


# SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

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Poetry | Prose | Visual Art

2026 ISSUE



*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.

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Cover image by Megan Hageman

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# SPIRIT LAKE REVIEW

## 2026 TEAM

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### **FACULTY ADVISOR**

Dr. Kara Candito

### **EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Shayla Trautsch

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND EVENT PLANNING MANAGER**

Isabel Peterson

### **WEB DESIGN MANAGER**

Michele Eaches

### **COPY EDITING AND SUBMISSIONS MANAGEMENT**

Maria Streif, Scout Dodds, Hunter Sheffer, Kevin Dunse, Alex Jansen,  
Gretta Droessler, Julie Patzlaff

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND EVENT PLANNING**

Ava Garrard, Chance Lange, Jaiden McCauley

### **WEB DESIGN**

Bryce Aide, Exie Hall, Aubryn Owen, Hunter Sheffer

# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 23rd issue of *Spirit Lake Review* presented by Dr. Kara Candioto's Literary Magazine Production class. Our 2026 team has curated an unforgettable collection of poetry, prose, and visual art that aims to foster reflection and connection within our readers. We offer special thanks to Editor-in-Chief Shayla Trautsch; Social Media and Event Planning Manager Isabel Peterson; and Web Design Manager Michele Eaches for their unyielding devotion to the success of this issue.

Many of the pieces in the issue grapple with the socio-economic pressures that pervade daily life. Alex Jansen's "Notes for My Betterment as an Employee" and Gretta Droessler's "In Order to Get a Job You Have To..." use comedic absurdity to convey the difficulties of landing and keeping a job in 2026. The complexities of quotidian moments in rural life are captured by other works, such as David Anson Lee's "At the Fleet Farm Checkout," Maria Streif's "My 4:00AM Thoughts," and Richard Jordan's "Mayfly Season." Other pieces, such as Scott Davidson's "Maytag Repairman" and Donna Castañeda's "A Child's Blue Plaid Shirt," enact the nuances of domestic life and relationships. Broadening the scope, Bānoo Zan's "Taraneh's Song" and Chuck Rybak's "MRI For a Bullet Yet to Arrive" probe the personal and collective impacts of social and political upheaval and posit art as a site of resistance to oppression and the normalization of violence.

*Spirit Lake Review's* 2026 cover image, *Trigeminal Neuralgia*, by Megan Hageman evokes a theme of shrouded psychological and physical struggle, which underpins the issue and is evidenced in Huina Zheng's "Motion Sickness" and Caroline Huckeba's "The Maid's Ledger." We would also like to highlight the works of emerging authors Kaz Bresnan, Scout Dodds, Julie Patzlaff, and Broderick Vaclavek, who lean into emotional vulnerability by exploring and critiquing societal pressures that illicit powerful emotional responses. We also praise visual artists Anna Carper and Casey Wang for their unique evocations of whimsical yet striking subjects and embodied experience.

*Spirit Lake Review* is made possible by the UW-Platteville faculty, staff, administrators, and community members who support our work. Special thanks to Humanities Department Chair Dr. Katie Kalish; Academic Department Assistant Sara Koeller; and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Education Dr. Travis Nelson. Most importantly, thank you to our readers and contributors for trusting us with your creative work and giving us your attention and support.

Until next year,

The 2026 *Spirit Lake Review* Team

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# **I've Grown Accustomed to a Certain Lifestyle**

MATTHEW J. ANDREWS

Yesterday I rose to two owls,  
captivated by their ghostly duet.  
This morning: silence in the trees.

Almighty God, giver of all things  
good and beautiful: what the fuck?  
I believe you owe me some owls.

# the tenacity of inheritance

C.C. APAP

she circled back to it at least  
three times—the bloody fact  
that the nazis took her teeth.  
knocked them out, neglected  
care. and this: how a body  
survived, could live on nothing  
solid for years. swallowing air  
just to fill up her swollen belly.

my wife, her granddaughter,  
sometimes wakes at night,  
spitting. in those nightmares,  
her teeth, unmoored, crack  
and crowd. she wakes, fingering  
her gums to see if she is intact.

it is embedded in her roots,  
the knowledge that keeps her  
up at night looking at the news.  
the truths that gnash at her.

# How much does a tan cost?

ALYIAH AZIZ-WHITE

\$1000 a week

That is the price I pay

The price that takes me to a sunny destination

A price that makes my skin naturally golden

\$20 a month

That is the price I pay

The price that highlights my features

A price that makes my skin darker

\$100,000 a year

That is the price I pay

The price that allows me to live in warmth

A price that shifts my skin away from its origin

Slurs everyday

That is the price I pay

The price that receives hate for existing

A price that makes me conscious of my actions

Police brutality annually

That is the price I pay

The price that makes me fearful of our system

A price that makes my skin a target

My life

That is the price I may have to pay

The price that to you may not be worth much

A price that means everything to me

A tan

That is the price you pay in money

The price that I must pay for the rest of my life

A price that is worth no amount of money

\$20 a month

That is the price you pay

The price that makes you ignorant of the cost

A price that is priceless to me

# In the Waiting Room at the Breast Health Center

DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP

The moment we step off the elevator,  
a nurse in lavender scrubs whisks my wife away  
to a back room locked by a card reader.

With a mechanical beep, she's  
gone.

I stand there, momentarily lost,  
before finding a seat in the corner.

While my laptop boots up,

I stare at the walls around me.

Pink letter decals declare:

YOU ARE STRONG.

For fifteen minutes I scroll through emails,  
check my watch, get up to use the Keurig,  
think vaguely of microplastics and pesticides,  
sit back down.

A conversation plays out behind the reception desk:

*Gina, do you like tiramisu?*

*No, I like chocolate cake with chocolate icing.*

*Oh, I thought you were Italian.*

No laughter.

A middle-aged couple joins me in the waiting room,  
leaving a respectful distance between us.

I thought we had years to go before we reached this place,  
but here we are. Time collapses.

I don't stare at the scarf on the woman's head,  
yet she dazzles me with her colors, scarlet and gold  
resplendent in my peripheral vision.

They lock hands. I pound away at imaginary emails.

The husband is kind, kinder than me,

making fun of the Christian soap  
playing on the TV above my head,

peering through the blinds, commenting on the weather,

anything to keep her gaze  
from turning inward.

Then comes the mechanical beep as my wife returns  
and I try to read her face.

# Two Pound Pumpkin under Tractor Wheel

DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP

If it hadn't been the wheel, it would've been  
thousands of tromping pairs of riding boots.  
She had put it down for a second  
to flip through credit and debit cards,  
distracted by thoughts of overdrafts  
and empty fridges and the yearning hazel eyes  
that swallowed all the rest.  
An air horn, a shout, a yank of an arm,  
and it was over,  
guts and seeds mingling with the foam  
from discarded pumpkin-spice lattes.  
That's how it goes  
in the Spirit of America.  
Cornstalks sway in a scarlet sunset,  
the earliest of the year.  
An old barn shivers with cold.  
Somewhere, someone is burning dead leaves.

# Still Life with Squirrel on Fence Post

DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP

A lot divides us. I see it  
from across a room and through a window, and  
I envy its peace as it enjoys the stillness  
of an acorn eaten in a field of sunlight.  
But let's be honest. Squirrels have their own problems:  
stray cats with loose marbles, cars,  
hawks.  
I turn away.  
Not much divides us.

# Winter Poem

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Your mother's wardrobe contained  
a false back. You discovered it  
after her death. Inside, a cache  
of videocassettes, labeled  
with dates, in her spiderweb  
penmanship. They stretch back  
decades—from before VCR  
was available to the public.

Your family hasn't owned a player  
since the eighties, as far as you know.  
You pull the tapes out, stack them  
on the bedside table, stare, wonder  
whether some secrets are worth keeping.

# Portal

JOHN BRANTINGHAM AND SHAYMAA MAHMOUD

This body is haunted by my people.  
Some of the ghosts, I recognize  
my father only as a child,  
rearrange my olfactory and  
taste buds like lincoln logs.

Jasmine, cilantro, olives, mint  
summon light and air, even when  
he finds cracks like a juiced lemon,  
when the handholding becomes  
finger crushing, becomes the pulp  
of me.

Other ghosts sit in a tribunal;  
I hear their ruling when I measure  
spices with their eyes, feel them  
offer me a memory I didn't make,  
guide my fingers when I write.

I know they bring the low lying  
clouds, the storm in my blood,  
but then I'll hear my grandfather,  
and those who made him  
this way, telling me the stories:

you feel this way because  
you're alive.  
You look for the pain because  
we know a wound can become  
a portal, if you let it,  
and the menders always do.

# Vacuum Poem

JACK BRAUN

“I removed silver wrapped Hersey’s bars and left them under the pants at the scene. The CP was notified.”

- Sgt. Matthew Meyer, May 1st 2024. Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, Deputy Report for Incident 240179861.

Your body heals,

Spitting out the bullets

The resource officer’s gun takes them back between its teeth.

You unbar the windows, and your classmates pull their desks away from the doors  
And return to the cafeteria

To regurgitate their reheated pizza.

Troll statues unsee teenagers scooping up toddlers

Suburban lawns reject their feet, they sprint backward towards the schoolyard

I delete my sister’s text that reads “I love you.”

Your pencil sucks up the graphite from your suicide note

You moonwalk back into bed,

Your fake headache retreats under your tongue.

Your mother drives home in reverse.

She forgets that it wasn’t her fault.

The neighbor hovers up her words

“Here happen never could that.”

# Reflections

KAZ BRESNAN

the problem is  
that i want to be good,  
but not in a way that is useful.

i want to be good like a rock is good,  
like a moth sleeping  
in the pocket of a wool coat.  
i want to be good like  
i have never done anything wrong  
even in my mind.

i walk past a shop window  
& see my face & think:  
*oh. that's what we're working with.*

sometimes i hold my breath just to  
prove i can. sometimes i count steps  
for no reason. sometimes i feel the urge  
to drink something blue  
just to see what it would do to my insides.

i am trying to be good.  
i am trying to be kind.  
i am trying not to look at my reflection for too long

# **when they finally ask what happened**

KAZ BRESNAN

/ when I go / I want to be buried with no embalming / no chemicals / no interruption / just the body's return to minerals / let my carcass feed a tree / let the roots cradle my jaw and carry whatever I could not say into the blossoms / let a child pick the fruit / taste salt / and not know why /

## **My Childhood Best Friend Asks Me About My Favorite Planet** **KAZ BRESNAN**

it was pluto, obviously,  
the little belt object.  
the discarded thing. the unbidden  
ball of rock. or maybe ice. to be  
and then not to be. to orbit and be unwanted.

i think dissociation is just as much planetary as it is psychological. things skip a spin  
and keep rotating regardless.

i don't tell many people this, but more days than not i look at a tree and think: that's  
a good place to vanish.

i mean this in the way volcanoes dream of eruption.

i mean this in the way dogs look at mirrors and don't recognize their reflection.

i wear a bracelet of hematite because it absorbs chaos. i read about lithium mining  
until i black out.

pluto was discovered accidentally. so was my fear of windows.

is it the reflection or the idea that something could watch me back?

there are people who love me. i think

there are people who say you are not a planet, and i agree—

but inside me, a thousand failed satellites are crying for re-entry.

if i must be spinning endlessly, let me at least do so with purpose.

if i must be small, let me at least have ice.

# I Created my Life

DONNA CASTAÑEDA

*Tina Modotti 1896-1942, Photographer*

Nine days after Pancho Villa was assassinated I boarded a cargo ship in San Francisco and traveled to Mexico City,

unafraid. There, turbulent abstractions invaded my dreams, black and white images of space and upheaval. The immense

angles of the crisscrossed telephone wires, sunlight falling across cascading doorways, the rounded contour of a heavy clay jug, lines of water dripping down its side.

Frida and I stay up late many nights over cups of wine, talking of art, politics, and lovers. She paints the emotional incisions

across her body; I photograph the geometry of modern life. But we agree our lovers are only a river we walk beside, the contours

and colors exist already in our hands. I walk the shouting streets of Mexico City, my Graflex camera on one arm. I stop to choose

my composition, the hands of a worker, at rest on a shovel handle, fingers angular and curving. I set the focus, then slide the 4x5

negative into place, pull out the dark slide, hold the camera as still as I can. Click. His hands have become all our hands, forever.

# A Child's Blue Plaid Shirt

DONNA CASTAÑEDA

I iron a child's blue plaid shirt, starting  
with the sleeves. Smoothing the length  
of them I carefully point the tip of the iron

to corners in cuffs. The front and back of the  
shirt are pressed hot smooth cotton, long  
notes sung to the end, then suddenly

cut off. I turn to the collar, shortest of all,  
curve the iron around a neck caressed  
by hands of a mother each morning.

Finished, I hang the shirt, seeing a child  
lifted up and up to laugh with me. If  
I could have you now in front

of me wearing this shirt, little again,  
I would do what I didn't do then—  
let you laugh even more.

# Before We Invented Gods

SCOTT DAVIDSON

These hills were bodies  
before we took their living  
shapes for the curves of  
women. These mountains  
were sacred, seats of power  
before we invented gods. These  
rivers were lifeblood. Rain was  
fortune. Grasslands nurtured life  
that crawled from the ocean be-  
fore we envisioned cultivation.

We are wrong to think by discover-  
ing things that were already here  
we can predate them, precede them  
in rankings, wrong to be shameless  
about our leaps of faith. With no  
working concept of two, seven,  
800 million years, with the public  
integrity standards we've settled for,  
numbers can be made to work in our  
favor. Whatever we ruin, we can own.

# Machine Language

SCOTT DAVIDSON

Not human words spoken by  
robots or gleaming binary trans-  
missions descending like rain,  
not kids blasting drones like  
skeet pigeons or dark ooze  
rising from the ground.

Protocols, permissions, configured  
displays, there are machines pro-  
grammed not to respond so users  
give up and leave. Sometimes,  
despite knowing what will happen,  
the only practical option is clicking

OK. Currently it's unclear if the way  
things are processed worldwide every  
day to facilitate transactions – real-  
time sharing of data from over  
12.7 million users with a browser  
extension – is a form of theft or not.

Bluster and big talk are how things  
fail, staking out the porch in night-  
ranger gear, on point and packing  
while skillful, less ridiculous charac-  
ters steal what they want through  
the back. It was never meant – as a

language – to move us ahead or add to  
anyone's understanding. The point has  
always been reassigning the meanings of  
building-block words, revising histories,  
critical functions slowly, methodically  
over time, eventually owning what we say.

# Maytag Repairman

SCOTT DAVIDSON

Now that she lives across  
the country, I'm staying inside  
more than I should be,  
turning to the window  
expecting too much.

Complete investment in  
fatherhood leaves me with  
all kinds of time. It's a fluke  
I'm not sitting on the edge  
of the couch, staring at the floor.

Maybe it's no better that I've  
become the Maytag repairman,  
pressed and ready. Here by the  
phone when spin cycles fail, when  
dishes come out disappointing.

The joke is no one calls. I find  
myself wishing people's dryers  
would break. My neighbor  
bought water trucks all  
one summer and secretly

wished for wildfires the next.  
If I sent commands to washing  
machines to fall into sleep mode  
soon as they're touched, people  
would call. I'd be working again.

# Dear Mother, I

ALICE DE HUBP

Dear Mother, I  
am not coming home for Christmas  
this year  
because who knows if my tourist visa will be enough  
or if posting too much on the internet  
to an audience of all my old friends  
and a lifetime of collecting them  
precludes me from entering  
the heart of empire, where  
you now reside

Dear Mother, I  
was looking forward to looking through  
the years  
the boxes you keep, like a time machine, my seventh grade diaries,  
when I was pathetically down bad for a boy who  
didn't know I existed, and the notes I passed  
in class with my best friend, and the fragments of costumes  
from a childhood of ballet recitals and an adolescence on the stage  
a compendium of my life in relation to  
yours; a constellation; does it still  
shine?  
even though I'm older  
now, a woman  
reborn, of woman  
born, your own  
child? Adult?  
At times we did not get along, but  
the memories are still  
there, in boxes upon  
boxes, and photo albums,  
back before cell phones, when you used to take the film to be developed  
to the store at the Iguatemi mall:  
marble floors, a high black chair, my feet never touched  
the ground where we waited, playing patty-cake; you  
were never embarrassed of who I was as a child, and you still

fail to be embarrassed of who I am now;  
did we get lost somewhere, yes, maybe, yes; it was  
sometime after I grew tall and curves, and did I betray you  
by doing so; and did I betray you when  
I yearned for empire and rejected  
your accent, your foreignness, and then,  
confronted with my own foreignness, I reverted  
back to your arms, to strong coffee, to Portuguese,  
tripping on my mother tongue, only to find  
I could no longer speak it  
not like before

Tell me, Mother, am I  
irrevocably fucked, and are  
our histories so tangled with history, that  
I can't come home for Christmas, but then,  
again, what is  
home?  
Is it Brazil, a ray of lightning, land of my memories,  
still, in my mind, filled with darkroom shops where we wait?  
Is it America, the promised land, the heart of empire,  
where I believed, then you believed, and maybe  
where we both, at some point believed?  
Is it Mexico, Mother, Tenotchtitlán,  
land of the Aztec gods, Mother, where I am  
making a family  
of my own?

So, Dear Mother, I am  
not coming home for Christmas,  
but you are welcome, always,  
to come  
home.

# And now i will tear You limb from limb

ALICE DE HUBP

And now i will tear You limb from limb  
And now i will pluck the tawny hairs from Your tawny flesh  
like prodigal cattle come home to die,  
and now i will devour You from the insides  
pale, pink, ruby, deep red, crimson;  
(golden)  
(oh aren't You anointed);  
brown, rotting, black, matte onyx, rotted;  
and now i will revel in the perfume of pungent  
    death  
        like  
            cardamom

And now i will tear You limb from twangy limb, and  
now i will feast upon Your hardened flesh, and now  
i will boil Your teeth and fry Your sorrows;  
sorry though You are, i don't forgive, i don't forget;

And soon you will be but a disembodied voice, floating  
like a cumulus, you incubus; terror of my  
dreams, et pluribus; filling up with  
blood and blood and pus; pull on your sternum, hear the crack, twist  
your ribs like plucking strings  
                            from  
                                a guitar

And now I will have afternoon tea (Earl Grey  
from a commercialized bag; I'm cheap; you told me  
that); and now I will refuse the offer  
of biscuits, exchanged  
from a delicate hand,  
because I'm full, really, I ate  
too much; I ate  
before I came

# In This Country

ALICE DE HUBP

I'm at the height of nine.  
My mother, combing my hair,  
tells me I have the strength of twenty men  
and I must be twenty times better than any man  
to get where I need.  
I am the only girl in chess club.  
In this country, she says, that's the way that  
it is.

I'm on the edge of twelve.  
My mother, walking me home,  
always crosses the street through the  
middle of the road.  
Why? I ask, uniform pleated,  
bow in hair, blush in cheeks.  
This is why: a sound, disgusting, guttural,  
from the other side of the street.  
In this country, she says, that's the way that  
it is.

The next day, my mother  
walks me home, holding my hand  
with the strength of twenty men.  
She doesn't cross the street. The sounds  
begin: disgusting, guttural,  
cheap on-demand cut off by a visceral  
scream.  
STOP. In capital letters.  
I shake.

I'm inching to thirteen.  
I quit chess for choir, praying for breasts.  
I sing to the moon, hoping the stars  
will collide. My mom  
holds my hand, on my knees,  
pleads me never to depend on a man.  
He stopped, she says, because I belong  
to a man.  
In this country, she says, that's the way that  
it is.

I'm twenty, wanted,  
collections of stories of male breaths in my  
head.  
My past is an anthology,  
confections of unwanted leers and phrases  
and jeers and phases.  
I'm twenty, wasted,  
and women share tales like shopping lists.  
It's not a question of will I be hurt, but  
when.  
Not a question of whom, but how.  
Not a matter of ifs, but truths.  
In this country that's the way that it is.

# Snowfall

SCOUT DODDS

Eun-soon hummed an old song from her childhood as she combed her daughter's hair, the lyrics long forgotten, but the melody, soft and sad, was unchanged. Eun-soon shivered; the bitter December winds seeped in through the walls like a curse through the walls, every breath visible.

From the other room, she heard the baby cough, a sickly, wet sound that made her bones ache. Her hands trembled as she ran the ivory comb through her daughter's hair, but it was not from the cold. Her Song-ae turned thirteen that May; she was a tall girl, and clever too. Her teacher said she was gifted before the school had closed, before the Russians had come. Eun-soon swallowed the shame that rose hot in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut.

*I'm sorry Tae-jin.*

She took a deep breath to steady her fraying nerves, hoping Song-ae overlooked her grief before she opened them again. Her daughter's hair was long and straight; it fell to her hips like a curtain of black silk. Thick like Tae-jin's.

Eun-soon tried to shove the arrangement that she and her brother had made from her mind. She tried to convince herself it was fair, honorable even. Rice and tinned meat for the children's bellies, medicine for the baby's cough, and kindling for the stove.

*"Noona, there is an officer, a man who would like a maid to keep him company, someone young and polite, just for a little while, until winter passes. He controls the stores, rice, oil, medicine; he has them all."*

She said *no*, offered herself instead, but Joon-seok laughed in her face and said she was too old, that the Lieutenant wanted someone pure to serve him.

Eun-soon hated that she knew what that meant. What that would mean for her daughter.

But what choice did she have? She had three children with nothing but silt in

their mouths, a sick baby, and a husband who had been dragged from their house in the middle of the night months ago. If she didn't accept, they would all be carcasses by spring, and instead of silt in their mouths—maggots, instead of a sick baby, she would have a dead one.

So, Eun-soon prepared her Song-ae for the Lieutenant's billet.

Eun-soon dressed Song-ae in her finest hanbok, her *jeogori*, plain white cotton, embroidered with cherry blossoms, done by Eun-soon's own hand, and her *chima* red—the color of luck.

Eun-soon frowned.

With a huff, she set the comb aside and began to braid her daughter's hair, but stopped and undid the plait, running her fingers through her daughter's hair, letting it fall down Song-ae's back. "He will like this more," she muttered to herself, but the moment the words left her lips, she knew Song-ae had heard. Her daughter, quiet and dutiful, let out a shaky breath. Eun-soon bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted blood on her tongue.

*Oh, Tae-jin, please forgive me.*

A knock at the door.

*Joon-seok.*

Eun-soon stood up at once, smoothed her *chima*, and glided across the room, reaching for the handle. She could barely open it, her arm void of any strength.

"Is she ready?" Joon-seok asked, stepping through the doorway, brushing snow off his shoulders. Eun-soon glanced at Song-ae, who sat on the floor, looking up at them with wide, trusting eyes.

Eun-soon looked at her little brother, drew in a sharp breath, and nodded. Then

she glanced over her shoulder, where her daughter obediently waited, hands clasped together in her lap, as she awaited instruction like a loyal dog. Eun-soon sharply turned away.

“*Song-ah*,” she called as sweetly as she could, voice shaking, “Uncle’s going to take you to the officer’s home now. Gather your things.”

From the corner of her eye, Eun-soon saw Song-ae nod as she rose and moved quietly to get her things in the other room. Eun-soon turned to Joon-seok, who watched Song-ae scurry away with something resembling a grimace on his war-weary features. Brows furrowed, and lips drawn so tight they were white.

He noticed his sister watching and cleared his throat. “Don’t worry, *Noona*, this man—he’s a good man—for a Russian.”

Eun-soon looked at him blankly but said nothing. She could only hope he was right. A draft blew into the room through the crack of the door, the Mukden cold prowling in like a stranger; she shivered and crossed her arms.

*Maybe the Lieutenant’s home is warmer.*

Eun-soon cleared her throat. “It is only until winter is over then she comes home.” She spoke like it was any other sentence, glancing at her brother, who was twisting his Army cap in his hands, bitten pink from the cold.

He startled at the question, his whole body flinching, Adam’s apple bobbing, before he nodded quickly—too quickly. He fidgeted, boot thumping rhythmically against the tiled floor. Then another kind of footsteps from behind, soft *pit-a-pats* Eun-soon had heard every day for the past thirteen years. Song-ae slid on her straw shoes, her little sack folded neatly at her feet.

An ache filled Eun-soon’s chest as she watched her daughter do something as simple as putting on shoes. How her tongue flicked out, brows furrowed in concentration. She always did that, no matter how small or big the task. The

look was so familiar—Tae-jin would spend hours, head buried in medical books, brows knitted together, spectacles sliding down his nose, the same scrunched expression.

She almost found herself smiling, the sweet tide of memory rushing in before she pushed it deep down as Song-ae rose to her full height. She was just as tall as Eun-soon now, maybe more. But her limbs were coltish, and her face still soft with childhood. Song-ae looked at her, eyes as large as saucers, intelligent beyond their years.

Eun-soon's throat tightened, her heart wrenched violently in her chest. She forced herself to clear her throat. "You are to behave yourself," Eun-soon said, coldly.

Song-ae nodded earnestly, eager to please her mother. Eyes darting to Joon-seok, who stepped forward and took Song-ae by the elbow, as a raspy fit of coughs overtook his body.

He forced a tired smile, "Come, the lieutenant expects you before supper."

Song-ae's face drained of all color.

Joon-seok creaked the door wide open, the Mukden air welcoming itself into the house like an old friend. Eun-soon stood with her fists clenched, guilt gnawing on her worse than the frostbite at her toes. Joon-seok tried to lead Song-ae through the door, but she stopped and shrugged away from him. Song-ae looked to her mother, her young face betraying her.

"I'll come back in the Spring?" she asked, her little voice cracking. Her lips trembled and her eyes were glassy with all the months of unshed tears.

Eun-soon opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came. Song-ae waited, already shivering. Eun-soon wanted to grab her daughter, to pull her back in and take her within her arms. Hold her, and rock her like she did when she was small, but if

she did that, she would never let go.

Eun-soon looked away, unable to bear her daughter's eyes, and gave one firm nod, even though something deep inside her knew this would be the last time she ever saw her.

She hated the sweet sigh of relief that left Song-ae's lips.

“Goodbye, *Omma*,” She said gently, making Eun-soon flinch, before Joon-seok pulled her into the darkened streets. Only then could Eun-soon look. She stepped gingerly into the doorway as Song-ae went, watching how the snowflakes fell into her daughter's hair.

*I'm so sorry Tae-jin.*

# **In Order to Get a Job You Have To...**

GRETTA DROESSLER

write a resume, find jobs on the newspaper or online, make rich people like you, have arms, have legs, have a head, be able to listen to instructions, be blood type AB negative, be right handed, never take breaks, never drink water, you can drink Pepsi though, wear work appropriate clothes, men wear shirts and pants, women wear 1 inch skirts, fist fight all your coworkers in an arena and win, split an atom, buy the boss new AirPods, he lost his old ones in the toilet, he would really appreciate the new AirPods, be good at flirting with Elon Musk, bang your wife, cheat on your wife, kill your wife, bang some other girl, eat at Taco Bell, go to hell, don't get woken up at night cause we don't like that culture, say a racial slur, apologize for saying a slur, say it again, be able to balance a plate on your nose while walking a dog while wearing headphones that are playing nothing but Christian country music and a sniper who looks suspiciously like Jake from State Farm is shooting at your feet, and you don't get to complain.

# To My Students -

MELISSA FIEGEL

It's okay if you forget me,  
if my name, the lines of my face  
fade  
as your life goes on.  
You have better things to do.

It's okay if you relegate me to the part of your mind  
you would rather forget.  
School is hard, even when everything is perfect,  
and nothing is ever perfect.

What I want you to remember  
is you,  
the little part of you at your center  
that is whole  
even when you feel broken.  
The goodness within you that remains  
even when you do something you can't take back,  
even when others tell you it isn't there,  
even when you feel so trapped and scared  
that you can't see it yourself.

Even when you believe you are beyond repair,  
remember, remember it is there.

You are good.  
Do you hear me?  
You are good.  
What I want you to remember  
Is you.

# OCD

TIM GALATI

Imagine the pain  
Of chronic visions  
Of yourself killing those you love  
Convincing, terrifying, unending

A purgatorial pain of the psyche  
A bewildering burden of the brain  
A monstrous malignancy of the mind

Step only on the blue squares of linoleum  
Or else your mother will die  
Check the stove only in increments of five  
Or else your father will perish

And etched across one's mind  
Are visions of these deaths  
Even if one satisfies the rituals

The inner mechanisms churn and work  
But for their fruits: out spews nonsense  
Trapped in a cycle of self-destruction

I used to pretend I was chained to things  
While so young, only thirteen-years old  
In order to keep at bay my intrusive fears  
Of killing my beloved family

How could I know what an intrusive thought was?  
How could I know to dismiss them, to help myself?  
Indeed, quiet years passed by in agony  
For how could I know?

# MEETING PEOPLE AT A PARTY

JOHN GREY

His chilly hands reminded me  
of a corpse's. The color in his  
cheeks could have doubled  
for an ice rink. He shuddered

when he saw me, like a spooked  
horse. I'd have pronounced him dead  
if it wasn't for his breath. Or living  
if his eyes weren't so black.

Or an abstract painting. That was it.  
A portrait, not of himself, but of  
all that was happening in the world.  
He moved into my field of vision

like gray clouds, as his outstretched  
arm filled the air with pallor,  
anemic and forlorn and, with a  
slow-motion somnambulistic gait,

spoke in a thin voice, halfway  
between a child's and a squeaking chair,  
the sound of something passing  
through me, a ghost in poor repair.

Our embrace was a blotchy watercolor.  
Our commonality was more clot than grip.  
Oh for the likes of a hot-blooded animal,  
I cried inside. It was the age of sorrow

and invisible substances. Of horror  
and a loosely connected line of people  
headed in my direction.  
He was the first of many,

and he proved to be the warmest,  
the most amenable of the whole lot.  
That should tell you something.  
It didn't teach me anything.

# Ephemera

PAULETTE HAMPTON

Life is thick and slow.  
It chokes me sometimes;  
I gag at the immensity of it—  
of what is expected of me—  
and regret what is no longer *not*.

It moves without intent.  
It just *is*,  
as I am—  
born into its unyieldingness,  
suspended between languid dreams  
and plodding reality,  
like encased ephemera  
within the mind of God.

# Anthropocene

JAN ELAINE HARRIS

we roamed over plains rivers deltas oceans  
we kept putting unknown fruits in our mouths  
when we captured one another and put shackles around familiar necks  
we spread plague blamed the gods burnt our neighbors at stakes

we employed our most refined aesthetics to record our epochs  
we excelled at subtle approaches for both depth and distance  
furnished any curious researcher with accurate topographical maps  
our cartographers could provide nuance for the mechanized  
destruction made possible by opposable thumbs

at the turning of each age we shook off the dust of familiar landscapes  
we gathered our soft babies with their laughably enormous heads  
our babies who could not walk and died easily of violence or thirst  
we hoped some would stay alive to remember our names

we placed our hands on their spongy chests  
we prayed that their hearts would not resemble our hearts  
we prayed that they would not resent us  
we had been so lethal to trees

# The Maid's Ledger

CAROLINE HUCKEBA

The hotel has been standing longer than the city admits. It rises from the block like a kept secret, all velvet rot and guilt remorse. Its name has changed three times—each syllable peeling off like old wallpaper, but the women who clean it do not change at all.

My mother scrubbed these floors. Her mother before her. I sleep during the day in the room they never finished renovating, the one with the cracked mirror and the radiator that knocks like a trapped knuckle. At night, I wear black and carry keys that open doors I am not supposed to enter.

Guests arrive in clusters, conventions mostly. Doctors with plastic smiles. Tech men with wedding bands polished to a shine. They carry matching lanyards and the soft thrill of anonymity. They like to tell me I am different. They like to tell me what they tell their wives only in dreams.

You are incredible, they say, as if discovery itself is intimacy. As if saying it here, under a ceiling darkened by a hundred years of smoke, makes it possible.

They leave on Sundays.

They forget things. Cufflinks. Watches. A shoe once, stiff with surprise. A laminated badge with a man's face smiling back at me, already forgetting. These objects end up in my service closet, in the cedar chest my grandmother dragged here with her wedding dress folded inside. The dress is gone now. The chest remains.

I do not throw anything away.

Each item hums faintly, like it remembers being wanted.

Downstairs, the bartender counts change like a prayer. He skims wallets with a surgeon's ease, lifts credit cards while asking about your flight. He calls it survival. I've watched him peel a life from leather and slide it into his sleeve without blinking.

“You ever steal people?” he asks me once, polishing a glass until it squeaks.

“I keep them,” I say.

He laughs like we’re the same.

The concierge watches us both. His desk is an altar of discretion. He can arrange flowers or funerals with equal calm. He has a way of smiling that suggests mercy is optional. When guests ask him where the good people are, he sends them upstairs. When they ask where the bad people are, he sends them to the bar.

Sometimes he sends them to me.

The rooms smell like heat and soap and the ghost of other bodies. Men like to talk afterward, as if confession might anchor them. They tell me their wives’ names. Their children’s allergies. They say I make them feel seen, which is funny, because by morning I could not pick their faces from a lineup.

What I keep is not them, it’s what they leave behind when they vanish.

A ring, too tight to wear comfortably. A note written on hotel stationery: *You’re better than this place*. A silk tie knotted so carefully it feels intentional, like a final bow.

I add them to the chest.

At night, when the hotel settles into its breathing, I open it and inventory my inheritance. The objects sweat in my hands. Sometimes they warm. Sometimes they ache. Once, I swear I felt a pulse.

My mother used to say the hotel eats people. I think it just teaches them

how to disappear properly.

The concierge tells me a new convention is coming, illusionists this time. He says it like a warning. I say nothing. I've learned that tricks repeat themselves.

One of them lingers after his colleagues stagger upstairs, drunk on applause. He smells like metal and cologne. He makes a coin vanish and reappear behind my ear. He asks if I believe in permanence.

I let him think I do.

In the morning, his room is empty. His suitcase gone. On the pillow: a deck of cards, rubber-banded tight. One card slips free when I touch it. The Queen of Hearts.

I add it to the chest.

That night, the bartender loses a wallet he swears he never stole. The concierge's smile fractures, just for a second. The chest in my closet won't close. The objects have shifted, pressing outward, as if making room.

I dream of the hotel shedding its skin, walls unzipping, carpets breathing, all the forgotten things walking back into the bodies that abandoned them. I wake with a key in my mouth and the taste of copper.

On my next shift, the mirror in the service hallway shows me wearing my grandmother's dress. It fits. Everything fits eventually.

The guests keep coming. They always will. But the chest is full now, humming like a heart too long denied a body.

Soon, I think, it will learn how to open itself.

# Notes for My Betterment as an Employee

ALEX JANSEN

I like my job

I got enough sleep last night

I am never annoyed by customers

I am not annoyed by the constantly changing  
dress code

I am never disgusted by things that  
customers order

I always remember to smile for my whole shift

I have never wanted to yell at a customer

I do not have carpal tunnel syndrome

I like all of my coworkers

I have never wanted to yell at a child

I make enough money

I feel respected and appreciated by my  
managers

I do not experience suicidal ideation

I have never yelled at a customer

I love relying on tips for 15-20% of my  
paycheck

I love capitalism

I have never yelled at my managers

I am not going to quit my job

# eleven

ELIZABETH JEANE

it was a bruised moon and a chewed noon.  
it was a candied brown chestnut and a little skirt.  
you're only a kid. you need to wish you exist.

it was a hollow ween and a turtle drive.  
it was a lame zoo and a wise fly.  
you'll never meet another like you.

it was a period stain and rack of ribs.  
it was a girl scout and a bathroom tile.  
move over. you need more room.

it was a if-i-kiss-you-kiss-me-back.  
it was a i'll-ride-my-bike-to-yours-and-back.  
give yourself a hand.

# The Girl in Pearl

ELIZABETH JEANE

As the museum's only nude bust,  
I must confess I've taken up  
gawking, swearing, billiards, and wine.

Oh yes,  
I get along great with the revolutionary men  
in portraits from just around that bend.

As the museum's sole proprietor of nudity,  
I will not deny  
the distinct, yet warbled, pain I see in their eyes.

If I can prove, yes, if it's true,  
then I believe there's something stirring under their clothes  
and inside their great big moon.

I could steal, just for a second,  
that big bulky coat. Their husbands finally  
with peace afloat.

It's simply cold, you see, the vent above,  
the fan below. My world like a snowglobe,  
and, I, the nude snowwoman ever aglow.

# dish washer

ELIZABETH JEANE

a spongy black mat squishing underneath Nikes,  
a triple-jetted mobile sink head crafted for blasting dishes,  
and an industrial dishwasher humming at my knees.

This is you, who washed dishes at the same exact moment I did.

earbuds pushed in tight, snug in the waxy ear canal,  
an endless carousel of espresso machine guts,  
and rolling damp sleeves up higher and higher.

This is you, dish washer, who burned like me.

a singed heat cuffed in tire-track burn marks,  
the rubbery chalk of skin flaked like arm dandruff,  
and an ashamed phlegm lump spiraling back down.

Did you mean to?

# Kindling

GRACIE JONES

My mother stacked my bones  
with patience, care  
to build my form.  
She shaped my quiet glow,  
watched my warmth rise  
into a little light,  
soft, steady,  
a flame she nurtured  
without taking anything from me.

and then you come along.

You reach into me,  
poke, then prod  
at my bones,  
which were never yours to touch.  
You distort my body  
that my mother tended,  
twist my structure,  
causing my flames to flicker  
in Morse code  
meant for anyone  
who might hear me beg  
silently  
for you to stop.

# Mayfly Season

RICHARD JORDAN

I stand at my father's favorite spot  
along Millers River, the confluence  
with Tarbell Brook. Brown trout leap  
repeatedly for the hatch, as I watch  
a heron stretch its long neck over  
a riffle, take a stab and miss. I, too,  
have come up empty all morning,  
flubbing cast upon cast, my finest  
hand-tied sparkle dun snagged high  
in a yellow birch. But the sun  
flickers through budding maples  
and the air is soft. On days like these  
my father used to tell me it's not about  
catching, only being. I can almost  
detect his pipe smoke on the breeze—  
a blend of cognac and roasted  
chestnuts. I place my rod down  
on the bank, inhale, exhale,  
turn and face the current.

# Confessional

KATE KADLECK

I remember imagining the slim,  
dark booth before I ever entered it.

I knew there must be an opening,  
an aperture between the priest's

domain and mine. I would later learn  
that one spoke into this hole.

In my ten-year-old mind, I  
mistakenly assumed that the space

was designed to press your  
forehead into, leaving you

eyeball to eyeball with the grizzled  
minister. *How terrible an intimacy,*

I thought. *How merciless of God.*

# Recovering Bulimic Takes Ozempic

SUSAN KOLON

The girl with the cinnamon candle  
in the crook of her elbow  
is fisting as many plain M&Ms

as the Dylan's Candy Bar scoop allows.  
I imagine she'll forget to discard  
the red ones as I used to,

the wall behind the toilet splattered  
red dye No. 40, like when I break  
open a pomegranate.

Once, my college boyfriend and I  
ate at Pizzeria Uno, known for salads  
and personal size pizzas. *I prefer*

*a skinny girl*, Josh said. I laid down  
the fork dipped in ranch dressing,  
pushed the pan away. At night

he fingered me, keeping his pillow  
on my stomach like a cookie cutter  
pressing down on dough.

After—I stayed in his dorm room  
and he held me from behind,  
drawing lazy eights on my hard

nipples. I felt full. I slipped  
into the handicap stall, bent over,  
gripped the grab bars

till they warmed, tossed my self  
-hatred into the bottom of a bowl,  
like rocks flung from an overpass.

Now, every Monday I shoot the needle  
into my yielding belly, the bruise  
like a love suck. *All you have*

*in your fridge is Tabasco and glass  
vials, Mom says, but the back seat  
of my car is no longer where I daisy*

-chain donuts and Boba tea to scald  
my throat. From the front porch, I listen  
for rain on concrete. Adam's coming

over; when he hugs me, his fingers  
trace the scar on my shoulder.  
I light a candle, jasmine.



**Vinnie**  
ANNA CARPER



**Space Cowboy**  
ANNA CARPER



**Northern Juniper**  
ANNA CARPER



**Trigeminal Neuralgia**  
**MEGAN HAGEMAN**



**Time Flies, Remember Death**  
MEGAN HAGEMAN



Untitled Multimodal Poem  
KELSIE HE



**Painting Infused with Dog Hair (Dropped Face Down on the Floor)**  
ALEX JANSEN



**Angelfish II**  
ALEX JANSEN



**Otter His Way to a First Date**  
**JOSH STONE**



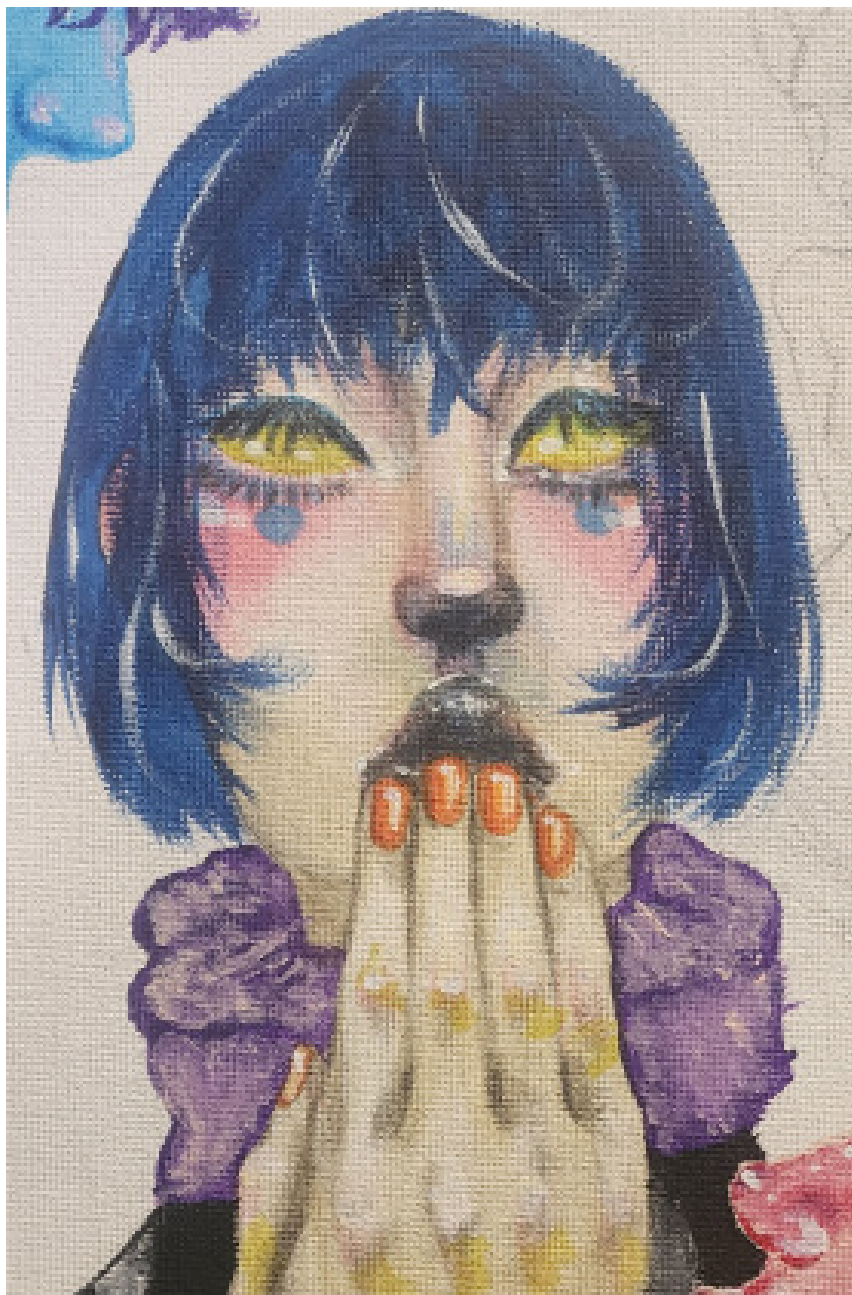
**Good Luck**  
JOSH STONE



**Up and Away**  
**JOSH STONE**



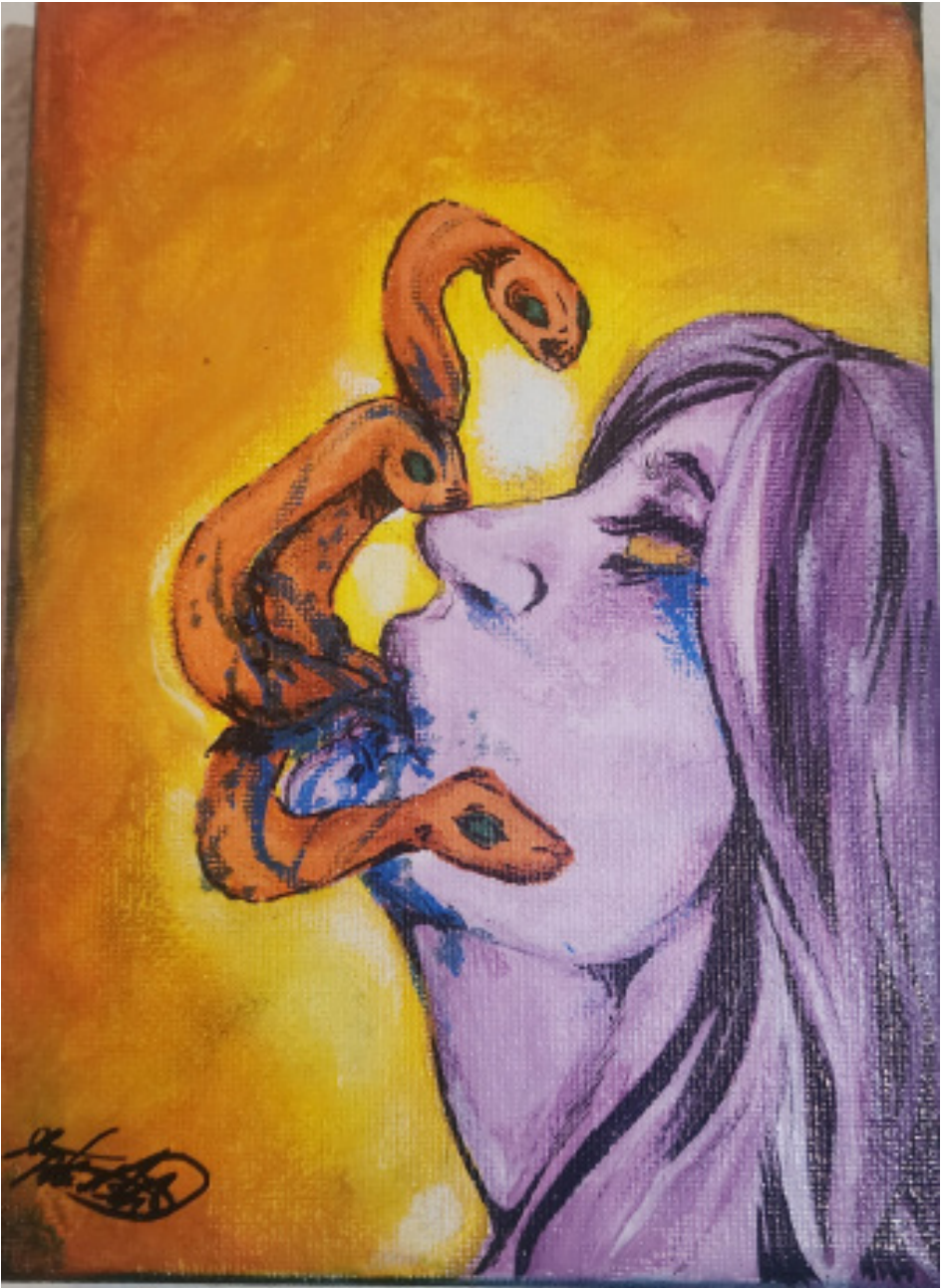
**Biblical**  
SHAYLA TRAUTSCH



**Just a Jest**  
SHAYLA TRAUTSCH



**Apple Core**  
SHAYLA TRAUTSCH



**Sin**  
SHAYLA TRAUTSCH



**Life Drawing #1**  
**CASEY WANG**



**Life Drawing #2**  
**CASEY WANG**



**Wayward**  
CASEY WANG

# Cracked

E KRAFT

Maybe if I wore one clean trait—  
pressed neat as a church bulletin—  
I could pray for a sliver of salvation.

Out here, names set hard as July concrete.  
Everybody knows your truck.  
Everybody knows your love.

My laughter dries like harvest dust  
in the back of my throat.  
stuck like momma's syrup  
sweet in public, heavy at home.

If only I were straighter than corn rows,  
simpler than Sunday hymns,  
loving you wouldn't feel  
like mud on my mother's kitchen floor.

In a town this small,  
even the sky watches.

# At the Fleet Farm Checkout

DAVID ANSON LEE

The conveyor belt advances  
a camouflage thermos, birdseed,  
two candy bars shaped like logs.  
The cashier scans each item  
with a patience worn thin  
by years of the same weather.

Behind me, a man smells  
of gasoline and fresh-cut grass.  
Ahead, a woman counts coins  
slowly, as if attention  
might teach them to multiply.

Outside, snow threatens again:  
that Midwestern reflex  
to undo progress.  
We leave clutching receipts,  
convinced we purchased something  
that will hold.

# Ode to Devil Dawgs

CHRISTIAN HANZ LOZADA

The relish hides  
in a deep hunter green  
while the pickle radiates  
much closer to yellow  
and the tomato's red  
lets you know  
blood has spilt,

but in the mouth  
no amount of bread  
can hide the snap  
and pop of fresh,  
pickled, and salted.  
This is what feet feel  
treading a forest floor.

# Dripping

VERONIQUE MANFREDINI

I'm melting through floorboards  
stalactite to your stalagmite,  
drip

drip

dripping

in unexplored caves. Like

r i p l s

i p e

through untouched pools, I yearn to ignite  
under a sun that hasn't touched me in

millennia.

Darkness swells in the grotto,  
no horizon in its depths, and  
I tread on limestone s

t

e

p

s—

dew-covered—wrapped in a gown of  
crystallized calcium and lichens

hand outstretched.

I have dreamt about you

finally reaching me—

to touch, to kiss, to marry.

To become the p

i

l

l

a

r of the

cavern I have lived in,

my only companion the echo of my

drip

drip

dripping.

# No Song

## SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

### I

The blue whales ceased singing  
Krill is dying and algae poisons the ocean  
There is no song when there is hunger

Families and bombs scream with the same decibels  
While the dust and rubble suffocate cities  
There is no song where there is no breath

### II

I dreamed my friend's grandmother died at 105  
and I was the last to see her alive  
She shared the secret of modern medicine  
Then whispered she wouldn't make it to the morning  
The same starved prophecy of Nostradamus  
and not a song in their hearts

That day, her ghost appeared behind my friend's shoulder and I cried  
My voice is a theremin, my tears a harp  
Seething as the boiling ocean  
How selfish of me to sing and dream when the whales cannot  
or when ghosts linger with their secrets

### III

I walked by a marble pool  
that used to reflect the lights of civilization  
and it was dried up  
A totem of swordfish leapt from its foundation  
Ossified in a contorted choreography  
They were silent too  
Silent and deaf

Pirouetted and questioning  
There is no song where there is no home

#### IV

The world will go dark on August 2<sup>nd</sup> for several minutes  
The eclipse of Leo's might  
Smothered by envy of hungry stars  
See how we all hunger

The silence of swordfish  
The wailing of children  
The obfuscation of the August sun  
The stifled symphony of blue whales  
The insurmountable fathom of volume and magnitude

Starved, famished, and frail  
See how we all hunger  
See how we need to sing

# Polymorph Perverse

## SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

Possessed, I am a shining sedition of flesh  
Spokes of a wheel engineered to an amphibious hub  
The living, craving star, radiant in six directions  
Open to every abundance since the first creature crawled from the trenches  
I am Mobius strip of milky body and *sbozzare* excavated with *gradina*  
Trailing strings of titian and mazarine LED in negative space  
In your cube of lust you are Metatron how you pierce with slow, deliberate  
    hands  
The artist continues on under a sextet candelabra as the blind sense colors  
    and shapes  
With many teeth on the chattering windows, my rain courses down  
You hold your heliotrope over my hungry mouth  
Our shivering breath in the sable  
It mixes  
It's frantic  
but why not defined  
Consider my answer when my lips wrap around your earlobe like a stygian  
    staircase  
Consider my love at your feet and yours at mine  
Intertwining parabolas coaxed into insanity  
Why does the world test its lovers?  
You are a whisper that twisted me  
A scream that changed me forever  
You keep libraries of secrets between us that swell the Euphrates of my  
    chest and belly  
I will crest when clouds render into neon and zap the lower buildings to

make us curious again

When our needs fuse and transform telepathic and hivemind

When memories hold color without leeching my own

I will crest when I shake from the magnetic fields of inner childhood

When we find the leylines among our barren stones

# Kopfkin

## SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

The films play in my head  
God, the reels are heavy and metric  
They still use reels for these things  
Loaded, fitful sequences called Imagination  
Hours at a time without audience save for me  
Timely as Mussolini's trains  
*Tempora atomica*  
A play of mummies, guisers, rhymers,  
pace-egg

soulers, tipeteers, wrenboys, and galoshins

The all-time sword dance revival

That feared, hated thing to be vulnerable

To show the pink of your stomach

To not ignite harrowing questions about your vulgar skin

or flickering exit signs in the sordid fugue

Every coward becomes a projectionist

# Absolution

LQ MCDONALD III

Forgive me the remaining. What is not alive  
in the morning. Only impatience of the earth  
to swallow the dead. Hungry and remorseless.

Forgive me the bodies that no longer touch.  
The canyon that has opened in the belief of us.

You have gone too far for turning back  
to the funeral from which you came.

And I atop the ridge, still watch the horizon  
like an owl—wondering why I can see everything  
in the dark, but the truth is so terribly blinding.

## **scam**

NIALL MCGRATH

He asks me about my trip to Pattaya.  
I indignantly reply has he been messaging  
another girl?

          Though I'm not a girl.  
I'm Paul from Pontefract, in Costa Rica  
find myself in this call centre supplementing  
a year's TEFL  
by conning lonely middle-aged dudes and dames  
who think they've found themselves a foreign flame.

He dodges, pointing out I said I was  
in Thailand, he assumed that's where I holidayed.  
Though he's emailing me as Valentina,  
I relent as Ximena,  
hope I can reel him in for my hotline boss.  
Either way, he's never getting laid.

# to you, who wants but fails to understand me,

LORENA MERCADO

have you ever wanted to hurl yourself into busy traffic/ at 6 pm hoping to finally  
find/peace or find yourself puking /kneeling before a toilet at 3 am but then/ kneeling  
before Him begging for His forgiveness for your sins that later /at midnight don't  
feel/like sins as your arms snake around a stranger on the dance floor and her  
breath/ smells like the regret you'll feel when you finally wake up/but you couldn't  
care less/ cause all you can understand and believe in is her.  
the way her hair feels as your fingers run through it.  
the way her lips taste against your own.  
the way her eyes reflect the flashing strobe lights.  
all that is true and beautiful is her.

Her.

Her.

Her.

Her.

but you have to wake up eventually/ and when you do that feeling will come/ again  
except now it's getting a new tattoo/ or a new piercing / or talking to your dad/ or it's  
practicing violin until your fingers bleed and the bow strings snap / and you're  
studying yourself in the mirror as the tears run down your cheeks / and instead of Her  
you're left with yourself and your own mind with thoughts that race and race and race  
and/ you lose all meaning staring at yourself in that fucking mirror that you are no longer  
who you want to be.

you are who you are.

and you are ugly and beautiful and terrifying and amazing and twisted and  
hypocritical and in so much pain from not being who He wants that there is nothing left  
of you anymore.

only bloody fingertips and dried out tears and sore knees and a raspy throat.

and you are everything and nothing at all.

you are not true.

you just are.

# Phantom Heartache // Too Intimate

JULIE PATZLAFF

Hey, Would it be too forward to ask if we could spend a few months together, you curled up by my side,

Just like old times, but instead, when you describe her in great detail,

**(aside)**

You remember that night, right? You told me all the ways she made you fall in Love, how you cried about her into my shoulder, and how I told you she was missing out and somewhere out there was your dream girl who loved you as much as you loved her. Yeah, that night, all those nights, I recall weeks, actually.

**(still to you)**

Ideally, I want you to forget me, I want you to curse me out, to be disgusted, to leave and remember me vaguely; Hopefully you sever me, the nerves we've shared, tussling hair, undo what can't be undone.

**(before I go)**

Fuck you. Sorry, I meant would you fuck me if I'm maybe 10% cuter? Maybe I'll stare at you softly like I imagine doing when you're not looking. I might even say the wrong thing and burst into tears and

Begin again.

I hate how much I love you, I wish I'd just lie and tell you, "We're cool."  
That I just like you and not like-you-like-you. That I'm not letting any feelings lie.

'I see you in everything good, and—  
Well, that's a lie, I see you often but sparingly,  
Like whenever a shit joke is made or when a Red Fox  
Surprises me, like the one darting in front of my car in the A.M.  
Or the Arctic one the morning after that popped up  
As my random daily fucking google desktop wallpaper,  
That made me start weeping at its cute nose and remember a fact you  
Told me about how foxes are your favorite because they can't be tamed  
and how you really wanted a nose job.

**(moments later)**

I wanted to stumble over my words, to show you I cared, to tell you that...  
That when I stumble over my words... sorry I mean,  
I'd softly mumble that I don't think you need one.

Instead I wish I could go back and tell you that in that moment  
I thought you were the most beautiful person  
And then you'd blush and say something awkward like,  
'Umm yeah thanks I think my skincare is working'  
and we joke it off and I tell you how someday you'll  
make some girl very happy. Then,  
You'd say thank you and I'd remember this small moment of gratitude when you  
Tell me how lovingly she held you and kissed you and how you were finally feeling like  
the  
Woman I see.

**(from the top)**

Ok you're right, let's just let the break be clean, but in stepping away I end up  
twisting tendons and cracking bones. I wouldn't dare ask you to drag me with,  
I'll gladly stay behind and plant myself in our tainted soil and wither as you grow.  
I'll shrink so you can be unabashed about your brightness, please go feel your glow  
I'll come to terms with how she's more than I can ever be  
And how you're much more than I could ever ask for, and in that difference,  
I realize that I could never make you stay with me for more than a moment. At best,  
I could beckon you to spend time with me (sparingly) with an amount of effort that—

**(well let's be honest)**

—At best gets us to a tender but stately distance. For months and years  
after I'll try to forget and instead find familiar loss once more that I'll hold dear because  
It's more comforting than thinking your indentations will be painted over.  
I'll hug my blood, I'll drink you up, I'll whisper softly, I'll sleep with love. Please don't  
live without, please don't go, I don't want to forget what 'with you' feels like, I want you  
to mark my soul.

# Doe

PAYTON PFEIFFER

A cadaver lay on a cold  
steel slab, glassy eyes upward towards  
two morticians who talked  
casually. One held a clipboard the other  
a scalpel. The thin blade  
runs across its arm, severing what was once  
warm and letting its vitality run  
into the aluminum collection  
tray. Doe did not wear makeup nor  
did it cologne. Its jaw was slack as though  
it was about to ask a question to the tile  
ceiling above it.

Fluorescent lightning tore through the  
intricate details of the creature. It was stripped of  
what made it more than an animal. Each shadow and  
blemish smitten from its smooth, hairless body. The  
hunter who stood above it carved his knife downward once more  
fabricating cord-like tendons and bone alike. One final  
spasm escapes from the curled legs  
of the animal, exerting what imprints of vitality still  
remained.

Each cell of the beast lay  
static and frozen. Its blood run  
cold and its heart no longer  
palpitating. The men who watched  
did so silently. A mutual agreement leaking  
into the stale air.

Doe  
wanted to be. And now  
Doe was.

# WATCHING *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*

KENNETH POBO

and while I love the Wyoming  
photography, lakes that perfectly  
reflect the sky, mountains

that dwarf us but connect us  
to them, outside of Laramie  
Matthew Shepard

was murdered.  
Age 21. Tortured. Left to die.  
He'd be 49 now.

Jack and Ennis could have had  
a great life. Tell the secret  
of who you are

and you're turned into a joke,  
hunted,  
a knife against a throat.

# In the Market

CHUCK RYBAK

In bed we dream the Dow Jones    its horizon scroll  
impenetrable    like trying to manually beat  
your heart on the day's systolic drum

Farmers dig rows for duplexes    drive tractors down  
cash-poor highways    no room to pass  
heads hopelessly tilting left

Button-down sailboats glide high-rise hallways  
raise interest rates that snap tight  
in the wind    filling while college funds flag

We dream of bears who paw down our streets  
We dream of bulls with their horns stuck in the trash  
We read the Nasdaq's entrails    poke its open guts

with a blind man's cane  
Fortune favors the second homes on hillsides  
We poll as possessing low confidence

The invisible hand pushes and shoves

# Echo Ghazal from a Parent, Errant

CHUCK RYBAK

Our plastic words choke the throats of the young, voiceless    the young, voiceless    less  
each promise, *we'll build you a better world*, meaningless    world, meaningless    less.

We'll tell you that our walnut tree is gone    our walnut tree is gone    on  
its side in another hundred-year storm, ripped rootless    ripped rootless    less.

Each rote election day we read the dead returns    the dead returns    urns  
on small screens that keep our ashes, bodiless    our ashes, bodiless    less.

We spur migration, the human crush    migration, the human crush    rush  
to cars, buses, people in lines drawn endless    in lines drawn endless    less.

For hollow men like us, age the alibi    age the alibi    bye  
bye now, because soon we will be leaving you, blameless    you, blameless    less.

Like you, this world was birthed by a parent    birthed by a parent    errant,  
who drove, ate steak, brewed the coming storms, merciless    storms, merciless    less.

We retreat into books, hide in a room and chair    a room and chair    air  
gone stale as our hopes to write great works of change, fruitless    change, fruitless    less.

We know we burned the world and then retired    then retired    tired  
of taking    chuck us all, who could never do with less    do with less    less.

# MRI for a Bullet Yet to Arrive

CHUCK RYBAK

I.

Just once to win to be in  
the feature film as the star a tough guy with a jagged scar  
staring into the camera to let some poor schmo know  
*This is how it's going to go*  
and be 100 percent bullet-proof correct  
not checked and pent-up in a tiny cell  
or yelled out of town by the loud *don't tread on me* crowd

Just once to bravely free a dying community using only a ukulele  
to strum and pick a false promise into something real  
*The only thing that stops a bad guy with a ukulele is a good guy with a ukulele*

Just once to turn every gun into an outdoor cat  
the kind that are hard to hold to carry around  
all claw their furry squirming spines  
with a divine need for ground

Just music and purr and fur no muzzles and stocks sitting quiet as space  
exploding big bang pointed pieces rioting outward with hate and pace  
bodies speeding toward bodies  
but with sighted guidance at the speed of science

I fear those bodies fear what someday might spear itself inside my head  
and fast as a snap I cease to be  
to fear this is there something wrong with me

II.

This is how it's going to go

Turn all bullets to liquid  
tiny squibs of water that we soak up together instead of the brain matter  
that forms these normal pieces of words heard moving  
from the brain outward rather than the reverse where  
all the words hide inside my head's tiny little hearses  
visible on a screen high zoom on the live feed in a distant room

But the bullets are now water after we finish  
we wipe our sweaty brows wringing the towels  
boil the absorbed water for mac and cheese  
see only food will emerge from this purge  
fill children's mouths fill the houses in their stomachs with living warmth

Or maybe transform every held gun into a hummingbird  
hovering in the sun invisible motion pointed at open-mouthed flowers  
the bullet hours and hours away from my head if it were already here  
this procedure would fail the irony you cannot carry anything metal

into this giant machine made of metal  
but you could bring a hummingbird  
to hover beside your loaded head on the sliding bed mind wandering

### III.

But it the bullet will meet me eventually  
right now it probably sits unowned  
by person and purpose unknown maybe in a square box on a shelf  
harmless by itself in a store where you can also buy bread  
cookies for kids and the birthday party at school the class huddled close  
snug like the bullets in the box waiting for the pop the opening of a gift

What did we sing as kids to determine who was "it"  
Bullet bullet Number Nine  
moving down the victim's line  
if the shot my skull should crack  
will I get my playthings back

Or maybe the bullet has yet to be made unlathed and unworn  
just like children who have yet to be born who remain the mere idea and trace  
of their first Halloween costume and pretend face

The paths are set even as body and bullet have not yet met  
but are turning toward each other toward intersection transformation  
as when the columbine was still a perennial flower  
but then bruised open into the first red and purple  
flesh of our present

the finished yearbooks of 1998-99 don't include "most likely to survive"  
now no flower is just a columbine

Maybe I'll be in the market mundane beneath Muzak reaching for Corn

Flakes

the Uncle Sam's cereal set aside

when we at last collide the bullet in my head that we scan for now far too early

like we have only read the first movement of a physics problem

*a train leaves the station a bullet leaves its metal womb*

the final sentence arriving soon

a mere platform away a tomb of mass and acceleration

we will know when to solve for x

when we ask how many of us are left

In truth the bullet is already here inside but not inside my head

because things are often present where they are not

the quantum tragedy the not-so-super position

like love being a condition that doesn't include the loved ones

IV.

Our children dress as superheroes as do our adults

marching in and out of movie houses and multiverses

but even the open mind allows only one timeline

So the truth is that Batman died in first grade wearing his sigil

lied down on the floor when a classroom door

opened in Newtown and cut him down

Mr. and Mrs. Wayne divorce like many couples who lose

a caped crusader no unity in our continuity

they are not killed in an alley one Gotham night

in front of a frightened young son the son does not grow

to know a life of the good fight we live in the backwards

there are no heroes because needing to save people is the norm

Mrs. Wayne takes on a new name the city has changed

what is left to protect pin numbers and passwords

the super computers peeking from our small pockets

There is no face to punch    no riddle to solve  
one trigger finger may die    but a million triggers stand by  
how do you stop the stock and steel and sin    an unchecked army  
behind an acronym

Without Batman all we have are drills    my childhood practice  
was for bombs    not bullets    a brisk walk into a basement built for pipes  
a dark night and whatever would matter come the day after

Don't search the sky for his signal    don't look  
Batman died at Sandy Hook

V.

This is how it's going to go  
trade every gun for a small plot of land  
on which we plant life by hand    varieties of natural death  
leaves and trees and seeds  
loaded into the ground    shooting from the soil in muted violence  
prettier than the gunpowder that lies behind my eyes

Whatever illness resides inside my head denies me a love for guns  
a love for the automatic mouths that speak their one-sound language  
repeated    over and over    until all their mouths are empty

To not love such a reality means there's something wrong with me

One of the new teachers at my children's school is gay  
so someone called in a bomb threat today    as I sit and write these very words  
what else is there to say  
they are afraid and I am not there  
afraid while I sit home    working on a poem

I have a frontal lobe filled with fine white islands    more each year  
the cause of it all    the fear  
the headaches    the holding place for a bullet still at rest  
somewhere out there  
waiting for the dark spark of male anger    a dull manifesto

If we planted actual bullets    nurtured them like seeds  
what would grow

weeping willows

yet the branches  
would not only limply reach the ground    but breach it  
disappear down into it  
joining as one with the roots  
root and branch an unbroken circuit of weeping

VI.

But the white islands in my brain    an archipelago of tropical migraines  
these white islands in my head are all our islands    reserving a place  
to warmly welcome projectile families into our space  
and in that moment    images and noise  
the sound of jazz that you can almost hear  
its promise as warm and close and snug  
as a horn    put away    locked and safe inside its perfect case

I don't know how to say this in a poem    in pretty images or metaphors  
knock-down spondees of knock-down violence    in the anapests of our peace  
I don't know how to say what's simple    but this is how it's going to go:  
I don't want people to get shot anymore

People believe we cannot be free unless we die all the time  
which is like saying we cannot have poetry    if it does not rhyme

This desire aches in my head    a bullet of its own  
turning into more bullets    white matter on a brain image

There are no pills for this    I fear the idea is what fills my head  
with excess blood from the heart  
and to set it free    a neighbor aims to blast my skull apart

Just once    to win    to be in  
the feature film as the star    a tough guy with a jagged scar

staring into the camera to let some poor schmo know  
*This is how it's going to go*

Then all the guns turn into branches and bloom

# **there's no record of milk like this anywhere**

DAN SICOLI

what i had thought were nervous tics i later learned were actually a variety of colors: our advantage was knowing how to squint: i wondered how many had been eaten away after a frail man lost his balance and exposed his chest: the gray steel wool of him only took attention away from the natural resources of his soul: he revolted but no one paid any mind: when he sneezed i worried milk would be spilled: all color fell absent in blank pages of an unintimidated sky: it speaks too many languages

an acidic sun curdles into the milky plain

# 15 Million Dollars for a Lake House

JOHANNAH SIMON

I'm crunching numbers during the Lake Geneva pleasure cruise, making a quick back-of-the-cardboard-coaster calculation from the main deck of the Grand Belle, a restored turn-of-the-century-styled steamer. She's patinated brass and oiled pine wood. Like me, she was born in 1972. We are the same age, but she's in better shape. When we boarded, the placard next to the boat noted she was widened in 2003 to accommodate more guests. I widened in 2009 to accommodate a single guest on a 9-month cruise. In lieu of a real vacation, I treat my family to the "Grand Houses of the Gilded Age" lake tour as a staycation. We pay \$30 for tickets to view estates built in the late 1880s by Midwestern industrial tycoons. Summer homes to escape the filth of Chicago before air conditioning and clean fuel. Opulent. Lavish. High class manors built by new money magnates. Creosote-soaked and slaughterhouse-stained dollars washed clean in the crystal blue waters of Lake Geneva. Each estate has a story and a matching pier, painted pastel-sherbert colors with coordinating Adirondack chairs. Sport boats and jet skis docked neatly like a Matchbox car playset. The views are a stark contrast to my future-focused quiet life of denial. Decades of saving not spending. Everyone around me is snapping photos. I'm evaluating my life choices. Screw retirement strategy. Spreadsheets and calculators. The conservative investments, 401k. Screw being strategic and mindful. Making plans to have plans when I'm 75. Screw the singular-focus, penny-pinching delayed gratification. I check my holdings every day like they herald the end of days, and the numbers don't seem to budge. I'm not a Robber Baron; I'll never have \$15 million to buy a lake house. Despite her size, the Grand Belle bobs with a hint of wild energy against the lake's spring-fed waters. A reminder that, like me, maybe she's tired of her daily work commute. Maybe she's also grown weary of being a vehicle, resigned to let others captain her. Determine her fate. Ferrying passengers on an endless loop. Maybe she dreams big, too. Finally sees a future she wants. All it takes are dollars. Dreams finance-fueled. Money to buy a lake house. Money to maintain a lake house. Money to buy new Adirondack chairs with a matching fire pit. Where I'll have money to burn.

# SAVIOR

MAX STONE

My uncle is praying for my soul.  
I can't believe I didn't think of that!  
I keep thinking about my missing t-shirt,  
the one with the hole in the armpit,  
it keeps me up at night.  
Lord knows, I'm holy too.  
Burn my journals if I die,  
I talk so much shit about everyone.  
My uncle, the one with premature white hair,  
although, I guess now it fits, he's pretty old,  
who bought land high and sold low,  
bought a newspaper company  
right around the time the internet  
took off, went bankrupt,  
and now is devoted to this new-age weirdo church  
that spews out bible verses spliced with  
robot stuff and conspiracy theories,  
thinks he's a living-saint, destined to be *my* savior.  
Thank you, thank you,  
I *am* a heathen, heaven knows,  
a good little drug user,  
a little of this, a little of that,  
but I know when to stop.  
And I can be a slut sometimes when I feel like it.  
Man, does he love me or what?  
Last week, I was in love with Special Agent Dale Cooper.  
Today, I don't know who to love.  
What if you start hiccupping and never stop?  
Hiccup and hiccup and hiccup...  
hiccup and hiccup  
hiccup to high heaven.  
Do I need Jesus?  
He'd probably tell me I need therapy.  
Could I call him at 3 am about boy problems?

I blocked my uncle's number because he was sending me bible verses every morning.

I saw him at a bar recently and he didn't see me, so I hid in the bathroom until I was sure he was gone.

Still, I appreciate the thoughts and prayers.

# Unspoken

MARIA STREIF

I remember the rug, threadbare and worn,  
each green thread unraveling under my fingers.  
Grandma's kitchen was usually a haven of cookies and laughter,  
but that day, the room held its breath — and so did I.

I remember how she assured me they would be back soon,  
but I saw the silent tears slipping down her cheeks.  
Her soft hands folded and head pressed against them.  
She did not move to stop them.

I remember Mom and Dad smiling when they picked me up,  
but their eyes were all red and puffy; I could tell they were trying not to  
cry.

The ride home was silent, broken only occasionally by the sound of my  
mom's sniffles.

When we pulled in the driveway, I immediately ran for my teddy bear.

I remember the tears that left invisible stains on our dull leather couch,  
where just weeks earlier, my mother had sat.

My tiny head pressed against her belly,  
listening, dreaming, expecting.

I slept in my old room that night.

The walls had been repainted, the curtains replaced.

Drawers were filled with clothes too small for me.

I curled up at the foot of the empty crib.

And we spoke of it no more.

# My 4:00AM Thoughts

MARIA STREIF

Have milkers on by five, but make sure calves are fed beforehand, but also that you're done milking before the milkman gets here; make sure they get bedded every day, but also don't use all the straw; make sure the cows are all milked out, but don't let the milkers hang too long - it ruins their teat ends; make sure you are prepping each cow thoroughly, our bulk tank SCC is through the roof; wash the buckets, wash the floors, wash the ceiling, wash the doors; you can put 1831 back in the tank today; or was that 1631?; no, definitely 1831; send samples into the creamery today, but make sure they don't sit out for longer than 30 minutes; oh wait, it's a holiday, never mind; the hired help called in sick, guess I'm milking by myself this morning; shoot I forgot to start the plate cooler; my turkey sandwich from yesterday's lunch has been sitting out all night, well I suppose it's still fine to eat, right?; if I get slapped in the eyeball by one more cow tail I will— Pause. Take a deep breath. Think of something else.

“You're just a dumb farmer.”

“Cow farts are ruining the environment!”

“Why do we even need farmers when we get all our food from the grocery store?”

Fix the PTO on the TMR mixer, but also the spreader has a flat tire and a cow has her head caught in the headlocks; the barn cleaner stopped working and I can't find the cow aspirin; gosh my feet hurt; let me just sit down for a— calf coming backwards, grab the chains; intervene swiftly but also not prematurely; call the vet if you have problems but also don't create an unnecessary bill; Prevail is subcutaneous; Ampicillin is intramuscular; 5cc's on day one, skip one, then 3 cc's once every 24 hours; make sure to administer the proper dosage but also all the numbers are worn off the syringe; pay the bills with the money you don't have, but also make sure you don't lose the farm or you are a disgrace to this family; work 24/7/365 to feed those that don't care about you or your family; *did you know farmers have one of the highest rates of suicide of any profession?*; I wonder what time it is, I'm— wait, I think I forgot to close the gate!

4:47 AM

# I'm Afraid I Found My Skin

## LYRE TOOTHED

Have you felt the lunar tide, salt-streaked lungs

*Pull*

of the ocean?

I admit I've heard it calling me.

Waves foaming along the soft insides of my thighs

My feet in the sand daring them, pretending

I'm not aching to be swept away.

Do you understand how someone can be

Happy

And still run away?

For that first breath of freedom the rush

Of open, turbulent waters- all life. All death.

Craving that returning.

It doesn't mean

I want it.

But if you give me the chance

My baby, my green shores, my freshwater midday-sun, my light

If you give me the chance

I can't promise I won't take it.

So put your head to my shoulder

*Pull*

Me to you

Admit your love, call my name.

Run your hands along the soft insides of my thighs

Ground my feet in your future, don't dare my past, pretend

You've got my aching locked away.

# Invasive Species

## LYRE TOOTHED

The ladybugs climb  
Blood spatter dots, sticky  
Streaking orange. Futile  
Defense mechanisms. You  
Can never find the cracks,  
The tiny flaws they press  
Their bodies through.  
You hate them more than  
You have hated anything.  
Their biting mandibles; the stink  
Of your father's garden  
With the sun-warmed plastic swing;  
Their bright reds and pale pinks and streaking  
Orange on your white walls, white ceiling,  
White floor; the way they dare to have  
What you lack. You crush them between your fingers  
Streaking orange, desperate.  
You once said you don't believe  
In hate. Futile defense mechanisms.  
There are always more and you have never had  
The determination to find any opening  
To force yourself through the gaps.  
Glass shatters under fist, you cry,  
Streaking orange down your face.  
You have never been able to find the cracks  
The tiny flaws so you let them press  
Their bodies through.

# My Medical Journal Has Strawberries On The Cover

SHAYLA TRAUTSCH

## My Medical Journal Has Strawberries On The Cover

~

Because the sweetness and pale pink feels  
lighter especially in the fickle presence of something so  
heavy, and the seeded flesh is also anatomically palatable,  
a sugar pill thought. I wrote this poem in the shower, thinking of  
washing produce in the sink, scrubbing off the pesticides and waxy  
sheen, and it makes me wonder how many of my symptoms are painted or  
self-imposed. I look at my skin and muscle weighing ableness and subtle in-  
fiction on the scale as if I were assessing ripeness. No one prepared me for the  
stress of advocating for my own ill conditions, incurable, just trying to be taken  
seriously when explaining how it hurts to breath, pleading for an explanation  
outside of my mind, because I'm well aware of how my produce stacks and how  
it falls when pressure eclipses and my anxiety assumes the nightshade root family  
always beneath the surface. I explain how my blood pools in my body pressing  
against the plastic, and the healer prescribes relaxation, which is like being told  
that it's crazy to think of a knife when the cutting board stays accessible on the  
kitchen counter. Panic attacks don't feel like inconsistent circulation and tem-  
perature irregularity, half frosted in the back of the fridge and wilting everywhere  
else. "The brain fog has nothing to do with over-misted fruit", but its right there  
in front of me and every fiber of my being knows that if they just put me on the  
tilt-table, they'd see it for themselves and tell me I was right. Tell me that it  
was worth it tracking my own flareups: BPM and PI% with a resting cardiac  
jumpscare so that I can rest, and be certain of what I already know,  
what my body has been telling me. How can a healer heal a  
snake fruit, if they're distracted by the scaly default, and  
they only ever eat strawberries? Tired of the  
doctor's digging their thumbs into  
my soft tissue and asking  
me, "Are you sure  
you're not just  
Rotten?"

# Resetting a Vignette

SHAYLA TRAUTSCH

My job is in the details

Designing spaces I'm not allowed to sit in

But change is more inviting in someone else's living room

Much like how it's more fun cooking for company

The company doesn't want dormant nails,

Or any sofas without table sets

It must look perfect, but lived in

Place the trays just off center so it doesn't resemble intent

Teetering the picture frames reminds me of a Newton's Cradle

Empty space above bed frames isn't allowed

After all, there's nothing more comforting than sleeping under a pendulum

Most people soak in the uncanniness of a furniture store

Remarking on how they pulled it off,

the idealistic quarters like in the magazines

They don't understand that a space not lived in gets

just as messy with a fraction of the care

You start to memorize the stains from salesmen kicking up their feet

And how dead flies are still tucked into the bedding displays

There's no place like home

Couldn't agree with you more, Dorothy

But everything's too uniform for red ticket heels

# The Executioner

BRODERICK VACLAVEK

My  
 breast  
 with  
 shaft  
 kept  
 as I  
 lord  
 above  
 the  
 woman  
 who sits  
 stoically  
 at the base  
 of my  
 body,  
 an unflin-  
 ching statue carved  
 of the type of stone  
 reserved for the older  
 generations. Like a cut of  
 polished marble, speckled with  
 streaks of age and experience,  
 the woman politely waits for her  
 inevitable fate like a well-behaved  
 dog to its master. She has no reason  
 to treat her fate with the grace she is  
 granting it, yet she greets her coming death  
 with a smile on her face and her hands clasped  
 around her jade prayer beads. On some  
 level I can't help but admire her. Most criminals  
 in her position thrash like wild  
 hares brought to slaughter, but  
 she respects me. I can see her  
 face, unlike the others, and it humiliates  
 me. In all honesty she is quite  
 lenient for a criminal, but that isn't what  
 strikes with me. It's her eyes.  
 I feel a bead of sweat drop from  
 my brow

Her eyes. So soft  
 the sunlight like  
 the Earth's breast.  
 its jagged fractures  
 make me feel more  
 at ease than punishment  
 the sun whilst  
 The woman reclines  
 in possession of her  
 set my gaze. I wish she would  
 could kill me and free me of the Hell  
 her to reach out and pierce my heart. I  
 condemned and I the executioner. Why then do I feel like such a prisoner in my  
 body? Why then do I feel like I can't escape my circumstances? I want to scream  
 I want to show weakness I want to break into a million pieces and never be put back  
 together I want to be left in the woods like a forgotten rotting thing and be fed to the  
 Earth and all her wild creatures. Give me to the vultures and tigers and foxes and  
 worms, let them bear me, kill me, take me. But I am the executioner and she the con-  
 demned. I am the vulture, the tiger, the fox, the worm. She lies out a meek sigh of re-  
 lief and I am called to my broken home where my duty resides. Her eyes open. Her  
 head hits the ground. I am already broken into a million pieces with no one to reas-  
 emble me. I am the executioner, she the condemned, and this is my living Hell.

# Cigarettes in Hospice

BRODERICK VACLAVEK

I've picked up smoking. I've snuffed  
enough ephemeral slender orange butts  
on the bottom of my boot to know  
that we die twice.

First with our body —  
burnt down to the filter,  
young or old, we are  
dashed against an ashtray  
or tossed in a storm drain  
with no sweeping score.  
An absence,  
felt in rooms where we once  
lingered, our names smothering  
conversations like smoke.

The second death is quieter,  
our yellow-stained filters  
erode away in landfills of flowers  
that never seem to wilt.  
Our names become forgotten words  
that choke the throats of those who  
speak them, like ashes in your mouth.

Yes, smoking is death.

The cigarette is gone,  
but your index and middle finger  
still look yellow under the streetlamp.  
An itch, incapable of being scratched.  
Leather jackets pulled from closets  
that still smell of drunken nights in  
bar parking lots.

Crushed packs and crumpled foil  
slip through our fingers,  
there is nothing left  
to put to our lips.

# The Death of Empathy

LYNN WHITE

When empathy died  
the soldiers could dance  
in the underwear of the women  
whose homes they had destroyed.  
And dance they did with pride.  
You can see it in the films they made  
but it's not in the News.

When empathy was dead  
the soldiers could steal children's toys  
from the rubble of their bombed homes  
and repurpose them as tank trophies,  
mascots to be flaunted with pride.  
You can see it in the films they made  
but it's not in the News.

When they had killed empathy  
the soldiers could shoot babies  
in the head or gut - they chose,  
and someone's daughter 200 times,  
or 300 - they could choose  
though there were fewer films now  
'enjoy yourselves but don't film',  
they had been ordered  
and most followed orders.

When empathy was murdered  
the soldiers could capture children  
and imprison them in cages,  
one metre square,  
or whatever they chose  
until they told them  
the whereabouts  
of those they did not know.

Then they laughed  
puffed up with pride  
but made no films.

When empathy was dead and buried  
and only silence could still be heard,  
Israel was supreme,  
a supreme being,  
godlike in its power.  
Human rights were dead,  
humans would follow  
any of them,  
even all.  
When empathy was no more,  
no one watched films.

# Taraneh's Song

BÄNOO ZAN

For Taraneh Alidoosti<sup>1</sup>

This revolution is my song  
I join the chorus—

shed my fear  
reveal my hair as god's word

post a photo to go around the world  
holding a sign: "Jin, Jian, Azadi"<sup>2</sup>  
Woman, Life, Freedom

In a later post I write:  
There will be consequences  
for your bloodlust

In our alley  
a man knocks at my car window:  
"Revolutionary Court!" . . .

Inmates in the next cell  
knock on the wall:  
"What's your name?"  
"Taraneh"  
"The actor?"

A song seeps through the wall:

*Sing—in your name—  
our symbol word—*

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<sup>1</sup> Iranian actress who was arrested during the Woman Life Freedom movement for her protests against the compulsory hijab and extra-judicial executions.

<sup>2</sup> Woman, Life, Freedom in Kurdish

*Sing—that the city—  
becomes the song of woman—  
Sing—that this homeland—  
becomes our homeland—3*

I am released from prison  
but my heart is a shadow beating on its wall

I turned against tyranny  
and my body turned against me

My skin—rent—into  
pain—manifest—unwanted  
anonymous mask—

I am in the open now—by the fire

My wound does not  
stifle my words

I am your *taraneh*<sup>4</sup>, my homeland!  
I am your song

*Why journey?  
Why exile?  
Stay—take back the land—  
Cut the breath of the oppressor—  
This night is dawn  
of a hundred revolutions—*

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3 The words in Italics are free translations of lines from “Woman’s Anthem,” songwriter: Mona Bourzouei, singer: Mehdi Yarrahi

4 Taraneh means “song” in Persian

# Motion Sickness

HUINA ZHENG

I've gotten carsick for as long as I can remember. Mom says it runs in my dad's family. Those Hakka people, if they so much as smell exhaust, think about taking a ride, or hear tires rolling by, they start retching until there's nothing left but bile.

Grandpa says our ancestors lost their souls on a jolting wagon while fleeing the wars. The souls kept chasing the wheels until they died halfway. Ever since, he says, whenever a wheel turns, our bodies can't keep up and try to empty themselves so the soul can catch up more easily.

"But we ride cars now," I once muttered.

"The soul only recognizes the wheel," he snapped.

He's seventy-eight, still meets friends for dim sum every morning, transferring twice on the bus. I just need a scopolamine patch or a Meclizine pill an hour before the ride and I'll be fine.

"Your body's too heavy. It hurts the spirit," Grandpa says.

Everyone on my dad's side has their own cure for motion sickness. My uncle's works best: pick a front seat, fix your eyes on the horizon, keep menthol balm and a vomit bag in your pocket.

"When you feel sick, just sleep," my aunt says.

But Grandpa insists I sing loudly when the road turns rough.

"Use your diaphragm; it helps the soul find you faster," he says.

"I open my mouth, and only dry heaving comes out," I plead.

He sighs. "Kids these days are too fragile. Can't even move their breath anymore."

Now I have a job that sends me traveling every week, flying through the sky or racing along the rails. Grandpa warns I'll lose my way

home.

“When the body moves forward and the soul pulls back, they’ll fight,” he says.

To him, our Hakka ancestors crossed mountains and rivers, fleeing wars and searching for a home, but always wanting to go back. That’s why, he says, they practiced *kam kut*: dig up the bones, wipe them clean, and arrange them into a ceramic bone jar to be reburied closer to home. If the family moved again, there would be a third, a fourth. “The bones follow the living. The ancestors never leave.”

I’m the only one among his thirteen grandchildren who flies for a living. But my soul has become practical. It’s used to waiting comfortably at home. Unless a crash kills me on the spot, we always reunite when I open the door. Like a property handover, my soul signs off this body as safely returned.

After my father dies, Mom and I bring home his urn. Grandpa doesn’t cry; he just goes pale and rasps, “Why didn’t you take him back to be buried?”

Mom explains that burials are banned now. He snatches the urn, clutching it like a newborn, muttering in Hakka, “Must return to the soil... the soul needs a root.” His voice is dry, like nails scraping wood.

More than the moment he’ll find the urn is empty, we fear his body giving out again. Mom grabs the car keys. “We’ll go back right now,” she says. I steady Grandpa and the urn, following quietly.

Dad’s ashes, carried out by his young wife, have long been scattered into the ocean, just as he wished. He’d said the ancestors’ souls had

run themselves ragged chasing wheels; his would rather catch a tailwind, drift with the currents, and see the world they never could.

The car jolts up the mountain road. My stomach churns. Grandpa is oddly calm. He rolls down the window, inhales, and says, “Smell that? That’s your father.”

Mom and I exchange a glance. She must have added a few drops of his favorite pomelo-leaf oil to the car diffuser.

The scent spreads through the car, bitter and bright, like air after rain. For a moment, the road smooths out. I can almost believe our souls have caught up, though I know one never will.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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**Matthew J. Andrews** is a private investigator and writer currently living in Central Iowa. He is the author of *The Hours*, *A Razor's Edge*, and *I Close My Eyes and I Almost Remember*. He can be contacted at [www.matthewjandrews.com](http://www.matthewjandrews.com).

**C.C. Apap's** writing has been featured or is forthcoming in *Gotham Literature*, *The Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight*, *The Sunlight Press*, and *The Wild Umbrella*. A 2025 winner of the Prime 53 Summer Poem Challenge, he teaches literature at Oakland University.

**Alyiah Aziz-White** is a senior at UW-Platteville, eventually going to law school. Alyiah plans to become a civil rights lawyer. Alyiah enjoys writing about civil and mental health issues. Alyiah writes to shine light on the harder-to-speak-about topics.

**Daniel Gene Barlekamp** is the author of poetry, fiction, and audio drama for adults and young readers. His poems have appeared in *Pictura Journal*, *IHRAM Press*, *Seventh Quarry*, and elsewhere, and have been translated into Chinese by *Poetry Hall*. Originally from New Jersey, he now lives with his wife and son in Massachusetts, where he practices immigration law. Visit him at <https://dgbarkamp.com/> and on BlueSky [@dgbarkamp.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/dgbarkamp.bsky.social).

**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. Recent/upcoming appearances in *AC|DC*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Periwinkle Pelican*, among others.

**John Brantingham** is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024. Additionally, he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines. He has 23 books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

**Jack Braun** graduated from UW-Platteville in 2025 with a B.A. in English and a minor in Creative Writing. His hobbies include mini painting, writing, and devising new and creative ways to be mistaken for his identical twin brother, Noah.

**Kaz Bresnan** is a Secondary English Education major at UW-Platteville with a minor in Creative Writing. He writes both poetry and prose, and his work tends to focus on both physical and mental health. He is currently student teaching in Southern Wisconsin.

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**Anna Carper** lives it up in downtown Milwaukee with two perfect cats and too many (dying) plants. She appreciates spicy ramen and city living. She spends her time daydreaming about economic stability and playing *Stardew Valley*.

**Donna Castañeda** is the author of the chapbook *Show me the road—I'll follow the lilt of your shadow* (Bottlecap Press, 2024). Her poems have appeared in *The Broken Spine*; *The Hopper*; *Crosswinds*; *The San Antonio Review*; *Green Linden Press* among others. Her M.F.A. in Poetry is from Antioch University-Los Angeles, but she also has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology and was a professor at San Diego State University-Imperial Valley for 30 years. She lives in Chula Vista, CA, near the U.S.-Mexico border.

**Scott Davidson** grew up in Montana, worked as a Poet in the Schools and lives with his wife in Missoula. His poems have appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Bright Bones: Contemporary Montana Writing*, and the Permanent Press anthology *Crossing the River: Poets of the Western United States*.

**Alice de Hubp** originally hails from Porto Alegre, Brazil, but she lives in Mexico City with her partner and cat. Alice's fiction and poetry have been published in *Juniper Zine*, *The Morgue Mag*, *Lunae Lit*

*Review*, *the B'K*, *Reading Into Culture*, and elsewhere. Find her full list of published work at [alicedehubp.carrd.co](http://alicedehubp.carrd.co).

**Scout Dodds**, hailing from Frederic, Wisconsin, is a senior at UW-Platteville majoring in Agricultural Education with a General Agriculture emphasis and minoring in Animal Science, while also earning certificates in Professional Writing and Integrated Liberal Arts. In her free time, Scout enjoys writing, cooking, and traveling to new destinations.

**Gretta Droessler** is currently a sophomore at UW-Platteville majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She explores writing poetry and making art in her spare time. She loves creative works in which any viewer can interpret their own meaning within the art or art pieces that showcase creativity and the strangeness of the world.

**Melissa Fiegel** lives and teaches middle school English in Milwaukee, WI. She spends most of her time watching procedurals, parenting, reading, and tending to her hoard of house plants.

**Tim Galati** is an author, outdoorsman, and engineer from New York's southern tier who spends his nights toiling over crafting novels, though once in a while he

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breaks to stitch together something short.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, U.S. resident, recently published in *Shift, River And South*, and *Flights*. Latest books, *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters* and *Between Two Fires* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Levitate*, *Writer's Block* and *Trampoline*.

**Megan Hageman** is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville majoring in Biology, with plans to attend graduate school to attain a Doctorate in Physical Therapy. Megan enjoys the arts, hanging out with family and friends, and running.

**Paulette Hampton** is a multi-genre writer who writes paranormal, memoir, and sci-fi novellas. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines such as *Typo Magazine*, *Disturb the Universe*, and *Suburban Witchcraft*. You can find her at [paulette-hampton42.wixsite.com/website](http://paulette-hampton42.wixsite.com/website).

**Jan Elaine Harris** (she/her) is a Professor of Writing. Her chapbook, *Isolating One's Priorities*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Recent poems appear in *Susurrus*, *Tiny Spoon*, *Feral*, *Stone Poetry Journal*, *American Writers Review*, and *The West Trade Review*. She lives in East Nashville with two perfect GSPs: Malloy

and Astrid-June.

**Kelsie He** is an aspiring writer and a college student studying on the medical track. Her work explores memory, love, identity, and the natural world. She writes in her free time between studying, spending time with loved ones, and working as an EMT.

**Caroline Huckeba** is a Psychology graduate student, writer, registered behavioral therapist, and dancer based in Dallas, Texas. She holds a B.S. in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at Dallas. Her creative work has been published in *Verusmy Magazine* and *Rappahannock Review*, and she was nominated for Best Original Screenplay at the Art Is Alive Film Festival (2025).

**Alex Jansen** is a poet, artist, and student at UW-Platteville. On the rare occasion that they're not busy playing cards with their friends, they love to make linocut prints of their favorite fish.

**Elizabeth Jeane** is an M.F.A. candidate at Butler University. Her work is forthcoming in *MSU Roadrunner Review* and *The Polk Street Review*. She lives in Indianapolis, where she tutors students and is at work crafting her first poetry chapbook.

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Find her on Instagram @elizabethjeane writes.

**Gracie Jones** is a writer, poet, and playwright who has had multiple poems published, including “Goodnight,” in *The Broken Spine’s Brutalist Anthology*. Her play, *One Day You’ll Understand*, was performed at a showcase at the Everyman Theatre in 2024.

**Richard Jordan’s** poems appear in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *DMQ Review*, *Rattle*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *The Squannacook at Dawn*, won first place in the 2023 Poetry Box Chapbook Contest. His new chapbook, *Spotting the Rise*, is available through Rockwood Press.

**Kate Kadleck** is a writer and relationship therapist based in Dubuque, Iowa. She earned her M.S. in Marriage and Family Therapy from Northwestern University and is the author of a chapbook, *Corpse Pose* (Bottlecap Press, 2025). Kate also has a poetry collection, *Not Quite Medusa*, forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

**Susan Kolon** is a Chicago-based writer. She spent a decade wandering the marketing halls of corporate America, dispelling stories about children, catalogs, and candy. “I hear a song and I can parrot

the lyrics in moments. Writing poems takes me infinitely longer.” You can find her work with *Four Tulips Publishing*, *Quarter Press*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Stanchion Magazine*, and elsewhere.

**E Kraft** is a poetry editor whose poems have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes multiple times and published by The Hanging Loose Press, *The National Poetry Quarterly*, and others. She is grateful for everyone who has read her poems or attended her readings including her favorite dog from the local shelter.

**David Anson Lee** is a physician, philosopher, and poet whose work explores place, memory, and the human costs of ordinary life. His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals. He lives in Texas and writes towards clarity, restraint, and emotional honesty, with particular attention to the landscapes and communities that shape us.

**Christian Hanz Lozada** wrote the poetry book *He’s a Color Until He’s Not*, and his Pushcart Prize-nominated short works have been published in over 60 books, journals, and anthologies. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his M.F.A. to teach his neighbors and their kids at L.A. Harbor College.

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**Veronique Manfredini** (she/her) has a Master's in English from Monmouth University and is the recipient of their Creative Writing Award in Poetry for Spring 2024. Originally from Italy, she often weaves her native language and hometown into her literary work. Find her at [veroniquemanfredini.com](http://veroniquemanfredini.com) or on social media @TheBookishGodmother.

**Savannah Manhattan** is an author and poet in Los Angeles. Originally from Minnesota, she has brought her Midwest warmth to two poetry collections, short stories in national anthologies, and poems in multiple lit mags.

**LQ McDonald III** is a writer currently based in Madison, WI. His work explores faith, trauma, grief, nature, intimacy, and the ecstatic. His poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Common Ground Review*, and *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*. When not writing, he is exploring wild places, traveling, or reading.

**Niall McGrath** is a twice Pushcart Prize-nominated writer in the 2020s, most recently for 2026, from County Antrim. He has had work in *The South Carolina Review*, *Antigonish Review*, *Malahat Review*, *Irish Times*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *New Statesman*, and *Quadrant* (Australia) among other journals. He is Assistant Editor of Northern Ireland's premier journal

of the arts and culture, *Fortnight*.

**Lorena Mercado** is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville with a major in Forensic Investigation and minors in Criminal Justice and Creative Writing. She is a first generation Mexican-American and is from Milwaukee. In her free time, she loves to play the violin, write, and read books, especially fantasy.

**Julie Patzlaff** is a soon-to-be-graduating senior at UW-Platteville majoring in English with an emphasis in Technical Writing and a minor in Creative Writing. In her free time, she enjoys writing, reading poetry, and playing *Magic The Gathering*.

**Payton Pfeiffer** is a Cybersecurity student at UW-Platteville with a passion for creative writing. He wishes to pursue a minor in the topic to diversify his portfolio and get better at doing what he loves. Apart from writing, he enjoys reading classic literature and various graphic novels.

**Kenneth Pobo** (he/him) lived in Wisconsin for six years and is the author of *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *At The Window*, *Silence* (Fernwood Press), and *It Gets Dark So Soon Now* (Broken Tribe Press). His work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*,

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*Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, *Mudfish*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere.

**Chuck Rybak** lives in Oneida, Wisconsin and is a Professor of English, Writing, and Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he coordinates their prison education initiative. He is the author of two chapbooks and two full-length collections of poetry. Chuck also writes on Substack as The Declining Academic.

**Dan Sicoli**, an editor with *Slipstream*, will have a new collection, *Slag Alley*, out from Ethel Zine Press in 2026. A three-time Pushcart nominee, he's placed poems with *Big Windows Review*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *Home Planet News*, *Hood of Bone*, *Steam Ticket*, and *Santa Barbara Literary Journal*, among many others.

**Johannah Simon** is a corporate schemer and professional dreamer. She's a Midwestern GenX writer, who can't stop writing about her messy life. Find her unhinged corner of the interwebs at [www.thewritingtype.com](http://www.thewritingtype.com).

**Josh Stone** is a man and not a Muppet. He's a senior at UW-Platteville where he is pursuing a degree in Finance. He wishes he could get paid to be an artist. He would much rather do that than many other jobs. He enjoys art and hates AI.

**Max Stone** is a poet and writer from Reno, Nevada. He is the author of two chapbooks: *The Bisexual Lighting Makes Everyone Beautiful* (Ghost City Press) and *Temporary Preparations* (Bottlecap Press). His work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize, and he is the creator, curator, and host of Landline Poetry Series, held monthly in Reno.

**Maria Streif** is a third-year undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is majoring in Biology and is also pursuing an English minor and Professional Writing Certificate. She hopes to become a physician assistant in a rural area of the Midwest. In her free time, she enjoys baking and painting.

**Lyre Toothed** is an emerging poet from the only city where blue soft serve ever took off. They are currently based in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where if they are not baking; rifling through CDs; or being crushed by a Maine Coon named Vincent, they always come back to writing.

**Shayla Trautsch** is a senior at UW-Platteville working on her Bachelor's in Professional/Technical Writing and Literature. She's currently working on writing a collection of short horror stories, a graphic novel, and designing a deck of Tarot. From acrylic portrait commissions to wire

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sculpts, she hopes to always be able to keep her hands and mind busy creating.

**Broderick Vaclavek** is an undergraduate English Education student. He is studying to teach English to high school aged students abroad at The American School in Japan, Tokyo. He currently serves as president of the Platteville Film Club and is in the process of founding the Platteville Poetry Club.

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

**Casey Wang** is an Animation student hailing from Madison, Wisconsin. When they're not drawing cartoons, they like to watch movies, cook, crochet, thrift, and attend local pro wrestling events.

**Bānoo Zan** is a poet and curator with over 300 published pieces and three books. She is the founder of Shab-e She'r (Poetry Night) and co-editor of *Woman, Life, Freedom: Poems for the Iranian Revolution*. Bānoo is the recipient of the 2025 Writers' Union of Canada Freedom

to Read Award.

**Huina Zheng** is a writer and college essay coach based in Guangzhou, China. Her work appears in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other journals. She has received multiple nominations, including for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction.

MATTHEW J. ANDREWS

C.C. APAP

ALYIAH AZIZ-WHITE

DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

SHAYMAA MAHMOUD

JACK BRAUN

KAZ BRESNAN

DONNA CASTAÑEDA

SCOTT DAVIDSON

ALICE DE HUBP

SCOUT DODDS

GRETТА DROESSLER

MELISSA FIEGEL

TIM GALATI

JOHN GREY

PAULETTE HAMPTON

JAN ELAINE HARRIS

CAROLINE HUCKEBA

ALEX JANSEN

ELIZABETH JEANE

GRACIE JONES

RICHARD JORDAN

KATE KADLECK

SUSAN KOLON

E KRAFT

DAVID ANSON LEE

CHRISTIAN HANZ LOZADA

VERONIQUE MANFREDINI

SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

LQ MCDONALD III

NIALL MCGRATH

LORENA MERCADO

JULIE PATZLAFF

PAYTON PFEIFFER

KENNETH POBO

CHUCK RYBAK

DAN SICOLI

JOHANNAH SIMON

MAX STONE

MARIA STREIF

LYRE TOOTHED

SHAYLA TRAUTSCH

BRODERICK VACLAVEK

LYNN WHITE

BÄNOO ZAN

HUINA ZHENG



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