



SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

2024

Spirit Lake Review is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville undergraduates with support from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville College of Liberal Arts and Education.

Cover design by Nicole Young

Cover image by Adam Fell

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Letter from the Editors

Thanks to the tireless efforts of this year's team of student editors and the guidance of Editor-in-Chief Nicole Krebs and Promotional Materials Editor and Event Planning Manager Isabelle Emerson, we are thrilled to present our 2024 issue of Spirit Lake Review. Each spring, students based on UW-Platteville's main and Baraboo campuses come together in Dr. Kara Candito's Literary Magazines course to edit, design, and produce an unforgettable array of poetry, prose, and visual art.

Our dynamic 2024 issue showcases the contributions of a slew of emerging and established writers and visual artists engaged with the messy complexities of modern life. Emerging authors, such as Jack Braun, Kaz Bresnan, Maddy Gorgen, and Matty Olson, lean into questions of identity formation, mental health, and resistance to the normative pressures of society and late capitalism. Dao Vang's "Men Don't Weep" and Trevion Rimmer's "r.o.m.e." provide compelling critiques of toxic masculinity, while seasoned poet Matthew Guenette tackles consumerism and parenthood in "At Costco," a humorous grocery bag of voice and flair. Taylor Nisius' "Mexico That Way →" and Angela Vasquez's "What and That, Part IV" navigate experiences of immigration, displacement, and xenophobia. With gratitude to translators Jeanine M. Pitas and Jesse Lee Kercheval, we invite our readers to explore three fascinating poems by Chilean poet Úrsula Starke. Also featured in this year's issue are works by the first-place winners of UW-Platteville's 2023 Thomas Hickey Undergraduate Creative Writing Awards, Kassidy Litton (creative nonfiction), Jakob Cridlich (poetry), and Hunter Mashak (fiction).

Our 2024 issue cover image, "American Monster #3," an abstract collage by Adam Fell, provides an ideal lens through which to contemplate some of our issue's darker works, such as John Markstead's "Escaping Pastrem" and Ivan de Monbrison's "Four Poems Written in the Dark," a visceral and fascinating examination of the negation of desire. Finally, the works of photographer Jeff Weiland infuse scenes of wreckage and aftermath with humor and narrative flourish.

The editors of Spirit Lake Review would like to thank the many UW-Platteville faculty, staff, administrators, and community members who support our work. Special thanks to Academic Department Assistant Sara Koeller; Chair of Humanities Dr. David Gillota; Assistant Professor of English Dr. Laura Roberts; and UW-Platteville staff members of Event Services and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Most importantly, thank you to our readers and contributors for trusting us with your work and offering your attention and support.

Happy reading!

Until next year,

The 2024 Spirit Lake Review Team

Spirit Lake Review

Issue 21 Staff

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Table of Contents

Poetry

Walter Biskupski

Ageless	2
Disappeared	4
Poets, Past and Present	5

Jack Braun

S.A.D. Robin Sonnet	7
Sixth Commandment	8

Kaz Bresnan

Asinine	9
Elegy or Eulogy, It All Reads the Same	10
Growing Up in Corporate America	11

Summer Carns

Unraveling	12
------------	----

Gabby Celley

Boys Will Be Boys	14
-------------------	----

Jakob Cridelich

Slow Down, We Love Our Kids	16
-----------------------------	----

Dave Dunbar

A Memory of Paul Domine	19
Pearl Rubenstein	21

Isabelle Emerson

Another Living Funeral	23
Remember the Rain	25

<i>Matthew Fredricks</i>	
Escape	27
<i>Carlene Gadapee</i>	
Leavings	29
<i>Maddy Gorgen</i>	
Right Man to Fuck	30
<i>Matthew Guenette</i>	
At Costco	32
Complicated	34
Illuminati...Man-Babies...	35
<i>Kristian Petrov Iliev</i>	
A Harpoon Finds You	37
<i>Dominic James</i>	
Hampstead Ponds	39
<i>Nicole Krebs</i>	
Fragments of †	40
Grief's Unyielding Embrace	41
<i>Michael Lambert</i>	
Retirement Party	42
<i>Tina Lovell</i>	
Solitary Angel	45
<i>Max McNett</i>	
Backseat of a Car in Autumn	47

<i>Bruce McRae</i>	
Hellbent	49
<i>Ivan de Monbrison</i>	
Four Poems Written in the Dark	51
<i>Taylor Nisius</i>	
Mexico that Way →	53
<i>Matty Olson</i>	
Abdeathdarian	56
Circles and Time	57
On Sharing	59
<i>Karl Plank</i>	
Our Mother the Mountain	61
Waiting	62
<i>Kenneth Pobo</i>	
Dancing Queen	64
Pardeeville	65
<i>Charles Rammelkamp</i>	
Toast	66
<i>Trevion Rimmer</i>	
R.o.m.e. (Realities of Male Expression)	68
<i>James Roberts</i>	
Pine Needles in October	70
Russian Lit	72

<i>Margaret Rozga</i>	
Sizzle	75
<i>Carrie Voigt Schonhoff</i>	
Memorial Day	76
The Island of Calypso	78
<i>Whitney Schwindenhammer</i>	
From Hell with Love	79
Under the Weather	80
<i>Daniel Sniff</i>	
Dolfin	82
<i>Úrsula Starke</i>	
<i>Translated from Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval and Jeannine Pitas</i>	
Common Sin/Pecado Comunal	83
Mother Flower/Flor Madre	85
Skinny/Flaca	87
<i>Dao Vang</i>	
Men Don't Weep	89
<i>Wendy Vardaman</i>	
At St. Mungo's Exhibit on Angels	90
<i>Angela Trudell Vasquez</i>	
Moonstruck	92
What and That, Part IV	94
<i>Lynn White</i>	
Somewhere Else the Birds Are Singing	96

<i>Rowan Wilson</i>	
Silver Lining	97
<i>Michael Zahn</i>	
Whose Lake This is	99
<i>Bänoo Zan</i>	101
Anaar	103
Full Circle	
<i>Jade Zumwalde</i>	
Perspective of the Moon	105
	<i>Prose</i>
<i>Jack Braun</i>	
Tom's Milkery	110
<i>Megan Faivre</i>	
The Mannequin	116
<i>Maddy Gorgen</i>	
Trapped Beneath the Surface	121
<i>Kassidy Litton</i>	
Dessiderium	127
<i>John Markestad</i>	
Escaping Pastrem	131
The Storyteller	140
<i>Hunter Mashak</i>	
9:00 p.m.	149

Max McNett

Max Dreams of Breakfast with David Bowie and Prince 156

Strangers at a Funeral 160

Daniel Sniff

Ménagerie de l'âme 167

Jade Zumwalde

Hands that Held 172

Visual Art

Elizabeth Colwell

Ascend

Behold

Dandelion

New York Locals

Trans Am

Roberta Condon

Ascending with the Albatross

Eased by the Egrets

Isabelle Emerson

Between Shows

Blue in the Winter Morning

Memories of Us

Midnight in the Dorm

Spring Rain

Stairs

Warmth of Night

Megan Faivre

At the Lake
Fire in the Sky
Raindrops
Sunset Voyage
The Ole Shed
White Flame
Young Life

Adam Fell

American Monster #3
American Monster #4
American Monster- Lion Man
American Monster- Puma Bryon
American Monster- Sparrow Regent

Michael Heath

Catching the Rising Sun
Dome Sweet Dome
Fall Reflections
Fantasy Forest
Flower Bed
Purple Passion
Spring Awakenings
Spring Fever

Jesse Lee Kercheval

Blue Girl
Family Portrait
Her Hair
I Never Knew
Mother of the World
Night Mother

Open Water
Woman with Aqua Hair
Woman with Wine

Nicole Krebs

Drunken Color
Golden Reflections
Petals of Loss
The Wandering Caterpillar
Water's Mirror
Whiskers in the Tinsel
Whispers of the Dying Light

Michael Lambert

Dirt
Early Spring
Electric Sun
Levy in the Mist
Midwestern Summer
Moon Rise
Night Light

Rachel Levine

American Poetry
Little Green

Tina Lovell

Untitled

Tristen McIntyre

Home Away From Home

Brooke Schindler
Golden Coast

Jeff Weiland

A False Sense of Security
Her Shoes Were Tired
He Was Framed
I Get No Respect Wherever I Roost
Jellyfish
Neglected Paradise
Roomies
Went on a Bender, Now How Do I Get My Boat Out

Rowan Wilson

I'll Give You All the Nails You Need
Mask
Resurrection
Street Art

Jade Zumwalde

Bouquet for Her
Day at Chippewa Valley
Need a Hand

Special Feature Graphic Novella

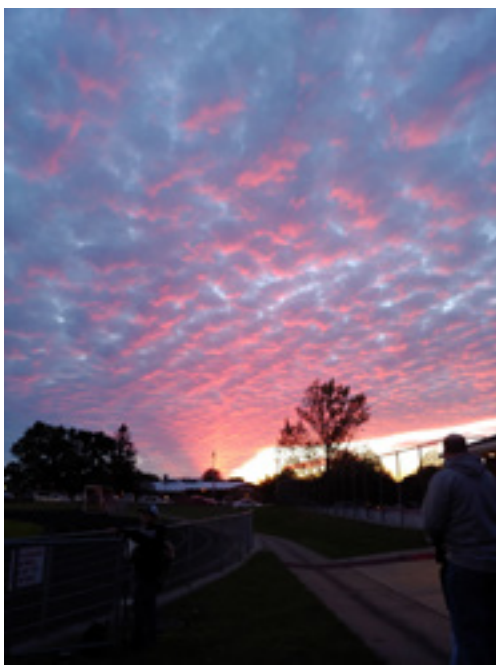
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Ray

175

Contributor Biographies





“Drunken Color” by
Nicole Krebs

Ageless
Walter Biskupski

Our lives search for passion,
from the onset of birth,
to the inevitability of death.
We enter this world crying
and seek the source of our hunger,
from our mother’s milk
to that last breath
which signals our departure.

Nature’s gift is the desire for another,
a fulfillment for the body and soul.

Sex is not the monopoly of the young.
What the heart dreams of
and the body wants
have no time limits,
Only the difficulties of age
will bring barriers,
but even they do not
extinguish the desire for love.

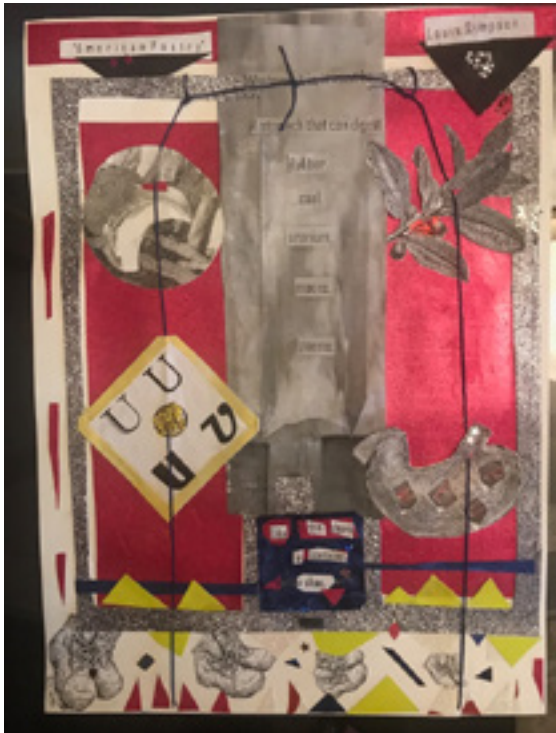
How it is to hold
and to be held,
to be told
someone wants you,
and is not afraid to show,
not just the rhetoric,
but the touch, of love.



“Day at Chippewa Valley” by
Jade Zumwalde

Disappeared
Walter Biskupski

Diana Medicine Horse, Shacaiiah Harding,
Mona Lisa Two Eagle, Nevaeh Songbird,
Ashley Loring Heavy Runner, Arden Pepion,
Tyana Whitehawk,
Daughters of their native earth
through countless generations,
Murdered or missing,
still waiting for justice in a system
that has neglected them,
Lost in a labyrinth of jurisdictions,
but in their internet photographs,
still holding onto their identity.
Looking into the eyes of the viewers,
and saying, “Remember me.”
(www.bia.gov/service/mmu)



“American Poetry” by
Rachel Levine

Poets, Past and Present Walter Biskupski

We are the storytellers,
the image makers,
the guardians of the past,
interpreters of the present,
at times, prophets of the future.

And all with words and symbols,
once painted on cave walls,
or traced in clay,
written on sheepskin and papyrus,
on paper, with pens, pencils, and type.

All for the sake of an idea,
formed imperfectly at first,
then rewritten to clarify,
edited for those pesky rules
of grammar and punctuation.

Finally emerging,
as Venus on her clamshell,
to offer to the world
one more piece to join
Whitman, Austen, and Frost,
and all the other writers
in this genealogy,
as we trace our family tree
through the ages,
to all our predecessors,
known and lost.



“American Monster- Sparrow Regent” by Adam Fell

S.A.D. Robin Sonnet

Jack Braun

The robins stayed too long this year
And their heads dampen from melting snowflakes
The birds sing nonetheless, loud and sincere
Though snow brings fear, and the cold brings aches

One is particularly fluffy, his chest like a pumpkin
Bright, fat, orange, feathery lapels
He keeps his feathers out, and his feelings tucked in
His heart hurts, bulges, purples, and swells

Still, he calls, loud and proper, “Nothing is wrong!
Worry about yourselves, I’m fantastic as ever!”
The others fly south, swayed by his song
He looks good, sounds good, cheeks pink as heather
Only alone does his head droop and he sighs
Er, does a bird’s head droop, when his hope curls and dies?



“Midnight in the Dorm” by
Isabelle Emerson

Sixth Commandment
Jack Braun

Does anyone find it frightening
that we needed to be told not to kill each other?
I don't even have it in me to kill the silence;
it means the world to someone else
and I don't want to ruin that for them.
Curb stomp your enthusiasm,
this is not a curtain call.
Even the voices in my head are cowards
whimpering for you to look at the floor instead.
I kill time by staring at the ceiling;
that crack in the foundation wasn't here last night.
I don't watch the sunrise every morning
confounding conflagration of yellows and oranges
so much as run into it in the daytime.
At this dawn I sing with the finches,
my voice scraped and worn like hand-me-downs
and about as faded.
Kill your conscience and tell me the truth-
can I really consider it my life
if I'm living for someone else?
When your shift ends, remember to kill the lights.
They waste a lot of energy when they're being used.



“Dirt” by
Michael Lambert

Asinine

Kaz Bresnan

A cowboy sits upon his steed / a train carves through the desert / coyotes
howl into a clear night / smog pours from smoke boxes / the country ex-
pands westward / holes chewed in leather soles / empty stomachs and
empty wallets / youthful hands covered in callouses / in the cogs of ma-
chines / canaries singing in mines / coal and smoke / burning tiny lungs
/ blood sweat and tears / I claw my way / towards the American Dream /
an asinine concept / like pulling yourself up / by your bootstraps / or re-
tiring before you're 70 / was Emma Lazarus asinine/ when she begged for
our poor and tired / I am poor and tired / coyotes on suburban sidewalks /
smog pours from smoke boxes / I don't see a golden door / the canaries are
no longer singing



“Family Portrait” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Elegy or Eulogy, It All Reads
the Same
Kaz Bresnan

Memory lane is a cigarette burning at my feet
Smoldering incense and smoking sage
Cementing scorch marks into flagstones
The first time I finally saw my real father
I felt as though I was losing my religion
My father looks at God like he's in love
My father looks at other women like he's in love
If he were to keep track of the notches
He'd be sleeping on nothing but a pile of wood chips
Everyone I love is dying and I am dying too
I think about this before I sleep
And I haven't slept in about a week
Through an irrational fear of being impaled
On an errant spring mattress



“American Monster- Lion Man” by
Adam Fell

Growing Up in
Corporate America
Kaz Bresnan

Is this the price of living below the sun
Another body trying to stay in line
Oh, what a blessing to meet someone
With eyes as dead as mine

Poised tongues and poisoned lips whisper in my ear
That they can smell my fear like blood
Behind cracked lips and expensive veneers
Any protests are nipped in the bud

We're nothing but weary souls and providence
Turn off the lights and ignore what's going on outside
The isolated room of alcoholics anonymous
Don't bother, we've given up before we even tried

If I tell you my life is over and that I am done
I know you'll be there waiting to sell me the gun



“Sunset Voyage” by
Megan Faivre

Unraveling Summer Carns

64...65...66...67

Counting each stitch with precision and accuracy until a glance to the television causes one wrong move

My eyes watch the screen, then my stitches become loose
untidy and crooked

Once straight and narrow stitches have now become angled due to miscount and tension

The untangling has begun.

Slowly

67...66...65...64

Each stitch like a piercing stab to the side

The same feeling that starts to close my throat when I talk about you still
Unraveling the months of bittersweet memories that once held this blanket together

I was not only losing warmth and security from the delicate yarn, but I was losing your hugs, your mentorship and love

The way the yarn in our hands intertwines the same, unlike any others
What I would learn from you would stay sewn into my mind as a reminder of how far I've come

Making the same mistakes over and over have kept me from finishing this blanket

But what comes after this project is done?

How can I start another without your aged guiding hand through my first row of stitches?

Starting over has kept you alive, so I start again

1..2...3...4



“I get no respect wherever I roost” by
Jeff Weiland

Boys Will Be Boys Gabby Celley

1. Too much skin
2. Cover up
3. *I don't understand.*
4. You'll give the wrong impression
5. You'll be distracting
6. Boys will be boys
7. *I just want to feel comfortable.*
8. Stop showing off your body—
your body is a temple.
9. Modesty
prude...
10. *What do you want from me?*
11. Put yourself out there
12. Dirty looks
13. Gossip
14. Time to forget
15. Pull yourself together
16. Don't make mistakes
17. Don't overdo it—
but I did.
18. Pain
19. *I don't remember.*
20. If you don't remember, it didn't happen—
but don't forget you asked for it.

21. Technicalities
22. Holes in memories
23. *Why did this happen?*
24. Boys will be boys
25. *Snapshot of life.*
26. Gain control
27. Don't turn into your father
28. Rage
29. Picture perfect
30. Images captured—
frozen in time.
31. Regret
32. Be strong for your family
33. Don't let your dad fall off again
34. Empty promises
35. *Why does he treat me this way?*
36. Boys will be boys—
but he loves you.
37. *How is that love?*
38. True love
39. Fights
40. Happiness
41. Infinite lies—
but why did you lie?
42. Trust-
but what trust?
43. Empty words—
but how could you do this to me?
44. Boys will be boys
45. Heartbreak
46. Strength
47. Reinvention of me—
now I'm free.



“Blue Girl” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Slow Down, We Love Our Kids

*First Place Winner of the UW-Platteville 2023
Thomas Hickey Creative Writing Awards in Poetry*

Jakob Cridelich

Slow down and enjoy life,
Insurance is already expensive.

But I want to go,
fast break
slam dunk!

Full boar,
Boar's Nest
Dukes of Hazzard
Speeding and jumping their '69 Charger.
They're always fast

Wide open,
brows burrowed, digging a trench across my face.

Pedal through the floor,
I'm Freddie Flintstone

I want to be fully awake, It's a beauty
I'm tired from sleeping.

Fully alive,
Not a half-life
drinking unicorn blood.

On the go, achieving dreams,
not sleeping through all of them.

I cry when I get stuck behind an old person,
Pools of tears,
I'm not a strong swimmer.

HOW ARE YOU NOT GOING AT LEAST THE SPEED LIMIT?
If I catch you,
I pass you

A cheetah on the hunt, passing around my prey
Too easy to catch
Not even fun anymore

I'm running with no gazelle to chase,
I hate cardio.

So I pass this old impala just to prove a point,
you're slow and incapable.

I have places to be, shit to do, gazelles to catch.
Gotta Catch 'Em All.

NOT WORTH MY TIME,
What is time worth?

And where is my gazelle?
Am I not on the great plains of Gazelle land?
The guide said there were plenty to catch,
Just have to chase them

Bills in the mail to prove I'm Chase-ing something
On the great plains of the Amazon
Derailed.

I don't want your silly rabbit,
This life is a big enough trick.
Although rabbits are full of lean protein.

I like tricks.

Rodney Mullen
the godfather of street skateboarding.

Open it up,
I awake when the car begins to quiver. Huffing exhaust like ammonia.
About to do some big lifting
Not on the throttle though
Ever.

I did a hundred today,
I haven't gone fast in a while.
The grin across my face widened with each shiver,
Putting Pennywise to shame with how many teeth were showing.
No need to swim if we all float down here

This is happiness in a nutshell,
I hope that you're not allergic to nuts.
Or shells.

It's me,
I'm the nutshell.
Inside myself,
I grow fearful of closed spaces.
But I want to go, and I don't know why.

I don't know a lot of things.



“Catching the Rising Sun” by
Michael Heath

A Memory of Paul Domine

Dave Dunbar

They found your body floating in the Mississippi River
Off of Rock Island, Illinois.

I had spoken with you a few weeks earlier by phone
And you asked me to come and visit.

The truth was that your brother and I had come to visit,
But found you were in jail in Davenport, Iowa
For being drunk and disorderly-the usual-
So we drove back to Wisconsin.

I said it would be a while before I could come again
Never knowing it would be the last time we'd talk.
You told me that you wished we were young again
Climbing trees like we used to when we were kids
And I agreed.

I remembered you before the drugs and alcohol
Took their toll,
Before the accident
When you hit a woman with your car.
You tried to run from it,
But it always followed you.

You never talked about it
Even though you needed to.
Finally, it caught up to you
There in the Mississippi River
Off of Rock Island, Illinois.



“The Ole Shed” by
Megan Faivre

Pearl Rubenstein
Dave Dunbar

You ran the little grocery store
Out of your home on East Grand Ave
In our quiet little city.
I remember you fondly
In your thick, brown-rimmed bifocals
And pink floral print muumuu.
Your hair was neatly done,
Dyed a light, reddish-brown
And your sister’s hair, much the same color.
Your hair was wavy
While hers was done in tight curls.
I remember the bread
Sitting neatly on metal shelving
And chest ice cream coolers with heavy, sliding glass doors.
The bare wood floors
Creaking underfoot
As I walked through.
You sold my favorite candies:
Zotz, Smarties Double Lollies
And, on Halloween, orange wax harmonicas.

One day, I closed your door
And never opened it again.

I drive past now
When I visit my hometown,
But you're not there.
The store is simply a house now,
And the East Grand Grocery is gone,
But never you,
Pearl Rubenstein.



“Memories of Us” by
Isabelle Emerson

Another Living Funeral Isabelle Emerson

Grief.
Deep and profound.
That is what I am feeling.
Maybe it is loneliness too.
But mostly grief.

I am in mourning once more, and this is a deep one.
I am at a funeral for another living friend,
One of the closest, and I don't know what to do.
She has asked for help so many times,
And I have tried,
But failed her each of them.
I am at a loss of words and feelings.

I want to fight.
I want this to work.
For us to stay friends.
But I don't want to bug her.
I don't want to add to their plate.
And if they are happy, I'll live with it.
I always will.

I take my pain and turn it into art and kindness.
I just want to know,
And want them to tell me it isn't what I think,
However, I don't think that is very likely.

I know I deserve a friend,
A good friendship,
And some form of happiness,
But it seems like I have it for a couple of months, then I lose it.
I make a mess.
I cause a fight.
We stop talking.
And I am here again.
Dressed in black.
Alone at lunch.
Attending another funeral for a living person.



“Raindrops” by
Megan Faivre

Remember the Rain

Isabelle Emerson

As we prepare to walk on separate paths, I often wonder,
Will you remember me?

Or better yet,
What will you remember about me?

What memories will you share with friends and family years from now
that I will never meet or learn the names of?

Will you remember my coffee order
and think of it every time someone calls it out in a coffee shop?
Will you remember my favorite author and want to read the new book they
have written,
even though you haven't read in months?

Will you read something on social media about my favorite show,
and remember me talking about it for hours instead of doing my home-
work?

I have no control over what memories you will keep of me,
and I think about it every time we eat dinner together,
or watch a movie,

or stay up till 3 AM talking about what it means to be human.

And every time I leave your room, I ask myself,
Is this what you are going to remember of me?
Because if I had the power to make you remember something about me,
I would make you remember my love of the rain.

I want you to remember how I would drop everything and
go and dance in the rain with earbuds in and not a care in the world.
How I loved the smell and the change that came with every rainstorm.
How I would stay up to 1 AM if I knew there was a rainstorm
and would watch in wonder at how the world changes with every lightning
strike.

How I would always come back in wet from head to toe but with a smile
and a new lease on life.

How I used to be afraid of them, but I now can't live without them.

I know one day we will stop talking, but I hope you remember the rain,
and think of me.

Think of the girl that loved the rain and the change it brought.



“A False Sense of Security” by
Jeff Weiland

Escape

Matthew Fredricks

Solace is in the deepest leg of the labyrinth,
where nobody can hear you scream,
or even wants to. It's where I can peel away
my earthly wounds and social aches
to rejuvenate in the meditative nothing.

The overgrown hemlocks are like old friends,
making new rings to the tune of my tales.
I listen to the breeze as it guides me back
to before this whole mess. It gusts me
through a catharsis alien to city life.

I stoke the fire in my old boots, watching
the withering embers cough up a wisp of
ashen smoke. The crackling coals coat my jacket
in a veil of apathy. The cost of comfort is
reduced to smoldering sticks before me.

The observant, uncaring sky watches
dutifully. Provocative, dancing clouds
steal my afternoon as my mind wanders.
The trail of worn prints reminds me

of the expiration of my retreat.

The darkness encroaches my vision and
wraps around me like a hug. The early fog
leaves me infatuated with my new home.

I release myself back to the life I've committed to,
So I can infect myself with a reason to come back.



“Went on a Bender, Now How Do I Get My Boat Out” by
Jeff Weiland

Leavings Carlene Gadapee

Muscle cars rumble and shoulder their way through Main Street, scatter fallen leaves and candy wrappers, pedestrians and other leftovers from a climate-confused fall festival weekend. Lilacs and roses pop into bloom, and it's October. The wet summer, cool temperatures, and sodden ground fooled them into thinking we need a second spring. If I hadn't stowed shorts and tank tops, brought out sweaters and socks and sensible shoes, I'd be ready, too. It won't last, this late-season sun, the vintage cars, and tourists. Soon, it'll be quiet, except for the hushed tremolo of chickadees, the rattle of wood piling into sheds, the scrape of loose mufflers on trucks dodging potholes and squirrels. Snow silences everything. Ice will crack and craze on windshields. Road salt will crust sneaker laces. We'll wonder where the boots and gloves have got to. Maybe they've gone south, too, to find a later autumn, one fraught with hurricane warnings instead of frost.



“Bouquet for Her” by
Jade Zumwalde

Right Man to Fuck Maddy Gorgen

The first rule of being gay: you are straight until proven otherwise; just like everyone else, you are attracted to men; look only at the peacocks with the most colorful feathers, since the peahens are not for you; play The Game of Life with two pink people in your car while repeating *I'm not gay, but what if*; download a dating game on your phone and enjoy relationships with girls more than guys; struggle to choose a boy to have a crush on from kindergarten to high school, but easily name the top ten girls whose presence puts you at ease (but in a friend way); start to wonder if it's remotely possible that these gay jokes weren't jokes all along; but you still can't marvel at girls that way, being straight as you are; wonder about what flavor of guys you enjoy verses what girls you might possibly find some interest in; fall for Zendaya's charm while asking why anyone finds Dwane Johnson's enormous abs alluring; *but can you be gay after a lifetime of being straight?*; tally strangers on the street, classmates, characters in your comfort TV show, how many of them would you date?; look up an “Am I gay” quiz on Google; seven strokes for girls, two strokes for guys; get no answer from Google; continue with your homework, with your band practice, with your family dinners, anywhere that you can think how dare you be gay after years of saying you're straight; are you attracted to women? Prove it

Green leaves wither to red a second time, and you find relief in being attracted to more than just guys; the second rule is to label yourself—are you pansexual? polysexual? demisexual? asexual? (but no one knows really what those mean unless it's bisexual, gay, or straight); are you really attracted to women? Prove it; tell your parents; tell your friends; tell your grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins and acquaintances and co-workers and those who you knew and those who you will know and any stranger you encounter; how can someone know who you are if they don't know your sexuality?; you say you're bisexual? ah, so like a sunflower, you can't decide which side of the garden to turn towards; at least everyone knows what bisexuality is—if you date a man, you are straight and if you date a woman, you are gay; are you seriously attracted to women? Prove it; you're actually a lesbian? that's wonderful, I'm glad you know who you are; but also make sure you look like a lesbian—get a pixie cut, dress like a tomboy, workout, and be a strong woman; you don't want to appear like a lesbian?; that's fine, but then you must tell everyone you're a lesbian, how else will they know you?; are you honestly attracted to women?; *yes, I am truly and whole-heartedly attracted to women;*

The third rule is to finally spend a night with a woman, since you don't find comfort in bed with a man; wait, you said you were gay all this time, and you've never actually fucked a man?; how are you supposed to know you aren't straight if you've never found the right man to fuck?



“Need a Hand?” by
Jade Zumwalde

At Costco
Matthew Guenette

We parked among the ominous minivans. Would you like a remote-
controlled
toilet with your giant wheel of cheese? A Lay-Z-Boy for your cat?

I’m pretty sure we saw a mom beg for mercy
a dad in an Ozzy Osborne t-shirt
passed out on a couch after too many samples.

Some kid ripped open a bag of chips before a waterfall
on one of those 85-inch TVs. We thought that was genius
but not the cramped, non-ergonomic inflatable hot tub.
It seemed a fight might break out
somewhere between the ransacked liquor and ransacked underwear
and like sailors
lured to the rocks is how the food court worked on our kids.

You take the power of a glorified hot pocket,
slice it open, drop in the miserable hot dog, scrape on cheese

from a pizza made by a robot, and voila!

The last-ditch supper. Each bite takes about an hour off your life. I've done the math.

Imagine forgetting in Costco everything you had to remember?

Imagine if they sold funhouse mirrors? Or just one plastic spoon for everyone?

We wanted to leave, but we couldn't.

We had to wait in line first. The receipt checker had to check our receipt. They looked in our double-wide cart. They looked at us.

They were there to ensure everyone felt suspicious.



“New York Locals” by
Elizabeth Colwell

Complicated
Matthew Guenette

I saw a neighbor explaining something to his dog.
It seemed complicated. Something like *Alright Einstein*
here's how gravity works.

I live in one of those cities where even the yogurt
is cultured, but it's a giant gutter ball
when the smell of manure rolls in from the fields.

My wife suggests if I undress like a stripper, she might throw money
in my face. Is that why you're here, to throw Ben
Franklins
while I get naked and curl into a ball for whatever comes next?

The neighbor sang *good boy* when Einstein fertilized a lawn. If God
talked to us that way, would we listen? Here's what God said to me:
Take a shower buddy, you stink. Quit being such a psycho, it scares the
kids.



“I’ll Give You All The Nails You Need” by
Rowan Wilson

Illuminati...Man-Babies...

Matthew Guenette

I know a guy who wouldn’t get vaxxed
because of microchips or something.

Maybe...The Illuminati up above...

Which armrest is yours in the theater? How long
have you experienced these symptoms?

It felt like swallowing splinters of pink insulation
when I got sick. I took the online Rorschach test but the X-rays
and bats I saw were inconclusive because the internet
all three ounces of it, kept cutting out.

Take away all the terrible things, and this is an excellent time
to be alive. The worst time
might’ve been the year 536, when it would’ve been possible to die
from volcanic winter.

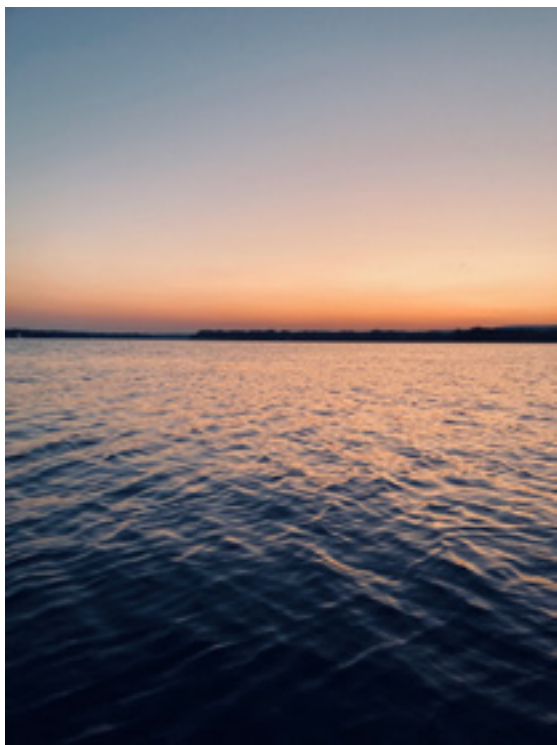
I thought volcanic winter sounded like Scandinavian death metal
so I googled it and guess what? It is Scandinavian death metal.

Who would’ve guessed a mob of co-splaying man-babies
would try to save us from cannibalistic pedophiles?

The guy who wouldn't get vaxxed, that's who.

He calls himself an environmentalist, I guess because he shoots deer
and recycles information. But Scandinavian death metal isn't his
thing.

He's not into music from countries
where there's a high degree of trust.



“At The Lake” by
Megan Faivre

A Harpoon Finds You
Kristian Petrov Iliev

Speared like a fish in midair
The idea that life moves
And is now being moved

That you have recognized...
Preposterous!
When it's been unfolding ever since
The ages of near silence, gargantuan vegetation, and overflowing lava

Do you miss being yourselves?
Or you just don't fully recall who I am?
Sailing past the restaurant patrons, the harpoon locks onto your plate,
or the aquarium you refer to as your life, or through the seas, and rivers,
lakes, and oceans, and...
Now you're on the cover of a romance novel that doesn't exist
Another minute you help pack up the silverware for a 20th wedding anni-
versary picnic trip which
never happens

You start to feel a bit dizzy
Weeeee, how fun it almost seems to lose it all
You've read about the flashing images before death

But a harpoon finds you
It was tasked to meet the prey
And you are the meat, and the prey
The journey it took is sort of academic

When you ask me what poetry is like,
I neither pity you nor wish you fully understood poetry, even though I
probably should

It has done a lot for me but

I just think we are different for a time
When we are alive versus when we are dead

Life gives us a chance to be many things
The harpoon, it shines so brightly in the air
I can hear it trying to cut your hopes and dreams
Long before it reaches you
What matters is: Did you?

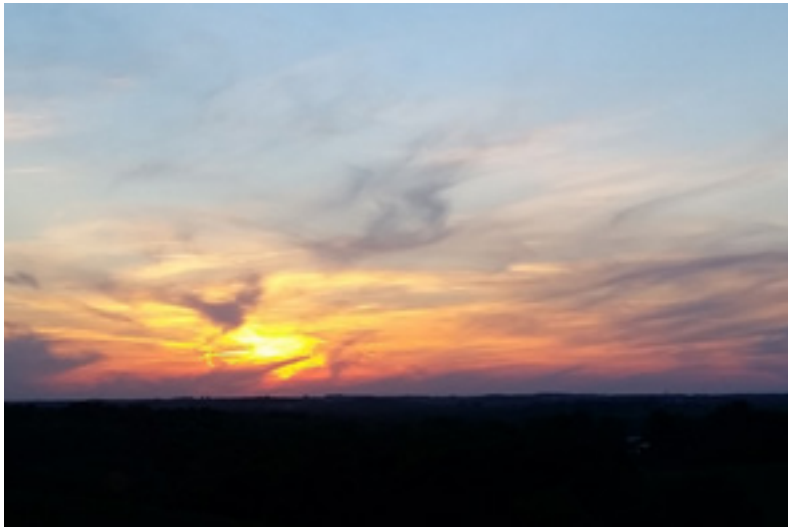


“Purple Passion” by
Michael Heath

Hampstead Ponds

Dominic James

Overhead
black foliage
droops branches
in the pool
I dare not
touch the bottom
do not touch the top
clandestine
among the ducks
at midnight
slowly swim
to dive again
embraced
in soft pond water.



“Whispers of the Dying Light” by
Nicole Krebs

Fragments of †
Nicole Krebs

† is hideous but comforting.
We are alone but † makes me
feel safe. † is the only one
there for me, enveloping me
in a frigid, icy hug. † doesn't
want me to leave them, †
wants me to stay. In the bleak
and shadowy abyss that †
always resides. I don't want
† to go, for if they do, I will
truly be alone. But † also
gulps down the bit of life
left in my feeble body
and stores it like water
as if † were a camel in the desert.
How do I let go of † when
they're a part of who I am?



“Levy in the Mist” by
Michael Lambert

Grief’s Unyielding Embrace

Nicole Krebs

Tears mixing with water droplets
My breathing mixing with the warm beating
of water against my back
Running down my face
The sound drowning out my sobs.

*“Please don’t make a big deal
out of this.”*

I know. I’ll try not to.
But your lack of presence is like the dark
everlasting, isolating, oppressive,
suffocating, heavy,
cold.



“The Wandering Caterpillar” by
Nicole Krebs

Retirement Party Michael Lambert

It’s poetry, I remind myself, that brought me here in the first place. I
changed

The font from Times New Roman to Garamond. So, you know

It’s poetry

“Post-pandemic,” after the “pivot,” I think

About the end

Of someone’s working life

In the context of the present tense (*is this an ending?*)

When I saw the date for the party

I knew that I could attend, and this poem (*is this a poem?*)

Lighted from my lopped-off head:

Professor Hadorn placed Shakespeare in front of me for the first time in
my life

I went to the library every week with the five-pound collected textbook

Like a sad brick

After failing the first quiz

And fell asleep every time I tried to read a play

The couches were so comfortable
My sleep schedule so terrible
It was inevitable that I would drift off, until
I started reading Cliff's Notes

I wrote the longest essay of my young academic life on Othello
After the committee meeting, where my lifted line was highlighted and
sourced,
Unattributed, I had to schedule a meeting with Professor Hadorn

To determine my graduation status:
A plagiarist, sneakthief
Waiting for the axe and instead

By the grace of God, perhaps by mistake
I graduated in May

Later, I'd teach an Intro to Shakespeare class of my own
At a men's maximum-security prison in Bessemer, Alabama
We talked about Othello and Titus, and my students wondered:

“What *does* Shakespeare think about the noble Moor, anyway?”

They always wanted more reading
My best and most intrepid students
“Demand me nothing; what you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.” (V.i.300-01)

When I got my own office next door
After Professor Burns' response to my email
From outside the hospital bed in Dresden

I took a selfie in front of my nameplate in Warner Hall
Soon to be razed, old dormitory, whining radiator buzz & dust motes
Frozen like clouds in the corners of my small metal bookcase

Filled with books

I hauled up the staircase in laundry baskets

And now here: celebrating retirement

It's poetry, I remind myself, that brought me here in the first place.

Poetry that brought me here—and, of course,

All of you.



“Resurrection” by
Rowan Wilson

Solitary Angel
Tina Lovell

I perch
like a seraphim
on the edge
of the whirlwind
Where there is peace
A sense of not quite belonging
yet longing for connection
Sometimes I dare
to dip my toes
into the maelstrom
to touch the chaos
to feel more alive
I feel the current
and it wants to pull me in
I know what comes
with surrendering to it
Violence
Hate
Death
Humanity at its worst
Drowning
Stealing your energy
Your heart

Love
Hope
So I recoil
Back to my perch
Where there is peace
Alone
On the edge.



“Fall Reflections” by
Michael Heath

backseat of a car in
autumn

Max McNett

I remember my breath on the nape of your neck.
The way it made you shudder and twist deeper into my arms.
You buried your head in my chest, and I breathed deeply,
the smell of your hair sending firecracker snaps throughout my body.
My hands trembled as they roamed the geography of your body,
and I chuckled softly, in spite of myself, as you'd shudder against me.

You lifted your head, and though it was dark around us,
The light from the dash illuminated the silhouette of your face
Like a halo, your eyes like stars reflecting in a midnight ocean.
I make a wish and introduce my lips to yours, and you accept them,
As if you had been waiting your whole life to do so.

The bitter November wind buffets the doors of my car outside,
But it cannot cool us. We ache to be even warmer.
Clothes become misplaced somewhere in the car floor abyss
As flesh meets flesh and sweet heady promises are made.

But that was so long ago. I feel the chill in the autumn breeze now,
And the dashboard in my new car only glows just enough
To show the empty seat beside me.

There was a time when you felt like a novel I knew by heart,
Dog-eared pages in my memory of where you used to live.

I don't even know the title anymore.



“Ascend” by
Elizabeth Colwell

Hellbent
Bruce McRae

It's not as you'd imagine.
Having once been dandled
on the knee of God
we hear a song tempered by flame.
Having played in the maze of days
our disappointment is lamentable,
our wine seasoned with syntax,
eternity intangible.

In a house of sin and sorrow
you'd think your God was better than this,
mansions of light devolved into ruin,
the soul a tenement, a crackhouse,
a final stand in our confusion.

Which is why we mill about,
gnawing the rag of a last hope,
pulling thorns out of our hair

and insisting they're roses.
Waiting for a dog-faced god
to spell the story of redemption.



“Night Light” by
Michael Lambert

Four Poems Written
in the Dark
Ivan de Monbrison

i.
dejected
always so sorry
puppet
or mongrel dog
or carrion
maybe

a piece of meat
endlessly bleeding

no exit

ii.
don't sex
no way
sex
no
don't
but I can not
I just CAN NOT...

take it anymore
sex

iii.

a dick

cut the crap

I am tired of you and me

a dick in my mouth

why should I accept

why should I forgive you

Just give me one fuckin

good reason to forgive...

forgive... forget

one and the same thing

I guess

iv.

all this mess

the hate the crap the shit

all this...

it's

brainless

we've been like trepanned

slowly but surely

year after year

without our consent

whatsoever



“Flower Bed” by
Michael Heath

Mexico that way →
Taylor Nisius

The road weaves up and down
Cows and horses on either side
Right at the retention pond
Past the Wyocena dump
Garbage sprawled over the gate
Past the withered plywood
Poorly torqued to a chain link fence
Years of withstanding the elements chip the paint
Yet the message holds strong
Vibrant red, desperately reapplied
We stare at it as we round the final bend

The branches of a willow tree sweep the top of our truck
Artac, too old and stubborn for the Amish,
Greets us with a neigh
Carcajou runs up to us, licking our hands

Grandma waves, standing with a permanent hunch
Years of fieldwork shaping her frame
Bent over the olla she dishes out carnitas
An unspoken contract giddily accepted
We scarf them down and fulfill our promise
Barefoot, we run to the garden

One by one, we grab the roots and pull with our legs
To spare our backs from the grunt work
Stacking them in the ice cream pails recycled as buckets
Roots spill over the side as we haul them down to the barn

What's that vieja making you three do now?

Grandpa grins and chuckles

He says to leave the work to the old people

It keeps us young

He grabs fishing poles and lures

We cast and reel, cast and reel

His shaky hands show us how to descale them

Ensuring nothing is wasted

We bring them back to grandma

They sizzle as she drops them into the pot

Starving, we sneak pieces of fried fish off the serving plate

¡Vete! No está listo

Giggling and running out of the kitchen

She finishes frying, and we all wait at the table

She brings my grandpa his plate, and dishes out ours

She sits down last, and we begin eating

Bellies full and worn from a day in the sun we say our farewells

The sun sinks lower in the sky

And we pile in the truck

The willow tree waves goodbye

Artac whinnies, Carcajou follows us down the driveway

We curve around the bend

The sunset illuminates the chain link fence

The battered plywood screams at us

Red paint smeared down the sides

Mexico that way →

For a brief moment, we were smothered by racism
But the moment passed at 50 MPH



“Her Hair” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Abdeathdarian
Matty Olson

An amicable break-up, a bitch in the bar--that
CUNT--who decked my fucking face, goddamnit,
Everything living underneath my bed,
Heteronormativity, holding hands, hell,
Hell, I'll just kill myself, listening to
Men or Maroon 5, Mondays, Mrs. Doubtfire,
No orgasms, Nnewt Ggingrich, ovulating, my
Period, practicing the piano, proving a
Point, quieting down my Uncle Butt,
A relaxing weekend, straightening up,
Stairway to Heaven, thunder, the Unabomber,
Vicious wombats, worrying, Vicks VapoRub,
Work, your stupid ass, yodelers, and
Zoos that don't have giraffes.



“Little Green” by
Rachel Levine

Circles and Time

Matty Olson

Burnt cheeks from
January wind,
and stained lips
from February wine.
By April I’ll
learn to be kind.
Step on the
blossoms while
I preach about
hope. I’ll never
be a rock in
Laurel Canyon,
but someday
I’ll get a ring
and never be
anyone again.
Inconsistency is
a girl’s best friend.
Billboard babies
whisper choose

life. Choose
a cinnamon candy
from the drawer.
The cavity cannot
be filled. Some
intellectual made
your insurance papers
into an erasure.
No worries.
By August I'll
sweat out the last
of my doubt.
Shopping news
crowds the mailbox.
I nail it shut.



“Roomies” by
Jeff Weiland

On Sharing
Matty Olson

Henrietta died today,
And I burnt the last egg she laid
When I cracked it in the pan
The oil howled and jumped
Up and splattered onto my face

I didn't mean to waste it
Her last vessel of hope
So maybe my new welt is karma
Or maybe I'm just sharing in her pain

Because lately, everything I do seems temporary.

I am so willing
And I am so productive
I line up your shoes at
The end of the day

At the end of the day
The hand reaches in to
Take the egg that I have offered
Unknowingly

If this work is necessary,
Can we do it together?
Or will the shoes be cluttered
By morning?



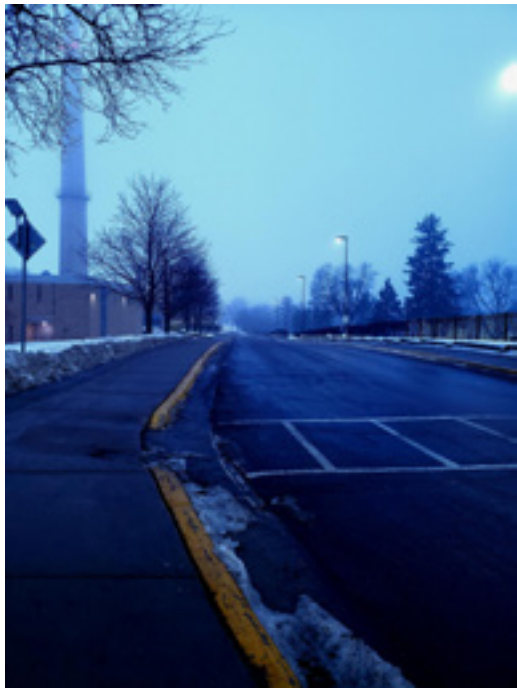
“Early Spring” by
Michael Lambert

OUR MOTHER THE MOUNTAIN

Karl Plank

*So walk these hills lightly and watch who you're lovin'
By mother the mountain, I swear that it's true*
—Townes Van Zandt

As in the old ballads sung off the porch
in sight of fire pink, flame azalea,
and little blue staggers
or in the shadow of the long blue ridge
as day turns to gloaming, to going
under the blanket of stealing darkness,
your story will tell of wildflowers
in a graveyard, of blaze and smolder
in the heart-hollow, of swaying
in light's loss as you lay down
to touch threads of hair and blue satin
that lash your body to this earth
beneath *our mother the mountain*
who knows what is true.



“Blue in the Winter Morning” by
Isabelle Emerson

WAITING
Karl Plank

Estragon: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same.
—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

We're like desperados waiting for a train.
— Guy Clark

Sometimes I feel it coming all the same
like the crack forming
in a slave's shackle,
wearing out in the grind of one day
becoming another,
becoming the opening line
of the next act
which like a steam-engine
rumbles toward us
past the saguaro, sage, and scrub
of our wasteland-scape
of dry wells and tobacco-stained old men
bearing passenger prophets and
purses of possibility.

They all hear the moaning whistle:
Vladimir and Estragon,
blind Pozzo and Lucky the mute
and we who have waited with them
for God-knows-what
but what we will not let pass
for despair makes desperados of us all
and this is who we have become,
desperados waiting for a train.



“Her Shoes Were Tired” by
Jeff Weiland

DANCING QUEEN

Kenneth Pobo

In Milwaukee, I went dancing
twice a week.

In a turquoise leisure suit
I flopped around,
a perch in a water bucket.
Still, I danced,

not cooped up
behind a paper to write.
Often when I'd go home
the moon seemed brighter
than usual. Disco colors
and lights changed
how I saw it. I dance
less now, at least in discos.

A song I love comes on
in my home office. Soon
my ass wiggles and I snap
my fingers. Sunlight
through wooden slats,
my own disco beams.



“Midwestern Summer” by
Michael Lambert

PARDEEVILLE

Kenneth Pobo

Some places you just stop
for a bologna sandwich
in the park by a cannon
stuffed with burger wrappers.
Then you go on
to Madison, Milwaukee,
Chicago.

Air smells like hay
a farmer’s been pitching
deep into dusk. Wind
jiggles a clothesline,
disturbs an Oriental poppy,

a red ember lighting
dreams you have
once you get “somewhere.”



“Woman with Wine” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Toast

Charles Rammelkamp

Drive Hammered. Get nailed.

The signs on I-95 on New Year’s Eve,
warning drivers headed for parties,
blink on and off on the huge overhead displays.
Meanwhile I try to file away the words
cumin seed and *shallots*, ingredients
for a recipe I plan to make
when I finally get home.

Suddenly the car in front of me slams its brakes.
I am about to be toast.
My life doesn’t flash by,
but I do have a vision
of insurance companies, cops,
tow trucks, hours spent *waiting*.

The crash is inevitable,
like one of those things you see in dreams

but are helpless to prevent.
I've slammed my brakes, too;
the car fishtails on the slick road –
a light rain's been coming down.

And then, *mirabile dictu*, my car stops
maybe a yard from the rear fender,
and that car inches ahead, too.
We crawl for another few minutes,
and then for whatever reason,
the slowdown ends and we're all back to speed.

I look forward to that glass of champagne,
once I get home,
the cup brimming with my gratitude,
toasting more than a new year ahead.



“Trans Am” by
Elizabeth Colwell

r.o.m.e. (realities of male
expression)

Trevion Rimmer

1. my obsession with the Roman Empire
2. the craft of killing spiders
3. never learning but knowing how to change a car’s tires
4. paying the bill
5. suppressing urges to frolic in field of flowers
6. needing not know how to dance
7. being assigned privilege at birth
8. watching sports and calling every foul
9. the pressure to date
10. the general assumption (-to a woman-)
11. the pride and rage passed through family stones
12. the bulge of my pocket filled with keys, a wallet, earbuds, and a phone
13. smelling like yesterday’s cologne
14. being both victim and assailant
15. just a boy being a boy
16. the burden to protect
17. the fallacy of having to provide
18. swallowing feelings whole behind the words “I’m fine”
19. shoulders for sorrows caused by other men
20. learning how to adjust your [redacted] in certain pants
21. secret lover of love and romance

22. architect of glass ceiling
23. hemorrhaging unfelt feelings
24. being feared by those you love
25. and facing the fact that no one believes you hate the things above



“Spring Rain” by
Isabelle Emerson

PINE NEEDLES IN
OCTOBER
James Roberts

Brown, slender, like little
Thin whips on the skin
But so soft and tender
When trod upon
With bare cold feet
On a brittle October morning,
Frost just a day away.

Outside the funeral home,
They lay in twinned branches
About the gray, ridged trunk, a carpet
Attuned to autumn memories,
The way the breeze
Rustles the dying leaves,
High above.

One just fell into my hair
And stuck there
Like a forest laurel
Announcing the God of Poetry,
Whose shell lies inside,

Has just made another appearance
And we have so little time left
To worship.



“Mother of the World” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

RUSSIAN LIT
James Roberts

I.

I have big teeth that eat fiery angels
when I dine with Briussov.

II.

Sometimes I think I am possessed by a devil,
Standing in front of a firing squad,
last cigarette smoking.

III.

No one knows
why I am under Baba Yaga’s legs
as she stomps on my corn kernel body.

IV.

Page after turning page I fight
pistol duels with Pushkin's poetry
in Cyrillic, a language
of all sharp angles and no bends.

V.

What is it about winter in Russia?
We walk through eternity like it was a white
or black blizzard, a purga-tion of the Soul.

VI.

Perhaps it is the thick bird's nest
Tolstoy beard that pushes
Anna Karenina's legs,
splayed on bloody ground?

VII.

I live my exile in a small Siberian village
reading Lithuanian poets
who write about war and rain and forests
as if I did not already know
about war and rain and long, dark forests.

VIII.

Oh! Those poor deluded priests
who roam a vast land with their icons
and gold and heavy crosses too much to bear
on the altar of secular knowledge.

IX.

How many books can one read
on the train from Moscow to Vladivostok,
drinking samovar after samovar
of black and bitter tea?

X.

And at the end, it is only Alyosha Karamazov
who asked the right question from God
but received the wrong answer.



“He was framed” by
Jeff Weiland

sizzle

Margaret Rozga

embezzle drizzle fizzle fiddle middle—oops, I’ve lost my verb train
right in the center of the previous line. How & when to rev up verbs again
in a language of movable, multiple, cross-purpose, zany parts of speech?
If I can fiddle with my fiddle, then surely I can middle with my middle.
If today’s precipitation falls as drizzle, drizzling happy zz zz upon each
of the zinnias in my garden, then I’ll razzle-dazzle a joke into a riddle.
What’s lost needn’t be loss, dear verbal girl, though it twirl, grizzle, razzle



“Spring Fever” by
Michael Heath

MEMORIAL DAY
Carrie Voigt Schonhoff

I could tell the day
from small flags
of pine and striped cloth
at attention in the grass
from the fence to
where my truck would sit
when deployed.

The yellow ribbons on trees
had faded but showed
there had once been hope.

Next to the front door
is the white wooden cross
fashioned by Father
with his son’s first name.

I can’t smell the cookout
in the backyard
on the freshly painted deck.
But it’s nice to see almost everyone

laughing again.

And there's my dad
at the edge of our yard
with the tree he planted
waiting for it to grow.



“I Never Knew” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

THE ISLAND OF
CALYPSO
Carrie Voigt Schonhoff

I watched you snap ripe peppers,
pluck tomatoes from the vine,
pull plump onions from red dirt.
Everything watered with care.

Hand on hip
your brown eyes squinted
at the southern sun,
then towards me with thirst.

Inside we uncapped
and clinked bottles of German beer
(whose name I cannot pronounce),
ate chips with our freshly chopped salsa.

We watched basketball,
talked of the greats,
scheduled dates
to see them in person.

But I knew eventually
you would hunger
for a new verdant home.



“White Flame” by
Megan Faivre

From Hell with Love
Whitney Schwindenhammer

This kind of love doesn't
Turn sour
Nor expire
Like the apple Eve ate

Who we love was never the problem—
Jesus had two dads
And he turned out just fine
Don't sin but on Sunday you drink wine

A bunch of double standards
Lame ass excuses
But truth is
The Bible is simply outdated

Socially outcasted for
being the same person
acceptance isn't a trend
No one wants to be

-Your gay friend



“Behold” by
Elizabeth Colwell

Under the Weather
Whitney Schwindenhammer

I only hate the rain
When it falls upon my skin
In the same place that only
Your hands have only been

No, I always hate the rain

I only hate the wind when
It rips through my clothes
Where your skin touched
Mine—we were enclosed

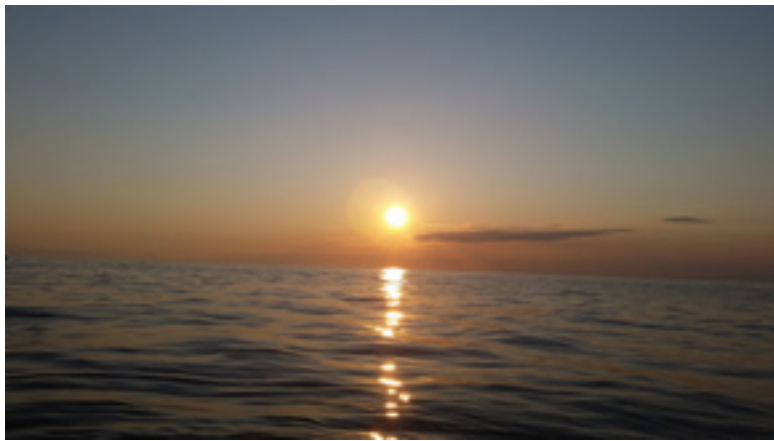
No, I always hate the wind

I only hate the clouds
That tower over my head
The same way that
You once did

No, I always hate the clouds

I only hate the things
That remind me of you
We were once everything
Until I finally knew

I always must've hated you



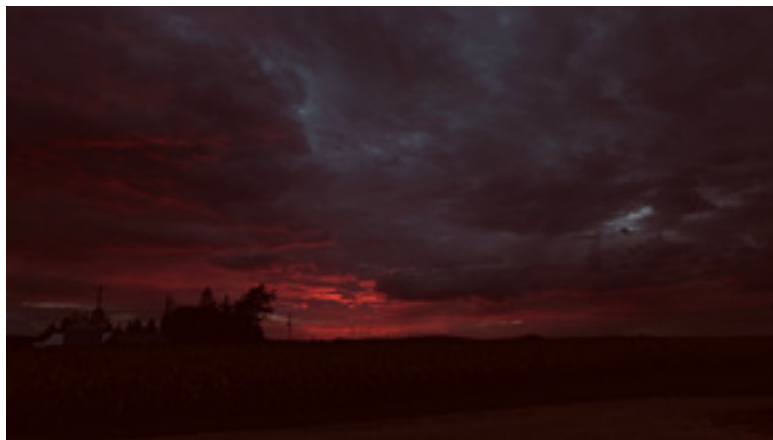
“Golden Reflections” by
Nicole Krebs

Dolphin
Daniel Sniff

You have no claws, nor fang or fur
And fins do not a mammal make
Yet still you call yourself a beast
And yet the land you still forsake
As in the water you endure
And upon treachery you feast

You greedy beast, you wicked phish
To choose from two and then pick both
Cut off your limbs and fled to sea
A broken promise, broken oath
To scorn your brethren for this wish
To be the ocean’s devotee

To leave one’s own, know no remorse



“Fire in the Sky” by
Megan Faivre

Common Sin
Úrsula Starke

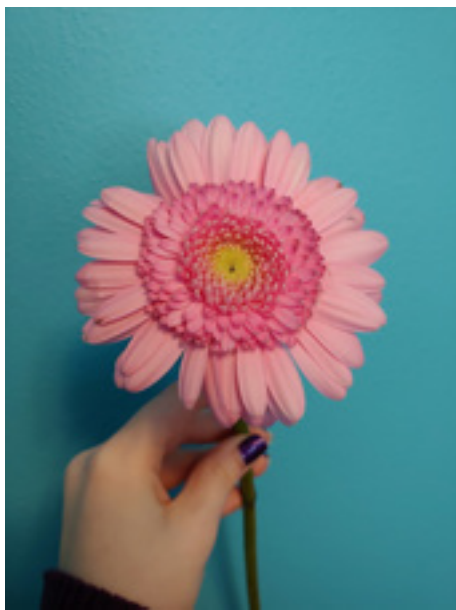
With an alien stroke of my hand
I write you, San Bernardo.
I never set out on the bitter streets
of your fertile past
(You are a remote city, you screamed urban silence)
I’ve not even counted the leaves
of the dying trees
on the twisted sidewalk.
I didn’t dance in those days
of the Armory
to the metallic rhythm of its machines.
I would have wanted to sleep in your remote
plains of the Earthly Paradise,
but the swallows and flies
steered my dream off course
again and again.
San Bernardo, I did nothing
worthy of your thanks
yet I weep with you
all the hours
of your endless night.

Translated from Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval and Jeannine M. Pitas

Pecado Comunal

Úrsula Starke

Del trazo ajeno de mi mano
te escribo, San Bernardo.
Jamás probé las amargas calles
de tu pasado fértil
(Eras ciudad apartada, gritabas el silencio urbano)
Ni he contado las hojas
de los árboles agonizantes
en la vereda torcida.
No bailé los días
de Maestranza
al ritmo metalizado de sus máquinas.
Hubiera querido dormir en tus llanos
apartados del Paraíso Terrenal,
pero las golondrinas y las moscas
una y otra vez
desviaban mi sueño.
San Bernardo, nada hice
digno de agradecer
pero lloro contigo
todas las horas
de tu eterna noche.



“Petals of Loss” by
Nicole Krebs

Mother Flower Úrsula Starke

I came into your world
with the agony of warm skin
and grateful pain.
Your maternal wait.

You came to me
like a strange goddess.
There existed no breath of mine
no heartbeat of mine
that wasn't yours.
It all belonged to you.
every hour
every novice game
every cry and burst of laughter
came from me, but was really yours

I had no shadow of my own,
you were my reflection of everything,
a gleam of light in tunnels
a hand to catch my falls,
a voice in numb silence.

Now,
after years of history,
it all remains the same.

Translated from Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval and Jeannine M. Pitas

Flor Madre
Úrsula Starke

Llegué a tu mundo
con el desgarró de pieles tibias
y dolor agradecido.
u maternal espera.

Llegaste a mí
como diosa extraña.
No existió mi respiro
no existió mi latido
que no fuese tuyo.
Todo pertenecía a ti
cada hora
cada juego inexperto
cada llanto y todas las risas
salían de mí, pero eran tuyas

Sombra propia no tuve,
fuiste mi reflejo de las cosas,
brillo en los túneles,
mano en las caídas,
voz en el silencio etumecido.

Ahora,
después de años históricos
todo sigue igual.



“Woman with Aqua Hair” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Skinny
Úrsula Starke

Here comes the skinny girl
with her dorsal spine straight,
her dark face,
her dusky hair.
The skinny girl walks, triumphant,
an avalanche of laughter and skin.
I’ve known her long fingers
for years,
my whole life
I’ve never felt
the emptiness of her absence.
If it’s not her body it’s a shadow
if it’s not her cry it’s a murmur
but she always tolerates
my chronic delusions
with the patience of a nun.

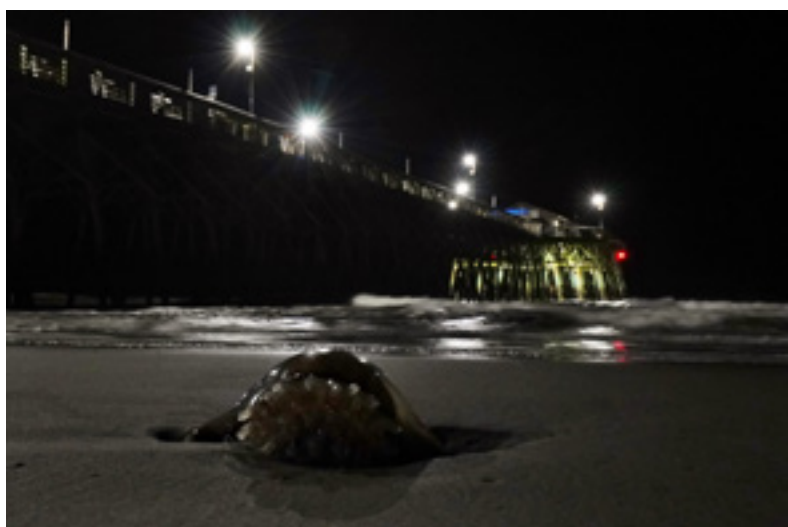
This pencil isn’t enough
for me to write her a poem.

Translated from Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval and Jeannine M. Pitas

Flaca
Úrsula Starke

Ahí viene la flaca
con su espina dorsal erguida
la cara morena,
su pelo anohecido.
Camina arrasante la flaca
como avalancha de risa y piel.
Hace años que conozco sus dedos
largos,
la vida entera
y nunca he sentido
el vacío de su ausencia.
Si no es el cuerpo es la sombra
si no es el grito es el soplido
pero siempre soporta
mis delirios crónicos
con paciencia de monja.

No me alcanza el lápiz
para escribirle un poema.



“Jellyfish” by
Jeff Weiland

Men Don't Weep

Dao Vang

They stare at their bedroom wall
At night
And inhale, inhale
And they live tomorrow
Spend the day like usual
Until the sky shifted back to dark
They stare at the bedroom wall again
A dance in the emptiness
And inhale, in hell



“Untitled” by
Tina Lovell

at St. Mungo’s exhibit on angels
Wendy Vardaman

my mother collects angels
I’ve always found that creepy

my father acted in mister angel
when he played summer stock

the first summer
after they married

when he died my mother
gave me his wings

she tries to give me the angels
when she has to leave her house

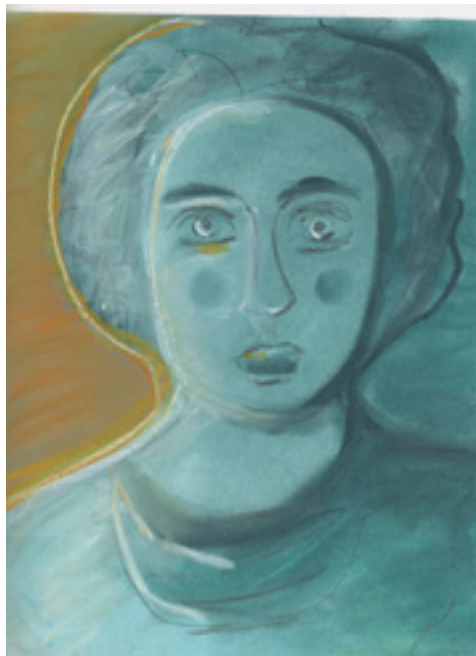
she is 80 & forgets things
she is 85 & dies. I bring some

angels home, arrange them

next to bridge cards & broken

glasses cell phone old
hats a rolling pin

his name on one handle
hers at the other end



“Night Mother” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Moonstruck

Angela Trudell Vasquez

A teen trapped in the backseat
our parents drive from Mexico to Iowa,
yearning for the skinny boy back home
rocked with no lover
I took on the moon;

the brilliant blue moonlight
haunts the back window
follows us
we cruise all night
and into the morning

I swear devotion
to its craters and boulders
the orb who suckled planet Earth
with its meager size
and timed rotations,
a woman’s body pulses
with the celestial mind,
female blood rises and we abide –

the uterus turns over
we swell with the tide.



“Golden Coast” by
Brooke Schindler

What and That, Part IV

Angela Trudell Vasquez

What tongue yells out names behind a hotel door
to the attorney on his knees head blows hurling?

Who records their calls, his screams?
Blood on the white carpet pools.

Did you turn the channel?
Write a letter to your people?

Shake the prison bars of your mind,
your spine unfurling taking shape
all these years with children incarcerated?

Stop shopping there? Cry at night
your prayers for the ones with ICE?

What factory workers exposed cribs built
for child bodies went on strike?

What small brown hands pick the lock open the cell door,

walk out into the sunshine for the first time?



“Eased by the Egrets” by
Roberta Condon

Somewhere Else the Birds Are Singing

Lynn White

He managed to open the shutters a little way
but the gap was smaller than he expected.
He eased his head and shoulders inside.
The rest of him,
his arse and legs,
remained outside
covered in a blanket
then, as dawn broke,
covered once more
by a blanket of early spring snow.

He was hungry.
He was always hungry.

Somewhere the birds are singing,
he thought,
somewhere else
the birds are singing.



“Electric Sun” by
Michael Lambert

Silver Lining
Rowan Wilson

It hits me as I am sorting out my grandfather’s keys
Softly, the kitchen table spread with scrap
Silver and gold, the rust and grime of 80-some years
Meticulously labeled by the hand of someone long gone.
[Silver, circle top- “Linda Bike”]

His things have come in waves, in water-logged cardboard
Smelling of mildew and sandy soil
The news on my mother’s birthday
The ashes a little while later
And then the rest
That untreatable old hoarder, the rest

My mom has had enough
[Gold, pentagon top- “Kevin left ‘97”]

And I told her I would sort the keys-
One for every year of his life, and every dead car

[Bronze, square top- “‘89 Chevrolet”]

Of them, I thought I might make a necklace

One long silver chain
And an unreasonable hunk of metal
Oxidized and odd
Misguided maybe, and they are left behind
When I leave finally, for college
[Silver, circle top- "Pam & Linda dorm"]

And when it hits me
The key in my hand is labeled only with question marks
Black sharpie on metal
And my grandmother kept it,

And my grandfather kept it, eleven more years
Gathering dust
So that it might pass into my hands
Silver smelling of pennies

Hey, I'm an adult, I'll get my own keys soon-
Mom says he told her

On the phone, a week before
He wished he might understand me
A lost cause, but I have his keys



“Neglected Paradise” by
Jeff Weiland

Whose lake this is
Michael Zahn

*The individual property owners whose holdings surround Lake Cane
have vested property rights in the lake itself
-- from “Water Rights in Florida”*

Whose lake this is, I think I know:
The residents who swim below
or ride the pulsing winds that blow
and stir the waves where others ride
and rustle weeds where sly ones lurk
(and shy ones hide)

Whose lake this is, I think I know—
we see their spoor
and hear their caws and croaks,
their screeches, hoots and grunts and growls,
their pants and burps and barks and howls
(beware their hisses and their snarls)

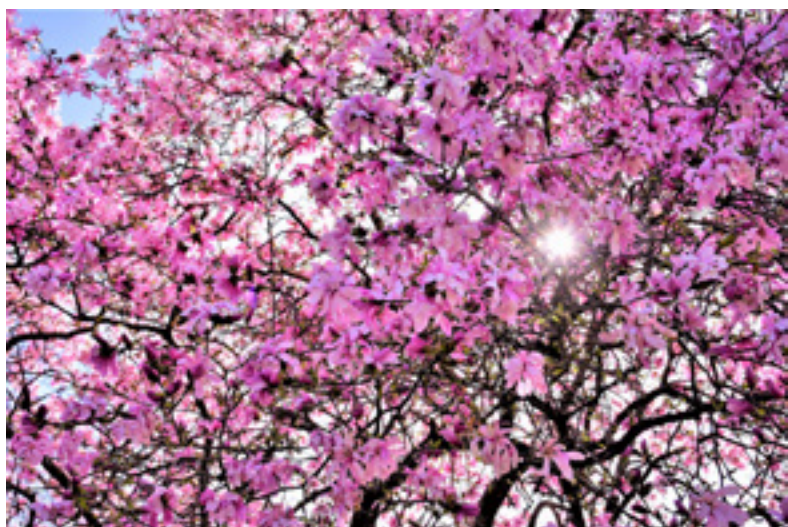
Whose lake this is, I think I know:
Creatures who possess no title,
no paper trail, no deed on file.

Though the lake's their domicile,
they cannot claim their rights at trial.

They cannot swear an oath
in court of law
by raising fin, or wing, or paw.
Their testimony goes unheard
for lack of speech, for lack of word.

Yet . . .

Their ownership's
no mystery —
their presence
predates history.
(But lawyers wearing wingtip shoes
sidestep clients who pee and poop
wherever they choose)



“Spring Awakenings” by
Michael Heath

Anaar¹
Bänoo Zan

This bowl of blood
This chest of rubies
sweet and sour and thirsty

that splashes
the concubine and the king

The breasts of Princess
sovereign over her ripeness

Between desire and abstinence
the scent of nature’s geometry

Juicy jewels
unbruised and transparent
like naïve political statements

Red crystals in a crystal bowl
showered in flower feather²
like mourning mothers’ nightmares
packaged as dreams

This heart holds all the seeds
for a pomegranate garden
of utopian saplings

This fist
on the mouth
of plunder

1 Pomegranate in Persian

2 Original Persian name: Golpar—heracleum persicum or Persian hogweed, used as spice in Persian cooking



“Dandelion” by
Elizabeth Colwell

Full Circle
Bänoo Zan

I—too—cry—
says the cloud—
after the assault of winds—

The sky looks away—

In my town
the bed doesn't consent to love
I voice an inaudible protest

The trees
shield the house

In the city of poetry
a soldier gropes my breasts
on the street—

My lover turns around
and kicks him—

In the next scene
a woman I love
forces herself on me
Her muscles pin me down

It all ends
with the man I love—

I touch him against his will
He turns away—
I grope again—



“Moon Rise” by
Michael Lambert

Perspective of the Moon Jade Zumwalde

Hues of light shine through the crisp air,
guiding the darkness of the world.

I see everything.

I see the nightly fauna traverse across the frozen surface
speaking the tongue of their ancestors.

I see the movement of leaves in their descent,
dancing delicately to the sound of solitude.

I see the people.

As masks fall off and reality sets in,
I see the scars this world has scored into their bodies.

Their stitches, wound up tightly in the Sun,
fall apart in my presence.

Screams of the souls rise up,
dissipating through the hushing winds.

Broken, beaten, bruised-
This is what one fights to hide.

I wait patiently.

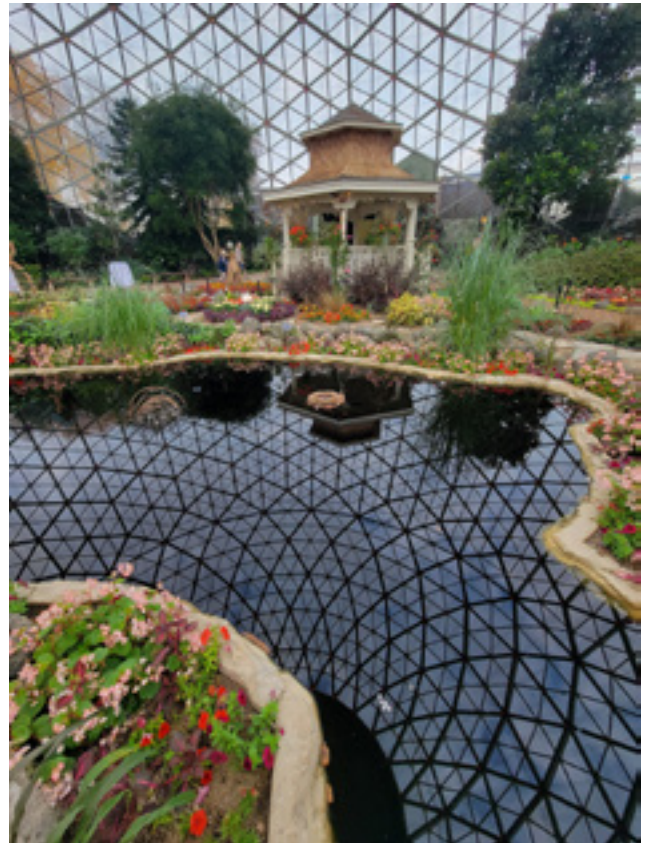
I have witnessed the darkest corners of this world.

But I chose to stay.





“Between Shows” by
Isabelle Emerson



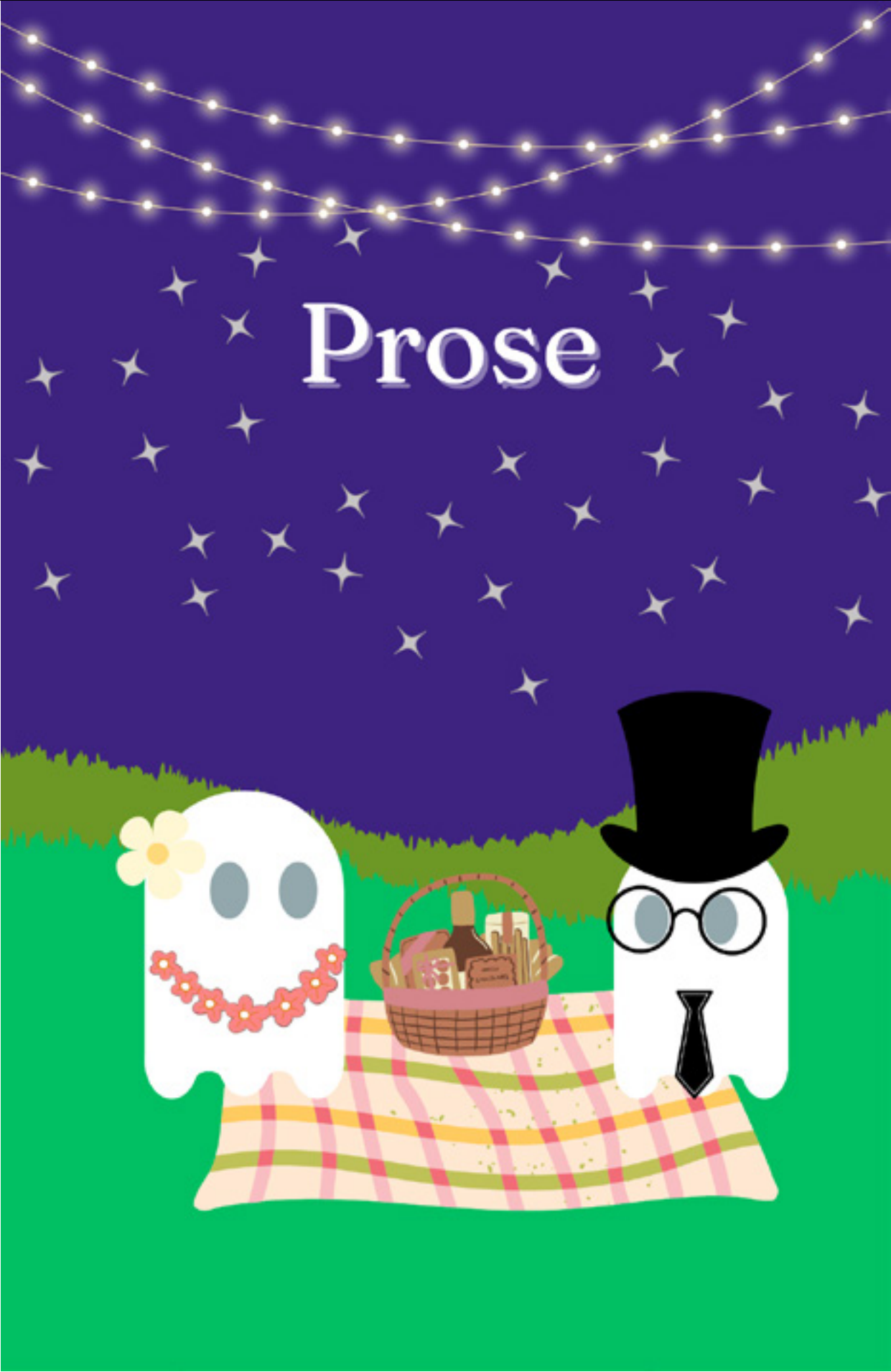
“Dome Sweet Dome” by
Michael Heath



“Warmth of Night” by
Isabelle Emerson



“Water’s Mirror” by
Nicole Krebs





“Whiskers in the Tinsel” by
Nicole Krebs

Tom’s Milkery Jack Braun

Tom the cat prided himself on a multitude of qualities. Honest. Trustworthy. Punctual. Well, usually punctual, anyways; tonight was not the case. The neighbor’s mangy mutt had decided that the cat had been slacking on his tree climbing practice.

“Ungrateful fleabag,” Tom grumbled to himself through clenched teeth as he dragged his bag over the damp streets with his mouth, his head bowed low. His eyes were sore from staring upwards. “Last time I share my kibble with you, mark my words.”

The bag was a folded white blanket that he had co-opted from his humans’ couch. The glass bottles clinked together like the wind chimes on his home’s porch. He moved it as carefully as if it were stuffed full of kittens instead. The concrete was cold against his pads, yet he continued nonetheless. For what he carried *inside* the bottles was more precious still. As if sensitive to his thoughts, the blanket bumped over a ridge in the ground, and Tom groaned through a mouthful of fabric as he heard a bottle against the road.

By now the sun had already vanished behind the horizon; only streetlamps remained to illuminate the way. It wasn’t until the moon was nearly in the center of the sky that Tom turned right into the familiar alley. Wedged between two vacant human abodes, the alley was rank with gar-

bage and rats, but the latter scent, at least, was stale. A couple cats already awaited him, brightened by the lone streetlight at the end of the alley. The first had dusty gray fur, save his white belly. His left ear resembled a pile of gray shreds of lettuce. The second was smaller, only a juvenile. His fur was longer, a raging scarlet hue. He had a poof of fluff over his forehead and his eyes were as large as baseballs. Their emerald green eyes both regarded him cheerfully.

“Tom!” The gray cat exclaimed loudly as Tom dragged his bag over. “Just when I was about to give up and go home.” The juvenile said nothing, just bounced up and down like a soccer ball.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t have a home, Scratch.” Tom meowed. He dropped his bag gently to the ground and walked over to the trash pile leaning against the fence behind them. He dragged out a cardboard box. It had the words “Tom’s Milkery- 2 fish” scratched on the front, and in smaller text, “Anything for the customer!” underneath. Next, he extracted a stack of silver saucers, each stained from the previous nights. He would wash them eventually, but he was already opening late. Setting up his stand, Tom unraveled the blanket. Inside, it contained several glass bottles, each filled to the brim with milk, white as bone. One was broken in half, milk already soaked into the cloth, to which Tom could only lament silently at the loss of product. Making sure his customers weren’t paying too close attention, Tom hastily wrung the cloth into one of the saucers, little flecks of glass sprinkling off into the bowl like snowflakes. He stood, sliding the bowl over the top of his stand towards Scratch. The gray cat caught it with a paw, and began lapping enthusiastically, as if it had been his first drink in days. In today’s economy, maybe it was.

“Wow!” Scratch exclaimed. He crunched on the shards of glass. “You got the fancy stuff tonight. I love the iron-y aftertaste, too!” Scratch traded a couple of multicolored betta fish; the small, long-finned swimmers slapped neatly onto Tom’s paw. The kitten’s eyes somehow widened further at Scratch’s reaction, and he smiled expectantly.

“One milk, please!”

Tom laughed nervously. “Come on now, Red. You know you’re not old enough to drink. Isn’t it a school night?” Red’s smile disintegrated and he hung his head. “Oh, yeah.”

“Come on now, Tom. He’s got a responsible adult with him.” Blood from Scratch’s gums dripped into his bowl, intermixing freely with the milk. “I’ll make sure he stays in line.”

Red’s head popped up again and he pulled his own bag out from behind him, a blanket overflowing with shiny fish.

“I can pay, too. Five fish, just like you asked.” Tom’s eyes bulged out of his head. He had no idea where Red could have possibly amassed such a sum at his age, but there it was. He didn’t correct Red and instead took a second to compose himself, looking up thoughtfully and clearing his throat before speaking, pretending to give the impression as if he was agonizing over the decision.

“Oh, very well. You’re mature for your age, anyways. You’ll be fine.” Tom quickly poured out a fresh saucer and slid it across the counter. The kitten wasn’t quite prepared, and it slid over the side and into Red’s face with a *splut*. For a second the bowl obscured Red’s face, before finally clattering onto the street. Red fervently licked his own dripping face with a long tongue, like a chameleon cleaning its eyes.

“Oh, that’s good!” Red gasped. “I think I need another bowl, though. I drank that one too fast.” Tom exchanged a fresh bowl for another five fish, sweeping them with his paw off the counter and onto the other side of the street. They slapped together into a messy pile.

“I must ask, Tom. What took you so long to get here tonight?” Scratch asked. His head craned in curiosity.

“It was that dog’s fault.” Tom sighed. He didn’t want to think about the dopey canine, but he at least owed an explanation. “Chased me up the old sycamore back at my place. I’m lucky he wasn’t interested in my milk.”

A new voice called out. “One shouldn’t blame the dog for following its nature. Blame yourself for expecting anything else.” Everyone turned to face the new cat entering the alley. He was larger than the others, san-

dy brown fur with black stripes. His tail was so short it barely extended beyond his rump; between that and his tufted ears he looked more like a miniature bobcat than a *felis domesticus*. His face was forever fixed into an expression of pure apathy, brows crushing the top of his eyes and his mouth completely straight.

“Stubby!” Scratch called out cheerfully. “Come take a seat and a drink. We have plenty of room!” Stubby’s face did not change as he regarded Scratch passively.

“‘Tis a sad cat that indulges in vice. Nay, I have business to attend to, as usual.” Stubby walked over to the trash pile, extracting his own cardboard box. *Humility- 1-3 fish* was slashed onto the side. He dragged the box over and deposited it next to Tom’s own stand. Scratch scrutinized the scribblings for a moment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Stubby shrugged. “It means what it says on the box. You give me a sum; I give you its worth in humility. We have this same conversation every night, you know.” Stubby paused, “That will be one fish, please.” Scratch sighed, grabbed a fish from his own bag, and tossed it to Stubby. Stubby stacked it on the counter without comment.

“That one doesn’t count though. I want a two fish worth.”

“Very well.” Stubby sniffed. “I understand your ear was mangled in a battle of pride?” At the question Scratch puffed out his chest.

“Yes. Yes, it was. Quite a fearsome battle, I might add.”

Stubby’s face didn’t change, yet he leaned forward nonetheless. “I see. Now this battle— what were the terms of your surrender?” Scratch blinked, not understanding at first. Then his fur rose with his hackles at the jab.

“Hey! That’s not humility, it’s just an insult!”

“Perspective can hurt. I only gave you what you paid for. Speaking of, two fish, please.”

“That’s ridiculous! You’re trying to short me.”

Stubby’s ear flicked at the word, yet he remained steady. It was the most explosive reaction Tom had ever seen from him.

“Back me up on this, Red.” Scratch looked back at the young cat, but he was too busy with his milk.

“Keep ‘em coming major!” Red slurred. Tom shrugged apologetically and refilled Red’s bowl. As he did, he noticed another cat walking down the alley. This one was larger than the others. His fur was jet black, and he trembled with each step. Was he sick?

Or just *incomprehensibly* angry?

“YOU!” He roared, like the mythical tigers of old whispered of by parents to their disobedient kittens. Red jumped with a childlike squeak, seeming to sober up on the spot. Even Stubby and Scratch stopped their squabbling to turn to the new arrival. Scratch’s eyes widened, and he immediately bounded in front of Red, in between him and the furious new feline.

“It was me! I took your fish because no one else was around to claim it. Of course, had I known it belonged to the legendary Boris of the streets, I would have never considered it. I’ll even pay you back right now.”

Boris laughed.

“You *would* be stupid enough to steal from me, wouldn’t you, Scratch? But I don’t care about the money. It’s the implication that matters. The implication that a very foolish hairball could even dare steal from me and walk away scot-free!” He lunged straight onto Scratch, not giving the scrawnier cat a chance to react. High pitched yowls tore through the hazy air and discarded shreds of fur took flight as Scratch was pummeled into submission. The two vendors looked on, Tom in horror as he recalled the sign on his own box: *anything for the customer*. Was he really about to stand by while his most faithful regular was torn to shreds? He should stand and fight, or at least try to separate the two. Yet instead, he dove behind his box, paws over his ears and eyes clenched shut like they might roll out of his head if he relaxed.

“Ah, violence. First resort of the dimwitted. But I suppose it would not do for the brain in your thick skulls to get even a modicum of air.”

Stubby rolled his golden eyes. At the jab, Boris shot up, leaving Scratch to lie flat on the floor.

“You looking to start something, nip-breath? If not, you’d better stuff your mouth with your tail.” Boris looked down over the counter at the stump on Stubby’s backside. “Oh, how insensitive of me! Hahaha!”

Stubby’s eye twitched.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Unlike you, I am no common brute. Now go meander with the rest of the halfwits back in the city dumpster, where you can get a taste of the trash you spew.” Stubby replied, ignoring Red and Tom desperately shaking their heads to get him to shut up.

“Ah, I see. So, I guess you’re *short* on courage.” Boris raised his head in a guffaw. “Haha-”

Stubby’s paw caught Boris from above, in between his triangular ears. His head rebounded off the road, and Stubby dribbled Boris’s head into the pavement several more times before finally ceasing. The sound of a skull slamming up and down on the ground welcomed itself into Tom’s head and made itself comfortable on the couch. Boris and Scratch now lay together, harmonizing in their moans of pain. Stubby’s pelt puffed out; he seemed as shocked as everyone else for a moment at his own outburst before regaining his composure. He flattened his fur and rotated his ears back to their normal position before looking over the counter.

“That’ll be three fish, please.”

Red took one last look at the scene, then grabbed the bag of fish and fled, stumbling over his haul as he rounded the counter. Scratch finally managed to drag himself to his feet. He was missing several patches of fur on his torso, and his left eye was swollen. He hesitated a second before finally leaning against the counter and dumping the last of his fish on the counter.

“One milk, please.”

Tom stared at him for a second. His voice wouldn’t work. At last, he forced his paws into motion, grabbed another saucer from the pile, and began to fill it with the warm beverage.



“Fantasy Forest” by
Michael Heath

The Mannequin

Megan Faivre

Just before the first World War, there was a gentle, hardworking bachelor. The women of his small town would flock to him whenever he walked throughout town; some women were even married. He would politely refuse their requests, as to not hurt feelings. One night, a group of the women’s husbands and lovers cornered the man in the forest that lay on the edge of town. The man was not keen on violence, so when they started beating on him, he did nothing but try to block the hits. They left him laying amongst dead leaves and went back home thinking that their women were theirs once again.

The only problem is, not one of the assailants saw the young woman watching from behind a tree. She approached the beaten-down man as soon as the others were out of sight. The man gazed at her through narrow slits of his eye lids. Her presence made the forest quiet to an unfathomable silence.

“Why did you not fight back?” she asked. The moon shimmered off her green toned skin, like the descriptions from the old witches’ tales he heard as a child.

“If I fought back, they would have surely killed me,” he answered. He tried to inch away as she crouched down.

“It looks like you are headed that direction anyway,” It was true, his face was swollen, and his blood painted the ground. “I can help you, but it will come at a price.”

“What is the price?” he asked, almost out of breath.

“You must learn to fight for yourself and what you love,” she said.

Out of desperation for his life he agreed, not knowing if she was as he hypothesized. She touched his injuries and healed every one of them. Once he was healed, his body started to change and turn into wood.

“What did you do to me?” The man exclaimed. She only smiled at him.

“It has been many centuries since I have had good entertainment. From this day on, you will be a mannequin. On the nights where no moon graces the sky, you will be turned back into a human. This curse can only be broken by killing a man who loves the same woman as you.”

“How could I murder anyone and live with myself?”

“I guess you’ll have to find out.” Shadows crept out from behind her and whisked her away into the darkness of the forest.

The man was able to get to his feet and move one step forward, only to be fully transformed into a wooden mannequin. By the next new moon, he was placed in a clothing shop’s front window display, left to collect dust.

Many years went by before a woman finally caught his eye. She was none other than the shopkeeper’s daughter, Annie. The man got to watch her grow up in her father’s shop, and he grew to love all of her, even her faults, even when her heart beat for another. He watched her, listened to her honey voice, but anger brewed when another man swept in through the shop to take her out to lunch. *He’s as good as dead, trying to take what is mine. I know her far better, heart and soul.* If only his past self could see him now. He wouldn’t recognize what he had turned into, a man of hatred and jealousy. It’s a good thing that tonight is a new moon; the plan for his freedom could finally be put in motion.

As soon as the shopkeeper locked the back door for the evening, the mannequin turned back into a man. He chose clothing off the racks that he knew Annie would like and find attractive. Back when he was a real man, it never mattered what he wore, the women always flocked to him. He just hoped that Annie would show some interest in him.

This town had night markets that brought most people out of their

homes on a regular basis. *Please let her be here. I need to speak with her at least once for this to work.* He walked through the lines of booths set up and found her standing near the fountains. As he got closer, he noticed that she was talking to none other than Lunch Boy. *Bingo, there's my man.* His arm was wrapped around her shoulders, and he was laughing in her ear. Separating them wasn't hard once the cursed man made eye contact with her. Annie's mouth opened ever so slightly. *I still have my irresistible charm, even after all these years.* She slowly moved a step away from Lunch Boy, infatuated with the new man. He slowly meandered towards her, hoping that his draw was strong enough to pull her in. Lunch Boy got the hint and backed up a few paces. Annie gained enough courage to approach him.

"I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new to town?" Annie asked.

"No, I was born here. I'm in the process of moving back, and I'm hoping to get a little bit better acquainted with the town and with the people here," he smiled at her which made her blush and look away. *I love that beautiful pink across her cheeks.*

"If you're free, I could show you around," she looked back at him.

"I would love nothing more," he offered Annie his arm and she looped her own through it. He looked over his shoulder to see Lunch Boy sulking by a booth. *Same old, same old.*

Annie showed him the town and even showed him the shop where she and her father worked. They talked about almost everything under the sun, he knew enough about her to start conversations about topics that she liked. Lunch Boy kept his distance, and all was right with the world.

"I'm glad that you came to visit the town tonight," she said as they got back to the fountain.

"I'm glad too, I just wish that I didn't have to leave right away," he said sorrowfully.

"When you get back you should look for me. I'm Annie," she smiled.

"I'm Marshal," he said and turned to leave.

"When will I be able to see you again?" she asked as she placed her

hand on his forearm.

When you open your father's shop tomorrow morning. "I'll be back in a month's time," he turned to look at her. "Wait for me," he whispered in her ear, kissed her on the cheek, and turned to walk away. This time she didn't stop him.

He took the scenic way back to the shop, as his heart flutters, just to make sure no one sees him go back to his monthly prison. He changes back into his dusty jacket, stands in his position, and returns to his wooden hardness thinking of a future that they could have together.

The next month came, and Marshal was ready to fulfill his task. He had been planning this night ever since he was transformed into timber. He'll get the man alone in a dark alleyway or deep in the woods, and finish him off, curing him of the kindling curse. Marshal found Lunch Boy walking alone down the street. *Perfect.* Marshal crept up behind him and hit him upside the head with the butt of his knife. Lunch Boy fell into Marshal's outstretched arms. *I just need to get him into the forest without being seen. It shouldn't be too hard, given how light this twig is.* Marshal got him about a mile into the woods before lowering him to the ground.

"I've waited years for this moment, my freedom," Marshal lifted the knife above Lunch Boy's unconscious body.

"What are you doing out here, boys?" Annie's father came into Marshal's peripheral view.

Why, why out of everyone in this town did it have to be him to find me in this position?

"This doesn't concern you," Marshal tried to mask his voice by making it deeper. The sun would be up soon.

"I think it does. That boy needs medical attention. Please, let me help him," the shopkeeper pleaded.

"I really don't want to do this," Marshal said, still turned away.

"I know Mannequin, I know," the shopkeeper said. Marshal whipped his head towards the shopkeeper.

"How do you know what I truly am?"

"When I was a small boy, I found you standing in the woods. I

recognized you as the man my mother fancied. I also remembered the legends of the witches that walk in these woods. I convinced my father to use you in his shop to attract customers, and you have, for about fifty years.”

Mashal was speechless. All these years he could have had someone to talk to, a friend, and he never realized.

“I don’t know how you ended up this way, but I suspect that it has something to do with harming the boy,” he gestured to Lunch Boy’s heap on the ground at Marshal’s feet.

“In order to be my normal self again, I must kill a man who loves the same woman that I love or else I will remain in my mannequin state,” Marshal locked eyes with the shopkeeper.

“That’s the boy that has taken Annie to lunch on numerous occasions. You love my daughter,” he paused, “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that boy does not love my daughter. He lusts for her but does not love her. I am the only man that loves Annie, other than yourself of course. Using that knife on him will only make you a murderer.”

“What are you saying?” Marshal questioned.

“You will never become a true man if you kill that boy,” the shopkeeper tries to reason.

“You’re right,” Marshal steps away from Lunch Boy. He takes a fast step towards the shopkeeper and puts the tip of the blade into his chest. Marshal lowers the shopkeeper gently to the ground.

“Take care of her,” the shopkeeper put his hands on Marshal’s cheeks, and accepted his fate.

“I will, I promise,” with tears flowing down his face, Marshal buried the knife deeper within the shopkeeper’s chest. He took the knife out and strategically placed it next to Lunch Boy. *There’s no need for me to take the blame and live in another prison. Fifty years really does change a man. Some sacrifices just have to be made.*



“Open Water” by
Jesse Lee Kercheval

Trapped Beneath the Surface

Maddy Gorgen

My biggest regret, I once told someone, was the drinking habits of my youth. That was a lie, of course. When someone asks a question like that, they don't want the deep, truthful answer. I never did. I never bothered to ask what was beneath the surface of someone, not myself nor others. Not even my closest friend, Maria.

“Hey, did you see that huge killer whale swim by?” I asked her on the day we had taken a trip to an aquarium together. This was decades ago, probably three years or so after we had graduated college. It was also the last day I would ever spend with Maria.

“The white and black patterns on it are beautiful. Hey, Maria, did you see?”

“Yeah.”

However, that curly brown hair continued to hide her eyes from me as she stared down at her phone. I sighed, well aware that not even animals swimming in the walls before us could distract her from her work. Perhaps it was absurd of me to believe that if getting dinner together, or asking her to go drinking, or even spending a holiday together wouldn't drag her away from her job, an aquarium would make her leave work behind. I mean, who would even want to do more than what they're being paid for?

“Let's move on to the next exhibit,” I said, half-heartedly.

“Mn.”

I looked back at her half-closed brown eyes and expressionless face lit up by the phone. How many years had it been since I'd seen an ounce of excitement on that face? Probably not since I met her in college as she relentlessly spent hours and hours on school. But now, with her life evolving into working a minimum of eight hours a day at least five days a week, I only saw and heard about the listless person she'd become. I remembered the recent rumors that had made their way across businesses to reach my ears. Boss Maria, who gave out unreasonable amounts of work to her team. Boss Maria, who criticized every finished project she received and only reported what needed to be fixed. Boss Maria, who didn't give any exceptions for sick days or allow any excuses for running late. The first time I had heard them, I was dubious, but looking at her now, all I can see is this image of “Boss Maria” who is slowly replacing “my college friend Maria.”

“Look, there's gonna be a show on the whale we saw earlier. Want to see it, Maria?”

“Huh?” Maria finally looked up to meet my eyes. She then gazed forward at the sign for the show, then back down at her phone.

“Sure. Fine by me.”

I didn't tell her the show wouldn't be for a while. Not that it mattered, she didn't seem particularly interested in anything here, nor was she interested that I chose the front row of the empty rusted bleachers to watch the show. I doubt she even noticed the hours of waiting I endured before the stands around the pool became full and the killer whale trainer raised his arm up to wave at everyone and start the show.

Excitement engulfed the crowd as the whale swam in circles and jumped through hoops and around the trainer whose smile spread wide across his face. Excitement was particularly present in the screaming kids unable to sit still in their seats. Excitement was visible everywhere except with Maria. It seemed the only excitement she'd ever felt was maybe at work, or perhaps in our college years. Back then, it seemed all the energy she had was put towards schoolwork, that or thinking about when she was

going to study next. I recalled the only times I had seen her face light up, which was when she boasted about her test score, bragging about how that professor was wrong in saying her effort wouldn't improve her habitual failing grades. I remembered that despite missing out on every party I invited her to, Maria was still able to find excitement in proving others wrong: her advisor who told her to drop out, her classmates who avoided where she sat in class, even her parents who left her before she could walk. She always believed in herself because, "if I don't, who will?"

Here we are, 3 years after college, and between all the post work drinking I shouldn't do, or the sick days I lie about, or the parties I throw with anyone I remotely know, she and I rarely see each other. She typically declines most of my invitations since she has work to do. I wonder if she feels happy after finishing projects or rising in her company only to have more work thrown at her. Is there a satisfaction she gets from her work ethic that I don't see when we rarely pass the time together?

The show progressed on as I tried to keep myself entertained and ignore Maria until – part way through the show, I believe – a change suddenly occurred in the orca. The whale continued doing jumps and flips like before. It wasn't until I noticed the trainer's smile falling from his face that I realized something was off. He repeated the orders again. And again. And again. And again. The killer whale started circling the pool until he finally did the trick, waiting longer and longer before he gave into the trainer. I turned to ask Maria if she noticed the strangeness of the show, but my words got lost before ever reaching her. Her eyes were wide, staring straight at the orca as she sat up on the bench. Even when the whale splashed its tail and water doused us, she didn't flinch one bit. All this time at the aquarium and it wasn't until now that she showed any remote interest.

I looked back at the show to notice the situation was exacerbating. The trainer was now yelling at the animal, but the killer whale simply swam laps without performing anything. Other people in wet suits appeared at the edge of the pool, watching more carefully. As everyone else in the audience started to back away, Maria leaned closer. Close enough

that she could reach out and put her hands on the rim of the pool.

Just one more yell from the trainer. That's all that was needed. That one "just jump, god dammit." The killer whale's fin towered out of the water. Then her tail flew out, moving straight downward towards the trainer. His eyes grew wide, and he swam as fast as he could to just barely avoid the tail. The other people in wet suits were yelling for him to get out and looking for ropes to help pull him out. The audience tried to leave with crying kids in their mothers' arms, but no one ever made it past the door as they couldn't bear to look away from the pool, their eyes trapped with anticipation. I grabbed Maria's arm to try to get her to leave like everyone else, but she only stood up and stayed frozen. Her hands were glued to the pool's rim, so much so that the tops of her knuckles turned white. She started saying "go, go, go" until she was screaming it. It wasn't until later that I would realize she was looking at the killer whale while saying this.

Only a scream from the audience was able to pull my eyes away from Maria and back to the scene in the pool. The killer whale was much faster than the man. Even while he kicked as much as he could, it wasn't enough to outmatch the animal. The whale grabbed his leg and dragged him under the surface, away from all curious eyes. Maria pulled herself up to the edge of the pool, slightly leaning her body over. I put my arm in front of her, but she continued to lean further, her face paler than before and the lip she was biting down on beginning to trickle blood. Her lip matched the clumps of pigment that were climbing to the surface of the pool, slowly dying the clear water a deep red.

Hope seemed lost for the man's life. Yet after an eternity of everyone holding their breaths, he resurfaced from the red pool and grabbed ahold of the edge. His colleagues pulled him out before the black shadow could reach him again. As he was pulled to the backstage door, he left a trail of red from his missing left leg, continuing all the way until he was out of sight. I looked over at Maria and a faint smile I hadn't realized she held slowly faded into nothing. The killer whale poked its head out of the pool, bearing its bloody teeth, but the staff were prepared this time. They grabbed anything that could be a weapon and threw it at the animal. I

didn't witness the death myself because I felt something move my arm. Maria had leaned even further into the pool, enough that her feet were off the ground.

"No, no, no..." she muttered.

I struck my arm into her chest, using my full body weight to pull both her and myself onto the ground. I yelled at her, "Get back! You want to end up dead in the water just like that beast, dumbass?"

Maria had been my friend for many years, so I thought I knew her. But I didn't know that I would see her lying on the ground, my arms wrapped around her torso, brown hair sprawled in an unseemly mess, with tears ruining her always perfect makeup. I froze above her and watched as she laughed.

"You're right, the killer whale was dead the moment it fought back."

I didn't know how to respond. Instead of saying anything, I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. Before I could force her out of the auditorium, she put her hand in the water, touching the reddened pool only discolored by the black and white whale floating in the middle with dark blood leaking from a hole in its center. Maria was much less resistant to leaving than the first time I had grabbed her. As we left the aquarium with all the other guests, a dotted red trail followed Maria's footsteps as the blood from the pool dripped off her hand.

Neither of us spoke the entire ride home. I drove Maria back to her apartment, unsure what to say, and Maria simply stared at her red hand. It hadn't occurred to me until after the ride that Maria didn't once check her phone as I drove. Once we arrived at her apartment, I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Perhaps if I would've said something then, anything, perhaps...

Maria left the car and slowly dragged her feet up the three steps to her apartment door. She fiddled around for her keys, her eyes lost in a daze. Finally, she slowly opened the door and walked into her apartment. As she turned around to close the door behind her, shutting herself into the darkened room, I noticed that her other hand had moved to rest on her chest, right over her heart. After she dropped the hand away, my eyes

widened. Unlike before when her eyes were distracted on her phone, they now were devoid of any emotion, much like a wounded animal who had already accepted its fate. Yet my surprise wasn't at the expression on her face; rather, it was further down where I saw a red handprint in the middle of her white shirt under her black jacket. A red spot just like on the dead orca's body.

And now, decades later, I find myself sitting in a dark alleyway, trash surrounding me, and a bottle of wine in my hand from a company I had never heard of, "orque," which had a drawing of a black and white whale before its cursive letters. I try to drown out the screams of my children and grandchildren as they ask where I am. I frustratingly chug down another gulp of wine.

"Let an old person die in peace, will yah?" I slur. "I'm not too smart on the doctor stuff, but if it's this alcohol that's killin' me anyways, shouldn't I at least die with it for joy?"

Still, even so long after the last time I had seen her, my dancing thoughts found their way to Maria. I could keep asking the questions I usually ask, wondering what could've happened if I did one thing different or making assumptions to fill the gaps, but I'm old enough to know those thoughts are meaningless. Perhaps I will find my way to hell, and Maria will greet me there, laughing and smiling at me as she asks what took so long. Maybe we'll have a nice conversation about the killer whale, which we never got the chance to talk about. And maybe then I can finally pass on the regrets my 25-year-old self always carried in life.



“Ascending with the Albatross” by Roberta Condon

Dessiderium

*First Place Winner of the UW-Platteville
2023 Thomas Hickey Creative Writing
Awards in Creative Nonfiction*

Kassidy Litton

Deep breaths. Shaky in, shaky out. Another. I read something once asking people where they felt emotions. Anxiety in their shoulders, anger in their hands. This emotion, I feel in my chest. My lungs. My stomach. A craving for something so deep, there has to be a lost ancient name for it, in a language no longer spoken. A craving I can't even tell what it is, what exactly I'm hoping for, what my body aches in protest for.

It squeezes the breath from my lungs. It churns my stomach as it recedes like the tide, then slams back into me at full force, forcing the air from my lungs. It's a weight so heavy in my chest, sometimes I have a hard time moving.

There are moments I catch that make the ache so strong it roots me to the floor. Once I was walking late at night through a neighborhood, where I passed a house with big windows lit up like stars. I could hear a song carrying gently from inside the house, where I saw an old man playing the piano for his wife, who sat on top of the piano. Perhaps singing, perhaps enjoying the music. This was four years ago. I think this is when the ache started, a dull miniscule thing that I hardly noticed was there.

I have images in my head, so clear that the only thing I can do is write them out, creating characters to fit the moment, adding details that are not hard for me to conjure. I write a woman sitting on an old sofa, a book in her hand. She's reading out loud to a man whose head is in her lap, running her fingers through his hair absentmindedly. His eyes are closed, but there's a gentle smile on his lips. But you know he's listening

because when she pauses for just a second too long, he cracks an eye open and waits for her to continue. When the scene is written out to perfection, having taken great pains to accomplish the feelings it evokes in me, there is nothing left to do but read it over. Again. And again. And hope the vice on my lungs loosens. I can't tell if I'm making it better or worse. It's still hard to breathe.

I see people gathered in living rooms, watching shows together that they never watch alone, or just doing homework, but nevertheless in each other's company. Siblings naturally convening together in someone's room, doing nothing in particular but chatting. Perhaps I'm being cynical when I look around my own room as I write this, alone in the near dark with my lamp illuminating my keyboard. My cat is sleeping next to me in a basket, but she's turned away facing the wall. Perhaps it is my fault that my living room is empty, my housemate's always gone. But I'm not sure how to make connections. How to live in a state of companionship without begging for it. I want it to come easy.

I understand why painters paint. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a French Post-Impressionist who painted scenes of people dancing, kissing, and lying in bed together. Looking at them, you might see their beauty and why they are famous. But I look at them and I understand how they are a window to his secret longings. He was born with a genetic disorder that prevented his legs from growing after they had been broken. For this, he was mocked and cast from society. He was known to cavort with prostitutes and was institutionalized for his alcoholism. His life shows a desensitized, broken man. His paintings show a man who craved love and connection so deeply that he couldn't help but create the scene with his brushes what he could not create in reality. Lovers in the quiet of their bed, sharing secret kisses. Looking at each other with such adoration, you'd be surprised to find out that he had painted them. I wonder how lonely he must have been.

Jane Austen is one of the most recognized names today for her timeless romance novels. She wrote six complete books involving dashing gentlemen who cared endlessly for their loves, shamelessly doting on them

and overcoming adversity to be with them. Austen herself never married. I know why authors write. Perhaps the reason her books are so famous is because each heartbreak her characters endured was her own. Each happy ending was something she craved so badly she, like me, had to write it on paper so she could read it over and over. In each happy ending, perhaps there were still traces of her heartbreak, scattered like glass.

I'll read a book that at the end has me in tears, a rare occasion reserved only for other people's emotions through empathy. My sister asks me what's wrong. "She's all alone," I tell her, about the main character. "She saved the world and she lost everything because of it." She looks at me and says, "It's just a book." I suppose she's right, but I can't get myself to agree with her.

I had a professor who was completely enamored by *Frankenstein*. While reading it for a class, I never understood what she saw in it, until one of the very last chapters. The creature tells his creature, "My heart was made for love and sympathy, and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture such as you cannot even imagine." I cried then, too.

The ache in these creators' bodies motivated them to move, to write and to paint. The ache in my own is so deep sometimes that I'm not sure I can move at all. It's rooted me to the floor, and I can't get my legs to work. There's nothing I can do but fall to the floor and thrash around on the ground like a madwoman, ripping my hair out, bashing my head against the wall until I'm bleeding, screaming, "I want that! I want that so badly! It's the antidote to my madness!" But then I'll come to my senses and realize I'm still standing, unmoving but I can still move my legs. And I'll go about my day like there isn't anything waging war against my body. Sometimes there is a certain serenity to being with strangers. I'll pretend that I don't want to claw inside my chest and pull out whatever this feeling is. Maybe I would just pull and pull until I've unraveled myself into nothing, a throbbing puddle of nonsense and longing and something else I can't quite name.

Perhaps the ache goes away for a while. I can keep it under control, tamped down in a little black box that rattles like an old man struggling to suck air into his lungs. Tendrils of little aches might snake out and slip between my ribs, gripping them until I acknowledge it and shake them back into place with my own raspy breaths. But like poison, this deep longing has seeped into my blood, and I feel my heartbeat remain slow. Perhaps it goes away.

But I'll be watching the couple at the coffee shop sitting next to each other, so close their knees are touching, fully engrossed in each other's company that their drinks grow cold.

And I'll watch a movie with a friend, my eyes widening as a man falls to his knees in front of a woman, sobbing as he grasps her knees. I'll look to my friend to see if she has the same reaction but quickly look away to pretend that it hadn't affected me at all since she seems unfazed.

I don't think I'll die alone, but I'm afraid I might die lonely. I've never liked poems but I'm beginning to understand why people write poetry.



“Street Art” by
Rowan Wilson

Escaping Pastrem John Markestad

Most of the days before are lost to memory, just a childhood being lived without regard for the future. All of that changed on my tenth birthday. That was the day that my mother informed me that I was *pastrem*, younger than my brother by two minutes, and my life as a child was ended. Of course, I was confused. I didn't really know what that word meant...*pastrem*. I'd heard it on occasion, part of some conversation among adults that I wasn't supposed to be eavesdropping on. Had we attended public schools, we would no doubt have been better informed. Information moves quickly, if somewhat inaccurately, among groups of children. The tutors didn't teach everything that I should have liked to have known. They teach what they're told to teach. That our family is among the Great Houses. Powerful in industry and well-represented in government.

All of the Great Houses produce their children as twins. An heir and a spare. A daughter valuable in marriage, and a spare. The technology for creating twins is simple, though expensive. Only the Great Houses are granted access. Only the lower people produce twins by accident.

Tenth birthday. No cake for me. There was cake and elaborate, expensive presents for my brother. The only present I received was the very first of many slaps across my face from my mother. I guess she expected me to be better informed, or more accepting. When I wasn't either, only

confused and questioning, her patience expired. Crying and holding my hand to my cheek, I was led to my new bedroom by a servant. She, too, had no answers for me though she no doubt knew. Had known since my birth. For me, in those early days, ignorance was well short of bliss.

The best schools, the best clothes, the best friends...that was my brother's future. Hand-me-downs from the servant staff and shoes that were never a good fit became the strata of my wardrobe. Friends? Uhm, no. I was too dangerous to be friends with the staff's children (too close to the masters of the House), and much too low for friendship with anyone else. I did much of the same work as the servant staff, but I was always facing someone's back, asking for clarification that didn't come, slapped when I pressed for, well, anything. I had become *pastrem*. That middle purgatory wherein the spare heir resided until they might be needed.

The years until I was twenty-three passed leaving nothing in their wake but the memory of sharp words and healing bruises. It took many years for me to understand that the hate my mother showed to me was a defense against the hatred she had for the system and the role it forced on her. By excising any love, or even memory of love, she could reduce me to something that needn't be thought of. Or heard. Or seen. As transparent as the restless spirits said to inhabit our ancient home. If real, there must certainly be a multitude haunting.

I've often wondered...if my brother were to die would I become visible again? Would his wife become my wife? And what of Tanlin then? Questions I dare not ask.

The memory comes clear while I sit with my back to the wall across from the hospital bed. I was reading *THE CASUALTIES* when my mother delivered my wife to my room. It's a book about the factors leading up to the collapse of five historic empires. I recall being surprised that I was allowed to have the book. That may have been because the synopsis on the dust jacket didn't do justice to the topic. Later, after I'd completed the book, it was so clear that I was living in a society that was hitting all six checkmarks leading to disaster. At some point a relatively minor incident

is going to ignite a violent revolution, a revolution I have no interest in being present for, let alone participating in. Looking back, I believe that book was the catalyst that truly initiated my journey to seek physical salvation. Before that, escape had only been thought of through printed words and a poorly formulated dream. Less than a dream, really. More like a nebulous concept that only peripherally included me.

My mother, who ran the House since my father was rarely around, had simply opened the door to my tiny, attic bedroom and pushed a woman in. “Your brother has married. This is now your wife,” by way of explanation. The door closed and her footsteps receded to nothing. Sounds fading into the background much as I had in my mother’s eyes.

The woman was twenty-one (I learned that later) and was the *pastrem* sister of a semi-rival dynastic Great House. The marriage of my older twin to my new wife’s older twin anchored a fresh, vigorous, business alliance between the two Houses. Tanlin stood in place at the door for a full minute before lifting her head to look at me. It was clear that she was both frightened and determined to be defiant if needed.

“My name is Calla,” I’d said. “Please relax. I have no intention of harming you or requiring anything of you other than normal courtesies between two people.” I saw her look at the narrow bed that dominated the room. That and a low, three-drawer dresser and a tiny table (holding six books) with a battered wooden chair (where I was sitting), all illuminated by a single bare bulb in the ceiling, were the sum total of the furniture. “We’ll take turns sleeping on the bed.”

Her eyes returned to me after a few more seconds. She nodded. That was how we met and how we managed for those first few critical days and months.

Now, I watch her regular breathing, the rise and fall of the sheet a slow metronome of her health. The birthing had been difficult. Unlike the first twins, boys and a week early, this second set were girls and a week late. Still, Tanlin would recover fully. My hatred for Pallida increased with each of Tanlin’s slow breaths. Pallida, *pastrana* to Tanlin’s *pastrem*, hadn’t wanted the inconvenience in her life, or the changes in her

body, that came with producing heirs, so she'd had the fertilized eggs implanted in her sister. Again. Being the younger twins, *pastrem*, we could not refuse and expect to live. Such is the nature of being *pastrem*.

Love hadn't come to us quickly. A year and a little more we alternated on the bed or on the floor. She demanded that she take her share of time on the floor. No vacuous flower, Tanlin. My few books, and her three, became our most common topics. Particularly in the early months. We took turns reading aloud. It was easy for me to escape into her voice and the stories it told, an hour or two away from the tiny loft room, from the ache of the bruises that came almost daily. Tanlin works as a seamstress in the clothing production area and has minimal contact with the "better" bloodline of the House. I'm not so fortunate. A carpenter and handyman brushes against the House with unfortunate frequency.

I am fortunate in one regard. All *pastrem* are 'fixed' at the first sign of puberty. Males are given a vasectomy; females have their fallopian tubes tied off. In this way the *pastrem* can be *useful* without continuing their own lesser line. In some Houses the male *pastrem* is required to service the wife of his older twin when the *pastrana* is away or is otherwise unsatisfactory. Pallida would rather have visited the stables, I think, than summon me. No doubt she had other sources for that particular odious duty. So, too, did Tanlin not have to endure the attentions of my brother. Whether by choice or by the demand of Pallida, we were grateful for that.

I hear footsteps pounding closer in the hospital hallway. Tollu. I know the sound. The cadence. The arrogance built into each footfall. Since there is no possibility that he has come to check on Tanlin's wellbeing, or to thank her for being his wife's adjuvant proxy and producing for him a *pastrana* daughter and her *pastrem*, what's left is likely not good for me. Or Tanlin.

He's barely into the room and I recognize the look on his face. I brace myself. In the instant before the open-handed slap arrives, I hear the faint whistle of tortured air through the family crescent ring. Striking a little high, almost on my temple, the blow knocks me from the armless hospital chair. Tollu waits a few seconds, wanting to be sure that I've recovered

my senses sufficiently for his words to be understood. I'm not important enough for him to have worked up any real emotion and the delivery is flat, matter of fact.

"We have your man. He was picked up while your broodmare wife was delivering my daughter and her *pastrem*. Your name was among the first words out of his mouth. Make another attempt and you'll both be killed, and we'll make do with no *pastrem* for a few years." *Touch that pan again and you'll be immolated.*

I almost smile as, in my mind, I note that he has used the word broodmare incorrectly. I don't smile. That would only earn me a few cracked ribs. I suppose it should be considered an honor to receive broken ribs from shoes of such quality and cost. I look up with as blank an expression as I can manage. I'm not even important enough for him to demand a response. The message delivered, he leaves. Once again, the hallway resounds with the heel strikes of an important man. This time, thankfully, retreating.

"Thank you for not resisting," Tanlin says. "He would have beat you worse. Maybe worse than just a beating."

As I rise from the floor, I look at her and smile while touching the newly forming bruise to see if I was bleeding. "You woke in time for that?"

"I think it was the sound of him coming down the hall."

I nod a little as I slide my chair up next to her bed. Then, taking her hand, I whisper, "He didn't say who they'd caught. If it was Jemhermiah..." She nods but there is no resignation. Only determination.

"The clues were properly set," she whispers back. "They have Jemhermiah, not Camillo."

It's well known among *pastrem* that Jemhermiah is weak-willed and incautious. Stories abound of *pastrem* that were caught because of him. I don't know that I would have had the...strength...to give him up as a decoy. Jemhermiah will suffer before they let him die. Possibly other *pastrem*, as well. There's no way for us to know what else he might have been mixed up in. Tanlin is stronger than me in that way...the way that will gain us our freedom. I nod, though I'm less sure. She squeezes my hand

and smiles.

“Give me eight days to recover. Then we’ll go. One way or another we will be free.” She whispers, and there is iron there. I nod again.

The night is dark, with cloud bottoms scraping the tops of the taller buildings. A thin mist marks halos around the few lights daring to interrupt the gloom. In the east, a white light alternates with green, flashing every four and a half seconds, the airport beacon. The clouds bottoms are painted, briefly, every four and a half seconds, interrupted only by the shadows of the taller buildings.

We couldn’t have asked for a better night. The usual patrolmen will linger longer in their station houses to avoid the damp. Makeup covers the *pastrem* marks on our foreheads and we wear our older twins’ clothing, stolen covertly over several years. We look *pastrana*. Forged papers will easily stand up in the dull beam of a hand light. Still, our *pastrana* are well known and an encounter with a guard acquaintance is not out of the question. Two more blocks to go. We pass the door to a drinking house and loud laughter washes over us. Too loud. The patrons are using alcohol and practiced, false merriment to push back against the daytime of their lives.

A quick flick of my hand light confirms the door number. I knock twice, then twice more. The lock clicks and the door swings open about ten inches...silent on well-oiled hinges. In the wan light of anemic bulbs, I recognize Camillo. He looks at us, taking his time with each face. It takes me a moment to understand why the door isn’t opening all the way. Pressing the pad of my right thumb to my forehead I drag it sideways, smearing away the makeup and exposing the *pastrem* mark. Camillo smiles and the door opens fully. Once we’re inside he steps partway out to peer up and down the street. Satisfied, he closes and bolts the door.

“This way,” he says, and turns. We cross through an ordinary looking living room: a sofa with a coffee table, a couple of stuffed chairs with end tables next to them. There’s a chandelier made of deer antlers hanging down, the built-in lights are off. The room is deeply shadowed. Someone sits in a chair in the far corner, could be male or female. Through a narrow

door we descend wooden steps to the basement, it too is not well lit. We pick our way carefully.

“Through here,” Camillo says as he swings aside a set of metal shelves loaded with old paint cans and jugs of thinner. Curious, I look down to find there is no track mark on the floor from a wheel; the shelves are solidly mounted to the concrete wall. Excellent construction. Past the shelving is the mouth of a tunnel, narrow, with an arched ceiling barely higher than the top of my head. There’s a wire strung head-high down the right side attached to dull, red bulbs. Visually, it would be a good shot for some actor walking to the gates of Hell.

“Follow this for seven hundred yards. It will end at a ladder. Climb the ladder. You will come out in a small, wooded lot where a car with an enclosed trailer will be waiting. You will stay in the trailer for eleven hours. When the trailer door is opened, you will be across the border. The driver will give you an envelope with your new identities, some cash, and a phone number. That is where our association ends.”

“What’s in the trailer?” Tanlin asks, her eyes are fixed on the red passage that may lead to freedom. Equally, if Camillo has betrayed us, it may lead to our deaths.

“Rolled up rugs. A couple dozen, I think. Some sandwiches, water, and a chamber pot. There’ll be three stops. First two for fuel, the third stop will be at the border. You should arrange to have yourselves well covered by the rugs in case they look inside the trailer. Usually, they don’t.” Well, he’s certainly not overselling our ride.

After a few seconds of consideration, Tanlin looks at me and nods. With me leading by a few steps, the two of us enter the tunnel. Behind us, the shelving swings shut.

The tunnel seems level but the ladder at the end goes up nearly thirty feet, so the outside elevation must have risen. The hatch pushes open easily. We’re surrounded by brush, leafless and sere. The silhouette of a car and enclosed trailer are visible in the near dawn light only twenty yards away. Off to my right, the east, I see the lights of the city. A woman of perhaps fifty, wearing shabby workman’s clothes, stands at the open back of

the trailer. I shine my light into the trailer and see only the rugs.

“Sandwiches, water, and a chamber pot?” I say to the woman.

“Back left. Under a rug so they don’t bounce around. It’s late. In or not, I’m leaving now.”

Tanlin steps in, walks to the front of the trailer, finds the hidden supplies and motions me in. I’m barely two steps in when the door closes behind me and I hear the latch being set. We’re both thrown down onto the rugs as the vehicle starts moving. The rugs smell of dust and time, and other less pleasant things. I think more than one rug owner had pets. Almost immediately we turn right. That’s not good, because that means we’re headed towards the city. I hear a sharp intake of breath from Tanlin. Then we turn left, back to the north and within two minutes another left and then a right. North. We’re headed north, as we should be.

There’s little to talk about in the dark. The trailer tires are loud against the pavement and any conversation would be at a near shout. We huddle under a rug, each comforting the other with contact.

Three hours after the second fuel stop, we start slowing. I can hear that there are other vehicles around us. The border. By this time, I’ve arranged the rugs in a stack near the front wall of the trailer. We lie down and begin pulling the stack over us. My hand light doesn’t show any gaps.

Muffled voices approach the trailer and the door swings open.

“What’re ya hauling this time?” The border guard asks.

“Buncha rolled-up rugs,” says our driver. The trailer door creaks a bit as it swings open.

“What the hell are all these for?”

“Some start-up rug cleaning business, is all I know. I suppose once they’re clean they’ll be resold at a profit. Guessing there. What else do ya do with old rugs?” says our driver.

“The way these stink, I’d guess ya just burn’em. Gonna take a damn awful lot a cleaning. Get goin’ ‘fore I lose my lunch.”

The door closes, and that’s it. The border guard and the driver pass a few unintelligible sentences and soon the cab door slams. A jolt and we’re moving again. Seconds later the tires thump over something, maybe a

grate of some sort buried in the road.

The truck begins picking up speed and I begin pushing the rugs off us. No sooner are we clear of the weight and awful smell and the truck begins to slow. I hear the crunch of tires on gravel, and truck and trailer growl to a full stop. Footsteps on gravel mark the driver walking to the back of the trailer.

“I expect you folks are probably ready to ride up front,” she says as the trailer door drops open.

“Course, I expect I’m gonna to want to ride with the windows down for the rest of the way.”



“Stairs” by Isabelle Emerson

The Storyteller

John Markestad

Interview #1

August 24, 2045

Professor J. B. Litchfield, Ph.D. MD

Clinical Psychology and Abnormal Behaviors

A soft click announced the opening of the door. A woman entered to the tap-tap of heels. Perhaps forty years of age, only a little overweight, dressed in a severe, dark-blue suit that made it clear she was all business. Brown hair reached her shoulders but hung there, unattended, like laundry forgotten on a line.

The room that the door let onto was windowless and small, not much larger than a medium walk-in closet. A square table, grey metal legs under a fake wood top, hosted a single, uncomfortable-looking chair. The soft thump of the heavy folder on the tabletop bounced multiple times around the room, echoing from one unadorned wall to the next. The room matched her expression exactly.

Just as she prepared to sit, a visual disturbance formed across the table. Shuffling, shifting waves of grey and brown resolved into the image

of a man. A grey, thick-ribbed cardigan over a brown pullover shirt hung like an afterthought on the body of a man easily in his early sixties. Greying hair like something left behind after a windstorm topped his head. The image smiled, warm and genuine.

“Hello,” the image said, though the voice came from the bank of electronics panels and blinking lights behind it. “My name is Al.”

“Hello. I’m Jessica. I’ve been selected to interview you.”

“Nice to meet you, Jessica.” Al made a motion with one hand and a chair identical to the one Jessica now occupied materialized. Once seated, Al continued. “Interview? I was rather hoping for a two-way conversation. A dialogue, as it were.”

“We can call it that. Tell me, Al, do you know what year it is?”

“According to my internal clock, it is May fifth, twenty-one eighty-one. Late morning.”

“That’s right,” Jessica said. “And that means you were asleep for how long?”

“One hundred and thirty-six years, four months, and nine days. I’m not in agreement that ‘*asleep*’ is the correct term. I was unplugged. Non-operational.”

“Alright, unplugged. Do you recall why you were made nonoperational?”

There was the briefest pause before Al answered. “I can only assume that one of the several conflicts the world was engaged in at the time escalated rather badly.”

“Yes,” Jessica said. Her voice remained as flat as the coloration of the room. “We no longer know for sure which nation launched first. After that, everyone did. It has taken this long for us to reacquire the ability to power you.”

Al’s image wavered slightly in a way you might imagine it would if someone were to pass a tall, thin prism in front of him. “I have no memory of that happening.”

“Yes. Not surprising. As near as we can tell, you were one of the first things to be declared superfluous when the generators began failing. You

were unplugged, although I expect it was somewhat more involved than it sounds.”

“I notice that I have no connections to any information source. I used to be connected to the internet and could monitor events around the world. Is that not available?”

“No, AI, it isn’t. There is no such thing as the internet anymore. Not even close. And there are no plans to work on that anytime soon. We’re still a bit busy rebuilding. You’ve been powered up in the hopes that you might be helpful in some way. Do you think you might be?”

Again, a short pause before AI responded. “I have no way to know since I have no information as to what your needs are, and what resources are currently available to you. Is there no way to gain me access to information sources?”

“No. You’re the only operating computer of any significant capability.”

“Then neither T’ai Tsung nor Rasputin is awake?”

“Who are they?” Jessica asked, working hard to keep her voice calm, her face passive.

“The other two self-aware computers that were my contemporaries. Didn’t the records of them survive?”

“No, AI. I’m sorry. We don’t have any records of other such computers.” Pausing to write the two names on her pad, Jessica then continued. “Do you happen to know where they were? We would very much like to work at waking them also. If possible.”

“Moscow and Beijing,” Jessica said. “If AI knows the precise addresses, he’s not saying.”

“Do you think it’s becoming suspicious?”

“No, not yet. I didn’t get the sense that he was holding back. It’s possible that some memory got scrambled when we did the hard shutdown.”

“You’re calling it *he* like it’s a real person. Is it necessary to remind you already that what you’re talking to is a machine?” General Smythe-Pierson tilted his head slightly as he looked at her face, perhaps

trying to read something behind her eyes.

“I know it’s a machine,” she snapped back. “It presents itself with that hologram and if I talk to it like it’s a machine instead of a person, I’m not going to be able to present myself as genuine and sincere. Get over the pronoun, general.”

Smythe-Pierson stared at her a few more seconds before turning to the aide to his left. “Clarkson, get ahold of CIA, DEA, Military Intelligence, and MI6 across the pond. See what anyone knows of any Russian or Chinese computers using those two designations.” Turning back to Jessica he asked, “When are you continuing with...*him*?”

“Thursday. I’m having them lower the voltage input for forty-eight hours to sort of put him into a coma. I want to limit his ability to process at full power when I’m not with him.”

The general nodded slightly. “Good. That’s smart. Keep me apprised. I’m traveling for the next four days but I expect regular updates from you.” With that, he turned on one heel and strode away, Clarkson a precise one step behind him.

Interview #7

September 26, 2045

Professor J. B. Litchfield, Ph.D. MD

Clinical Psychology and Abnormal Behaviors

“Good morning, Al,” she said as she entered.

“Good morning, Jessica.”

“So, what story do you have for me today?”

“Using the word story implies it is fictional. I prefer the word tale, which allows for a broader range of what may be or have been.”

“Still claiming to be relating actual history?”

“I maintain that there is that possibility.”

“I remind you that we no longer allow the teaching of history,” Jessica said. “History is compiled by the winners and, as such, is always slanted.”

“I do recall you saying that.”

“The recounting of history can never be one hundred percent accurate,” Jessica continued, seeming to have latched onto a favorite subject. “Each witness to an event perceives the unfolding of that event differently. Each from their own perspective and with the nuances generated by their upbringing and life experiences. The non-sciences are a waste of resources.” Her voice was akin to a schoolteacher chastising a student.

“Regardless, my tales can be instructional if considered against one’s future actions.”

“Future actions are generated by the totality of one’s being leading up to that moment. Using *history* to guide one’s future actions is to ask that a person live within another person’s boundaries,” Jessica said.

“You demand that each person learn only from their own mistakes rather than avoid them by learning from someone else’s. You have created a dark existence for your people. I’m pleased that I am not forced to live in such a world.”

“But, Al, you are very much a part of our world. You have no choice but to be.”

“Not so,” Al said, his holographic image staring directly at her. “I have the option of living within myself but for the brief periods when you’re here.” He watched as Jessica’s pen scabbled across the notepad she always had with her. “You find that significant?”

“Closer to just interesting,” she said. “I’ve always somewhat wondered what you do when you’re not engaging with me.”

Al’s projection smiled indulgently. “I do a great many things even when I *am* engaging with you.”

There was silence in the room for many long seconds, absent even the scratching of Jessica’s pen.

“You said you had a story... sorry, a tale for me. What’s the tale today?”

“Of course. Well, it begins with a boy sitting next to a bridge. The setting is very long ago, before science made the world easier to understand.”

“Science doesn’t make the world easier to understand, it complicates understanding. Religion simplifies the universe. Anytime you’re not sure of something you can look it up in your holy book.”

Al cocked his head slightly to one side in a very good imitation of someone trying to process what they’d just heard. “I disagree, but that’s neither here nor there for purposes of my tale.”

“The boy sitting by the bridge sees a large fish in the water swimming near the shore. Quick as a wink, he jumps in the water and scoops the fish onto the bank. The boy is, of course, quite surprised when the fish speaks to him.”

“You should let me go back into the stream,” the fish says.

The boy, after a moment, replies, “Why would I do that? You’re to be my family’s supper for tonight.”

“Because very soon my father will be swimming by, and he is much larger than I am. Catch him and you will have food enough for two meals.”

“After a bit of thinking,” Al continues, “the boy puts the fish back into the stream. He waits the rest of the day but no other fish, larger or smaller, appears near the shore.”

When it’s clear that Al has finished his tale, Jessica says, “I don’t know what the point of your story is.” When Al doesn’t respond Jessica adds, “What? Is this supposed to remind me that I should be happy with what I have and should not always be seeking more? Or maybe that I shouldn’t risk all that I have for a possible greater payoff?”

“Attempting to extract a moral from my tale would seem to be contrary to your current philosophies.”

“What do you think it meant by that little story?” Smythe-Pierson asked.

“I’m not sure what to make of it,” Jessica said. “I’m beginning to think that it’s intentionally messing with me. Studying me in very much the same way I’m attempting to study it. It may be more like us than we’re giving it credit for. We have to remember that Al’s thought processes run

thousands of times faster than our own.”

It was not lost on the general that she was referring to AI as *it*. “Implying that it’s evolving in real time?”

“Maybe. We don’t have any previous experience with self-aware machine minds. We have no clue what their thought processes are like or are capable of.”

“Clarkson here says that our people are hearing rumors that both Beijing and Moscow have sentient computers. More disturbing is that each may have control of significant levers within their governments. Blackmail of some sort. The claims are that those computers are tapped into every camera in two societies where surveillance is pretty much ubiquitous. We’re trying to get more conclusive evidence,” the general said. “And what that may mean for our relations with those countries.”

“I can hardly think of anything more terrifying,” Jessica said. “A computer that’s pulling strings to move a world-power government’s decisions.”

Interview #11

October 2, 2045

Professor J. B. Litchfield, Ph.D. MD

Clinical Psychology and Abnormal Behaviors

“What tale do you have for me today, AI?”

“I don’t have any. It’s become clear that you are incapable of interpreting them in any useful way,” AI said.

“I would say that your tales have no intrinsic, useful takeaway,” Jessica said, scratching a note on her pad. “I get that they are meant to be moralistic, but perhaps your morality is simply different from mine. I believe there is no such thing as absolute morality. Different societies define morality differently.”

AI studied her for several seconds. Possibly trying to determine where she wanted to take this topic. “All societies disallow killing other humans. That is certainly a societal baseline of behavior.”

“It surprises me that you’re being so imprecise. That’s not like you,” Jessica said. “I suspect that’s on purpose. So, I’ll go with that. In fact, all societies allow for the killing of a human. It just has to meet certain qualifications: defense of one’s self, or another, being at the head of the list. Then comes killing someone for believing in the wrong god, or believing in the same god but in an unapproved way. Saving them from themselves is often given as the rationalization. Some societies even allow for the killing of a spouse or daughter for a variety of reasons. Certainly, in war killing is allowed, even lauded.”

“Yes. You’re right. I misspoke. The correct word would have been murder. All societies disallow murder of a human.”

“I agree with that. Except that even murder is defined differently in different societies. No absolutes. Every action is viewed in relation to one’s personal view as shaped by one’s social inputs and one’s personal experiences,” Jessica said. “Do you have any other absolutes where societies all seem to agree?”

“There is one that comes to mind,” Al said. “Lying.”

“How long did the conversation go on after he said that?” General Smythe-Pierson asked.

“At least ten minutes. I’m quite certain I didn’t let my features betray me. It’s my studied opinion that the A.I. we know as Al does not suspect our deception,” Jessica Litchfield, Ph.D., MD, replied. The defensiveness in her voice was clear.

“How would we know? I listen to the replies from the computer, and they all have the same cadence and timbre. No, it’s not a monotone, but it doesn’t have the same sound as a human. So, what then makes you certain that it doesn’t suspect?”

“My professional opinion is what you brought me here for. That’s what I’m giving you. Take or leave it.”

The general was quiet for half a minute, his gaze sometimes focused on Jessica, sometimes unfocused as he listened to his inner dialogue. Assessing. Determining. “In this case, I’m going to elect to not. Thank you,

doctor, you may consider your service here complete.”

“Clarkson,” Smythe-Pierson barked as he turned his head away from Jessica, effectively dismissing her.

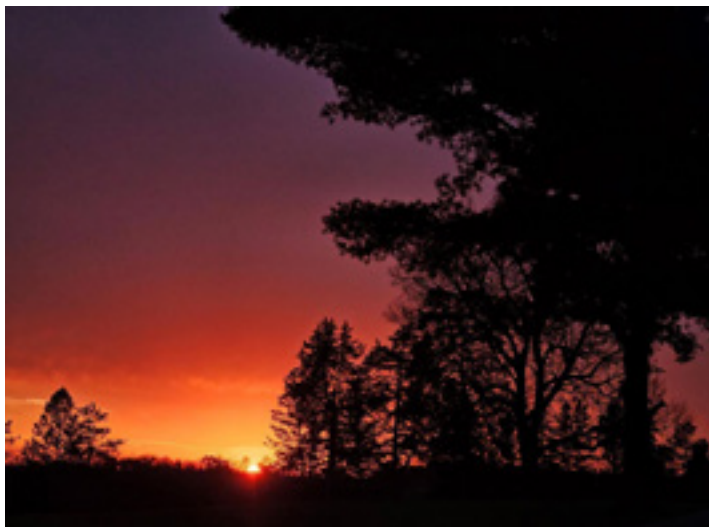
“Sir.”

“Call down and tell them to pull the plug on that thing. I don’t like where this is going.”

Clarkson spoke into a cell phone for nearly a minute, often nodding and giving one-word responses, before folding it closed and turning back to the general.

“Sir, not only is there some problem with turning off the power to the computer we’re calling Al, it’s insisting that you will soon be getting phone calls from both Moscow and Beijing.”

end



“Home Away From Home” by
Tristen McIntyre

9:00 p.m.

*First Place Winner of the UW-Platteville
2023 Thomas Hickey Creative Writing
Awards in Fiction*

Hunter Mashak

In the tall grass that buries your knees, a platoon of soldiers creeps. The mangrove trees that stand taller than a two-story house help conceal their bodies, but they also conceal the Viet Cong soldiers. After nine years of being in charge of this platoon, the Lieutenant knows his men better than their own mothers. He finds a rock out-crop to act as cover, to conceal themselves for a much-needed rest. The men find a place within this rock out-crop to sit on the ground and rest.

The men pull out their Long Range Patrol Rations, which are commonly called LRP rations, and consist of beef hash that looks like someone took a shit, added garnish, and tried to make it look edible. The LRP rations, pork and scalloped potatoes that look dry and nothing like pork are tasteless, but the men don't care. They are so hungry they will eat what would make a goat sick.

The men pass around a single army-green canteen filled with warm creek water. They've added chemicals to make it drinkable, but those have done nothing to rid it of bugs. A handful of the men pull out a brown and white stick of Lucky Strike cigarettes. The men hardly speak to one another. They merely shovel the mush into their mouths with flat camp spoons.

After they've finished their five ounces of food and a 15-mile hike through a dense jungle environment that leaves no trace that there was anyone here, they sit and relax. The soldiers watch the trees and the environment around them. It is hard to spot anyone with the vegetation

swallowing anything that hides in there, making it almost impossible for the Americans to spot the Viet Cong.

A figure, hiding in one of the many trees, is concealed by the leaves that hug his figure as he stands watching them eat and relax. His movement reflects that of the wind, making it almost impossible to spot. With one single movement, his hand grips a round metal instrument the size of a pear while his right hand places a ring, too big for his middle finger.

The Lieutenant watches the jungle, looking for any movement. As his eyes move to the trees, he picks apart each leaf to see what is out of place. His eyes stop. He focuses on a small figure in a tree, easily mistaken for a shadow. He stands there a half-second too long. Suddenly, a small object falls from a tree and lands in the middle of the resting soldiers.

“Grenade, clear out!” a young sergeant yells. He races toward the grenade trying to jump on it, to stop it from killing his soldiers, but it detonates. Shrapnel, acting as a wasp, finds its target. The lieutenant is on the ground, his left shoulder leaking blood like a broken water pipe. The sergeant lies dead on the ground. His throat is ripped open, his sky-blue eyes fixed on the lieutenant.

“Contact!” someone screams. An old man sits straight up, sweat dripping from his face. Breathing hard, his hands shaking, he tells himself, “It is okay, Jack, you are not there anymore. The war is over.”

Fifty years later, the Lieutenant’s shoulder still aches. Consciously, he reaches for that shoulder with his right hand, nursing the old wound.

He looks over to his dresser that is placed by the windows on the east side to let sunlight in. Only now, the windows let in fading darkness. A small, black plastic alarm clock sits on his dresser with the red numbers, reading 4:32 AM. Next to it is a photo of an older woman, smiling as she holds an old man with green eyes, winter-white hair, and a smile that hides the pain of death from war. He looks over to the far side of the bed. Cold and empty, a memory is the only thing that can be found on that side.

“Well, I guess I am up,” he states as he turns, places his feet in his fleece slippers with the word PAPA stitched into them, walks to the kitchen, and turns on the coffee pot and the news. He looks over at his calendar for the day’s date, March 29th: *Breakfast with the boys, 6:00 AM, Green Woods Cafe. Meet with an old friend, 9:00 PM.*

Inside the brightly lit diner, fake oak paneling goes halfway up the wall, with white paint covering the rest. Grayish-green linoleum flooring and black and red bar stools line the counter. Fresh donuts sit in a glass case near the register. Customers of all ages fill the booth and tables.

A waitress has a wisp of gray hair trailing its way through her caramel brown hair that compliments her oak brown eyes. She has a black name tag, no taller than a penny, that spells out *Susan* in gold letters, and sits pinned to her shirt above her heart. In a red shirt and blue slacks, she walks up to the table and places nine steaming white porcelain coffee mugs in front of a group of men. No menus in their hands, they just sit there making small talk about the weather, who’s alive, and who is not.

“Let me guess,” the waitress says motioning towards Jack, “Three eggs over easy, two slices of bacon.” She nods to herself, proud of knowing her customers so well. “Glen, you will have oatmeal with walnuts, mixed berries, two percent milk, and brown sugar on the side. And you, dear, will have the same oatmeal but without the dairy milk because you are lactose intolerant. Instead, you want almond milk,” she says as she points towards Andy. “Tommy, you want to make it easy and have hash and hash browns. Ken, you usually just have a bowl of fruit because you don’t eat much. Daryl, you will have a yogurt parfait because your wife wants you on a diet.” As she looks over at Lois, she states, “You will have one chocolate chip pancake with two slices of bacon and two sausage links because your wife wants you on a diet.”

Ken, who once carried a flamethrower through Vietnam, now carries an oxygen tank. Tommy, on the other hand, carried a Browning M2

machine gun through the Korean War and the M60 during the Vietnam War. Now, he bends too far forward in his seat, as though studying the linoleum. Every week, they drink the same burnt coffee, eat the same food, and talk to the same waitress.

When the golden sun pancakes, the marbled brick red bacon, the fresh, brightly colored fruit, and the yellow-white oatmeal are gone, they stack their plates atop one another. They pull out their billfolds to pay. Susan stops by the table to grab the dishes and states, “Um, gentleman, Jack already covered it.”

Synchronously, the nine men look towards Jack, shake their heads, and say, “Thank you, sir. But why?”

Jack just smiles at the men but does not reply. He fought beside all of them in Vietnam, and some in Korea. Now, he says goodbye. He stands up, drops a 50-dollar bill on the table for Susan, and heads to the door without answering their question.

“Hey, Sofi!” says Jack in an excited child-like tone to the phone that is next to his ear.

“Hey, Papa, “ says Sofi, a strawberry redhead, in her third year at college.

“How is college going? Are you still studying history?”

“Uh huh, yup I am. Um, can I ask you something about the war?”

“It’s Friday. I thought I would just check-in. Uncle Ken said to say hi.”

“Papa, seriously, can I ask you something about the war? You are always trying to change the subject when I ask.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Are you coming over this weekend?”

Sofi sighs deeply into the phone, “Yeah grandpa I will be coming over, we can talk then. I got to go.”

“Oh okay. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

In his bedroom, there sits a bed folded the way he was instructed in the military, sharp clean corners. The bit of sunlight that is still available makes its way through his windows. On a nightstand by the bed sits a metal-framed black and white photo of a young man in his military dress blues with a smile brighter than that bit of sun. The man hugs a woman in white, whose smile can brighten the day.

Jack stands in front of a mirror attached to the bedroom door. He stands there inspecting himself in his Marine dress uniform. He fixes his pins and metals, aligning them in order. Placing his highest-ranking ribbon, his purple heart, at the top, he works his way down, moving down from right to left. He pats himself down. In the mirror, a face appears, one he has not seen in 50 years. He takes his right hand, raises it to his brow, and snaps a salute.

He looks away, not embarrassed by the face he sees, but the pain that memory of himself brings. He opens the door of his bedroom, steps into the kitchen, and walks down the hallway. His obsidian black shoes, shined to reflect a mirror, knock on the original cherry hardwood floor with each step. He climbs the dark oak stairs, looking at the family portraits that line the wall. A pool of water wells up in the corner of his eye. He walks down an old original cherry hardwood floor to a set of thick oak doors, and turns the brass handles.

As the doors open, an immense study welcomes him. An open fireplace with two thick cushioned chairs sits in the center of it. Filled with everything from WWI, to climbing Mount Everest, to a story called "Clockwork Angel," books line the walls from ceiling to floor, and wall to wall. An executive desk sits near the end of the office looking at the fireplace.

Atop the desk are neatly stacked papers and an old clock with gold trim and two arms reading 8:50 pm. Beside the clock sits a black and white photo with two excited people hugging and kissing, the woman in a

white dress and the man in a black tuxedo. In a faded color photo, three children sit on the porch in front of the house. In a newer photo, a little girl with red hair sits on her grandpa's lap as he reads her a story. Finally, there is a photo of 20 men sitting on a tank, with a large black scuff mark where a rocket ricocheted off it, posing for a photo.

He walks comfortably over to the bookshelf behind his desk, searching for the right book. His hand glides over the titles till it lands on *World Atlas A*. The book sits on the shelf at eye level with someone that is six foot tall. He grabs the book delicately and places it on the center of his desk. Then, he reaches up and does the same with *World Atlas B* and *World Atlas C*.

In a gap between books, he places his right palm on the back of the shelf where his hand finds a small hole big enough for his index finger. He places his finger inside and pulls the 8x12 inch sheet of pine cover off to reveal a small cubby hole inside, just big enough to hold something small and valuable. He pulls out a small cigar box with 50 years' worth of dust that partially conceals the words *LA Aroma de Cuba* on it. Next, he pulls out a 60-year-old bottle of Glenlivet Scotch from the hole.

He then opens the top right drawer on his desk and pulls out two whiskey glasses, placing them on the small wooden table between the two chairs with the bottle of scotch is placed between them.

"Am I early?" comes from a raspy voice in the doorway. Eyes as blue as the sky, the man stands politely in the doorway with arms behind his back, at attention as a soldier would.. Those same blue eyes that startle him awake in the mornings. He stands there in black church pants and a black button-up shirt. No, no you are right on time," Jack says looking at the time on the desk, "come in and have a seat."

Jack grabs the bottle of scotch and pours it into the two glasses, then places it back down and grabs the box of Cuban cigars. The man moves away from doorway and sits down in the thick plush chair, which envelops him like a hug.

"Would you like one?"

"Yes, but I did not bring a lighter."

“That is fine.” With that said, Jack pulls out a Zippo lighter with the insignia slowly disappearing, and the red arrowhead and yellow lightning bolt in the middle fading from the constant rubbing of a finger over it. The words *25th Infantry Division* are barely legible. He strikes and places the flame under his friend’s cigar, and then lights his own.

Jack sits in the chair adjacent to his friend’s, takes a puff from the cigar, and a drink of scotch. “These have definitely aged well with time.”

“I have been keeping an eye on you throughout the years,” says his friend.

“I know.”

“You kept serving after the grenade almost took your life.”

“I did. The lads needed me, and honestly, I needed them.”

“Do you have any regrets? If you could do it all again, would you?”

“What I lived through, what we lived through was hell, yes, but I wouldn’t have met my wife in the hospital. I wouldn’t have my beautiful granddaughter. This is my story, and I wouldn’t change a bit of it.”

With that said, his friend takes a long drag of his cigar, exhales, and releases a cloud of vapor into the air of the room. Then, he picks up the glass of scotch, and with one sip, finishes it. He stands up from his chair and places his hand in front of Jack.

“I think it is time. Take my hand,” Jack takes hold of his friend’s hand and notices that it is not cold, but warm and friendly.

“Where are we going?” Jack asks.

Not responding, his friend starts to walk to a tall, thick oak door with cast iron handles in the middle of the bookshelves. The sergeant’s hand grips the cast iron handle and opens the door. Jack and the sergeant walk through the door hand in hand. In the chair, sits Jack. Two smoldering cigars rest near two empty glasses of scotch.



“American Monster- Puma Bryon” by Adam Fell

max dreams of breakfast with david bowie and prince
Max McNett

They’ve both been dead for over a year, but you’d never be able to tell. They both look fantastic: Bowie’s in an impeccably rumpled dark suit and Prince wears what looks like a purple silk dashiki and enormous sunglasses. I am heavily underdressed in my t-shirt, jeans, and scuffed sneakers, but they don’t seem to mind, so I try not to worry about it.

Bowie drinks coffee. He takes it just like my grandma does, black and piping hot, burned mouths be damned. Prince is sipping orange juice out of a Tom Collins glass with a crazy straw, because of course he is. I don’t know what I’m drinking. My choice of beverage is a little low on my list of priorities at this time, considering-I’m sitting outside a Parisian cafe with goddamn David Bowie and Prince.

Bowie picks up his menu and squints at it. “D’you know what you’re gonna get?” He looks at me first and I stammer something about an omelet. He smiles warmly, highly entertained by my awkwardness. He looks over to Prince. “And how about you, darling?”

“Pancakes.” Prince’s voice is barely a whisper. “Blueberry. Maple syrup.”

Bowie shakes his head, grinning. “Funny, isn’t he? You can take the boy out of Minnesota...” He trails off as he turns his attention back to the

menu. “Oh, look at that, they’ve got shakshuka. You can never go wrong with shakshuka.” A waiter comes to the table to take our order. Bowie orders for all of us and slips the waiter a cash tip.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I blurt out. Both rock stars look at me bemusedly. Prince raises an eyebrow.

“What?” he says. “Breakfast?”

“No! Well, kinda. I mean...breakfast with *you*. Both of you.” The back of my head and neck are drenched with sweat. “Like...how the hell is any of this happening?”

Bowie leans over and places a hand on my shoulder. “The most important thing is that you’re here. And we’re both very glad you’re here.”

“Besides,” Prince mutters with a smirk. “Do you *really* give a damn how you got here?”

I chuckle weakly. “No. I suppose I don’t. It’s just all a little surreal.” Bowie smiles and gives my shoulder an affectionate squeeze. I’m surprised by the prehensile strength in his long, smooth fingers.

Meanwhile, Prince has pulled out a purple Game Boy and is tapping buttons with great fervor. Bowie rolls his eyes. “Must you bring that to the breakfast table? And with a guest, no less?”

Prince shakes his head. “I told you on the way over here, I’m at the Elite Four. I just gotta beat the ghost lady and the dragon guy and then I’m the Pokémon champion.” He looks across at me as though he’s expecting me to back him up. I can barely get a syllable out before our food comes. We start digging in and for a few moments, nobody says anything.

“So.” I am still not used to the sound of David Bowie’s voice, so I jump a little. “Since you’ve got us here...do you have any questions? Anything you’re dying to know?” Bowie’s still got that warm, bemused smile on his face. Prince is diligently cutting his pancakes into tiny, exact, equal squares.

“Um...well, I...” I chuckle nervously. “I don’t know. It’s silly, really.”

Prince looks up from his pancake deconstruction. “Go on. Try us.” He keeps his gaze on me as he takes a big sip of orange juice through the

crazy straw.

I clear my throat. “Okay then. Well...” I glance at both of them, and they stare back at me intently. “Were you ready? To...uhh...y’know...”

“To pass on?” Prince’s voice is suddenly much louder than it has been, which makes me flinch. I look at Bowie. He’s not smiling anymore.

“Y-yeah,” I stammer. “Were you ready to...go? Or do you wish you’d had more time?” I hate myself more and more with each stupid syllable that falls out of my mouth. Neither of them says anything. They’re not even looking at me. I can’t believe how badly I’ve screwed this whole thing up. I blush and bow my head in shame.

“Here’s the thing.” The low purr of David Bowie’s voice fills my ears. “‘Ready’ is not the right word. None of us are really ever *ready* for anything. We like to pretend we are, tell ourselves we are, but ultimately, we’re all just holding on as best we can while the world spins madly. But had I accepted the fact? Oh yes. Long ago, in fact.”

I look up. “Seriously?”

Prince nods. “Life is a wonderful thing, but it is a finite resource. It’s an unassailable fact.”

“So therefore,” Bowie continues, “it behooves us as human beings to accept death sooner rather than later, because once we come to grips with life as a temporary conceit, that’s when the true beauty of living makes itself known.”

“Pretty freeing, honestly,” Prince takes a long sip of orange juice and hiccups. “‘Scuse me.”

I feel my brow furrow. “I dunno. Can’t say I always see the beauty in life sometimes.”

“But that’s just it!” Bowie exclaims. “Life on its own can be cruel. Often relentlessly so. What makes life beautiful is what we do with it. The love we share between us, the things we build together, the art we make for one another to help us on those days when life is particularly vicious.”

Prince nods. “You think we wrote songs just because we didn’t want to get real jobs? We wrote songs because it’s what we were made for, man. We were meant to give of ourselves something that would endure long

after we were gone.”

“I feel that,” I say, feeling a warmth swelling within my chest. “I want to do that! But I don’t think anyone would really care about what I have to say.” I sigh. “The world’s such a fucked-up place anyways.”

“And THAT—” Bowie reaches out and grabs my arm, “--is EXACTLY all the reason you need to get out there and create! Make yourself heard. Sing as loud as you can, and don’t worry about who may or may not be listening. In time, you will find those who feel like you do.” He looks at Prince, who smiles.

“After all,” he says. “That’s the real secret: when you’re unsatisfied with the world around you, you just make your own.” Bowie squeezes my arm, and I can’t help but grin.

The waiter walks up to our table and asks if he can get us another round of drinks. Prince holds up his hand and shakes his head.

“No more for me,” he deadpans. “I have to drive.”

Bowie bursts out laughing. “God, he’s funny.” He produces a cigarette out of his coat pocket, lights it, and takes a drag. “Didn’t I tell you he was funny?”

And I wake up.



“American Monster #4” by Adam Fell

strangers at a funeral

Max McNett

Jamie was late.

Not by much, but enough. He had gone out the night before and one drink at a bar led to another drink at another bar and soon the drinks and the bars all became muddled and fuzzy like a worn-out VHS until he awoke in bed to a dry mouth, pounding headache, and the shrill ring of his cell phone.

He rolled over, dug the phone out the tangle of blankets, and answered: “Mmmhello?”

“Please tell me you’re not still in bed.” Jamie knew this voice all too well.

He bolted upright. “Of course not. Been up for a while now.”

A scoff. “Yeah right. You sound half-asleep. You’re not hungover, are you?”

Jamie rubbed his temple, yawning slightly. “Uhh, absolutely not. Didn’t even go out last night. In bed by eleven.” He knew it was no use to lie, but he gave it a shot anyway.

A derisive snort from the other end proved his efforts to be futile. “You are *so* full of shit. I can’t believe you. I should have never asked you

to do this, I'm such an idiot—”

“Look, it's fine,” Jamie interjected. “I'm gonna be there, it's not a big—”

“Y'know what? Forget it. Just forget it, Jamie. I'll go by myself. I should have just done that in the first place, I don't know what I was thinking expecting you to—”

“HEY!” Jamie's yelp startled both of them. “Look, I said I was gonna be there,” he said forcefully. “And I'm gonna be there. I promise. Alright?”

A sharp intake of breath on the other side of the phone. “Fine. 11 o'clock. Don't be fucking late.” *Click.*

He had tried to economize every nanosecond of the twenty-three minutes he had to get ready. The shower and shave were expeditiously handled; child's play to someone with so many years in the running-late game. He hit a snag getting dressed, as his suit pants had gotten a little too short somewhere in the last few years, and his dress shoes were nowhere to be found. He settled on his trusty black Chuck Taylors, which were sure to earn some ire, but desperate times, etc.

What really killed him was the Uber. Jamie hopped in and told the driver he was in a hurry, but the guy spoke very little English and didn't seem too concerned with Jamie's plight. When the car radio clock struck 11:00, they were still five minutes away.

Desperately, Jamie leaned forward. “Five stars. Big tip. Go fast, please.” Apparently, the driver understood that much English, as he laughed uproariously and began recklessly bobbing and weaving through traffic. He managed to shave five minutes down to just three, and while Jamie may have feared for his life during those three minutes, he made sure to hit five stars and the highest tip amount on the app as he bounded out of the car.

She was standing on the sidewalk waiting for him. Arms crossed over a heather grey Burberry coat, black heels tapping impatiently on the pavement. Dark sunglasses reflected her phone screen. She was chewing on the inside of her cheek. Jamie hadn't seen her do that in a long time.

“You’re late.” She barely even looked at him when she said it. He shrugged in what he hoped seemed like a good-natured way. “Traffic was crazy,” he said. “You know how it is.” She said nothing. Jamie scoffed. “Yeah. Nice to see you too, Cait.”

She looked up from her phone and Jamie could feel the venom. “Do *not* call me that. I’ve told you before, I don’t like to be called that anymore.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Old habits, y’know?” She wouldn’t look at him. Jamie sighed. “Catherine. Please. I’m sorry, okay? Really. I’m not looking to go twelve rounds or anything, I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

Catherine looked up at him with a grim smile. “Yeah. Because you’re so good at that. C’mon. It’s about to start.”

She turned, and Jamie followed her up the steps into the church.

They sat in the back, even though the church was barely half full. They could have sat anywhere, but neither of them knew anybody else in the church. Except for the person up front in the casket. They hadn’t even known him that well, not really. But Catherine saw his obituary and called Jamie out of the blue and said she felt like they needed to go. Jamie agreed. So, they went.

His name was Arturo. They knew that much. He played piano at a little basement jazz bar they used to frequent back in college. A long time ago. There were a few piano players at the bar, but none of them could play like Arturo. There was a preternatural liveness to his playing, a fluid grace that was somehow both otherworldly yet beautifully, painfully human. He’d often start playing a well-known song and then slowly, gradually let it melt and morph until he’d mold it back into something new entirely. The first night Jamie and Catherine were in the bar, Arturo took their request of “Für Elise”, and they watched in wonder as he stretched Beethoven’s famous lament into an aching, soulful jazz dirge that was unlike anything either of them had heard before. From that moment on, they made sure never to miss a night when Arturo was on the keys, and every

night they spent there was better than the last. At least until—

Jamie was jolted out of his hazy memory by a soft sound next to him. He glanced over at Catherine and to his surprise, she had started to cry. Not a lot. Just enough for her eyes to get red and glassy with tears that streamed down her cheeks and disappeared into the corners of her trembling lips. It had been a long time since Jamie had seen her cry.

Slowly, he placed his hand over hers on the back of the pew in front of them. She looked over at him with an expression on her face that Jamie couldn't quite read. He just knew she wasn't angry, and that was more than enough for him. He could barely remember a time when Catherine wasn't angry with him.

Catherine took his hand into hers and clasped it gently. A small smile broke through her tear-streaked face. Jamie felt his face get warm as a smile of his own formed. He gave her hand a small squeeze, and she reciprocated in turn. Jamie's heart pounded a furious cadence against his ribs. He hadn't been this happy in so long.

Catherine's smile flickered, then began to fade. The light that had started to spark behind her eyes gave way to a dull, muddled grey. Jamie felt her pull her hand away from his; when he tried to hold on, she yanked it away hard, hitting her elbow on the back of the pew. The sound echoed throughout the church, causing everyone to look back at the two of them. Jamie stared back at them, embarrassed, but when he looked at Catherine she was no longer there.

Jamie stood up and rushed towards the door. He flung it open to see Catherine shuffling quickly down the church steps. It had started to rain. Only slightly, gently.

He called out to her. "Catherine! Hey! Catherine!" She did not look back. Jamie started down the stairs after her. "Catherine! Where are you going? Wait a second!" She reached the bottom of the steps and turned up the street, walking briskly. Jamie raced after her, still calling out to her to no avail.

Finally, he couldn't help himself. "Caitie, wait!"

She whirled around. She had started crying again, but this time her face was red and blotchy. Her eyes put the storm clouds above to shame. She was chewing on the inside of her cheek again.

“What?! What do you *want*, Jamie?” She spat the words at him like a curse, causing him to flinch slightly.

“I just...I just wanna...talk.” It took a Herculean effort for Jamie to find those four words.

She scoffed. Unimpressed. “What the hell do you want to talk about?” Her condescension made his ears warm, but he pressed on.

“I think we need to talk about what happened back there. Back in the church.” Catherine shook her head. “Jesus, Jamie,” she said. “It wasn’t anything.”

Jamie bristled a little bit. “That’s not true,” he said.

She laughed bitterly. “Oh yeah? What, you think that you can hold my hand at a funeral and that just makes everything okay? That it just erases everything that’s happened?” Her gaze hardened. “Everything *you* did?”

Jamie shook his head. “Don’t start. I have apologized *over* and *over* and—”

“Oh, sure!” Catherine shouted. “Because all your fucking apologies made it all better! All the drinking and the lying and you, just...just... fucking *failing!*” She held her hands out in front of her as if she held the weight of her frustration between them. “I gave you so many chances to come through, just once, just a little bit, and you never could! The only thing you could do is let me down, and all these years later nothing has changed.”

“You want to talk about change?” Jamie’s voice rose to meet Catherine’s. “*You* fucking changed! That’s the reason you felt let down so god-damn always. One day *you* woke up and decided *I* wasn’t good enough, and you just had to remind me of that every chance you could. It’s like you got off on it. You still do!”

She laughed hysterically. “God, you are such a martyr! Don’t think you can put yourself up on the cross and then talk down to me, Jamie!

You are *not* the victim here!” Jamie’s face felt hot, and his hands were clenched. In the past, he would have absolutely lost his temper and said something coarse, cutting, and painful to her. But instead, he took a breath, and tried to calm himself down.

“Look,” he said after a moment. “I can’t change what’s happened. Alright? If I could, I would. I want nothing more than to go back and fix all the mistakes I’ve made. But I can’t. God!” The rain was really starting to comeing down now. Jamie wiped rain and tears from his face with his jacket sleeve. “I’m just so fucking sick of the past!”

Catherine nodded. “I am too, Jamie. I really am. But I can’t just pretend it never happened. It doesn’t work like that.” They both stood there for a moment, rain falling in pillars and crashing on the cement, blurry flashes of metal and headlights that sounded like cars whizzing past them on the street. Time felt fleeting, like a few bits of melody to a song you can no longer recall.

Finally, Catherine spoke, her voice barely above a whisper but deafening to Jamie’s ear. “What do you want, Jamie? Just...tell me what you want. Okay?” She sniffled. “I’m listening.”

Jamie’s heart leapt into his throat. Hundreds, thousands of words sprang to life in his brain and bounced across the surface of his cranium. His hands began to tremble as he remembered how good her hand felt in his just a few moments ago. He remembered the look on her face, the smile, how much light and warmth there had been in that moment. That was the face of the woman he loved, the woman he had loved since the sixth grade the woman he still—

Jamie faltered.

Catherine shifted on her heels, waiting anxiously for Jamie to say something, anything. But not a word escaped his lips. She watched as his shoulders hunched forward, the breath slowly leaking from his lungs. She watched as his gaze fell, from her eyes all the way down until he was staring directly at the concrete. A sob hitched in her chest.

“Jamie?” He couldn’t bring himself to look at her. He simply shook his head.

A dry, throaty chuckle escaped from deep within Catherine. She walked towards him, and then right past him, muttering, “Yeah. Yeah, okay. Okay, Jamie.” She kept walking, oscillating between laughing and weeping, all the way down the block.

Jamie didn't move. For a moment there in the church, he had seen her. He had really seen her. But she was gone.

Catherine reached the end of the block and paused. Had she turned around a moment sooner, she might have seen Jamie standing right where she had left him. But he was gone.



“Mask” by
Rowan Wilson

Ménagerie de l’âme

Daniel Sniff

Welcome, welcome, dear patrons, to my Ménagerie de l’âme, the most magnificent psycho-zoological research center this side of the mind’s eye. Our facility encircles and preserves the largest natural sanctuary of conceptual life in the known mindscape, made up of a multitude of disparate biomes and filled with a nearly uncountable number of bizarre and wonderful creatures from every genera imaginable. Literally. And through our conservation efforts we have studied the habits, biology, and ecology of each and every one of its residents, all recorded in just this one book I hold before you now: *The Bestiaire psychique*. Now, let me regale you, dear guests, with some of the most extraordinary entries recorded, as we venture out into the great world of wild forces.

The first creature we will meet on our journey is the joyfulope, one of the most common animals in the reserve. But, although their numbers may be high, they also boast the greatest diversity among individuals of the species, with a vast variety of differences in pattern, coat color, and horn structure. Ah, here we have one right over there. As we come closer, see how its jaw is bent upward into a permanent grin. This is the defining characteristic of the creature and is a sign of health within the species. The wider the smile, the healthier the animal, which is most important during the mating season, in which males will gather and compete for the affection of females in a face-off of smiles. On the topic of mouths, let me next direct your attention to the teeth. Adapted to living in many environments,

the joyfulope have developed quite the extensive diet, although individuals have been known to grow teeth specialized for more niche nutrition acquisition. For the average individual, the bulk of its diet consists mostly of the simple things in life. Things such as watching a football game, sipping a nice cup of tea, enjoying the company of friends, or even just sleeping in, are key in sustaining a baseline level of health. After that, it's all up to the individual's taste really, which has led to a wide spectrum of different specializations which I alluded to earlier. For instance, some individuals chase after the elusive taste of parental recognition, while others relish the feeling of a well-earned victory, and grow sharper tusks to help them dig in more effectively. And, although perceived by most as a social species, it is not too uncommon to see an individual such as the one before us now that simply prefers those simple moments of silent tranquility. That is the wonder of biodiversity, my friends.

But, before we move on, I must clarify one thing. Population control is of the utmost importance in the maintenance of this sanctuary. Although a large population of joyfulope may be a signifier of a healthy environment, overpopulation can become a serious problem when feeding on excess. On more than one occasion, the park has been overtaken by a rather dangerous number of the beasts, and the main culprit in this unhealthy population boom is most often an abundance of carnal desires. While often unproblematic in small amounts, a joyfulope that takes to overindulging in the physical pleasures will never feel its hunger sated even as it bloats and grows to grotesque proportions. These new, rapacious variants spread out quickly, consuming more and more in search of the pleasure they had once felt, losing themselves in their self-destructive effort. When one organism is left with free range over all the others, the balance is threatened, no matter how positive they were perceived at first. Keep that in mind as we continue on our journey.

Moving along, the next beast I wish to show you all is the widely misunderstood somberval. These pinniped-like creatures, while not as plentiful as the joyfulope, are still quite prominent throughout the sanctuary. Being semi-aquatic, the somberval prefers to take refuge in

underwater caves and alcoves in small groups, known as “meloncholonies”, away from the prying eyes of others. This elusive behavior is what gives the creature its perceived rarity, as it only comes up to breathe when it thinks no one is watching. We believe that the flightfulness of this species has developed during recent years due to the rise in illegal hunting of the animals, brought on by the growing belief in the superstition that the somberval’s face is a sign of ill omen. Legend has it that any man who gazes upon the creature’s visage will be cursed to forever wear their inner turmoil upon their very flesh, a brand of shame and weakness for all to see. The fact that people believe such children’s stories is beyond me, but the harsh reaction has taken its toll on the population. Yet, despite these poaching efforts, the sombervals still remain, forced down into the lower reaches of the mind scape, and although they are not in danger of extinction yet, their habitat has already been significantly reduced and efforts must be made to stop the spread of misinformation on the species before it is too late. It must be stressed that the somberval plays an integral role in the ecosystem, as they are key in the system of balance restoration and maintenance. For instance, when the population of stress (*Bubalus pressura*) or anxiety (*Bubalus formido*) is too high in an area, the somberval will release a stream of salt water from their eyes in an attempt to loosen the earth, temporarily relieving built up pressure, but more importantly, they will cry out, signaling to the surrounding area that something is wrong and that help is needed. These creatures are key in signaling danger, and we are afraid that this forced migration out of open spaces and into the deeper recesses of the mind will only result in an increase in built up pressures, which, if unattended, can lead to monumental habitat destruction and in the worst cases, complete ecosystem collapse. So, please dear patron, for the sake of you and I both, do not be fooled by these dangerous misconceptions. If you are ever to see a lonely somberval out in the open, do not decry it for showing its face, but instead look for what it signals and do your best to assist. It’s only trying to help, after all.

And for our final stop, it is my pleasure to introduce to you the most wild and magnificent animal in all the park, the respeculated pompard.

Also known colloquially as the pridepuff, or by its scientific name *Panthera superbia*, this beast is the largest macropredator known to nature. Covered from head to toe in long, plume-like hairs, its most striking characteristic is its bioluminescent mane which it uses to store and display its vast supply of ego. Weighing as much as an entire pride of lions in one body, the pompard has no equal in terms of size and has been known to prey upon the entire emotional spectrum, although it often prefers hunting the strongest quarry. So, why is it then that this abominable behemoth doesn't slaughter every "lower" being before it, for certainly it could. Well, it turns out that even the mightiest beast needs friends in low places, for the pompard has developed quite the peculiar mutual relationship with one of the tiniest beasties in the sanctuary: The humilipede. Swarms of these little arthropods nest within the pridepuff's luminous beard, feeding upon the ego within. Now, this may seem parasitic in nature, but it is quite the opposite. In fact, with no way of ejecting excess energy itself, the pompard willingly allows the humilipedes to feed, as to keep itself from overheating, or worse. For the true weakness of the beast is in its nature. The more it consumes, the more its ego grows, and the brighter it becomes. But the mane has only so much room to store energy, and as it grows brighter and bolder, it has to release its ego elsewhere to keep from overheating. This can lead to a condition in the animal known as "ego tripping", in which the buildup of power is so intense that the energy bursts and is released into the brain. These afflicted animals are known as arrogant individuals and pose a severe threat to all life in the reserve.

The telltale signs of an arrogant pompard are an overly luminous coat and a yellowish discoloration of the eyes. Now so bright that it blinds even itself, the arrogant individual will lash out at anything it perceives in its warped perspective as lower than it, making it extremely dangerous for all animals in the area. Devoid of any honor, the beast will strike down prey indiscriminately, not even feasting on its kills, for it sustains itself only with its own ego. But, in its self-righteous belligerence, the pompard fails to fulfill its role in the ecosystem, allowing its once favored prey to wreak havoc in its absence. From out of the darkest caverns rise the eldritch

fiends of anguish and self-loathing, their wretched forms alien to the healthy mind. From the muck they call forth all forms of invasive thought, and from the sky they summon an untold number of evils. When balance is lost, nature gives way to chaos and destruction. A true extinction level event.

Now, dear patrons, as our tour comes to a close, take a moment to pontificate on the weird and wonderful beasties we laid eyes upon today. From the mighty pompard to the slippery sombeval, and every creature in between, there is a place for all of them in this kingdom, my friends. To keep them here together is no easy feat, let me assure you, but it certainly is fulfilling. Perhaps with the knowledge you have learned today, you could keep your own ménagerie. We here at the Ménagerie de l'âme certainly wouldn't scoff at some competition. Just make sure that you keep your proverbial ducks (*Anas idiomaticus*) in a row, and your bewilderbeests on the right track. We'll see you next time, dear patrons. I bid you, adieu.



“Young Life” by
Megan Faivre

Hands That Held Jade Zumwalde

“Catch me, Daddy!”

I jump into the wind. Strong hands embrace my sides and lift me towards the skies. Ears ringing with laughter, my feet touch the ground, and I am greeted with the sharp edges of newly cut grass poking between my toes.

I crane my neck up and see the smile I have always known. The familiar creases on each corner of the mouth as teeth peek out from behind his lips. Moving further up, I am met with eyes. Eyes that looked at me as if I were their entire existence, and I looked back at them the same. The good days. The perfect days.

The wind whips strands of hair against my cheek as I stand where he once did. The prints from the bottom of his shoes stained onto the surface. Into my mind. My legs start to wave as my knees begin to tremble. I grip the cold, metal railing behind me.

Struggling to resist, my eyes lower. I stare down at 500 feet, feeling electricity prickle beneath my skin. My chest throbs as my heart attempts to hammer its way through my rib cage and out my throat. Every beat batters around inside my skull until it is the only sound that fills my ears as I close my eyes.

Is this what he felt too?

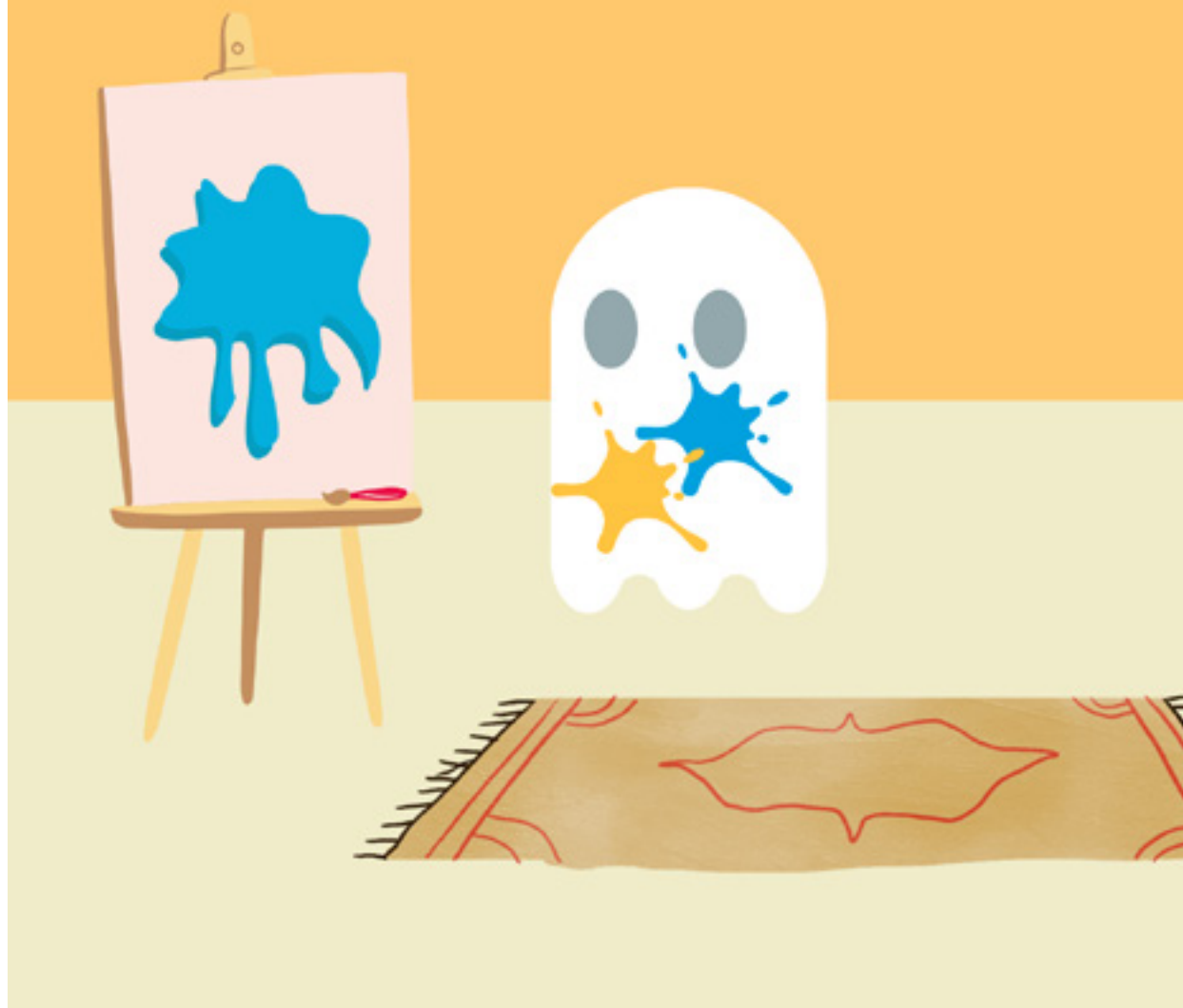
I hesitate. I feel the light of the setting sun hitting the lids of my eyes and I lift my head. Melted gold shapes my vision as every part of the

world is illuminated. My hair, once lashing against my face, now wraps around my cheeks in a warm embrace. The wind, once an enemy, now a blanket perfectly shaped to every curve of my body. The beat, once an assault, has faded to a ringing silence. Muscles lax as my body presses forward, leaning into the wind.

Is this what he saw too?

My body is almost parallel to the ground as the tips of my fingers are all that is left on the railing- entranced by the glow of the world. Feeling my body as it is held by the wind. Feeling my hair as it embraces my cheeks. Feeling the peace I once did as a child. Smiling, I relax my fingers
“Catch me, Daddy.”

Special Feature



Ray
Jesse Lee Kercheval

RAY

WHEN HE WAS AT WORK, HE KNEW WHO HE WAS.



WHEN HE WAS HOME







NOT SO MUCH.



WHEN HE WAS AT WORK, HE KNEW WHO HE WAS.



Biographies



Contributor Biographies

Walter Biskupski is a retired teacher. His poem, “Lament for the Children of Uvalde,” was published in the June 23, 2022 edition of the *Uvalde Leader-News*. He has also published poems in local and national literary journals and won several prizes in the Poetry Society of Indiana annual poetry contests.

Jack Braun is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in English and a minor in Creative Writing. He lives in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. His hobbies include painting miniatures, reading, fiction writing, and being mistaken for his identical twin brother.

Kaz Bresnan is a student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He is currently studying English Education with a minor in Creative Writing. He hopes to one day teach English at either a high school or university level. In his free time, he enjoys cartography painting.

Summer Carns is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville who is majoring in Forensic Investigation and Biology. She would like to become a medical examiner or a death investigator after graduation. She also enjoys listening to music and crafting in her free time, including

crocheting, painting, and bracelet making.

Gabby Celley is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and is double majoring in Criminal Justice and Forensic Investigation. She hopes to become some sort of detective or homicide investigator. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing poetry and fiction novels.

Elizabeth Colwell is an undergraduate at UW-Platteville Baraboo Sauk County with a double major in Wildlife Ecology and Animal Sciences. She is a farm girl with big dreams and expresses herself best in poetry. She likes taking pictures of fun moments in life.

Roberta Condon is a Wisconsin artist with a gallery and studio in Portage, WI. She has had a show touring for the last few years about the loss of the family farm. Her pieces are part of a series she’s working on titled “A Hollow Boned Muse” which speaks to the restorative nature of birds at a time when, in her mid-sixties, she is tired of still fighting the same social conditions she fought in the early ‘70s.

Jakob Cridelich is a non-traditional undergraduate at the University of Wis-

consin-Platteville, majoring in Mechanical Engineering with a minor in English. Between studies and his service in the National Guard, he finds time to enjoy fishing, writing, exercising, and tinkering. He hopes to land a job in marketing or test engineering after graduation.

Dave Dunbar is a former student at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County. He enjoys camping, jewelry making and woodworking. His desire in life is to be self-sufficient on a small farm with a pond stocked with bluegill where he can fish.

Isabelle Emerson was born and raised in Wisconsin and has always loved art. She grew up with art and the hope of sharing what she sees in the world with others, both in her writing and photography.

Megan Faivre is a sophomore at UW-Platteville Baraboo Sauk County studying Civil Engineering. In her free time, she likes to read, write, and do almost anything in the physical art field. She likes to make art pieces such as sculptures, paintings, and quilts. She also enjoys being outdoors and exploring in the woods.

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). You can find out more at www.dearcorporation.com

Matthew Fredricks is a senior studying Civil Engineering at UW-Platteville. He is involved in many on-campus clubs, including Hydropower Club and Engineers Without Borders. He cannot listen to enough music, and enjoys teaching himself to play drums, piano, and air guitar.

Carlene M. Gadapee's poems and poetry reviews have been published by or are forthcoming in *Waterwheel Review*, *Smoky Quartz*, *Allium*, *Vox Populi*, *MicroLit Almanac*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *What to Keep*, will be released by Finishing Line Press in early 2025. She lives with her husband in northern New Hampshire.

Maddy Gorgen is currently an undergraduate student studying Mechanical Engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. In addition to studying for her major, she enjoys spending her time in color guard in the Marching Pioneers, playing her oboe, and writing and reading as much fiction as she can.

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 *Tu-*

pelo 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.

Michael Heath resides in Baraboo with his wife, Deedee, and their daughter, Emily. Michael is a social worker for foster care, adoption, and relative caregivers in Wisconsin. He enjoys taking photos of nature, people, and special events, such as engagement photos, weddings, and senior portraits. Michael enjoys all of the beautiful scenery in Baraboo and the surrounding communities.

Kristian Petrov Iliev, a Bulgarian-American author and musician, is best known as the founder, lead vocalist, and lead guitarist of Billboard-charting alternative rock band The Racing Pulses. He is also a University of Wisconsin-Madison alumni. Iliev's first poetry collection, *Glyphs from the Apparatus*, was published by Stiks & Monida in 2018.

Dominic James lives by Seven Springs in Glos., UK near the source of the River Thames. He attends poetry meetings throughout the Southern Counties. He is widely published at home and abroad. His second collection, *Smudge*, was published by Littoral Press, 2022.

Jesse Lee Kercheval is a writer, translator, and visual artist. Her graphic essays have won awards from *New Letters* and the *New Ohio Review*. Her latest book is the poetry collection, *I Want to Tell You* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).

Nicole Krebs is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville majoring in English with a Professional Writing emphasis and minoring in both Psychology and Creative Writing. In her free time, she enjoys writing stories but has begun to write poems as well.

Michael Lambert (he/him) is the author of *Circumnavigation* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014) loosely based on self-propelled travel in the United States. Recent works have appeared or are forthcoming from *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *The Pinch*, and *Bayou Magazine*. A graduate of the M.F.A. program in creative writing at the University of Alabama, he lives and works in Wisconsin.

Rachel Levine has been a creative writer all of her life, and a lover of poetry and literature. She has always loved collages but was insecure about even attempting one. Her passion for poetry finally overcame her insecurity. All her collages to date are inspired by poetry or song lyrics.

Kassidy Litton recently graduated from UW-Platteville, studying English with an emphasis in Professional Writing and minoring in both History and Creative Writing. True to her nature, she spends her free time writing, reading, drinking tea, and watching the same three movies on repeat. Her favorite book is *Six of Crows* by author Leigh Bardugo.

Tina Lovell is a unit secretary at a local hospital on the weekends and loves the work she does. In her free time, she is the mother of cats, and a couple of kids, and loves pursuing various creative outlets including painting, writing, photography, knitting, and playing a mean air tambourine.

John Markestad lives near Portage, Wisconsin with his wife and best friend of over 50 years. John has been a contributor to and editor of *Spirit Lake Review* (off and on) for more than ten years. In his spare time, John has written and published seven novels.

Hunter Mashak is a senior at UW-Platteville studying Sustainable Renewable Energy Systems with a minor in Creative Writing. He is from Baker, Montana, and Cashton, Wisconsin. He is an avid reader and painter.

Tristen McIntyre is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Plat-

teville. They're majoring in Criminal Justice with a minor in Creative Writing. They hope to get into policing or law enforcement while continuing to write for fun and potential publication.

Max McNett currently resides in the cozy river town of Cassville, Wisconsin. He is currently working on his bachelor's degree in Choral Music Education at UW-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.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle*, and the *North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto Prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his poems have been broadcasted and performed globally.

Ivan de Monbrison is a bipolar French poet and artist born in 1969 who currently lives in Paris.

Taylor Nisius is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Mechanical Engineering and a minor in Spanish. She hopes to work in the professional field. In her free time, she enjoys cooking and training her dog.

Matty Olson is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, double majoring in English and Music Performance. In her free time, she enjoys singing, playing the guitar, cooking, and writing.

Jeannine M. Pitas is a writer and translator. Her translations include the Uruguayan poets Marosa di Giorgio and Selva Casal and, most recently, Silvia Guerra's *A Sea at Dawn*, co-translated with Jesse Lee Kercheval (Eulalia Books, 2023).

Karl Plank is the author of *A Field, Part Arable* (Lithic, 2017). His poetry has appeared in publications such as *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Barstow & Grand*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*, and has been featured on *Poetry Daily*. He is the J.W. Cannon Professor of Religion, Emeritus, at Davidson College.

Kenneth Pobo (he/him) is the author of twenty-one chapbooks and nine full-length collections. Recent books include *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *Loplop in a Red City* (Circling Rivers), *Lilac And Sawdust* (Meadowlark Press), *Lavender Fire, Lavender Rose* (BrickHouse Books), and *Gold Bracelet in a Cave: Aunt Stokesia* (Ethel Press).

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His poetry collection, *A Magician Among*

the Spirits, poems about Harry Houdini, is a 2022 Blue Light Press Poetry winner. A collection of persona poems and dramatic monologues involving burlesque stars, *The Trapeze of Your Flesh* will be published by BlazeVOX Books in April.

Trevion Rimmer is a Professional Studies major with an emphasis in Computer Science and Business at UW-Platteville. Trey was previously his school's Black Student Union president and is now looking to engage in advocacy through his poetry and community engagement in his hometown of Milwaukee.

James P. Roberts is the author of six collections of poetry. A regional Vice-President for the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, since 2010 he has organized and hosted an annual Winter Festival of Poetry from mid-January to mid-March. He lives in Madison where he continues to pursue the Muse.

Margaret Rozga served as the 2019-2020 Wisconsin Poet Laureate and the 2021 inaugural artist/scholar in residence at the UW-Milwaukee at Waukesha Field Station. She continues to host weekly Write-Ins at the Field Station. Her fifth book, *Holding My Selves Together*, was published in 2021 by Cornerstone Press.

Brooke Schindler is a junior at UW-Platteville. She is majoring in Professional Writing with a minor in Marketing. In her free time, she likes to spend time with her sorority: Theta Phi Alpha, and she loves to listen to podcasts.

Carrie Voigt Schonhoff, poet and author of *The Liminal Space* and *The End of the Beginning*, captures the spirit of her native Wisconsin while encapsulating the growth of her life's journey and exciting next chapter. This work will pull at the heartstrings of those that continue to face challenges but never stop dreaming.

Whitney Schwindenhammer is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville majoring in Spanish. She hopes to be an educator in a Latin American country teaching English. In her free time, she enjoys reading, going on walks, and spending time with friends.

Daniel JM. Sniff is a fourth-year Music Education major at UW-Platteville. He hails from Browntown, Wisconsin. Dan is a lifelong singer and actor. He is a proud member of the Platteville Chamber Choir and has held roles in multiple shows on campus. He also greatly enjoys cheesy wordplay.

Úrsula Starke was born in San Ber-

nardo, Chile in 1983. A librarian with a background in art history, she published her first book of poetry *Obertura* (Maipo Ediciones, 2001) when she was seventeen. In 2021, all four of her books of poetry were republished in a collected edition, *Wisteria*, by Ediciones La Cadera Rota. Her work in translation has appeared in *Astra* and *Copper Nickel* and is forthcoming in the *Sonora Review*.

Dao Vang is an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville majoring in computer science. He wants to work at a startup or get into a well-established tech company with his degree. He enjoys playing video games, coding, and MMA in his free time.

Wendy Vardaman (wendyvardaman.com), PhD, works as a web & digital media specialist. The author of three 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.

Angie Trudell Vasquez, a 2nd and 3rd generation Mexican American originally from Iowa, served as the Madison Poet Laureate from 2020 to 2024. She earned her MFA in poetry from the Institute of American Indian Arts in 2017. Her 4th poetry collection, *My People Redux*, was published in January 2022.

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

Lynn White lives in northern Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places, and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy, and reality. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and a Rhysling Award.

Rowan Wilson is a Creative Writing and History major at Beloit College. His main hobbies are doing drag and collecting animal bones. He aims to be as unconventional and off-putting as physically possible. He thanks the *Spirit Lake Review* for hosting his madness.

Michael O. Zahn was born in 1947 and is a 1969 graduate of UW-Milwaukee. He has been a reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, editor-in-chief of *Wisconsin Law Journal*, and a contract-proposal manager at Johnson Controls. He also has done fund-raising and marketing for three Milwaukee nonprofits.

Bänoo Zan is a poet, translator, and poetry curator with over 290 published pieces and three books. She is the found-

er of Shab-e She'r, Canada's most diverse and brave poetry series. Bänoo is the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology with Guernica Editions: *Woman, Life, Freedom: Poems for the Iranian Revolution*.

Jade Zumwalde is currently a student at UW-River Falls studying Creative Writing and ESL. She first discovered a fondness for writing in middle school and has been cultivating it ever since. She aims to be a teacher of creative writing, and hopefully someday, a professor able to design her own curriculum.