LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO. 11 • OCT. 2026

LIT SHARK *magazine*

THE SHARK DOG EDITION

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

LIT
SHARK

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 11 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 2026.

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EDITED BY MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

The last time I wrote to you, it was for Issue 10 of *Lit Shark Magazine: The Winter Edition*, back in May 2026, after taking about half of a year hiatus for my mental health. I had no idea the plans 2026 had in store for me.

Throughout the hiatus, I struggled with finding purpose each day and had to really focus on being grateful for the little things, so when I finally came back to Lit Shark, I was not only grateful to have it back in my life but to have creativity to fill my days. But returning presented its own challenges, mostly me figuring out what my rhythm post-hiatus looked like compared to my old one.

When Issue 10 came out, I was excited for a summer of releasing the SHARK DOG and SHARK WEEK issues, only for one piece of bad news to drop into my life after another, including the passing of my brother in August. As much as I wanted to keep moving forward, and for every small bit of progress I made each day, even if it was only reading a few submissions, it's taken a very long time to get back into a rhythm and feel like Lit Shark is something I can still "do" without doing a terrible job. Thank you for your patience.

While the final three issues of the year will come out in much quicker succession than I originally planned, I'm confident in the talent found within these pages, as well as the heartfelt responses to the issue's theme of being stigmatized, misunderstood, othered, and outcasts, originally launched in response to the XL Bully Ban against bulldogs, pitbulls, and other large breeds in the UK and Wales. In a world where beauty is often offered in a very small box, this issue demonstrates just how much more beauty there is in this world if you only open your eyes and your heart to it.

Though it's called the SHARK DOG Edition, most of this issue didn't end up being about our beloved shark dogs, though they and their spirit are most certainly present. The issue hinges much more on other misunderstood wildlife who equally deserve attention, like sharks, hyenas, crows, vultures, and coyotes, and there are touching examples here, too, of ways in which being human isn't always easy, either. I adore our beloved shark dogs, but I adore our fellow animal friends, as well, and I'm grateful our community gave them space.

I'm incredibly touched by the vulnerability found within these pages and how all of these writers made even the most difficult situations feel a little more poetic, palatable, even hopeful. I've loved diving into these works, collecting them, and forming this collection, and I hope within these pages, you find comfort, love, and belonging.

No matter how alone you may have felt in your life, you always have a home here at Lit Shark (that includes your animal friends, too).

Happy Reading! Until Issue 12,
McKenzie
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan
October 2026

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This issue is dedicated to my late brother, Jay,
who passed away during the creation of this issue:
You will always be one of my favorite people.

And to Jay's late dog, Jordan,
easily the most misunderstood creature I've ever loved:
Your fear of car honks and church bells
was far greater than your (nonexistant) bite.

ONE:
THE SHARK DOGS

K.D. BATTLE

30,000 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP

My best friends are mostly other species:
Some trees, a few hound dogs, an ancient cat.
Why don't we write about dogs more often?
Mary Oliver had clause in contract
Allowing her to bring her dogs to school.
When you live with canines your entire life,
You learn to smell like them, use the canines,
Bite flesh to assert dominance at home.
With human senses, hear their loyal hearts,
Personify their personalities,
Watch them catch critters in their sleep, sighing.
Speak their voices in your mind with real words,
Feel their love to run, freedom of the woods—
Their hearts so unfiltered—what precious goods.

LINDA M. CRATE

FRIEND OF THE CROWS

crows have
always followed me,
i have always
loved them;

their strange song
never offended my ears—

but i have always been
a wild, feral girl
misfit of my own species;

perhaps that's why
i have a fondness for these
birds many consider creepy—

once i told my friends of
the myth that the crow was the
one that gave all of his colors
away so that the other birds
of the forest could know vibrant hues,

and they said that it made
them less creepy to them now;

and my heart smiled
for crows have and will always
be my friends.

K.D. BATTLE

THE PRESERVES OF SOUTH COASTAL MAINE

Trained Sundrop deep in the Kennebunk woods, ran half a mile out from me to chase
Critters on the ridge dropping down to the creek. A dog that runs free is a different dog
Compared to the leash. The canopy changed as the path wound downward, we faced
A creek alight with magic, trees tall & holding court with the sun, glistening logs
Dancing with light along the mossy banks, broken bridge to no where a growling shadow.
When you run with beasts long enough, feed them, train them with freedom,
You connect consciousness, pet to person, friend to friend, primal to primate.
My dog's sight, black & white, maw both hands & maw, nose illuminating
Paths of histories, pheromones as conversations between friends. A stain in the grass
Contains a canine timestamp, an instant message in dog speak saying,
"What's up, dawg?" In the woods, Sunnie smelt the dirt, how the moisture changed
In the mouth as we walked from birch to pine to oak grove, descending upon willows.
The sweet stubborn maples hung over the creek with ancient pride. Sundrop found some toy,
An entire deer leg, which she paraded in triumph, a familiar pride of purpose & conscious joy.

CYNTHIA STEELE

ALL HAIL THE VELVET HIPPO

My husband and I fostered 13 dogs over more than a decade and only "failed" one of them.

A foster fail means the dog stays with you instead of being prepared for adoption into another home.

The dog we foster failed was a velvet hippo that no one applied to adopt.

Kona is, in nearly equal measure, Siberian Husky, Great Dane, American Pit Bull Terrier, and American Staffordshire Terrier. I wasn't concerned about the pittie in her—39% pit bull type breed. I'd had a pittie in the past, one of the sweetest runts of a litter we dressed in a sock for his first month of life. He became the most loyal companion imaginable. Perhaps I was even glad there was pittie in Kona. Still, I worried others wouldn't feel the same.

Kona now weighs 80 pounds, or 5 stone 10. She is heaviest in the skull and chest.

All hail the velvet hippo.

The term is widely used by owners of pit bull–type dogs because of their velvety coats, oversized heads, and substantial bodies. Kona is brindle, striped in shades of brown and black, and she has heterochromia—one blue eye and one brown, both penetrating and seemingly able to see straight through to the soul.

These dogs are intensely people-oriented, silly, humorous, bed-hoarding creatures with enormous heads and sturdy bodies. They ask for little more than one good walk a day and a place beside their people.

Kona is shy but playful beyond measure. Before we adopted her, I took her to dog parks at least twenty times to socialize her.

Sometimes people crossed the park when they saw her coming. Some picked up dogs larger than the ones she wanted to play with. They saw the broad head, the heavy chest, the pit bull in her ancestry, and made up their minds before she took a single step.

By now, they hardly notice her.

She has joined all their packs. She goes low, then springs upward tiger-like, playing and mouthing with the other dogs. She is remarkably careful with the tinies and smaller breeds. If I call out, "Too small," she walks right past them. More often, she simply stands nearby, looking at them with her large, soulful eyes.

Shortly after our adoption was finalized, Kona caught kennel cough along with the rest of our crew. All of the dogs had been vaccinated against kennel cough, and most recovered uneventfully. Kona didn't.

This was an especially virulent strain. What began as a routine infection quickly became a fight for her life. The illness ravaged her left lung, leaving it permanently scarred, and she spent a terrifying week in the hospital.

We didn't know if she would live.

For days, every phone call felt like it might bring devastating news. We watched her struggle to breathe and wondered whether we were about to lose the dog we had only just welcomed into our family.

People who had followed her story online or spent time with her rallied to help. They raised about $1,500 toward her care—a small fraction of what we needed, but enough to remind us we weren't alone. Messages, prayers, and well wishes poured in from every direction, carrying us through some of the darkest moments.

When we visited, hospital staff sometimes reprimanded us for getting her too excited. Even exhausted and tethered to treatment, Kona's spirit never dimmed. She would light up the moment she saw us, wagging and straining toward the door because she wanted desperately to go home.

As pneumonia deepened and one lung began to balloon,

surgery seemed increasingly inevitable. Then, somehow, she turned the corner. Day by day, her strength returned. Against all expectations, she pulled through.

In the years since, she has never been seriously ill again.

Our crew includes three Shih Tzu mixes, a Brussels Griffon, and a German Shorthaired Pointer. Kona, the largest dog among them by far, is unfailingly gentle with every one of them. Her size has never matched her temperament; beneath her powerful frame is the same resilient, tender-hearted dog who fought so hard to stay with us.

No one applied for Kona.

Fortunately for us.

Kona and Friends - delicious poetry in motion! Photo by Cynthia Steele

ROBERT WYNNE

EL PERRO

—after the Goya painting

As his mind slowly slipped away
Goya trapped a small dog
in one of the walls of his house

and then died. He did this
solely with paint, lighter browns
comprising a sky made of dirt

while darker browns rise up
from the bottom like a challenge.
The painting's namesake stares

up at that burnt umber horizon
seemingly without noticing
the dark smudge in the top right

where something like a sun
would be shining, if this were
any other wall in any other house.

Ears lowered, body fully hidden
the dog is nearly lost
in such earthen-hued tones

but he lives on in Madrid
with a little placard
which lets everyone know

he is in distress, perhaps
drowning, although
there's no blue anywhere

to even fill his lonely lungs
with death.

DO DOGS HAVE SOULS?

I didn't used to think so, but maybe now I do—
our neighbors got a puppy about a year ago,
a handsome lovable guy with copper fur and
stark green eyes—Tully they named him. Then
they had a baby and Tully overnight went from
being a baby himself to protective Big Bro',
knowing somehow the need to watch over the
helpless, fur-less, human puppy . . .

I was amazed when they told me about that
sudden unexpected awareness in Tully
and his self-appointed guardianship of their
infant boy—until I remembered King,
my family's alsatian, and the time when I
was a little kid and back-talked my mom
and as she moved to slap my face, King
leapt up and gently—yes, gently took
her arm in his mouth without hurting her,
not even breaking the skin . . .
and she had to laugh, and I was saved.

Then too, if dogs have souls they can do bad
as well as good and so I think about Mary,
a cocker spaniel who pretty much ran our
family farm: That twenty pound dog would
chase our half-ton horses round and round
the corral like a veteran cowboy, snapping
at their hooves, and if you crossed her with
so much as a harsh word, she would visit
your room late at night and leave an unwanted
present (liquid or solid, depending on how
great your offense towards the tiny queen).

So yes, maybe dogs do have souls . . .

LYNETTE G. ESPOSITO

THE WATER DOGS

I imagine heaven is a beach

where loved dogs go

to romp through the edges of waves

waiting for the rest of us to join them,

I see little Peattie the Pomeranian
taken in before he was sent to a shelter
challenging Khia the hundred plus pound golden collie
thrown out of his house because of a girlfriend issue.
He liked cold cuts.

There's Benji the Dalmatian who they said
was house trained but wasn't and the first day ate
a pound of butter and threw up all over . . .

and Tipi who kept trying to go back to the home
that didn't want him until he realized
we were his home.

Lady, the only girl in the lot . . . so beautiful—
a pure-bred collie—born on the fourth of July—
Had her family put a sign up on the vet's office bulletin board for someone to take her free.

I imagine them shaking the water from their fur and paws—

running up and down on the sand

back and forth

waiting for me to call their names.

FAITH-ANNE BELL

NEW ORLEANS EVENING

Toured the Garden District
& saw the mansions—
Sandra Bullock & the rest

People walking their dogs looking at us
like *you don't belong* wanting peace,
but they chose to live in opulence

I see plantations built on slave blood—
Houses so big it takes a full minute
to walk around one

Signs of "No Loitering" as if an excuse
for living like this expecting peace
& no tourists peeking

Something makes me sick to my stomach
I go back to hotel & find a homeless veteran
with a guitar outside asking to sing me a song
He plays & sings with a voice more beautiful
than a Garden District mansion

I give him some money, & we exchange
life story for life story & poem for song—
Reading my words right on the street

In the distance, I hear a trumpet
& a single player lights up the street
with meaning, art, & music

E.B. WHITE

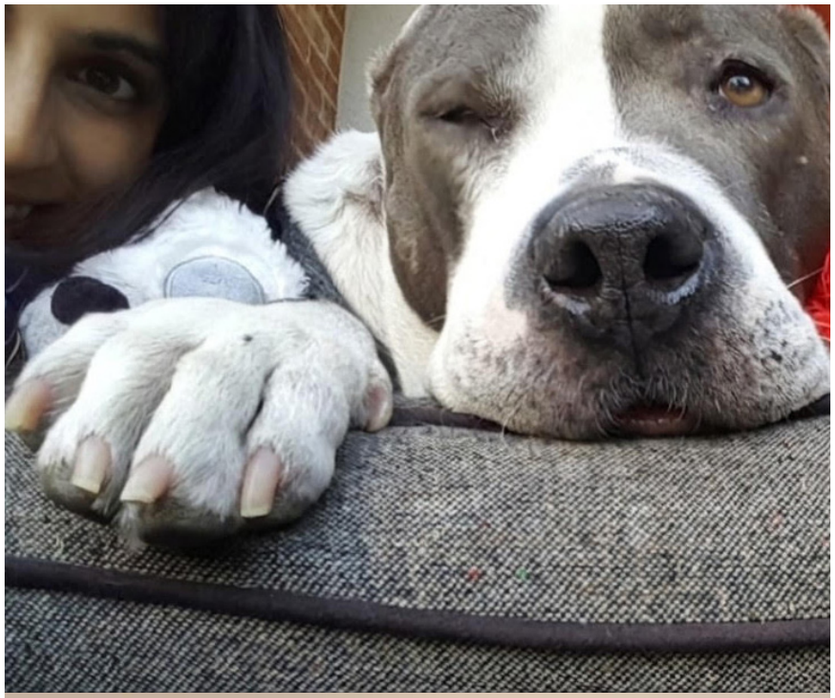
DOG AROUND THE BLOCK

Dog around the block, sniff,
Hydrant sniffing, corner, grating,
Sniffing, always, starting forward,
Backward, dragging, sniffing backward,
Leash at taut, leash at dangle,
Leash in people's feet entangle—
Sniffing dog, apprised of smellings,
Love of life, and fronts of dwellings,
Meeting enemies,
Loving old acquaintance, sniff,
Sniffing hydrant for reminders,
Leg against the wall, raise,
Leaving grating, corner greeting,
Chance for meeting, sniff, meeting,
Meeting, telling, news of smelling,
Nose to tail, tail to nose,
Rigid, careful, pose,
Liking, partly liking, hating,
Then another hydrant, grating,
Leash at taut, leash at dangle,
Tangle, sniff, untangle,
Dog around the block, sniff.

ROBERT WYNNE

BANDIT SLEEPS WITH HUNGER

The dog laying across my legs
is heavier than he looks. He breathes
so erratically, he must be dreaming
of a refrigerator, cold and closed
and dark, filled with all the food
he wishes would rain down
from above. He imagines
my clumsy hands fumbling with
cutting boards, smoked sausage
slicing the still air as it sails
straight into his waiting mouth.
He pants, bares his teeth
and twitches with excitement
because he knows when he wakes
I will still be so human, able
to open any door, but not
quite willing to control
all the tender morsels
which he's sure must cover
every out-of-reach kitchen counter.
A single drop of saliva falls
from his anxious jaws
and his unthinking tongue
darts out to catch it. It could be
a piece of meat or cheese
giving in to gravity
in a final attempt to escape
the dark destiny of his throat,
or he could still be dreaming.



Top: Sara with her fostered XL bully, Ferdinand; Bottom: Sara's children with their rescued cats and rescued, blind cocker spaniel! Both photos by Sara Kapadia

SARA KAPADIA

MISUNDERSTOOD XL SNUGGLE SHARK DOG

I did not choose the weight of my head,
or the width of my chest,
or the way my shadow arrives before I do,
I did not chose the way my jowls hang,
Or the strength of my shoulders.

I just want a snuggle.

People see me and their bodies tighten,
I feel it travel through the lead of the leash
into the soft place behind my ears
where I wait for a voice to tell me who I am.

I am a snugglebug shark dog,
A big softie,
A gentle giant.

I have learned the language of distance...
how footsteps change when they decide not to come closer,
how hands rise not to greet but to shield,
how eyes speak in sharp glances
that judge me.

They say my breed like a warning:
XL Bully,
I am anything but a bully.

I am a hug machine,
A love bear,
A land seal.

I remember the first time I understood fear
was not mine.

It slipped off a stranger and settled onto my back
like rain that didn't ask where I had been
or what I had carried to arrive here.

I am careful with my steps.
I place them like I'm walking through glass
no one else can see.

Still, the world flinches.
I watch other dogs run toward lifted arms,
their welcome unquestioned, uncomplicated.
I want to be lifted up and cuddled.

I do not understand statistics
or the stories told about us
in rooms I will never enter.
I only understand the space beside you
and whether it opens
or closes.

When you kneel,
when your hand pauses midair
and decides to come down anyway,
I hold myself so still
so you know I am truly gentle.
I need to prove myself to you,
So, you see beyond my huge size,
Beyond my rippling muscles.

I want you to see that I am just
A gigantic teddy bear,
A weighted blanket,
A supersized lap dog.

They call me
An XL Bully
But in reality
I am
And
Always
Will
Be
A
Misunderstood snugglebug shark dog.

K.D. BATTLE

ON HIVER

Always loved winter best, dogs in snow, powdery fire,
throwing balls.
There's more wonder out in the woods, that blissful piney breath,
Freezing inhalations like burning, holy chill & nip.
Out in the trees, never question purpose, life choices &
Become a person about their business surviving by choice,
With snug boots & thick-wool alpaca socks & long under
Wearing gloves keeps hands hot as humming kettles, stinging,
Boiling breath hanging in the crisp. Dogs check-in, grateful.
The sheen of the sun reflects brighter from the snowy hedges,
Grass rustling blue when it pokes through the drifts.
The hounds hunger to hike through blizzards, & why not
Share their enthusiasm for entropy, a virgin landscape?
Moonbeams marinate snowflakes in crystal twilight—
Never minded the cold, just wore the clothes right.

TWO:
THE POETS

ANNETTE BIRDSALL

LUNULAE: HEAVENLY BODIES

Poets wax and wane about starry
starry eyes, but look more closely:
a celestial crescent
rests in space at the base
of each finger &
toe nail bed—each
a perfect
little
moon.

CHEESE

The moon has become cheese. Fondue
geysers explode into the dark. The man
on the moon is sipping tea on his balcony.
Everything he does, he did better 25 years
ago. His hands are wrinkled, hard as time.
There are so many things he should be doing
instead. Life is always like that. Even on
the moon, joy is a fleeting thing. He sips
and a mountain falls. Or is shot into
the black to wipe out all life on Earth.
There's not much he can do. His import/
export business outstepped demand.
It was so much work turning the moon
into cheese, and filling the packages
for UPS. Now, there's nowhere for the drivers
to park. It's just him and his cheese
and his tea, which was cold before
he even sat down.

I'M NOT SUPERSTITIOUS, BUT I AM A LITTLE STITIOUS

Man plans and God laughs, which makes
God kind of a jerk. I'm doing the best
that I can, except I could do better. My
father would say can you take it to the bank
and get a crop loan for it? I just wanted
to be a kid. Nowadays, that means being
in constant danger of getting shot. I miss
me. I miss my college body. How long into
working out daily does it take before
you start to feel good and not just tired
every day? Asking for a fat friend
that's me. I wouldn't call myself a friend
to myself. It's hard to believe that temperature
was the only thing wrong with the bear's
porridge. In the mirror, I see an old
man's face and wonder how I got here.
There is a clown crying outside my
window. Three mimes are curb-stomping
him. It's the funniest thing I've seen
all year and it's probably not real. So many
abandoned churches on soft hikes and yet
not enough. I need to find a woman who
doesn't like pickles so I can eat hers.

EMMA JOHNSON-RIVARD

THE POET CONTEMPLATES THE HUNTER

the black-footed cat lives alone
except for her kittens and the occasional
very occasional
stranger in the dark. she is lone but not
lonely. she knows her full measure.

i strive for this alchemy.
my solitude is strange.
little wanderer, i too
would like to understand myself.

i, too,
would like to carve pride
beyond the dark.

LYNN WHITE

DEAD POETS

Outside the night was filled with stars,
a sky full of dead poets
if van Gogh is to be believed.
But he was inside now
and all he remembered
was the red curtain
coming down over his eyes.
Red first and then black.
So black it turned everything black.
They told him that
he had died
for a few seconds,
or was it a few minutes.
Then he was back
looking out
on the starry night.
He wondered how long it took
for a dead poet to become a star.
Was a few seconds,
or even a few minutes,
sufficient.
And now,
now that he was back,
was he still shining
undead, living
up there with all the dead poets.
Unless the raising of the curtain
put out his light.

MARILYN CAVICCHIA

MAE WEST OBJECTS TO DIANE ARBUS'S PHOTOGRAPHS

I hate them because
they are truthful.
Wisdom in my peignoir?

Well, wisdom doesn't belong there!
Would you like to be *wise* in bed?
Shall we count your wrinkles, too,

say you look *stately*
as the world moves past,
leaving you alone?

I was the woman of every hour,
especially the wee hours. The night,
the night has caught me at last.

JACKIE CHOU

THE CLIQUE

I lurk through your posts
like a famished beast

You haven't changed much
the smile
the ebony hair

All I wanted
was a corner
an edge
of your exclusive club

All I longed for
was a shred
of your laughter

My words
never mattered to you
the paper crumpled
and tossed away

I will always be
that girl who passed by
while you took pictures

like a coyote
in the background

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE

THE MAGIC BOX

When I was a child,
my greatest joy was the box—
the magic box—
from Grandfather's study.

His strong hands would lift the lid
with reverent care,
and nestled there in wooden trays
were stories to be told.

The cork bobbers recalled the time
that he was fishing with a bamboo pole . . .
the iron weights a daring adventure
on the high seas after sharks.

He explained the weights of the lines—
why you needed to choose
this nylon for one fish,
that braided wire for another . . .

The lures all had names.
"Zelda caught me a twenty-five-pound bass once."
"Muriel here won me a prize at the World's Fair."
I shyly made their acquaintance.

Now, that magic box is mine to guard,
and I take it down from its shelf
to show its contents to my own child—
the next to learn its secrets.

ABIGAIL OTTLEY

DOUBLE EXPOSURE

O little ghost without even a name
I lived ten years before she told me

how, with no warning, you came unstuck
before the name you never had was never spoken

how your future unravelled *before her very eyes*
before you saw first light of day.

I was too young to be told then
you couldn't be born. Perhaps

her grief came between us. Maybe her
kindness in not wanting me

to think that, being second,
I came in second best.

One day I saw her in a black & white photo
by the gravestones in front of a chapel.

Smouldering eyes, a dark widow's peak:
so beautiful, but barely there.

Her hair was partly covered by a plaid woolen scarf.
She held an infant swaddled in a shawl.

Is that me? I asked her. A startled pause.
It was a work friend, her little girl's christening.

It was hard. I'd not long lost my own.
They told me after my baby was a boy.

S. ABDULWASI'H OLAITAN

A PYRAMID TO ELSEWHERE

On a hospital bed, I rifle for awhile—the leaves
of becoming. The ward–scents of death & life incognito
A nurse passes an eye level away, hell-bent in her white
heading to the obstetric unit, to the delivery room. I
follow her, not out of love but out of thirst
for the primordial cries—of egg etching open, of asterisk
that means someone is here. She moves past ward 1, past ICU
her shoes throbbing like the heartbeat of water. I stay
close, drawn in by the weight of it—the smallness
of the fugitive smell of new skin.
She gets to the doorstep—pulls it open like pulling a breath
& then shuts it. For what seems seconds,
I wait, then the sounds intercept—a whetted cry, then
another, growing like a cornet's desperate call. That's where
the poem ends, but

it may start this way as well—I was passing by
the labor room, the scent of babies' cries hanging in the air.
Maybe they're twins, maybe they're not. Those kids, are
passersby like I once was, how familiar—their cries clinking
against the chandelier's glass, gripping the light like Noah
ringing the bell to escape the jaws of sharks. The voice,
as strange as an old naira coin, the room, as obvious
as a crescent moon on its fourth day of fading.

I know, truly, what it is to be shut out, the door
a heavy weight behind me. & I know, truly, how it feels
to be a dog, clawing at bones, forever hungry. & I know,
truly, how it is for a passenger, dragged to somewhere
they never asked to go. & I know, truly, what it's like to
be caught in the crossfire when the exit isn't a way out.
& I know, truly, how a pyramid can take you to a place
your hands never retch.

JAMES LEWIS HUSS

GREAT-GRANNY'S QUILT

my granny made quilts out of motley cloth scraps
that she bought with her social security cash.
my granny would harmonize contour and hue—
all colors were welcome, all patterns were used.
my granny worked hard all the year on her art
to gift us at christmas a piece of her heart.
but my granny unfortunately lived not to see
the greatest of gifts that was given to me.

my son, who was born on my very birthday,
has fun in the quilt that his great-granny made.

> great-granny who cooked for dad every night
> (and dad thanked great-granny by eating every bite),
> great-granny who loved dad's furry best friend
> even though he weighed more than great-granny did,
> great-granny who on her deathbed saw dad's face
> when he was in a place eight thousand miles away.

my son and my granny will never embrace
except when he wraps himself up and he plays
in great-granny's quilt.

JAMES LEWIS HUSS

FAHRENHEIT 68

If Bradbury knew how I grew
to love his words
I think he would approve.
He spent ten years
among the leaves of fallen trees
adorned with prose and poetry,
consuming every story, every verse,
to educate himself without a university.

But me? I went to beat
the Southern summer heat.

You see, the library had great A/C,
and I could get there easy—
I'd just walk the railroad tracks
that lay beyond the shacks
and past the junkyard
in the woods behind our house,
and in a flash the library, the world
would open up their doors for me.

So me . . . I went to beat
the Southern summer heat
but stayed all day to read
the pages full of facts and stories,
some of them the same
that Mr. Bradbury studied in his day.
And all those stories stayed with me—
inspired, taught, and mentored me—
a needy kid whose only hope to know the world
lay on the ample shelving of his local library.

DAVE GREGG

THE BEGINNING

any writing teacher
insists early identification
of the narrator
but how to identify myself?
I'm barely five lines old
with no clue
where I'm going
or hint of what
I will say only knowing
I have to say it
as every poet understands

LINDA M. CRATE

MY HANDS WERE MEANT TO CREATE

spiders and bats
have their purpose
in this universe,

and i will never
hold that against them;

bats pollinate
and spiders help with
pest population—

i may not be fond of either,
but i will not go out of
my way to harm
any creature;

my hands were meant
to create not destroy—

once a little spider
saw a fly was bothering me
and came down and
politely waited to see if i
wanted to get the fly before
i let her grab it instead,

and i realized how gentle
this creature was in asking me
for permission to help;

and perhaps they were not
the villains i had always
been led to believe
they were.

THREE:
THE WEARY

ROBERT WYNNE

MEXICAN BLUEBELLS

Bright blossoms burst forth every morning
though they will wither by nightfall. Each flower

a celebration of the only day it knows,
the only sun it sees, the photosynthetic world

holding me in its brief spell. Then the dog pees
and I get ready for work, vibrant memory

of purple petals setting all my expectations:
shrunken, twisted and fallen when I return.

BREAKFAST WITH THE OBITS

I look at the photo, read the words
seeking summary of a person.
I imagine what I missed out on,
not ever meeting them.

My lips try out those names,
what was it like to say, to spell
again and again, year after year,
that mouthful of name?

How many breakfasts had they eaten
reading the obits, all those years
—if it was—all those years?
As I read, I swallow a spoonful of oatmeal,

perhaps the very same spoon my mother
used to eat her oatmeal as she read the paper,
the same spoon that went ting-ting
stirring sugar and milk in her morning coffee.

HISTORY LESSON

Beside the road on my sun-soaked
morning walk, a knee high scrawny stalk

barely a blue whisper of chicory
grows alone and easily overlooked.

On my way home, unseen till now,
a seamless spider web, silky threads

cling to that chicory stem,
rays stretch from the center to form

a spiral. Droplets quiver, sway
on the strands and distil sunbeams.

What holds this dainty orb
in place in space?

I turn, look again for the web. But Nothing.
Instantly I understand disappearance

the silver draperies gone missing
Now I grasp their absence, the Nothing.

LINDA M. CRATE

DEAD CROW

when i saw the dead crow
on the side of the road,
something in my heart stopped;

because crows have
always been my friends—

they announce my
arrival,
they have always been my
feathery guardian angels;

a majestic one even
greeted me into
a magical forest—

i wanted to bury him
or her from sight,
wanted to plant flowers
all around them;
but i left them there face
down on the grass—

because maybe
that was what they
needed to know peace
from the angry nightmares
of this world.

CL BLEDSOE

HAZEL

As in, it's raining inside your eyes
and no one can see the truth of you.
As in, if you keep talking long enough,
you can talk yourself out of anything.

Hazel like gray but homier. Like
a couch with just enough pillows.
A bed that doesn't bite. We're not
talking about the same thing but
let's keep talking anyway.

As in, I tried but you were just too
stuck. I tried but I couldn't check
the mail quickly enough.
As in, wearing tragedy in the eyes
means you can blink it all away.

S.E. WHITE

WHAT WE DON'T SEE

A woman died in a patch of woods up the street from me. The county calls those woods an "old-growth forest" and a "green island in an urban residential setting." From the street, all you see are trees felled by disease and wind surrounded by a rusted chain-link fence filled with periodic barbed holes.

Nothing about those 30-acres invites. Maybe the locals enjoy evening strolls under the canopy of those gnarled trees, but I have never dared to venture in. Houses peek through the trunks and brush, but it is rare to encounter a car or person coming and going from that fence.

The woman disappeared in January and wasn't discovered until the first of April. A couple walking their dog made the grisly discovery. "Human remains" was how the newspaper described the woman, before an identification could be made.

I did not know a woman was missing, especially a woman I might almost count as a neighbor. She lived a few streets over. Apparently, it was not uncommon for her to walk from her house, cutting through the old-growth forest to her friend's house just up the street from me. She was a woman in her sixties.

In those weeks between January and April, I drove by those woods many times. When I come home from work, that green island is on the corner of the four-way where I turn left, so close to home—my own island. You can peer deeply into those woods, but all you see are mossy broken trunks and cracked branches. A broken person would be easy to overlook.

Her obituary appeared in the paper with a nice professional photo of her smiling. A much different photo from the unsmiling woman with flat, almost unwashed hair in the photo they circulated after she went missing. The family opted for a private ceremony and little was shared about her. I never would have read the obituary if a neighbor hadn't mentioned the news article about the body found up the street and said, "I guess that's her."

A later follow-up article solved the mystery and included words like "toxicology report" and mentioned that once in the woods, it may have been difficult for the woman to find her way back out (between the lines suggesting she may have been under the influence and stumbled around lost until she passed out). Those woods don't seem large enough to snatch away a life unless something else was involved.

I mourn this woman, her disappearance and the discovery of her body that took months. Who was looking for her and how did they miss her? Why weren't they out walking through that 30-acre island, following the short path from her house to her friend's house?

Why weren't we all looking?

I guess this could be an allegory or a metaphor or something more, but in the end, I think it's just a damn sad story that's far too close to home.

ASHLEY MANGTANI

PESOS

The teller at Banco de Oro called me Coco, even though my ID said Conrado. He never once looked down at the card. My father called me Conrado whenever he rang to ask for money.

I wired fifteen thousand pesos to the Dinagat slums on the first of every month for seventy-two months to keep him alive. All he left was forty-three loose coins in a Nescafé tin and a smell that had not worked out he was gone yet. The room measured nine feet by seven beneath a corrugated iron roof, trapping the midday heat. Other people pray in times like these. He taught me to count on the jeepney to the market, fish first, then the coins. The arithmetic was simple. Every year, there was less of him and more of them.

Paint sealed the window against the alley, and the door lacked a lock. A lone bulb hung from a stripped wire above a rice pot, black crust welded to the steel. His foam mattress was worn brown in the shape of a man, and above it hung two shirts on a nail and a wall fan that did not turn. By ten, the heat sat on my chest, and the sun was a creditor with all afternoon to wait. A thousand pesos was all that reached him. They took the rest, built a shrine on an island and called it heaven, and my father gave them fourteen thousand pesos a month for a photograph of the Master above his bed and a nickel ring.

Next door, a woman boiled pagpag, and the smell came through the plywood before her shadow did. Vinegar, stale frying oil, and meat gone sour in the heat, cooked down too many times to still behave like meat. It sold for eight pesos a plate. My father ate it on the days the thousand ran out before the month did.

The pot was boiling when I arrived, and it would still be boiling when I left. By noon, the smell had moved to the back of my throat and built itself a home there. The alley outside ran a meter wide and carried the street's water down its center in black runoff, and children played through it as a radio somewhere pushed out a PBMA hymn.

The Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association calls the faithful to remember in His light.

Lord, keep the name within Your light

Let no forgetting reach him where he rests under Your care

Bless the offering carried each day, small but faithful in Your sight

Bless the hands that send, the hands that receive, the island that does not abandon

I am not sure if the prayer is for him.

Money bought distance. I left as a boy with nothing but a suitcase and came back a woman with a salary. Each time I tapped confirm, the screen flashed its approval, and thousands of miles away, he hovered over a cracked phone waiting for the balance to climb. He knew nothing of the hours that funded those digits. All he knew was that when the money landed, he ate.

The peso had found that island before. When my mother was sick, my aunt in Boston sent eighty thousand pesos, enough for the operation. My nanay had no account to put it in. The only one of us with papers was my father, four years gone from the house by then. It went to him, and he agreed to come to Manila and take her to the hospital. The surgeon set a date, and my father did not board a plane that day, or any day after. He stopped answering, and she never got the operation. At the funeral, he told us he had donated the money to the PBMA because an angel told him our mother's soul was past saving.

Afterwards, the household did not grieve so much as re-route. Six siblings still needed uniforms, medicine, rice, and somebody to sign the cheque when the landlord came. I was sixteen when I became that person. The ID still said, Conrado. I mothered them anyway. That is what mothers do in this country. They save up and send their children away. I learned that the day I turned nineteen and took a job keying invoices in a back office, where the glass towers run the air conditioning so hard the cold hits you at the door like a second city. Outside, the boys sell cigarettes one at a time, and sleep under the flyover at noon because the pavement holds the heat until midnight.

The exchange rate lived beside my pulse. I budgeted around

the peso's moods and the country's weather and was never, not once, late. On the wall where another man hangs his children, my father had hung a PBMA calendar, the Master looking down in his white suit, every feast day inked in his careful hand and the first of each month circled twice. This was where it went. Forty pesos of metal, and he had worn it past the bone, a wedding band to a god I was not asked to share. I put it on my thumb, where it spun loose, and took it off.

Under the bed lay the rest of him. Strips torn from a school notebook, every line crammed with the same block capitals.

THE EFFEMINATE SHALL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Forty pages of it, pressed so hard the pen had gone through to the page beneath and the page beneath that. All written in a room I paid for, on a mattress I paid for, by a bulb I paid for, and he had kept it dry like something worth preserving. The notebook left my hand before I decided to let it go. It hit the floor, and the laminated prayer card came out from between the pages, the Master's face looking up at me from the concrete, a hotline on the back, and an account number. The PBMA collects by bank transfer, the same as any utility.

One million eighty thousand pesos. Nineteen thousand dollars, on a bad day for the peso. I put my phone away and picked up his shirts. I had a flight at nine. The estate was one room. I gave it an hour.

Someone knocked on the tin wall twice, the knock of a man who already owns the place. He filled the doorway, and the room went dark, which was the only kind thing it had done all day. White short-sleeved shirt ironed to a blade, soaked through at the navel. His ring was the same as my father's, and he held a folder under his arm, gone soft at the corners.

"Ma'am. Good noon. I am from the Philippine Benevo—"

"I know who you are."

"I came for Tatang Conrado." He untucked his shirt and dragged it across his face. "A faithful man—"

"What do you want?"

He stopped wiping. He looked at me properly now. "Who are you, ma'am?"

"I'm his daughter."

"Tatang had no daughter." There was nothing unkind in the way he said it.

I kept my voice flat. "What does he owe. I'm his next of kin."

He took that in without a flicker, and the smile came back a degree warmer.

"No, ma'am. Tatang settled in full." He said it with pride, as if the achievement were partly his. "I'm only here to close the file. One last maintenance payment. Four thousand pesos, due today."

"Maintenance for what?"

"The plot. There's a maintenance fee." His hand opened toward the walls, as if the heat and the stain in the foam counted in his favour. "We settle the clearance, and we bring him home."

"This was his home. I paid for it." I held up the water bill. "Third notice. You took his money every year. Where were you when he was in the hospital, before they sent him home to die?"

"The body is temporary, ma'am. We do not insure the flesh."

"No. You insured the hole you put it in. How much did he pay you?"

"He purchased the Divine Master Shrine package, ma'am."

"On my money. While he ate pagpag off the woman next door."

"And he reached it, ma'am. That is what people remember. Not how a man gets there."

"The only thing he reached was a coffin. He starved himself for it."

"It was never about the box, ma'am." Patient, as if I'd misread a figure. "He chose all of it himself. The casket, the embroidered barong instead of the plain one. But the engraving, that's what he cared about."

"The engraving?"

"He was very specific, ma'am."

"What does it say?"

He looked at me like he'd only just wondered who I was. "If you're his next of kin, then you know. Tatang lost a boy." He set the folder down and squared it with both hands. "This is all for his son. The plot, the casket, all of it."

I picked up the folder.

PHILIPPINE BENEVOLENT MISSIONARIES ASSOCIATION
PREMIUM TIER: DIVINE MASTER MEMORIAL SHRINE
POLICY NO. 6041-DGT *STATUS: PAID IN FULL*
TERM: 72 MONTHS *CLOSED:*

I read it the way I read any invoice. Down the column. Summing as I went.

Casket	*₱22,000*
Barong	*₱9,500*
Plot	*₱60,000*
Procession Band	*₱8,000*
Marble Plaque	*₱40,500*
TOTAL	*₱140,000*

The missionary took the barong from his bag and held it out to me, folded in tissue, already made. A slip of paper sat tucked in the fold.

I opened it.

Measurements, in a tailor's pencil. Chest, thirty-six inches. Shoulder, seventeen inches. I had stood on a stool in Cubao, a man's tape gathering my dimensions, my father outside with the rent money for the graduation gown. The body I had then.

I folded the slip back into the silk and turned to the last page of the file, in his handwriting, and under it a clean typed copy, so the carver could not get it wrong.

CONRADO SARMIENTO, JR.
MY SON, AS GOD MADE HIM
LOST TO ME IN HIS NINETEENTH YEAR
NOW RESTORED, WHOLE, IN THE LIGHT

"I'm not dead. I'm right here."

"Ma'am." He said it the way you settle a child. He had known from the doorway, and he had let me read the engraving myself.

He chose a dead son he could dress in silk and visit on feast days. Over a living daughter.

Seventy-two payments.

Never once late.

I checked the date the policy opened. The third of June, six years ago. The day of my surgery. He had remembered it to the hour.

He was still talking. "Money sent in love, ma'am, for a father to spend how he saw fit. A gift with a string on it was never a gift at all."

"Then I'll pay it and go."

"Four thousand for the clearance. But ma'am, the name. The registry allows a correction. A fee, the Master's review. It can be done, if the name is not the one you—"

"The name stays."

He stopped. His shirt had gone dark to the third button, and he turned the ring once around the loose bone of his finger.

"You wish to leave it."

"I wish to close the balance on the account." The card was already in my hand, and I laid it on the glass of his terminal. The machine woke, and thought, and chimed, and fed out its slip.

He tore it off and read it, and his mouth moved before the sound did, because the slip printed the name on the card, and the name was not Conrado.

It read *COCO SARMIENTO*.

"Put him in the silk," I said. "Bury him. Cut the stone the way he wrote it." I drew the slip from his fingers. "He paid for a son. Give him his son."

Outside, the sun stood at the top of the sky, and the tin threw it back white. I walked back up the alley. The woman was still bent over her pot, and I put a thousand pesos in her hand. It was the going rate for a month of my father's life.

The Grab was waiting at the kerb. The air conditioning came down on my chest where the heat had been.

"To the airport," I said.

Behind the glass, the city ran bright and loud, already turning into the past, and I opened my banking app and cancelled the standing order, the one that had gone out on the first of every month for the last six years.

In the graveyard on Dinagat Island, my name waited in marble for a tenant, and my father was the one moving in.

Rent paid in full.

DAVID ANSON LEE

COYOTE PSALM AT THE EDGE OF SUBURBIA

Every year
the subdivision grows another mouth.

Bulldozers flatten scrubland.
Mesquite roots lift briefly
into daylight
before disappearing.

Still, the coyotes remain.

At 2 a.m.
their voices spill across cul-de-sacs:
high, laughing yelps
that make porch lights bloom awake.

People post warnings online:

danger near the playground.
keep your pets inside.
something wild is watching us.

As if the coyotes
filed the permits.

As if asphalt
were always ours.

I once saw one trotting
past a Walgreens parking lot,
tail low, ribs visible,
moving with the exhausted grace
of something learning
to survive our imagination.

The automatic doors opened for no one.
The coyote kept walking.

DAVID ANSON LEE

HYENA THEORY

They taught us
the hyena laughs
because cruelty delights it.

Cartoons sharpened the teeth.
Documentaries lowered the music
into something sinister.

But listen longer.

The sound is not laughter.
It is communication:
distance calls, warnings,
recognition between clan members
beneath the African night.

Female hyenas lead the hunt.
Their societies remember hierarchy
better than most governments.

Bones vanish inside their jaws.
Calcium becomes continuation.

Even lions steal from them
when hunger outweighs pride.

Still, we made villains of them.

Perhaps because the hyena
refused elegance.
Refused nobility.

Refused to starve beautifully
for our approval.

The hyena survives
by using everything left behind:

a talent civilization shares
more than it admits.

DAVID ANSON LEE

LITTLE BROWN BAT, WINTER COUNT

The town blamed bats first.

Before the graphs on television,
before refrigerated trucks
waited behind hospitals,
someone pointed upward
at the colony beneath the bridge:

as if wings themselves
carried punishment.

Meanwhile, mosquitoes multiplied
above the riverbanks.
Cornfields lost their nighttime guardians.
Moths climbed unchecked
through orchards.

The little brown bats kept flying:
stitched silhouettes
crossing dusk
like loose handwriting.

Each one consuming
thousands of insects each night,
protecting crops
without applause.

White-nose syndrome
already hollowed their caves.

Wind turbines clipped the dark
with invisible knives.

Still they returned nightly
to feed the sleeping towns
that cursed them.

I once held one gently
inside a rehabilitator's glove:
small enough to fit
within a worker's palm,
its heart beating so quickly
it resembled fear itself.

THE VULTURES WAIT BEHIND THE GAS STATION

They arrive before dawn,
black shapes balancing
on telephone poles
behind the abandoned Exxon.

No trumpet of apocalypse,
no appetite for prophecy:
only their patient arithmetic
with death.

Roadkill swells in the ditch.
Heat opens the body
like a spoiled suitcase.
Flies stitch the air together.

The vultures descend carefully,
as if entering a church
after the sermon has ended.

Their bald heads:
nature's way of saying
some jobs require cleanliness
more than beauty.

Children throw rocks at them.
Adults call them disgusting
while tossing chicken bones
through drive-thru windows.

Without vultures,
the county would rot faster.
Disease would rise steaming
from every shoulder of highway.

They do not kill.
They finish.

Maybe that is why
we fear them:
because they survive
by touching
what we refuse to name.

DAVID ANSON LEE

WOLF SPIDER CARRYING HER CHILDREN ACROSS THE BASEMENT FLOOR

At first,
she looked like nightmare:

eight quick legs,
body low to the concrete,
moving from shadow to shadow
beneath the water heater.

Then the flashlight found
the hundred silver dots
covering her back.

Babies.

Each one clinging
to the mother's abdomen
as she crossed the basement floor
without dropping a single life.

Outside, rain hammered the gutters.
Inside, someone reached
for a shoe.

But she was only searching
for dryness,
for a safer crack in the foundation,

for one more night
where her children
might continue becoming.

The spider paused briefly
inside the beam of light.

Not threatening.
Not monstrous.

Just tired.

"YOU LOOK TIRED"

No, thank you. You can
keep that. In the big world
of boulders mossed on one side
and trees that look leaved
but are bird-filled and oceans
so vast our metaphors for
every kind of lost can be found
in them, there is not one
person, not one woman who
in being told she looks tired
has thought, *fantastic,*
now I know, I'd have had
no idea, walking through work
with all this tired on my face,
all this tired I could have combed
through my hair, all this tired
I could have lint rolled off my
chest, my vest, my coat,
all this tired—not one woman
has ever not known.

THE GIVING TREE

You're thirty when you give away
your body. At first the bark,
which stretches purple and pink,
exposing you to the elements.
Your appetite for photosynthesis
which fades into a haze of wilted
grey-matter-leaves, your crown
dizzyingly empty. You reorganize
all of your organs. Your limbs
which were once delicate root
so deeply in the ground they could
each be a trunk, startlingly
solid. When the axe
comes, it is too late, there is no
reclamation. You think you have
given everything, but it is only
a body. And when you hold
your baby, stretch-marked
and sleep-robbed, eyes puddled
and amnestic, you will pretend
you never had a body at all.
That all you've ever had is this
baby, with thin shiny bark
and dazzling leaves.

FIRST TRIMESTER, BLEEDING

I cannot tell if a funeral
is happening inside me.
Baby on the cover of a poetry book
lying flat in the sand
eerie all of a sudden
the stark of print without rhythm
the still of page-blood
the question of dripping tap
bleeding while waiting for ultrasound
like a parting of the clouds.
Like two hands clasped,
heralds of a vision.
Everyday whispers
to the I-hope-two-fetuses,
fetusi? But maybe to empty.
My husband is a fluffy white cloud
of excitement. He cannot see
a red moon in a starless sky.
A vanishing twin in 30% of cases.
What would that feel like?
Losing everything.
The possibility of them
is enough. I am in love.

FOR SALE: BABY SHOES, NEVER WORN

I wouldn't let my husband purchase
anything until the second trimester,
at which time within a week we owned
changing pads and onesies,
a stroller and two car seats,
bottles and a bottle washer
and adaptors for the car seats
and a near-empty registry
so full was that extra room
in our house. I believe that he
believed that this was all
evidence. That no God would
look upon our preparations
and still go forward with
the flood. I know the wrong-
goings are infinite. The parents
of the kids with
gastroschisis, spina bifida,
congenital diaphragmatic
hernia, tracheoesophageal fistula,
owned car seats. Loved so hard
so fast and still had to stand
outside of the operating room
with clasped hands. I have the
ultrasound tech scan up
and down the diaphragm,
print out the images of their

spines. I am the first, I think
to diagnose a 19-week-old
fetus with possessing
my husband's nose.
Thanks to Hemingway
I can't buy them shoes yet.
At night I scroll back through
the images, imagine
counting the toes on their
tiny socked feet.

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT

INTRUDER

The creature finds its way
Again, its teeth chew
on my thought channels,

nibble neat bites, diminish
who I think I am,
who I want to be.

Chisel teeth rip ragged tracks,
carve out more space for its swelling
shape. It pushes at my edges,

grinds away the membrane
I thought tensile, but now discover
only fragile webs hold me together.

I hear it gnaw, hear it burp, its body annexing
more of my thoughts with each slurping swallow
Stop! I yell inside my mind.

One furry eye opens, peers at me.
Yes, you! You can't eat another morsel of me,
I say and I mean it.

The thing stirs, emits a low grumble.
But is it getting a tad smaller?
I poke it with a stick.

Get outta here. Private Property. Be gone!
The breath of the creature
fainter with each of my words.

It shrinks to a splotch,
scuttles away from me
looking back once or twice,

no, just once. Its scent lingers
in my nose. I give it the evil eye.
Poof! It vanishes.

It will sleep now, groan in its rest
readying for the next meal.
But I, too, am readying.

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT

SKULL CAPS

1

In the boys' locker room, they hold him down,
Elvis playing on the transistor radio,
They shave my brother's scalp
into ratty tufts.

2

In the attic, the trunk holds letters
revealing that had I been born in Germany
my grandparents on one side of the family would have
torn off the skull caps from my grandparents on the other,
removing us to a place where hair would no longer matter.

3

Inside our house many decades later, a neighbor consoles me,
"Who woulda' guessed you'd have such a nicely shaped head?"
A bit later hair grown back, I stand,
scissors in one hand, burgeoning locks in the other,
mirror giving me directions,
I sculpt some future.

4

Next to our house stands an eighty-year old tree
In winter white-fingered twigs and branches

lay bare the maple's head bones, then change
to green, then yellow to red to brown,
the head of toothy leaves scalloped
into a globe shakes its full
whispering crown.

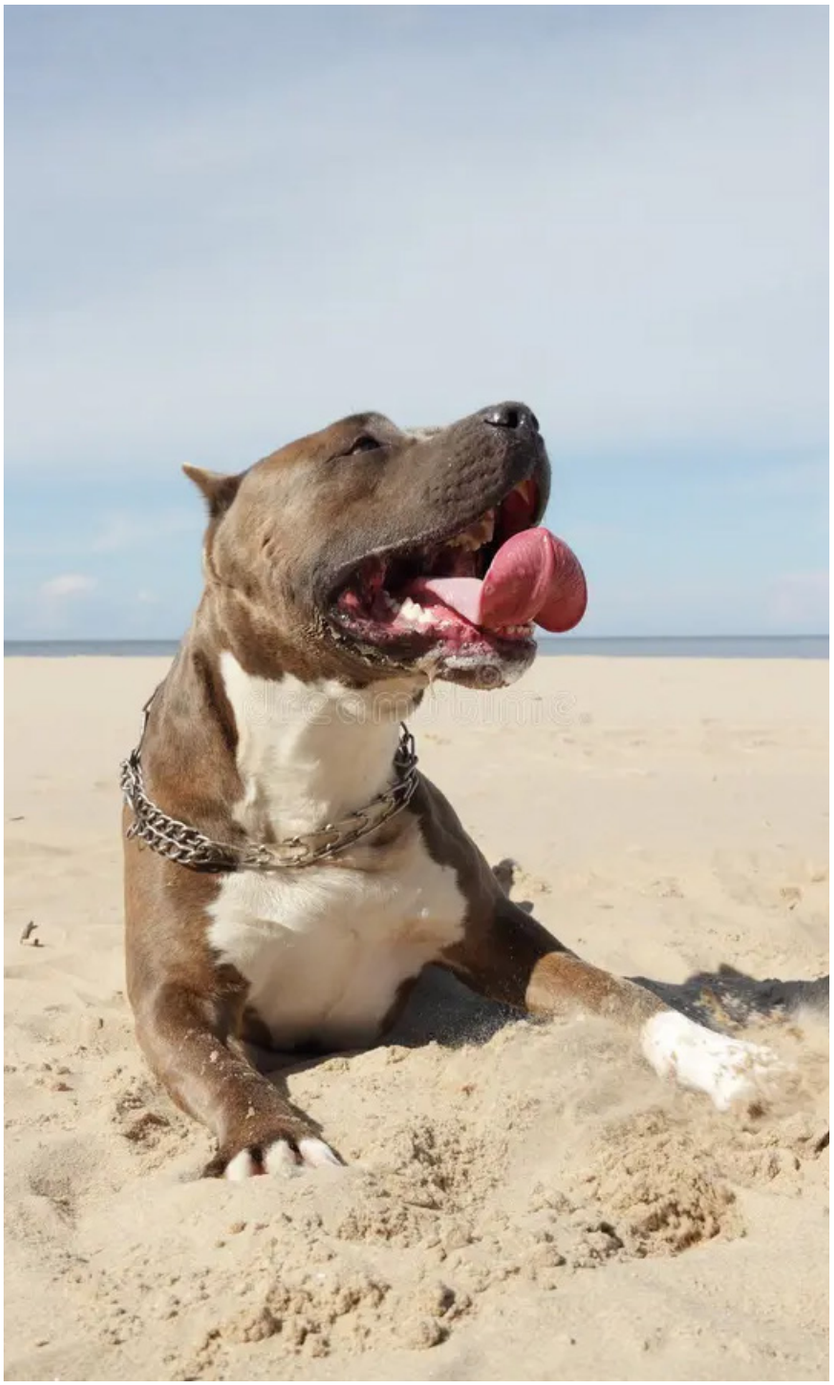
5

Arcing high above the postage stamp view
of my brother, grandparents, me, our maple and you too,
curves the earth's big beanie
Day rises, a skull cap of pearly flannel
knitting invisibly into blue, bluer, bluest,
later a crimson streak slips behind
the indigo cap stretched into blue-black darkness,
now spangled with brilliant spores.

ELLEN HIRNING SCHMIDT

BANANAS AND BULLETS

"How does it feel?"
this man in the warm water therapy pool asks me.
"I mean," he continues, "you have one foot in the grave
and the other on a banana peel?"
It is between the first and the second surgery and
before the one that would insert my port.
My throat could not answer him.
Now–today–five years later–I sit across from my doctor.
"Congratulations," he says,
"Your stats are much lower."
How low?
"Well, they've gone down."
From what?
He consults his laptop.
"From a 70% chance of recurrence . . ."
(I know this is doctor speak for metastasis)
And now?
"Well, about 5-10%."
I'll never dodge the bullet,
but this is really good!
Outside it is raining.
I get in the car,
turn on the lights and the wipers and
begin the drive home,
my eyes glisten,
not from rain.



FOUR:
THE MISUNDERSTOOD

FAITH-ANNE BELL

SPIDER

She likens you to spider—
says you were all web & plan,
but I love spiders—
giving thanks for all they do.
So many are unjustly afraid—
Could it be the world misjudges you
as well?

Not knowing your motives—
I brush away the thought like cobwebs,
but entertain it for just a moment
that you are misunderstood—
like a spider . . .

LINDA M. CRATE

IN DEFENSE OF HONEYBEES

people tell me how
they hate honeybees,
and i find myself
getting annoyed;

because we need them
more than they need us—

they help pollinate
our food and our
flowers,

but people find them
annoying and don't want
them around;

but they've always vibed
when they're around me—

i saved five of them from
my apartment one summer,
and each one turned around
to look at my face after i had
freed them outside;

they memorize faces i learned
soon after—

one felt comfortable enough
taking a nap on my leg,
but refused to leave even when
i tried to move her;

so i stayed outside a little longer
than i intended so she could rest
before flying off again.

DEBBIE WALKER-LASS

YOU RAISE THE GRASS

All lawns shimmer with your bluest energy—
In the hushed white sunlight down along
the flat land, rich and somber,
harrowed and sweetened, urged, increased—
The furrow sprouts,
a tropic tide of air with ebb and flow
flashing seas of green
You toss the stars like clover seed, you sling them
like water to the red palm, tender bubbles
stir all day to pretty tunes the breeze fetch along—
The grass is happy to open her scents like a dress,
drugging light hearts
Grass rises, thick and clean, it shines like the sea
Emerald and garnets, sewed like seeds in the dirt,
the grain turns green, unbidden.

LINDA M. CRATE

THE GIRL WHO BEFRIENDED CROWS

i've always been
different,
i've always known
magic is real;

i have always hugged trees—

when i was small
i remember bringing together
a circle of fallen branches—

when i was asked what
i was doing,
my reply was:
"i'm making a friendship
circle so i can make
animal friends."

i was told it wouldn't work—

but i think the crows
remembered,
for they have always
been my friends;

perhaps they knew i was
a misfit among my own kind—

so i became a misfit crow,
and i found beauty in my own
feathers and magic;
even if it it sometimes stings
how often i am lonely or mistreated
i know there's worth in being
who i am.

PAUL LAMB

SQUIRRELLY MAN

The only haunted house in Green Hills turned out to be not so haunted.

The children of the neighborhood didn't know the actual name of the man who lived there and didn't need to because he was called Squirrelly Man by everyone, even the adults.

His house had once been the garden spot on the block. Much of the front lawn had been given over to xeriscaping by the original owners, the Armentrouts. Beds of water-sipping, low maintenance native plants, with lots of gravel and flagstone walkways running through them, meant less mowing, and the chore and expense of watering non-native grasses on the edge of this semi-arid part of the Midwest was thus greatly reduced. Nonetheless, the yard always looked lush and alive.

Many of the residents of Green Hills had been skeptical and even a little suspicious about this at the time. Why not a broad, green lawn like everyone else? they asked. And wouldn't a big bed of impatiens look nice right about there instead? And what was this talk about fostering pollinators and other insects? Half of the neighbors were dousing their lawns with advanced chemistry specifically to be rid of insects. And to be rid of weeds. And if the peculiar smell of their effort and expense kept errant dogs from squatting on their grass, that was good too.

The backyard, seen only by the neighbors whose own backyards directly bordered it, was arched over and partly hidden by a diverse planting of trees that found their places in the crown or the understory. These trees were favored by the neighborhood squirrels that built several nests in them, from which they would emerge to empty nearby bird feeders. These trees also provided an important

connection in the arboreal highway the squirrels used to evade neighborhood dogs. Below the trees were beds of shade-loving plants, mostly hostas of various varieties that would have rubbed on visitor's trouser legs had any neighbors been invited to walk among them. That none had been, became another grievance.

But most of this talk was saved for private, tsk-tsking over fences or coffee. The Armentrouts rarely heard even snippets of it, for they were to-themselves kinds of people. They would be seen working in their garden beds or leaving and returning in their car with no more than the expected frequency, but whatever went on inside that house was a mystery to all. Repeated sightings reported that inside lights were burning at unlikely hours, often at opposite ends of the house, and the blinds were pulled throughout the day. And unlike nearly everyone else on the block, they did not leave their porch lights on at night.

The Armentrouts moved away after a long tenure in Green Hills. It was not generally known why they left or where they went, but that was due in small part to the fact that few people cared about these strange people once they were gone and in large part because the man who moved into the house was even stranger, and he soon became the subject for intense speculation.

The story of his entry to the neighborhood was speculated on and embellished by each voice that shared it. He was a shell-shocked veteran, one whispered with confidence on the playground. The VA had given a home in a quiet, leafy suburb by so he could peacefully recover his senses. Except that wasn't right, for another heard he was a disgraced scientist who took up residence in Green Hills to give the appearance of conventionality in order to hide some nefarious scheming. Why else, they asked, could odd, hammering sounds be heard coming from his house? But no, that wasn't right either according to the people who implied that they had special knowledge. He was a fallen man, once of wealth and power, now temporarily at bay as the divorce or the lawsuit or the hostility within the board of directors or the investigation by the

authorities was resolved. Except no one liked this version because they didn't want to think that Green Hills would be where someone would *fall* to.

Though Squirrelly Man's true story eluded everyone for a long time, the evidence of his yard going feral did not. The xeriscaped beds soon included opportunistic weeds that grew tall and vigorous, for they were native plants too. The grassy parts went unmowed for weeks, drawing the scornful eye of everyone who passed, but never quite getting tall enough to be cited by the city, for a crew would arrive just in time to cut and trim it back to a rough semblance of acceptability, and to evade the urgent queries of the neighbors about who had hired them for the men claimed they spoke no English. This, of course, only deepened the mystery that was Squirrelly Man.

Perhaps most troubling of all, however, was that the mystery man's garbage bins did not appear at the end of his driveway each Tuesday morning as did those of the respectable houses of Green Hills. For many, Tuesday morning was an opportunity to be conspicuous about their consumption, their trash bins filled until they couldn't close and their recycling bins brimming with collapsed cardboard boxes that had recently contained the worthless doodads they'd had delivered to their front doors. That they could throw out so much showed, in their minds, that they had the means to acquire so much.

For others, Tuesday mornings became an opportunity to show their restraint. Their barely filled trash bins would be rolled to the curb for collection because how long did you want the odor of rotting banana peels and coffee grounds in your garage? Yet they might even skip a week with their recycling bins because; since they didn't mindlessly consume much, they didn't produce much either. And if they were virtue signaling, they thought their trashy neighbors were vice signaling.

The new man in the Armentrout's house did neither. And because this behavior, as well as his lack of exhibiting any other

conventional behaviors, of any behaviors at all, caused a great need to talk about him, his neighbors gave him the name of Squirrelly Man just to facilitate their laments.

Squirrelly Man never answered his doorbell. He never collected the flyers that were hung there. He never raked his leaves in the fall or shoveled his driveway in the winter. His front yard became an eyesore, and his backyard was a jungle of fallen branches and overgrown hostas, both of which made it that much harder to scrutinize his peculiar ways. There were plants growing in the gutters of his roof, paint peeling in the corners of his eaves. He seemed to have his groceries delivered. At least that was the conclusion based on the one time the van from the local grocery store was seen parked in his driveway for a few minutes. Once or twice a month a car would arrive that had access to his garage, for it entered and then the door closed behind it. Who this person was and why they came were never clear. Nor was the visitor ever seen leaving, though they must have since they'd be seen returning later in the month.

All of this compounded the mystery of Squirrelly Man, who stayed in his house and kept to himself and minded his own business. But what was that business? Once again, lights in various parts of the house burned some nights and not others. The visitor came and went. Squirrelly Man was apparently alive in there, but nothing more was known about him.

Yet on mutual dares, some of the older children in the neighborhood would slip through his fence where the pickets had rotted and fallen away, and creep through the rampant growth in his backyard, hoping to peer into his windows. Mostly, the blinds were pulled and the drapes were closed, and the one time when this wasn't the case, all the children could see was a room empty of furniture with a crumbled fast-food bag in the corner and a hammer in the middle of the floor. Their hope of being titillated or terrified remained unsatisfied.

And yet, Squirrelly Man, or at least someone who surely

must have been him, was spotted one afternoon by the neighbor in the house directly behind his. He was in his backyard, wearing a bathrobe, which wasn't tied in front, and little else, with flyaway hair that looked about as disreputable as his grass and skin as pale as the moon. In the company of two police officers. Squirrelly Man led the two offices in a circuit around his house, his hands shoved deeply in his robe pockets and his belt trailing on the ground behind him. The whole remarkable incident happened so quickly, and caught the espying neighbor by such surprise, that by the time she had made a few phone calls and sent a few texts, it was already over, and curious eyes up and down the block were left frustrated.

What did it mean? Had Squirrelly Man called the police, or had they been called on him? Was there a danger, or was *he* the danger? Either way, it seemed like the kind of thing the neighbors were entitled to know about.

There may have been other sightings of Squirrelly Man during the years when he lived in the house. Someone reported seeing a flashlight darting its beam about his backyard late one night. A pair of hands may have been spotted reaching out his front door to collect a box on his porch. Empty water bottles accumulated for weeks on his rotting back deck and then suddenly disappeared. A shape was reported seen in an upstairs window one day when the mowing crew had come and swiftly completed its work. The unexplained car and occupant continued to come and go twice a month. But all of this did nothing to explain who he was or what he was doing there. Rather, it merely added to the tantalizing mystery that was Squirrelly Man.

But his greatest mystery was when he disappeared from Green Hills. A For Sale sign sprouted briefly on his front lawn one summer day and quickly disappeared. No one knew what this meant for it happened so fast. Soon strange people were seen entering and leaving the house, and a week later, a large dumpster was dropped off in the driveway.

The crew of workers that descended were more obligingly

garrulous than the men who had mowed Squirrelly Man's lawn. They were, they confessed, flippers, who had watched the decaying house for years and pounced on the opportunity when it went up for sale. They were going to gut the place and replace all of the fixtures and appliances then sell it at a tidy profit.

This was unsettling, for the men had said they would "replace" the fixtures and appliances rather than "upgrade" them, and the idea of flipping carried a whisper of crass and opportunistic expedience that seemed unsuited for the graciousness of Green Hills. Yet these concerns were soon forgotten because the neighbors finally learned the story of Squirrelly Man.

He was a wacko, a nut case, a screwball, the foreman of the crew said as he stood at the end of the driveway, having been approached by several neighbors.

"His brother put him in the house rather than stick him in an institution. He had mental issues. Thought everyone was out to get him."

The good neighbors of Green Hills never imagined that *they* were included in the "everyone" that was out to get him.

"Thought he heard voices. People living inside his walls. You should have seen this dump before my crew got in there. Hammer holes all over the place. Walls, ceilings, floors. Cabinets ripped down. There was no ceiling left in the dining room. You couldn't even get into the master bathroom because of all of the drywall torn out."

He gave a chuckle, for he had seen it all before, but the good neighbors shook their heads. Such mayhem in their own neighborhood! Mental illness was such an untidy intrusion on their expectations of a settled and satisfying life. Squirrelly Man had lived among them.

"I've been watching this house for months, waiting for it to be up for sale. These are good opportunities if I can act fast enough." His words upset the Green Hills neighbors, for they

implied that their residency was little more than a transaction and that what they had all worked so hard to achieve and maintain and enhance was merely a commodity to be traded when the time was right. And then he upset the good neighbors even more. "There are a few houses in the subdivision like this that I'm watching."

But Squirrelly Man was gone. And soon the house would be restored, and the past would be patched and painted over and almost fully forgotten. A new family would arrive. Normal folk who would care about property values and the importance of being neighborly. Even the remnants of the dubious xeriscaping might be removed and a proper lawn restored.

And in time, this happened. The flippers completed their work. The dumpster disappeared from the driveway. The knots of neighbors, who had collected at the ends of their own driveways to shake their heads and share their dismay at Squirrelly Man and his aftermath, went back to their lives. And a new For Sale sign rose in the yard, standing there a little longer this time but eventually being removed too.

A large moving truck arrived one day, and the earthly possessions of these newest residents of Green Hills were carried into the house. The man who seemed to be supervising this work proved to be the new homeowner: Mr. Simmons. Yes, he said to curious neighbors who just happened to be passing, he'd bought the house sight unseen off the internet, doing his shopping from distant Pennsylvania. Yes, he was married. His wife was an OB who had taken a job at the hospital just down the road. Yes, they had three children who would be attending the grade school just down the block in the fall. Yes, they had plans to take down some of the overgrown trees in the backyard, get a little grass growing there for the kids to play on. Maybe they'd get a dog.

And none of the neighbors thought it at all helpful to tell Mr. Simmons about Squirrelly Man, for it seemed that ghost had been fully exorcised from Green Hills.

Until the little Simmons children, who slept innocently in the bedrooms of the storied house, came crying to their parents in the night reporting that they heard voices in the walls.

And indeed they did. Their mother followed her children to their rooms and listened in the quiet until she heard something too. She then summoned her husband who also heard the sounds, once he grew calm enough to listen carefully after being pulled from his sleep for yet more nonsense from his kids.

So the children slept with their parents that night and in the morning, Mr. Simmons dragged a heavy metal stepladder from its place in the garage to a closet in the master bath where there was an access panel to the attic in the ceiling. With flashlight in hand, he poked his head into the inferno that was his attic in July and soon solved this mystery of many years.

A family of squirrels had been living up there, and from the accumulation of droppings he'd found in the shredded insulation, as he gingerly stepped from joist to joist, it appeared that they'd enjoyed living in this bit of Green Hills real estate for years. Thus the first major undertaking of the new homeowners was to evict their unwanted guests, block their entrance, eradicate their residue, and re-insulate their attic. The children were hushed and assured that they could now sleep in peace, and when they started school in a few weeks, they had a great story to share, one that their parents weren't too delighted about. And yet it was through this childhood grapevine that the true story of Squirrelly Man was spread.

The squirrels' presence in the attic had gone unnoticed by the flipping crew but not by Squirrelly Man, who didn't know what they were but was prone to think the worst. And the neighborhood confab decided that he wasn't crazy because he'd heard voices in the walls. He was crazy because he didn't understand they were merely squirrels. But the squirrels were gone, and so was the man, and the mystery of the house in Green Hills that had never been haunted was put to rest, though maybe in a shallow grave.

JAMES LEWIS HUSS

DAD BOD

I have a Dad Bod—it's a fact.
But not because I'm fat.
I have a body only Dads could understand.

My Dad Bod can withstand
all kinds of torture on demand—
a headbutt out of nowhere,
random front kicks to the groin,
a foot upside the face,
and tackles to the ground.
But that's not all.

My Dad Bod can conform
into a lion or a horse,
can tumble over dead
and moments later resurrect
and tumble over dead again.

My Dad Bod has a stomach
that can finish off a plate of food some days
('cause Dads don't let food go to waste)
and walk away on other days with stomach growls
so grub can go to growing mouths.

My Dad Bod has two eyes that never look away
from any danger in the way,

two ears that hear the slightest cry of pain
yet never get annoyed by screams of joy,
two hands that tend the scrapes of play
and wipe the falling tears away,
a head that never rests from worry, and
a heart that's large enough for three (at least).

EMMA JOHNSON-RIVARD

AN ODE TO *FELIS NEGRIPES*, THE BLACK-FOOTED CAT

linger not in the darkest places, oh wanderer
but take to the night in shade and
shadowed glory. you are lone but
never lonely and i stand beyond,
in awe of grace and the silent press
of little black feet
upon the grass

THOSE DARK FEATHERS

all my life
people have complained about
crows,

but i have always found
them beautiful;

not the messengers
of death or the
evil creatures people make
them out to be—

others have complained
about their songs,

but crow song is pretty
to me;
and always makes me smile—

they like pretty trinkets
like i do,
they are happy and get
excited and shout about their
friends;
they can hold grudges
but keep friendships with humans,
too—

and i have seen them mourning
their dead,

i heard an indigenous myth
of how the crow became black because
there was a time he was the only
bird with color and he gave all of his
colors away;

so the only left for him was black
yet i have always found beauty in those
dark feathers dancing across sunny skies.

WALT WHITMAN

A NOISELESS PATIENT SPIDER

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres
to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile
anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my
soul.

NOLO SEGUNDO

SOME ARE NOT MEANT FOR THIS WORLD

They cannot fit, they cannot go along,
And the reasons vary—pride, fear, or
Even love never tempered by time,
Illness of the heart or mind, or simply
Bad, bad luck: life throws them away
Until they throw life away . . .

She was one of the gentle ones,
The unlucky ones—a flower child
Who missed her time, an era she
Might have thrived in, free, alive,
Unencumbered by family ties . . .

If she had come of age in the 60's,
She might have lived into her 90's.
But lost and afraid in a cold world
Not of her making, with her bird-
Like heart breaking, she ate her
Last hoarded apple, then lay down
In the house abandoned of hope
To sleep and sleep and sleep until
She awakened safe in heaven's lap.

MARILYN CAVICCHIA

PROTISTA, MY KINGDOM (THE SLIME MOLD SPEAKS)

I roam the earth.
I don't know about sleeping.
I replicate replicate replicate.
I can identify that bird for you,

but only in my language:
It's a *hidihidi5hidi5hidi*.

I do not cause diseases.
I lack chitin in my cell walls
but make up for it in magic.

I have no direct economic importance.

JACKIE CHOU

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

I shan't look for you
nor shall you look for me

I am freakish
as a white crane flower
large-winged
yet going nowhere

My sepals spread open
papery
like blank pages
flipping in the wind

No voice comes out
of my beak-like mouth

I am an alien
alien as the color
of my silence

So stay put
in your orange crowd
glowing in sunlight

JOAN BAUER

THE TRUTH ABOUT SHARKS

The noise seemed faraway at first, like a foghorn blaring in the distance. It was a persistent, ringing, irritating sound. I hated it. I pulled my down comforter over my head, but the noise got louder. It would continue to get louder, too, until I did something. I lifted my head from beneath the covers and saw unhappily that it was morning. I did not do morning, being a devout night person. I gripped the sides of my bed to steady my angst-ridden body and lumbered toward my closet as the noise got louder.

"l hate this!"

I threw open the closet door, lamely stretched my arms upward to find the source of the noise and turn it off, but my mother, the rat, had hidden it well this time. I searched through shoe boxes, purses, then I found it. I grabbed the alarm clock and pushed the on button to off.

Silence.

I dropped to the floor ignoring the knock on my door. All noises were unwelcome in the morning. My smiling mother opened the door and regarded me slumped on the floor.

"There you are."

I shook my head. "It's a mirage."

"Beth," said my mother, "The day has begun; I suggest you do the same. You have to go shopping, wash the dog . . ."

My mother is a morning person. I made a pitiful noise and curled into a ball.

"Don't push my buttons, Beth. The party starts at five."

I sighed deeply, indicating my level of stress. I didn't see why I had to go to Uncle Al's birthday party that would be nothing but torture because Uncle Al was, basically, subterranean.

"And," my mother ordered, "Don't say anything about this party, either, because Al is my brother who has his faults like all of us do .

I don't tell sexist jokes at the dinner table.

I don't suck food through my teeth.

"And we're going to go and honor him and make it very clear that we love him."

Nothing came from my lips. Mother stared at my lips just to make sure nothing would. "You can have the car, Beth, from now until one; then I absolutely have to have it."

"It's ten-thirty already."

"Then you'd better get cracking."

"I hate mornings."

"What a joy you are to me," Mom said and walked off.

I pulled my best black pants from their hanger, the pants I had spent a fortune on, the black pants that now hung dull and lifeless, hopelessly stained by guacamole dip that was dumped on me and them in sheer hostility by Edgar Bromfman while he was doing his Ostrich in Search of a Mate imitation at Darla Larchmont's party. I loved those slacks. They had power.

Once.

They went with my best beaded vest that I wanted to wear to Uncle Al's party because Bianca, my hideous cousin who always dressed to kill, would be there with her latest gorgeous boyfriend to snub me and make me feel insignificant and toady. She learned this from Uncle Al, her father.

Reingold, my black toy poodle, whined torturously at the door. I let him crash in, a rollicking, teeny ball of fur. I picked him up.

"Reingold, you who see all and know all, tell me where in Fairfield County, Connecticut, I can get a vastly important pair of black power pants." Reingold licked my neck and wiggled.

"Reingold, your wisdom exceeds even your cuteness. Of course, I will go to that new store on Route 1 in Norwalk. And there I will find them."

Reingold followed me into the bathroom. I gave him a drink of water from a little Dixie cup, washed my face fast, brushed my

oily brown hair that hung exhausted on my shoulders; I threw on gray sweats. There was no doubt about it, I looked seedy.

"You're going out like that?" Mom asked, staring.

"Yes." Beauty would come later. All I had going for me now was personality.

Mom touched my bangs. "Maybe if you just—"

I put on sunglasses. "I won't see anyone we know."

Mitchell Gail's was a huge store; five stories, to be exact, with too many choices. My mother said that was the problem with the world today—too many choices. Paper or plastic? Regular, premium, or super? Small, medium, or grande?

I walked past the stocky, stern security guard who was picking her teeth, a visual reminder of Uncle Al's bash tonight. Maybe they knew each other. She glared at me through frigid, gray eyes and touched her name tag, MADGE P. GROTON, SECURITY GUARD. The woman needed a life. The sign above her read, SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW. I should hope so. I caught sight of myself in a full-length mirror. Who would know that beneath the greasy hair, sallow skin, and baggy sweats there lived a person of depth and significance? I groaned at my vile reflection and headed for the pants section.

I found four pairs of black slacks, size 10, and one pair, size 8. Hope springs eternal. I walked into the dressing room, past another larger, more threatening sign—SHOPLlFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW—just in case any thieves missed the first warning. A sweet, round saleswoman showed me to an empty changing room. Her name tag read HANNAH. She had sad eyes.

"If you need anything I'll help you," Hannah said.

"Thanks."

She looked down.

"Must be the pits working on Saturday," I offered.

She shook her head. "I'd rather work. It's better than sitting home. My boyfriend was cheating on me with this manicurist. I saw them kissing in his apartment."

''I'm sorry."

She laughed, not happily. "He said he never really loved me; I was too fat."

She looked at her plump arms.

"He's a jerk. You're not fat."

"I'm just going to work, save my money—"

"—Hannah!" It was the store manager. Hannah shrugged stiffly, let out a long, painful breath, and left.

Males. I was between them at the moment. Probably just as well given my last boyfriend's sizzling attraction to blondes—a little problem we were never able to work out since I'm a brunette. I observed a moment of silence for Hannah's pain. Then I tried on the size 8 pants. I could zip them up exactly one-eighth of an inch. Okay . . . size 8 is still a dream.

On went a size 10.

No.

Another .

Thunder-thighs.

The fourth pair hit me mid-calf.

I tried the fifth. Not bad. I turned in front of the mirror. Not perfect, but doable. And with my beaded vest, these could be downright smashing. I put on my shoes, left my coat and sweatpants in the changing room with my purse underneath them. I shouldn't leave my purse there, but I was in such a hurry. I said to Hannah, "I'll take these, but I'm going to keep looking."

"They look nice on you."

"They do, don't they?" I smiled at the beckoning sale sign over a rack of pants right by the elevator that I'd not seen before. I walked toward the rack and was just reaching for an excellent pair of size 10 black silk pants marked 50 percent off, which would keep me within my budget, which would be a miracle, when a rough hand came down hard on my shoulder and spun me around.

"That's not the way we play the game," Madge P. Groton, Security Guard, barked.

"What?"

"That's not the way we play the game," she repeated, pulling my hands behind my back and pushing me forward.

"What are you talking about?"

She was strong. She pushed me past a line of staring customers, into the elevator. She squeezed my hands hard. A cold fear swept through me.

"What," I shouted, "are you doing?"

"You were going into the elevator wearing pants you didn't pay for. We call that shoplifting around here."

"No, I was—" She pressed my hands tighter. "You're hurting me!"

"Shut up!

Tears stung my eyes. My chest was pounding. I had seen a TV show about what to do if you're falsely arrested. You don't fight, you calmly explain your position. There was an explanation. I would give the explanation to this person at the right time and I would go home and never set foot in this store again. If I panicked now . . .

The elevator door opened and the guard shoved me forward past the jewelry counter like a mass murderer, past Mrs. Applegate, Uncle Al's nosy neighbor, who stared at me like she wasn't surprised.

"Ma'am, I'm innocent," I said.

"Yeah, and I'm the Easter Bunny." She opened a door that read SECURITY, and pushed me inside to a dingy beige windowless room with the now-familiar sign: SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW.

"Please, Ma'am, Ms. Groton." My whole body was shaking.

"Take them off," she snarled.

"What?"

"Take the pants off. Now."

I stared at her. "You mean here?"

She put her hand on her gun. This was crazy.

"I get a phone call, right?"

"You are in possession of stolen property."

"Ma'am, I know you're trying to do your job. Just listen to me. I was going to buy these pants. I told this to the saleswoman. I left my coat and my pants and my purse in the changing room.

Believe me, this is a big—"

"Take them off." She leaned back in her chair, enjoying her power.

I felt my face shaking like tears were exploding inside. I was sick and terrified. My mind reached for anything.

I remembered that article I'd read about sharks. If you're swimming in the ocean and a shark comes at you to attack, hit him in the nose, the expert said.

I looked at Madge P. Groton, Security Shark.

"No, Ma'am. Not until I get my pants back."

She leaned toward me; her face was tight and mean. "You do what I tell you."

I took a huge breath and looked at her hard. "No, Ma'am."

Her face darkened. She punched a button on a large black phone, said into the receiver, "I've got one. Send a car."

Nausea hit. I choked down vomit. My heart was beating out of my chest. Madge P. Groton, Security Guard, took her handcuffs off her belt and clinked them on the cracked linoleum floor again and again.

"If we could just talk to that saleswoman," I tried, "I think we could clear this—"

"That's not the way we play the game."

I leaned against the wall and pushed down the screaming voice inside that shouted I was innocent because Madge P. Groton had made up her mind and the Easter Bunny himself couldn't change it. And a car was com ing for me with police, probably, which meant jail, probably. I could get thrown into jail with dangerous people and no one was going to listen. I'd never get into veterinary school, never see my dreams fulfilled. My life was over at seventeen.

"I need to make a phone call, Ma'am. I need to call my mother."

"I bet you would."

"The law says I get to make a phone call."

"You can do it at the station."

"Ma'am, my purse and coat and pants are still in the changing room." Nothing.

I checked my watch: 1:10. My mother was waiting for the car. She wouldn't be getting it soon. I lowered my head and started to cry.

"I've seen you kids," she snarled. "You think you can take anything you want, call your parents, cry some fake tears, and it's over, huh? You think wrong."

"I didn't do it."

I jumped at the harsh knock on the door. A big policeman with leathery skin entered with his hand on his gun. He listened to the security guard's story. I told him she'd made a mistake, but it didn't seem to matter. No one believes prisoners.

"Don't ever set foot in this store again," warned Madge P. Groton.

Don't worry, lady.

The policeman took my arm firmly and we walked out of the store, past Mrs. Applegate, past jewelry, and purses, and leather gloves, and scarves, past the Clinique counter with those white-jacketed technicians, to the waiting police car. "You have the right to remain silent," he said the sickening words to me. "You have the right to an attorney. If you do not have an attorney, one will be appointed for you."

He opened the back door of the squad car, I got in crying.

The door shut like a prison gate.

"It wasn't worth it, Miss," he said, got into the front, and drove off with Mrs. Applegate staring after us.

I slumped down deep in the seat and looked at my feet because I was sure everyone I'd ever met in my entire, complex life saw me in the prisoner sec tion of the squad car.

"Officer," I whispered, "I know you're doing your job. I know that security guard was doing hers, but I've got to tell you, if we go back to that store, I've got a witness who knows that I didn't do it."

This was a definite gamble. I didn't know if that saleswoman would remember me.

"Who?" he asked.

I told him about the saleswoman. "Officer, I am really scared and I don't know what else to do. Would you let me try to prove I'm

innocent?" He stopped the car and stared at me through the grill.

"Look, sir, I know I look really weird. I had to buy some slacks for my uncle's stupid birthday party and my mother needed the car in a hurry, so I just jumped out of bed and hadn't figured on getting arrested. I mean, I normally bathe. I normally look better than this. Corpses look better than I do right now. I sound like an idiot."

The policeman searched my face. "Which salesperson?"

I put my two innocent hands on the grill. "Her name was Helen. No. Hortense. Wait—Hannah. Yes! She had just broken up with her boyfriend who had been cheating on her for months with this manicurist and he said he'd never really loved her because she was too fat, which she wasn't—a little plump, maybe, but definitely not fat—and she was giving up men. At least for the moment."

He stared at me.

"Not that men are bad. I mean, some are. But you know that. You arrest bad people and that's a really good thing."

I was digging my own grave. He would take me to the psychiatric hospital. I would be locked in a room with no sharp objects. I looked away.

"Please believe me, Officer. I'm not really this strange!"

The officer sighed deeply. "I don't have time for this." He rammed the patrol car into gear, did a perfect U-turn, and headed back toward Mitchell Gail's.

"Oh, thank you, Officer! You are a wonderful person, a—"

He held up his hand for me to stop. I bit my tongue. I didn't ask what would happen if Hannah wasn't there or didn't remember me or was Madge P. Groton's best friend.

"Don't try anything funny," said the officer as he opened the squad car prisoner door and I got out.

"I won't." This was the most humorless situation I'd ever been in. "I do the talking."

I nodded wildly. We walked through the front door, past jewelry, purses, and Madge P. Groton, who nearly dropped her

fangs when she saw us.

"Just checking something out," said the officer to her and kept on walking to the elevator.

"What floor were you on?" he asked me.

I held up four trembling fingers.

"You can talk when I talk to you."

"Right," I croaked.

The elevator came and Madge P. Groton glared at us with poison death darts as we got in. I figured an actual policeman was more powerful in the food chain than a security guard, but I decided not to ask at this moment.

The elevator stopped at every floor. A little girl got on with her mother, looked at me and said, "What's the matter with her, Mommy?

"Polly," said the mother, "don't be rude."

The elevator opened at the fourth floor. We got out. My eyes searched for Hannah. The policeman walked up to a gray-haired saleswoman.

"We're looking for Hortense," he said.

"Hannah!" I shrieked.

The woman pointed to Hannah who was folding sweaters and arranging them on a shelf. We walked toward her. *Remember me?* I wanted to shout. *I am the person who took time from my busy schedule to listen to your problems with your scuzzy boyfriend; the person who cared enough to show you the healing touch of humanity during a particularly stress-packed morning in my life!*

"Do you know this young woman?" the policeman asked Hannah.

Hannah looked at me and smiled. "I waited on her this morning. She left her purse and coat and stuff in the changing room. I've got them for you."

Madge P. Groton stormed up. "What's going on?'

"Just clearing a few things up," said the officer.

Madge P. Groton dug in her spurs. "This girl is a shoplifter. I caught her trying to leave the store wearing merchandise!"

Hannah looked shocked. "Then why would she leave her

purse in the changing room?"

Why indeed?

I smiled broadly at Madge P. Groton, Security Guard, whose face had turned a delightful funeral gray.

"And why would she leave her coat?" Hannah continued. "It's worth at least as much as the pants. You made a mistake, Madge."

"Can I see the purse?' asked the officer.

Hannah ran to get it. I winced as he pulled out Tums, dental floss, breath mints, two hairbrushes, my giant panda key ring, a box of Milk Duds, three packs of tissues, my sunglasses, four lipsticks.

"You got a wallet in here?"

I reached deep within and pulled it out. He checked my driver's license. He counted the money. Seventy-five dollars.

"I think," said the officer, "we've got things straightened out here, wouldn't you say so, Ms. Groton?"

Madge P. Groton sputtered first. Her wide jaw locked. Her thick neck gripped. Her nose mole twitched. She turned on her scuffed heel and stormed off.

The officer gave me back my purse, coat. "You're free to go," he said. "Just give the store back the pants."

"I never want to see these pants again. Thank you for believing me, Officer . . . um . . . I don't know your name."

"Brennerman."

"What a wonderful name."

I thanked him again. I thanked Hannah. I thanked God.

I ran into the changing room, put on my dear, old gray grubbies, drew a penetrating breath of freedom, and raced toward my mother's Taurus. It was two-thirty. All I had to worry about now was the flaming war spear my mother would have singeing the lawn in honor of my late return.

I floored the Taurus, most unwise, since I'd had one brush with the law already today. I drove home, three miles under the speed limit (a first), thanking God I was a free American.

I turned left at the Dunkin' Donuts on Route 1 feeling something wasn't quite right.

I stared at the poster of the cholesterol-laden Dunkin'

Munchkins nestled cozily in their box as the unrighteousness of it grew in my soul.

I'd been publicly humiliated.

Falsely accused.

I have my rights!

I rammed Mom's car around and headed back for Mitchell Gail's. I am teenager, hear me roar.

I parked the car, stormed into the store past the SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW sign, right past Madge P. Groton, Security Neanderthal, to the Clinique counter.

"I need to see the store manager," I announced to a blond woman demonstrating face cream. "Immediately."

"Third floor, left by Donna Karan, left by lingerie, you're there."

Madge P. Groton was now guarding the elevator. I took the stairs two at a time, rounded left by Donna Karan, left by lingerie to the store office.

"Can I help you?" asked a tired receptionist with too red hair.

"Only if you're in charge, Ma'am. I need to see the manager."

She looked me up and down. "He's busy now." She looked toward the manager's closed office door. The sign read: THOMAS LUNDGREN, STORE MANAGER.

"It can't wait."

"I'm afraid it's going to have to, dear, you see . . ."

"No, Ma'am. You see. I was falsely arrested in this store by Madge P. Groton, Security Witch, and in exactly two seconds I'm going to call a very large lawyer."

"Oh, Mr. Lundgren!" the woman's bony hands fluttered in front of her face. She flew into his office. I walked in behind her. "We have a little problem."

Thomas Lundgren, Store Manager, appraised my grubby gray sweats, unimpressed. "What problem is that?" he said coarsely, not getting up.

I told him. The policeman, Hannah, Madge, the lawyer.

He got up.

"Sit down," he purred at me. "Make yourself comfortable. Would you like a soda? Candy?"

"I'd like an apology."

"Well, of course, we at Mitchell Gail's are appalled at anything that could be misconstrued—"

"—This wasn't misconstrued."

"We'll have to check this out, of course."

I folded my arms. "I'll wait, Mr. Lundgren."

"Call me Tom." He snapped his finger at the receptionist. "Get Madge up here."

I crossed my legs. "I'd call the police, too, Tom. Officer Brennerman. He's probably the most important one, next to the lawyer."

Tom grew pale; the receptionist twittered.

Make this happen, Celia," he barked. Then he smiled at me big and wide. "We certainly pride ourselves on treating our customers well."

I smiled back and didn't say he had a long way to go in that department. The phone buzzed and Tom lunged for it. Maybe I'd can veterinary school and become a lawyer. Lawyers have power. No one gets worked up when you say you're going to call a veterinarian.

"I see." Tom said into the receiver. "I see . . . Yes, Officer Brennerman, it was most unfortunate . . . a vast misunderstanding . . . thank you." He pushed a stick of Wrigley's toward me and mouthed, "Gum?"

I shook my head. Madge P. Groton had seeped into the hall.

I said, "By the way, Tom, in addition to false accusations and public humiliation, your security guard told me to take off my pants in her office."

"Pardon?"

"It was a low moment, Tom."

"Tell me you kept them on."

I nodded as Tom moved shakily to the hall, his arms outstretched.

"Madge, what is this I'm hearing?

He shut the office door.

There were hushed, snarling words that I couldn't make out.

I racked my brain to think if I knew any lawyers, large or otherwise. I sort of knew Mr. Heywood down the street, but he was a tax lawyer.

The door opened. Tom grinned. "Madge is truly sorry for the misunderstanding."

Madge glowered at me from the hall. She didn't look sorry.

"Mitchell Gail's is terribly sorry for the . . . inconvenience," he murmured.

"Um, it was a bit more than an inconvenience."

"We would like you to accept a $250 gift certificate from the store for your trouble."

I thought about that.

"We'd be happy to make it $500 for all your trouble," Tom added quickly. "I'll think about it, Tom."

"We'd really like to get this worked out here and now."

"I'm sure you would, Tom, but I'm going to think about it."

I walked into the hall, past Madge P. Groton, who was so penitent she looked like she'd bitten into a rancid lemon; past Celia, who was fluttering by the receptionist desk. I walked down the stairs and out the door.

Yes!

It was three thirty-seven. All I had to fear now was my mother.

I rehearsed my poignant speech all the way home. I was encouraged pulling into the driveway that there was no flaming spear on the lawn. Only a mother spitting fire.

"Mother, you're never going to believe what happened to—"

"You're dead."

I wasn't, of course. Even a profoundly angry parent cannot stay that way long when their beloved child has been falsely accused. It was all I could do to prevent Mom from driving back to

the store and personally annihilating Madge P. Groton.

I was the hit of Uncle Al's party. I wore an old black dress, but there was something shining in my face that I could feel—something, Mom said, that money could not buy—empowerment.

Mrs. Applegate had called my Aunt Cassie to report on my shoplifting, and even though Aunt Cassie had questioned my innocence, when I told her about Officer Brennerman, she turned pink and flustered and hurried away.

I even took Uncle Al aside and told him that the joke he told before dinner offended me and all women through the ages and he apologized.

As for my cousin Bianca, she will probably always have a more glamorous life than me, but for a few brief moments that night, it really didn't matter.

And regarding Tom and Madge, I decided to not call a lawyer. Tom upped the gift certificate to $650 and had Madge P. Groton personally apologize to me, which was like watching a vulture telling a half-eaten mouse that he didn't really mean it.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," she snarled.

Tom glared at her.

"It was wrong of me," she added flatly.

"Thank you," I said.

Madge P. Groton backed out the door fast and ran down the hall. It was a great moment. Tom said she was going to work in another store and hoped that I would come in often and bring all my friends. I hoped the store was in Antarctica.

I clutched my $650 gift certificate and embraced budget-free shopping. I found the black pants that had started all the trouble—they were marked down 40 percent now—so I got them along with a cherry-apple-red pants suit and a leather jacket and four pairs of shoes and a silk blouse for my mother, who kept saying how proud she was that I had handled this by myself.

I guess I'd learned the truth about sharks: If one comes barrelling at you, the best thing to do is hit it in the nose.

FIVE:
THE WILD

CL BLEDSOE

THE BURROW

Driving home at night, headlights
blinding me as they do now, I see
a fox trot across the road. It means
that I'll be all right. Animals
have always seemed figurative to me,
dreams on four legs, connecting me
to the future. I saw a committee
of vultures on a date once, with
someone who proved about as loving.
The animals I see these days are usually
harried, running across the road
at night or surprised while feeding
during the day. They are all free,
the fox who outwits the coyotes,
the rabbit darting for its tunnel.
And I am free, harried by society,
but I have a burrow to slink into
when things get too bad.

LINDA M. CRATE

INVADING SPACE

they say
leopard
sharks are friendly,

and if that's true
i want to pet one

because i saw
one
pictured on facebook;

he had the cutest
little face—

sharks have always scared
me,
but i think i could meet
a friendly shark and be okay;

when i enter the ocean
this is their home—

so they're not infesting
anything,
they're just swimming in their
own home;

if anything i'm invading
their space.

DAVID MILLEY

STINGER

I was never frightened by your bees. All our lives,
I watched you move, hive to hive, pry each apart,
blow smoke between frames, gently raise them.
You always moved considerately. You made it safe.

You taught me to move slowly with your bees.
Year to year, I brought my camera to the hives.
Brood revealed, I peered within. Lens to eye,
I stole moments in their humming, dancing lives.

Forty years on, came one day, I teased our cat
with feathers on a string, making her leap.
We wandered too close, waving, jerking, twirling.
One bee landed on my arm, stung me there, died.

No big deal: the welt healed in a week. But I still see
that torn stinger pumping, forcing final valor into me.

ABIGAIL OTTLEY

FOR A CREATURE LIGHTING UP THE DARK

Darkling beetle, creep from under
bark or leaf mould if you dare.
Know your squirming days are over.
Go where starlit skies shine clear.

Happy creature, crawl and slither.
Rise above your earthly nature.
Seek and find your bright-winged future.
What delight awaits you there!

Little worm, you may discover
how your fleeting fire-sparks shimmer.
Every day the earth grows dimmer.
Firefly, seek and find your lover.

Firefly, seek and find your star.

HANNAH DILDAY

FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREE?

He carried enough venom to kill
but was the sheep in wolf's clothing kind

born to be a lover not a fighter, he never
understood the why behind our screams.

He looks frightful through the looking glass
and my fear looks like vice—

his momma raised him with the motto
never trust a human with your life.

Lucky for him, my daddy always said
never trust a man who would hurt a fly.

The scorpion of Amalfi lifts his stinger
as my husband lowers the glass.

Turns out, pincers and hands wave goodbye
just the same—
fight, flight, set free.

ED ROBSON

URBAN NATURE

Nature subjugated, trapped on tiny reservations.
32 square feet of dirt, one tree,
low wrought-iron railing, purpose indeterminate.
Smaller, unfenced squares support lone boxwoods
by the intersection, by the coffee shop.
Smaller, shallow-rooted shrubs make do
with terra cotta planters.
Sparrows hop, flit, peck around the picnic tables.
Is it tragic, all the asphalt, concrete,
brick and limestone, steel and glass?

Or is the habitat of H. Sap Sap
as valid and respectable as those of other species?
Some are less invasive, true,
but what about pine beetles, goats, and kudzu?
Is the architecture of a termite mound
less natural than that of coral reefs?
All nature is not beautiful
unless we so define it,
and if we do, then why deny
the charm of human structures?
Our manners aren't the best in Gaia's purview,
but we have our moments.

On the sidewalk, underneath the lonely trees,
and indoors by the potted scheffleras,
ancient mating rituals may be observed,
and beings not so far evolved
as they believe themselves compete
for dominance, attention, partners, food,
their social norms complex and subtle,
with occasional forays into aggression under stress,
but mostly gentle, friendly, clever creatures,
to the open-minded naturist
unfailingly amusing.

MARIANNE TEFFT

THE REAL WILD CARIBBEAN

Two million tourists come to The Friendly Island
Each year for a taste of wild Caribbean life
But those of us at home on the Rock
Have little time for play
For we exist in a tropical war zone
Locked in endless struggle with the real wild Caribbean
Last year seven rats met their demise in the garage
Under the weight of a pink kamikaze toolbox
Three headless iguanas expired on the bedroom tile
Glutinous and pulsating gifts from the dogs
Two panicked sugarbirds flew into the living room
To knock down a pair of glass candlesticks
More than a dozen geckos and a blue-faced anole
Left their thin calling cards in the bathroom
Twice the orange neighbor-cat Adam
Had us night-petrified and ready to call the police
Before he Sunday-sauntered from the pantry
And we wonder how long it will be
Before the double-whammy Armageddon Round
When the raccoons that fled the zoo during Irma
Nest between the tin roof and the wooden ceiling
And the gluttonous Vervet monkeys
That skitter atop neighborhood walls
Decide the backyard papayas look good
But any mangoes we dare to leave
On the kitchen counter look even better

FIONA SINCLAIR

HER MOTHER'S WILL

Antonia had not entered her mother's flat since her death. She had no wish to now, not for the reasons other daughters might have, where clothes and perfume could stir tearful memories. Quite the contrary, this place would have nothing but unpleasant reminders of a woman who had been the cause of so many tears.

Whilst her mother had planned her own funeral with all the pageantry of a royal, nevertheless as the only child it fell to Antonia to sort through the inevitable bureaucracy that the departed leave in their wake. She knew that her mother's flat would need attention, not least the clearing of her effects, before placing it on the market.

So, she called upon her friend Jenny for moral support, a woman for whom Valerie's charms had always been entirely transparent. Antonia pushed the front door open against a litter of letters. The sitting room was fusty. Jenny threw open the French windows that lead onto a small balcony.

"Where do you want to start?" she asked, gazing round the room that resembled a high-end antiques' shop. "We have to itemise the good stuff" replied Antonia, gathering up the post. Whilst Jenny made a start in the bedroom with paper and pen, Toni began to sift through the mail, curating it into junk, bills, and correspondence from old friends. One letter, however, seemed anomalous. It was a large white vellum envelope. She examined the front and recognized the name of her mother's solicitor stamped in the top left-hand corner. Antonia went cold, as if she had suddenly felt a lump in her breast.

Once released, the contents sprang out and landed on the floor. Toni stooped and picked up the thick document. She saw at

once it was a new will, written about a month prior, and sent for her mother's approval and signature. The details robbed her of breath. Broadly it annulled all previous wills, snatching her mother's estate away from her in favour of Valerie's grandsons.

As she stared at it, all colours left her face, she found herself unable to think or move. Her friend was suddenly beside her. "Toni, what is it, you look dreadful." Antonia silently handed her the new will. Jenny had guessed the contents after the first few lines. "Bitch" she snapped. "What on earth made her do this?"

Antonia's body drooped as she envisaged more year's struggling on an income that was little more than a stipend. Now seventy, she was not sure she had the strength for this unceasing ducking and weaving to make ends meet. Feeling faint, she sank onto the sofa.

Her troubles with money had begun with her marriage to the charming but irresponsible Stephen. In the early days he had made his money as a professional gambler at the various London casinos. And he was successful. But the thrill for him lay not in the money but the jeopardy. This was fine as a single man, but he was now married. Antonia was pregnant.

Matters came to a head when having given birth to their son in an exclusive clinic, he arrived scattering charm amongst the nurses, ostensibly to take his new family home. However, he whispered to Antonia, "Sorry darling, I can't pay the bill, I lost the lot last night." Antonia, brimming with hormones, burst into tears. This time his kisses did not have a placatory effect. "Listen, just fake an infection, I'll win it back tonight." True to his word he was able to settle the bill the next day.

But standing in the hallway of their Knightsbridge home, infant in arms, there was a show down between Toni and Stephen, with the ultimatum he gave up the tables or she would walk. There was panic in his eyes as he read the resolution in hers and stood on the cusp of losing her and his son. So, he gave up the gambling.

There was no doubt Stephen had a knack of making money.

He built up fortunes like a Genga tower, which he would knock down when he grew bored and saw the challenge of a new venture. Offers were made that might have secured his fortune, like an invitation to invest in a nascent company called 'Microsoft' but he always rejected them as dull. His febrile brain sought the next financial adventure. In a way, such speculation became a substitute for gambling.

So, their married life was one of boom and bust. One minute they lived in Kensington and partied at Tramp, the next bailiffs were knocking on the door. Toni learned to use her Julie Christie looks and cut-glass accent to charm them. But she also became savvy enough to squirrel money away for the kids' school fees.

Her husband's luck ran out at 58 when cancer was found to have overwhelmed his body. Like all gamblers he had scorned life insurance. Prior to his prognosis he had staked all their savings on a deal that his swift death effectively annulled.

She did not blame Stephen for the financial disaster that was his legacy. Instead, when the grief had dialled down a notch, she rolled up her sleeves to deal with the situation. The family home was sold and, after settling the outstanding mortgage, she was left with a small nest egg. She moved into her own cottage that she had insisted Stephen buy her when he was particularly flush. However, Toni still needed an income. Her friend Jenny had introduced the idea of becoming a theatrical landlady. The cottage had two spare rooms and Canterbury possessed several theatres. All it involved was providing clean beds and breakfast the lodgers could help themselves to. The income would be just enough to cover her expenses. Her considerable jewellery collection became her 'disaster fund.'

She was not ashamed to admit that what sustained her throughout all her penny pinching of the last twenty years of widowhood was the knowledge that inevitably her money concerns would be alleviated. To put it bluntly, she knew that on the death of her mother she would inherit her late father's fortune. Now it

seemed that at the eleventh hour that relief was to be snatched away from her.

Jenny read the document thoroughly and reaching the end cried "Hang on a minute, she hasn't signed it yet. "Her friend glanced at the date; it had arrived postmortem. "The will won't stand Toni," she sat down beside her. "See for yourself" With vision blurred by shock she peered at the empty line that awaited her mother's signature. She flared like a struck match. "Does it invalidate?" It seemed too good to be true. Jenny put an arm around her "Come on Toni. Where's your spirit? "Antonia smiled weakly. "I will ring George. He'll know what to do." George was her solicitor of countless years who had helped Stephen through his many scrapes and was no fan of Valerie.

His secretary informed them that he would be in court until two. She did, however, notice the urgency in Antonia's voice. "I'll message him to ring you as soon as he's free." Toni knew that she would be true to her word but, looking at her watch, she saw it was still only noon. At least two tortuous hours to wait. Jenny had poured large glasses of brandy. She had also spied a deck of cards on a side table and suggested they play whist. Antonia smiled, "You're a good friend in an emergency."

They played cards with the will curled on the table like an asp. Beside it sat Antonia's phone. Every now and then Toni glanced at it as if begging the mobile to ring. As they played, Jenny allowed Antonia to chew over her relationship with her mother. A nanny and then boarding school meant that Valerie's social routine of bridge, dinner parties, and shopping was not disrupted by her young daughter. Never one for gestures of affection, kisses when they came were blown rather than bestowed. "In my view some women just aren't cut out for motherhood," pronounced her friend, as she grimly shuffled the deck.

However, when Antonia turned nineteen, Valerie became more interested in her not as an individual but more as an asset.

She manoeuvred to arrange a marriage between her daughter and the son of a newspaper magnet.

But boarding school had made Toni independent. Instead, she was introduced to Stephen at a party. Every woman's eyes, married or single, had followed him about the room, dazzled by his racing driver's good looks. But the moment these two met, it was clearly a case of coup de foudre.

When Toni returned to her flat in the early hours she declared to her flatmate "I've just met the man I'm going to marry." Her friend had giggled "Not the boy whose name you keep forgetting, with bags of money that Mummy wants you to marry then?

Stephen, in fact, had a better pedigree than either her own background or the newspaper millionaire. He came from an old family whose fortune, regrettably, had long since been squandered by profligate ancestors. His mother was a successful actress and his father a busy theatrical agent. Together they had put Stephen through public school and Cambridge.

The pair both knew that Valerie would try and destroy the relationship. She would paint Stephen as a chancer, only after Toni's trust fund. But this was no heist of a naive young woman's fortune. On the contrary Antonia, although in love, had not lost her head entirely. She was a savvy judge of character. If anything, the two were in cahoots. So, a month later they eloped. The two of them blowing the money in five years of fun and adventure, where the world became their playground, and no country was off limits.

"What a blast" said Jenny, taking a swig of brandy. "She loved hearing Antonia's stories from this time, which seemed improbable but were, in fact, the unembellished truth. Smuggling diamonds in Cyprus to dealing with pirates off the coast of North Africa. "Yes, it was." Antonia's eyes, for the first time, emptied of sadness and shone with the reminiscence.

The conversation now turned to Stephen, this man who had

changed the course of Antonia's life. Jenny had known him. Behind his charisma lay a kind man devoid of side or snobbery. He had that rare talent for making the person he was addressing, male and female, feel absolutely of account. His appeal lay in his genuine interest in others' lives. He could chat for hours about cricket with the Sultan of Brunei who he was at school with but also pass the time of day with the local vagrant whom he frequently treated to a full English breakfast in a greasy spoon round the corner. Consequently, on their return, poor in pocket but ripe with experiences, her father did not chide but took to Stephen unreservedly.

Valerie, of course, wanted to hate him. However, Stephen had the measure of her even before they had met. He flirted with her from the off, sussing that her beauty was her weakness. He caught her off guard with compliments. "Valerie, I've met Elizabeth Taylor, and she has got nothing on you.'' Toni would watch with amusement as the flattery gave her mother a champagne flush of pleasure.

Coincidentally, when he died, her mother was widowed too, but her circumstances were entirely different. Valerie's own background was modest. She had trained as a nurse and, during the war, had nursed Antonia's father, who happened to be the son of an earl, back to health. He had been bewitched by her dark beauty. Marriage made her Lady Bedgebury. She revelled in both the title and his considerable fortune. On his death, she became a very wealthy woman.

"I thought it would bring us together, both being widowed" Antonia remarked as she examined her cards. God I was naive" She had neither asked for nor expected any financial support from Valerie, but she would have welcomed moral support. "I thought we could share the sheer agony of losing a partner." Jenny's eyes were flecked with sympathy. She remembered the effects of Stephen's unexpected death on her friend. Antonia had crept about as if in physical pain. Her beautiful face was laid waste to. She didn't cry

publicly but Jenny suspected that Toni contained her sobs for the privacy of her bed. In contrast, Valerie's demeanour did not change. She seemed to revert to nurse mode, regarding her husband's death as merely closing the eyes on another patient.

Toni sighed at the memory. "Without Stephen in my corner, my mother could finally settle old scores." She recalled their first private conversation after Stephen's funeral. Pouring tea into elegant Victorian cups her mother observed "Well, my dear, he's left you high and dry, as I always predicted.'' Antonia felt the criticism like a slap ''I've only just buried him, mother'' she said, sickened that even his untimely death could not satisfy Valerie.

"Oh, it's sad no doubt," her tone was glacial, ''but the fact remains, he was irresponsible. Got bored too easily. Your fortunes went up and down like a temperature." Antonia accepted the cup that was handed to her, but anger made her hands shake and much of the liquid slopped into the delicate saucer. She stared at her mother. Words crowded her head as she strove to defend him. "He showed you nothing but kindness ". Valerie loved mirthlessly. "He was charming alright. But I never really trusted him." Her daughter looked in horror. "You think he was going to make off with the Gainsboroughs?"

Valerie regarded her with large blue eyes that seldom held warmth and now were downright frosty. "Well, he made off with you didn't he"? Antonia, winded by this revelation, could not speak. Her mother pressed her point. "I'm merely stating that he encouraged you to squander your trust fund." Her daughter found her voice again; it was raised in volume. "That was thirty years ago mother and anyway, it was mine to squander."

Her mother tutted and shook her head whilst selecting a piece of shortbread. "Well, it must have crossed your mind that he was only after your money." Her opinion came as no surprise to her daughter. She knew from family and friends that behind the couple's back, this was the spite Valerie liberally spread. So,

Antonia had her answer. “Well, if that was the case, he would have bloody well left me when it ran dry.”

A smirk grew across Valerie’s Elizabeth Arden roughed lips. She did not reply immediately, but bit into the biscuit as if giving herself time to change tack. “Of course, it’s my two grandsons I pity.”

Knowing the glorious childhood her sons had enjoyed, playing football with Georgie Best, who was a neighbour, running wild in the grounds of her half-brother’s stately home, the extensive travel, Antonia was at a loss as to her mother’s meaning. “Your poor sons have nothing for their future. No money to help buy a first home.” It made the boys sound like deprived children from a sink estate when, in reality, they had completed university and were now embarked on lucrative careers. Antonia was exhausted. Tears of frustration threatened to spill, and she would not let her mother see her cry. She gathered up her handbag and jacket and made her excuses.

But this conversation set the tone for the next twenty years. Her mother would never tire of this theme. She developed a knack of inveigling Stephen into any conversation. When Antonia’s ancient Peugeot needed repairs, she would tut “Well if he had left you better provided for” and Antonia would sigh “Are we really going to do this again.’’ Unsurprisingly she came to baulk at visiting her mother. Only performing filial duties such as chauffeuring her to the Drs, shopping, and weekly bridge parties where Valerie used her bone structure and charm to schmooze everyone. Her smile switched off as soon as she got back into her daughter’s car. Jenny had borne witness to these brutal exchanges over the years. She sided absolutely with her friend and was always prepared to allow Toni to vent.

The friends continued to play. Jenny dispensed more brandies. At length Antonia’s phone sprang into life. She snatched it up. George’s tone was reassuring “What’s up Toni?” Antonia’s heart rattled inside her, and she fought to calm her breathless voice. She

explained the facts slowly so as not to leave anything out.

Her solicitor listened, calming, asking questions, and taking notes. When he finally spoke, she felt her body visibly relax. The will did not stand because it was unsigned. She received the news with eyes closed in relief. Luck, it seemed, had been on her side. Then a thought occurred to her. “But if the boys contest?” George had navigated countless such cases before. “They could try but, in my experience, it wouldn’t do any good. Whatever your mother’s revised intentions were, the fact remains the will is unsigned, therefore not legally binding. The first will remains legitimate.” Antonia knew George was a canny solicitor and his advice was always sound. He advised her not to speak of this second will to anyone. “No need to stir up ill feelings before the funeral.” He instructed her to package the document up and send it to him to deal with. When the call ended, she clutched Jenny’s hand. “Thank you for staying with me.” But the friends did not celebrate, neither wanting to tempt fate.

Despite George’s reassurances, Antonia found it difficult to sleep. When she dozed, she was plagued by dreams of the money being taken from her. During the daytime, her body was clenched in a permanent state of flight or fight. Antonia had never had any intention of squandering this legacy. She knew that, given her parents had lived into their nineties, longevity obviously ran in the genes. Therefore, the money must last her at least 20 years.

But it would banish the constant financial niggles. Give her a better life. It meant she could have the heating on in the winter. The ramshackle Peugeot could be replaced with something dependable. Her only plan that might be considered extravagant by some would be an extension to her bedroom, making it larger with an en-suite that meant she did not have to troop downstairs to pee or take a shower. In fact, the expansion of the pokey room into a proper master bedroom would add value to the cottage. And food, she could treat herself to camembert, lamb, tiramisu….

The fear of losing the money tormented her, but other

thoughts also began to spike. It wasn't just the withdrawal of funds but the callousness, the lack of any maternal care that lay behind the act. Antonia often envied her friends' relationships with their mothers which, although not perfect, were still fundamentally based on mutual affection.

The changing of the will was also the last act in her mother's plan to drive a wedge between Antonia and her sons. An ambition her mother had worked towards for years. Antonia had never prevented her boys from visiting granny. But she guessed that over whiskies one or other of them would listen to their grandmother, querulously complaining "She never visits me. I know she screens my calls."

Antonia knew too that her mother had constructed a false narrative concerning her daughter's finances. "Frankly, I don't believe your father left her that broke." Toni helplessly watched as her mother's insinuations seeded. Ben and Tom's attitudes towards her hardened. They seemed to believe that she dissembled about her financial struggles, insinuating that there existed a fund she had hidden from them. And she had no way of disproving the lies.

Part of the problem lay in Antonia's ability to disguise her impecunious state. The central heating remained off all winter. She would take to her bed in the evenings with a hot water bottle. She ate modestly and shopped at the cheapest supermarkets, elbowing single mums out of the way to plunder the mark down counters. Antonia did treat herself to new clothes to keep her spirits up. However, she no longer held accounts at Harrods or Harvey Nicols. Instead, she shopped the sales and discovered Primark. Her trademark blond hair was coloured at a local hairdresser's training day for a fraction of the price.

Valerie's funeral was a tense affair for Antonia. She found the secret of the second will a heavy burden. Her sons either were either in the dark or concealed their knowledge behind tears shed for granny and glad-handing attendees. Antonia went through the motions, greeting family and friends. Nodding without comment at their recollections of Valerie. "A loyal friend" "such fun."

Characteristics that were contradicted by her own experience of the woman.

George accompanied Antonia to the reading of the will. They sat together on the soft green leather seats, beneath chandeliers with oil paintings of former partners and Scottish landscapes on the walls. Glancing round him George commented wryly in an effort to keep Antonia's spirits up "Rather over doing the decor, positively Victorian." She managed a smile, "It's what my mother's generation expected from their lawyers."

But this was the only smile she would manage that afternoon. Toni knew that the invalidation of the second will, if George was correct, would be like a hand grenade going off. Whether her sons were cognisant of the document or not, the result would be the same, their grandmother's fortune would be snatched from them in her favour. The whole affair created contradictory emotions within her because at the same time she was terrified the second will would somehow stand. So, she waited, unable to calm her heart that beat full pelt. Her legs and body were twisted tight as a rolled umbrella. Antonia could not believe her heart could go any faster but when her sons entered the waiting room together her heart rate accelerated even more. "Christ," she thought to herself "I'm likely to have a coronary."

At the sight of George, the sons exchanged puzzled looks but said nothing but a curt "Good morning mother," and a nod in her lawyer's direction. They elected to sit in the chairs opposite Antonia. No small talk was initiated but the sons spoke in undertones to each other. George whispered to Antonia that their presence was significant. They had either been left bequests or were confident that Valerie had signed the new will. Seated in the lawyer's chambers, a smaller copy of the grandiose waiting room, Antonia repeated to herself "Either way, I just want this over." She tried to find comfort in thoughts of being back home in her cottage, sipping coffee.

George was entirely correct. The second will was acknowledged by her mother's lawyer but then dismissed as invalid. She was

the full beneficiary, apart from some generous bequests to Tom and Ben. Antonia showed no emotion in case it might prove even more incendiary. She saw her sons exchange furious looks and shake their heads. Toni guessed they already had knowledge of the second will's existence. The betrayal smarted, she felt as if she had lost rather than won.

As the proceedings came to a close, her sons jumped to their feet, tossed the chairs aside to reach her, and snarled in their mother's face. "Well, you've got what you wanted now. Don't get too used to it, we'll contest, of course. Granny clearly wanted us to have it."

Antonia flinched as she read their obvious desire to hurt her. She was silent with shock. George stepped in and drew their anger onto himself. He coolly pulled them up on their conduct, reminding them to act with some dignity. But the sons had clearly lost all control. They accused him of somehow being involved in "stealing granny's money from us" and threatened to have him disbarred. George merely smiled at which they unleashed a salvo of expletives that had Antonia cringing with shame. Other clients, not used to such scenes disturbing the old-fashioned decorum of their solicitors, began to shake their heads and whisper. Two security guards appeared, clearly reserved for such scenes, and their presence made her sons regain some self-control and they hastily left.

The episode had left Antonia feeling wobbly, so she and her solicitor walked slowly out to their cars. She sighed "I don't know where they get this greed from. They are so unlike their father." "Families and money are a toxic brew "replied George. "I see it all the time."

Her sons attempted to contest the will immediately. However, their lawyers advised against it. They began a campaign of bullying, trying to force her to surrender the fortune. The two men would arrive together like a pair of German pincers. Once in the house there would be no preambles or pleasantries, they got straight onto the subject.

"Granny meant us to have her money."

"You'll squander it."

"There'll be nothing left for us or the grandkids."

Her kitchen became the setting for these encounters. All three stood. Antonia did not deviate from the script George had given her to navigate these meetings. The second will did not stand. She could do what she liked with her money. And she would not be manipulated by them threatening to deny her contact with her grandchildren.

It was not just the script that got her through. Antonia found a new confidence now that she was no longer on the back foot financially. And years of struggling had made her tougher than she knew. There was a new firmness in her tone. Frustrated by her unwillingness to capitulate, one Sunday morning her sons lost all control and screamed their grievances at her. Antonia did not respond at first. She was sickened by the greed that contorted their faces into strangers. When she found her voice, she spoke calmly.

"This money was, in fact, my fathers and he intended that I eventually have it." And in a move that made the sons gape "Now I must ask you to leave. Do not come back again if you intend to continue bullying me in this fashion."

They left, slamming the doors, and revving the engines of their Mercedes in fury. It did not stop them calling again. And when she refused them entrance, they hammered on the door, even resulting in shouting abuse through the letter box.

Finally, George sent letters of restraint which seemed to curb them. Of course, Antonia wept at their behaviour. It was as if the sons she knew were now dead. Toni suspected this was a breach that could never be healed. They would certainly not forgive her all the while she kept the money, perceiving themselves as aggrieved and wholly in the right. Their moral compasses which she knew they had once possessed had now sheared off their bearing's.

As probate made its way with glacial pace, death duties were met, and the flat put on the market. Antonia began to feel that the legacy was unequivocally hers now. even though she had not seen a

penny yet.

One morning George rang. “When you’ve a minute today, look at your bank account.” She could sense his eyes twinkling with pleasure. Ending the call, Antonia got out her laptop and logged on. There in her account that for decades had been trapped in the red, was a figure in black so large it took her breath away. She could not stop smiling.

After gazing at the figures for a while, she suddenly reached for the phone “Andy, I think we can go ahead with the extension now.”

CHRIS WOOD

REMEMBER THE BITTERSWEET

Fox pups peep out of a hole dug in a meadow
behind the church. White clover and grass hid
their lair until I saw brown furry ears and curious eyes.

I stop along the trail, sit under an overgrown bush,
its thin limbs jutting out over part of the path.
They sit so still, reminding me of my own puppies

when they were asleep just after a feeding frenzy.
Their energy spent and bellies bulging with mama’s milk.
A positive during the pandemic. From my workstation

at the kitchen table, I got to watch my puppies grow.
Corralled in a two-foot-high doggy playpen, they always
tried to find a way out and succeeded most times.

I spent my breaks chasing them through the house,
my evenings cuddling with them and my mornings
smelling puppy breath. A nice respite

during a time of turmoil and stillness, a time of loss.
It was bittersweet. My introvert self lavished in the aloneness,
but the extrovert part of me missed fellowship,

missed the crowds of the shopping centers, the restaurants
and loud football games on monitors over the bar. Today,
life is in balance again—

I spend early mornings alone, my day in the office, evenings
with friends in crowded restaurants, and nights with my husband,
throwing ball with our grown-up dogs.

THIS ONE PLANET

they say shark
infested waters
like sharks
don't live in the ocean,

and i'm not saying i
would want a shark in my
bathtub;

yet they're not known to
live in those so i think i'm fine—

we have to share this
earth with creatures,
instead of expecting the
creatures of this universe
to always avoid us;

you're more likely to be
killed by a hippo than a shark—

so does that mean avoid
land, as well?
of course not,
we just must be aware
of what we're doing;

we have to pay attention
even when it's inconvenient

because every creature
is just trying to live their
best life and we all were given
this one planet.

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 in order in which they appear in this issue and may vary slightly from their previous publication:

E.B. White's "Dog Around the Block" and Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" are in the public domain.

Lynn White's "Dead Poets" previously appeared in *Scrittura*, Summer 2019.

Rie Sheridan Rose's "The Magic Box" was inspired by Irwin J. Sinks' "Tackle Box," 1926.

Ellen Hirning Schmidt's "Intruder" was originally published by *Evening Street Press*.

"Skull Caps" by Ellen Hirning Schmidt was first published by the *Connecticut River Review*.

Ellen Hirning Schmidt's "Bananas and Bullets" was originally published in *Blood & Thunder*.

Debbie Walker-Lass's poem, "You Raise the Grass," is a lovely example of a Cento, a form of found poetry that intentionally borrows singular lines from fellow poets' works and combines them to create a poem that is something new. The lines in "You Raise the Grass" have been borrowed from the following poets' poems, listed in the order in which they appear:

1. "A Windmill Makes a Statement," Cate Marvin
2. "Youth of Grass," W.S. Merwin
3. "Prairie Spring," Wila Cather
4. "The Hawkweed," Edna St. Vincent Millay
5. "Poppies on the Wheat," Helen Hunt Jackson (part of two lines, from the same poem)
6. "You Toss the Stars like Clover Seed," Maurice Manning
7. "Native Grasses," Jenny Brown
8. "The Grass Has So Little To Do," Emily Dickinson
9. and 10. "Hay," Ted Hughes
11. "Field Near Linden, Alabama," Mary Oliver
12. "Reservation Grass," Natalie Diaz
13. "From GEORGICS Ii," Virgil, translated by David Ferry

"The Truth About Sharks" by Joan Bauer can be found in *From One Experience to Another: Award-winning authors sharing real-life experiences through fiction*, Edited by Dr. M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss (Forge/Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.).

"Stinger" by David Milley was previously published by *Green Ink Poetry*.

"Urban Nature" by Edward Robson was featured in *Fleas on the Dog*.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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

K.D. BATTLE—he/him—Poetry
K.D. Battle (he/him) is a Northwoods Buddhist, multi-genre writer, and teacher living in Kalamazoo. He's also an ex-lead singer, Navy submarine vet, and a writer and composer of musical theatre; his debut musical—"The Dead Memoirs," an adaptation of "The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas"—sold-out its opening run of concert readings at an old church. Battle's poems, stories, and essays have been published in venues like *The Writer's Chronicle, Vita Poetica, Bear River Review, Whitewall Review*, and *Line of Advance*, where he won the Wright Memorial Writing Award for prose in 2024. He earned his MFA from Western Michigan University, where he is now pursuing a PhD and serves as *Third Coast*'s Editor-in-Chief. He is the co-founder of *The Rambling Read* and can sometimes be coerced to play in bands around town.

FAITH-ANNE BELL—she/her—Poetry
Faith-Anne Bell (she/her) resides in Maryland. She has recently

had her work in *Pen In Hand, Gaslamp Pulp!, Prudence Dispatch, Superpresent, Synkroniciti*, & *Blue Heron Review*. She has poems in the anthologies *I Haven't Made It Home Yet* (Procrastinating Writers United), *New York Great Cities Vol. 3* (Pure Slush), & *A Poet's Directory of Wild Things* (South Broadway Press). Faith-Anne's first micro chapbook is *Grieving Him* (Bottlecap Press). She can be found reading her poems at open mics around Baltimore.

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Annette Birdsall is a poet, picture book author, 12x12 member, SCBWI member, retired library director, and former youth services librarian. Her poems have appeared in *Little Thoughts Press* and *The Dirigible Balloon*. Her other published work has been in 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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Raised on a rice and catfish farm in eastern Arkansas, CL Bledsoe (he/him) is the author of forty books, including his newest poetry collection, *Banana for Scale*, and his latest novel *The Moon on My Back*. Bledsoe co-writes the humor blog *How to Even*, with Michael Gushue: https://medium.com/@howtoeven Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his son.

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Marilyn Cavicchia (she/her) lives in Chicago. After many years of swimming in Lake Michigan there, she's finally convinced it has no sharks in it, but it does have sturgeon. Other publications in which her poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming include *The Lake* and *Thimble*.

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JACKIE CHOU—she/her—Poetry
Jackie Chou (she/her) is a writer of poetry and flash fiction whose recent work has appeared in *Chainmail Poetry, Gnashing Teeth Publishing, Poetry Online, Alien Buddha Zine*, and *Collaborature*. Her poems have been translated into Chinese in the journal *Poetry Hall*. Her story "Kiss from a Rose on the Grey" is published in *Spillwords*. She believes that writers must write in order to call themselves writers, and hopes to live up to that herself.

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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Hannah Dilday is an emerging American writer residing in the Netherlands since 2020. Prior to relocating abroad, Hannah earned her BS in Philosophy from The University of Oregon. Hannah's poetry has appeared in *Maudlin House, Divinations Magazine*, and *ONE ART*, among others. When Hannah is not writing, she enjoys photography, traveling, and practicing Dutch.

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.

DAVE GREGG—he/him—Poetry
Dave Gregg has written poetry and prose for the better part of six decades and is an acclaimed survivor of several writing groups and poetry readings. He's had several pieces published in various journals and publications.

JAMES LEWIS HUSS—he/him—Poetry
James Lewis Huss began his writing career at the University of South Carolina, where he earned a BA in English. He earned his MA in English at NSULA and has taught English Literature in the USA, China, Bolivia, and Taiwan. James primarily considers himself a poet, but is also a novelist and playwright. He is the author of two YA novels, an extensive collection of poetry, an epic in blank verse and more than a dozen plays also in verse. James currently teaches English literature at a private international school in Washington, DC.

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Emma Johnson-Rivard is a doctoral student in creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons, Tales to Terrify, Red Flag Poetry*, and others. Her poetry chapbook, *mice inherit apocalypse*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

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SARA KAPADIA—she/her—Poetry
Sara Kapadia is a neurodiverse author and artist of South Asian descent. Sara's middle grade fantasy novel was selected for a Macmillan diversity fellowship. Sara has a bachelor's degree from the University of Cambridge, a master's degree from the University of London, and a PhD from Claremont Graduate University. Sara founded a publication called *The STEAM Journal*. After 20 years in Los Angeles, Sara just moved back to her birthplace, London, with her adopted foster sons, a rescue husband, rescue cats, and a rescue dog. In truth, they all rescued her!

PAUL LAMB—he/him—Fiction
Paul Lamb lives near Kansas City, in the middle of the United States, but escapes to his little cabin in the Ozark Mountains whenever he can. His stories have appeared in dozens of literary magazines, and two of his novels, *One-Match Fire* and *Parent Imperfect*, are published by Blue Cedar Press. A third novel is coming in 2026 from Graveside Press. You can read more about him at paullambwriter.com. He rarely strays far from his laptop.

DAVID ANSON LEE—he/him—Poetry
David Anson Lee is a poet, philosopher, and physician based in Texas, originally from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. His work explores ecology, resilience, overlooked forms of intelligence, and the intersections between the human and nonhuman worlds. His poetry has appeared in *Right Hand Pointing, Unbroken Journal, The Scarred Tree*, and forthcoming in *Lit Shark Magazine*.

JOEY LEW—she/her—Poetry
Joey Lew is the author of Insensible Losses (Nymeria Publishing, 2024). She holds an MFA in poetry from UNCG and an MD from UCSF and is currently a surgical resident at Duke. Her work can be seen in a number of literary magazines and medical journals including most recently *Four Tulips, South Broadway Press, The American Journal of Surgery*, and *JAMA*.

ASHLEY MANGTANI—she/her—Fiction
Ashley Mangtani is a slipstream writer whose work explores ecological and social collapse, and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Smokelong Quarterly, Strange Horizons, Litro, Washington Square Review, Boudin, Heavy Feather Review, BULL, Expat Press, HAWKEYE, Mobius, Third Wednesday, Rock Salt, Neon Dystopia, Apocalypse Confidential*, and others.

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DAVID MILLEY—he/him—Poetry
David Milley's recent work appears in *Neologism Poetry Journal, Third Wednesday, RFD Magazine*, and *Last Stanza*. His collection of verse, *Tiller and Shields*, is scheduled for publication under the Aldrich Press imprint in the autumn of 2026. David lives in New Jersey with his husband, Warren Davy, who's made his living as a farmer, woodcutter, nurseryman, auctioneer, beekeeper, and cook. These days, Warren tends his garden and keeps honeybees. David

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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).

Twitter: @saolaw999
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ABIGAIL OTTLEY—she/her—Poetry
Abigail Ottley writes poetry, short fiction and memoir. A Best of Net and Pushcart nominee, she has been published in more than 300 journals and anthologies. In 2024, she placed second in the International Plaza Prose Poem Competition and won the Wildfire 150 Flash Award for the second year running. In the same year, she placed third in the International Patricia Eschen Poetry Prize and went on to win the Metro Poetry Competition on the theme of Care. In May, 2025, her 100 poem collection, *'Out of Eden',* launched with Yaffle Press. These poems celebrate the strength and resilience of working class women. Abigail's current project also has a feminist focus but, this time, she foregrounds the women of myth and legend, including the old Celtic saints, and those who occupy the fringes of history. Abigail was born into a tribe of South and East Londoners but now lives in Penzance. You can find her at "Abigail Elizabeth Ottley"on Facebook and Instagram.

ED ROBSON—he/him—Poetry
Ed Robson (he, him) practiced psychology for 30 years, then quit, went back to school for his MFA, survived a heart attack, got his groove back paragliding over Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, and now spends his time restoring neglected houses with his wife, cooking for his friends, and writing like his life is on the line. His first poetry collection, *Carping Every Diem*, will be published in July 2026 by bramble press.

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.

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.

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.

FIONA SINCLAIR—she/her—Fiction
Fiona Sinclair lives in a village in Kent UK. She has had several collections of poetry published by small presses in the UK. She started writing short stories about 3 years ago . Her collections has just be accepted for publication by Shoe Music Press in the US. Her other interests are a large cottage garden and riding pillion on her husbands Yamaha motorbike.

Website: fionasinclairpoetandwriter.co.uk.

CYNTHIA STEELE—she/her—Fiction
Cynthia Steele, Anchorage-based Alaska writer, blends humor, memory, and lyric insight across nonfiction and poetry. Associate Editor and staff photographer for *Cirque Journal*, she holds a BA in Journalism with a minor in Justice and an MA in English. Her work appears widely, and her memoir *Thirty Before Thirteen* is forthcoming.

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*.

DEBBIE WALKER-LASS—she/her—Poetry
Debbie Walker-Lass, (she/her) is a poet, collage artist, and essay writer living in Decatur, Georgia. Her work has appeared in *Collaborature, The Rockvale Review, Green Ink Poetry, The Ekphrastic Journal, Punk Monk, Poetry Quarterly, The Light Ekphrastic* and *The Niagara Poetry Journal*, among others. Debbie was proud to be nominated by TER for the "Best Small Fictions, 2024" anthology. She also enjoys collaborating with Jahzara Wood, together they write poetry as "The 1965." Debbie is a nature lover and avid Tybee Island beachcomber.

LYNN WHITE—she/her—Poetry
Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for Pushcarts, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

Website: https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com

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S.E. WHITE—she/her—Nonfiction
S.E. White teaches English and Honors classes at Purdue University Northwest. She has her BFA from Bowling Green State University, MA from Iowa State University, and MFA from Purdue University. She has published with *The Smoking Poet, Ginosko, NELLE, Raven Review, 100 Word Story*, and others. Perhaps most importantly, she owns two of the coolest dogs around--Oscar Woolf and Daphne du Furrier--who have their own Tiktok account!

CHRIS WOOD—she/her—Poetry
Chris Wood manages numbers by day, spends most evenings cleaning up dog hair from the abundance of love she receives from her fur-babies, and in between, she writes to balance her right brain from her left. She has a bachelor's degree in accounting and works for a REIT. Her work has appeared in several journals and publications, including *Poetry Quarterly, Black Moon Magazine* and *Salvation South*.

Website: chriswoodwriter.com.

ROBERT WYNNE—he/him—Poetry
Robert Wynne earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University. A former co-editor of *Cider Press Review*, he has published 6 chapbooks, and 3 full-length books of poetry, the most recent being "Self-Portrait as Odysseus," published in 2011 by Tebot Bach Press. He's won numerous prizes, and his poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies throughout North America. Having retired from the IT world in 2023, he lives in Burleson, TX with his wife, Brenda, and their aging German Shepherd Charlie.

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 making plans to start a pumpkin patch.

SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!

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

If you're interested in submitting 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 #12...)

POETRY & PROSE

contributed by

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