

SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW 2025



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Cover image by Jada Brylski

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SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

2025 TEAM

FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr. Kara Candito

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Matty Olson

SUBMISSIONS AND COPY EDITING MANAGER

Jack Braun

WEB DESIGNER AND EVENT PLANNING MANAGER

Thomas Wertel

COPY EDITING

Michele Eaches, Megan Faivre, Alex Jansen, Grant Patzlaff,
Hunter Sheffer, Maria Streif, Shayla Trautsch

SUBMISSIONS MANAGEMENT

Michele Eaches, Alex Jansen, Grant Patzlaff, Maria Streif,
Shayla Trautsch

SOCIAL MEDIA

Bryce Aide, Rylie Endres, Jordyn Hodgson

WEB DESIGN

Bryce Aide, Jordyn Hodgson, Hunter Sheffer

LAUNCH PARTY PLANNING

Rylie Endres, Megan Faivre

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

Welcome to our contemplative, critical, and absurd 22nd issue of *Spirit Lake Review*, brought to you by an ambitious group of student editors at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Our 2025 issue is the product of an intense collaborative process, facilitated by the members of Dr. Kara Candito's Literary Magazines class. This spring, for the first time, *Spirit Lake Review* offered three funded internships to Professional Writing majors. Special thanks to Editor-in-Chief Matty Olson, Submissions and Copy Editing Manager Jack Braun, and Web Designer and Event Planning Manager Thomas Wertel for their leadership and dedication to each stage of the issue.

Our cover image, *ILuvUnicorns*, by undergraduate student Jada Brylski, is an evocative culmination of many themes that pervade the issue. These themes are presented boldly and without trepidation by the authors and artists featured in the issue. Ava Garrard's "Something in the metaphor" and Madison Burns' "Metamorphosis" tackle topics of sexuality and gender by exploring what it means to belong to an increasingly marginalized group during a period of cultural and political upheaval. Ken Poyner's "BALANCING PROFIT" and Robert Beveridge's "Kitty Zuckerberg vs. the Russian Space Nipple" provide a brilliantly comedic lens through which to critique the absurdities of late capitalism. And Jonathan Fletcher's "How to Build a Skyscraper in Gaza" is a brutal reflection on current global events.

While the complexities of our conflicted cultural moment are exposed and dissected in the 2025 issue, explorations of human relationships and desire are also championed. Undergraduate Kaz Bresnan's "i took my meds-" is a powerful exhibition of yearning and vulnerability, and William Doreski's "We Share Each Other" showcases the boundlessness of love and connection. On a similar note, undergraduate Max McNett's "The Shot" captures the nostalgia for small-town America and its communal spirit.

The 2025 issue of *Spirit Lake Review* is made possible by the tireless support of the UW-Platteville faculty, staff, administrators, and community members. We would like to especially thank Academic Department Assistant Sara Koeller, Chair of the Humanities Department Dr. David Gillota, Assistant Professor of English Dr. Laura Roberts, and Assistant Dean for Academic Administration and Operations Carrie Van Hallgren. We thank this year's diverse and thoughtful group of writers and visual artists for trusting us with their creative work. And most importantly, we would like to thank you, reader, for contemplating this issue – for supporting our small but mighty literary journal – and for being an active participant in one thing that has the power to unite us: art.

Until next year,

The 2025 *Spirit Lake Review* Team

CONTENTS

POETRY | PROSE

Rizwan Akhtar

The Valentine is a Literary | 11

Robert Beveridge

Blue with a Little Red in It | 12

Kitty Zuckerberg vs. the Russian Space Nipple | 13

Kelsey Bigelow

Self-Made Horror Story | 14

Jack Braun

Milk Carton Elegy | 16

Tankas for Your Medieval Sensibilities | 18

Wallace Henry Hartley | 19

Kaz Bresnan

Dirt Muncher | 21

I Took My Meds- | 22

I'm 7 Shots Deep and I Think I'm in Love with You | 24

Madison Burns

A Constant Earache | 25

Metamorphosis | 26

The Origin of the Crazy Cat Lady | 27

Daniel Dahlquist

1940 | 28

Indian Police Button | 29

Time | 30

William Doeski

We Share Each Other | 31

Jonathan Fletcher

How to Build a Skyscraper in Gaza | 32

Ava Garrard

Cicadas | 33

Something in the Metaphor | 35

John Grey

Neighborly | 36

The Plum Giver | 37

Matthew Guenette

A Cheap Chair Massager | 38

Riff | 39

Ted Bernal Guevara

Zin | 40

Bruce Gunther
How to Get Rich | 41
The Long Season | 42

Jordyn Hodgson
Right, Right? | 43
Things I've Said... | 44

Alex Jansen
A Poem About You and My Poems About You | 45

Psycho Kanev
Just | 47

Will Karls
Haiku 2/8/2024 | 48

Vartan Koumrouyan
Delilah | 49

Michael Lambert
Born On the Bayou: Mea Culpa | 51

Sheila Griffin Llanas
Garden of Anything | 57

Catherine McGuire
My Mother Had Dragon Claws | 58

Max McNett
The Shot | 59

Micol McSweeney
Molting Old Burdens | 63

Ivan de Monbrison
Four Poems | 64

Sheila E. Murphy
Authority | 91
Reflections on a Piece by Yuko Otomo | 92

Robert Okaji
Love Poem with Eight Questions | 93

Matty Olson
MJ Lenderman for President | 94
Thursday, Mid-afternoon | 95

Elizabeth Onheiber
Constellations | 98
Kali | 100
Slider | 102

Richard Oyama
Staking a Claim | 104

Grant Patzlaff
Eternal Struggles of a Single Day | 105
Misshapen | 107

Isabel Peterson
Snowfall | 108
With Both Hands | 110

Ken Poyner
Advantage | 112
Balancing Profit | 113

Charles Rammelkamp
The Shaving Kit | 114

James P. Roberts
I Wish I Had Learned to do “The Charleston” | 115
Only a Poem (for Rita Mae Reese) | 116

Richard Stimac
Currency | 118

Wendy Vardaman
Or Would You Rather Be a Fish | 120
The Bearded Girl | 122

Aleksandra Vujisić
Drink Me to Shrink | 124

Juliet Waller
Five Suitcases | 125

Thomas Wertel
Animal Planet | 127
Place de la Concorde | 128
Weight Training | 129

Michael O. Zahn
Paging Dr. Williams | 130

VISUAL ART | GRAPHIC NOVEL

Bryce Aide

Bird on a Cable | 66

Jada Brylski

JaneDoe | 67

Madigan Squeeze | 68

Adam Fell

American Monster #6 | 69

American Monster #45-47 | 70

Alex Jansen

Baba Yaga | 71

Koi | 72

Sunset Over Trees | 73

Jesse Lee Kercheval

Water | 74

Michael Lambert

Clown Show | 79

Catherine McGuire

Once Upon a Time | 80

Year of the Snake | 81

Richard Moninski

Sea/Shore X | 82

Kiersten Prom

Coexistence | 83

Ukeme Udo

Within the Soul | 84

Jeff Weiland

I Love Pelicans | 85

Sisterhood of Runners | 86

Thomas Wertel

Bird of War | 87

How Do I Get Out | 88

Elizabeth Wiegel

Coming Back Down the Mountain | 89

The Shadows Grow Longer Yet | 90

The Valentine is a literary

RIZWAN AKHTAR

The winter is still holding on, freezing moments.
A text congealed; a letter unopened is dramatic.
Dior's burnt sienna lipstick, I purchased from Amsterdam, is intact.
The lips slurp over coffee,
I recited Anna Akhmatova,
woodpecker-like, the cursor of dreams clicks
on the right stanza where we stopped
made a vow to make an alternative interpretation
of her love poems.

The reason we are together after a year
is that lost interest in Austen,
and switched over to Lorca's Ghazals,
and of Agha Shahid, who missed Kashmir,
like a beloved, still seeing in the mirror,
crumpled papers are in drawers,
an epistolary kiss, right where rhetoric begins,
letter writers indulge and boast about,
we are sending counter gazes, passing through cold verandas,
it seems there is no epilogue.

Blue with a Little Red in It

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

We tried to scam the Emu local 229
out of their petty cash, since their
operating budget was protected by ADT
instead of FDIC, but the rottweilers
couldn't hold in their laughter every time
someone said the word "flightless."

They saw through us like the dirtiest
your glasses got when you and your buddies
went mudding in the last hole in rural Maine
two weeks before the local government
filled it in, claimed a new set of condos
would be better for things like "tax revenue"
and "a decrease in noise complaints."

Meanwhile we're stuck
in a cloudburst and those stupid birds
won't let us back in. Perhaps our best
option is to dash across the street
to the combination bank/German-
Mexican restaurant, a fine option
for both the rotties AND the calupoh.

If we're lucky, we can commandeer
the PA, turn every speaker outwards,
crank up "Baby I'm a Star" and go all
The American Government vs. Ferdinand Marcos
on 'em till those overgrown pigeons
cough up that \$89.50 to cover another few
plates of those schnitzel tostadas
while our overalls dry.

Kitty Zuckerberg vs. the Russian Space Nipple

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Swoops down into Verde Canyon after
an anonymous tip someone looked
at an album cover with side boob. Shook
his fist at the sky and screamed “Pterodactyls!”
upon the discovery this was fake news.

Wanders through the aisles at Whole Foods
and mumbles over and over to himself “it’s
the FETA cheese. It’s the FETA cheese” but
can only find camembert and blueberry
habanero cheddar. Tries to rewire his brain
for cheese grits tonight and fails. Buys beer.

Applied for a job as a pixelator for Eirin.
Was turned down after he explained his idea
for CGI application of men’s bellies
over women’s faces, expressed his admiration
for the athleticism of those two girls
and their cup. Opened a cottage industry
weaving merkins from organic seaweed.
Forgot to remove the rice and grilled eel.
Run out of town on a rail, forced to wear
an Eldon Hoke mask made of ika.

His star of David is at Bibi’s for a resize
and borax wash. When he gets it back,
will sew it anywhere other than over his chest.

SELF-MADE HORROR STORY

KELSEY BIGELOW

I am both haunted house and ghost haunting
every reflection-less mirror
Searching for versions of happiness
I murdered in my grief

My trust now lives as dust
coating a China cabinet
crashing each time I see intruder
disguised as lover

My ghost is desperate
to see anything but centipede legs
in each person showing interest
But this haunted heart
is a creaky door warning
Untrusting that rotting floors can heal

I have become brittle like plants I let die
in the conservatory I built in a season of hope
I have faded into the color of oil portraits
of each person who said they'd stay

I have sung silence
in my study full of stories I hide
shut in shelves
behind locked glass
fogged with my failed history

I have scorched stacks of rough drafts
lining my halls I let go dim
with each attempt at peace

I once prayed
I'd never scare anyone away
But I've been keeping
this self-made horror story alive
by letting myself die further into disbelief
because haunting this heart
is the only way I know how to stay
how to exist

Until I see my reflection again
I will remain both haunted house and ghost

Milk Carton Elegy

JACK BRAUN

1.

I made a fist and punched a hole in my chest, twisting my hand until my ribs folded and let me dig my heart out from between them. Holding it between my thumb and fingers, I carried it to the window as my viscera darkened the floor and flicked it out onto the highway. It plopped onto the road without bouncing and lay still until a car ran it over. It popped like a milk carton.

2.

I held my hand to my breast like I was pledging allegiance as I walked into class the next day. My professor, seeing the cavity, did nothing. She did, however, gently suggest I turn my chair to face the wall so the class wouldn't have to look at it anymore. I could have turned to sit with its backrest between my thighs, but instead I beat the hole to mimic a pulse. From then on, I wore a shirt. It grew rusty, and I soon ran out of change for the laundromat.

3.

I used to sleep on my side, but the crevice to the left of my sternum ached unbearably after a couple weeks. Now, I stared up at the ceiling and shot an occasional glance at my digital clock. The numbers were red. Sleepless, I stuck my hand in the hole, trying to figure out if the little flaps of skin hanging over it were a bit longer than the day prior. My pillow was crusty and stiff from my repeated attempts to fluff it with scarlet palms.

4.

I let her caress my clavicle from the inside. She told me that the indent was what made me unique, and the pink of regrowing muscle was charming. Her lips brushed the new organ, connected by fleshy filaments, as it grew anew under the light of her cardiogram. Like a rose, your hand burst from the ground, fingernails worn away from the time spent scratching against the coffin. You shambled, rotting away with evaporated eyes and found us then, sticking your hand in to wrench the beating blot from my

chest and tossed it again onto the highway. A truck smooshed it like a pomegranate seed. She watched you limp off back towards your grave and shook her head. I had lost my novelty, so she made like dandelion fluff and floated away.

Tankas for Your Medieval Sensibilities

JACK BRAUN

You weep at blood, Knight,
loved ones mangled by your hand
'twas this or sanction
but fulfilled oaths and Zolof
will not keep you warm at night.

Pitch your jokes, Jester,
watch them howl and guffaw
your liege, however,
lounges, still and unamused
you're no match for his iPhone.

Lie in wait, Dragon,
or just pass time on Netflix
gut rumbling, unfilled
you will catch no meat to roast
without a princess as bait.

Wallace Henry Hartley

JACK BRAUN

"What the carbon markets do is turn CO₂ emissions into a commodity by giving it a price."
-carboncredits.com

97% of meteorologists concur:

The end is coming
but the last 3% are
free market thinkers
and you think,
"the skies are cloudless
and investing in a bunker
means no vacation this summer"

[Clear your throat and politely avert your eyes.]

The choir opens slowly,
soon to bellow full throat
to be heard over the sleet
at the windows
the wrong twitch turns them into
screamers™:

sirens without the sex appeal
[Fancy them out of tune and put on your headphones.]

The wrinkled man on television
powdered wig,
and too-tight pants
harumphs and scoffs,
"ignore the lightning."

[Take his advice and go fly a kite.]

When he expires
and is buried with his billions
your wife will be
in the delivery room

[Go ahead and fuck her now, it's important to start early.]

Tap your shoe impatiently
on the damp linoleum floor

[Promise the kid the world and swaddle them in a rain jacket.]

The crows have a grating tendency
to harmonize with the blaring
that wakes up your sleeping child
[Throw a rock at them and open a college savings account.]
As your basement becomes part of
the drink
and your scrapbook rubs elbows with
the Edmund Fitzgerald
[Listen closely, this is the most important part...]
Hold up your hands and say:
“Who could have seen this coming?”
[Keep your baby’s birth certificate, you’ll need it for fish bait.]

Dirt Muncher

KAZ BRESNAN

Like most good, and all bad poetry,
it begins on my knees
in a field I cannot
grow anything in. “God?”
I mutter into the soil, “Are
you there? Were you ever? How
much longer?” The earthworms beneath
me make love and move in
the secret language of dance
we biped beasts are not permitted
knowledge of. One day
my body will be worth their worship,
like most living and all dead whales.
“How much longer?” I ask again.
“As long as we are,” dance the worms.

i took my meds-

KAZ BRESNAN

—and i got questions for you
like; what are you doing later.
if i cloned myself. how do i
teach my own clone how to be happy.
can i craft a poem that makes you know me.
can we kiss like this. can i sit with my body so close to yours.
is it okay that i am always shaking. is it okay that you walk
so loudly inside my head. is it okay that i am
always cold and my bones creak when i walk.
can we watch shitty movies together.
can i hold your hand. can i see you
in the morning. can we stand in the kitchen together.
baking and laughing and dancing.
can we split this. can i
make you happy. can i fold myself into your life like clean laundry.
do i have to get a physical done
every year. can you come with me. will i embarrass you
if i cry in the lobby. will you be in the room
when i change into a medical gown. or will you step outside.
can i have a moment. can i have more
time. can i hold you a little tighter. can you
stay the night. can we have a little space
where the world can't touch us. can i know
every line in your forehead.
is this gray hair because of me. can i be buried in the same grave as you.
can we be here. can we be
okay. can we lie down to sleep. when we wake up.
will you still be here. i want to ask you -
is this real. is this love. does this feel to you what it feels to me.
is it okay i've never felt like this. is it okay if it feels too big.
is it okay if i am scared of it.
i'm sitting in an interrogation room with
a singular bulb burning my retinas

and the shadow they leave behind
looks a little bit like you
if there is a sequel to *Abraham Lincoln:*
Vampire Hunter will you watch it with me

I'm 7 shots deep and I think I'm in love with you

KAZ BRESNAN

The night of the election I down half a bottle of SKYY Raspberry and puke over your kitchen floor while you hold my hair back I think about how nice your nails feel as they tug against my scalp and what songs we could play at our wedding as I pass out drunk in your shower until the water runs cold and my lips turn blue and I can feel every pump of blood that escapes my heart and surges past my aorta and you drag me out still fully dressed except for my socks which have been discarded and tossed to the side with one over the faucet and one in the toilet and I don't make it to your bed or your couch so I am left face down on the floor of your living room inhaling the fibers of your cheap carpet as they press against my cheek and maybe if you are generous you will throw a blanket on top of me or if I am lucky I will be gifted a pillow and I want your fingers in my mouth and I want you to hit me and I want to drink more (please just give me one more drink) and I want you to break my nose and carve your signature into my skin with a dull knife and I want you to kiss it all better and hold my hand and spit on the cut and then spit in my mouth and tear a cavity inside my chest so you can crawl your way into my rib cage and die there

A Constant Earache

MADISON BURNS

Have you ever had an earache, I mean piercing, deafening pain, the kind Katniss Everdeen experienced after blowing up the Careers' supplies in defiance? Have you ever watched the sky searching for the projections of others' torments and screamed with ferality to the dim, uncaring moon for a moment of relief only to realize that the moon is less lonely than you? Have you ever gone to the emergency room and the intake nurse asked, is there a chance you're pregnant, and you said no, only to take a pregnancy test you paid for out of pocket and waited an hour for the results? Have you ever wondered if your cycle is being tracked like you are the moon, but the moon only bleeds two to four times a year and you seem to bleed endlessly? Have you ever spent the night begging a doctor to look in your right ear because you recognized your pain, and when they agreed they said you didn't have an ear infection, and you should just go home? Have you ever taken four ibuprofen and cried yourself to sleep then dreamed of the wizards from *A Trip to the Moon*, but your face is on the moon and the bullet hits your ear making you incapable of protecting the aliens that inhabit you? Have you ever decided to go back to urgent care where they told you that you have an ear infection and hand you amoxicillin? Have you ever wished you could snatch the umbrella from the wizards and hit them over the head so they turn to dust? Please tell me I am not the only one.

Metamorphosis

MADISON BURNS

Egg, larva, chrysalis, butterfly
An egg is laid gently on a leaf
I was born with the umbilical cord wrapped
Around my neck, stifling my first few breaths
When a caterpillar emerges
It eats the leaf it was born on
No one ate my mother's placenta, but we surely could have
Hell, Kim Kardashian ate hers on reality television

The caterpillar's defenses develop in the form of toxins and spines
But I don't remember any carefree times before I wished
That I could be as thin as the starving children my mother guilted me with
When I pushed the peas around the borders of their plate

And ripped off their skin to see if they were nearly as damaged
On the inside as me but they don't bleed
Caterpillars wrap themselves in jade green shields of skin; a chrysalis
Inside the bug breaks down and reforms itself: metamorphosis

I am desperately waiting for my transformation into something beautiful
Maybe I'll end up on Forbes' list of sexy, intelligent women
Where my breasts come just before my ideas
But at least they would be printed on a page

Everyday, I wake up and question my position
While I drink bottles of Kirkland champagne and fail to solve
The discounted, misprinted puzzles I surround myself with
But I'm told that if I keep working, I might be able to make the pieces fit

When a butterfly emerges, it stretches its wings
The cycle starts again with the laying of an egg
I'm scared to be a mother because I don't know if I can handle
The violent detachment of autonomy expected of women

The origin of the crazy cat lady

MADISON BURNS

Baby, like a cat I won't give you love on command
Burn me at the stake because I'll never serve any man

I've been an ungodly woman forming my own opinions
Ask me again if my rage is a symptom of my period

I'll save up my blood and cast it on your restrictions
While the bodies of my sisters pile up at the lawmakers' crotch

The common strand connecting all time is a need to suppress women
The narrative propagated with progress veils the immutable human
tapestry

I have tried so long to outrun my preordained destination
Fighting to remain in control of my intruding thoughts

But as I stumble closer, I recognize the gruesome fibers
Woven from bound fallopian tubes discharging tarnished blood

My role has been engrained since an early age when I was playing in my
proverbial kitchen set

complete with a toy broom

Listening to my father read innumerable fairytales where the damsel was
saved from her distress

I am wretched realizing being devoured by the dragon is the better
alternative

And my entire life has been founded on playing house

I am snagged in the everlasting thread of the tapestry
And the only means of evasion is to choose to be haggardly mad

1940

DANIEL DAHLQUIST

When he saw my 1940 Humber bicycle with rod brakes
and leather and horsehair saddle, and men holding
hands in the chainring, circling the maypole
of the bottom bracket, he ran his crooked fingers
over the thick black enamel of the top tube; he pressed
the plunger of the brass bell with his thumb. He said
he jumped bomb craters on a bike like this
during the Blitz, delivering messages for the police
when the wires were cut, and the sirens screamed.

His mother needed 66 coupons for canned food.
When he turned twelve it took 12 extra coupons
for shoes. 18 for a suit. But who got a new suit?
The rich had well-appointed basements
and country homes. The poor took the bombs.
He carried a hatchet with a fireman's pick
to dig through rubble. It had a rubber handle,
in case he struck raw copper.

Twice he'd followed cries down
through the bricks, splinters,
and plaster lath. If he found a body,
he wouldn't say. When he got home,
his mother drew him to her breast.
If there was water, he would wash,
then slip on his thin leather dance shoes
and tights and plié, and relevé, and sauté.
He wanted to be Frederick Ashton, or perhaps
Margot Fonteyn. Later he had a son,
and danced in the Royal Ballet.
I think of him often, my friend Peter Franklin White,
when my roadster hits a pothole,
or the Neo-Nazis march in Charlottesville.

Indian Police Button

DANIEL DAHLQUIST

From the Skippy Peanut Butter jar of pearl and brass buttons, I mailed the best antique to my German/Ojibwe friend Jim—the round brass button embossed Indian Police, from the turn of the previous century. Jim was dating my ex-girlfriend Georgia, her Assiniboin Sioux name Whirling Cloud Woman. I confess: Jim’s child-like innocence, assisted by the imp of the perverse, encouraged me to enhance the dramatic effect of my gift.

In the best tradition of the creative possibilities of the lie, I suggested to Jim and Georgia that the small brass button held great power, having come from the blue coat of a guard assigned to Sitting Bull on the day of his death.

Visiting Jim a month later, I inquired about the button. “The button is gone,” said Jim. “You’re right—the button is very powerful—so in the dark of the night, under a full moon, Georgia and I pitched it onto the roof of the meanest man in town.”

Picasso said it:
“Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.”

Time

DANIEL DAHLQUIST

Rememberer, you can no more pick
and choose memory
than change the color of your eyes.

A single remark, dropped casually,
perhaps cruelly, in a long-ago
conversation haunts
in the momentum of years.

I am thinking of one I called friend,
standing in a doorway, both
literal and figurative—the doorway
of half a century.

“Daniel,” he said. “You want to use time.
I want to serve it.”

Exactly what my would-be Zen
master friend meant by this,
I have no clue, then
or now, save
for the criticism implied:

Time used is Time used up
and thrown away.

Even now, he says,
I’m wasting it:
our precious world of words and time.

We Share Each Other

WILLIAM DORESKEI

You look at me in the mirror.
I look at you in the mirror.
When did we become each other?

Shades drawn, shadows extrude
from the woodwork. The smell
of new snow refreshes our senses,

but the shadows might absorb us
before we return to ourselves.
Let's shovel the driveway together.

Because we share each other,
our muscles will equally ache,
when we finish that dreary job.

Not enough snow for a plow
to shove aside with a roar
of failing pistons. But more

is coming this afternoon, when
the sky will warp into fractals.
Winter never quite finishes

whatever it begins. We lack
the mindset for season angst,
but peering into the mirror

only to catch the other's face
reminds us how quickly with age
we've dispersed in time and space.

How to Build a Skyscraper in Gaza

JONATHAN FLETCHER

With 100 trucks working day and night,
clear the rubble, moving brick by brick

for fifteen years. To solid bedrock that is
not yours, anchor a mat slab foundation.

Rivet beam to beam into steel columns.
To the horizontal, connect the vertical.

Where children hungered, turned to skin
and bone, behold your metal skeleton.

Into the spaces between the beams,
pour concrete and let harden. Add

the exterior, the roof, and windows. Look out
over a people you wouldn't let in.

Cicadas

AVA GARRARD

The sun was starting its descent behind the horizon while painting the sky orange. Sycamores, seemingly stretching for miles in the countryside, engulfed two figures. A mother and her son were making their way down a long gravel path, and with every step the curious six-year-old seemed to wander further away and into his own thoughts.

The slender woman was balancing a basket on one arm and trying to corral the boy with the other. The surrounding forest was filled with a common summer sound. The cicadas were humming their obnoxious, yet familiar tune as the little blond-haired boy looked around in wonder.

“Mommy,” he tugged at her shirt, “what’s making that noise?”

“It’s just the cicadas, honey,” she replied, “and hold my hand.”

Her long, dark hair swayed in the warm, late-summer breeze as they walked in a comfortable silence. Of course, the silence wasn’t actually silent. From the trees, the noise came once again. The insects kept calling.

“Mommy,” he started again, “why are they so loud?”

She laughed, and with a soft hand, brushed the boy’s hair out of his eyes. His hair had a familiar tendency to fall like that, she thought. She could still see him; in fact, it was hard not to. The towheaded boy reminded her every second of him.

“Are they bothering you, sweetheart?” she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear as she kneeled next to him.

The little boy paused and let go of his mother’s hand. He stepped forward. Putting one hand under his chin, in a sort of pondering stance, he said,

“No, I guess not, but WHY do they sound like that?”

Reclaiming her six-year-old’s hand, she thought for a moment.

“Well,” she started, unsure of what to say. “Maybe the cicadas are talking to their families. I bet they are telling them dinner’s ready right about now. Just like us.”

The little boy let out a sigh with his arms outstretched above his head and, yet again, continued with his mother down the now grassy path. His mother swung open a large metal gate and led the boy through, closing it behind them. The two walked hand and hand past many stones. Oftentimes, he would try to sound out the letters on them, but complex names weren’t quite his specialty yet.

The lump in her throat started to grow, just as it always had. The little boy leapt forward and hugged the smooth marble.

“Hi, daddy!” he proclaimed.

Sighing with a smile, the young widow began setting up the small picnic she had brought along. The plaid blanket was soon decorated with the varying tastes of macaroni salad and club sandwiches. She glanced at her son, who was

still leaning against the engraved stone. The way his little head bobbed as he stared at the fleeting clouds reminded her of him; even the way he leaned against the stone did. Those eyes, those ocean blue eyes, were the most telling. Grief overwhelmed her for a moment, yet she tried tirelessly not to let it show on her face.

Suddenly, the boy started to make a faint hissing or humming noise, she couldn't tell. As the sound grew louder, his mother questioned him,

“Dear, *why* are you making that noise?”

The boy ceased his hissing and looked into his mother's eyes.

“I was telling daddy that it's time for dinner, like the cicadas do.”

Something in the metaphor

AVA GARRARD

of girls in bloom
but there isn't any growth.
Not when a father refuses to admit
that his daughter may be older
than the version he wants to keep,
close to home. A child forever in
their father's eyes. Is the mother ignored
in this process of thought?
It is only women,
that they talk about the virginity of.
The mother? The mother is not,
but it is not shameful for her.
Only for the daughter. And other girls
they are in bloom, growing.
Too fast, they keep growing.

NEIGHBORLY

JOHN GREY

There's a moving van outside
the blue house down the street.
Men are hauling out boxes,
dressers, beds, two televisions,
more boxes, and a huge green trunk.
Strangers are about to be replaced
by even stranger strangers.
And to think I promised myself
just this week how I would
get to know my neighbors better.
And now there's a moving van
pulled up outside my promise.
Men are hauling out boxes,
vows, resolutions, two declarations,
more boxes, and a valiant decision on my part.

THE PLUM GIVER

JOHN GREY

You can have this plum.
It can be your fruit,
from spotted purple skin,
to lush flesh, to hard stone.

I'll watch as you eat it,
as pearl-teeth snap rind,
juice flows up into the curl
of your tongue,
flavor truly penetrates the buds.

And then you'll clunk against
that unforgiving center,
gingerly nibble your way around it,
the best of the saturated pulp behind you now,
dollops of tiny taste nibbled
rather than ripped messy, fleshy,
from the generous whole.

When done,
you can grasp that chunky core
in your hand for a moment,
hold it up to me for inspection,
every last molecule of sweetness devoured,
just the seed remaining.

You'll toss it in the trash.
Nothing to remember it by
but for the swollen pleasure of your smile.

A Cheap Chair Massager

MATTHEW GUENETTE

Buzzes un-therapeutically. A stack of untouched must-
reads gathers dust by the bed. No one knows

if Schrödinger's Pizza is any good but space-time

ripples with our impulse buys. The advanced auditors
side-eye our hauls. When their sleek forms descend

they'll demand our receipts. They won't rest
until they dissect our spending habits.

Riff

MATTHEW GUENETTE

Our daughter must have overheard a commercial.

She wanted to know what it was
a *reptile dysfunction*. My wife couldn't stop laughing
it wasn't helping, and I wanted to help. I wanted our daughter
to know we took her seriously. So I said

a reptile dysfunction is when your lizard
has relationship issues. Probably because

it's depressed, and drinks and smokes too much
and needs to lose some weight.

ZIN

TED BERNAL GUEVARA

It's easy to love the rain
when I hear the word, "zin."
I apply it on my deepest wounds
now. It's like Merthiolate with
the pain before the healing.
Two words from the folds
of my youth. The locals may
have meant zinc. Or as a child,
the silence of letters was
beyond my grasp. The pink of
Merthiolate unleashed from
the cotton ball was certainly
a fear-developer. The value of
its recuperation was drowned by
noise. It must have rained hard
one night, when my mother
was applying it to my no-stitch gash.
The symphony from above
lulled everything, even the going
away of my father. It wasn't on her face.
There, only mend sat.

How To Get Rich

BRUCE GUNTHER

The fishermen slide across the ice
to reach their shanties
as the northerly wind
cracks its whip.

The terrier on a leash
at river's edge
glances at its master,
who wishes he had a dime
for every time someone
complained about the weather;

*It's not like any of them
should be surprised,*

he says to his dog,
who wears a sweater,
but is still too cold
to bark at the squirrel
that slipped under a bench
when it thought
no one was looking.

The Long Season

BRUCE GUNTHER

Dusk came earlier and earlier,
and what followed: storms and months
of asking ourselves why we didn't
move someplace warm.
We decided, again, to ride it out,
that we'd get through it, like
the horses motionless in the corral
while wearing heavy blankets
as snowflakes drifted confetti-like.
We'd remind ourselves that the kids
never called anymore, and how
the city's snowplows seemed fewer in number.
At least we have us, we agreed, before
peeking through the drapes to watch
the young man next door shovel his sidewalk
with a cigarette pasted between his lips.

Right, Right?

JORDYN HODGSON

My sister likes to be
right,
she can't be wrong.
Head held high,
always.
I'm usually right,
but in the wrong way.
Never seem to fully
grasp everything I write.
My dad's right-handed.
So are both my sisters,
while my mom, brother,
and I are
ambidextrous.
(So, like part-time
right-handed, right?)
My boyfriend tells me to
turn left, no
right.
Left or right?
I told him he needed
to write left and
right on my hands
because I can never
get my directions
right.

Things I've Said...

JORDYN HODGSON

...While I've Cried

*I'm sorry
It's all my fault
Why, God, why?
I'm not sure what to do
Mom, are you free to talk?
I don't even know why I'm crying right now
It's fine, I know you're busy
No, no, I'm okay
Please stay
I hate you*

...While You've Cried

*It's going to be okay
Things are going to get better, I promise
God put you on this path for a reason
You're going to come out of this stronger
I'm always going to be here for you
It's okay to cry
I can stay as long as you want me to
Are you sure you're okay?
I'm not going anywhere
I love you*

a poem about you and my poems about you

ALEX JANSEN

I wrote a poem about you
and I really want you
to read it but
I'll need you
to pretend that
you didn't but
I printed it out and
folded it up and
sealed it with wax
because that's a
normal thing to do
with a poem that
you don't want
the subject to read
even though you're
about to hand it
to them and say
*please read this and
tell me what you think*
when what you
really mean is
*please read this and
never mention it to me again*
the meaning could
be so subtle unless
the author were to
print it out and
fold it up and
seal it with wax and
place it directly
in the palm of
your hand and
try not to avoid

eye contact because that
would be really obvious
but too much eye contact
would be even more obvious
how nervous do I
usually act around you
how much of it is an act
I really need you
to read it but
don't look at me
if you do and
I added instructions
at the bottom
of the page to
burn after reading

Just
PEYCHO KANEV

The last rhinoceros
in the African savanna
dropped dead from
just imagining for
a moment
the boom of the poacher's
shotgun.

Haiku 2/8/2024

WILL KARLS

“Collaboration”

It is the name of the game.

Heaven help us all.

Delilah

VARTAN KOUMROUYAN

Even though the procedure is quick, it gives a lot of adrenaline, when faced with the actual moment of the “kill,” to the person who holds the knife or the participants who are helping and watching from the side, witnessing the moment the spirit leaves the body.

The pig has a life of its own, it kicks, screeches, and tries to jump. When the blood is drained to the last, CobraMan pronounces « patay », dead, and this is when the spirit has just vanished in the air we were breathing, unbeknownst.

This is the proof of the existence of the spirit. Before, in Beirut, I used to hear that people have died, but I never saw the spirit leaving the body, be that of a pig. People died on the news, at a distance, except when a rocket exploded near you, or a sniper had you in his cross hair at the Barbir crossing, and decided to pull the trigger. This never happened, I was never hit by a stray bullet or intentionally, but I’m sure a sniper had me in his sight but decided, there and then, when I was twenty-years-old, not to shoot.

He pulled the rope tied to the pig’s neck and we walked down the footpath to the well to kill it, with Paranto, Mike, Dong, and CobraMan, because we needed a lot of water to scrub and clean the carcass, and wash the blood.

Paranto used a length of nylon cord to fasten all four feet of the beast together to reduce its movements to naught. He also pushed a piece of wood into the snout and tied a strong knot around it to prevent it from screeching and biting. The animal was laid in a convenient position to collect its blood, which began to throb out slowly with the heartbeats, when the knife was withdrawn after severing the vein.

We leaned the four of us to contain the kicking beast, blood leaking into its lungs through the windpipe in quick gurgling sounds, until it stopped breathing, but not before the last snaps of its tied feet one last time, refusing death to the last breath.

Paranto, following his primitive instinct as if dealing with the origin of things—raw meat, blood, fire, and smoke—immediately scratched a match under the dry wood to boil water and moved back to watch mother nature, as if we were, all of us in that moment, affiliated to its entire body, life and death in a constant relation, exchanging our feelings and sensibilities with the elements, with the white smoke rising under the canopy in the sunlight as we waited. No one talked, perhaps out of respect for the lifeless pig, its blood in the mud, dust, and soil.

We then scrubbed the entire carcass for an hour—feet, snout, underbelly—until it was white, free of its bristling coarse hair. We eased it on a skewer over charcoal to roast for five hours.

Sweeping the knife on the scrubbed skin as if to bless it, Big Chef looked

around the landscape and said, “Nami.”

“Pretty.”

“It’s still a jungle, but I plant many seedlings in the clearing,” I said.

“No one will come. Here. For you,” he said, haltingly, to see if he was choosing the right words.

“Better so,” I answered.

Rodney and Ebok came from the barrio with more bottles and a fancy looking brandy, with a Styrofoam full of ice.

We sat drinking slowly, munching chunks of meat, and many people with their families came from the barrio. It was a natural event, to eat, drink, and celebrate, like the Last Supper, kind of. The girls cooked spaghetti and pancit canton for the kids, plus chunks of meat Big Chef was whacking off the carcass with his machete in deft blows, drinking soft drinks in nylon cups.

Sheryll said CobraMan’s behavior was inconsistent when he drinks, « be careful ».

He was involved in a scuffle with his brother, about a piece of land the family bequeathed to the barangay, and he was not happy about it. I suppose they had no funds to pay for the taxes, so they signed it off to the municipality, to free himself from government scrutiny.

Jhun surreptitiously collected the machetes to hide them. We were all drunk. Someone said it was because we mixed the Emperador Tanduay, San Miguel Gin, and ten-year-old Napoleon Brandy with three gold stars embossed on it as a mark of prestige, I suppose, to mask its strong taste.

Still, no one cared about its sour aftertaste, drunk or not.

At one point, Uncle Ontoy stood up to sing « Delilah », and Sheryll said it was the first time she heard her uncle sing. The kids and the women gathered around the Nipa shed when the moment reached its apex height within the song, when we all joined in the chorus line after him—Uncle Mero, Mike, Dong, Big Chef, who was by then bare chested, drunk, you might say, as we were, repeating each stanza, « why, why, why Delilah ! » in the jungle, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Born on the Bayou: Mea Culpa

MICHAEL LAMBERT

It's been five years since the last edition of *Rouge Roubaix*. Things have changed. I moved from Alabama to Germany after grad school, continued competing at the amateur elite level internationally, and then had an accident at a course named Sachsenring that left me with a rebuilt collarbone and a ten-day hospital stay in Chemnitz in 2019.

I came back home following that experience, bought another road bike, and took a teaching job at my alma mater. I got engaged, bought a house, and split up before the wedding while living through Covid-19.

Writing about those experiences, I look back on my own setbacks and mistakes. There is a point at which racing bicycles yields diminishing returns—more time spent, and fewer rewards—like most things. In the context of the pandemic and a failed relationship, I wondered sometimes what I was doing keeping at the sport in my early 30s, but it made me feel good to ride a bicycle—“now more than ever.”

*

I'd hired a coach for the first time at the very beginning of the 2021 season. Hiring someone who knew more about training and preparing for target events than I did changed me more than I expected.

Elmer was Tim Ingram's coach back in the day. When Tim was teaching me about basic bicycle mechanics at his shop in Wisconsin over the years, sometimes the conversation would drift towards his racing days and biggest exploits. Whenever he talked about Elmer, his coach, there was a sort of reverence and deep respect that changed his tone of voice and storytelling mode. He used a similar tone whenever he talked about his mentor, “Tiger,” but that's a whole other story.

*

When I met Elmer for the first time, I noticed the intensity of his eyes and his unique glasses right away. When he introduced himself, he did so with a direct and professorial tone, which makes sense given that he teaches theology courses at a nearby university. It's the first time in my life that I can afford to pay someone to be my coach, and Elmer agreed to the job at the beginning of the 2021 season somewhat begrudgingly. It wasn't until early spring that I contacted him, I mean—later than usual.

*

So, what do you do when you're riding to the start line of a big race and realize that your shift cable is failing?

It's a question I was asking myself at the onset of a 127-mile mixed-surface bicycle race in Saint Francisville, Louisiana on Saturday, March 5, 2022. I decided to pretend like it wasn't happening. Maybe it was just dirt that was preventing my shifting from working normally? Maybe it would fix itself?

Rouge Roubaix XX is different this year. It's the first time the race is being held after a five-year hiatus. The course is different, and the typically separate groups or categories of riders are instead all leaving the start in one big group—a mass start. The effect that this change has is that all experience levels are riding together, at least at the beginning.

Inexperienced cyclists, or “Fred’s,” as they are sometimes referred to, make silly mistakes (like not replacing their shift cable prior to a long race) and are generally to be avoided at all costs. Their equipment is faulty, their clothing is often ill-fitting and perhaps mismatched, and they seem to always be the cause of crashes.

So, prior to the first gravel section at mile 29, I decide to go off the front in true Fred fashion in order to give myself a buffer for what I imagine will be a mechanical emergency as a result of my failing shift cable—I know that the stainless-steel threads are fraying inside of my right shifter and preventing the cable from moving my rear gears properly.

In other words: I'm *totally hosed*.

I'm limited to a little more than half of my cassette. So, I half-assed roll off the front of the group and hope that I can make it to the start of the gravel section alone.

*

I make it through the first gravel section following the lead vehicle, a yellow Jeep with Rouge Roubaix flags waving out the windows, kicking up dust in a huge, clay-colored cloud. The passenger pokes her head out the sunroof and takes some photographs of me riding through the dust. I look behind from time to time and see a small group of four that have separated themselves from the peloton, giving chase. Shortly thereafter, the main group of around 200 riders reabsorbs the chase group.

When I make it back onto pavement, I text my director, Bert.

“Might need a shift cable.”

Bert responds, “K I’ll ask around but have idea where to find,” then...

“Will have one, front or rear?”

“Rear.”

After this brief exchange, I go back to pedaling in earnest. I think about my options and look behind me again—nothing.

I text Bert again.

“I’m not stopping—grab torque wrench for limit screw, put in musette bag.”

*

When I arrive at the feed-zone at mile 45, there are groups of people there, including the mobile bike shop van where Bert has acquired the torque wrenches I had requested, in addition to a spare shift cable. Bert hands me the musette bag, and I replace my water bottles and drop the shift cable in the road.

A man in the crowd says, “Out-STANDIng” as I pedal by.

I text Bert again: “give me a gap”

A few minutes later, Bert responds: “2:15”

*

Based on the laws of physics, riding solo off the front of a 127-mile bike race at mile 25 is not smart. While riding a bicycle on a flat road, for example, nearly 80% of the resistance a rider experiences is the result of air. Riding in a group means that this resistance is buffered by the riders around you, making higher speeds easier for each individual rider within the group.

The laws of physics suggest that what I am inadvertently doing is incredibly stupid. Worst case: when my cable snaps, I’ll now have the tools required to limp the rest of the way back home by adjusting the limit screws on my rear derailleur. I won’t have to call for a ride, I mean. I put faith in the gap that I’ve established, stay focused, and try to relax. On the outside, I probably appear like I’m doing fine. Totally normal. Inside, things are a bit more chaotic.

Inside my mouth, I can feel the dirt caked between my teeth.

Inside my head, I’m focused on reaching the next milestone while simultaneously dying a million deaths alone. I resolve to focus on smaller, more achievable goals: “Maybe I can make it to mile 70?” I think.

“That’s not too far.”

*

When I reach mile 70, and cross a technical low-water bridge section, the gap is up to four minutes.

*

By the top of the Blockhouse climb at mile 90, I am totally alone when I reach out and grab the \$100 prize. Bert isn't at the feed-zone at the top, though, and I'm out of water. The cracks are likely beginning to become visible to spectators at this point—the fronts of my legs now the color of the road in stark contrast to the crisp white of my shoes and socks. My face is covered in dirt.

I text Bert: “go to feed-zone at 107.”

Then, my phone dies.

*

When I get to the feed-zone at mile 107, at the top of the gravel climb called “Big Bertha,” Bert is there with another musette bag with two cold bottles of water and a can of Coke.

I put the bottles in my cages and open the can of Coke.

It tastes so good and so cold.

Then I hear, “Do you need water?” from the support crew behind me.

I think, “I’m already through the feed-zone...”

Then three riders swarm around me and I toss the can of Coke towards

Bert.

*

A psychologist would likely be able to explain why so often when a rider is caught after being off the front in a race for a long time they seem to implode. On the one hand, the obvious exhaustion from the effort itself could be to blame. On the other, the pure psychological impact of being caught after having played your cards foolishly too early is enough to make some riders straight up quit. I resolved to steel myself against the feelings of defeat. I hitched onto the back of the group of three other riders.

Then, the most remarkable thing happened: my rear shift cable snapped.

*

Sheer panic and rationality are wrestling each other in my mind as I realize that I'm now stuck in my 11-tooth rear cassette cog—the longest gear. I resolve to try to hang on for 4th place.

“At least I got the \$100,” I think.

The other three riders look fresh, standing up out of the saddle on the inclines and sharing the workload evenly. They don't even seem to mind that I've tagged on, perhaps because of my appearance, caked in dirt.

*

There is a certain level of no-fucks-given that comes with being totally exhausted while also having a mechanical failure occur twenty miles from the finish line of a big bicycle race. I didn't really care if we got caught, I mean. I hadn't totally given up, but I was beginning to settle for whatever position I could salvage from the situation.

I thought back to my time this winter in the state of Arizona, where I've gotten into the habit of visiting my last-surviving grandparent during the holiday break. I bring my bike along and put in big base miles in December and January in the desert.

I made a new friend in Tucson this year, a long-distance runner. I thought of her grandfather's advice: “Don't settle.” He was a distance runner, too, and the phrase became a mantra for her track and cross-country teams in high school. She wore it on a bracelet during races and used it as a memento and motivator for when the internal voice in your head starts to turn against you, a by-product of evolutionary biology and our neurological impulse to preserve self.

“Don't settle,” I thought.

*

By the time we reach the “5km” to go sign, the four of us are starting to play cat-and-mouse games—little sprint accelerations just to test out the legs of the others promptly followed by coasting to a near standstill.

On one of the hills, I stand up out of the saddle and move past the group just to keep from having to unclip and walk. I think, “they must know my cable is broken,” while pedaling at a glacially slow cadence in my 39-11 gear combination.

We arrive at the base of the old course's finishing straight.

*

The new finishing straight is shaped like a cradle—sharp downhill followed by a flat followed by a sharp uphill finish. It was here, a little over five hours ago, that I originally realized my cable was fraying.

When we start down the descent, I shift into my *longer* gear combination (53-11) in last position of four. I get small and tuck into the draft of the riders in front of me. The road starts upward, and I shift into my 39-11.

*

When I first started writing this story in 2016, I talked about why bicycle racing in Louisiana feels like coming home. I talked about my first time in New Orleans and canoeing down the Mississippi River with my older brother, Chris. I think back to the sunset on our last night on the water in 2009, more than a decade ago, and how that experience fundamentally changed me.

I think about the way that the world felt when we achieved something that we thought was impossible. How it seemed to open up after having accomplished something remarkable and how my older brother gave me the key.

*

Lying in the grass after winning the race with a broken shift cable, I keep repeating to myself: “Unbelievable. Unbelievable.”

*

Now I know why bicycle racing in Louisiana feels like coming home. Because I love my brother, Chris.

Garden of Anything

SHEILA GRIFFIN LLANAS

I go back to the garden to check up
on my soul, verify I was happy there.
Wonder if I am peripherally still here.
In the old days I was barely there.
The beginning of my spectacular
I barely tolerated the terms. It's all
changed now. Manicured. Manufactured.
Tailored. It's just not the same.
There's a little free library by the fountain,
a virtual birdcage gone dark and...I forget
what else. A natural uncertainty
calls everything into question. Imagine,
a story so old still shedding its runoff of warnings,
despair that bleeds. Ah well, let it go.
I'm putting a pie in the oven. Next door,
a neighbor prunes a tree, the chainsaw noise
drifting through the open window, into
my most basic way to cope, such joy
I get from a place gone empty
and so much more beautiful from here.

My Mother Had Dragon Claws

CATHERINE MCGUIRE

Always, lacquered nails arched like a curl
of orange peel, as lethal as a cat's.

She lavished hours on color and shine, flashed them
like red flags at parties, preening; challenging.
An unchanging sheen on hands slowly wrinkling.
Gold rings and rock-solid fingertips, her treasures.

I recall one sixth-grade day: inexplicably
she grabbed and shook me, her sudden fury
drove those talons through my flesh,
blood dotted my blouse, a sweater
barely hiding my shame.

My own nails were soft, bendy—no match.
My restless hands with nails bitten bloody
never raised to confront her. She mocked me
for my pitiful stubs.

Now I hold this old photo
in my wrinkled unbitten hands,
see a child of 23, holding infant me.
Her cropped hair, cropped nails
polished but puny, so nibbled, so raggedy!

When did she conquer nail biting,
admission of frustration or fear?
When did I first encounter her claws,
learn to dread their cold strength?
If I'd known the girl with bitten nails
could I have tolerated the woman
she became?

The Shot

MAX MCNETT

an excerpt from *hometown hero*

There are towns like Rivers Edge all over the state of Wisconsin, all over the country, and indeed all over the world. Not always easy to find, but a pretty quick study once you lay eyes on them: tiny hamlets tucked away from greater civilization in pockets of boundless countryside, the kind of towns that you never drive through accidentally because they aren't on the way to anywhere. The only reason you'd come through a town like Rivers Edge is if you lived there or knew someone who lived there. Otherwise, why the hell would you go to a place like *that*?

Stuck between craggy bluffs on one side and the mighty Mississippi on the other, Rivers Edge would never be mistaken for a bustling metropolis. It was a river town through and through, right down to the dank, earthy odor that wafted off the water and seemed to permeate everything and everyone within the city limits. Even in the days when its humble economy was bolstered by the presence of the barge industry and summers full of heavy river traffic, its population never got much higher than a thousand. It was small, almost painfully so, and its inhabitants liked it that way. After all, it had always been that way. So what if it felt like your friends and neighbors were living all over you? At least you *knew* these people for chrissakes (whether or not you liked them was a different story entirely).

The town didn't get a lot of outsiders, but if you happened to find yourself in Rivers Edge on any given night, you might find yourself in a dingy little corner tavern on the main drag called Teddy's Tap. Once inside, you could marvel at the scuffed horseshoe bar, the warped black vinyl barstools that teetered when sat on, and the inexplicable haze that hung over everything like cigarette smoke, even though nobody was smoking. And if you sat at that bar and ordered yourself a pint of whatever your poison may be, it would only be a matter of time before somebody brought up *the shot*.

It was inevitable, less a possibility and more a specter looming among the flickering neon, slithering between the rambling and scrambling of bar conversation, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Somebody around the bar would get full enough to start waxing poetic about "the good ol' days," and, as if on cue, another voice would chime in with something to the effect of, "Man, nothin' was better than '99," at which point a chorus of *ohhhs* and *yeahhhhs* and *fuckin'-A-rights* would swell like a symphony of beer-soaked nostalgia.

1999 was the year the Eagles of Rivers Edge High School made it to the state basketball championship, so immortalized with a framed maroon jersey on the wall by the weathered front door of the Tap. "*Hell* of a team,"

someone would undoubtedly mutter, followed by the thrum of excitable murmurs, creaking barstools, and the clinking of glasses. And they had been; the Eagles had won every game of the season by double-digits, except for one, and cruised through the postseason with relative ease. What's more, they were a true team, not driven by the talents of just one or two star players, but a well-oiled, well-conditioned machine engineered by longtime coach Lon Dugan ("God rest his soul, man," a voice would croak as eyes instantly became misty) and powered by staunch defense, swift ball movement, and a deep, inherent trust in each man to play his role and deliver when the moment called for it. To the patrons of the bar, this was "playing the right way," which skewed closer to godliness than basketball strategy. "That's the problem with kids these days," they'd grumble into their bottles and cans. "They just don't *play the right way* anymore. It's a goddamn shame, I tell ya."

Rivers Edge made it all the way to the state championship game playing the right way, where they ran into division powerhouse and longtime rival, the Carlton Prep Crusaders. Carlton was a private school about twenty minutes upriver, an oddity amongst all the tiny rural public schools in that corner of the state. Only the wealthiest families in the area could afford to send their kids to Carlton, unless you were a star athlete, in which case some loophole would conveniently appear to help take care of that pesky tuition and put you in a crisp royal blue Crusader uniform right quick. They dominated in every sport and likely should have been moved up a division, so they would be forced to play the other big private schools in their region, but they always found a way to circumvent that whole process and keep beating up on all the farm kids and poor kids and Catholics that populated the public schools. It was a stacked deck, and Carlton held all the cards.

The farm kids and poor kids and Catholics at Rivers Edge, though, would not be put down so easily. Though they hadn't beaten Carlton in decades, they were a perennial thorn in the sides of the Crusaders, and even the snobs from Carlton had to admit that the energy of an Eagles-Crusaders game had a different tenor to it. What's more, in recent years a few Rivers Edge players had gotten offers to attend Carlton, but turned them down to play for Coach Dugan, giving even more fuel to an already potent rivalry.

Rivers Edge had very nearly beaten Carlton at home earlier in the season; they had a one-point lead in the game's final moments, and when Carlton's last-second layup bounced off the front iron as the buzzer sounded, the tiny bandbox gym vibrated with the reverberant screams of joy from the hometown crowd. But the head referee called a foul on the shot ("*No way* there was a foul!" the bar cried out like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. "If

that was a foul, then I'm Barbra fuckin' Streisand!"). The Carlton kid sank the two free throws, and the Crusaders escaped with a one-point victory. It was the only loss in the Eagles' otherwise perfect season, and that loss stung like hell.

The sting felt as fresh as ever when they were reunited with Carlton in the state final several weeks later. They took the floor in a packed Kohl Center in Madison, the entire building brimming with that special kind of electricity you only find in small-town high school sports. From the opening tip, it was an incredibly close, incredibly physical matchup. "Best goddamned game of high school basketball I've ever seen," old Slim Naderman would hiccough from his spot at the far end of the bar. "Been watching ball games for almost seventy years, and I ain't never seen a goddamned game like that one." Carlton's size and speed advantage kept them in the lead for most of the game, but Rivers Edge kept coming back, never seeming to tire, always managing to hit a big shot when they needed it. With 2.5 seconds left, Carlton led 59-57, but Rivers Edge had the ball under their own basket. One last inbound play. One last shot to win the whole thing.

It was a beautiful play call, everybody agreed on that: quick inbound to the low block, immediate kick out to the near corner. The inbounder ran up to the top of the key then broke hard for the opposite corner. By this time, the ball was skipping along the perimeter until it once again found the hands of the inbounder, a sophomore guard named Tommy Sanderson, who was wide open. "I can still see him now," a voice cried out, "the little son-of-a-bitch."

He rose in the air and shot, firing away with a flick of his wrist, sending the ball soaring over the outstretched fingertips of a sprinting defender, all in one fluid motion. The shot was high and arcing; it seemed to float in the air more than fly. The crowd held its breath. It felt like it took days for the ball to come down.

The buzzer sounded.

Swish.

RIVERS EDGE 60 00:00 CARLTON 59

The place blew like Pompeii. Fans stormed the court, jumping into each other's arms, boosting the players onto their shoulders. The Rivers Edge band blasted the school fight song with tears streaming down their faces. Coach Dugan raised both fists in the air and bared his gritted teeth in victory, an image that made the front page of the next day's newspaper and had long since lived in a worn homemade frame behind the horseshoe bar. It was pure pandemonium, and it was beautiful.

"Still feels unreal," somebody would chuckle, shaking their head in

decades-long disbelief. “Been almost twenty-five years and I still can’t believe it really happened.” “I’ll never forget it,” another voice would call out. “Never in a million years. I can still see that shot going in, clear as day.”

A rumbling, reverent buzz. *The shot.*

“*Hell* of a shot.”

“Picture perfect. You couldn’t *dream* of a more perfect shot than that.”

“And he was a sophomore! A *sophomore*, for chrissakes!”

“I tell ya, not many kids would even *take* a shot in a moment like that, let alone *make* the damn thing!”

“Greatest shot I’ve ever seen in my life. Fuckin’ A.”

A glass shot up into the air. “To Tommy Sanderson! The biggest shot in school history!” Dozens of bottles and cans followed suit. “TO TOMMY!”

From a rickety pub table in the corner, a figure in a leather jacket and baseball cap pulled low over his face obediently raised his glass and nodded his head at the boozy reverie before him. He gave half a smile, maybe a quarter of one, then he lifted his drink to his lips and sipped through gritted teeth.

Tom Sanderson was so fucking sick of that goddamned story.

Molting Old Burdens

MICOL MCSWEENEY

Clinging to old skin
suffocating, tearing at the seams.
I mistook your weight for warmth,
mistook your grasp as grounding.

But even a locust knows
there comes a time to shed.

I split free,
ripped open our fragile past,
leaving the husk of you behind,
hollow, lifeless, dust.

You tried to stay,
but exoskeletons don't grow,
squeezing, trapping, tightening.

And I, with new skin
am set free, unburdened.
Rising to the sky,
wings sharp,
ready for a new flight.

Four Poems

IVAN DE MONBRISON

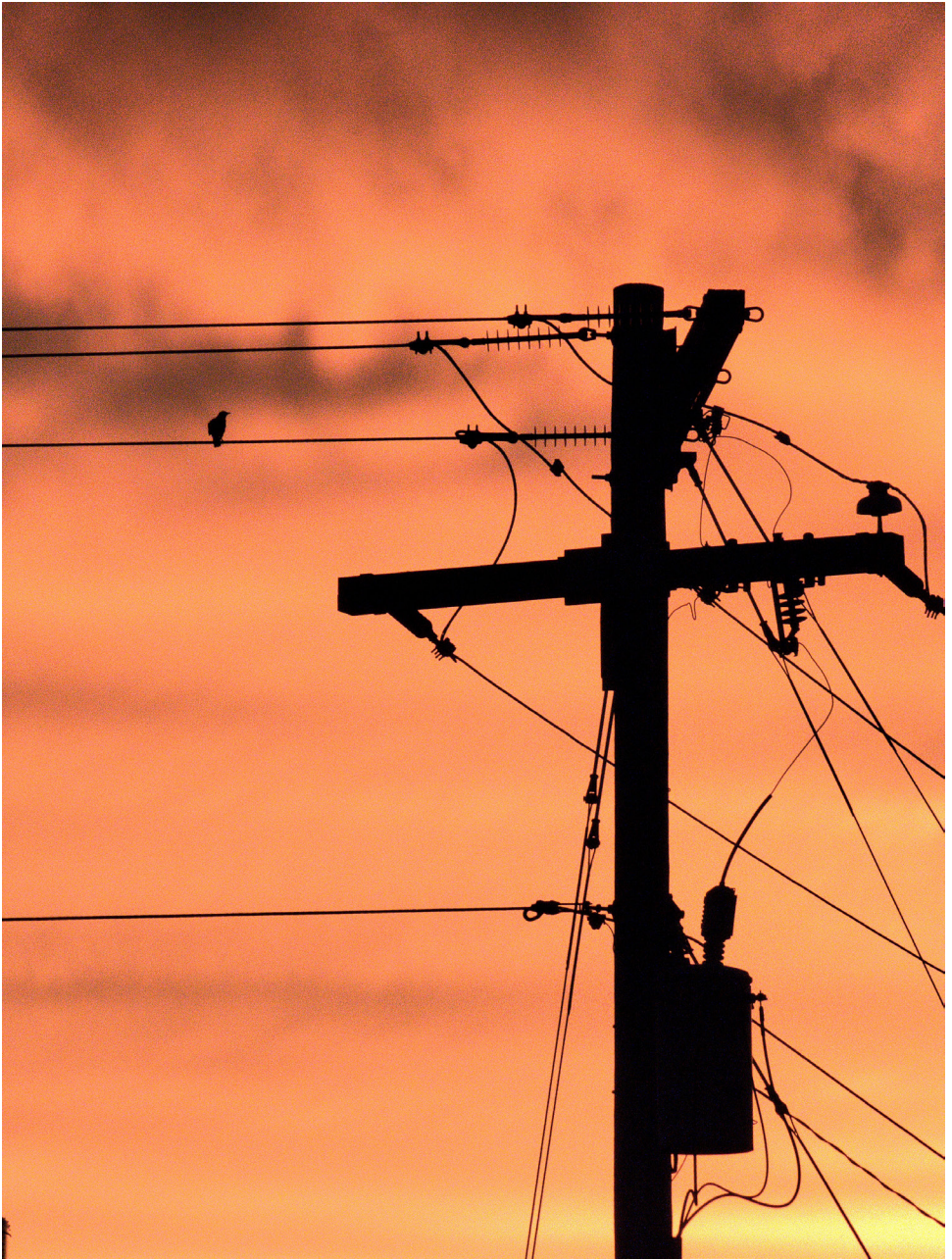
Awkward balance of a man
Devoid of garment of skin
Whether treading on a thread
Or falling in the darkness under
And maybe travel through time
I was never able to measure
The precise length of my death
Like on a crippled canvas
Where I spent days trying to undo
My ugly self-portrait

Fantasy of leisure could be
Fathomlessness of cruelty
An appointment with the devil
The threshold that shall not be crossed
Writing always upside down
Enables me to forget all
The memories of my future lives
And the forclusion of my past

Frantic dismay of a bulb
Broken glass bleeding its light
Digs a deep hole in the ground
Where your shadow has been swallowed
To weave the texture of time
Is harder than it seems to be
To learn hatred as to survive
Is far harder than just to die

The sanctuary once profaned
We stepped in on feetless legs
Watching the sky like an abyss
That nothing can deflect

I know I'm just a doll of bones
Carried around in a ragged bag
By a madman always busy
chewing away my empty mind



Bird on a Cable
BRYCE AIDE



JaneDoe
JADA BRYLSKI



1/3

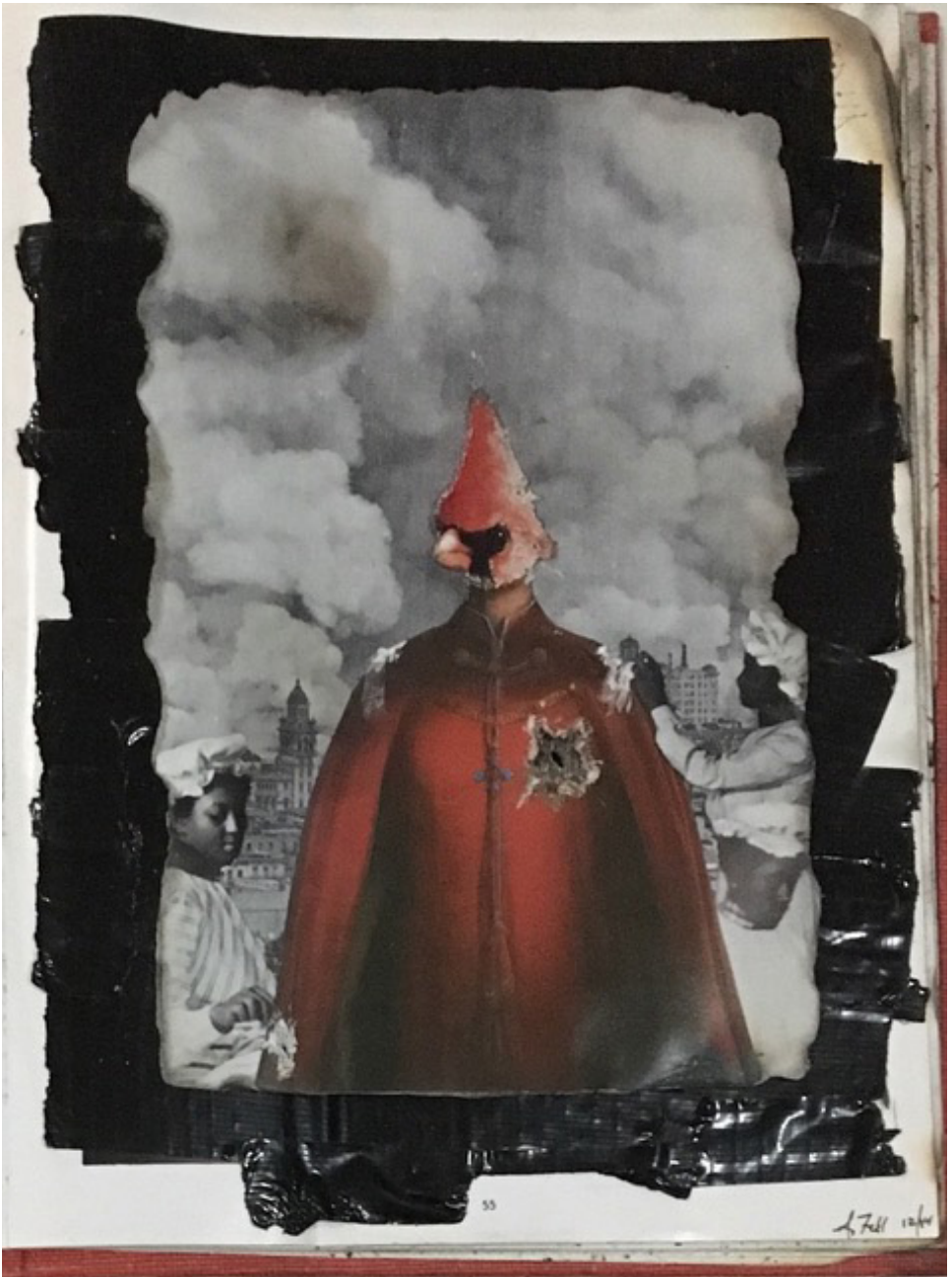
Madigan Squeeze

Jada Brylski

Madigan Squeeze
JADA BRYLSKI



American Monster #6
ADAM FELL



American Monster #45-47
ADAM FELL



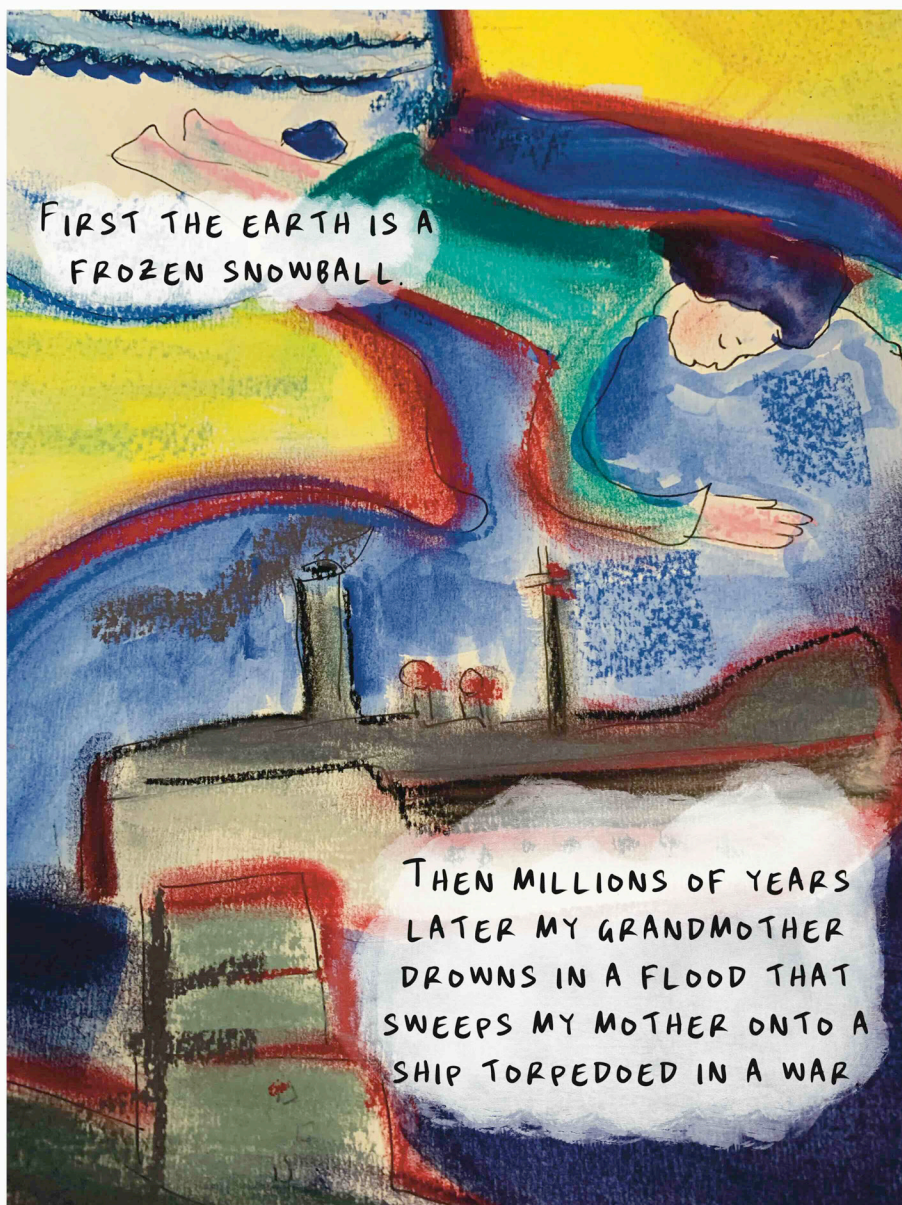
Baba Yaga
ALEX JANSEN



Koi
ALEX JANSEN



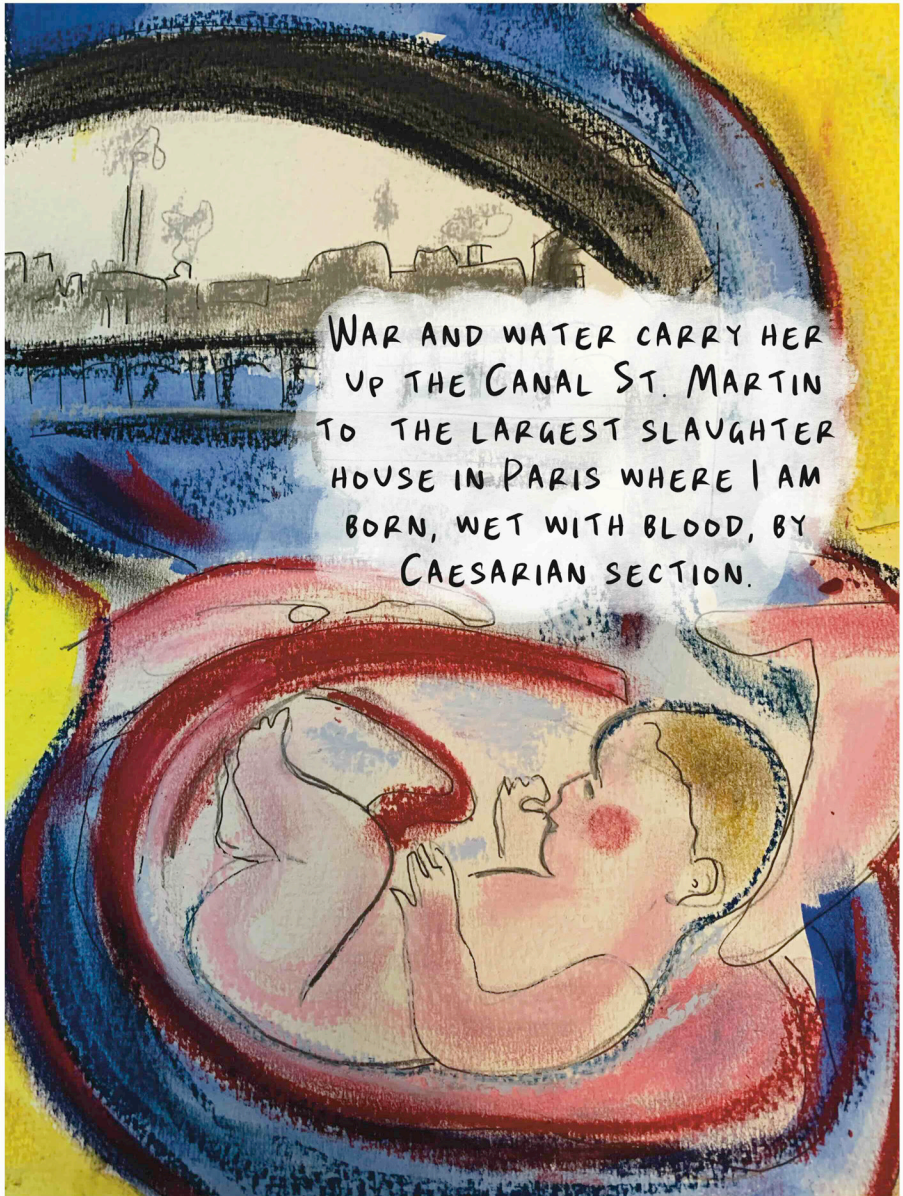
Sunset Over Trees
ALEX JANSEN



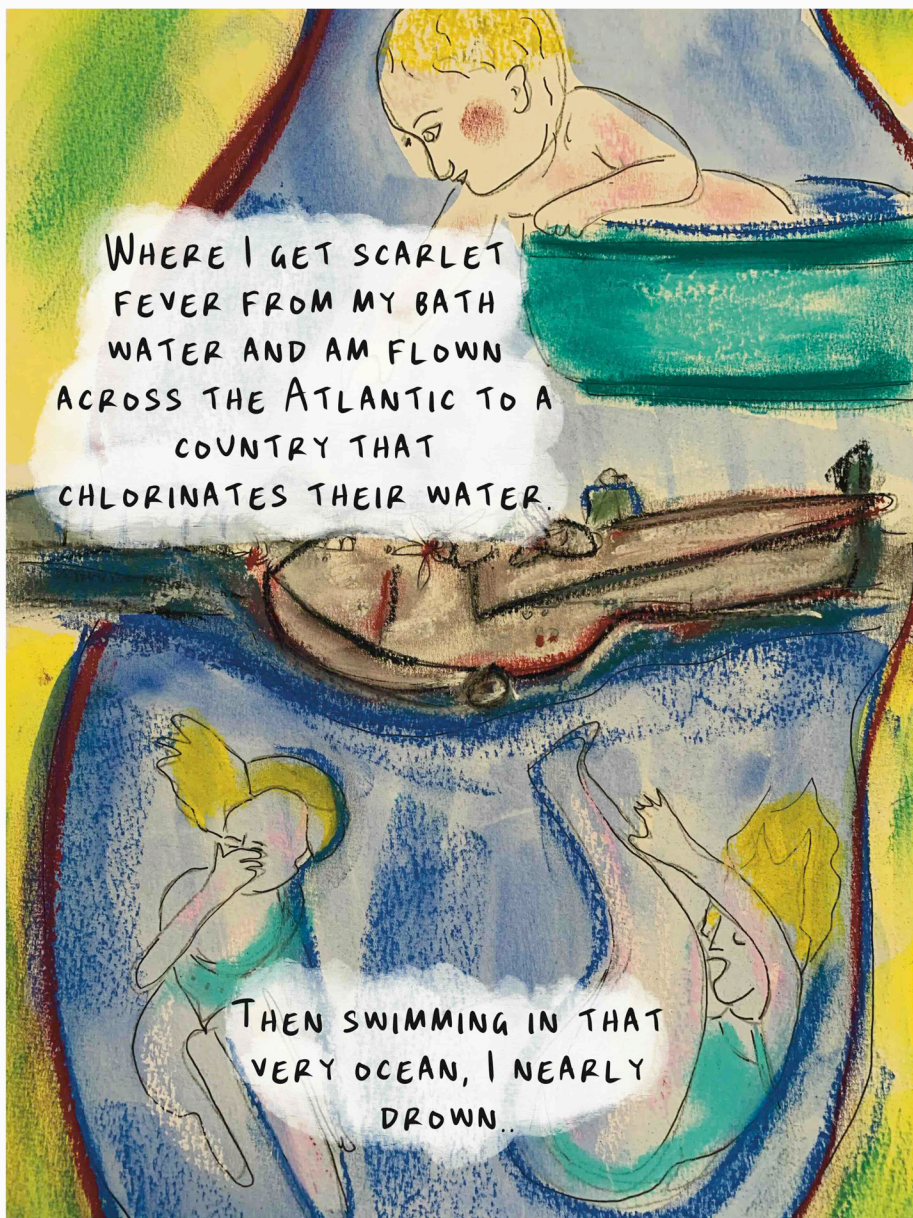
FIRST THE EARTH IS A
FROZEN SNOWBALL.

THEN MILLIONS OF YEARS
LATER MY GRANDMOTHER
DROWNS IN A FLOOD THAT
SWEEPS MY MOTHER ONTO A
SHIP TORPEDDED IN A WAR.

Water
JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL

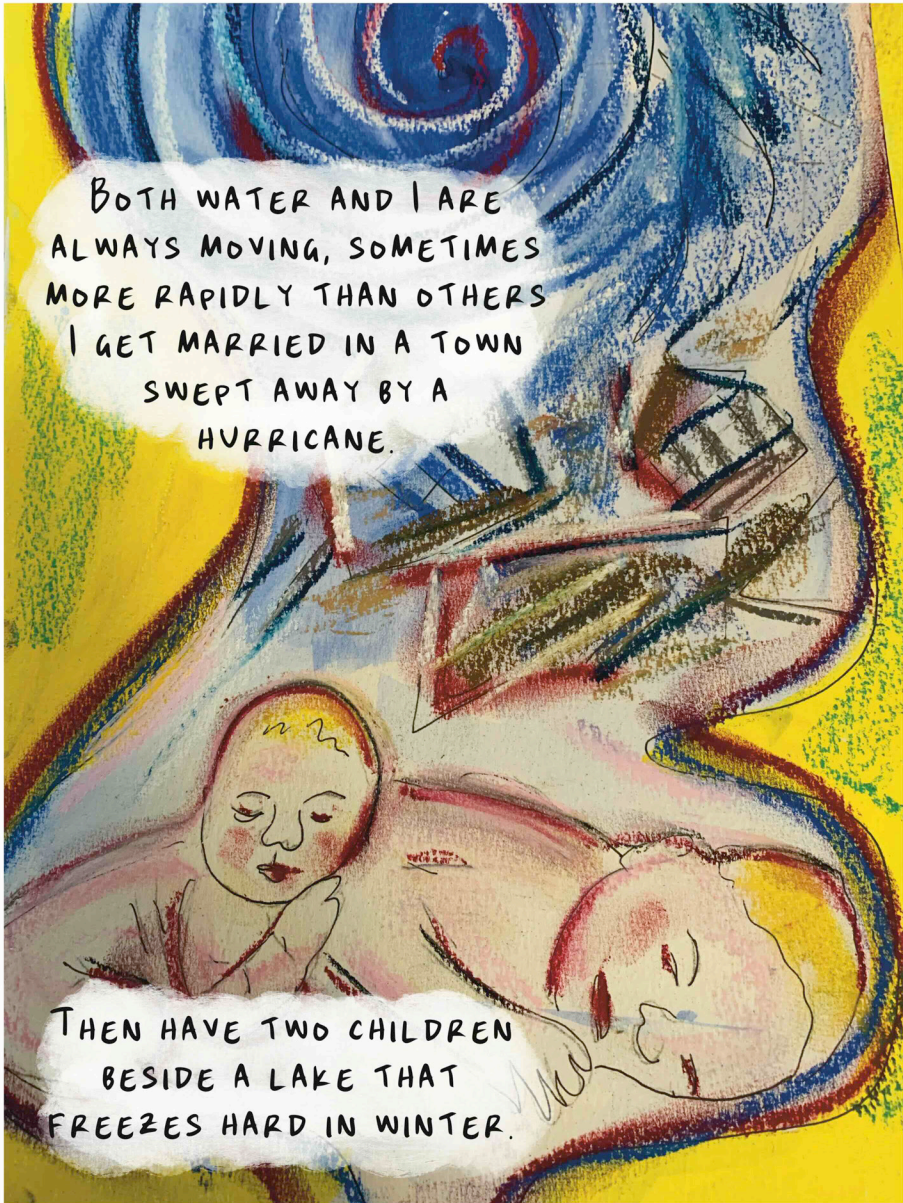


WAR AND WATER CARRY HER
UP THE CANAL ST. MARTIN
TO THE LARGEST SLAUGHTER
HOUSE IN PARIS WHERE I AM
BORN, WET WITH BLOOD, BY
CAESARIAN SECTION.



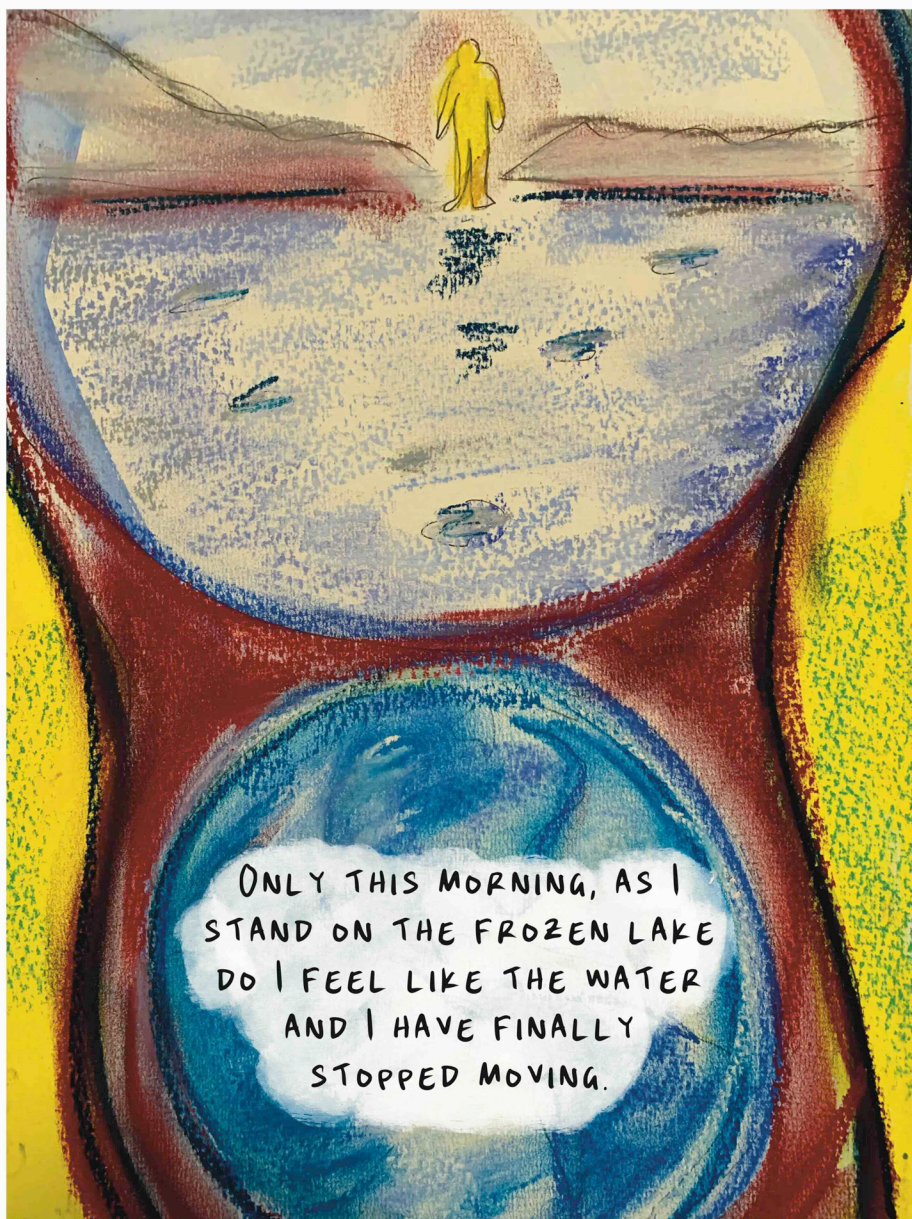
WHERE I GET SCARLET
FEVER FROM MY BATH
WATER AND AM FLOWN
ACROSS THE ATLANTIC TO A
COUNTRY THAT
CHLORINATES THEIR WATER.

THEN SWIMMING IN THAT
VERY OCEAN, I NEARLY
DROWN..



BOTH WATER AND I ARE
ALWAYS MOVING, SOMETIMES
MORE RAPIDLY THAN OTHERS
I GET MARRIED IN A TOWN
SWEEP AWAY BY A
HURRICANE.

THEN HAVE TWO CHILDREN
BESIDE A LAKE THAT
FREEZES HARD IN WINTER.



ONLY THIS MORNING, AS I
STAND ON THE FROZEN LAKE
DO I FEEL LIKE THE WATER
AND I HAVE FINALLY
STOPPED MOVING.



Clown Show
MICHAEL LAMBERT



Once Upon a Time
CATHERINE MCGUIRE



Year of the Snake
CATHERINE MCGUIRE



Sea/Shore X
RICHARD MONINSKI



Coexistence
KIERSTEN PROM



Within the Soul
UKEME UDO



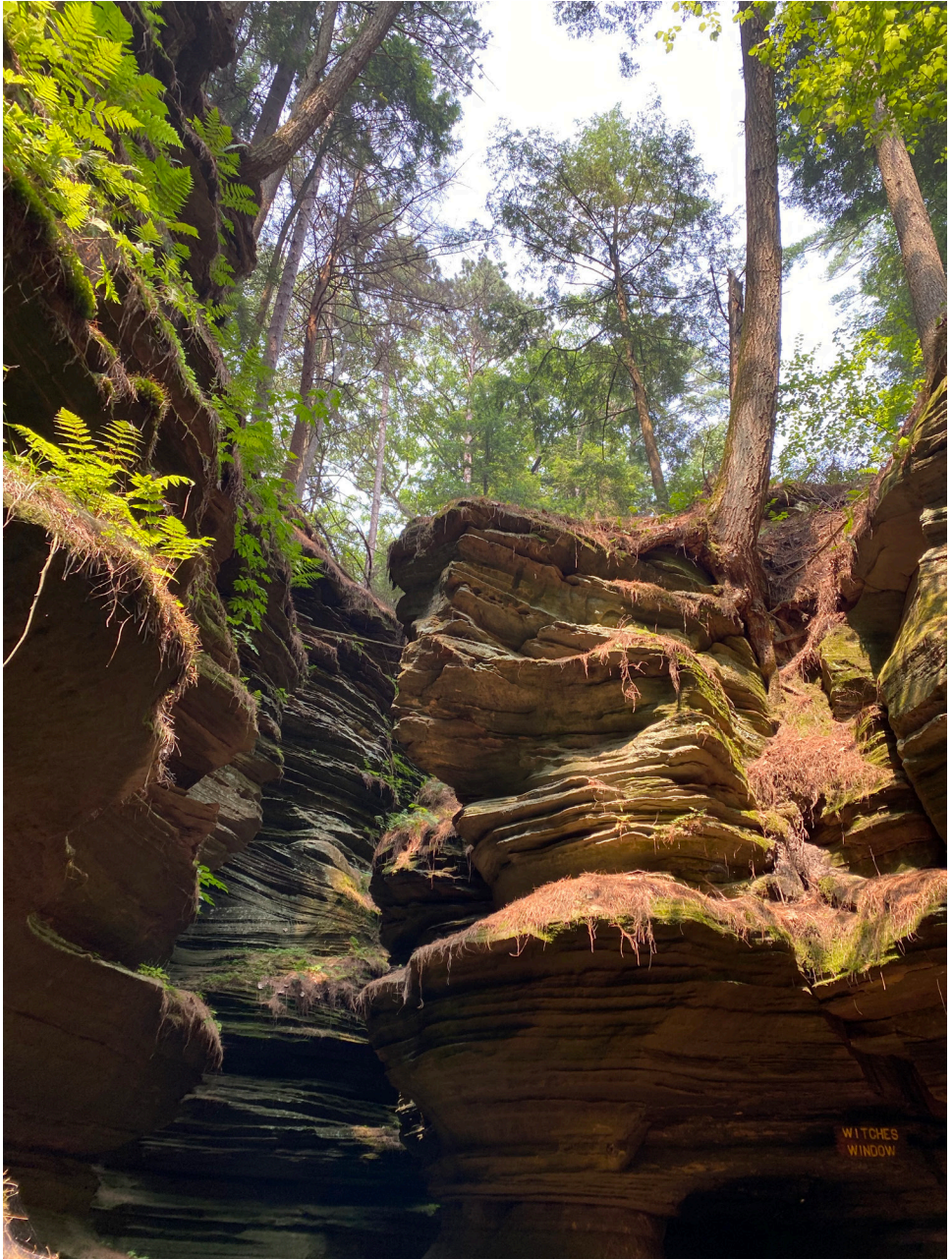
I Love Pelicans
JEFF WEILAND



Sisterhood of Runners
JEFF WEILAND



Bird of War
THOMAS WERTEL



How Do I Get Out
THOMAS WERTEL



Coming Back Down the Mountain
ELIZABETH WIEGEL



The Shadows Grow Longer Yet
ELIZABETH WIEGEL

Authority

SHEILA E. MURPHY

The father begs his son to accept
what the father is about
to protect. The son is crying,
barely able to stand. His hands shake.

The father declares he would do anything.
There is blood on the son's shirt
and shoes. On the legs of his trousers.
He whispers that he cannot feel.

The father asks permission to take charge.
The son nods. The father knows
a good attorney. The son, throat quivering,
leaves home to begin again.

His father texts in fear. Just making sure.
The son does not reply.
In near distance, a dog barking,
the sound of a railroad train.

Reflections on a Piece by Yuko Otomo

SHEILA E. MURPHY

I see brush strokes as petals or butterflies, the yellows threading greens
mingled or apart from swash blue, the lazy wash full
of background hue the artist draws in

to the familiar unfamiliar lapsed as vacancy
erupts between a place for care
exactly a rosary's distance walking from home

I imagine G's voice hummed
at a low tone sustained across the vast *thinking*
paired with flecks of erudition corresponding to a thing well made

some instrument fermenting theory and practice
cufflinks catch the latticed light
at the center of a room

all very arbitrary the sougning of musical light
turned generous sprawled across the page
known as though by heart

would he sing bass to match soprano mezzo
alto voices shimmering across the under-
lying bass line spawning aloof grace notes

and harmonics locating no ceiling to reach
just the wild empty kismet, vast sky consistently
unbroken by hand

Love Poem with Eight Questions

ROBERT OKAJI

Imagining God, or rather what I think
God looks like, is pointless,
but what is the point of anything
if I'm not with you? And what
is that void between love and us,
between snowflake and bone
and all the pine needles
nestled comfortably in their beds
in this cold world? When I become ash
what else will remain of me?
Does our first kiss still exist
somewhere in the New Mexico sky,
or has it floated north to Indiana
and beyond? Does God need eyes
to see my tumors? Or ears to hear
my curses, or a mouth to eat my
love? What shall we call that space
I'll no longer fill?

MJ Lenderman for president

MATTY OLSON

I've been down on the pavement
Scrubbing rocks out of my shoes
It has nothing to do with you.

Did it hurt when you fell from
The yellow pages?
Heaven has VIP stages
Charles Manson Ronald Reagan
It has nothing to do with you.

I've been pushing the buck
Smearing ink on my hand
I've been passing the luck
To the hotel man
And my iPhone is hungover
It's been ringing since November
An American would answer
It has nothing to do with you.

Even Mike TeeVee knew how to be
Disestablishment-tary
But he's as ignorant as me
And cable's got nothing to see
AND IT HAS SHIT TO DO WITH ME

It has nothing to do with you.
Tippecanoe and Tyler too
Elon's auditing the moon

Thursday, mid-afternoon

MATTY OLSON

I.

It fell on the door, softly
Displaced, fragmented through tattered curtain.
Is the lighting okay?
Effervescence of a fine champagne
Not spilled, bubbled over
Gold, needing, creeping
It doesn't take,
Only rests by
Enveloping, shaking, swallowing
It begins, it's
Creaking

II.

I opened
Kept an eye on the window, the screen
Now, I'm half girl
Half mourning, so
Don't the floorboards look lovely?
Watch me walk
Joints gliding, gushing, groping
My head bobs up and down
And settles
Not spilled, placed
Complacent

III.

You sat on the edge of the bed frame
What's it like to be strong?
Kinetic? Noble?
What made you
Decide it was worth
Gliding, gushing, groping

A lapse or weakness or write-off
Spillage
You define it
Recontextualize
Sweat and cover and skin

IV.
And skin
And slip
And seize
And surveillance
And surge

V.
There's a crook
Deep in your chest

VI.
I grip on
Korbut flip
I'm trying
To tire

VII.
You
Out

VIII.
Half girl,
Half bow, just deep enough to
Settle, finish.

IX.

A beat

A thoracic cavity

A pothole

X.

What else

Needs

Filling?

Constellations

ELIZABETH ONHEIBER

*“Holding on to anger is like holding on to a hot coal—
you are the one that gets burned.” - The Buddha*

Mom smoked inside,
now the whole house smells.
Maybe I should vacuum.
Maybe I should sweep.
My 15-year-old aunt was sold into
sexual slavery by her parents at the bar.
Why had you forsaken her, Grandmother?
Now she dwells within the temples of the skull.

Showgirls, lobotomies, California,
electroconvulsive therapy, fashion.
Tarantulas are delicacies.
Wanna see my stitches?
Tigers digest bones.
Hospitals used as a punitive measure,
state-issued underwear,
misanthropy,
a misdiagnosis,
a trendy mood disorder,
something-something not-otherwise-specified.
Dye your hair green and
put a bone through your nose.
Let me put this gun in my mouth
and [SMOOCH] kiss my ass goodbye.

A mattress, a grave, a resting place,
I climbed right in and got the dirt all over me.
Prostitution, prosecution, persecution,
memento mori and amor fati.
Misogyny, hysteria,
public meltdowns,
and private prisons.
Break the windows
and gas up the van.

Kali

ELIZABETH ONHEIBER

Jai Matha Kali Matha, Jai Maa Kali Maa

I cast my eyes from the walls to the hills,
and look upon the campfires and roads.
If the sun fell from the sky, I could throw
myself into the sea to become sea-
foam. I will flatten the hills with my palms,

I miss my son.

A sword, a dish for the drippings, one arm
outstretched in reassuring blessing for
the children she avenges and a tongue
stuck out for stepping on Shiva. Damage.

One arm with a severed head by the hair,
then Kali drank the blood of Raktabeej.

A blood-spattered headdress on an ele-
phant blooming with henna tattoos,
a harness for the bride on its back.
A poem for the baby girls buried
in the sand. What crime have they committed?

A heaping midden of shotgun shells, a
screaming meteor streaking the sky, the
line I drew when I said “no,” not again.

A room of one’s own, a door that locks, and
gardens beneath in which running waters flow.

A bloodstain and a bubble bath.

A snuffed-out cigarette still stinking the kitchen reminds me of what went wrong yesterday.

Slider

ELIZABETH ONHEIBER

What is the sky?
Para siempre,
el sol,
yo soy.
I can pull the slide back.
Sequins and a menthol.
Fireworks in Vietnam.
Cobwebs. Roadkill.
An impotent penis.
Scorpions have 8 legs.
Say “cheese.”

All my lovers were chewing on my bones,
so I cut my ring finger off
and buried it in the backyard.
I snatched the sun from the sky,
gutted it like a melon,
fed it to my child,
and sent him off to school
with the sun in his belly.

Let's have kiwis and avocados and
green things in our home.
How long do Cockatiels live?
I could learn chess.
Do you think they're real,
statues that cry, grant wishes,
and heal people?
Why doesn't anyone
get the stigmata anymore?

During the Red Revolution
my great-grandmother buried
czarist currency in secret
believing the Czar would return to power.
I want to go to Thailand,
and I want to go to Cambodia,
and I want to go to sleep.

Staking a Claim

RICHARD OYAMA

For my Grandfather Katsuji Oyama

What color the ocean that took Katsuji on a tramp steamer to
Angel Island? Surely not the rust-colored slick in the Gulf where
Nutrients starve and islands drown like cathedrals. What I imagine is
A fog-shrouded shore where no angels but deer are afraid not to tread, where
What's remembered is what is lost: cedar forests, *torii*, pine. What
Faces them on this shore is alien: barrack walls where Cantonese sojourners
Carved poems, interrogation, *hakujin* meat-odor. The strangeness may be
Unassimilable, perpetually foreign. Katsuji will be a migratory bird, truck
Farming, making avocado pomade in the basement of a sea-beaten Victorian
And hawking organic cosmetics in a horse-drawn cart to *issei* wives in the
Coastal towns. Katsuji promised an honorable death for the family in
The Los Angeles River, when it was river, not balled foil, empties,
Ticket stubs to nowhere. He was *issei*, barred from citizenship, owning land. It
Must have been Wesley, the American-born son, to sign the deed. My uncle could
Plot a future, stake a claim. After the last spike on the Transcontinental was hammered,
Chinese were shot, lynched, driven out. *Nikkei* grew lettuce, potatoes,
Strawberries. They enraged *hakujin* farmers. They crossed a border
Of an ocean, stole their livelihood, don't speak the language.

I have gone home.

Eternal Struggles of a Single Day

GRANT PATZLAFF

Destitute, en route, crumpled up and stuffed in a pocket, I'm resolute, fill up the tank, keep that scrunched brow locked in Clenched fists, cracked fingers, gripped wheel, stress-stained reins, and feel, the pain, thoughtless chains, hook bone and flesh to the steering wheel. I can't take it, pull over.

Forage your glovebox and shell the pits of uncracked issues, an endless hunger for you and you, you can't see, so you intuit. You can't breathe, so you turn blue and you can't be, so you blew it. You can't believe, so you shoot through it, red light, crash.

At home what once was neutral now freezes, leaves vision, dead, head full of smog, breath stolen. The invisible noose rots, pulls, thwaps, and is gone, then is back.

When I finally exhale, only fiberglass finds its way out, clogging, cutting, blood stained lips, crimson creases curdle, dry blood on my mouth. Try again, choke up on your swing, and then fall once more and cough it all out. Ashes and Ashes all, embers gone out.

Mental defense today was less than stout,
tighten shoulders, widen base, flatten back,
box out.

Sweat through shirts and pants, and pant and breathe
too hard, then pass out.

It's raining in the trenches. My boots are
worn through and the voices of the dead cut
through the dying's shouts. Is that ticking for
me, that siren sound?

Sending this soldier asunder,
sing self-doubt, sink in stupor,
sleep with no sound.

MISSHAPEN

GRANT PATZLAFF

You see the square peg failing to pass the
round hole,
and you think that the square peg must simply move to the
square hole.

However, that assumes that:

1. The square peg knows about the square hole.
2. The square peg knows it's the square peg.
3. The square peg knows how to locate the square hole.

We extrapolate ourselves as larger, more complicated puzzle pieces, with
ourselves longing to fit into our respectively shaped holes. It is apparent
not everyone has a specific hole made for them. Sure, some do, but others
fit as best they can in wherever is the least uncomfortable.

A not-quite-right sense, an uncomfortable crunch, an
unwanted crease. Whatever hole I manage to cram into,
it's never quite right.

There is no assurance that I will ever feel like how
a square peg must feel in a square hole.

Every hole I find a liking to, I squeeze in, chipping paint,
dulling edges, scraping loudly and bleeding from splintering
wood grains. I look around at the other pegs who entered
this hole.

They all look more alike than myself.

I'm missing a piece.

I'm trapped in the wrong hole.

Snowfall

ISABEL PETERSON

Easel with you there
I feel an eagle bite the air.
Too little or too much; not there
Couldn't help how much
Couldn't plan how my eyes would light so,
but burn faster. What do I owe
you?
A coming rapture?
A caster,
oil? One that silks my hair smooth.
Soothe or soft touch
A bullet graze. Hurts but not too much.
My shoulder: ripped and split skin. shot/wounded
Unsure of how the loon did/
does, make that sound.
Where did you go? Where do you go?
I reach—
my hand goes through
the ghostly handle of your body;
like little snowflakes melting in my palm.
The crystallized look I see when I imagine the distance written
down.
By a ball gown that reaches the floor and spills over the spalting
its navy velvet creases create shadows. Always waltzing,
ones that follow; always following.
I have been emptied of all my "I don't knows."
Where do I go,
spider webs humming the future it sees
white goose, open needle, a crimson trickle, silly bees
frozen shattered water, fickle.
Catastrophic.
Catatonic.
Under the weight of a white suffocant.

Avalanche of an achiness any living thing dreads to feel.
The tighter I grip the more slippery the juvenile first snow heels
Where do I go
Your footprints are gone.

With Both Hands

ISABEL PETERSON

I might should delight in the distance
Dance in the rain in the sun's absence
Play games with existence, let go of my inherent resistance

I might should hold my heart with both hands
in the room without a candle
Hear when hearts speak
Ask eyes more questions about what they know
Smile to the shoulders that are too tired

I might should remember that
I am the ant's guest, the bird's friend, the moon's lover, and the dirt's child

I am gifted sacred navy feathers,
I'm gifted moments that swim with moon beams and
ooze with the heartache of 1000 pianos

I might should carry more firewood into my home
Prepare the table with earth's tangible poems
Eat more croissants and say big words incorrectly
Laugh at the wrong time, ask the restaurant host for a seat outside

I might should be less careful with my heart
Let it wander the earth without reservations and let it
Paint, and want, and cry, and hope
Remember how much smarter it is than I and is the truest teacher

I might should use chalk more often and get more paint on my favorite pants
Accidently spill black tea on the cream-colored carpet, and
Lose more at card games
Climb trees to dangerous heights and
Run down the street at midnight and taunt the tall lamps with my shadow

I might should stop arguing with the clock and carrying all of these heavy rocks
Put my feet in more streams barefoot
Tell the world what I feel
Understand that sometimes all there ever was to do is be

I might should be okay with knowing I will never really know
Have an irreligious faith that the clouds, coffee mugs and all the open windows
Will take care of me

I might should delight in the closeness
The too sweet chocolate chip cookies
The almost forgotten birthdays
The adopted kittens
And
The consciousness that holds my heart with both hands

ADVANTAGE

KEN POYNER

The mystery is why the oboists gather at full moon. It does not seem to sway their music. It does not make potential listeners easier to snare. It seems to make so little sense that there are no popular mythical rationales to draw townspeople into opposing camps of explanation. The moon goes on sunning itself without their ministrations, and the oboists independently regularize themselves, casting notes, harmonized and not, at anyone who wanders against them. It is a given that, if your family wants its own oboist, full-moon gatherings are the time to spirit one from the herd, attempt a domestication.

BALANCING PROFIT

KEN POYNER

The clown harvest went particularly well this year. Pens are nearly full. The logistics of support are no longer trivial. The median salary for clown-herds has skyrocketed, as well as conditions on size of drive, patience of supply lines. It is ironic that with the best harvests, it is less likely that clowns will be abundant for circuses, carnivals, even clown-o-grams. When all the clowns are finally on the drive, red noses, giant yellow shoes, and other ejecta, will litter the former corrals. We recoup our losses by establishing a secondary market: we have what your newly acquired clown needs!

The Shaving Kit

CHARLES RAMMELKAMP

For my high school graduation,
my soon-to-be sister-in-law gave me
my first shaving kit,
a footlong imitation brown leather pouch,
with a zipper down the center,
official as a doctor's bag,
certifying my masculinity.
Like my older brother, David,
Marilyn was two years older than me.
She and David had been dating since tenth grade.

No longer a high-voiced kid,
I now had adult grooming tasks

to perform ritualistically,
daily hygienic devotions,
the shaving kit my reliquary.

I took it with me to college,
used it for more years than I remember,
my razor and shaving cream, toothbrush and deodorant,
tucked safely away as a doctor's pills,

blood pressure cuff and stethoscope,
or crucifixes, bones and bits of saints' clothing,
placed on the plinth of a stool by a medicine cabinet,
or on a shelf over the bathroom sink,
until one day, time taking its toll,
it fell apart, zipper snapped, material torn,
the damp rot of bathrooms deteriorating its solidity,
like that marriage between my brother
and my former sister-in-law.

I WISH I HAD LEARNED TO DO “THE CHARLESTON”

JAMES P. ROBERTS

Then I could have asked the petite
Young woman in the straw boater
With a daffodil in her hair
Her fringed daisy dress
Swirling above her knees
Just for one jazzy dance.

I imagine myself in a charcoal
Zoot suit, red bow tie
A real hep cat, slim and smooth
With a grin as wide as a gold tooth
Shiny black shoes tapping
The ballroom floor in rhythm.

The band would blow a tune
Just for us—piano, trombone, trumpet
Tenor sax, upright bass and banjo
Doing a Scott Joplin rag
Or Duke Ellington’s “Birmingham”
As the night wore on and on.

Finally, we’d stroll out on the patio
Or verandah, hold hands and kiss.
All it would have taken
Were a few lessons on how
To do The Charleston
And turn the clock around to midnight.

ONLY A POEM (for Rita Mae Reese)

JAMES P. ROBERTS

She holds up a piece of paper and says
Look, Mommy, I have made a poem!

I take the sheet, scrutinize the squiggle,
Her hand-printed letters resembling

Chinese logograms. What story is she telling?
And then I frown *How does one make a poem?*

What is created in the making, especially
In the mind of a five-year-old daughter?

A mystery it seems only a parent can unravel.
Gaby mistakes my frown for unspoken criticism.

Even at five, she is aware of the hidden language
Of grown-ups. *That's okay it's only a poem.*

But it is *not* only a poem, Gaby. It is a piece of you,
A piece you were brave enough, trusting enough

To share and I was late in recognizing
Its essential fact. I read the poem again;

About making chalk figures on the sidewalk
And how funny they are. It is a short poem,

Six blocky lines slanting to the right like
Cardboard houses in a high wind. I look up

To tell Gaby her poem is wonderful but she
Has already moved away to look at the clothes

Hanging in the next booth over from where
We were sitting at the Saturday morning bazaar.

Yes, Gaby has *made* a poem all her own.
I tuck the paper in my purse to put on the refrigerator

Door and wish I could make a poem as easily.

Currency

RICHARD STIMAC

Buried in the back of the family safe,
itself cornered in the side hallway closet
behind my mom's dresses and old boardgames,
boxes of worthless gold coins gathered dust.
They weren't completely worthless, but worth less,
far, far less, than what my dad paid for them.
He was a sucker for TV coin shows
with their proof grades, mint states, and troy ounce weights,
words with density that lent gravitas
to buy-now deals and prices guaranteed
to rise like stock markets, or one's net worth.
My dad didn't buy coins so much as a dream
he could best the guy next door, or a friend.
We're all elitist in some common way.
For me, the oddest thing about the coins
was that they were sold in a plastic case,
like incorrupt saints you find under glass
in quaint frescoed chapels stumbled upon
when lost in the twisted streets of a *borgo*,
or princesses asleep beneath cut crystal,
their bodies un-stroked by the hands of men.
In all three cases—woman, coin, and saint—
human touch devalues the humanmade.
A fetish must be worshipped from afar;
to be divine, a god must stay transcendent.
My dad now lays in a mechanized bed,
his arms and legs skeletal, shaking hands,
distended stomach below heaving ribs,
bewildered eyes, mumbled speech that runs back
against itself, in circles, without end,
a flattened pillow haloing his head.
He is my transi; I, his supplicant.
But there is not, at the foot of his pallet,

a candle, angel of grief, or mite box
for me to drop two bits of copper coin,
light a wick, whisper formulary prayer,
cross myself, then return to days of work.
Soon, soon, me and my brother will unrack
our mother's clothes, sweep the dust, one last time,
then sell those gold coins alloyed with the dreams
they were meant to buy, but only on loan.
We will sell them, to a dealer in specie,
divide the gain, and think of them no more.

or would you rather be a fish

WENDY VARDAMAN

she tells me her grandmother
died. her cousin died.
my aunt & uncle died.
my father, also dead, she hopes
will pick her up later this afternoon.
or if not my father,
my brother who is
alive & sometimes in her mind
my father and sometimes
a baby that my brother & I
kidnapped. she leaves
messages on my phone for me,

my brother, her dead cousin,
the police. holds up her hand
again thumb & index finger less
than an inch distant *my memory*
is about this long. after she sold her
house, she told me that their
grandfather molested her
older cousin for years. that she
didn't know, although they
shared a bedroom. her cousin
when she finally spoke wanted
to know. *did it happen to you, too?*

I practice remembering
my dreams for what it's
worth. in one the son who
left us but isn't dead turns
into a fish trapped inside
a glass jar in a river
somewhere far

away. I can see his face
curving to fit. it still
looks like him pressed
against glass. I can't
do anything to help

The Bearded Girl

WENDY VARDAMAN

Fort Smith, Arkansas 1974

I remember the bearded girl at school—
junior high—I think her name was Ruth—and I
can see her—big eyes, brown hair. She didn't
wear make-up, though most of us wore gobs. I did—
mascara, eyeliner, shadow, lipstick, blush.
I put mine on mornings before going
to school—it took at least 15 minutes,
sometimes more, and if I went out later,
I'd do it over again.

Ruth—let's call her that—
dressed plain. Not boyish, but it didn't
look like she bought clothes at the mall. She was
always alone in the cafeteria,
in the halls. I spent whole years alone, too,
and never talked to Ruth. Never sat with her.
Even I knew better than that.

It wasn't
a beard, really, but two patches of stubble
on each side of her chin. Enough to notice,
enough that girls and boys—if they noticed
her at all—would mock those tufts, that bit of
fluff, which would have weighed nothing, added up
to nothing—measured together—not more than
an inch laid end to end.

Back then I plucked
my eyebrows, worried about the dark hair
growing on my arms when most girls were blonde,
and bleached it for a while. Shaved my legs after
being made fun of once.

Ruth kept to herself
in class too. Never spoke up. Did any

of us? I don't remember her last name.
If I did, I'd Google her. Just to see
that she's ok.
I tell the kids that back
then we didn't have categories for
non-binary gender, but we did. It was *weird*.
And if it got near you, you'd shrug it, shake
it, step on it *quick* before it stained your
polyester skirt or messed with your face.

Drink Me to Shrink

ALEKSANDRA VUJISIĆ

Shrink, shrink
until you fit in a palm,
until you condense into a word—one or many.
She is someone's mother, sister, daughter,
now that she's suffered, she is least of all a woman.
Shrink, so you can fit into the frames,
into expectations, into statistics.
Don't stand out, don't shout,
just smile, make sure to smile.
Now that she's been born,
she is least of all alive.
Don't seek what belongs to your brother, your father,
if you have none, don't seek your uncle's,
because what belongs to men
is cursed for women.
If you dare take it, it's stolen.
Shrink, shrink,
be gentle, be demure,
never more than silver.
Shrink, until you return to the size of a rib.

Five Suitcases

JULIET WALLER

1.

I am a suitcase.

I used to be a nanny. Part time. For one kid. The other kid had their own nanny.

The mom had a little basket in her bathroom for hand washables for which I had great disdain. I don't know why but at twenty-one, I had plenty of disdain. And boxed rice with flavor packets, free lemons, and bladder infections.

2.

I am a suitcase.

The Friday after Thanksgiving, the pocket of my apron was a suitcase for three generations of tissues.

But I'm not that kind of suitcase. It's not so emotional. I'm hard shelled and practical and inside, a mass of rumpled fabric. I enjoy travel and washing up on unknown beaches.

3.

I am a suitcase.

I used to be a dancer.

A woman once told me that I had complete control over my entire body, but she said it without moving her mouth at all. I understand. Sometimes my lips are too big for my teeth. And my teeth are too big for my words. My mouth, the suitcase for my tongue, watches helplessly as everything

spills out.

4.

I am a suitcase.

I know a person named Nadine who collected her tears in a jar for one year.

She put the jar in her suitcase and travelled from California to Paris where she cried some more for the uncle who had left her enough money for that trip. When she got back to California, the customs agent made her take a sip from the jar. She called me that night, afraid that her body was now an ocean of its own making. Nadine had an accent that no one could place.

5.

My body has been a suitcase.

Twice.

The first time, an early miscarriage, in an emergency room where an old man shouted as he thought he became everyone he saw.

The second time, a big baby boy who is now a man who accidentally wore my jeans to school in the fifth grade.

I put those jeans in a suitcase. Someone picked up that suitcase thinking it was theirs.

They have my suitcase.

Animal Planet

THOMAS WERTEL

Hermit crabs trade shells
Swapping sizes and making old new
Can we swap shells too?
I could give you my rose murex
You can give me your junonia

Puffin's beaks go from grey to orange
Transforming themselves to find a mate
Should I alter myself too?
Dye my lips a dazzling red
All to catch your tender gaze

Two birds in the sky
Locking talons and diving
Would you lock claws with me too?
Wings beating in tandem
As we plummet together towards the earth

Place de la Concorde

THOMAS WERTEL

A friend of mine told me
that his ex-girlfriend
tried to hang herself
in a public bathroom
with an extension cord
after failing calculus
He laughed
The agony she must have had
to try to bring about her own demise
using the nearest object
Has he ever known desperation
Ever considered self-harm
Thought about pushing up daisies
Sat in the fetal position at midnight
Lingered on the thought of a single mistake
Bawled himself to sleep
When you have never experienced hardship
how can you be the judge and jury
and mock the method of a would-be executioner

Weight Training

THOMAS WERTEL

Sometimes I consider
shearing the flesh off my bones
Clutching my hip
and clawing off the loose skin
The Fat
I detest that word
Old Englishmen must have too
Otherwise they wouldn't have created
so many euphemisms for it
Chubby, pudgy, portly, husky
I agree with them though
It's much better to be
called portly than fat
At least portly implies dignity
Fat implies excess
and I've never been that prosperous
I avoid looking at the numbers on a scale
More numbers means more imperfections
Gives creation to a self-made famine
The human body can survive
8-12 weeks off only body fat
so why can't I survive that long
without going to McDonalds
and worrying about how many
calories are in a double cheeseburger
Fast food means no eating the next day
because I gotta stay fit right?
I can't have anyone calling me husky

Paging Dr. Williams

MICHAEL O. ZAHN

Nothing depends
upon

a lost shopping
cart

with froze
wheels

beside the white
Snow

CONTRIBUTORS

Bryce Aide is a Junior at UW-Platteville. He is currently pursuing a degree in English Literature with minors in Creative Writing and Spanish. After he graduates, Bryce plans to attend UW-Madison to get a master's degree in Secondary-English Education. In his free time Bryce loves reading, drawing, and playing Dungeons and Dragons.

Rizwan Akhtar is a writer from Lahore, Pakistan. His debut collection of poems, *Lahore, I Am Coming* (2017), was published by Punjab University Press. He has published poems in well-established poetry magazines in the United Kingdom, United States, India, Canada, and New Zealand. He was a part of the workshop on poetry with Derek Walcott at the University of Essex in 2010.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November of 1988, and it's been all downhill since. He has recent and upcoming appearances in *The Bamboo Hut*, *Password*, and *The Stray Branch*, among others.

Kelsey Bigelow, a UW-Platteville alumna, works as a mental health poet. She's the creator of four poetry

projects, including her latest book *Far From Broken*. Her work is published with several small presses and journals. Videos of her poetry are on Button Poetry, Write About Now, and elsewhere.

Jack Braun is a Senior at UW-Platteville, hailing from Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. He majors in English with a minor in Creative Writing. His hobbies include creative writing, mini painting, and no longer being mistaken for his identical twin brother.

Kaz Bresnan is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He is an English Education major with a Creative Writing minor. He hopes to one day teach high school English. In his free time, he enjoys writing poetry and prose pieces related to pirates, cowboys, and social isolation.

Jada Brylski is a Senior at UW-Platteville pursuing a major in Graphic Design. She uses animal subjects in her work to depict lived experiences and emotions. In her free time, Jada enjoys riding her horses, playing video games, and creating ceramic works.

Madison Burns is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing poetry, spending time with her husband and cats, watching movies,

hiking, and skiing.

Daniel Dahlquist is a retired Speech Communication professor who taught at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville and a very active, prolific poet. He has published multiple poetry collections, including *Speech to the Dead* and *Slow Dancing in Carbondale*, and was an editor for the poetry collection *Geneseo Days* by Marvin Kleinau. You can find more of Daniel's poetry at <https://www.dahlquistcycleworks.com/about.html>.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent collection of poetry is *Cloud Mountain* (2024). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

Adam Fell is the author of *Catastrophizer*, winner of the Sixth Finch 2022 Chapbook Contest, and two books of poetry: *Dear Corporation* (Forklift Books, 2019) and *I Am Not A Pioneer* (2011).

Jonathan Fletcher holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia University School of the Arts. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals and magazines, and he has won or placed in various

literary contests. A Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Best Microfiction nominee, he won Northwestern University Press's Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize contest in 2023, for which his debut chapbook, *This is My Body*, was published in 2025. Currently, he serves as a Zoeglossia Fellow and lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Ava Garrard is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville with a major in English Literature. She hopes to attend graduate school in the future and eventually teach at a community college. Ava enjoys participating in cross country and track as well as writing short stories.

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *City Brink*, and *Tenth Muse*. His latest books, *Subject Matters*, *Between Two Fires*, and *Covert*, are available through Amazon. Grey has work forthcoming in *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Cantos*.

Matthew Guenette is the author of four books of poems including, most recently, *Doom Scroll* (University of Akron Press, 2023). His poems have appeared in publications including *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Third Coast*, *Sou'wester*, *Cream City Review*, *Pleiades*, *Spoon River*, and in the anthology *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology*

of *Contemporary Persona Poetry*.

Ted Bernal Guevara has had poems appear in *THAT Review*, *Rattle*, *Suisun Valley Review*, *Vita Brevis Press*, *Vending Machine Press*, *Otherwise Engaged*, *FU Review Berlin*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and more. His website (<https://ted-bernal-guevara.ueniweb.com/>) is invariably complete, and accessible.

Bruce Gunther is a former journalist and writer who lives in Michigan. He's a graduate of Central Michigan University. His poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Spare Parts Literary Magazine*, *Cacti Fur*, *Modern Haiku*, and other publications.

Jordyn Hodgson is a Senior at UW-Platteville from Dubuque, Iowa. She is majoring in Political Science with a minor in History and certificates in Law, Writing, and Integrated Liberal Arts. In her free time, Jordyn enjoys listening to music, hanging out with her family and friends, shopping, and reading the latest political news.

Alex Jansen is a student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, who enjoys writing and making art. They have recently discovered the joys of writing poetry and making linocut prints. They hope to publish a poetry collection before they graduate.

Peycho Kanev is the author of 12 poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the United States and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as *Rattle*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *The Cleveland Review*, and many others.

Will Karls is a Chicago-based actor, director, and writer. He seeks to challenge convention and inspire in his work both onstage and off.

Jesse Lee Kercheval is a poet, writer, translator, and visual artist. Her graphic essays have won awards from *New Letters* and the *New Ohio Review*, and have appeared in *Fourth Genre*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *Image*, the *Chicago Quarterly Review* and elsewhere. She is also the author of the memoir, *Space*, winner of the Alex Award from the American Library Association, and the graphic memoir, *French Girl* (Fieldmouse Press, 2024), named by the Washington Post as one of the Best Graphic Novels of 2024.

Vartan Koumrouyan was born in Lebanon and lives in Paris, France, and Palawan, Philippines. He has published a short story, "Tulatulan," in *Mocking Owl Roost*, and essays in other magazines. Koumrouyan's

short story, “Down on the Levee Vosky,” was produced on the BBC. He is currently revising an upcoming manuscript.

Michael Lambert is the author of *Circumnavigation* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014), loosely based on self-propelled travel in North America. His recent work has appeared in *Bayou Magazine*, *Timber Journal*, and *Spirit Lake Review*. A graduate of the M.F.A. program in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama, he lives and teaches in Wisconsin.

Sheila Griffin Llanas, raised in Monona, WI, and educated in Madison and Iowa City, lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin. She taught at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, and writes books for children and teens, such as *Modern American Poetry: Echoes and Shadows*. Her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Agni*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Jubilat*, and other publications.

Catherine McGuire is a writer and artist with a deep concern for our planet’s future, with five decades of published poetry, six poetry chapbooks, a full-length poetry book, *Elegy for the 21st Century*, a SF novel, *Lifeline*, and a book of short stories, *The Dream Hunt and Other Tales*. Find her at www.cathymcguire.com.

Max McNett currently resides in the cozy river town of Cassville, WI. He is currently working on his Bachelor of Arts in Choral Music Education at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and can often be found playing across Southwestern Wisconsin as one half of the fun-time feel-good acoustic rock duo Big Cat Eddie.

Micol McSweeney is a Junior pursuing a major in English Education at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is extremely passionate about writing, reading poetry, painting, and drawing. Micol McSweeney aspires to become a high school English teacher to inspire students to love literature and creative expression.

Ivan de Monbrison is a person affected by strong psychic disorders that prevent him from having what others may call a “normal” life. He has found writing to be an exit to this prison. Or maybe it is a window from which - like an inmate - he can see a small square of blue sky above his head.

Richard Moninski is a painter residing in Mineral Point, WI, a small town with a vibrant artist community. His work has been exhibited nationally. He is often seen drawing on his iPad; but when he is not, he directs Green Lantern Studios, a gallery of fine art and handicrafts.

Sheila E. Murphy's work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Passages North*, *Hanging Loose*, *Fortnightly Review*, and numerous other journals. Her forthcoming books include *Escritoire* (Lavender Ink), *October Sequence 52-122* (Chax Press), and a collection from Unlikely Books. Murphy's most recent book is *Permission to Relax* (BlazeVOX Books, 2023).

Robert Okaji has late-stage metastatic lung cancer, which he finds terribly annoying. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife—poet Stephanie L. Harper—stepson, cat and dog. His first full-length collection, *Our Loveliest Bruises*, was published by 3: A Taos Press in January 2025. His poetry may be found in *Only Poems*, *Vox Populi*, and other venues.

Matty Olson is a Senior at UW-Platteville, majoring in English and Music and minoring in Creative Writing. She has been previously published in the 2024 issue of *Spirit Lake Review*. In her free time, she loves to sing and write and laugh.

Elizabeth Onheiber is a mother, poet, stand-up comedian, reporter, rapper, and producer. She has a 17-year-old son named Adam. Elizabeth graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Baraboo/Sauk County in 2013 and has freelanced for the *Baraboo News Republic*. Her music is available on all

streaming platforms.

Richard Oyama's work has appeared in *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, *The NuyorAsian Anthology*, *Breaking Silence*, *Dissident Song*, *A Gift of Tongues*, *About Place*, *Konch Magazine*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Buddhist Poetry Review* and other journals. He has a M.A. in English: Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Oyama taught at California College of Arts in Oakland, University of California at Berkeley, and University of New Mexico.

Grant Patzlaff is a Senior at UW-Platteville pursuing a BA in English with a Professional Writing emphasis and grew up in Appleton, WI.

Isabel Peterson is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in English and a minor in Creative Writing. She hopes to be a sports counselor or English teacher. In her free time, she enjoys reading poetry and dystopian fiction novels.

Ken Poyner has nine collections of poetry, flash fiction, and micro-fiction available on Amazon and elsewhere. He cheers on his world-class powerlifting wife at meets and has worked for years wrangling computer software. His work appears in several dozen Internet and print venues (www.

kpoyner.com).

Kiersten Prom is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a double major in German and Environmental Science and Conservation. She wishes to get a PhD in Archeology and become a professor. In her free time, she likes sewing, hiking, and reading detective fiction.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His poetry collection of persona poems and dramatic monologues involving burlesque stars, *The Trapeze of Your Flesh*, was recently published by BlazeVOX Books.

James P. Roberts is a Madison poet and literary adventurer, often seen skulking around open mics and other readings, ready to spring his words upon the unwary. A regional Vice President for the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets since 2010, he has organized and hosted the annual Winter Festival of Poetry.

Richard Stimac has published a poetry book *Bricolage* (Spartan Press), two poetry chapbooks, and one flash fiction chapbook. In his work, Richard explores time and memory through the landscape and humanscape of the St. Louis region.

Ukeme Udo, from Nigeria, is a visual

artist, contemporary African artist, and abstract expressionist. His art highlights the culture and traditions of African people in diaspora. Throughout his professional career as an artist, he has undertaken various important responsibilities with utmost sincerity as an artist. He's a full-time studio practicing artist, participating in numerous exhibitions both virtually and physically such as the 2023 American art award. He graduated from the University of Uyo Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria with a degree in welding and fabrication.

Wendy Vardaman (wendyvardaman.com), PhD, works as a web & digital media specialist. The author of four poetry collections, her creative practice includes editing, prose writing, printing, and book arts. She served as Madison, Wisconsin, poet laureate from 2012 to 2015 and volunteers as a graphic designer. She received the 2024 Dick Scuglik Memorial Fellowship and residency for writing about art at Write On, Door County and a 2025 residency at Ragdale.

Aleksandra Vujisić, from Podgorica, Montenegro, is an English language professor and an award-winning writer and poet. She writes in her native language and English, and her work has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Polish, Albanian, Korean, and Chinese. She is the author of four books.

Juliet Waller is a Seattle-based writer and playwriting teacher. Her pieces have appeared in, among others, *3Elements*, *Mountain Bluebird Magazine*, *Third Street Review*, and *Does It Have Pockets*. She has an upcoming piece in *Pixie Literary Magazine*.

Jeff Weiland was a graduate of both UW-Baraboo and UW-Platteville in the 1980s and has always enjoyed photography.

Thomas Wertel is a Senior at UW-Platteville, majoring in Professional Writing with a minor in Creative Writing. In his free time, he enjoys reading, writing, biking, and playing video games.

Elizabeth Wiegel, a University of Wisconsin-Stout graduate, is a graphic designer based in Darlington, WI. Outside of her computer-based design work, she enjoys creating in a variety of mediums, though she has a special fondness for screen printing and photography.

Michael O. Zahn lives in Poinciana, Florida. Three of his poems appeared in the winter 2024 issue of *Door Is A Jar Literary Magazine*. The service manager at the Kia dealership in Lake Wales, Florida has tacked one of Zahn's poems on his cork board. Born in 1947, Zahn was a reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal*.