *The Fox and the Fool*, *Mayflies*, *The Last Human Getaway* and *The House of Vines*, along with poetry collections (including *Wild Daughter*, *Marry Your Chameleon* and *umbel.*). She has also written two plays—one

even on purpose! Her poems appear in *Rhubarb: Seconds*, *Lit Shark Magazine*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *The Lake*, *Apricot Press*, *Dream Catcher*, *The Dawntreader*, *Reach*, and *The Black Nore Review*, along with several collections by The Superstars. When she's not writing, she can be found pootling around the garden or library, researching weird stuff, making miniatures, annoying the cats, and playing board games. You can find out more at her website: (www.laurenknixon.com), Instagram (@laurenknixon), and Facebook (@IndieAuthorLaurenKNixon).

SHILO NIZIOLEK—she/her—Poetry

Shilo Niziolek has written *Fever* and *atrophy* (Querencia Press), *Porcelain Ghosts* forthcoming from Querencia Press, *A Thousand Winters In Me* (Gasher Press), *I Am Not An Erosion: Poems Against Decay* (Ghost City Press), and *Dirt Eaters* (Bottlecap Press). Her work has appeared in *Juked*, *Honey Literary*, *West Trade Review*, *Entropy*, *Pork Belly Press*, and *Phoebe Journal* among others. Shilo is a writing instructor at Clackamas Community College, a workshop facilitator for the Literary Arts, and is the editor and co-founder of the literary magazine, *Scavengers*. Find her on Instagram @shiloziolek

SANDRA NOEL—she/her—Poetry

Sandra Noel is a poet from Jersey, Channel Islands. She enjoys writing about the ordinary in unusual ways, her passion for sea swimming and her love of nature often weaving its way through her work. Sandra has poems featured online and print magazines and anthologies. Over the past year she has been longlisted, shortlisted and highly commended in various competitions. She has poems on buses in Guernsey from the Guernsey International Poetry Competition 2022 and 2023. Sandra is finalising her first collection which will be published by Yaffle Press in 2024.

JESS L. PARKER—she/her—Poetry

Jess L Parker (she/her/hers) is a poet and strategist from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Jess lives in Fitchburg, WI with her husband and two-year-old son. Her debut poetry collection, *Star Things*, won the 2020 Dynamo Verlag Book Prize. Jess' poems have

appeared in *Bramble*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Blue Heron Review*, and elsewhere. Jess holds a B.A. of English and Spanish from Northern Michigan University, an M.A. of Spanish Literature from UW-Madison, and an MBA.

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.

TERRY SANVILLE—he/him—Fiction

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been accepted more than 500 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The American Writers Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated three times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist—who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

MANDY SCHIFFRIN—she/her—Poetry

Mandy Schiffrin is half-British, half-Argentinian, and lives in the Netherlands. Mandy has always had a passion for words, language and how we understand what we mean by what we say. In fact, she obtained a doctorate studying this topic, in Artificial Intelligence (Natural Language Processing), and still works in the same field to this day. Mandy explores this with her poetry too, and has recently started submitting some of her work for publication. She has poems either already published, or accepted, in the following magazines and journals: *Black Nore Review*, *The Crowstep Journal*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Dawntreader*, *Obsessed with Pipework*, and *The High Window*, as well as for a couple of upcoming anthologies.

NOLO SEGUNDO—he/him—Poetry

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.j.Carber, 76, became a late blooming poet in his 8th decade in over 150 literary journals and anthologies in America, England, Canada, Romania, Scotland, China, Sweden, Australia, Portugal, India, Australia, and Turkey. The trade publisher Cyberwit.net has released 3 poetry books: *The Enormity of Existence* [2020]; *Of Ether and Earth* [2021]; and *Soul Songs* [2022]. These titles and much of his work reflect the awareness he's had for over 50 years since having an NDE whilst almost drowning in a Vermont river: that he has--IS--a consciousness that predates birth and survives death, what poets for millennia have called a soul.

FRANKIE A. SOTO—he/him—Poetry

Frankie A Soto is a 2x winner of the Multicultural Poet of the year award from the National Spoken Word Poetry Awards in Chicago. His (New York Times) performance called him an absolute force. He's been featured on ABC news, FOX & his HIV poem "Guessing Game" was nominated & premiered at the Atlanta Hip Hop Festival. His poem "Spanglish" is widely used as part of the curriculum at Colleges/ Universities around the country & partnered with HBO for Hispanic heritage month promo. His current manuscript 'Petrichor' was a semi-finalist for the 2021 Hudson Prize with Black Lawrence Press & was a top three finalist for the 2021 Sexton Prize with Black Spring Press in London. Petrichor is now being published with Tolsun Books and set to release 3.12.24.

ALAN SWYER—he/him—Fiction

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel 'The Beard' was recently published by Harvard Square Editions. His newest production is called "When Houston Had The Blues."

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN—she/her—Poetry

McKenzie Lynn Tozan is a formerly Midwestern writer, transplanted to coastal Croatia. 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 2024. Find more at www.mckenzielynntozan.com

DOUG VAN HOOSER—he/him—Poetry

Doug Van Hooser splits his time between suburban Chicago where he uses pseudonyms with baristas, and southern Wisconsin where he enjoys sculling and cycling. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Orison Anthology. He has also published short fiction and had readings of his plays in Chicago. Links to his work can be found at dougvanhooser.com

STEVE ZISSON—he/him—Fiction

Steve Zisson is a biotech journalist whose fiction has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Nature*, *Little Blue Marble*, *Selene Quarterly*, *HyphenPunk*, among other places. He also edited a science fiction/fantasy/horror anthology, *A PUNK ROCK FUTURE*. He lives on the North Shore of Boston with his family near a lake that once produced great quantities of high quality ice that was exported around the world not so long ago when there was no refrigeration and the climate was colder. As far as he knows, the lake is not connected to the ocean three miles east by a creek or canal where a bull shark or great white might mistakenly swim up. Probably.

Thanks for the confidence there, Steve. Are we secretly in The Twilight Zone? We may never know.

SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!

Thank you again to everyone who submitted to Issue 4 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 5 and beyond, here is the most pertinent information (and you can always look at our website, too—www.litshark.com).

Looking Forward to the Rest of 2024!

We had so much in 2023 and are really looking forward to how we can make 2024 even better. Here's what we know so far, and maybe this will lead to a submission opportunity for you!

Lit Shark's Best Of 2023: Coming January 2024

This is pretty self-explanatory, but we'll be going back through all of the pieces that we accepted throughout 2023, and our favorites from the year will appear in the anthology, but we will ALSO reach out to each of those writers about including something new in the anthology, as well, to give us all something new and interesting to read!

We're loving our monthly **Poem of the Month Contest**, and we'll continue to run that every month throughout 2024 with one winner and several honorable mentions each month. **Submit in January 2024 to be considered for our February contest!**

Read on for our submission periods! We're going to do our very best to stick to these dates.

Issue 1 (Winter 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered from January 1st through March 15th, and the issue will come out at the end of March. General submissions; all welcome!

Issue 2 (Spring 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered from April 1st to May 31st, and the issue will appear by or before mid-June. General submissions; all welcome!

Issue 3 (Summer/SHARK WEEK 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered from June 1st through August 15th. For this issue, we're looking for nature pieces, marine life, reactions to Shark Week and other documentaries, etc. Put your spin on it, but make it fishy and sharktastic! The issue will come out at the end of August.

Issue 4 (Spooky Season 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Spooky submissions, dark retellings, and campy horror and shark tales and poems will be considered from August 15th through October 15th to be released just in time for Halloween 2024! Yay!

And Lit Shark's Best of 2024 will then appear in Nov-Dec! Yay!

It might seem a little funny to end on our spooky issue, but we thought doing this would give us more time to focus on our annual anthology, our upcoming merchandise, and hopefully an issue of Lit Pup! We eventually want to reach a point with Lit Pup of releasing a winter issue that students can read during their winter break and a summer issue they can read over the summer! Most of us have some kind of break around those times, too, so one more

literature to pass the time never hurt! If you know a child, teen, or professional writer of children's/teen/YA literature, let them know we're looking for work and are open 24/7 for submissions!

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 eco-poetics, 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.

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 4.

FIN.
(UNTIL ISSUE #5...)

POETRY & PROSE

contributed by

- JENICA AMALITA • MAGGIE BAYNE •
- MARK BLICKLEY • CATHERINE BROADWALL •
- INGRID BRUCK • LORRAINE CAPUTO •
- MARK CONNORS • STEVE DENEHEN •
- JULIE A. DICKSON • KARIN DOUCETTE •
- PATRICK DRUGGAN • CAROL EDWARDS •
- LYNETTE ESPOSITO • MICHAEL FLANAGAN •
- ANNETTE GAGLIARDI • G. TIMOTHY GORDON •
- SHANNON FROST GREENSTEIN •
- TAYLOR HATHORN • MATT HENRY •
- VICTORIA M. JOHNSON • EMILY KERLIN •
- JENNIFER SCHOMBURG KANKE •
- BETH MARQUEZ • BETH MATHISON •
- JULIAN MATTHEWS • LAUREN K. NIXON •
- SHILO NIZIOLEK • SANDRA NOEL •
- JESS L. PARKER • RIE SHERIDAN ROSE •
- TERRY SANVILLE • MANDY SCHIFFRIN •
- NOLO SEGUNDO • FRANKIE A. SOTO •
- ALAN SWYER • MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN •
- DOUG VAN HOOSER • STEVE ZISSON •



LIT SHARK MAGAZINE

www.litshark.com

Issue 4 / 2023