

LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 10 • MAY, 2026

LIT SHARK

magazine



SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO



CONTENT

Dear readers, we always want to support you and give you the information you need to have the best reading experience possible. Please note that Issue 10 may contain some troubling elements, like animal violence, hunting, pollution, and animal extinction, as well as death, mental health issues, illusions to child loss, and animal death. There are multiple illusions to sexual activity and expletives. Thank you again for your support. We hope you will enjoy our tenth issue, our winter edition for 2025.

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LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 10 • MAY 2026

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THE WINTER EDITION

EDITED BY MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

When I say I miss you, I truly, deeply mean it: I have missed you. I have missed our community and what we've built together. I've missed Lit Shark and the meaning it's brought to my life.

Most of you who submitted know this, but those of you who didn't know, or who might be coming to this issue unaware (welcome!), I went through a pretty big moment with my mental health mid-2025. Looking back on it, it felt debilitating, insurmountable, and horizonless; I couldn't see a way out or through it. My husband suggested taking something, anything, everything off of my plate that I could during that time so I could come back into myself. After a lot of going back and forth, I decided to put Lit Shark on hiatus until the start of 2026, so we'd be back in time for its third birthday.

We succeeded; we came back, I healed some things, and most importantly, it was confirmed for me just how important Lit Shark is to me. Right away after putting it on pause, I became plagued with a different problem: I had more time on my hands, for sure, but I felt more directionless, and it was much harder to find joy and purpose in my days. I had to find joy, self-worth, and meaning in

other, smaller things, which is something I think I've needed to challenge myself to do for a long time, but when it was time to come back, I was deeply and truly ready. I missed the community, the words, the work.

I'm grateful for you being here. I'm grateful for you filling my cup.

Now, enough about me, because THIS ISSUE, this issue is lovely. Between the pieces that were submitted before the hiatus (from writers who patiently let me hold onto their work until we came back; thank you), during the hiatus unbeknownst to the wait time they had coming, and after we returned, I read over 1,000 submissions for this issue alone. While this is "The Winter Edition," it's much more about winter's thaw, rebirth, and hope. There were many pieces along the way about overcoming writer's block, going through a tough breakup, navigating grief, rediscovering the self, and feeling like Jesus walking on water or rising like a phoenix from the ashes. Going back to me for a moment, it was the kind of hope I needed while I was away, and it was reassuring, like a balm, when I returned.

I hope you'll enjoy this issue as much as I enjoyed creating it. It was a labor of love and healing and fresh air after holding my breath for too long. I hope you find the love, the light, the dark, and the cracking open of hope in it. At least for me, there's a lot of it to go around; feel free to take as much as you need, and come back for seconds and thirds.

Happy Reading! Until Issue 11,
McKenzie
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan
May 2026

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Dear Lit Shark Community,

While going through submissions for this issue,
I accepted three poems by John Brantingham.
I was deeply impressed with all the work he sent,
but these were the three that lingered.

I sent my acceptance email, only for John's lovely wife, Ann,
to respond, letting me know that
John unexpectedly passed away on Easter Sunday.

That news and John's work have stayed with me
throughout the process of creating this issue.

This issue is in memory of John and dedicated to Ann.

May it be a comfort and a light.



**ONE:
WINTER'S THAW**

MARIANNE TEFFT

NEW DAY

Like the golden tulip
That overwinters silently
Untouched and undisturbed
I wanted nothing more
Than to cling to blindness
To rest untroubled in the dark
Yet sunrise brings all things to light
And at the dawn of this new day
I am grateful Mother Nature
Knows so much more than me

KB BALLENTINE

WE DREAM SPRING

—1949

In the cold and dark
of winter, when the moon
shines bright and clear
over snow, we dream spring.
When cows, plump with milk,
greet us from the shadowy barn,
when the pale sun winks
over the horizon, and we trudge
to the river to slice ice for warmer days,
we dream spring.
When Lenten roses finally kiss
the air with blooms,
when daffodils splash yellow
through the pasture, we laugh.
Daylight stretches the hours,
and we dig through rich soil,
sow the corn and hay.
The work is still the same—
cows to milk, firewood to chop,
brush to clear, and fences to mend
until summer sweat drips
down our faces, our backs
as we train the ox to plow the fields.
We dream spring winds to cool us
as we gather the apples, the cherries
and harvest beans and cabbage

then eat them fresh and boil the rest
to preserve the fruit and can the veggies
in the steamy kitchen—rows of jars
gleaming like jewels, precious
and flavorful when winter returns,
and we once again dream spring.

BUFFY AKAASH

BLACKBERRY WINTER

I should have saved the blackberries for pancakes
but couldn't resist a little sweetness.

It was December. Vermont.

So what if they came
from Mexico.

Unseasonal fruit, much like myself
born and raised somewhere else
ripened on the bush
thriving in summer.
Bitterness

on my tongue a fire in the dark the cold spirits
gather round for warmth to tell
stories and sing songs
Old ways that became
new to me

halfway through life.

And as we were all done merrymaking
ready to call it a night I realize
I want pancakes.
Tomorrow.

I have nothing to put in them.
The snow is deep. Roads slick.
Stores all closed.
The right medicine—
berries in winter

The flavor of flames. A warm spell.

My soul.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

SPRING EQUINOX

March. When daylight catches up to the dark.
Descendants of crocus I planted thirty years ago
dot the brown lawn, dimples of purple, yellow,
and white. Blue squill will steal the show in a week.
Early spring indulgent as childhood. Small birds
dart about so fast I can't identify them. Like whims
they come and go. All these new beginnings,
the rush of expectation. I am the brown grass.
I dream of green. Of poems that are tulips.
That time will gift me another season,
another chance to bloom.

MARIANNE TEFFT

IN THE STILL NIGHT AIR

The Saturday-night pageant of watch dogs and horns rests
Not a zephyr ruffles the spotless midnight lagoon
Only the green carpels of the hibiscus silently strum the air
As if to beckon their bold neon blooms back to the nest
Yet through the balmy quiet whistles a tiny voice
Staccato insouciant sweet
As familiar to tropical hearts as the mangoes in the next yard
And restless rain in the elephantine ears of the palms
To the rhythm of the familiar hillside chant
Universe re-seams the ether
That divides Capricorn and Cancer
And brings you to dream this sleepless night
Under the indigo sky with me

JENNIFER SUSAN SMITH

AN ABUNDANCE OF BLUEBELLS

*—With respect and appreciation for the Shirley
Miller Wildflower Trail, located in Crockford
-Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area
of Walker County, Georgia.*

Spring beckoned early in Georgia last March,
her calling cards edged in assurance and light,
scattered by winds to painted porches,
with promises of Virginia bluebells on wildflower path.

Row of eastern redbuds preceded trail,
their heart-shaped leaves displayed in lavish rose shades,
confident preamble to majesty ahead,
reminders released of fragility expressed by wilderness.

Across boardwalk and beyond stream's reflection,
abundance of bluebells embellished Earth's floor.
conversation gently whispered between human and nature,
blooms sealed pledges that preservation prevails.

Promenade of flora caught sunlight's gleam,
Phacelia, wild blue phlox, and wild geraniums in pale lavender.
Georgia's native Celandine poppies shared yellow cheer,
purity captured in white trillium and rue anemone.

Slender trees towered upward, approaching sky blue heights,
rocks and roots wound beside cascading waters,

waterfall's invitation to breathe rhythmic with flow,
cautious courage urged when seeking panoramic views.
As trail looped back to redbuds at entrance,
tiger swallowtail butterfly lingered amid purple and pink,
landing on bluebells against dried leaves,
spring's fulfillment of promise, commemorating hope.

NOLO SEGUNDO

ODE TO MY RED MAPLE

She lives just outside
my bedroom window,
ever loyal, ever faithful—
always in the same spot,
day after day,
season after season—
she's there to give
comfort, even joy,
especially in November,
the sloughing month
when the leaves fall
in sad splendor, with
grace—but my tree,
my Japanese Maple,
holds out, turns scarlet
with the blood of life,
its leaves dancing
little dances of love
in the autumnal winds
as though it were
laughing at death . . .

SHERRY POFF

SPRING DEBATE

All up and down the street,
neighbors are taking sides.
The lines are clear-cut between
the smoothly groomed
and the wildly beautiful.

Some yards have been visited
by the mowers, the blowers,
and the trimmers. Others
still ragged and colorful
with violets, daisies, dandelions.

Soon we will all bow our heads
to the inevitable, but even then
close inspection will reveal
honeysuckle in some fence lines
and curly dock in a sunny corner.

CAROLYN MARTIN

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

“Nothing is improved by being praised.”
—Carl Dennis, “Canadian Hemlock”

Listen up, Carl. Think again.
My feral cat’s green eyes blaze
whenever I praise her cleanliness.
Between naps in bark dust and forays
into bowls of food, she licks and cleans
and preens her mahogany-tinged black coat
growing thick for winter’s freeze, reminding me
delicacy in the wild is not beyond the miraculous.

And consider how my miniature roses blush
when I compliment their autumn change
from white to yellow fringed in red.
This, after months of watering and urging
new buds to conquer summer heat.
They followed my advice and rose
to heights beyond what experts claim.
Every day we share a bow: mine to their fortitude;
theirs to smiles I can’t contain.

Even undeservings, Carl, need an uplift:
slugs brunching on Hosta leaves,
dandelions denying they’re weeds,
abandoned robins’ nests clinging to maple trees.
Useful or not, their natural talent’s served
by poets who congratulate them
in a line or two. So give it up, Carl,
for the gnarly hemlock you nearly dismissed.
Think what wildly raucous praise might do!

MICHAEL EYRE

WOOD WIDE WEB

I lie upon a mossy mound,
eyes closed, listening for
the forest's fragile pulse—
the thrum of mycelium
deep in the loam's dark womb.

Threads spread in every direction,
a vast unseen network
of capillaries pulsing
with rich elixir
distilled from dank decay.

They merge with the roots
of towering trees above;
trade minerals for sun-spun sugars,
whisper warnings of danger,
store memory of past injury.

An ancient evolution,
a living community,
a mindful presence;
sensing, choosing,
communicating.

A wondrous wood wide web,
I only now perceive,
breathes and beats
beneath my feet.
Can you feel it too?

SARA BAKER

BOLD DAFFODILS

dazzling yellow bejeweled tiara
atop green nylon stockings
bold daffodils waving

LAUREN K. NIXON

ABERDARON, FOURTEENISH

There is a photograph on the noticeboard behind me, taken years ago with my kids' Kodak on those old-school rolls of film. Among the gravestones there's a church, a low-roofed, double humped thing in the Welsh style, one small bell the only call to prayer, and beyond it: the sea, the tip of the Llŷn Peninsula, and the mist.

I could fall in, right now, sink through the inks and chemicals to being fourteenish and not quite at home in my own skin. The newspapers in the white metal rack outside Café Hen Blas declare it the 'hottest summer on record', as they will roughly every year from this point on. Now, it is 2001 and still surprising. By the end of this year, the world will shift tectonically, but for now it is July, and things rumble on the way they always have, as predictable as the tides marked on the ominous noticeboard on the path to the beach.

It's very straight, the bay, like the sea has taken a bite of the rock and boulder clay and then given up, not liking the taste. It's surrounded by hills, most of them Marilyn's, and I imagine each with a guardian in white hiking gear and platinum curls. There are songs and poetry in these hills.

We are staying in a tiny cottage at the end of a tiny row of cottages, recommended by a colleague of my mum's who used to play hockey for Wales. It's a pretty little space, what now would be called retro. At night, we watch TV in Welsh, and understand almost none of it, except some of the curse words, which I picked up in school.

The people next door are lovely—an ex-policeman and his wife, baked brown and wrinkled by the sun. Sipping coffee outside that first morning, they become fast friends with my mum. It's Mrs Next-Door who tells us that somehow, the tax disc on the car has

expired without us noticing, which leads to a very tense drive back to England a week later, but for now, the ex-policeman has lent us a tarp to cover the front window.

Mum, exhausted from the summer term, spends much of the week asleep. It is not unusual for the school holidays. Burnout, before we had a term for it.

This is my first taste of freedom.

I get up early, make us breakfast, leave Mum dozing, and go straight down to the sea. It's cold, always, and the stretch that seems safest is thick with leg-wrenching seaweed. For a while, I mess about with the bodyboard that will live in our garage for years after this. Then I just swim, up and down the beach, just deep enough to support my weight, just shallow enough to not feel in danger. There is no lifeguard here and I am not a confident swimmer. I only learned in year six – the last in my year—which in my short so-far life is not that long ago. In geography, I learned the patterns of the waves, so I find myself counting. Every seventh is bigger, bolder. I think of the wizards in my books: the seventh sons of seventh sons.

I am the first and only, but also the first of three. Different and the same. Witches come in multiples of three. Perhaps there is magic in me, too.

By eleven I am salt-tired and I head back for a shower in the narrow space behind the pantry, and to see if Mum feels up to going out for lunch. Most days she does, and sometimes we go for a walk along the cliffs (though not too close, her astigmatism is forming, a phantom pulling her to the left and making being at height perilously daunting). Then she's back to bed to read or sleep, and I'll maybe read for an hour, too, our bellies full of fish and chips or American-style milkshakes. I'll sit on the little sofa on the landing, Paul Simon's *Rhythm of the Saints* on my Walkman, reading *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, by Louis de Bernieres.

Later, I go out again—not to swim this time. I check the tides because I have a vague dread of being caught on the beach when it rises, then I walk along the stretch of sand, all the way to the blunt eastern end of the beach, where the cliffs rise, then back again to the place where the River Daron empties over the sand into the Irish Sea, like the veins on the back of a leaf. Back and forth. Back and forth. Just existing, drinking in the sea air, picking up shells and driftwood.

I feel grown up, using my paper-round money to buy a small piece of local art and a plaster Cadwalladr, and the CD of the music from *Oh Brother Where Art Thou*. That and Paul Simon are the soundtrack to my wanderings. Mum calls them a waste of money, but all three are still with me, two decades later.

I am no stranger to being alone.

Sometimes I walk towards the ruined farmhouse on the cliff path (but no further on my own) and sit among the brambles, with my back to the warm, grey stone, telling myself stories about the people who had lived there as I gaze out over the bay. The sea is restful, even when the waves are large and the storms that hurry up over the water noisily arrive and leave me soaked to the skin. I have not seen it often, but it seems to heal a piece of my soul I didn't know was cracked.

Somewhere out there is Bardsey, where locals whisper to tourists that Merlin is buried, which can't be true, because even at fourteen I'm still half-convinced he's stalking the tamed country around Alderley Edge. It has a lighthouse, the traces of a monastery, and a Marilyn of its own. The English name feels a little stilted, like it's trying too hard: the Isle of the Bards, as if the monastery were a music venue. I prefer the Welsh: Ynys Enlli—The Island of the Currents. On a clear day, you can see the wicked riptide between the land and the island. It is aptly named. Little wonder that this place is known for shipwrecks. Despite it, I want to take a boat trip out there, to see the shearwaters and choughs, but

there isn't time before we leave—and anyway, Mum says, we saw porpoises in Scotland two years before.

I walk up the other side of the cliffs to the church, Eglwys Hywyn Sant, which has been there as long as the church in my home village has, nearly a thousand years. I am humbled by this depth of time. I read on an information board that the poet R.S. Thomas was vicar here for a while, and that there are tombstones that are even older, commemorating Christian priests from the fifth century, discovered on nearby farmland. I stand before them and speak their names like a prayer, Veracius and Senacus; 'more truthful' and 'old man.'

What a way to be remembered, like the guards beside two doors, one who always tells the truth and one who always lies. I walk to the fence line and shiver at how close it is to the cliff-edge. Coastal erosion has cast many of the older dead into the sea, though there are measures to slow that down, now. I consider how unsettling it must be, to see coffins teetering on the cliff above you, a literal cliff hanger, like in a cartoon car chase. Long dead who are also your own about to take the plunge and set off on a new adventure.

I take a photograph, to remind me.

When I track the river Daron back down to the village, to where it meets its major tributary the Cyll-y-Felin (the *Thump* and the *Hazel of the Mill*—I look the meanings up in my Welsh dictionary and fall in love with language all over again), I find a crowd and join them. My mum is there, having woken and decided to stretch her legs.

It's a duck race, she tells me. We sponsor a duck and watch it get stuck halfway to the nets at the beach, spinning giddily in an eddy while the horde of plastic, yellow waterfowl bob chaotically under Pont Fawr under the force of the two Afons. We run with all the others down to the sand, laughing.

On our last day, we will find a large slug on the carpet of the living room and trace its path back to the kitchen sink.

JASMINE HARRELL

SWEET APRIL

April is sweeter with you.
I worry if I miss the wisteria in bloom,
If I overlooked a single daffodil, even one out of tune—the broken
horn-like petals would have as much of my affection as the erect ones—
If I saw willows and never pictured them in slim necked bottles,
I might be vexed with myself
Because there would be a forgotten loveliness to be cherished,
A solemn act to deliver,
A verse uprooted from my heart and cast aside
To dry out of my memory's bed.
No, April is sweeter if I reach for the fragrant cluster
Of floral grapes,
If I shout to the terrestrial trumpets with glories
That could resurrect the dead for a moment—skulls would
Sing their hallelujahs—And if I get the chance to come across
A willow, I'll seek out a glass soda bottle, drain and clean it
Before filling it with said leaf, one like a mournful palm.

Yours in Warmth Always.

JASMINE HARRELL

TWILIGHT

Twilight is a delicious
Mix of lavender-pink
And pastel blue sugar,
Like flavors of cotton candy.
And paired with them at the horizon
Is a golden citrus sorbet,
Lemon mango, I think.

GRACIE JONES

SWEET TOOTH

Another sweet stolen from the jar,
you put me in your pocket.
Save me for later,
for when I am convenient for you.

Peel my wrapper from my skin,
throw it into the black bag in the corner
with all the others you've discarded.

You lick at my sugar-coating
until I am smooth.
Stealing my flavour, tasting it
on your tongue.

My hardened shell—
the only thing protecting my insides
broken down by your teeth
as you crunch me in your mouth.

LAUREN K. NIXON

(LUSCIOUS) LEMON

thrust your thumbnail through my bruised flesh shuck it off,
down to the pith let it fall in oily spirals leaving only the meat
my juice is herb-bitter not quite rotten salted in old mistakes
new aches sorrow seeds in every mouthful

peel segments free there is sweetness in this flesh there is
acid, too I could burn you I know how to sting

if you are pretty if you have pretty words I might let your
teeth sink all the way to my heart

MELANIE GREEN

EBULLIENCE

The shadowing of winter
into
unshackled spring.
Redwing blackbirds and blossom-delirium,
rain
through new-lyric leaf.
All
waking to the brimming trill,
realm
of the lark-voyage,
crab apple bloom and indivisible
greening.

LAUREN K. NIXON

RAIN, MORNING

oh, to be warm and safe
limbs languid
cotton swaddled

to rise slowly from sleep
greet the grey, quiet day
with the patter of rain

MELANIE GREEN

AFTER THE LONELINESS

We awake from rain-heavy
grayness
of things

to a frisking
unflagging blue.

We walk through rhododendron
garden
radiant with color:

livid purple
 tangerine
 scarlet

a prismatic livening.

Moss
 waterfall
 wood ducks

scent
of yellow daphne.

Sunlight
praising smooth water.

BARBARA ANNA GAIARDONI

IN MOTORCYCLE

I'm clinging to that
like there's no tomorrow

high peaks covered
by dazzlingly white glaciers
and bright blue tarns

DIANE FUNSTON

CRUISERS

In the bloated emptiness
of winter ocean
plankton and krill
lurk under the waves
fantasizing about taking the world over
while whales wield baleen nets
slurping survival in a soupy slurry
A mindful moving of tonnage

On the surface
dolphins seem less serious
jumping in unison
perhaps to God's silence
Leap and bound
head over tail
splash in wreaths of joy

A difference from leviathans of the deep
mindless fish-missiles of sharks
Even the sentient soulful
squid and octopus
are seldom seen beaming ecstasy

A swell breaks and the show continues
dolphins stitching lines
parallel to cruise ships
Side to side clutching cargo
Tools made from barren conch shells
scooping a seafood salad bar
laughing at their own flippant jokes
throwing heads back
like the cruisers above them

CAROL MIKODA

PASSAGE

we pass
through winter's underlit tunnel
to the other side where geese
walk over stale ice to resurrect a nest
where birds' chorales shake dawn air
the driveway is mud again
fall's brown fields uncovered
beneath bluest sky
our disbelief shows
but like ivy leaves turning
toward the south window
we cannot help ourselves
we rejoice
the dance in our minds apparent
as we throw off down jackets too soon
the glitter of sun
on every branch and twig
outlines the sleeping chaos that waits only
for a few more degrees of sun's slant
and warmer light to burst
into green song

SANDRA NOEL

ISLAND GIRL VISITS A CITY

Two days off my rock
and I'm drowned in a city of shops.
Parched in absence of salt,
no blue in this sea of landlock.
I stew in craggy air,
drink a reservoir of water.

No trace of island tide.

MIRANDA PHELPS

SPRINGTIME IN MAINE

Jenny was staring out her kitchen window as the unwelcome April snow, lifted and swirled by a screeching wind, covered everything in sight. She watched the three orange male cardinals, the two brownish females, and the bright yellow goldfinch fly back and forth from bush to bird feeder. A sense of wonder filled her as the fragile creatures scratched and pecked the seeds despite the deepening snow. Gratitude. She reminded herself every day to have gratitude for the goodness in her life, and bright birds surviving a snowstorm was something to be grateful for.

She turned toward the sweet-smelling pot of split pea soup on the stove, grabbed a long wooden spoon and was stirring when she heard a loud crash and a voice yelling “Oh shit.” Little Frankie, her fierce Yorkie protector, started barking.

“What the hell,” she said under her breath, a little scared but also annoyed that her quiet day at home with Frankie and her beloved plants—each one affectionately named—was about to be upended. She opened the door and saw a man in a brown jacket with a yellow plaid scarf covering his face and nose, lying in the snow at the bottom of her stairs. “I meant to put sand on that ice patch,” she muttered to herself, wondering if an uninvited person could sue you if they were injured on an ice patch in your front yard.

She grabbed her boots, attached the grippers—an essential for Maine winters—and was pulling her jacket on when she heard another whoosh, *bam*. A huge sword of an icicle had broken off from the roof and slammed down. She took a deep breath, expecting to hear another curse and a curdling cry, then realized that the icicle had stabbed the ground next to the sprawled visitor but had not hit him.

Jenny walked carefully down the snow-covered stairs and saw that her uninvited guest was none other than Devon. Devon, who had left her six months before to “find himself” by learning step-dancing on Prince Edwards Island. . . from Marissa, a young Canadian woman who had taught a workshop in Maine. He hadn’t been in love with Marissa; he’d been clear about that. But he wanted to spend time with her, and he couldn’t make promises about what that meant.

“Okay,” Jenny had said, the simple word catching in her throat, sucking back tears. She didn’t try to hold onto him. Jenny owned the house they lived in, a cottage along the river in their small Maine town. And Jenny ran her own business, a plant and flower shop on Main Street. Devon often said how much he admired her independence and success but had little confidence in himself. After years of restaurant work, he had gone back to school in midlife to become a vet tech. He loved animals—and had a rare gift for relating to them—but hadn’t been at all sure that was the right career choice.

She walked up next to him and held her hands out, shaking her head. He grabbed her hands, and she pulled him up. “You okay?” she asked.

“More or less.” He was rubbing his left shoulder. “My shoulder is killing me. Fine otherwise. I’ve been trying to get ahold of you.”

“Come on in,” she said. Jenny couldn’t stop herself from laughing. Devon had tried to get in touch for weeks now. He started out texting. She didn’t answer. He emailed. She didn’t answer. He put a note in her mailbox with a return address. She had nothing to write back. He had finally succeeded in getting her attention.

They walked into the house, ducking to avoid her hanging plants. When Devon left, Jenny was determined not to wallow in loneliness. So, she did what she knew best: bought plants and brought them home. Each had a specific spot on the floor or on a stand or hanging, and each had a name.

“The place looks great,” Devon said, as he took his left arm out of his shirt. A huge purple welt was beginning to swell. Jenny

took ice cubes from the freezer, wrapped them in a dish towel, and pressed the cold cloth against Devon's shoulder.

"You're the only one who would say that," she said. Her house had become a jungle with full blast humidifiers and a smell of green. The many plants allowed little walking space.

"Are you going to introduce me to the new friends?"

"This is Beatrice." She pointed to a potted plant with the red and orange flower shooting up from the green leaves. . ."

"The bromeliad," he finished.

"Yes. And this is Izzy." She walked under the long strands of ivy trailing down from the door that led to the living room. "This is Nellie," she said, pointing to the dramatic pink and green leaves edged in green.

"A nerve plant. I love those," he said.

"And Artie," she said, now in the living room, showing him a plant with red blooms shooting up above shiny green leaves.

"An *Arthurium*," he said.

"And then you know the rest of course."

"Phil the *Philodendron*, Patty the *Pony Tail Palm*, Maggie the *Money Tree* . . ." He named each one of her many plants as they had been beloved to him, as well. Her faded striped silk couch and two facing chairs looked like a clearing in a small forest.

As they walked back into the kitchen, Devon's homemade ice pack was beginning to drip. He dropped the ice in the sink and squeezed out the towel. "I'll make a dry one," she said.

They sat at the kitchen table and Jenny made tea. . . ginger for him, his favorite, and *Bengali Spice*, her favorite, for herself. They chatted about her business and his internship at a vet's office, which he was enjoying.

"I've been trying to get ahold of you." He repeated what he'd said face down in the snow.

"I know," she said. "But I didn't know why."

"I wanted to ask you a question."

"Okay," she said, standing to get more hot water for her team, getting a little space. "What's the question?"

"I wanted to ask if you missed me, even a little."

She stood by the stove and poured hot water onto her tea bag for the second cup. "I have a lot of company here, Frankie, my friends."

"Your beautiful plants."

"Yes, my beautiful plants. I talk to them. I feel their caring. I try to be grateful for what I have and not long for what I don't have. I try. But it doesn't always work." She took a deep breath.

"Then why didn't you answer?" he asked. She looked down at her mug, steam still rising, and said nothing.

"Can I ask you one more question?" He spoke after a long pause. She nodded.

"I never understood what you saw in me. You went to a great college, have a good family, started your own business. You grew up with more money. You always seemed so sure of yourself. What did you see in me?"

Tears streaked slowly down Jenny's cheeks. She took her napkin and wiped them away. The silence was familiar as Jenny had never been a talker.

"I like your company," she said finally. "Isn't that enough?"

Devon walked to the sink and dropped the second group of ice cubes, twisted the cloth to release the water. He pulled his arm back into his shirt and sat back down.

"I always thought I should be more for you," he said quietly.

"Maybe I didn't let you know how much you offered. You. As you are."

They both stared out the window, as the snow continued to pelt down, on the bushes, on the bird feeders. There were even more birds now, still darting back and forth from the nearby branches, competing for a place on the feeder.

Jenny stood up, walked over behind Devon, and put her arms around him. She kissed the familiar cheek. "I tried so hard not to miss you," she said quietly, "but of course I did."

More silence, as they both finished the tea in their cups.

"Split pea soup for lunch," she said finally. "Do you want to stay?"

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

DANDELION GREENS

Before we blow our wispy wishes into the wind;
before we mow away the yellow from the lawn;
before we notice the darkest green encircling a bud;
we hunt for tiny pale tender shoots.

We dig them up from the cold ground;
cut away the root.

We work for a taste of spring
dandelion greens swimming in olive oil
and a winter hint of vinegar
folded in a crusty cloud of Italian bread—
sandwiches dripping spring with Nonna.

SARA BAKER

THE RUGGED TRAIL

The trail ahead of me is a silk scarf over green hills; it undulates with the earth, leading into the horizon of land meeting sky. It could have been woven for thousands of years, perhaps in a place where time is truly forever, a place of eternal serenity. Each of my footfalls is cushioned from below and the next encouraged, for this is a path given to the walker, to the one who relishes the chance to follow the rising sun.

the rugged trail said
'follow me deeper, deeper
to your yearning soul.'

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

INSIDE THE FOG

The mud season brings with it the fog
that quiets my vision, and I'm grateful
to have a single moment when the whole
world is not on display. I walk the bog
and focus on the little creatures there.
The ice is gone so the muskrats swim
along shore, and I can watch the birds skim
the surface, then rise.

For this moment, the fog hides everything
wrong with this too wrong world, and I am back
inside the childhood where no one dies,
and no one ever will, and tomorrow will bring
only justice, and love is just a fact.
God above makes sure no one ever lies.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

WHEN THE WORLD TURNS TO MUD

Mud season is gentle on us this year
except for the deaths of people I've loved
since birth, except for all those I have
lost track of and forgotten. I hear
the family of crows through the trees.
They don't have to deal with mud of course.
They have their own problems, I suppose
but from here they seem joyful, worry free.
Mud season comes hard after the snow melt
every year, and it catches me unaware.
I never expect the world to mire
like that, the ground a foot sucking killer
of shoes. I trudge straight through it. My father
died this season. I feel his grip pulling hard.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

MUD RENEWAL

Mud season smells of last year's decaying grasses and leaves, nearly gone, crushed under hooves, paws, and feet, teeming with next years microbial life and bacteria, festering with all that good shit. The smell is death, which is the smell of new life. Rot is rich with hope. It feeds the soil and bugs, which Phoenix themselves. Rot renews this earth. The mud wakes the woodchucks in my yard. They climb out after the false demise of hibernation, and the geese troop in too, all of them with newborns. Life is hard for the young. They have such difficult times ahead. Envy us who shall be reborn soon.

**TWO:
WRITER'S BLOCK**

ELIZABETH WING

THE SEACAVE

the seacave waits for the tide
as bull kelp coil the sand and

the land slumps dune-weary towards the hungry sea
I scrape out a clamshell the same blue

as the alien soil where you came into bloom
gull clips air and refineries spike the horizon.

the water won't let its turbulence be hung on the wall
the waves erase the story you wrote so diligently
in the sand

meanwhile on those barnacle rocks
we clung to the eclipse

pinning it all on that the glass expanses of no past/no future
between shore-rot otter-prints and bottle dregs

I met a woman who works the oil spills
the moon a thing she could hoist over shoulder or slip
under her tongue

her pupils crooked. the sea cave waits for the tide
in the tangle of kelp the small things hide and scuttle

the seal gives half her body weight in milk
I'm sure it isn't graceful.

Tell that to the breakage of crustaceans
who, being poets, eat each other's shrapnel

And me? All I know is how to pull
the way the gull pulls the eye out of beached sunfish

Give me this, I say. Give me a moral to the story
No. The sand resettles in the mole-crab's bubbled wake.

CAROLYN MARTIN

LET THE BEAUTY WE LOVE BE WHAT WE DO

—*Rumi*

At each stroke of dawn,
stars and Moon Glow power down
and constant noise embraces the earth.
Roosters announce their strut. Trucks rev up.
Sky diamonds twinkle out final calls to be wished upon
so lovers who wake in each other's arms
can harmonize dreams coming true.
While I stretch my stroke-numbered left arm and leg,
I recall Rumi's dictate and scope out a dozen ways
to redo beauty each recovery day.
Someone said, "What we pay attention to makes it holy."
And isn't holiness beautiful? Heretofore,
I'll attend to peace lilies that need watering,
the feral cats that need feeding,
my next poetry book yearning for editing.
Not to mention boxes of diapers, soap, shampoo,
toothbrushes, and paste. I'll keep them organized
within easy reach. There's beauty in utility.
When I hunker down tonight, I'll dream of walking
around our yard, my left foot powering into the ground,
my right providing stability. The maples
will applaud my triumphant return as I cheer
burgundy beauty falling through the holy autumn air.

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT

HAVENS

—A duplex poem with appreciation to Jericho Brown

In saturated darkness, buried seeds grow.
Crickets hear the moon's moan and the song of stone.

In thickets the moon moans, I sing stone's song
and listen to hummingbird suck her fill.

After this hummingbird sucks her fill,
I hope my mind will give up to sleep.

I dream my mind will give in to sleep,
catching the scent of Russian olive.

Inhale deep the Russian olive scent
while swoon-filled, lust-petaled blossoms fly.

Soon swoon-petaled, lust-filled blossoms sail,
blow to oases of kindness and reason;

oases of kindness and reason still glow
in saturated darkness, buried seeds grow.

MANDY SCHIFFRIN

THE HISTORY SPINNER

The spider in my head is febrile, sensing each twitch of the web. A memory catches, and every strand quivers. She scuttles and follows the silk to the source, replaying the story of untold casualties who were tangled before. The bridge line is taut, and she feels her way over the widening spiral, paws plucking silent chords on the skeins. Husks twirl and bob, a concerto in her wake.

There are holes in her trap: imperfect repairs, rips over time, missing beats. She knows where they are; she can find her way around. This fat-bodied arachnid is a ruthless editor. Nine times out of ten, the victim dies.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

NO ONE SAID (#5)

I would dream of buying a chariot. Have to decide
on an axle, the wheels, and the whip. Went with

tandem duals like a semi but with chrome spinner
wheels the lowriders use on their vintage 1960's

hydraulic lift Chevy Impalas. The whip longer
than Indiana Jones's with the crack of August thunder.

But the chariot has no draught poles to harness
the horsepower. No Pegasus or Budweiser Clydesdales.

Was it electric? Elon's latest model? Fresh off
the showroom floor chosen over an all-electric

buckboard? Ah, the beauty of a dream. Nonsensical
as an orchid. Roots anchored in bark chips, perlite,

and moss, or just the air. Not the corn and soybean
furrows of black dirt. I haven't watched Ben-Hur

in decades, but a 65-millimeter frame must be stuck
between neurons in my hippocampus. What other cries

and whispers are lurking in there? Maybe a clip
of that raven haired Sicilian girl from 1973 who

didn't know the motif metaphors of red and white,
roses and lilies, of an Ingmar Bergman film.

LYNETTE G. ESPOSITO

JUST MUSING WHILE TAKING A NAP

I am lying on the rich tall grass
talking to the river.
It is rushing, a Mississippi hurry,
trying to find the sea down south,
Why am I here I ask
and it answers with a spray of cold—
Wake up—get up—
But lazy in the noonday sun, I watch the river
working the shore
over and over
like an artist.
while I do nothing.

NOLAND BLAIN

TORSO OF ECHO

—*For Rilke*

Your task is to love what you don't understand.
I have to understand. That is how I love.
I love your understanding, that is my task.
I love you and I cannot understand you more.

You have been understood. I stood and stood,
understanding you, then un-understanding you,
untasking myself with that tisk-task—
then retasking. Standing around, under the shroud

of your understanding. Because my task is to love.
And I love your love of love, your understanding of it,
which is your task, and mine is tucked under your stand.
My task understands the under, under the ground,

out from love. In love, you cannot understand the task
of loving: unloving love, reloving it, unloving it again.

THOMAS MIXON

STARBOARD

You are the very worst fish
in the ocean. I curse
the fervent indentations
you have left the hull's formerly
bare width with, before I dip

the oars into the depths. I have
no business or agenda worth your salt
water tide. It is high time
I dock this boat & give
cognitive behavioral therapy

a try. A reason why
not to nets me each morning.
I sandbar myself on your teeth
marks & meek as I am I run
my snared sailor's hand across

each one. By the time I'm done
there are bells for vespers, wares for sale
in the harbor. I am starboard
of the memory of mouths
you have left me dry without.

S.D. DILLON

FISHING FOR THE AUTHOR

The angler historicizes these tropics.
He totes his line to the fly
Zone in waders. Challenge feeds its own collapse
Unsoftened by a knot.
Gear dragging, he casts into saltfoam
At its apex.
Where no trophy emerges.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

USING THE WINNING POEM AS BAIT

I put the bait on a hook, cast it into your lagoon.
You think the wriggling worm is braggadocio.
I think, but you are an audience of one,
not a coliseum crowd that thumbs up or thumbs down.
I am a four-year-old reciting A B C to Z
looking for a smile, an exuberant *good*.
A smitten teen wanting a kiss not on the cheek.
But your lips are unbalmed, no twinkle in your eye.
No comment on the worm's peristaltic pace,
undulating voice, its metaphorical ability to land a bite.
Expectation puts me at the summit.
Your response pushes me down the moguls.
My balance teeters, my confidence totters,
my skis cross, and I tumbleweed.
Me thinking accomplishment is a big dipper,
a little dipper, an asterism in the poetry constellation
you will point at and exclaim *I see it!*
But no. You point your dagger and tell me
to walk the braggart plank.

LYNETTE G. ESPOSITO

LET'S ASK FREUD

In my dreams I see a tall bridge, very tall.

My mother and I are trying to cross it
in our car. I am driving.

The bridge abruptly ends and we fly right off
like a glider

sailing through the air—a heavy bird.

We descend into the water but bob up
wet and free.

How serious is the dream?

Do I need a therapist?

R. JAMES SENNETT, JR.

MAKING

letters takes time.
Thank god!
Remember drawing
a cursive Q, a Z?
Alien hieroglyphics
took the life
of so many pencils
striving for the perfection
that never arrives.
It chases us
until we decide
we actually like
this life game:
forming letters
that become ours
when we inject them
into dreams
where they play
with Plato's shadows.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

NINE OF CUPS

Sunlight warms our arms
in that paper-dagger space
between iced coffee
and the moon. We try our
hands at art criticism,
navigation by starlight,
conspicuous consumption
that somehow does not
involve cheese. We pour
one out for all the missing-
and-presumed-dead guitarists,
seek the last Chinese buffet
in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.

MATT HENRY

SHE, IN TIDES

She is not water—
she is the deep that remembers my pulse,
a blue that makes liars of maps.

She carries storms behind her eyes
yet moves with a guarded hush,
leaving men to kneel where no altar stands.

I have lived inside her shifts
the way widowers watch windows,
learning light where there is none,
mistaking motion for mercy.

like a tide
she ebbs and flows—

some nights
she presses in like breath on bare skin,
fills every hollow room in me
in this kingdom by the sea.
She pulls the dark out by its roots
until I forget there was a shore at all.

Then, without wind or warning,
the warmth loosens from my ankles,
and I am left cataloging shells
that still carry her temperature.

Hours she draws me outward,

slow as devotion, fierce as need,
and I do not know I am gone
until the land is only rumor.

Days she barely arrives—
never fully here,
never fully lost—
as the moon bends the tide,
its silver hands stirring,

salt and sepulcher cradle her,
drawing her from shadowed fear into the marrow
of longing.

Man cannot alter the tide;
man can only stand where it breaks,
as she curls up to embrace him
for a moment he mistakes for forever,
then releases him back to the shore,
watching the shoreline
forget him into the sea.

GRACIE JONES

HER CANVAS

Faced with a lifeless canvas,
an unknown smile
invites her to throw her paint,
make her mark.

She traces curves, presses harder
engraving her outline into the sheet
scribbling every detail into place.

Her sketch fills the empty being
with her pinks, greens, yellows
glistening out of the white.

She adds her darker colours;
the page smudges it back at her,
paint runs down the page
and covers the apron.

Her hand dabs at the drips
but it smears even more.

JOHN CHMURA

FORECAST

Riding the late afternoon
laissez-faire breeze
home from The Island
on a swatch of watercolor canvas
softly brushed in rose and lavender
by a gifted god's finesse
and stretched to frame
with the same strength
that plunges supranatural
sunburned artists' arms
elbow-deep in pines
to carve a future from fire,
repairing the seedbed
in the aftermath
of furious thermal events
where fierce fragile contenders
have tested their limits
and trampled the earth
and each other
in exuberant evacuation.

Isolated but never alone
puddle jumping migrants
wade on a spring layover,
wary but not alarmed
by the last detectable smolder

dissipating under the drifting canopy
and lingering in indigo clouds
muting to indulgent grays,
easing toward the impossible
parallel horizon
and the great carbon sink
that is the sea.

DUSTIN P BROWN

ART HISTORY AND PRESENT

I painted a series of landscapes
that we can jump into anytime you like.

They span eras, styles, geography,
and even color spectrums

so if you want to vacation in a black-
and-white 1760's Paris, visit

the Bastille before it's blown up or whatever,
sneak into a Mozart show before he gets blown up or what-
ever

then we can, just pack a spare wig. Or if
you want to weekend in a surrealist

cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains
where all the ridges are actually orange

and there are salmon flying through the sky,
glowing golden like so many fireflies,

then we can, I'll grab the sleeping bags.
Or else we can take a trip to an impressionistic

version of 1880s Tokyo, meet the last
samurai before he gets blown up or whatever,

find out if sushi existed back then
and eat the textured, watercolor maki rolls

with ever-swirling soy sauces,
we can go now, don't even need to book anything.

I'd paint any place you want, go wherever you go,
love you as a cubist mess of perspectives and angles

or attempt to hug you as a throbbing mass
of abstract colored shapes and lines,

I don't care what you look like,
just that you're there.

BUFFY AAKAASH

DROP THE MOON BEHIND CRUELTY

“Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.”

—Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

January 20, 2025, Inauguration Day

Create a backdrop so pure
I won't say white
Vitriol is often white
We must predict the color
of cruelty we know
will fly in
It will try and hide behind
the basest of natures
chameleon that it is
On some dark night
it will streak black
hidden across the sky
And we must drop
the moon behind it
Translucent golden words
that beg for mercy
Make the perfect bid
for empathy
Exposed for what it is
it will tremble with hatred
shriveled and hide.

When it returns disguised

as the lunar-white knight of goodness
we must roll in pitch black
heaping upon it the rebellious
wrath of the people wounded
by its lies
Continue the chase
Root it out
With our deeds
it will one day
meet its death.

DAVID M. HARRIS

NOT WRITING A POEM

I am not writing a poem.
I have been not writing poems,
mostly, since the pandemic started.
Have I run out of ideas?
I have stared at the blank
page for part of that time,
but too often just mindful of where
my notebook lies ignored.
In the back of the notebook a pocket
full of cards, each card full
of ideas. Plenty of ideas.
Depression? My doctor says no,
although I could tweak my answers
to his test to reverse the result.
Low energy? I eat well, sleep well
enough.

I have two desks in the room
I call my office, one for writing,
the other for my computer.
The computer desk ties me to the world
of taxes and Facebook, the day's news
and cats on the keyboard. The rolltop
holds pens and ink, the notebooks,
the lava lamp for contemplation,
the thesaurus. All my tools. I need
to clear that desk and my mind,
set aside the outside world, take up a pen
so I can write this poem you are reading.

T.C. MILL

FEBRUARY 14, 2021

Midday, my eyes slide past
the porch door, gaze drawn
into the ice-glazed trees

Above snow luxuriant as pillows
or the fluffy blanket I hogged in sleep
and have fantasized against your flesh

Rime on branches like ash
on logs that survive a campfire,
under sun so bright it doesn't look cold

—There, more vivid than any rose or wine
scarlet sharper than blood or tongue of flame
the cardinal rests, tilts his head

No messenger from Heaven,
reminder that you are never far, no,
just one blazing blessed brilliant bird

In the business of being a bird
perched on a bough too crowded
with snow to be lonely

Pinprick on the skin of day, evidence of how
the world without you still holds glorious things
and I cannot even resent it for that.

ALLAN LAKE

PAPER & PEN

Too frugal/cheap to let a page
lie fallow just because I can see
through to the scribble on other side.
Moleskine notebook made of once
pricey, pristine paper is quaint,
deeply last century, comforting.
My handwriting has gone rogue,
regressed to the point where some—
times I wonder what in hell I wrote
in my moment of revelation.
Ahoy, what slippery fish be this?
Edible, dreadful, gasping on arrival.
Ocean provideth then cometh doldrums
or walls of salt water that are more
than any blue whale can swallow.
So, you grab dangly wee fish and
do what you can to make a meal of it.

NEETHU KRISHNAN

THESE FRAGILE BOATS

This could be a pond, a brook, an ocean,
or a ginormous, planet-sized pool
for all we know. But for now, there are
boats,
so many and so close, we might as well
be anchored to a harbour without a coast.

We eye each other politely
when the grey, churning water
gurgles the sun and the moon, ever so
softly, like our fleet were buoying
in a sea of sparkling mercury
or the mist of dreams.

But mostly, we hold desperately
the wandering gazes of when
the waters beneath us rush and rumble,
huffing off to someplace urgent,
important,
towards the sharp bend, where
the water dips off the horizon
of whatever's containing us,
holding us up,

where the familiar grey-blue as we
know
it, have always known it, thins to a long,
splinter-wide underscore,
despite our oaring

against the currents,
despite our unreadiness
to fall off the lapis lazuli
rim of our familiar liquid home.

We clasp one another's clammy
fingers, with our distress signals flaring
so different, yet, unoriginally, the same,
desperately closing
the gap between our boats, webbing
ourselves
into an allied fleet of wilful force,
in vain, but trying still
to resist the rabid,
anarchic currents
that gallop
towards a pandemonium
of vagrancy,
of insanity,
of avertable, irreversible
and calamitous
chaos.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

UNQUALIFIED

400 applications, zero responses, & a fraid
of ghosts later, we crack our hope

like a wet beach towel against the sky,
drape it over a tree branch & rest

our toes bare in the surf. We sit tight
like large, soft rocks on the shore. Pebbles,

cracked shells, & sea glass whisper
under our butts, leave indents in our palms

I'm almost tempted to tattoo later. Forget not
the cerulean fragment, the high-gloss

abalone, a fragile sliver of a tower shell,
the tiger eye. You stretch your legs,

letting the surf take you up to the knee,
& lie back. I see your back arch

for just a moment as the chill
of the collective rushes up to meet you.

You ask me in a voice that barely competes
with the sea's what you're supposed to do

now—what is a hummingbird who has spent
their whole life preparing their wings to do

if they cannot hummingbird? But while you think
of the speed of their wings, the vibration of their heart,

I focus on their long beak & think of the sea.
There's something so familiar

about a swordfish, a narwhal, a compass pointing North.
We are more than a collection

of assets. We are more than our wetted wings.

DAVID M. HARRIS

POST-SURGICAL

The house is quiet; dogs lie at my feet.
Our daughter spends the night with friends.
My wife lies in bed upstairs, drugged beyond
awareness of pain. Every hour, or every half hour,
I check: is she conscious?
Can I divine her wishes?
Through the opioids, in almost-lucid moments,
she worries she might miss
last week's book club, might fail
to oversee homework, get dinner on the table.
But now she sleeps, and the home pauses
in the effort of her recuperation.
Tonight I eat alone in silence
reserving my attention for our future together.

SHILO NIZIOLEK

PARTS WORK

I'm building a new girl
mud-pressed over husk,
sticks for ears,
like antennae, searching
for a signal that's been lost,
time of crash: the 17th hour.

I'll press into her mud-caked
face, pinecone eyes
to smell your fear,
a gum-ball mouth,
barbed-bite seed-toothed.

New girl, mud-slicked,
you'll find her,
sleeping under bark bits,
algae, presumed dead
like a dog, croissant-curved,
to protect—
her limbs the stems of
stinging nettle, each touch
an exercise in pain.

It won't be til years later,
later still than you could
have imagined, that a
new-girl will yet again
have to be built.

When ice-melt cracks mud open,
when you first tug one thread
and then another, and then
another, the entire mud-girl
ecosystem unravels.

Your new-new girl will be
stone-soft, she will unfold
plant-like from the rubble.
She will be orchid-headed,
wild Fibonacci fern
unfurling from her scalp.
She will be rock-tree,
evolutionary, fed on
sunlight, rainwater,
and the minerals mud-girl,
a necessary loss, leaves behind.

MELANIE GREEN

FOSSIL, OREGON

Sitting on steps of the ranch house
as the sun
eases
toward horizon.
Across the road and up the hill
four horses graze the meadow.
Wide field of
silence.
Scent of sagebrush and juniper.
Pick-up truck speeds by on gravel road.
Cloud of dust
backlit
becomes cloud of light.
Slow
the sifting return to stillness.

BETH MARQUEZ

LOVE LETTER TO WILLINGNESS

Oh great chameleon, oh towering waterfall,
oh lush aria of many suns. Your love is
a spiral staircase full of astonishments.

Your touch deepens the room I have for it.
Whenever I think I have learned all your songs,
you break open the pilot light in my chest

with another gorgeous storm. Oh little black
sheep, oh endless glittering fractal. People
always think they know you at first glance,

I know I did. They passed your raincoat,
they nod but don't really meet your eyes.
Meet me in the thundering air, meet me

where I don't know I am. You turn my river
into many rivers, my many rivers into a sea.
Am I unfolding you or are you unfolding me

with hands that make the cost something
I can bear. Your name on my lips fills the room
with golden strings which hum a strange comfort.

In your arms there is always more sunlight,
more skin singing, more sky to brush away
the chains. If I lose sight of you, know

that the key is under the mat, the window
is cracked, my voice only resting,
waiting for another song.

ADDISON CURRAN

TO THE DEER

To the deer that I saw
On the side of the road
You are the worst ache I ever experienced.
I can't explain the beauty
Shining through your light brown fur
And I can't explain the light
That flickered still behind your eyes
When I drove past you.

To the deer that I saw
On the side of the road
You are the quietest tragedy
To happen on my street.
I can't explain the shock
That accompanied your last moments
And I can't explain the loss
Your mother will feel when she finds you.

To the deer that I saw
On the side of the road
You are the link between
Us and our humanity.
I can't explain what killed you
In any real way
Like I can't explain what death is
When it comes to deer
On the side of the road.

CAROLYN MARTIN

THE BRAINSTORM

—August 21, 2025

A quiet afternoon painting-by-numbers
in the dining room. Magenta flowers are what
I remember last before the tornado attacked.
Fierce winds wound around my underarms, then my waist
before I screamed for help and lost consciousness.
A wild stroke hit and a clot-buster saved
my voice and thought processes, weakened
my left arm and leg. The trade-off:
a mind that works hard every day
for a body that doesn't remember how.

MATT HENRY

IN THE LIMINAL

noiseless space
between opium
and balsam,

a dream
of a constellation
bearing water:

an ethereal, rosy
apparition
whose breath stirs
the gray, snowy winter
into trembling life.

I can scarcely recall
the words I read
from Salinger's short stories
just an hour ago

but the scent of her hair lingers,
pressing into all parts
of my memory
like smoke
I cannot exhale—

curling around my lungs.

URSULA MCCABE

ORBITING AGAIN

in morning's rawness
when the world is quiet and small
I cleave the peach of myself and let
each downy skinned side fall open

your face is all I see
hazel eyes that never looked away
cheekbones pushed up
from so much expression
delight, surprise, sharp hurts
smiles were common
but like finches in the dogwood
never taken for granted

whatever season we are in
you are still a gravitational force
my full moon

BETH MATHISON

FLOATING IN SPACE

She had read about the vastness of space, seen the films and heard other astronauts' stories.

But nothing could have prepared her for the reality of looking out the craft's window into a clearer view of the stars than she had ever experienced on earth. Thoughts and words failed her, and she just took the sight in—the deep black of space, stars scattered and flickering. A dark blue ring that lightened, brightened as it got closer to the brilliant colors of the planet. White clouds swirled slowly over land and water.

She had a protective urge to hold the earth in the palm of her hand, to stave off the darkness all around it. Protecting it from the cold blackness of space that pressed against the living.

Senses returning, she laughed at herself. Here she was, a mortal being floating in a tin can around a planet, dependent on borrowed oxygen and heat and food. She was as fragile as the planet below them. They would have to protect each other.

Pressing her hand against the insulated hull, she felt grateful for her chance to explore. To take a first step into blackness to expand life, precarious as it was, somewhere where it wasn't present.

Letting herself float, she looked out the thick window as long as she could, before work called her back to other duties. Breathing in and out, a small thing in the vastness of space.

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY

NATURE'S POETRY

A sonnet has appeared upon the sky,
created in a way I did not see,
that I might read its lavender and try
to guess the end the sun composed for me.
The river chortles in iambic song.
The lyrics of the mystic meadows thrill.
Wildflowers captivate the whole day long
with villanelles of yellow on the hill.
All earth is poetry that shall endure.
The mountains rhyme with odes the valleys made,
awakening my muse, but I am sure
these humble words I write will only fade

while nature scribes with an almighty pen
immortal verse that tells where God has been.

ALAN SWYER

BLOCKED

When a month went by without a single idea, notion, or springboard for a new song, Lenny Kaplan was disappointed. When a second month yielded nothing resembling a *eureka* moment, he grew perturbed. After three months of inertia, what he felt most was fear.

Over the years, Lenny had gone through occasional periods devoid of inspiration—a week, or maybe ten days, of recharging after an extended spurt of creativity. But lying fallow had always been followed by bursts of productivity, turning each new day into an adventure.

Never had a new song come to him through conscious effort. Sometimes Lenny would awaken with a flash—a word, maybe a figure of speech. Or a thought would surprised him while showering, driving or shooting baskets at a nearby playground.

From time to time, as with Buddy Holly, whose classic “That’ll Be The Day” echoed a retort from John Wayne in a western called *The Searchers*, Lenny’s point of departure was something he read or heard.

Unlike composers who began with a bit of melody or a refrain, with Lenny the beginning was invariably a word or a phrase. That explained why he relentlessly championed lyricists. To him it was almost criminal that in books about George Gershwin there was far too little mention of the composer’s gifted brother, Ira. It was also why he favored Gerry Goffin’s lyrics over Carole King’s melodies, or Cynthia Weil’s words over Barry Mann’s music. The foremost exception, in Lenny’s estimation, was the team of Leiber & Stoller, whose songs seemed to the perfect marriage of words and

music.

Surprisingly, a key source for Lenny's songwriting efforts were romantic breakups. "I Thought It Would Last Forever" moaned a graphic artist named Joanie, which Lenny promptly seized as a title. "Here Comes Heartbreak Again" came courtesy of a kindergarten teacher named Suzie, leading to a new song. "Hello, Loneliness" moaned Audrey, a screenwriter, which Lenny also appropriated. Most amazing of all was the success of Lenny's song "It Was All A Lie"—recorded by women in Pop, Country, R&B, and even Americana—which was screamed in a moment of pique by a French pastry chef named Delphine. Little wonder that one of Lenny's basketball buddies, Bixie Chappell, accused him of purposely torpedoing relationships in the hope of getting another hit or two.

Growing up, Lenny never envisioned a life as a songwriter. In truth, the only careers he dreamed of were as a professional athlete or a rock & roller. By the time he was a junior in high school, thoughts of pro baseball or basketball gave way to reality; he was good, but not quite good enough. To the chagrin of his parents, who hoped he'd become a doctor, lawyer, or at least a dentist, music became Lenny's primary focus, resulting in a switch from piano to guitar.

Trudging from New Jersey to Greenwich Village for open-mic nights, it quickly became clear that Lenny needed not only to get over a case of stage fright, but also to find some way to separate himself from all those warbling cover versions of other people's tunes. Awkwardly at first, then with ever-increasing confidence, he started writing songs of his own.

That was accompanied by an ever-deeper dive into music not familiar to most of his contemporaries. Whereas they largely shared the same influences—the Beatles, Springsteen, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro—Lenny immersed himself in in

different kinds of music. A key inspiration was Willie Dixon, who wrote “Hoochie Coochie Man” for Muddy Waters, “Evil” for Howlin’ Wolf, and “Wang Dang Doodle” for Koko Taylor. Another was the aforementioned Leiber & Stoller, who penned “Yakety-Yak” for the Coasters, “There Goes My Baby” for the Drifters, and “Hound Dog” for Big Mama Thornton. Then came Goffin & King, who came up with “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” for the Shirelles, “Natural Woman” for Aretha, and the “Loco-Motion” for Little Eva.

Despite Lenny’s nervousness, audiences reacted positively to his new compositions. But there was nothing but silence from record companies, agents, or managers. Lenny’s mounting frustration only began to be assuaged when other singers—including some higher on the food chain—asked for permission to use his songs.

To Lenny’s surprise, first one of his tunes, then another, then a third, wound up on other peoples’ albums.

When at last a manager invited him to lunch, then offered to represent him, Lenny was elated. He grew even happier when an overture came from a music attorney whose clients included Tom Waits and the estate of Fred Neil. Lenny, who’d been scuffling to pay the bills through a series of day jobs—truck driver, waiter, Little League umpire—started thinking that maybe it was time to devote himself full-time to his craft.

Maybe, he hoped, by putting away his guitar and returning to the piano, where he was more comfortable composing, he could follow in the footsteps of three would-be artists who settled for important careers as songwriters. Otis Blackwell gave up dreams of stardom once he scored with “Fever” for Little Willie John and Peggy Lee, “Breathless” and “Great Balls Of Fire” for Jerry Lee Lewis, plus “Don’t Be Cruel” and others for Elvis, whom he never even got to meet. Next was Dan Penn, who co-wrote “Dark End Of The Street” for James Carr, “Do Right Woman” for Aretha, and “It Tears Me Up” for Percy Sledge. Then there was New Orleans’ legendary Allen Toussaint, who composed “Mother-In-Law” for Ernie K-Doe, “It’s

Raining” for Irma Thomas, plus one of Lenny’s personal favorites, Benny Spellman’s “Lipstick Traces.”

It was gratifying, but also strange, for more and more of his efforts not merely to get recorded, but also to hit the airwaves, in unexpected ways. That a songwriter has little control over what his song winds up sounding like was made clear to Lenny thanks to a story about the writer of “Angel Of The Morning.” Driving one evening with the radio on, Chip Taylor listened almost to an entire record before realizing that a British group called the Throggs were performing something he’d written: “Wild Thing.”

Realizing that Los Angeles had superseded New York as center of the music business—plus fed up with winter cold and summer humidity—Lenny made the move west.

Staying underneath the radar—no Grammy nominations, no profiles in Billboard or the *LA Times*—Lenny continued to do what he termed “earn and churn” through periods both good and not-so-good. Once songs of his—some of which he cherished, others less so—began being licensed for movies, TV, and commercials, the royalties carried him through cycles when his current efforts were less in demand.

At last Lenny reached the point where he started considering himself as “a lifer,” a craftsman whose work owed in equal parts to *inspiration*—the sparks that materialized out of nowhere—and *perspiration*—the polishing and refining that turned preliminary versions into well-crafted songs.

The term Lenny felt best described him came from his erstwhile French paramour Delphine, who referred to him as *un celebre inconnu*, which translated less felicitously to *a famous unknown*.

Through boom times and lean times, Lenny persisted, joking that his body of work was fungusing as he continued to conceive song after song.

Until the day that ceased.

No longer just disappointed, perturbed, or afraid, Lenny grew disconsolate. What if, he wondered, this was not a three-, or four-, or even six-month dry spell? What if the block he was experiencing was destined to last in perpetuity?

On a mundane level, what he called *mailbox money*—royalties—could only sustain him so long, since their worth diminished over time. Barring some sort of *deus ex machina*—Spielberg or Kathryn Bigelow using one of his songs in a new film, or J.J. Abrams including one in a new series, or one winding up in a national commercial—at a certain point he'd have to try to sell the publishing rights he'd long tried to retain. Or, gulp, find some sort of real job.

Even worse was an existential problem. Songwriting was not just what Lenny did. It was who he was.

Without it, his identity—his sense of self—was vanishing.

If he were a drinker, Lenny might have tried to drown his sorrows. If he were a stoner, he might have hit one of the marijuana dispensaries now vying with coffee shops and Pilates studios for space in LA's myriad mini-malls. If he were a sleazebag, he might have made a trip to one of the countless local massage parlors on Santa Monica Boulevard.

Being none of those, Lenny stewed and fretted, feeling like the walls were closing in on him.

Days felt like weeks, and weeks like months.

There was a limit to how many times per day Lenny could hit a playground and shoot baskets. Or spend time checking out Blues groups on Facebook. Or meet friends for coffee.

Nor was examining his life any solace. Lenny was a guy with no significant other, no kids, a string of broken relationships, and not a single song he'd like to have cited on his tombstone. No "What A Difference A Day Makes," no "Hit The Road, Jack," no "Don't You

Just Know It.”

Lenny couldn't remember the last time his manager checked in, or when he and his attorney had spoken.

Did that mean he was consigned to an existence of sports on TV, Netflix, and meals from Trader Joe's?

Should he have listened to his parents and become a doctor, lawyer, or even dentist, though that likely would have resulted in his being institutionalized or jumping off a bridge?

Sinking deeper and deeper into depression, Lenny stopped showering, shaving, or answering the few calls he received, most of which were likely solicitations.

For a while, he spent time listening to songs of despair—Ray Charles' "Drown In My Own Tears," Nina Simone's version of "Trouble In Mind," Bessie Smith's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out"—until they no longer provided solace.

Days were long and dreary. Nights spent tossing and turning were worse.

Then one morning Lenny jumped out of bed with a plan. Feeling as though he was rejoining the human race, he showered and shaved, then breakfasted on a combination of yogurt and granola instead of leftover pizza or takeout Thai noodles.

He was granting himself a second chance, a do-over, an opportunity to turn back the clock.

Alive for the first time in far too long, Lenny pulled out his old acoustic guitar, then dusted off the case.

An anomalous figure among aspiring musicians who reminded him of what he was like when he was starting out, Lenny signed the list for an open-mic night at an Echo Park coffee house.

Waiting patiently until it was his turn, Lenny looked

like someone's dad or uncle when at last he faced the surprised members of the audience.

Free from the nervousness, stage fright, and expectations of his youth, Lenny couldn't help but feeling a bit rusty when he sang one of his better-known songs. But a second one was easier. And a third easier still. Each tune he performed them not as they were recorded by others, but as he wished they'd been done.

More gratifying than the applause Lenny received was the approbation from the aspiring artists, who were thrilled to learn that "old-timer" was the guy who'd written songs familiar to them.

Buoyed by the experience, Lenny started frequenting other open-mic venues—a coffee house in Santa Monica, a bar in Silverlake, a little club in San Pedro.

That led to Lenny's first ever appearance on a podcast. Then someone offered him studio time to record his own versions of songs he'd written that were recorded by others, backed up by young musicians who were fans.

One of Lenny's basketball buddies wondered if he'd wind up a later-in-life star like Carole King, who recorded her own versions of songs co-written with Gerry Goffin. Another mentioned an album by Dan Penn of tunes he'd co-written for others.

But Lenny was simply pleased to be back doing what he loved.

That happiness reached new heights on a Thursday morning when he woke up wondering whether "Starting Over" might work as the title of a brand new song.

CAROL MIKODA

PREPARATION

The owls call and call at dusk
in a language you do not speak.
The fullness of the wind presses
against you. You stare at the dark waters,
across whitecaps that leap and jostle,
always moving, infinity of choreographed
dolphins that seem to warn of a cataclysm
looming, approaching from the top
of the lake. You feel you must get ready.
But somehow their breaching and dancing
reassure you that it is not the end.

**THREE:
LIKE A PHOENIX**

BETH MARQUEZ

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD IS TRUE

The birds, in their resplendent lies. The bees, in their incessant truths. The frogs, in their frightful rhythm them of disappearance.

The wet eye of the scrub jay, which swivels the whole of the year on its spindle, knows more than the chorus of critical mothers

in your head, no matter the red dresses they wear. The bees, dancing out their location, all boogie woogie and spatial coordinates, taste more

geometry than all the high school classrooms combined. How long have you suspected, oh pink eraser, oh child of the kitchen table legs?

The wingbeats against the rafters and the flood of boisterous heartbreak aren't lying to you. They gift you the last of their breaths.

S.D. DILLON

IF YOU'RE KEEPING SCORE

1.

For my part, I'm cooking
Trout. Three, in fact.
And not every fish I catch
Ends up on my fireplace wall. I do plan on
Smoking it, though. Cause that's the way
I do good food for me.

2.

We were going to see the duet first.
But given what I just heard,
I don't believe there's enough air in this room
For a voice
In those gills.

3.

So why not just lob it onto the pile of bones,
Fins, and scales, and shake until
It sprouts mushrooms. It's normal,
Here, it is. If you live in a cave
At the bottom of the lake.

VERONICA LAKE

HEART'S PLACE

Time slows; congeals like
old memories clotting in my head.
As always I escape;
return to the ocean, return to my heart's place
where things are as they should be.
South Beach waters lap me round;
rock me gentle, salt tanging skin
as I wallow in healing shallows.
Lids tear-swollen, heart stuttering pain
I dissolve, become liquid.
Floating light once more, slow, drifting.
Lulled by waves, in and out.

Mind melts.
The sludge of memory loosens,
becomes molten, carried away
by sweeping currents.
Like a child again I am home.
A light wind whispers over water's surface.
Indian ocean cradles me close,
cradles me safe,
rinses me clean.

SARA BAKER

ALONG THE WATER'S EDGE

The pond is the finest of mirrors, never showing exactly what is above, but converting it to a image so beautifully smudged and broken. The weeping willow, the soft clouds above, all become a Monet painting—all free for the looking. I can walk here every day and it will always be both the same but different. This transience, the changing by the hour, by the day, by the season, makes it precious.

I walk along the pond's edges under the puffs of my own breath, taking in the denuded trees and the stark freshness that only the coldest season can bring. A small bird in a bold cap of golden feathers disturbs the silence. It alights upon a nearby twig, fluttering its wings, each beat forming a sonnet to the air. The water is a clear, movie-star blue, the kind of blue their eyes are.

crystal clear water
reflecting a world beyond
pond holds earth's secrets

bright blue sky above
cotton clouds float by in peace
see nature's canvas

trees in winter's hold
nature's beauty unadorned
aesthetic stillness

SANDRA NOEL

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Fly to a heated sky-dock of atmosphere,
nibble on dipping stratus,
banquet on cauli-cumulus

or catch a ripe nimbus,
high rise to wisps of cirrus
served in silver-rimmed teaspoons.

Spin cirrostratus veils into scarves,
pocket just enough to take home.
Do not destroy their shadows.

S. ABDULWASI'H OLAITAN

**I WAS ONCE AT MY BEST
BUT NOT EVERYONE LIKES
THE MOON AT ITS FULLEST**

—once, i was a Ceylon cinnamon tree—

but human taste—a smokescreen, ugly

in its hunger. they want something else

something as gracious as moonlight. their quest

a quickest amin of God

—the visitation of moon graces my rooftop

as stars ornamenting night cloud—

yet, it doesn't quench their thirst

of storm 'you're too gentle, too calm,' they say

—now the weeds in their backyard are kvelling

for the sheep they seek of me: a willing victim—

but their starvation of snow drops

will never kiss their own flavor of petals.

yesterday *—i pushed through*

my half-broken door___summer painted

in dust, stepping past

the harmattan's deserted breath, the morning

holds panacea & i

shaped the cold into a snowman—

as if longings would commend them into satisfaction

but it did not, because they are hounds who claim more

bones. & i gave & i gave & i

gave untill i can't, anymore.

today, i step outside of their music, i

am not here to besiege light from the spells

they cast. so, pardon me

if i say, i have nothing more to go weary

& i am no longer a jar

for your water dropwort.

DIANE FUNSTON

NOTHING REALLY MADE SENSE

We built a home of sunflower petals
A big he loves me
he loves me not
We caroused in thunderstorms
with lightning over the Seine
I offered you a nibble of cactus-wood
you dribbled it with kerosene
Nothing really made sense

So we imploded
before the explosion

You carried me over
a net of hungry crocodiles
for a wedding night
of ravenous disappointment
I hunted in my purse for
a crystal vial of laudanum
but cut my finger
on a bottle cap from Rolling Rock

Something lit my fire
in a deluge of rain daggering down

I came to my senses afterwards
and sang a dirge for a lost girlhood
She giggled behind a whitewash
of birches against the sunrise
though no one else saw her

I called her to come back home
You scared that sensitive girl
into the sun going down

I left you then after you left me
Neither of us ever heard from again

DIANE FUNSTON

BARREL OF MONKEYS

Sometimes I feel the burden
of helping
Its molded into me
Holding my curved hand
out to lift others
They grab on
next thing I'm holding
a whole heavy chain
while they stare blankly ahead

I hold on
in all weather
or any exhaustion
In the clumsiness
of some
who swing and rock
out of ignorance
or malice

It took a decent while
to collect all these
hangers-on
their immovable grins
rigid unbending arms
The ingratitude
of this long line
of plastic motherfuckers

If I make too sudden a move
they will plummet
Then I'll be blamed
for the mess
on the floor

JASON SCHWARTZ

TEHRAN

The chat room cups profile pics
like the sun
cradles shrapnel.

The timeline shows red
lacquering
dermal breaches.

(If you've cut a t-shirt with scissors,
that's what skin sounds like,
says the LLM. Seek help if needed.)

Has anyone seen @Ameen69?

I seed the question with a black heart.
He said he likes to steep
in a local pool :shrug emoji:—

might his pruny fingers cling
to a metal lip, tired feet
pressed to a round light that flickers

or turned off days ago,
black hair buoyant
in chlorinated water, alive

like a wet moth?

VISHAAL PATHAK

THE ANTONYM OF LOCKDOWN

Samarth struggled with the regulator on the new gas cylinder for nearly 45 minutes, slamming on its top and thrusting it down the nozzle, unaware of Ridhaan peeping in from behind the kitchen door. A loud grunt marked the end of the scuffle; strangulating the regulator hadn't brought the gas connection to life. Samarth watched his bloodshot palms tremble as he lay down on the floor. 'Life is pointless,' he mumbled, 'something as basic as this doesn't have to be so hard.'

A stomach rumbled. Samarth turned his head. A quick meeting of the eyes first sent the duo laughing, then Samarth got right up, panged by guilt. Hurriedly, he grabbed leftover milk from the fridge, and amidst the clanking of several pots and pans, poured it into a bowl of cornflakes. Hands still trembling, he handed Ridhaan the bowl, planted a kiss on his forehead and whispered, 'Sorry'. Ridhaan looked up and smiled, offered the bowl back and gestured, 'You?' Samarth shook his head and gave Ridhaan a light pat on the back, nudging him to run back to the bedroom. Taking a deep sigh, Samarth wondered if one must be as quick to forgive themselves as apologize.

Fifteen minutes later, he was on a call with Mrs. and Mr. Mehra.

"No, let me talk to him today. He's feeding cold milk and cornflakes for dinner. He needs to listen. Won't step out to buy groceries. Doesn't even have a balcony in his apartment where they can get some Sun. Staying in a 1 BHK without balcony, it seems."

"Hello Papa Ji. I'm guessing you forgot to push the mute button on the call," Samarth remarked, forcing a smile.

“How are you, Beta? You need to push the rubber valve on the regulator downwards and wait to hear it click.” Mrs. Mehra attempted to douse the fire, but was soon interrupted by her husband.

“Have you never changed one before?”

“No. And yes, I figured.”

“Beta, why don’t you come here for a few days? Flights are now operating again.”

“Yes Mummy Ji, but it’s not so critical that I fly.”

“Of course, your culinary skills appear to say otherwise. Please come to our home.” Mr. Mehra demanded.

“And what does tricking a six-year-old child to spy on his father say about you?”

“What do you mean? He’s our grandson!” Mr. Mehra roared with authority.

“I know how to raise my son. I don’t need any help whatsoever.”

Mrs. Mehra struggled to pacify the two warring men while Ridhaan, who had been eavesdropping, wondered why adults always had to do this—fighting over the same thing. If they care equally about the same thing as they claim to, why does it have to be one or the other, though not both together? Perhaps he was too little to understand the ways of the world.

The call ended as most calls between adults seem to end—without a resolution. A moment later, Samarth had a repeat of the call with the other set of parents waiting to be apprised of the situation. This was customary—it was always only about which group got to him first.

“Why does everyone keep asking me to come back home? I *have* a home.” Samarth snapped.

“We just wanted to check if you and Ridhaan are fine,” his mother confessed. “By the way, his new haircut is really nice. Did you give him?”

“Yes, I did. Ma, I’m really tired. Can we do this later?”

When Samarth was off the phone with his parents, he couldn’t help but think if it was the right thing to teach Ridhaan how to use these gadgets—although, for most part, he admits the kid was pretty much self-taught. What effect will all this screen-time so early on in their lives have on their development in the long run, who’s to say? But he was not the only one. Parents all over the world had let their little ones use these things—a fact that gave him at once, both relief and concern.

A sudden, sharp, momentary squeal of the doorbell threw Samarth off-balance. Every unsolicited bell-ring these last few months seemed to send a shiver down his spine. He’d sit still and quiet, signalling even Ridhaan to shush. ‘What is with these doorbells,’ he’d grumble. ‘Do they have to be reminiscent of wartime bugles?’

“Sir, can you please come out?” A voice from the other side of the door demanded.

“What is it? Can you call?”

“It will take five minutes, Sir. Even Mr. Sharma is here to talk with you.”

“I request you to please call me? There’s no space for physical distancing in the corridor outside.”

There were some murmurs among the men outside that Samarth couldn’t follow. Then his phone rang.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Samarth, you mixed the dry and wet waste drums again. Last time you said you hadn’t received the pamphlets on how to segregate. What seems to be the problem now?” asked the voice on the phone.

“I . . . actually, I think I went there early in the morning. It was dark and I must’ve been feeling groggy . . .”

“Sir, you please understand. The authority is very strict now. If you do this the next time, you will have to bear the fine.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m deeply sorry. Won’t happen again.”

*

With the men gone, Samarth heaved a sigh and walked to his bedroom.

“Who was it, Papa?”

“Just the caretaker and people from the society. Nothing to worry about,” he brushed it off. “So,” Samarth smiled mischievously, “Your grandparents called you?”

“Yes. Did I say anything wrong?”

“Oh no, not at all. It’s never wrong to tell the truth.” Samarth reached out and caressed Ridhaan’s hair, “Are you hungry?”

“No. Can I watch cartoons?”

“Yes, you may. Papa will cook something nice for you tomorrow, okay? Sorry about today.”

“No problem.”

*

Samarth switched on the TV and navigated as fast away as possible from the news channels to the kids’ channel, and made his way back to the kitchen to fix a meal and sort the waste. To him, it seemed that the world perhaps expected too much of him each day. Walk four flights of stairs all the way down because apparently lifts might no longer be safe, sort and empty the trash correctly into four categories, cook, clean, order in advance and collect supplies left at the door, and if the street was blocked—like it was two weeks ago when he had to eventually step out of the house and walk all the way to the main street—he first tried to hold his breath as long as possible for fear of inhaling something spurious even through the mask, then was out of breath because he was no longer used to walking with all the weight in his hands, walk back up, sit the groceries out for 24 hours (wash them later),

repeat the whole cleaning, sanitizing and disinfection routine—keys, phone, eyeglasses, hairband (because he'd not had a haircut now in four months), wear and remove the mask properly—and all this while being on your tenterhooks—did you come in contact with someone? Did you touch something you shouldn't have—but hope you didn't touch your face—did you wash your hands thoroughly for 20 seconds? He fretted the next two weeks—do I have a temperature? Was I coughing in sleep? Why am I panting? Should I maintain distance from Ridhaan? And then, add to that everything going on in the world right now. Switch on the TV or social media and risk losing any shred of sanity left. He shuddered to think of what'd have been the case had he been in a profession where he'd have to step out each day.

It was late in the night and Samarth was too tired to cook. He grabbed some frozen food from the refrigerator. The thing looked suspicious, killing the remaining of his appetite—most of which had been decimated after his brawls with men and machine that night. It was probably too late to eat anyway, he thought. The frequent waste imbroglio irked him. He decided perhaps it was best to store dry waste in a carton and clear them once a month. There was no urgency to clear it anyway. And the wet waste he'd probably refrigerate and clear once in two weeks, also reducing contact-risk further. Or maybe he'll sleep on it tonight and review the plan tomorrow. His thought process felt too cloudy and he felt too tired to think anymore. He tossed the frozen food into a trash bag and put it back into the refrigerator.

When he returned to the bedroom, Samarth found Ridhaan sleeping soundly, with a video still playing on his phone. It was from their Andamans' trip four years ago—their favourite beach. Where he had proposed to Nandini eight years ago. It was also where they went back once Ridhaan was old enough to not be bothered by travelling.

Ridhaan always claimed to recognize himself in those

videos and that he remembered the trip distinctly. If he had formed memories by watching them or he just bluffed –it was hard to tell. Sometimes, as Samarth had noticed recently, Ridhaan would switch to another video in his presence, as if he didn't want him to know that's what he'd been watching.

“I will take him rafting and paragliding and parasailing,” Samarth appeared to scream in the video, running around the beach with Ridhaan on his shoulders, panting. “And I will teach him how to ride and fix a bike and fly a plane.” He declared.

“Fly a plane?” Nandini could be heard laughing in the background as Ridhaan made a whirring sound perched atop his father's shoulders.

Samarth hovered his finger on the screen but then changed his mind and let the video play. ‘At least we're together and happy somewhere,’ he rued, and left the battery to drain. ‘Serves you right, you technology—the preserver of incorruptible memories, the witness to happier times—whose only purpose it seems is to come back and hit you while at your lowest. Perhaps the old times weren't as happy, one may doubt – oh no, here's proof!’

Samarth sniggered at his animated conversation, shed an inadvertent tear and went to bed empty-stomach.

*

Early next morning, Samarth fixed the duo a heavy breakfast and plugged in his laptop to attend an office call. Right next to him was Ridhaan, attending his classes online.

‘What a buffoon this man,’ Samarth thought to himself. ‘When things were normal, he used to call it available-from-home, and claimed that no work ever got done sitting at home. And now he can't stop yapping in praise of all the productivity.’

Realizing he may have said it out loud, Samarth instantly clicked his tongue and double-checked the mute button on his machine. He then turned to Ridhaan, “Did you hear what I said?”

“No. Papa, do you miss your friends?”

“You mean from office? No. You?”

“Yes. Ahaan and Navya from school and Krish from playground. But no need to be sad. I made new friends.”

“What friends?”

“Promise you won’t tell anyone else?”

“Look who’s talking.” Samarth chuckled as Ridhaan rolled his eyes. “Well anyway, go on. I’m interested.”

“There’s flyGirl and roachBoy. There are seven, no, five roachBoy and many flyGirl. But spiderUncle is bad, he eats them.”

“So, this is the new cartoon my son was watching yesterday?”

“No.”

“Actually,” Samarth beamed at something that had just struck his mind, “You know what. Come, hop on.”

A moment later, Ridhaan could be heard screaming with excitement.

“That window.” “That one.” “And that one.”

Obedying his master’s commands, Samarth ran around the house, ferrying Ridhaan on his shoulders, hoping to catch some sunrays and occasionally waving to neighbours and friends who they could spot at their windows. They did it for the for the better part of the morning; when tired, they’d stand in silence and observe the street from the window. A vendor tried to sell fruits and vegetables out of an auto. Construction workers had returned to a site opposite their building. Some semblance of the world as it existed. Far from normalcy; too far away from when Samarth would like to venture out.

“Papa, what’s the antonym of lockdown?” Ridhaan struggled to pronounce the words ‘antonym’ and ‘lockdown.’

“Who taught you that word?”

“Miss D’souza. Don’t you know what it means? It means opposite. Like day and night. Does every word have an opposite?”

“Phew! I didn’t learn that world till I was double your age. Everyone’s in a hurry these days. No dear, I don’t know what the opposite is or if everything has an opposite word or not. Ask Miss D’souza?”

“Okay. Let me down, I’m getting late for my maths class now.”

Ridhaan ran towards the bedroom as Samarth looked on. The vendor continued to list creatively the stock he had, although nearly no one stepped out to buy anything. He reached the end of the street and turned around to try his luck in the next.

*

A loud shriek from the kitchen woke Samarth up from his post-lunch weekend slumber—he had hardly slept the past few nights. ‘Is Ridhaan in trouble?’ He sprang off the bed and sprinted towards the kitchen.

“What happened? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Ridhaan was crying—some ice-cream in a cup in hand and some on the kitchen slab—uttering indecipherable sounds as he spoke.

“Okay, slow down, I don’t understand. Is it the spilled ice-cream or the cockroach? Should I squish it?”

With no recognizable response, Samarth ran to fetch his slippers and prepared to land a blow. Ridhaan gulped and yelled.

“No!”

“What?”

“Don’t kill him.”

“What then?”

“spiderUncle will eat him. Yesterday, he ate two flyGirls,” Ridhaan cautioned his father of the impending doom.

“What?” Samarth scratched his head.

“We have to save him,” he pleaded with his father. “His feet are stuck in the ice-cream I spilled on the slab. Look, spiderUncle

is approaching. Papa, look!" Ridhaan screamed with urgency.

"Ok. Ok. Let me think."

Ridhaan kept an eye over spiderUncle as Samarth went to the drawing room, grabbed a piece of cardboard from the dry-waste pile and split it into two. He carefully whisked away the ice-cream with one piece of the cardboard and used the other for the cockroach to hop on, then ran across the hall and threw it out the window.

"Happy?"

Ridhaan smiled and ran to hug his father.

"Should we at least squish the spider?"

"No!" He screamed again, "we can throw him out the other window."

Samarth burst into laughter as his son appeared pretty serious about his suggestion. Having pacified his boy, Samarth returned to complete some work, only to find himself in the midst of another evacuation.

*

"You know my situation!"

"I don't make these decisions myself, Samarth. I called you up to let you know that I'm the only one fighting for your job." An agitated voice on the phone roared, "They've frozen all hiring. Offers have been rescinded. When the lockdowns were announced, they asked me to let you go. I took it on me and asked for three months. But you don't seem to be delivering at all!"

"What can I do, can you at least spell it out for me?"

"What do you mean? We've had this conversation several times. Ramp up. You need to show you have the fire. You need to increase your visibility. You can't expect to be not known or seen and hope to survive in these situations. But you don't seem to take this seriously. If you don't work on this, I'm sorry to say I can't help you."

Samarth fell silent.

“Hello? Hello, are you listening?” The voice on the phone suddenly resorted to hushed tones, “And don’t tell anyone else, this is strictly confidential. Okay? Say yes for God’s sakes.”

“Yes, I . . . I think I get it.”

“Great!” The voice seemed encouraging before slamming the phone down, “Send me the sales numbers by EOD. Get working.”

*

If one more person screams today, Samarth thought, he’d be done for the day. A familiar number flashed on his phone the next instant. Perfect timing, he thought.

“What is it?” he asked unenthusiastically.

“What do you mean ‘what’? Can’t a father call up his son? Do I need your permission?”

“Not now. Can we do this later, please?”

“Do ‘this’? What is this ‘this’ you refer to? Why must you always misunderstand me? I didn’t call up with an agenda.”

“Well whatever it is, can it wait until later? I was just told I might get fired.”

“Again?”

“What do you mean ‘again’?” Samarth seethed, “I had quit the last time around because I didn’t like the culture.”

“Your generation can never stick to anything long enough. Never!” His father prophesized, as he had in the past.

Exhausted, he begged of his father, “Let’s please do this later. Please.”

“Fine. Don’t listen to me.”

“Listen, I’m getting another call. I will have to call you back.”

*

“Hello? Yes. No, the street is no longer blocked. Can you come all the way to the dead-end to building no. 19?” Samarth seemed to be explaining patiently on the call, “Yes, I will leave a carton outside. Yes, I remember it wasn’t permitted to come here last time—I had to come to the main street. But the street is no longer blocked. I don’t think someone will object, but if they do, I will talk to them. Thank you.”

Samarth wondered if that’s what everyone thinks—that all they do is deal with difficult people all-day all their lives. ‘We can all be only one of two things then—,’ he concluded, ‘too difficult, or too simplistic in our thinking about others.’

*

“Papa, were you fighting with Dada Ji?” Ridhaan ran to comfort his father.

“No, it’s . . .” Samarth struggled to offer an explanation. It was hard to explain to his tender age that world over, fathers unwittingly seem to be disappointed with their sons—and have been for centuries—as though it’s a ritual. Too bad they’re always around for commentary but not enough during the training.

Just then, Ridhaan flung his empty ice-cream cup from across one end of the hall towards the pile of trash in the drawing room, leaving Samarth completely aghast.

“Will we also fight when I grow up?”

Distracted by what had just occurred before his eyes, Samarth took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Well, let’s hope we don’t. And dear,” he implored his son, “don’t toss the garbage into the carton like that. It’s just a temporary arrangement. Don’t make it a habit, okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

Samarth hugged Ridhaan in a tight embrace, but a bell-ring frantically disoriented the little soul. Startled, he put a finger on his lips to shush his father, signalling him not to move or

make any noise.

“No, no, dear. It’s alright. I . . . We ordered supplies. Nothing to be scared of.”

Samarth felt Ridhaan’s heart racing and could sense the fear in his eyes. It seemed like a mirror into his own past, when he, about the same age, developed an unusual fear of kitchen and its appliances after witnessing a fire accident at home. It didn’t help that his father shared the same fears. It had taken him a long time to drive the fear away. Samarth hugged the poor soul again, hoping to soothe even himself from back then. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, it was all too clear to him.

He needed to mend a few things—he made a mental note—starting point of which would be the waste situation.

*

The stench from the mix was unbearable. For a good five seconds, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it incapacitated him. His brain suddenly felt so foggy, he had to slap himself out of it. Samarth grabbed the trash bag from the refrigerator, put on his mask, locked the door and ran down the stairs as fast as possible, emptied the trash in the drum, ran back up to his flat, locked the door behind himself and then stood as though in a stupor near the door. ‘What did just happen? Did it actually happen?’ He had to hold the door knob to help his convulsions. Was he cold? He couldn’t shake the visuals from the trash bag off his mind. The palpitations felt as though his heart would tear the skin and leap out of his body. He was breathing heavily, then began to cough violently, but had to silence himself for fear of waking Ridhaan up. ‘What’s going on? What’s going on?’ He ran towards the kitchen, then back to the hall, then to the washroom. He switched on the shower, but remembered that he had forgotten to switch on the geyser. He shut the shower, turned on the geyser and stood under the shower for two minutes. Should he dry himself? But he’s not yet taken a shower

–he had shut it off. Is it even time for a shower? What’s going on? Is this a dream? ‘Take a minute, take a minute for yourself, Samarth,’ he caught himself saying. ‘Let’s switch on the shower. Now, let’s get under it. The water is warm. It’s fine, it’s soothing.’ But the feeling didn’t last. He could hear the trash collection vehicle pull up in front the building. ‘Shush, focus, listen, they’re talking among themselves – what is it? What are they saying? Will they refuse to collect it? Will it harm somebody? Will they arrest me? What’s going on? What’re you saying?’ He closed his eyes, force shut his ears with his palms, knelt down under the shower and remained still for as long as he could. When he opened his eyes and ears again, everything had already fallen silent. He stood up quietly, leaned against the wall and craned his neck to peek from the window–the collection vehicle had left. He closed his eyes again and stayed put inside the washroom for as long as needed, for fear of disturbing the cosmic equanimity.

He next woke up a couple of hours later, when Ridhaan knocked on the washroom door.

Intermittently, the morning visited him through the day. What if he had exposed himself to something potentially harmful? What if he needs to visit the doctor–in the current situation? What if something were to happen to his son–how could he be so irresponsible? Samarth buried his face in his palms and almost pulled his hair out.

The day, for him, seemed eerily silent. Every noise, every movement would upset his form, his disposition. ‘Are they back? Are they here for me? What’s going on?’

The world outside continued to function without knowledge of or hinderance from the thoughts plaguing his mind. Later at night, he conducted a mental re-evaluation. The frozen food he tossed a couple of weeks ago was stale. The fungus probably spread to the vegetable peels that he continued to toss through the week. Hence the stench and the coloration. It was

stupid, but probably not as awful as he had imagined it to be. What caused his reaction then, he couldn't tell. But of one thing he was sure. It was time.

*

"Papa."

"Yes?"

"It's open up." A sleepy Ridhaan stated casually after dinner.

"What?"

"Answer to the question."

Samarth nodded nonchalantly, and when Ridhaan had slept, he sat himself down and dialled a number that he had had for four years now.

"And, what would you like to discuss, Samarth?" A calming voice at the other end of the line asked.

"Bereavement."

*

There was a lot going on in the world. But when has it not? The world's multiple problems are as relevant as his—except he can't seem to solve both of their problems—not in his current shape. He felt guilty for not being helpful, swore not to add to that pile, but it was time to retreat. He would love to help others, but at first, he must help himself.

His own privileges weren't lost on him. Our fault lines—the chinks in the armour if you will—have been around too long. The crisis has unabashedly ripped the patchworks, laying it bare. However, the relatively fortunate have had to come face to face with the crisis within. There are some so used to crisis both within and without, they've not had a time-off for this new crisis.

Then what's the point of acknowledging privilege if you

cannot put it to good use? If everyone disconnects, won't there be a vacuum? Probably. 'But shouldn't we be more concerned about the health and quality of connection?' Samarth shot back at the voice within. The smallest unit of a society is an individual. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

He'd often lose himself to existential questions, such as why does experiencing the same event cause a trauma in one, not so much in other? But now, he would check himself. May be these questions are best tackled on a better day.

He started planning the next course of action. Of course, anything can happen to anyone, anytime—as much as we may not want to admit it, it doesn't cease to be the truth of this world we live in. But does it have to hold you captive or does it have to be freeing—or neither? Maybe all we can do is plan well for prosperity, and plan well for adversity.

A moment later, his mother was on a call with him.

"What is this that Ridhaan was saying? Is there a woman you are talking to?"

"He said that?"

"He's heard you talking to some woman on the phone the last few days. He says he even saw you crying once. Do you think it's nice for him to see his father cry?"

"Yes, it's fine—perfectly fine—for him to know that crying exists in his vocabulary of emotions."

"Why don't you tell us anything? Are we not your family? What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. It's... it's therapy, Ma." His voice slightly quivered. The static on the line amplified.

"Ther... is everything alright?"

"No, but hopefully they will be."

"You were such a happy child. What happened?"

"You know what happened."

"But it's been four years!"

Samarth recalled taking Nandini to a hospital for a fever four years ago—and her never coming back. To him, it was not only evidently clear, but also the only option—to lock himself up in case of crisis. But as luck would have it, sometimes, new wounds peel the band-aid off the old ones long disguising as part of skin.

“I know. I shouldn’t have waited all this while. Ma, can you put Papa on the phone?”

To his father’s surprise, Samarth thanked him.

“For?”

“Keeping me safe all this while.”

*

The bell rung. Ridhaan turned to Samarth and flashed a mischievous smile.

“Yes?”

“It’s alright.”

“It’s alright.” Samarth repeated with assurance.

“Nothing to be scared of.”

“Very good!”

Samarth gave Ridhaan a light peck on the cheek and stepped outside to collect the packing material. The duo teamed up to clean the house and spent the afternoon packing their stuff. With some cartons left, Samarth created a box-fort for the two of them to play hide and seek in. Later, he taught Ridhaan the basics of cooking and sorting the trash. He reminded himself that he will need to keep reinventing to engage Ridhaan in activities outside of his allotted screen-time, apart from daily chores.

“Where are we going?” Ridhaan asked curiously.

“We will go to Dada Ji’s house. When things eventually get better, we can also visit your Nana Ji. You can meet all your cousins. Would you like that?”

“Yes, very much.”

It does take a village, after all, to raise a child. He was aware

that kids inherit more than financial profit or loss—they embrace and go on to embody emotional excesses and deficits.

*

The next morning, they sent off the cartons and sat down to compare their daily notes.

“Papa, what did you draw in your thankyou book?”

“I drew you. What about you?”

“I drew ice-cream!” Ridhaan screamed with joy.

*

Life cannot stop. It must go on—it will, perhaps go on, with or without you coming along. If you don't, although—you get stuck. In a loop. Nothing in life—sadness or happiness—should be so debilitating that you cannot move forward, even after a brief halt.

The duo got ready and double-checked if they had everything they'd need. Samarth looked out the window in the hall—perhaps for the last time—as Ridhaan bid farewell to his friends in the kitchen. When the cab arrived, he closed his eyes for a second and beckoned Ridhaan. They stood in silence, smiling. Gathering their luggage, they stepped out the door in the corridor. Samarth looked for the keys and took a moment to bid his byes to the house. With a deep breath, he bolted the door, surrendered the keys to the caretaker and the two made way to the cab.

“To the airport, please.”

“Sure, Sir,” replied the driver.

As the cab hurtled down the empty roads—buildings, trees, placards seemed to fly in the opposite direction. The Sun shining on their faces, the wind blew his long hair as Samarth watched Ridhaan besotted with the ordinary outside.

GTIMOTHY GORDON

NETSCAPE

Even if my net cast far, wide,
dark, and deep, it wouldn't be
by the book for loaves and fishes,
miracles and wonder in abeyance,
eschatology, Gnostic gospels,
rigid synods diluting faith,
deep consults with my grimoire,
days long over and done with,
just snake it down, plumb, unclog,
clean out strands and split-ends
of guilt and neuroses, fraught,
misspent loves and friendships,
underweening ambition, and less,
pompous and circumstantial
searches for self and meaning
signifying, at best, not so much,
if at all, knowing I'm caught, as all,
in the Uncertain, extant web of Necessity,
unable to account for and untangle
life's incalculable mishaps, missteps,
misgivings, on my elsewhere way out.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

JESUS WAS

Jesus was a poetry man.
Words were in his eyeballs,
His retina.
20-20 sight but a universal default.
Tears wept down on an old Olive tree
Or was it a dogwood tree cross?
Mystery waits out the years.
Resurrection and returns—
a slow retail business.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

A SOUND SHARP ENOUGH TO COUNT—

Don't explain yourself, she says—
Let the rain fall where it falls.

If you must
place buckets to catch the excess rainwater—

a prayer
in mindfulness—do not mind

if they also catch
debris, insects, extra fiber—

This is the way of things
This is what it means

to be human—we are all dancing
this dance we call life

for the first time, all wishing
we could be Jesus—

not to walk on the surface
of the water, but to know that

the tap of our shoes
is as crisp

as raindrops striking
a galvanized tin roof.

TAYLOR MCKAY HATHORN

THE LAND OF NOD

Clara is in the third grade Sunday School class the first time she hears the story of Adam. Mrs. Canfield reads from the book of Genesis while they cut out butterflies Clara wonders why, if Adam had been given dominion over all the animals, they only had butterflies in class, and Mrs. Canfield's warm voice belies the harshness of the words: *if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*

Clara's head swims with the image of sin outside her bedroom door, a rabid dog like the one her father had shot when it staggered into their front yard. Clara had only been in kindergarten, but she had watched from the front window as her father went out onto the porch. He had the same gun that he used to go hunting in the deep winter, and Clara's mother clapped her hands over Clara's brother's ears when he pulled the trigger. The dog dropped in its tracks, and later, as her brother splashed in a plastic kiddie pool, Clara found dark smears of the dog's blood in the grass. Her mother had yelled at her to get away from it, and she had.

Clara imagines God with a gun in the hallway of her house, shooting the mad dog of sin before it devours her. She does not imagine God coming inside her room, even though her Sunday School teacher says he lives inside her heart. If God could master even the wild dog, she does not want him in her bedroom.

She associates God with the doctor's office, too, because Mrs. Canfield also reads them a story about Adam's wife, Eve. Adam

had been formed out of the dust of the earth (this feels right to Clara, who has made mud pies. It is not something from nothing *a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*. It is something from something). Eve, however, was born from Adam's rib *the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh*. Mrs. Canfield talks about how nice it must have been for Adam to awake from his slumber and find Eve lying there it is not good for man to be alone.

All Clara can think about is what happened when Adam was asleep. She imagines God's finger opening Adam's ribcage the way her father splits a watermelon. She imagines the blood spilling onto the earth, *your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground*, imagines the white rib in God's hand as it whirls into a woman, *flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone*.

Adam wakes up when the violence is over, when there is only a woman left behind.

*

When Clara is twenty-five, she decides that she would very much like to not believe in God anymore, thank you very much. Her brother is dying and her father can't stop drinking about it, and she's in her second year of seminary, learning Greek and Hebrew and wondering how she, the child did not want God in her bedroom, will ever stand behind a pulpit and tell other people that they should invite him into their lives.

There are stories that she loves, stories like *take up your mat and walk I once was blind but now I see forgive them for they know not what they do* and those stories laid down to sleep with her at

night and woke up next to her in the morning, helped the raging dog outside her room turn around three times, helped her forget the deathly horror of surgery and remember only the warm body in the recovery room.

But now, there is only the story of the dying Lazarus and the tarrying God, the God who, *after hearing that Lazarus was ill, stayed two days longer in the place where he was*. As her brother wastes away, she thinks endlessly about those two godless days, those days when Martha and Mary watched the life leech from their brother's body (these words are not in the book, but she hears them rattle around in her skull and knows that they must have been said in hushed whispers around the sickbed of Lazarus: God loves him, and shouldn't that count for something?), those days when Mary and Martha wrapped their brother in cloths and anointed his dead body and put him in a tomb near their house so that they could visit his grave and rail that God would allow such a thing in the first place.

The rest of the story, of course, is *Lazarus come out and the resurrection and the life*, but she rips it out of the book of John in a fit of rage, and she helps her brother plan his funeral. There will be a black dress, and she will give the eulogy and will try to say words that are not *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*, even though they are the truest ones she knows.

*

She marries Jack when she is thirty-five, and she thinks about the story of the surgery in the garden again, the story that had so tormented her as a child, and now it feels so true that she can feel it in her teeth, behind her eyelids: under his heart was where she had been born and where she would go to die. She does not say

this out loud because it feels too close to the bone, too true.

She gets in the pulpit and says plenty of things that she believes half-heartedly and half-of-the-time, like *surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life*, but this one certain truth, she cannot say. She says it in other ways, by listening to jazz while they make dinner together and by running with him in the mornings when she would rather be in bed. She tells him she loves him before they go to bed at night, and when he says it back, she thinks it might be sufficient.

*

She is forty-seven when the sky falls. Jack dies on a Thursday morning, struck by an elderly woman going the wrong way up a one-way.

When she drives to the hospital, she thinks about how cold the knife blade must have felt on Isaac's neck, thinks of the way the scent of steel must have haunted his relationship with his father his whole life long, thinks of how long and lonely the walk down the mountain must have seemed when he discovered that there was nothing that God would not ask of his father *take your son your only son whom you love* and nothing that his father would not give him *he reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son*.

*

She is an old woman who has learned to sleep in the middle of the bed, an old woman whose cardiologist tells her that the pain in her chest leads to nothing (this is not diagnosable, but she thinks to herself that what she feels is the aching emptiness of the

missing rib, the divine surgical scar with its phantom pain).

She hears her bedroom door creak open, and when she opens her eyes, Jack stands at the side of her bed. In her mind, he has been frozen in time, but now, in the deep darkness of her empty bedroom, he is the same age she is, with white hair and deep creases around his eyes. She has never seen him as an old man, and she is blinded for a moment at the sight of it, at what might have been but never was.

Be not afraid, he says, and he climbs into bed beside her. Just as when they were young, they cross their arms over each other's, an X marking the spot in the middle of a bed that has not been theirs in forty years.

You know when I lay down and when I rise up, she tells him, and she feels the tears she thought she had long stopped crying leak from her eyes.

*You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down
And are acquainted with all my ways.*

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY

CONVERSATION

A conversation has begun
where woods comprise a scene.
The leaves are talking to the wind
in syllables of green.

The gossip flows from twig to twig
and by the garden wall
I hear the burly oak relate
the wildest tale of all.

Why should I listen to the field
for what the grass might say,
when leafy tongues already tell
the story of the day?

MANDY SCHIFFRIN

DUAL PERSONALITY

The hair looks lighter on the floor, and
I'm seeing double: the one with buyer's
remorse, and the glee-filled banshee who
told the hairdresser to chop the mop off.

The one looks baleful in the glass and
asks me who I am. The other preens
her cox-comb with light-headed fingers,
then leaves to order a double espresso.

LYNETTE G. ESPOSITO

MY DAUGHTER'S HAIR

I cut it once while we stood
on the new grass in the spring
at the front of our house.
Her curls fell like seeds
around our feet
into the rich dark soil
and held us in place.

I remember she said Mama,
don't cut too much—
my scissors paused—
it was just a trim to save
the cost of a trip to the beauty shop.

Her hair is frosted now, still long
and thick. She goes to the salon
and pays a fortune.
She can afford it.

I hold the memory of cutting her hair
in my mind—
how young she was—how trusting.

My daughter runs a green comb
with its soft plastic teeth through
my thinning strands.

She says Mama go get it styled.
I'll pay for it.

If it would wind back the clock,
I would go.

KB BALLENTINE

THREADS OF FAITH

Mimosa pods droop,
March sun not yet potent
enough for sap
to swell. But it will—
redbuds purpling the woods
shun the shadows, reach
past laurel leaves and rusty moss.
But here and now
the dark is light enough.

Stones crushed
under water's weight burst
the air with color of noise—
the noise of spring
surging from the mountain
after last night's rain.
Ferns sheltering the forest floor
through winter's chill. Aching,
we grasp at filaments and pray.

DUSTIN P BROWN

SACRAMENTS

Cracked breath blocks
my windpipe.

A small cough.

At mass some Sundays
as a child, I swung bored

feet under pews,
waited lifetimes for bread

and that okay-only-here sip of wine.
Now (according to doctrine) I can't—
it's been too long—

but the incense, the chants,
the robed men with their

absolution
so familiar, comforting

Even if (according to doctrine) I can't
use it, holy water

from the font
is still water, cold and

clear. This cough—
 this prayer—

I have trapped inside

is a stone, smooth granite
of all those years

I forgot the words.
When I sing the old songs
(anyone can, according to doctrine)

I am back there
next to my grandpa
with our voices lost in the crowd
but I can hear him
even though he doesn't want me to.

Here, now, in this tiny Portuguese chapel, I am

a ghost, silent, so as
not to disturb the (truly) faithful

dutifully kneeling before
an altar (as doctrine dictates) hidden

by off-white cloth. I stand
to leave. Through limestone

arches, the floors
echo.

BARBARA ANNA GAIARDONI

NUGGETS OF WISDOM

in deep ocean waters
where you find yourself

what peace
what good life
you will give to others

KELLY PINER

WALKING ON WATER

Shelby dipped her foot into the early morning foam washing ashore from the Gulf side of the Atlantic. Morning, her favorite time of day to be at the beach before screaming kids and boom boxes showed up. She ignored the *No Flotation Devices Allowed* signs as she rushed out and splashed into a wave, and then leaned against the inner tube she had brought with her and kicked her feet back as she watched sand pipers pecking at the shoreline and chasing one another. It could be hours before Geena made it to the beach after all the margarites she had drunk at The Karaoke Den the night before, but that wouldn't keep Shelby from enjoying her first full day of vacation.

Far away from shore, Shelby eased her body onto the tube and closed her eyes. Six whole days of rest and relaxation—first up: the petting zoo with Geena after lunch, followed by a visit to Serenity by the Sea Spa inside the Hilton for facials and mimosas.

Waves sloshed over her legs as she listened to crooning seagulls from above and dreamt of someday owning her business. She and Geena were saving money to open a high-end salon that would offer European facials and hot stone massages. Unlike their current employer, Tangles, that only provided hair services in a cramped space situated next to a warehouse, they'd offer luxury surroundings. Maybe they'd even keep going and open a chain of salons throughout the state.

As Shelby reveled in the early morning sun, she leaned her head back and counted her blessings.

*

The gentle waves felt more aggressive now, and when she opened her eyes, she saw nothing—no shore, no hotels or condos. Even the sun had grown into a fiery-hot disc and looked off—bloated and blazing, like it was too close to the earth. It was so bright that she had to squint to even see a foot ahead of her. Even the crystal clear and turquoise water near the shore had morphed into bottomless black water, waiting to swallow her up. And the smell—a sickly mixture of seaweed and rotting fish.

Panic stirred in her chest, sharp and sudden. Where was she and how could this have happened? She'd only closed her eyes for a moment. People drifted out to sea sometimes—she'd read about it—but it was rare. Wasn't it. She searched in all directions for any glimpse of land, but only angry waves surrounded her. Geena would eventually notice she was gone—but Shelby hadn't even left her a note. No one would know where to start looking.

She told herself not to panic. Rescue helicopters were always flying around and would eventually spot her. But her phone was back at the condo, and what about sharks!

She caught herself praying out loud, but stopped. What right did she have to ask for anything? She hadn't attended church since her high school graduation four years ago. The congregation had thrown her a party in the assembly hall, and the chaplain had even said a special prayer for her. But she'd been too caught up in everyday life, cosmetology school and having fun, and had told herself that she'd have plenty of time later in life to reconnect to her faith. What she'd give to make up for that now.

She'd never been a good swimmer. She only had one choice, to cling on the float and hope someone found her. She paddled with both hands until her arms burned, gasping for breath. But with no sense of direction, she could've been drifting farther out to sea. Her biceps now felt like Jell-O, useless, trembling.

Then, she spotted large sea animals emerging from the water. Sharks? Dolphins? There was a whole school of them,

greyish thick bodies, swimming toward her.

For safety, she tucked her feet up on the inner tube, but who was she kidding? She'd be no match for a school of sharks or even dolphins. With quivering arms, she paddled in the opposite direction. If she ever needed God, it was now. "Dear God, please save me. If I survive, I swear I'll carry your message for as long as I live. I want to come home."

She exhaled with relief when the massive creatures turned and disappeared. Her grandmother had told her about the power of prayer years ago, but Shelby had dismissed it as the hopeful ramblings of a dying woman trying to square things before the end. Now here she was—adrift, alone and entirely at God's mercy.

She'd once heard of a woman falling from a cruise ship and floating on her back for 24 hours until discovered by the crew of a passing ship. But already her shoulders were red hot from the blazing sun, and tiny blisters swelled on her thighs. She needed to do damage control. Despite her fear of the dark waters below, of the sharks or other sea animals that might devour her, she eased herself over the edge of the tube, mindful to keep one hand on it, just in case. But when the tube sprang forward and hit her in the face, her grip slipped. She watched helplessly as it floated away.

She splashed toward it, but the waves carried it farther out of reach. Gasping, she fought her way forward—and finally it. But the tube felt squishy and soft, nothing like the firm float she had started with earlier that morning. The air was leaking from it! How much bad luck could one person have?

She forced her body back onto the sagging tube, but her hips were now fully submerged in the water. At best, she maybe had an hour before she clung to nothing more than a useless piece of plastic. She couldn't even try blowing it up—all the new tubes could only be filled by an air compressor.

Dark clouds had set in and a flash of lightening lit the

sky. She flinched in response to a clash of thunder. The few raindrops that initially cooled her seared body soon transformed into pelting rain that jabbed at her flesh, like tiny darts. More dark waves roiled toward her and to Shelby, they looked fifteen or twenty feet high. And unlike in the disaster movies she sometimes watched, no rescue boat or copters rushed in to save her.

She shut her eyes and wondered how long it would take to drown. She'd almost drowned as a child and hadn't liked submerging her head under water since. Would she flounder, bobbing up and down in the waves, screaming for an eternity, waiting to die? She'd heard that taking a big gulp of sea water would end the misery more quickly. But she couldn't even imagine.

And what about her aging grandmother and her parents? As an only child, she was all they had. It would destroy them if she died. She'd just started to live. And what would Geena do—blame herself or slip into a depression and abandon her hopes and plans? They'd been best friends since the first grade.

From the corner of her eyes, she caught sight of something that wasn't water, a trawler in the distance, its massive sail rising above the waves.

As it drew nearer, she gaped. The men aboard wore loose tunics, and the vessel itself looked like something from a forgotten century—weathered wood, no engine, no markings. Then came a voice—calm, steady—and she couldn't tell if rose from the sea, the boat, or the echo chamber of her own desperate mind.

A bearded man wearing a white robe then emerged from a mist, walking on water toward her. "Take my hand, Shelby."

She didn't reach out. "I can't. I'm afraid."

But the voice grew louder from the robed man. "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."

And then the scripture came alive for her, and as if someone had taken over her body, she quoted from Matthew 22. In the words of Peter, Shelby said, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the

water.”

“Come,” he said.

Only then did Shelby abandon the tube, which immediately disappeared in a wave. She took tiny steps, her arms outstretched as if she were walking on a balance beam, but when the wind and waves kicked up, she looked down at her sinking body.

Immediately, Jesus reached out and caught her. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

*

“Hang on, miss,” a garbled voice called.

Surrounded by darkness, only a dim light shone from above. Cold water lapped at her waist, and she shivered uncontrollably. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth and shards of glass poked at her flesh.

Next to her, slumped in the passenger seat, lay Geena. Her neck hung at a sickening angle, tilted sharply to one side, like it had been snapped. Like a twig.

Disoriented and immersed in water, she had no memory of how she’d gotten there.

“Geena,” she mumbled. This couldn’t be real. It had to be a nightmare, the worst kind. With only a vague memory of being swept away on an inner tube, how had they ended up trapped inside a car? *Please God*, she prayed, *just get us out of this*.

She shrieked as the memory surfaced—their first night of vacation, a club with Karaoke and way too many marguerites. But how’d they end up in the middle of the water? Had she driven off a bridge?

And then Geena’s screams echoed in her head, ‘Slow down! Slow down!’ She’d taken the wrong exit—straight into a canal.

The man’s voice jarred her again: “We’re losing them. The one in the passenger seat already appears dead.”

“Oh God,” Shelby managed.

Sirens wailed in the distance. How could she survive, knowing she'd killed her best friend? Death would be easier. Kinder.

*

Wrapped in a blanket inside the trawler, Shelby trembled. The vision inside the engulfed car still flickered behind her eyes. How had she made it out?

Had God taken mercy on her?

The robed man stood beside her. Five others cast nets out into the sea.

She searched the man's gentle face. "Geena?" Her voice broke. "She's dead because of me. How can I live with that?"

He met her eyes. "Oh you of little faith." He pointed beyond the boat.

Through the mist, a young woman emerged, walking on water.

"I am the resurrection and the light. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

LEE ANN ECKHARDT SMITH

EARTH'S AMBASSADOR WELCOMES A REFUGEE

*The butter of the sun is spread on world
Thick as all summer in this time.
All gay seeds are split for primordial light
to enter.*

Welcome to the earth.

—Gwendolyn MacEwan,
“Exploration and Discovery”

You are new here,
may I carry your bag, it's so shiny
this fabric from your home planet.
You bring so little with you,
did you rush to leave, did you flee?
We hear of intergalactic wars, they hurl
light from blasted stars, yet to us so distant, the light
appears as twinkles from a sprite's wand.
Here our breezes are gentle, curled.
The butter of the sun is spread on world

of soft valleys and smooth blue waters,
surely succor to your troubled journey.
May I give you food to break your fast?
I can assure you with no false pride
of our expertise with care for escapees like yourself.
You'll find this plant root's soothing enzymes
nourishment indeed unparalleled
with helpings freely shared and spread with

luscious fruits at peak of prime
thick as all summer in this time.

Tread lightly here, friend, as careless footfalls
bring fatal consequence to small hidden beings
and here all lifeforms—the giants, the many-armed,
the invisible—
contribute: feathered birds inform with music
that also enchants; petals open, yellow-bright,
summoning the pollen-bearers; vapor sails up to the sky
on unseen currents, condenses into billowing clouds
releasing rain, and from its downwards flight
all gay seeds are split for primordial light.

Let me take you now to refuge, to the knitted coverlet
prepared with you in mind
and carefully pressed against soft moss
fragrant with the perfume of this place.
Let me mother you with all the comfort
held in this community's centre
with all the gentleness
of the gossamer-winged flying beings
who share your new home. We permit no tormentor
to enter.

Welcome to Earth.

R. JAMES SENNETT, JR.

THE SANDPIPER

with feathered laser legs
darts through sunbeams—
a free safety with eyes aimed
at orphaned morsels promised—
if persistent—
enough to fuel its mission:
survive the day.
I watch this daily quest
on the sidelines myself avoiding
the tap on my shoulder
to grab a bench
and get out of the way.
I study his moves—
fast ankles getting away
with it.
The play is repeated endlessly,
it seems.
To what end in the end?
Quickly forgotten dexterous feats,
hobby horse distraction?
What was missed in the meantime?

BETH MATHISON

FOREST BATHING

Stepping between the fallen leaves on the forest floor,
I try to muffle my clumsy footsteps

the quiet, hidden deep within my furiously beating heart,
is here, where it always has been

walking slowly, my feet sinking
into rich dark earth

a soft wind bringing the scent of trees and green,
hinting at the changing season

filtered light warms my face in the cold
as I slip under my chattering mind

into the quiet
sounds of the forest

breathing in
and out

into the quiet.

JAMES B. NICOLA

ON THE FERRY FROM MARTHA'S VINEYARD

There is a cool fire, one that is inviting
to touch with a half-promise it will not
burn you. I've seen it in the eyes
of kindness once or twice. But I saw it
or something like it too when I rode the ferry
from Martha's Vineyard back to Massachusetts
after a busy day galumphing and happy
when the sun was lowering. Suddenly

the sea turned into a horizontal blaze
and I into a child on a merry-go-round
wanting to clasp the brass ring. At least that
is how the ripples of the sea
attracted me with their powers of enchantment
at about 6:40 just as the day
was thinking about turning again into a night.

It lay as a field of a million salt-sweet poppies
with a carpeted lane in front of the ferry leading
to Wood's Hole, as if rolled out just for me.
For I had climbed and now leaned like a masthead,
so everyone else on the boat disappeared behind.

And all was orange. Glossy orange, then matte.
And then the conflagration dipped to a mere glisten
and then the spell was gone. But since then I
have believed that even in water molecules,

no less in the air, therefore certainly every solid,
there is fire, which if you are alert and catch,
you can see: There is a luster to the world!

I look for it every time I turn a corner
particularly at twilight, wherever I am,
and in strangers' eyes as well when I meet them,
which are aqueous as the sea at Martha's Vineyard
and lit—though from within—by a lowering light.

SANDRA NOEL

IN THE SHIVER OF DAYLIGHT, I CONTEMPLATE THE SUCCESS OF WIND

The trees that remain have torn limbs,
ripped hearts;
the bark of last night's storm
strewn over the road.

Sparrows hop among upturned roots;
heads cocked,
they listen to the dying.
All this stirs roots in the earth of me.

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE

BEACHED

I.

Deep beneath the waves,
the green of
the ocean
melts into
blue-black shadows.

The silence presses
on the soul
with the weight
of a tombstone.

and the loneliness
whispers of death.

II.

A ship sails
upon the waves
like a proud dowager
before her
entourage,
outstripping the
rest of the
fleet with ease.

She carries

the jewel of the
kingdom—
the Crown Prince—
held in her
bosom
like a lover . . .

III.

From the depths
I saw his
face,
golden halo

of curls,
eyes that rivaled
the sea's green—

my sun had come to
Earth.

I followed the
ship for hours
slipping beneath
the wake
to watch him—
leaning his chin
on his hand
with a sigh . . .

They said later
there was a storm—

that's a lie

he climbed
the rail,
balancing for a
moment—

arms outspread
to embrace
the night—

poised like an
acrobat on
a wire—

then let
the sea take
him.

IV.

Diving down
into the cool,
cool depths

like death . . .

I followed him down

unwilling to lose
him,
even if he wished it.

I dragged him
from the water

like a child

from the
womb

and spat him
on the beach
like an
offering.

V.

“Give me your voice,
and I’ll give you the
freedom to dance.”

The witch’s promise
was a siren’s
song—

it was the closeness
I wanted,

to be beside him . . .

who needed
to talk?

I bargained freely,
and drank her poison

the knives

sliced through
with each step
I took . . .

and my footprints
were red.

VI.

He was my
ticket to paradise

I was his
hope of sanity

He told me to
wait for him

then took a nap
in the bath . . .

I waited so long,
Wished so hard—

never moving,
never blinking,
that they thought
I was
stone

and had me
bronzed.

SANDRA NOEL

MOON AT MONT ORGUEIL

her fullness
unsecrets
from late spring sea
treads her beam
up the castle

a pause
as she ponders
the harbour
below

we swim
in her light-line
free from the thumb
of our element

THOMAS MIXON

LEAVING THE NEST

Above the moss, tangled
branches form
canopies we're born to
desert. We're meant to watch
each boring sunrise
from this spot,
guaranteed the best
horizon view.
I look down,
juxtapose the Earth with mysteries
known to sky, but I can't
lie to myself.
Mud is all I want,
natural & full
of substance, unlike this
perch's lofty
qualities.
Rise &
shine,
tomorrow chirps. I hide
under the perfect
vantage point.
While everyone I love
extends their necks,
yearning for
zeniths, I bring in my wings.

SARA BAKER

DESERT BEAUTY

The lush, tree-covered green hills of my native North Texas slowly give way to the parched, bland Permian Basin with its colorless sage brush and low-lying mesquite trees. By late afternoon, absolutely nothing is in front of me except never-ending miles of dry, hot Chihuahuan Desert. Flat is the land—yellow, ochre, and brown.

A dust storm barrels through the desert, forcing me off the Interstate. I check into a motel waiting overnight for the dust storm to pass. I wake up early the next morning, the brilliant sun sparkling off the dusty venetian blinds casting a warm glow across the room. I peek through the blinds, surprised that the sky was now abundantly clear. The sun glistens across the sand beckoning me outside.

I stand at the doorway and shield my eyes, looking far off in the distance. The aridity has somehow freed the light unleashing the desert's grandeur. The sky is a dazzling, intense azure, blue. The sand dunes take on sunlight and pulse. I can see tiny clouds of sand floating above the ground like smoke. It's breathtaking!

The earth here isn't cloaked in forest, nor draped in pastoral, peaceful green. Instead, it dons a simple, khaki-colored robe embellished with a colorful lavender sunrise, splendid fishhook barrel cacti, yellow desert marigolds, and pink desert dandelions to name a few.

golden sand dunes rise
endless expanse of burning
desert's fiery soul

harsh, rugged outcrops
cacti stand like sentinels
prickly yet serene

flowers in desert
bloom beneath the blazing sun
desert beauty rare

CAROL MIKODA

STAND FAST

You have seen it: trees' branches push up
to a truer home, far from earth. Leaves
long to wave in high winds; you, too.
Keep pushing. Be relentless. Be adamant to kiss that changing,
unreachable sky. Insist on asking those questions
that can be so uncomfortable. Be attentive to the natural world
even as you are part of it. Any chipmunk
listens to what goes on around it; you can at least
pay that much attention. Don't make excuses. This
concerns your meaning and purpose, not last week's grocery list,
with its avocados and paper plates. Make a place where you
can do this work, and prepare for it with tea and vitamins,
oranges and naps. Are you confused? Then sit,
listening – to your breath, to the wind of a wider plane,
to the sun-warmed birds, to your heart's strong song.

BARBARA ANNA GAIARDONI

cruise ship . . .
with binoculars at breakfast
sea otters

touch pool–
at the marine center
sea cucumbers

colorful posting
a mantis crab display
among the coral

in the basement
of the secret laboratory
a shark tank

flying sharks
everyone's tired
of the scaremonger

LINDA M. CRATE

YOUNG AND CURIOUS

once a white tail
deer and i
met eyes

they were young
and curious,

i was just taking a
walk into the wood
as i was apt to do;

we just kept looking
at each other
until suddenly they took off
and only their white tail
was visible before they disappeared
into the trees—

maybe they were curious
because i wasn't wearing orange
like hunters do,

or maybe because i was dressed
in fine and pretty colors like
a bird but i had no wings;

or perhaps they just didn't know
what to make of a harmless human.

KB BALLENTINE

MOURNING, FRACTURED

For a little while we shall grow old.
Death taints our days, we suffer
and groan. The dew-damp aroma of dirt
as the coffin settles beneath its marble crown
will filter into each moment, each atom.
We will forget to smile, fail to breathe the greening
Spring brings. Sorrow will indulge us,
hold us more tightly than we wish.

But soon sun will supplant shadow, dusk golden
and glowing. Stars will reveal themselves
around a crescent moon, river sighing
its current. We will remember to celebrate
every memory of you. And, for a little while,
we will not grow old.

SARA BAKER

FISHING FOR WORDS

My father was a devoted fly-fisherman who couldn't seem to resist the almost masochistic urge to wake in the quiet predawn hours and stumble, blurry-eyed with his loaded thermos out of the house. He drove to a nearby icy cold stream or lake where he lowered his boat into the water; cranked the outboard engine into action; and navigated through the occasional murky waters taking note of the invisible currents and the direction of the wind blowing across the water. He eventually anchored his boat near the shoreline, disembarked, and stood at the water's edge casting his lure into the open water never knowing what he'd reel in. Often he gazed at the water for hours believing he could get a fish to bite on the lure and then pull that fish from the realm of the mysterious water into the world of his reality. And when my father caught a fish, he removed the hook from the its mouth and more frequently than not released it back into the water from whence it came. Sometimes he nabbed a fish he called "a keeper," for it was the perfect fish suitable for his family's consumption.

Growing up, I certainly thought my father was rather fanatical about fishing and often wondered what drove him to be the angler that he was. That is, until I became a writer. Suddenly his fanaticism made sense to me. I, too, possess a similar masochistic urge to wake in the quiet predawn hours and stumble blurry-eyed with a loaded cup of coffee out of the kitchen into my office. I lower myself into my chair; crank my

laptop into action; and navigate through the scattered papers, journals, scrapbooks, and photographs strewn across my desk taking note of the invisible currents and the direction of the ideas blowing across my mind. I eventually anchor myself to my desk and stand on the precipice of creativity casting my mind onto the blank screen never knowing what I'll reel in. Often I stare at the glassy screen for hours believing I'll pull something from the realm of the mysterious into the world of reality I'm creating. I catch a phrase or two but more frequently than not I remove them, releasing them back into the realm from which they came. Sometimes I nab a paragraph or even a page or two that I dub as "keepers," for they contain the perfect combination of words suitable for reader consumption.

Indeed, anglers and writers share some similar behaviors. Both enter into a staring contest with ripe with potential, a challenge devoid of guarantees. When an angler stands at the water's edge gazing at a glassy pool or a river proceeding with the freedom and discipline only the natural world can finesse, he's scrubbed clean of life's trivia and distractions. Watching the water, he's confronted with the unconscious as surely as the writer who stares into the humming blank screen each morning, praying that from the fathomless gray, prose will rise. Both fishing and writing are largely acts of faith—a belief that there is indeed a rich run of fish or ideas lurking below. The angler's false casts and hooked branches as well as the writer's convoluted first drafts are all part of some cosmic ritual designed to seduce a shiny gem to the surface.

So, why do anglers and writers persist in what seems to be such fanatical pursuits? I can't speak for anglers; I can only speak for myself. I know if I don't write consistently, I'm unhappy and

suffer a type of melancholy defined only by its absence. So, I must have a need to write. Perhaps that need comes from the thrill of getting a nibble, playing with an idea, and reeling it in. When I gaze into that glassy screen, I'm much like an angler scrubbed clean of life's trivia and distractions. Time collapses into itself leaving only the pulse and rhythm of the moment. In those rhythmic moments, my characters speak to me. I listen and write their stories. I don't plan. I get out of the way letting the story take me where it wants to go. I suppose I just love the adventure of taking that seemingly fearless, intuitive leap of faith onto a higher ground rich with ideas and imagination, never knowing what's going to happen or what I'm going to reel in. In the end, it's the not knowing that keeps me writing and fishing for words.

SANDRA NOEL

WHEN THE SEA GREW TIRED OF HER BLUE

She rose out of herself,
gobbled ripe rapeseed,
noshed on warm under-earth.
pooling in cloud mirrors.

Then a slow slink
as gullies of silver water,
her gift to dry boats
waiting for the next tide.

Further out
wind whipped a white froth,
turned ferry folk green,
threw her a red shoe.

LEE ANN ECKHARDT SMITH

THE AVENGER

Draping myself with a banner
red as a circus flag
I sally forth, great
avenger of the wrongs inflicted
on my Mother Earth
who matches my siren colour every autumn
but do not be fooled by her glorious
spectacle, her colours like festival
parades because this
is no celebration
it's her life draining as from a gash
it's her warning, her crying out
"I'm bleeding."

I race to staunch what I can but
my banner
begins to fray so I call
for reinforcements from around
this greenhouse where we live
and find plenty of international representatives
huddling in the heat
wringing their hands or arguing.

So I shred
the remains of my banner for compost,
create a new banner not quite
so bold

the soft heartening colours of spring now
draping my shoulders as I work
beside my neighbours
tend our small plots
whisper to the soil
to the air
to the trees
“please, can this be enough.”

SHERRY POFF

A TIME TO BUILD

The shadow of a tufted titmouse
tearing puffs of wool from
a multi-colored bird-nest ball
on my front porch pulled me
from my reverie by the front window.

The small gray bird will use the material
from this ball—a novelty gift
from my daughter—to build a nest
in which to raise her own brood
who will one day fly from her side.

When nesting season comes to an end,
wind and rain will tear the flimsy
construction apart, and some day,
walking in the yard, I'll find that tuft
of wool caught on a bare branch.

THANK YOU FOR READING

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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 alphabetically by the contributor's last name and may vary slightly from their previous publication:

Taylor McKay Hathorn's "The Land of Nod" was first published in Issue 14 of *The Muleskinner Journal: Handle and Spout*, 2025

In "She, In Tides" by Matt Henry, "in this kingdom by the sea" references "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe.

"Sweet Tooth" by Gracie Jones was previously published in *Fowl Pox Press*, 2025, FFR Issue 145.

"On the Ferry from Martha's Vineyard" by James B. Nicola first appeared in *Wild Violet*, 2015.

Jennifer Susan Smith's "An Abundance of Bluebells" was published in December 2024 by Grub Street, in *Our Planet, Our Stories* (a student anthology).

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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

BUFFY AAKAASH—he/him—Poetry

Buffy Aakaash's (he, him) work has been seen in *Main Street Rag*, *The North*, *The Brussels Review* and many other publications. His 2022 chapbook *Untangling the Knots* (Kelsay Books) was nominated for the Vermont Book Award. Breaking, his full-length book of poetry, will be published later in 2025 by Shanti Arts, LLC. He currently lives in the Vermont Green Mountains with his dog, Bodhi.

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SARA BAKER—she/her—Poetry and Nonfiction

A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited Sara's writing desire. Sara ignored that whisper and pursued a different career; eventually she re-discovered her inner writer and began writing. She's written a novel (*Secrets at Dillehay Crossing*); compiled a book of memoir vignettes (*Shoebox Stories*); and created a poetry chapbook (*Kaleidoscopic Verses*). Her manuscripts,

memoir vignettes, and poems have been published in numerous anthologies and magazines including, *All Your Poems*, *Coin-Operated Press*, *Good Old Days Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and *Guideposts*.

KB BALLENTINE—she/her—Poetry

KB Ballentine's eighth collection, *Spirit of Wild*, launched in March with Blue Light Press. Her earlier books can be found with Iris Press, Blue Light Press, Middle Creek Publishing, and Celtic Cat Publishing. Published in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Atlanta Review* and *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, and others, her work also appears in anthologies including *I Heard a Cardinal Sing* (2022), *The Strategic Poet* (2021), *Pandemic Evolution* (2021), and *Carrying the Branch: Poets in Search of Peace* (2017).

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ROBERT BEVERIDGE—he/him—Poetry

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Bayou Review*, *Molecule*, and *The Atlanta Review*, among others.

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ANNETTE BIRDSALL—she/her—Poetry

Annette Birdsall is a poet, picture book author, 12x12 member, SCBWI member, retired library director, and former youth services librarian. Her poetry has been featured in *Stirring Words*, *Lit Shark*, and in various professional library journals with articles on encouraging reading to babies, teens, and reluctant readers; and on removing library fines and access barriers across populations.

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NOLAND BLAIN—he/they—Poetry

Noland Blain (he/they) is a writer and archaeologist from Jacksonville, FL. They are inspired by their love of history, folklore, and the landscape of the American South. They most recently

excavated near Siena, Italy, at the site of a Medieval castle built over a Roman bath. Their poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *SAPIENS*, *Funicular Magazine*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *The Kudzu Review*, and elsewhere.

Instagram: @_landless.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM—he/him—Poetry

John Brantingham was always thinking about radical wonder. He was a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024, and he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and *The Best Small Fictions 2016* and *2022*. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, and he ran *The Journal of Radical Wonder* and Radical Wonder Press alongside his wife, editor and nature artist Ann Brantingham. John passed on Easter Sunday, 2026, but his memory, his work, his art, and his wonder live on.

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DUSTIN P BROWN—he/him—Poetry

Dustin P Brown has a BA in creative writing from Western Michigan University. He was also a fiction reading intern at *Third Coast Magazine* and an editorial intern at New Issues Poetry & Prose. These days he lives in Spain working as a freelance editor, writes, and drinks delicious wine. He has poetry published at *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Coe Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *Punchnel's*, *Falling Star Magazine*, *Waterhouse Review*, *Third Wednesday*, among others.

JOHN CHMURA—he/him—Poetry

John Chmura is a poet living and writing in the Pine Barrens of Ocean County, New Jersey. His long and short form work has recently appeared in *The Winged Moon*, *Presence Magazine*, and *Trash Panda*. John is a member of the Barnegat Poets' Society, and he regularly participates in the monthly Last Stand Open Mic at Tuckerton Seaport.

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LINDA M. CRATE—she/her—Poetry

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022).

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ADDISON CURRAN—she/her—Poetry

Addison Curran is a poet. She has been published in *Aura Literary Review*'s Issue 26, 'Whimsy', and was a Teen Editor for *Inlandia Institute*'s Issue 22. Addison Curran has been inspired by loss, grief, and perseverance, and writes mainly about themes of nature, philosophy, and spirituality. She hopes to one day have her poetry read widely and inspire people and is open to constructive criticism regarding her work.

S.D. DILLON—he/him—Poetry

S.D. Dillon is a poet from Michigan with an MFA from Notre Dame. His poetry has appeared recently in *Strange Daze*, *pioneertown*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and *Trash Wonderland*, and he received the 2025 Visual Poetry Award from *Bacopa Literary Review*.

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LYNETTE G. 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 EYRE—he/him—Poetry

Michael Eyre (he/him) writes poetry. A BREW Poetry Award Honoree, he has been published in diverse literary magazines and highly commended in poetry competitions. Based in the UK, he is a graduate of Liverpool University and the University of

Central Lancashire.

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DIANE FUNSTON—she/her—Poetry

Diane Funston has been published in journals including *California Quarterly*, *Synkronicity*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *F(r)iction*, *Tule Review*, and *Lake Affect Magazine* among others. She lives in the agricultural Sacramento Valley of California with her husband and two dogs. Diane's chapbook, her first, *Over The Falls* from Foot-hills Publishing, was born in 2022.

BARBARA ANNA GAIARDONI—she/her—Poetry

Barbara Anna Gaiardoni has received two nominations for the 2023 Touchstone Award and one in 2024. She has been recognized in The Mainichi's Haiku in English Best list for 2023 and 2024. Her poems have appeared in the 2023 and 2024 Haiku Euro Top 100 lists. Her Japanese-style poetry has been published in 230 international journals and translated into 12 languages. Barbara obtained Honorable Mention at the 2024 edition of the Fujisan Tanka Contest. She has published two origami micro-chapbooks: *Untitled* in 2023 and *Eating Haiku* in 2024. The latter was shown at the "Artfarm Pilastro," an exhibition of contemporary art and performance. Drawing, swimming in the sea and walking in nature are her passions. "I can, I must, I will do it" her motto.

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GTIMOTHY GORDON—he/him—Poetry

GTimothy Gordon divides lives among New Mexico/Texas borderland Chihuahuan Desert Southwest Organ Mountains, Asia, and, if the cash-money (as the 'aughts were wont to say) holds out, Europe.

Dream Wind was published in 2020 (Spirit-of-the-Ram Press) followed by *Ground of This Blue Earth* (Mellen Press), and *Everything Speaking Chinese* was awarded the RIVERSTONE Poetry Prize (AZ). His work has appeared in *AGNI*, *American Literary Review*, *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *RHINO*, *Sonora Review*, and *Texas Observer*, and several were nominated for Pushcarts and the Best of the Net. His ninth book, *KNOWING*, is forthcoming from Cyberwit Press.

MELANIE GREEN—she/her—Poetry

Melanie Green's most recent collection of poetry, *A Long, Wide Stretch of Calm*, was published by The Poetry Box. Earlier books are: *continuing bridge*; and *Determining Sky*. She lives in Portland, Oregon and has been published in *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *The Oregonian*, and elsewhere.

JASMINE HARRELL—she/her—Poetry

Jasmine Harrell is a volunteer reader for *Mud Season Review*. She has been published by the *Bacopa Literary Review*, *The Missing Slate*, *Star Line Magazine*, *Scarlet* by Jaded Ibis Press, and *Fraidy Cat Press*. She lives in Fort Washington, Maryland with her husband and their son.

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DAVID M. HARRIS—he/him—Poetry

A New Yorker in exile in Tennessee, David M. Harris's first career was in book publishing, as an editor, agent, and copyeditor. He also worked for a while in film production before getting his MFA and starting a career teaching college English. His poetry has appeared in various journals. His first collection of poetry, *The Review Mirror*, was published by Unsolicited Press in 2013. He is also the author of *Democracy and Other Problems*, an essay collection (SRM Publishers); *Bill, the Galactic Hero: The Final Incoherent Adventure*, a novel with Harry Harrison (Avon Books); numerous magazine articles; several published short stories; and two produced screenplays.

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TAYLOR MCKAY HATHORN—she/her—Fiction

Taylor McKay Hathorn is a Mississippian by birth and a Jacksonian by choice. Her work can be found at www.taylormckayhathorn.com.

MATT HENRY—he/him—Poetry

Matt Henry holds a Master of Arts in English from Indiana University South Bend. A writer and hockey player, his poems are often noirish, introspective, and dreamlike, exploring the shadows and intimacies of human experience.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON—he/him—Poetry

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. He has over 296 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 44 countries, has several published poetry books, has been nominated for 6 Pushcart Prize awards, and 6 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chapbooks. He has over 453 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society: <http://www.illinoispoets.org/>.

GRACIE JONES—she/her—Poetry

Gracie Jones is a writer, poet, and playwright studying creative writing at the University of Gloucestershire. She has had multiple poems published, including GOODNIGHT, published in The Broken Spine's BRUTALIST Anthology. Gracie has also completed work experience at Treehouse Digital LTD, where she worked with professional filmmakers, allowing her to discover a love for storytelling. Her play, ONE DAY YOU'LL UNDERSTAND was performed at a showcase at the Everyman Theatre in 2024.

NEETHU KRISHNAN—she/her—Poetry

Neethu Krishnan is a writer based in Mumbai, India, who writes across genres. She holds an MA in English and an MSc in Microbiology, and her work has been curated in 50+ international literary venues, including *The Spectacle*, *Prairie Fire*, *Southword*, and elsewhere. She is a Best of the Net poetry and non-fiction nominee, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and a Creative Nonfiction Award winner.

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ALLAN LAKE—he/him—Poetry

Allan Lake is a migrant poet from Allover, Canada, who now lives in Allover, Australia. Coincidence. He has published poems in 24 countries. His latest chapbook of poems, *My Photos of Sicily*, was published by Ginninderra Press. It contains no photos, only poems. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/allan.lake>

VERONICA LAKE—she/her—Poetry

Veronica Lake lives in Wyalup (Fremantle) Western Australia; the place where two winds kiss. She is a Churchill Fellow, awarded in 2010, for the Study of Shakespeare. In 2018, her poem “Twigs and Sand,” won first prize in the Mornington Peninsular Poetry Competition. Her first poetry collection, *Dragonfly Wing*, published by Sunline Press, was released in 2019. Her poems have been published in local, national and international journals. She lives by the sea and has need of it every day.

BETH MARQUEZ—she/her—Poetry

Beth Marquez has recent or upcoming publications in *Cathexis*, *October Hill*, *Spillway*, 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 and holds three mathematics degrees. She is a freelance statistician, poet, and singer-songwriter residing in Altadena, California.

CAROLYN MARTIN—she/her—Poetry

Blissfully retired in Clackamas, Oregon, Carolyn Martin is a lover of gardening and snorkeling, feral cats and backyard birds, writing, and photography. Since the only poem she wrote in high school was red-penciled “extremely maudlin,” she is amazed she has continued to write. Her poems have appeared in more than 175 journals throughout North America, Australia, and the UK, and her latest collection, *It’s in the Cards*, was just released by Kelsay Books.

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BETH MATHISON—she/her—Poetry and Fiction

Beth Mathison has work published in *The Foliate Oak* (including the 2008 and 2009 annual “Best Of” print editions), *Haiku Journal*, *365Tomorrows.com*, *MysteryAuthors.com*, *Drops of Crimson*, *Colored Chalk*, and *The Citron Review*. Stories published with Untreed Reads include *Mobsters for the Holidays*; *Criminally Hilarious Short Stories* (also an audio book) and the short story romance series, *Young at Heart*. Her poem “My Grandmother’s Hands” was featured in *Verse Wisconsin*, along with a

reading with Wisconsin's first Poet Laureate (Ellen Kort). Beth lives with her family in the Upper Midwest, and during the cold winter months, she dreams of snorkeling in the Riviera Maya.

URSULA MCCABE—she/her—Poetry

Ursula McCabe lives in Portland Oregon where the ocean is not too far away. Her poet father, Robert Huff, taught at Western Washington State University till his death in 1993. Ursula's poems can be seen in *Piker Press*, *Bluebird World*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Lit Shark Magazine*, *The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press*, and others.

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY—she/her—Poetry

LaVern Spencer McCarthy's work has appeared in *Writers and Readers Magazine*, *Home Life Magazine*, *Cappers*, *Meadowlark Reader*, *Agape Review*, *Bards Against Hunger*, *Down in the Dirt*, *The Evening Universe*, *Fresh Words Magazine*, Wicked Shadows Press, *Midnight Magazine*, *Pulp Cult Press*, *Stygian Lepus*, *The Hedge Apple*, *The Stray Branch*, *Metastellar*, *World of Myth*, *Otherwise Engaged*, Alien Buddha Press, *Blood Moon Rising*, and many others. She is a life member of Poetry Society of Texas, and she is the author of 14 books of short stories, poetry, and journals. Among her latest is *The Sea's Elusive Treasures*, published by the Austin Poetry Society in 2026.

CAROL MIKODA—she/her—Poetry

Carol Mikoda, living near Seneca Lake, is the author of three chapbooks, *While You Wait*; *Wind and Water*; *Leaf and Lake*; and *Outside of Time* (coming in Fall of 2025). Her work appears in many literary journals, and her prose poem, "Jesus at the Pub," was nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize in 2024. She is strongly attached to clouds, trees, and music.

T.C. MILL—she/her—Poetry

T.C. Mill writes passionate words about indecorous things and runs a small editing business (one answer to the question "What do you even do with a philosophy degree?"). Based in Wisconsin, she volunteers locally and sometimes lifts weights when that doesn't keep her busy enough, but she'd rather read than do almost

anything else. She was on the longlist of the 2022 Penrose Prize for Excellence in Poetry from LGBTQIA+ Writers.

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THOMAS MIXON—he/him—Poetry

Thomas Mixon (he/him) is a fiction reader for *Short Story, Long*. He has poems and prose in *ONE ART, Epiphany, Lost Balloon*, and elsewhere.

Substack: <https://inanorchardsoftwithrot.substack.com>.

JAMES B. NICOLA—he/him—Poetry

James B. Nicola's nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* magazine award. Recent nonfiction can be found on-line at *Heimat Review, About Place, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, Unlikely Stories* and *Lowestoft Chronicle*; fiction, at *Epistemic, 10 x 10 Flash Fiction, Neither Fish Nor Foul, The GroundUp, Sine Qua Non*, and *Platform Review*. The latest of his eight full-length poetry collections are *Natural Tendencies, Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, and *Turns & Twists*. A graduate of Yale and returning contributor to *Lit Shark*, he has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, one nomination each for Best Microfiction, Best of Net, and Rhysling awards, plus twelve Pushcart nominations—for which he feels both stunned and grateful.

LAUREN K. NIXON—she/her—Poetry and Fiction

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, 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.

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SANDRA NOEL—she/her—Poetry

Sandra Noel is a poet and lover of words from the island of Jersey, Channel Islands. Her passion for nature and the ocean weaves its way through her work. Sandra loves year-round sea swimming and is often darting out with tow float, dry-robe and Ipad. She has poems in various magazines and anthologies throughout the UK and further afield. Sandra's debut collection, *Into The Under*, was published in July 2024 by Yaffle's Nest, Yaffle Press.

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S. ABDULWASI'H OLAITAN—he/him—Poetry

S. Abdulwasi'h Olaitan is a Nigerian introverted poet, a savant, graphics designer & essayist. He writes from a city 5,280 miles away from hell & a second close to haven "ilorin". He is deeply devoted to God and lover of his parents & good tea. He is the author of the shortlisted chapbook, *Life, An Objet D'art* (Arting Arena Poetry Chapbook Prize 2023), Co-winner for Prose Purple Writing Competition 2024 (Poetry category).

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VISHAAL PATHAK—he/him—Fiction

Vishaal writes short stories and poems, mostly about memories. Some of his work has appeared in *ARTS by the People*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Ghudsavar*, *Kitaab*, *Hakara Journal*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Bare Bones Publishing*, *Panorama*, *The Perch Journal*, *The Kelp Journal*, *Vermilion*, *The Rush*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, *The Rainbow Poems*, *Antonym Mag*, *Good Printed Things* and *Metonym Journal*. One of his poems was recently nominated for the Best of the Net 2026 Anthology.

MIRANDA PHELPS—she/her—Fiction

Miranda Phelps is a child-and-family psychologist/writer living in Central Maine. Previously a freelance writer, she has an MFA in playwriting from Brandeis University and is now writing short stories, picture books, and a novel. Having grown up in the military, continued traveling and working with a college in Haiti, she is keenly aware of the wider world while rooted in her chosen community. She is devoted to her family, friends, and Buddhist practice.

KELLY PINER—she/her—Fiction

Kelly Piner is a Clinical Psychologist who in her free time, tends to feral cats and searches for Bigfoot in nearby forests. Her writing is inspired by Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*. Most recently, Ms. Piner's story, "Class Reunion," was published by *Persimmon Tree*. Her short story, "Euthanasia," was chosen as The Best of 2023 by *After Dinner Conversation*. Her short stories have appeared in *Bristol Noir*, *Litro Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Dragon Soul Press*, *The Last Girl's Club/Wicked News*, *Rebellion Lit Review*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Drunken Pen Writing*, *Lit Shark Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Weirdbook*, *Written Tales* and others. Her stories have also appeared in multiple anthologies.

SHERRY POFF—she/her—Poetry

Sherry Poff lives and writes in and around Ooltewah, Tennessee. Sherry holds an MA in Writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is a member of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild and the Poetry Society of Tennessee. Her stories and poems have appeared in numerous online and print publications including *Artemis*, *Speckled Trout Review*, *Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*, and *Salvation South*.

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.

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.

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT—she/her—Poetry

After retiring from a crisis center in 2006, Ellen Hirning Schmidt designed and teaches “Writing through the Rough Spots.” More than 100 students from across the U.S & 15 countries and at Cornell University, have participated as well as summer writing circles on Star Island, NH. She received the Helen Kay Poetry Chapbook Prize, a Pushcart nomination, a Connecticut Poetry Society Award, and was named a finalist in the 2023 American Writers Review. After submitting her very first poem when she turned 70, her second full-length poetry collection, *Oh Say Did You Know / This Much I Know*, was just published by Evening Street Press. A mother and grandmother, she lives in Ithaca, NY with her husband.

JASON SCHWARTZ—he/him—Poetry

Jason Schwartz is a crypto tax lawyer who writes poetry between calls. He posts about crypto, taxes, cryptoart, and other things as @CryptoTaxGuyETH on X.

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 180 literary journals and anthologies in America, England, Canada, Romania, Scotland, China, Sweden, Australia, Portugal, India, Australia, Turkey, Hungary, Israel, and Italy. 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.

R. JAMES SENNETT, JR.—he/him—Poetry

R. James Sennett, Jr., lives, works, breathes and chases his muse in Louisville, Kentucky. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications for which he is grateful.

JENNIFER SUSAN SMITH—she/her—Poetry

Jennifer Susan Smith, a retired speech-language pathologist, was born in Summerville, Georgia, and resides in Rock Spring, Georgia. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Novus Literary Arts Journal*, *Mildred Haun Review*, *Appalachia Bare*, and *Sunflowers Rising: Poems for Peace Anthology*, among others. She holds membership in Chattanooga Writers' Guild, Poetry Society of Tennessee and Georgia Poetry Society. Jennifer is chairman of Alpha Delta Kappa Pages and Pearls Book Club.

LEE ANN ECKHARDT SMITH—she/her—Poetry

Lee Ann Eckhardt Smith is a Canadian writer of many genres. She is an award-winning poet, most recently the 2025 winner of the national Golden Grassroots Chapbook Contest. Her poetry has been included in several anthologies. She also creates Poetry Art from her photographs that spark new ideas for poems. The author of two non-fiction history books, Lee Ann also regularly publishes articles with the Historical Novel Society and Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton. She lives in Richmond, Ontario, a historic village outside of Ottawa, Canada's capital.

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 film is *When Houston Had the Blues*.

MARIANNE TEFFT—she/her—Poetry

Marianne Tefft is a poet and voice-over reader who daylights as a Montessori teacher in Toronto, Canada. Her poems and short stories appear online, in print and on air in North America, Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. She is the author of *Full Moon Fire: Spoken Songs of Love* and *Moonchild: Poems for Moon Lovers*.

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.

ELIZABETH WING—she/her—Poetry

Elizabeth Wing is a writer and gardener in Portland, Oregon. Her recent work has appeared in the *Washington Square Review*, *Poetry Currency*, *Mudroom*, *ALOCASIA*, and other venues. Wing wrote the work that appears in this issue while through hiking the length of the Oregon Coast.

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MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN—she/her—Poetry

McKenzie Lynn Tozan lives and writes on the coast of Croatia. She's the Editor-in-Chief of *Lit Shark Magazine*, the front-end copyeditor of Bridwell Press's Project Poetica, editor-at-large at Willows & Wood Publishing, and a volunteer poetry editor at *MUZZLE Magazine*. Her book reviews and essays have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Green Mountains Review*, *IndieReader*, *POPSUGAR (PS)*, *Motherly*, *The Lifestyle Collective*, and other places. Her poetry

has appeared in *Whale Road Review* (who nominated her poem, “Shopping for T-Rex,” for Best of the Net), *Rogue Agent*, *New Mexico Review*, and others. She’s currently working on a poetry collection, a novel, and a book of short stories of her own. When she isn’t at her desk, she’s walking the coast, dreaming of swimming with sharks, or reminiscing about the Midwest from her kitchen.

SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!

Thank you again to everyone who submitted to Issue 10 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 your work for consideration at *Lit Shark Magazine*, you'll find the most up to date information on our website: www.litshark.com.

In addition to our general and themed issues of *Lit Shark Magazine*, we also have our paid, monthly **Poem of the Month Contest** and weekly opportunities to submit creative responses to the **writing prompts** we share on our website.

We're also always interested in hearing from potential book reviewers, conservation/sustainability writers, marine biology/ecology writers, and anyone with interesting stories about marine life, whale sightings, swimming with sharks—anything on your heart/in your imagination!

Happy Writing and Happy Submitting, readers, writers, and shark fans—and thanks again for reading Issue 10!

FIN.
(UNTIL ISSUE #11...)

POETRY & PROSE

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