A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Welcome to issue no. 7!

Thank you for taking the time to read our seventh issue! We sincerely believe that you are going to find some great material in this issue. This issue is packed with various writers, artists and poets whose material we truly enjoyed reading!

The next issue’s elements are: **Oval Portrait, Premature Burial, and Purloined Letter (Edgar Allan Poe-themed).**

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook for all of the latest updates!

Sincerely,
Mikaela Shea
### Fiction

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## Story Slam 2015 Winners

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Venus Blues
Gabriel E. Calle

He simmers on hot beds of rocks old as Hadean. Dreams rivers, silver ribbons cutting creases in dirt fine as moon dust. Dreams green fields slithering from cold liquid abysses. His wrinkled face stretches, folds, cracks under pressure of Eras, Eons, wayfaring planetesimals. He opens his brilliant white mouth to greet the torturous wind. A miasma of heat crawls from the depths, envelops like a low cloud, a sulfur veil. He floats in cold a vacuum, the brightest in our night sky; our whimsy; our other-Earth; our other-home; our fantastic next pit-stop; our next host. Where we will promise life to him, life in exchange for life. And instead we will leave him pocked with deep misconceptions, like the black bruises of planets and moons.
HE kept looking at his mama and she kept looking back, kept looking back until she left to do the bad thing.

Travis James watched her jeans slap the dirt, her copper hair ruffling, arms windmilling. She shouted something over her shoulder and then flipped up her fleece and stomped up the road.

Don’t yell. How many times had she said that? They’d sit on their porch under a cloak of stars and embers and his mother would twiddle her thumbs and tell him never to yell or cry. Chiefs didn’t do those things.

“And you want to be the big chief right? Like Papa?”

He would nod, even though she never said Daddy. Only Papa. Only his grandpa. He nodded anyway, mostly because Dad and Daryl never nodded at her. Daryl stabbed at her with forks at dinner, and Travis couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his parents kiss.

Today the sun angled through shifting clouds, and the sky was so close he could smell it. He wiped his brow and looked at the
swamp, watched it simmer, the water green and shallow, shadows moving beneath the surface. Up ahead there was a parched log with its legs sticking out of the water. Frogs liked fallen logs.

_Gonna catch something today, Travis?_ The birds, with their heads tilted. _You getting muddy again. Why do you smell? Travis Travis Travis where’s your mama going?_

He leapt over a pool, swatted through a swarm of gnats. He slinked along the shore, peering over the edge at the lilies and grasses. Sometimes, they’d hear him coming and vanish. Sometimes, they’d see a heron fly away and that’d be a signal. With anyone else that’d be enough. But Travis was nine years old and Travis was catching more every day. He was getting better. Everyone said he was.

“How many you catch?” His dad, every night.

“At least ten.”

His brother would laugh, call him Dirty, his new nickname. He’d say, “Who cares how many he caught? Dirty gonna put ‘em back and catch the same ones tomorrow.” And then Dad would say, “Shut up before I get my belt,” and Daryl would just stare at his plate of beans, eyes hidden beneath a mop of brown hair.

Dad liked Travis better. Travis thought he did, at least. Daryl was mean and Daryl was twelve and Daryl once stabbed a teacher with a rusty screwdriver. Their parents said Travis could catch as many frogs as he wanted, long as he listened in school and didn’t do nothing stupid like draw bad pictures on a girl’s arms or say a cuss word at his principal. Daryl had done all that and now he spent every day at a special school. Even the weekends.

Travis wasn’t allowed to say anything about the bad thing either. That’s what Ma told him. Never talk. Never ask. A chief can’t do that. Right?
He looked back at his house, sun-baked white, porch collared by trees with snaking arms. Ma would be back, like always. And Dad was still sleeping, like always.

There was a small grotto ahead. Inside, flies danced with whimsy. He scanned the reeds. There were three...four...five of them, chins popping, backs glossy. They didn’t move, like they were hoping this brown-haired, saucer-eared monster couldn’t see them, that he’d toss a few rocks at the water then lose interest and wander off. But Travis had been catching frogs since he was four years old. He knew their tricks. *Think before you blink.*

The boy shrunk, dipped his knees and nudged around crusty leaves. They sun drove daggers into his face. He itched, rubbed an eye, crept to the water’s edge and leaned over it. The frogs still didn’t move.

*Grab the legs, both of ‘em. Squeeze ‘em and don’t let go.* His hands quivered. One wrong finger could ruin everything. The frogs would feel the vibration and disappear. So Travis leaned closer and picked out one frog with its back to him. It sat on a lily pad just far enough away that Travis would need a foot in the water when he lunged. The last time he’d tried that with Margaret and Dougie, he’d misjudged how deep it was and tumbled face-first into the water, spitting up the swamp with sewer-stained teeth.

Margaret had giggled and Dougie had been on the ground laughing so hard he nearly choked. Travis thought about hitting him then, the way he’d seen his daddy hit Daryl. But before he could, he felt something struggling in his hand, looked down and smiled, and when he showed them the frog, Margaret’s entire face shone.

Now Dougie never came over anymore. He always had soccer practice or rock climbing or he had to stay after school to wait for
his older brother. *Dougie was never good at it, anyway. He’s too loud.*

Travis looked at the big bullfrog. He studied its legs, its hunched back, that heart-pounding chin. *Now. Do it now. Now, now!* Travis jumped, fell, felt his hand drive deep into the muck... and when it came up there was only mud. “Dang!”

The lily pad shook, an empty raft at the end of the world. The frog was gone.

Swearing under his breath, Travis pulled himself out. He almost didn’t hear the low grumbling. Gravel. He turned and saw a car ambling through the trees. It was white with a red strip along its side. It slowed as it reached his front yard, like it wasn’t too sure. Then it vanished on the other side of his house. The engine stopped and more than one door opened and shut.

“Ma?” He yelled, knowing right away it wasn’t his mom. He thought of his dad and looked at the sky. The sun was nestled among a crowd of clouds, but Travis could tell it wasn’t lunchtime. His dad must’ve been up early then, having his friends visit...yeah, that was it...even if his friends rarely came around anymore, even if Travis couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen any of them before lunchtime, even if Dad only brought them around when Ma was here so they could all snicker at her.

Knee-deep in mud that *schluped* at his pants, Travis thought about school, his dad driving up the circle and hopping from his car with an oversized grin. Hair slicked back. Shirt unbuttoned twice at the top. Sleeves rolled up. Dad used to bring his friends with him. They’d sprint to Travis, giggling, and fix his hair.

Jamie. Nadine. Chelsea. Travis said their names out loud. He could out here. He pulled a rock from the stream, threw it. *Emilia.* Emilia with her haggard voice and tangerine breath that
made Travis blush so deep he felt like he wanted to dig a hole and disappear.

If it was Emilia now, she’d laugh at him for being so dirty, then pull him into the bathroom to run a washcloth over his face. Travis grinned. *Maybe she’ll stay for dinner too.*

But morning was the best time to see frogs and he had caught only three of them today. He needed to catch more. He needed to show her how good he was. So he wiped his pants and turned around, certain the car had upset many of the frogs. They were sneaky and suspicious and somehow they could hear really, really well. That’s what made them so tough to catch.

Ahead, he saw another log drunkenly knifing the water. Flies crowded around it, soldiers at a post. Travis crept on light feet and noticed tadpoles in the water below. He eyed the surrounding grasses, the water’s haircut all gone wrong. Searched them for movement, for a trickle of water, a noise, for a pair of big, bubbly eyes. Finally, he spotted one staring at him from a green raft not three feet away. He inched forward, never blinking. His parents taught him that. *Think before you blink.*

It was big. Old man neck working overtime. Body beneath the surface. Travis nudged closer, leaned over the water. And the frog didn’t flinch.

He looked at the frog, waited, and then lunged over the edge, everything splashing, messy, the swamp swallowing and spitting him back out. When he leapt up and spat and rubbed his eyes, he knew. Felt it squirming. Looked down at his dead-white fingers and smiled and laughed and laughed some more as he threw himself up the bank. Then he raced across the yard.

“Dad. Look, Dad!” He found his bucket with the rock and the wired cover, and he threw the frog inside, heard it *plop* against
the bottom, and shoved the top down. The frog kept climbing the sides and falling. Travis watched until it stopped.

“Dad.” He yelled over his shoulder. “Come look.” When no one responded, he glanced back and saw a light was on. His father’s room. Travis eyed the back door, waiting for Jimmy James to emerge with a smile and come running, hair combed, shirt unbuttoned twice at the top, sleeves rolled up.

Five minutes later, still nothing.

Travis grabbed the bucket and turned back to the swamp. He found a big rock, sat down. Put the bucket between his feet. The frog watched.

The boy put hands to chin and looked at it. Little legs, tiny hands, he wondered how old it was. Did it have a son? Did it know where it was? How many little tadpoles did each mommy frog make? He watched the animal breathe, eyes glazed and ohmygodwhoisthiswhereami-ing at him.

Travis kept three tanks next to the back porch and every day he filled them with the frogs he caught. Bullfrogs. Leopard frogs. Spring Peepers. Toads too. Before he let them go, he studied the frogs. Sometimes he took one out to play. When they touched the grass they’d shoot out with a speed that made Travis stumble and stab and accidently kill them every once in while. Others got away. Then, Travis would cry.

The thought made him fling off the bucket top. He grabbed the frog with both hands and caressed its back. It was warm. He ran a finger over the throat, pushed it in to see how far it fell out, ran his thumb down the center of the frog’s head, between the eyes.

“Don’t be running now.” He rolled the frog over. “If I put you down, I bet you run away.”

He squeezed the animal until it squirmed. Could feel the
strength in its legs, that yearning for the swamp. For home.

Travis held the frog down and reached into his pocket. Grabbed his knife. Brought it across the frog’s backside and sliced, sliced until both back legs were gone, the little thing making no noise, just rolling over in his hand again and again, guts spilling brown and stained.

“Now you can’t run away,” Travis said, dropping the knife. “Now you gotta stay.”

He tossed the legs into the bucket and put the frog down. He wanted to see. The frog flinched, rolled, stopped moving.

It was then that Travis heard them. He turned and saw four black-coated men in shin-high boots opening the back door. They hopped onto the grass, turned and beckoned and Travis saw his dad, hands behind his back with two more men beside him, faces flat and pale. Before he even knew what he was doing, Travis started sprinting.

“Dad.” He forgot the bucket, the dead frog, the legs. “Come look.”

The men glanced up, stared, like bears, camouflaged in gruff clothes and growling beards. His father’s caramel hair was out of place and he wore only pants and a battered T-shirt, but his face was clean and hairless as always.

“Hey, Dad.” Travis pumped his arms.

The men looked to each other and finally Travis saw their faces break. They glanced around, at the woods, at the swamp, at Dad, at Travis. The boy kept coming.

It was his daddy who wasn’t looking at him. Jimmy James’ neck strained at something in the distance. His freckles were like paint splatters. His brow glistened.

“Where you going?” His dad’s toes were white. “Why don’t
you got shoes?” It came out like a plea. *Take me with you. Please? We gonna be back for dinner, right?* It tickled his lips, his tongue. Travis scolded himself and frowned. *Don’t ask where he’s going. Never ask. You’re not supposed to.*

Travis stopped in front of the porch. He could smell them, something they were wearing. A miasma like his mama’s bathroom, spicy and ugly and it grabbed his face and twisted his nose.

“Dad.”

Finally his father saw him, black pits ringing his eyes, top lip bleeding. He straightened. His back cracked. “Stay here. Wait for your mama.”

“She went to do the bad thing.”

“She went to do the bad thing. But she’ll be back, right?”

“Yeah.” She did always come back. Dad was right. “When you gonna be back? I caught more frogs. Four of them.”

“That’s good. Real good.” His daddy coughed, tried to coil away but the men’s grips were strong. “Gonna throw them back or keep ‘em?”

Travis thought of the dead frog in the grass. The birds would get to it soon. The black crows would come swooping down and fight over the bits he’d left out in the sun. They’d pounce and claw and the racket would be so loud he’d have to chase them away.

“I already threw the biggest one back. It was really big though.”

“You’re getting better,” Dad said as one of the bearded men slapped him across the back and nudged him forward with a hard shoulder. “Wait for your mama. She’ll be back soon.”

“Why, where you going? Dad.”

They started ambling around the side of the house, long
jackets billowing in the breeze. Travis ran after them, came up beside his father and touched him. One of the bearded men slapped his hand away and his father reeled and pushed and growled and got another hard punch upside the head. That quieted him.

“Where you going?” Travis stumbled over the words. “You gonna be home for dinner? What should I have Ma make? Can we have pizza?”

One of the men laughed then, a sound that seemed to ricochet off the trees. Travis bet he liked pizza. Everyone liked pizza. Maybe they could all come back and eat pizza. He didn’t like these men but they could stay for dinner if someone just told him when his dad would be home. Maybe these men knew Dad’s other friends. Emilia...would she come for dinner? Travis felt the heat on his forehead. He took a gulp and wiped himself with his stained shirt.

“What should I have Ma make?” No answer. He was getting annoyed now.

“Ask when she gets home.”

Then Travis saw the white car again, the one with the red stripe. It must’ve been their car, parked as it was on his front lawn. He saw one of them flick a button and the car beeped once, twice, then a bearded man was opening the doors and they were shoving his dad inside. He hit his head on the roof and Travis heard him grunt and swear. Dad never swore.

“Can I come?” Travis yanked on the man’s coat next to him and immediately recoiled. These men didn’t like to be touched. He should’ve realized that. The man peered down at him, smirking. When he breathed into Travis’ face, it smelled of breakfast. Travis looked at his feet.
“Keep hunting for frogs.” His father was leaning out the window as best he could. “Keep hunting. Every day. Catch as many as you can.”

“I always catch a lot.”

“I know. You’re getting good.”

Before Travis could say anything else, the man with the funny breath pulled out a piece of paper and started punching at it with a pen. Every now and again he judged Travis from the corner of his eye. Travis kept thinking of Injun Joe from *Tom and Huck*, kept seeing the Indian’s face when he appeared from nowhere, when he snuck up on Travis in his bed and stuck his face in the window and snickered. Travis wanted to sprint for the marsh and hide in the bushes, stay there until everyone was gone. That’s what a boy would do. Run and hide and cover his eyes. Instead, he kept his eyes flat and did what Dad always said. *Think before you blink.*

Travis motioned to the paper. “Can I see?” Maybe it was directions to give to his mama.

The man laughed and slapped Travis’ hand on his way to the house, his coat flowing over the boy’s face. With an open palm he smacked the paper against the front door, leaving it there to flutter and die on the front step. Then he signaled with a finger. The car started.

“Dad, where—”

“Tell your Ma I’m going to see friends. Tell her.”

“Why? They coming for dinner?” They were all staring at him, just looking, not saying a word, not moving, not frowning or smiling or laughing. Travis’ lower lip quivered. He pushed back the first tears, covered his face. He couldn’t have these men over. He couldn’t. They weren’t nice and they scared him and they’d eat all of the *basghetti*. He didn’t want them over. Not these men.
The car grunted.

“Go on and catch your frogs.” His father’s voice again. Travis could barely see his face because the car windows were dark and only opened in a tight leer. Travis took a step forward.

“Travis, keep quiet okay?” Dad curled his fingers around the top of the window. “You know the best way to keep a secret right?”

Travis wasn’t sure.

“I know you do. Don’t you?”

Travis shook his head.

“Don’t have any.”

Someone turned the car radio on and his dad’s voice fizzled and disappeared. Travis covered his ears. He wanted his baseball bat. He wanted to swing it, hit the car as hard as he could, to scream as loud as he could until the men got out and then he’d hit them too until their faces melted away. He wanted his knife.

“Dad. Wait.”

But the car was already driving away in a cloud of earth and there was Travis running and running and running. He was fast. All his teachers said so. But he couldn’t catch the car as it shot away, spitting up gravel and sand. Travis followed as far as the tree line but stopped when he could no longer see the letters on the Mississippi license plate. He watched it go.

Within a moment all was quiet. He started whining again and the long-armed trees reached out to steal him.

He thought about following, even if he knew he wasn’t fast enough. But if he had known that’d be the last time he’d ever see his daddy a free man, Travis might’ve kept going anyway.

“DAD!” He called one last time. Where were they going? He wanted to follow. Wanted to so bad. Where is Ma? Why isn’t she
here? He tried to picture his mother, to feel the warmth of her voice against his face, the way it sputtered out in low gurgles. He wanted to wrap himself in her long, spindly arms, her meaty hands, and fall asleep and wake up to hear his father’s rhythmic snoring down the hall. Why hadn’t his Ma been there? She should’ve been there.

He rubbed his eyes, looked down at his feet, and stomped on an anthill. Then he found himself running back to the house, to the front step. It was still there, fluttering in the breeze. Travis scooped up the note and started reading.

Desi-

Desi was his mother’s name. Well her real name was Desiree. Desiree Brodie. She had a different last name than Travis. Saying her last name always reminded him.

Desi-

Coffee breaks over. We got him. Bring the white.

Then below, in messy letters:

Boystayshere

He read it again. Boy...boy. Did he mean Travis? Stay? Here? Or with her? Travis eyed the trees. The ruby maples bloodied the sun. He watched the branches move in the wind, the way they tugged at him, pointed back to the swamp. He didn’t want to stay by himself. Didn’t think he’d ever done that. There was always someone even if it was only Daryl.

But now Daryl was gone and so was his mama and now they’d taken his daddy too and Travis saw himself bring his thumb to his
mouth and start sucking, whimpering like a dead animal, like a baby, and he couldn’t stop it, couldn’t stop it even as he tried.

Travis sat down on the front stoop and put his head between his legs and stared at the paper for what felt like hours, wondering where his mama had gotten new friends.
Willow Soft
Gail Goepfert
Aged
Kristin Procter

Heat shrivels the cherry tree
blackbirds bounce between branches
wings shimmer with summer whimsey.
The miasma of past-ripe fruit finds the breeze,
finds me in my chair in the shade.

I knead the night from my knuckles,
swirl the cherry in my whiskey
listen to the last simmer of summer ask:
would you rather be eaten easily by a bird
or rot wrinkled and forgotten in the dirt?
A Recipe

Jenna Fisher

*Bildungsroman with wild rice motif, a hint of garlic*

spread one sheet of foil character over blank page
preheat adverbs to boiling (so as to better pace the road to hell)
slowly add a troubled childhood,
a love triangle,
essence of it was actually all a dream;

flit with fancy, whisk in whimsy,
stir until combined like butter batter banter
a noxious miasma cloud of cliché
But with no measurements
no timers, no time

add a pinch of hyperbole, stir vigorously, literally, liberally
reduce heat; simmer
until cooled.
season to taste
for not everyone hates

a purple prose
Women gave up white gloves in industrial Pittsburgh; they came home gray. Chinese women clean masks worn against the polluted air of crowded cities.

“Let the sunshine in,” we sang in the sixties, thinking a new age imminent. The simmer of angry summers boiled over, cooled, flowed underground for a long season.

I want some potent whimsy to poke holes in the miasma over us, as Lewis Carroll poked holes in the ground he stood on, sending Alice down, sending the March Hare around the tea table, the only one to get a clean cup.

Some still watch for Aquarius. Drought’s about to put that water carrier out of business, leave the Cheshire Cat less to smile about.

Rising dust at the construction site is flour in a soup pot. When the foul air grows thick as gravy, alarms will sound, send us inside to clean spilled sand off our windowsills.
Cardinal
Gail Goepfert
HELLO, friends! Welcome to Aggression is Expression, your Non-Nonsense Cooking Show. I’m your hostess, Georgina.

Today, I have to start with an apology. Last month, I promised I was going to teach you how to prepare fried chicken in sixteen easy steps. Instead of starting at step one, we’re skipping straight to step four. Yes, the chicken is already dead and plucked. I bought it yesterday and, as always, locked it in my little cage here in the kitchen. The chicken was behaving like a lady, but in the middle of the night the goddamn thing had a panic attack or something. It freaked out and somehow opened the latch. When I got up, it was flying all over the place, breaking stuff right and left, like it knew its time had come. My sleep was ruined so I thought, “What the heck, let’s cut its suffering short.”

If you want, send me a letter and I’ll tell you what to do with the feathers and the blood. For now, we’re going to focus on the breast. Look at it: so pink, so cute. It looks like you when you were a baby, Leo. By the end of our show it will look very different.
It will look more like your father, Leo: all beat-up and wrinkled. Unlike your father, though, it will taste delicious!

Our other ingredients for today are salt, pepper, onions, an egg, flour, and wine. Simple stuff you can buy anywhere. None of those whimsical ingredients we don’t know where to find or how to pronounce.

Before we get to cooking, I’d like to thank my fans for asking about my thumb. It’s been healing really well. I’m going to remove the bandage for a second. Can I get a close up here? Thank you, Leo. Kisses, kisses. Mama loves you. Okay friends, here it is. They say the pus around the stitches is sort of normal. The thumb should lose this purple tone and go back to its regular color soon.

Accidents will happen, especially here in our aggressive kitchen. Besides, you know your Georgina. I’d rather lose a finger than have blunt knives! Did you enjoy the rabbit stew, by the way? That little furry thing surely had a lot of energy, but in the end I showed it what happens when you try to mess with Georgina. I hope your bunnies were better behaved. I hope you didn’t hurts yourselves.

I was really touched by your concern, fans. If I knew your names, I would thank you one by one. Wait... It’s Sally, Joanne and... Damn it, I can never remember the third one. You’re the one that sent me the rubber gloves, right? Martha? Thank you for the lovely gift, Martha. The embroidered border was such a nice touch. The bright green was a perfect match for the yellow. I hate wearing rubber gloves; they get on my nerves. Those surely look nice, though, so nice that they’re part of my decoration now. Show them, Leo. Over there, by the figurines, hanging between the Bambi and the kissing couple, below the crucifix.

Okay, let’s get to our chicken. First... Eh, Mittens! Get away
from my chicken! If you weren’t so dumb I would say it was you that opened the cage last night. Little whore has her gut filled with kittens again and has been eating like a bottomless pit! Shoo, shoo, go eat that mouse that made a nest in the attic, you lazy sack of fleas. Go!

First we’ll prepare the seasoning. Grab some salt, some black pepper and some onions. Go ahead and dice the onions. Be merciless. Be aggressive! Tiny, tiny pieces. Leo, what’s that yelling outside? It’s those boys again, isn’t it? Can you hear it, friends? They love to play soccer in my front lawn. Kids and soccer: it doesn’t get more annoying than that! They broke my window the other day. On purpose! They hate me! Leo, open the window for your mama. Open it! GET OFF MY LAWN RIGHT NOW, YOU BUNCH OF BRATS, OR I’LL CUT YOUR TOES OFF, MAKE SOUP WITH THEM AND SERVE IT TO YOUR PARENTS! See, they run away laughing. Tomorrow they’ll be back. Bunch of creeps. We’ll see who’s laughing when I plant my poison ivy.

Done with the onions? Good! Spread them along your chicken, then rub some salt and pepper on it. Rub, rub, rub. Here we’ll give the chicken a massage to help make it softer. Don’t be gentle, though. Be aggressive! Get your fingers in there like you mean it. Poke it, smash it, punch it! Use a hammer if you like. Think of stuff that drives you mad, like creaky carts at the grocery store! Weak coffee! Getting the crappy prizes at the church bingo! That neighbor that moved to another state and never returned your Tupperware! Try to get the breast as flat as possible, then put it aside and let’s peel the potatoes.

Did I mention we’re going to need potatoes? I’m sorry. Well, we will. It doesn’t matter what kind. They all taste the same to me. My sister can’t respect that. “Even sweet potatoes?” Yes,
Jolene, even sweet potatoes. She says it’s the cigarettes that make
things taste the same. She says I should quit smoking, or else I’ll
die. Really, Jolene? If I stop smoking I’ll live forever? Give me a
break and stop bugging me. I’m not going to see a doctor. I’ll tell
you again, it’s the doctors that make us sick.

My neighbor Layla is the perfect example. Healthy as a bull,
ever had a headache, cramps or any complaints whatsoever.
She was doing just fine, but her daughter dragged the poor
thing to the doctor, and guess what? The goddamn doctor found
something in her uterus. A miasma, myoma, or whatever it’s
called. What’s that, Leo? Miasma is what? Ha, I didn’t know there
was a fancy word for the stench your father leaves behind every
time he uses the bathroom. Anyway, the doctor found this thing
in her, and three weeks later, poof! She was stone cold dead. Am I
exaggerating? Am I making things up? No. It happened right here,
next door. Tell you what, I only went to the hospital to get this
finger sewed because Walter was about to faint. He’s a pussy like
that, what can I do? The man simply can’t stand to see blood. I
swear I’d rather trust a butcher to take care of me than a doctor.

If I get sick, I want to die at home. No doctors, no surgeries,
none of this crap. I had my Leo swear he’ll never let me spend a
single night at the hospital. Friends, did I ever show you my Leo’s
pretty face? Come here, Leo, let them see you. Come on! You
don’t have to smile, keep your mouth shut. We’ll get you that
front tooth back, Mama promises. Come here! Take your glasses
off and let the girls have a little taste of you. Well ladies, don’t get
too excited! I’ve been taking good care of him for 43 years. I won’t
let just any minx take him away from me. Come on, Leo. I know
you need a haircut. I won’t have time for that until Saturday. Now
come here! Fine, don’t come then; but you know what Grandma
used to say: *shy* is just a nice word for *coward*.

Let’s get back to our potatoes. You have to skin them. Skin them really thin, or you’ll waste half the potatoes. Now *that’s* something I’d like to get my hands on and skin really thin! Leo, open the window! GET OFF MY LAWN, YOU BEAST FROM HELL! THIS IS NOT YOUR BATHROOM! Ha! Right in the head! I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE, YOU BASTARD, AND I KNOW A GREAT RECIPE FOR GROUND MEAT WITH A SPECIAL INGREDIENT: MILLED GLASS! Leo, go get that potato back. Of course I will. A quick rinse, and it’s as good as new.

Okay friends, now chop the potatoes and throw them in boiling salted water. If you smoke, be extra careful here. If ashes fall in the water and you’re cooking for someone picky, they might notice a difference in the taste. After your potatoes are cooked, don’t turn off the fire. Turn it down and let the potatoes simmer. This is how I keep them warm. Reheated potatoes don’t stand a chance with me. Neither do cold potatoes. Potato salad? Ew. Feels like kissing a toothless old man in the mouth.

Now, let’s heat up the oil. Wait until it’s as hot as the seven circles of hell. See, that’s why I love fried food: it’s simple and aggressive! Few things are as aggressive as hot oil. It doesn’t matter if Mittens licked the chicken, if your hands weren’t that clean, or even if your chicken fell on the floor. The hot oil will kill all the germs and any other tiny creatures that are not good for you.

While the oil heats up, let’s beat the egg. Beat it real good, like this egg is Steve Sorrelli. You know, the one that had the guts to break up with you two days before the prom so he could invite Susan Malone to go with him. Don’t spare it! Hit it with gusto; eyes, ears, cheeks, everything! After it’s foamy like that bastard’s
face, you coat the chicken with it and with some flour. There, there, quick and easy. And... there you go, right into the pan.

Goddamn it! Didn’t I tell you to unplug the phone, Leo? Go pick it up and bring it to your mama. Thank you, my treasure. Hello! Oh hi, Walter. Fine, whatever. Bye. Here, Leo, take it. Your father is not coming for dinner again. More chicken for us, eh? What do you mean you’re not staying? Role playing game, what the heck is that? What friends? Don’t be pathetic, you’re too old to make friends! Fine, go; but you know what Grandma used to say: “You’ll never be alone again, Georgina, because that boy of yours is surely not going too far.”

Well friends, that’s all for today. Crap, I totally forgot about the wine! You should add it to the seasoning for extra flavor. I’ll just go ahead and drink it. What’s better company than a box of Franzia, right? Next month we’ll learn how to prepare a lamb in thirty-six easy steps, if I can find a bigger cage. See you next time, friends, and don’t forget: “Aggression is Expression!”
I simmer at the question
which disturbs my bath.
How can you ask
if I carry my toothbrush
in dirty socks?

Sure, I kissed your feet in our tent,
and I brushed with Desenex.
You choked back a laugh;
I called poison control;
your mother read the tube through her magnifying glass.

I had my mother’s teeth
until my braces.
We’d leave the dentist
wondering how we’d pay,
and she’d open the wrong car
insisting it was ours.
This was not whimsy.
The braces did not fix
the miasma of my teeth,
but that clinic in Juneau finally did—
the two that were chipped,
the one than needed a crown,
another to pull, and six to fill.

It takes two-and-a-half minutes to floss.
I’ve timed you.

I wonder who has my records,
who can identify me in case of fire,
and remember how much it matters
when I realize you were asking about
the socks—
whether I wanted them washed—
and not about me
My cherished writing time, five o’clock in the morning, and the light on my desk goes out—just like that—no last flickers of the torch that cave explorers in action movies are always granted.

One moment I’m trying to write a poem about last night’s weird dream and the next I’m in a miasma of darkness. I change my camp to the kitchen table and discover a startling landscape of new poetry prompts that simmer like Thai tom yum soup. The bowl of kiwis practically begs me to write a poem about greenish-brown eggs discovered in red loam by the rover on Mars. The teapot suggests what you’d expect—a villanelle about a tranquil volcano that suddenly spews its guts out. The salt and pepper shakers
are the most trying—they insist
I write a whimsical sonnet
about their secret lives as lovers—
“Like Romeo and Juliet,” they say,
“but without the tragic ending.”
Flowering Mingle
Gail Goepfert
“I’M here for your tree.”

The voice of the man standing in front of me had the gravel of someone who has simmered in smoke for many years.

“You’re Stokely?”

He nodded, looking at a piece of paper. “Kiran Mal...?”

“Malhotra,” I answered.

“Maybe I should say ‘namaste’,” he said, looking at me — a tallish, graying Indian lady, a “dot head,” although I didn’t actually wear the dot but did have a nose piercing and was wearing an Indian style paisley printed tunic. He folded his hands in prayer position.


“I’ve been to India,” he said. “Been some years, but I loved it. Still keep the Upanishads by my bed. Where are you from?”

I was now taking a second look at Stokely, and I have to confess, that little namaste of his had the effect of warming me instantly, like one of those moon pillows you heat in the
microwave and put around your neck. His face had been weathered by the outdoor nature of his work, and his wiry hair rose from his forehead in crinkled waves. He wore glasses that, in the morning light, prevented me from really seeing into his eyes, but I imagined they were kind because I believed that reading the ancient wisdom written in the Upanishads could only make you a better person. I guessed he was in his late forties, early fifties. Not too far off from my own forty-six years.

“I was born in Varanasi,” I told Stokely.

He had heard of the place, but had not visited. His travels had taken him north, to Dharmasala, the exiled home of the Dalai Lama, a place I had visited too, but for work, not enlightenment.

“This the tree giving you trouble?” he asked and jerked his thumb backward towards the entrance to the house.

We stepped over to the Chinese elm and looked up at it. I lived on a cul-de-sac in an area of Los Angeles called Cheviot Hills, named romantically after the hills of Scotland. My house was at the end of Dumfries Lane where it curved into a nice wide turning circle. The elm towered like a giant umbrella between my house and my neighbor Ken’s, although neither was quite under its protection. I loved the tree’s grayish-colored bark that flaked off, leaving it with mottled chestnut and cinnamon colored patches, as if it had little freckles all over, and I loved the way its trunk twisted at its core, giving it folds like those robes on the ancient marble Greek statues. It had long weeping branches that sang when the wind possessed it.

I hadn’t know the tree was a problem until I’d run into Ken one morning the week before. He was in a tailored suit and getting ready to get into one of his sleek black sedans, one German and the other Bavarian, evidence, I suppose, of a healthy income.
Ken had said, “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Of course,” I replied, thinking maybe he was going to suggest a neighborly get-to-know-you dinner and wishing that he hadn’t caught me emptying the trash, wearing stretchy yoga pants and a thin cotton t-shirt that didn’t really buffer the nipples or the stomach bulges which had come to haunt my middle section. I confess I was attracted to his square jaw and precise grooming which I read as evidence of ambition and success. And there was no tell-tale gold band. It wasn’t that I was husband hunting, or even boyfriend seeking, but the idea was set at a low burn in some part of me, maybe my left elbow. It was hard to put a name on what had happened with my ex, Reese, but I do believe it was heartbreak for both us.

“Do you think we can do something about this tree?” Ken asked me.

We both stared up at the elm, and its quivering, messy mop. The branches shot out in every direction and sprouted bushy headdresses off its joints like some kind of weird Halloween hairdo. Leaves rained everywhere, and the weeping branches hung so low they brushed the top of your head when you walked under them.

“Every time I pull in and out of the driveway it scratches my car.”

“Oh,” I said, “that’s terrible.”

“You might want to call one of those tree companies.”

The tree was technically on my property, and so my responsibility. I nodded, thinking I should say “good idea,” but was unable to speak. Money was tight. I didn’t have the money to pay some fancy tree trimmer. Good old Reese had left me the house in the divorce but no funds for maintenance. I was in that catch-22
where I couldn’t sell the house because it needed too much fixing up, but I couldn’t fix it up because I didn’t have the money. Had that been the problem with the marriage too? We couldn’t love each other the way we had when we first married because too much needed fixing — his drinking, my depression — and then by the time everything was on the rails, we didn’t have the forbearance we needed to fix it.

“We don’t want this to turn this into a legal situation,” Ken said with a knife-like look in his eyes that left me blindsided. By the time he had eased his car out of the driveway I was inside my front door trembling, my knees gone weak.

Stokely stepped way back into the street and I followed him out there to get a better look at the whole tree. “She’s a beauty,” he said.

“I think my neighbor would like it cut down,” I said.

“Well, you could do that,” Stanley said, kind of musing. “You’ve got about fifty years of tree here, and, shit, man, it’s barely a teenager, in tree terms.”

Take that, Ken, I wanted to say. Cutting down a tree in the prime of its life. Any other bright ideas?

Stokely suggested we give the girl a good haircut. She would be a lot happier. He said she had a beautiful branching structure but all the foliage was masking it.

I wanted to hug him. Was it possible I had a good branching structure too? Was it possible with some good pruning I could become a thing of beauty? Or better yet land a permanent teaching job somewhere, anything to get me out of the rut of being a freelance journalist, a once hot profession that was now near extinction due to the all-consuming jaws of the internet.
I hated to bring it up, but I had to ask Stokely how much it was going to cost. He made some mental calculations and told me he thought there was a solid day and a half of work and that I was looking at about nine hundred dollars. Maybe he heard the “ouch” that I thought I had said silently.

“I could give you a little break,” he said. “Do it for eight.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That’s a help,” thinking not a big enough help though.

“Maybe your neighbor would be willing to chip in?”

“It’s a thought,” I said, staring over at Ken’s house, its smooth, modern white stucco façade punctuated with sleek stainless window frames that glittered in the sun. One man alone in three thousand square feet. What the hell did he do in there all by himself? The bastard could easily afford to pay for the whole thing.

“Can I offer you a cup of tea?” I asked. “Some real chai. Not that sickening syrupy stuff they serve.” I’m not sure what prompted me to invite Stokely inside; maybe my mind trekked forward to the idea of dating a tree cutter and kissing him goodbye as he rumbled off to his day job, because in the few minutes we had spent together I had come to like the ease of his manner. Or maybe it was just that I thought a little hospitality, Indian style, would soften him up even further on the price.

He accepted my offer. I led him into my sixteen hundred square feet of fifties ranch home nirvana with its never redone linoleum floors and what were once sunny yellow formica countertops. Stokely took a look around as I put water to boil on the stove with chopped ginger, cloves, and cardamom.

“Sorry about the mess,” I said, taking a pile of newsprint-filled folders off the only chair in the kitchen so he could sit. He
elected not to and picked up a book that was on the top of one of the piles. It was *Spoon River Anthology*, a first edition copy from 1916 that Reese had given me one year for my birthday when he had actual money in the bank and could afford a bit of whimsy. I almost wanted to grab it out of Stokely’s hand, fearful somehow he would hurt the book. I kept an old snapshot of Reese tucked in the back of it — I was standing behind him and had my arms adorned around his neck. He was clasping my hands and looking back at me with delight as I leaned in to kiss him. I didn’t necessarily want Stokely to see the photo.

“What an idea,” Stokely said, after he had read a few of the one-page stories of the dead written by the dead.

“I know, I know,” I said. “It makes you think about what you would write about yourself from deep in the grave.”

Stokely continued reading. The water had come to a boil and I added tea leaves. I found myself wanting to watch him read. There was something sexy about the way he leaned against the kitchen counter and held my book like a fallen autumn leaf in his hand. I wanted to unbutton his shirt, reach in and stroke the weathered skin inside. I wanted to kiss him, take him. *What if I did it*, I thought. How long had it been since a man had stood in my kitchen sharing literature? This was the crazy kind of madness my mind had been rummaging in of late.

Finally he closed the book, placed it back on the table. He took his glasses off and dabbed at his eyes. Was he crying? I turned away and pretended to be busy by wiping some crumbs off the counter.

“My wife left me a month ago.”

I pivoted to look at him.

“She just woke up one morning and decided she didn’t want
to be married to me anymore. She said she couldn’t be herself in the marriage.” He seemed to shrink as he said it. “After thirty-two years,” he added.

Now that we were standing inside and the light wasn’t bouncing off them, I could see through his glasses into his eyes. They reminded me of those newsprint black and white photos — just flattened out, sucked of vitality — a representation of life, but not life itself.

“That must have been hard.”

“I never stopped her from doing anything she wanted to do. Travel, golf, church. Stuff I don’t even like. I thought I had a good marriage and now I see it wasn’t good at all. How can you be so wrong about something like that? Broke my toe kicking the wall.”

I knew exactly what he was going through — boxing with a ghost. The punches never landed on anything solid. I poured the tea into a pot and brought it and a plate of cookies to the back patio. A weathered wooden slat table sat out there with chairs that needed their screws tightened.

“Nice spot,” he said, looking out to the view of a grove of eucalyptus trees that, because the back of my house sloped down thirty feet to the hill below, were almost eye level with my back porch. The deck was littered with their leaves.

“What’s this?” he asked, picking up what to him probably looked like a random object sitting on my table.

“That is the tibia of *Smilodon fatalis*, Saber tooth cat. Probably about twelve thousand years old. Maybe much more.”

“Wow,” he said turning it in his hand. “I thought it was a piece of wood. It looks like polished mahogany.”

“I wrote a profile of an archeologist at the La Brea Tar Pits. She gave me that as a gift. Amazing scientist. She’s seen gazillions of
these fossils and she still got excited about each and every one.”

Stokely set the bone back on the table. I picked it up. I liked the way it felt in my hand. Smooth and light, about the size of a ruler, with curious joint notches at each end. “She told me the bone came from a skeleton they had excavated from a sinkhole. The cat still had its saber teeth locked in the windpipe of a tapir. What a way to go.” I tickled the back of my arm with it and felt a pleasing shiver. “I should probably keep it in glass, but I like having it out here.” I looked over to the stately trees as if an invisible force might be hiding there. “I’m hoping it might attract some ancient animal spirit loafing around.” When I looked at Stokely he was staring down at his own hands.

“I hope my wife dies a horrible, painful death,” he said.

“There are tar pits everywhere, you know,” I said softly, thinking of their sulphuric smell, their seething ooze.

“I know,” he said. “I hope she gets stuck in one of them.”

I could tell he wasn’t getting it. He was caught up with the miasma of hatred dripping in his mouth. I knew nothing I could say would free him from that. We were both silent for a moment.

“Maybe we could have a meal sometime?” He looked up from his tea.

The question startled me, although I suppose it shouldn’t have.

“A meal?” I said. I felt him searching my face, waiting for an answer.

“That might not be a good idea right now,” I said. “I think we both have things to work out.” I smiled in that lame way you might offer pity to a beggar but not give them any money.

“Call me if you change your mind,” he said. “You seem like a neat lady.”
He placed his cup on the table, and I thanked him again for his time. I walked him out to his truck. We stopped under the tree and looked up again at it.

“Stokely,” I said, mustering the courage to be blunt. “I’m sorry. I just don’t have the money right now. I’ll tell my neighbor if he wants the tree trimmed, he can pay for it. I’ll leave him your card and tell him you’re the one for the job.”

Stokely took the news with equanimity. “No problem,” he said. As he was getting ready to climb into the cab, he turned to me and said, “I’ve enjoyed talking to you.”

It was only when I turned back to the house, burdened by the look of crushed hope that lashed Stokely’s face that had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the wife who had left him and stood under the elm, letting it bless me with one of its long branches that I understood how badly I needed to take a pruning saw to myself. Avail myself of a blind and indiscriminate desire to reshape my life. List the property as a fixer upper. Take the first offer to come along. Maybe Ken would buy it. Maybe he would tear it down along with the tree. Whatever.

The truth was not a day went by when I didn’t think of Reese, didn’t hope there would be a message from him, didn’t hear if only like a persistent echo of sorrow for the way we couldn’t get our gears lined up. It wasn’t as if I had hopped, skipped, and jumped over that black ooze they call love. I had its meal in my mouth and I wouldn’t spit it out.
Untitled
Gail Goepfert
Pencils in left hands used
to bedevil, suggestive anyway,
words obscured, loops smeared
by graphite’s & skin’s commingled
drag & whimsy.

As with shifting clouds, shapes took
shape, took names: rabbit
ears, pupils, little lambs pre-slaughter,
the segmented tails of rats & (well)
clouds: cumulus, cirrus, cirrostratus
(complete with haloed suns).

Oh! But how the nuns would
simmer, so serious in their wimples,
thinking us cursed, or simple, or worse:
*Lucifer*, they’d jeer (the bravest
among us automatic with a Bronx
cheer), wooden rulers ready to come
down hard on an insolent palm, or worse:
*Such cheek!* *Such brass!* A real chutzpah
miasma in that stifling, fusty room.
Others managed the switch to right & so were saved. I worked & worked, persevered with Nana’s Shepherd’s Improved Slate & all the dusty chalk nubs we could scrounge. (The slate’s vow: will teach cursive and object perspective! Arts, then as now, lost to me.)

Back in Room Two with Sister Agnes standing in wait, I would manage, defiant, for a time: my right hand’s upper-case Ts as sure & assertive as the stakes Saint Joan was bound to. Weak, I gave in to the temptation of that dominant, evil hand. The relief of easy cursive, the back-handed smudge-conjure of flames & smoke that curled & licked up up up up, poor Saint Joan, obliterated in a whirling flourish, gone: along with every letter gesture, any chance at my redemption.
My daughters move as they grow, the speed of light on the virescent path. Petals burgeon under their feet. Unable to go on farther, I rest on a bench, encourage them to walk ahead. Words scattered on garden stones promise the coming of crocuses, uphold, *The clearest way into Universe is forest.*
The ornamental onions in plastic pots turn with me toward the hills of the Palouse and tick...tock at slower and slower rates. Still, I just notice the simmering trees—a willow coursing phosphorescence in her body. A thousand spindles breaking into pliable, yellow needles. Another’s trunk-bark, watermelon points of pink and seeds, on the precipice of bloom. What trees are these?
My gaze lifts over them to the brown hills of Pullman, shaved of wilderness, planted with sunflowers and wheat. A man, *The Little Prince* on his planet, stands like an odd tree devoid of branches. He walks toward
the yellow West on a stripe of scribbled trail. Everyone walks away.

To follow?

My daughters’ voices return, sparrow on the path into my whimsy. They find me dozing in a tangle of leaflessness. Soon, I must tell them about perennials. Before the forsythia fades.
Staying Still
Frank Mundo

In my dreams I still smoke cigarettes.
And I’m always still about 16 years old.
Even when I’m 40.
Even when I’m 5.
My brother’s still alive,
But, always dead to me,
my sister still persists in memory,
a nasty scar across my cheek.
My heart is still stentless
and infarction-free.
I’m still single, yet committed to my wife,
and still so damn skinny and sleek
-- or at least I’m not as fat as I am still in life
or as lackluster as I’ve come to be.
I can still play basketball like before,
and I can slam dunk now, too,
not like before,
not like ever before
but just like I always have,
just like Blake Griffin.
In this warped wilderness
of whimsy and weirdness,
of peace and perfection,
while laws and letters do still apply,
certain truth is still certain to lie
like brakes that don’t brake,
or boiling water that only simmers,
like a donated organ that doesn’t take
or a noxious miasma,
a piercing knell,
that no nose can still hear
and no ears can still smell.
In my dreams I am still free
not to grow up, not to heal,
and still eat bacon with every meal.
Magenta
Gail Goepfert
THE poppies shone orange along the horizon where flower petals covered the earth like unmelted snowfall. From the backseat of the car Peter felt the world pulse and breathe as it passed through the window. The blizzard of orange in the distance cascaded in the breeze like an avalanche. The closer the car came to the poppies, the lower the sun fell. His mom always called it a game, like chicken—all they had to do was make it to the field before the sun set and they would win. It was a game Peter didn’t like to lose.

The field had become their escape. Our escape—Sam and Peter’s. Peter asked who Sam was. His mom said she was Sam. He didn’t stop calling her mom. This is a place we can run, and they ran there often. Peter would watch his mom paint, more often try to paint, but Peter wanted to run, to shoot through the poppies and feel the brush of the petals on his skin as the wind trailed behind him in gusts of whimsy.

“It wasn’t literal,” his mom once told him. Peter looked at her, unsure of what she meant. What wasn’t literal? What did “literal”
mean?

“Forget it,” she told him before he asked. She told him to forget a lot of things, like words and paintings and his father. But she didn’t forget Peter’s father; neither could he. She popped a few pills. “Whatever makes you feel better.” The pills were sky blue. Peter thought of the possibilities in swallowing bottled sky; what kind of clouds would drift through his stomach? Would they taste like marshmallows? If it were to rain, would he wet himself? Then he remembered lightning storms, and the pills made him nervous. He was afraid of lightning, didn’t want it simmering in his stomach. His mom didn’t fear storms, not that he remembered. She could take all the sky pills she wanted, but he wouldn’t touch them.

The car jerked to a halt.

“Sorry, darling,” his mother said. “We’re here.”

Peter opened the door. He pushed himself from the seat. He couldn’t move. He tugged. He struggled. He stretched. The seatbelt wrapped around his chest; he unbuckled it. He was free and ready to run.

“Not so fast,” his mother said. “Don’t forget him.” She pointed to the teddy bear in the backseat.

Peter grabbed Claus by his arm and fled the car. He didn’t bother to close the door. The tent was in the backseat, and if the door was open, his mother wouldn’t have to tug at the car and hurt herself. He was helpful. He didn’t know how to set up a tent, not one bit. His dad had taught his mom, but his mom hadn’t taught him. She was too eager to get the tent set up and paint, and Peter didn’t mind because he would rather run through the field with Claus.

She yelled to Peter but her words were taken by the wind.
He knew them by heart: *don’t go too far*. He never did. It wasn’t about where he went. He could run around in circles and belly-flop into the flowers and be happy. It wasn’t about hiding in the poppies. He would be surrounded by orange dots that created a bigger picture; his mom once told him of a painter that did that, but he couldn’t remember his name.

Peter felt the soft soil squish under his feet and the breeze at his back while Claus held his hand and urged him forward; Peter breathed in the air and the field drew into his nose. He huffed and felt the soft brush of flowers against the back of his hands, and his heartbeat quickened when the wind blew past him, but he continued forward at the same speed because he knew that there was no way the wind could sustain that speed for long and would fall behind him, and it did fall behind, which made Peter push faster and farther towards the hills in the distance where the sun would soon hide. So his heart beat faster, and Peter felt he could dig his feet into the earth and jump into the horizon. But the horizon would be too far, though he couldn’t slow down now, not with the wind at his back and Claus’s confident advice to push forward, and Peter wanted to push, to beat the wind, to touch the horizon, to look down from the sky. Peter enjoyed the possibilities of this world his mom brought him to, the ability to run into forever or to dive into solid ground, to swallow the sky—but he wouldn’t swallow the sky. He could stop the world, like his mom, who froze her dreams in paint.

Peter stopped to breathe and was whipped in the face by the wind. It had caught up to him and wasn’t happy. Another reason Peter didn’t like to lose at sunset chicken. He didn’t like to get caught by the temperamental wind, its faraway source a sore loser, with a tendency to get physical, always filled with or
followed by the faint miasma of flesh-rusted metal.

Peter slid to the ground and out of the wind’s retaliation. The smell of fresh dirt filled his nose, and as he pressed his back to the ground, the flowers surrounded his head and covered the partial light of the sky. The sun sank deeper behind the hills, the poppies cushioned Peter’s head, and for a moment, he and Claus looked up at the blend of sun and stars. Clouds drifted through the split sky but Peter had no desire to catch their shapes, name the animals, nor count the rings on the clouds to see how old they were.

Peter wrapped his fingers around a poppy. The petals were moist and tender between his fingertips. He hoped the orange would stain his skin and paint him, hide him in the field so that when his mom called for him, he’d sway in the breeze and see how long he could blend into the scene he knew she had frozen on her canvas. But all the petals released was water, and Peter left them crumbled in the dirt.

The sky was dark, and Peter felt the thrash of the poppies from the heavy wind. He stood and ran towards the light of the tent.

“Don’t even think about diving in here,” his mom said as Peter readied for his pounce. “You know the rules.” Peter bent down to take off his shoes. The wind pushed at him again. “And don’t just slip them off either,” she said. “That’s how you ruin them.”

Peter ducked into the tent. It was large enough for both his mom and him to stand in. She preferred to paint here, out of the wind with the flap open to the view. Peter made his way to the cooler and grabbed some grapes. He didn’t offer any to Claus. Claus hated red grapes.

His mother had two canvases next to the opening of the tent, one on each side. They looked like windows—the closest
Peter could get to his mother’s world. One was old; it was the first painting Peter had watched her create. She had said she needed release, placed Peter in a high chair and pressed her brush to canvas. She said this so often when Peter was young that he thought painting was called “release.” He would run around the flat house with paint on his hands, through the hallways that circled the rooms, through the kitchen, beyond the entryway door, and to his parents’ room where he’d press his painted hands to empty walls or to his clothes and yell, “Release! Release!” His small hands imprinted on the world, his tiny mark made and, at the time, he thought permanent like his mother’s art. That’s what paint was—forever—like fun and Claus and his parents, but he knew that couldn’t be true because Peter’s dad hadn’t been permanent. Peter learned that painting wasn’t a release, but release still became a prayer.

Peter threw grapes into his mouth, one by one, and positioned them between his teeth. He wanted to savor the crunch. The squish. The juice. The sweetness. His mouth filled with saliva. The grape felt small. And weak. He chomped down, chewed the skin. He felt its firmness. He wiped his mouth with his arm, and his mom brushed the canvas. The tent rustled in the wind but held hard to the ground.

The older painting was of giant hills bordered by Victorian homes and a trolley car. He scanned the painting house by house, street by street, and car by car. His mother liked to hide images in her art, to create a detailed account of a larger object by including a smaller object somewhere. She said the search was half the fun. “You know where it is,” she said. “You’ve seen it a hundred times.”

Peter liked to search anyway. He liked the mystery, even if
there was no mystery. He scanned the colorful, hilly streets and found the image: his mother’s face, painted as the back of the streetcar, her honey hair run over the top of the trolley as ribbon, with big clear window eyes and a large advertised smile, not the same smile Peter was used to; it was one he had never seen before. More teeth, shiny white, bright, clear eyes.

“That’s the only self-portrait I ever painted,” she said. “I like myself better that way.” Peter bit into another grape. “You ready to see the new one?” she asked. She took the last grape from Peter’s hand. He nodded and brought Claus with him. It wasn’t a race but Peter wanted to find the image before Claus. That was their tradition.

The painting didn’t have hills. It had mountains. Rocky peaks that sprouted above the clouds. Birds flew around the base as if they could go no higher, thwarted by a mountaintop.

Peter looked closely at the painting. The clouds, fluffy and mystical, seemed as if they would disappear with one shallow breath and unable to hide an object any more than Claus could hide his eye patch. The birds’ wings flapped and interrupted the silent air that surrounded them. The tiny sky above the mountaintop was empty and still.

In the rocks, the small pieces that built the towering mountain, he found the secret on a rock face in the middle—his father, chiseled into the granite, almost invisible. His face full of the wide smile Peter almost couldn’t remember, his beard made of granite, his eyes made of soft, gray stone that seemed familiar. The rock his father was made of now made the mountain. Peter wasn’t surprised. After his father’s death his mother hid more of him in her paintings—him or the car, sometimes crushed, immortalized in her art.
Peter had witnessed the van getting hit and folding in half, dad behind the wheel, behind the cracked windshield with a lost smile. Tires folded sideways. Car parts in the air, splintered and scattered around the road. The thick crunch of metal. The red traffic light blinked on and off, or the red ambulance lights blinked on and off, or the street lights blinked on and off in the red pool that crawled through the broken glass, and Peter waited for the world to go black and return to color with the van put back together, with his father put back together, with a father who could hold him in his arms. The world was remade, reshaped, and redrawn. His father’s face around in paintings, his mother pulling away, his father gone, and the car crushed. The blue sky went dark that day because all the blue was sucked into the tiny pill that Peter’s mom now swallowed, the entire sky swallowed and gone.

“You find him?” she asked. Peter brought his shoulders to his ears and nodded. “Of course you did,” she said with a smile, the smile he was used to. She grabbed him and held him between her arms as they faced the paintings split by the tent flap that was open to the night.

“Do you know where that is?” she asked. Peter shook his head. But he knew. She had told him before, in pictures she had shown in galleries, or thrown in dumpsters, or painted over, or that fell out of her purse in postcards, or that she drew on the walls at home in her sleep, which Peter blamed on Claus. He held Claus closer to him, a sign for Claus not to answer the question.

“That’s Peru. Machu Picchu. Your dad loved it there. It was his favorite. I never got to go.”

“And that there?” Peter shook his head again. “That’s San Francisco. That is my favorite.” Peter felt his mom’s stomach push against his back with every breath. She was warm around him.
“What about there?” she pointed to the open tent, a faint orange from the poppies yet visible in the moonlight. “That’s here,” Peter giggled.

“Of course it is,” his mom said. She ran her fingers down Peter’s ribcage. He pressed himself into her, delighted by the attention. He wanted to stay in her embrace forever. Even Claus almost smiled.

“Let’s go play,” his mom said. Peter giggled again.

“But it’s night,” he said.

“Is it? Then let’s go bounce on the moon!”

His mom wrapped her fingers around Peter’s hand. The sun and the wind were gone, the wind having disappeared with the final traces of sun. Peter’s father was gone. Peter smelled the sweet scent of his mom’s skin and wanted to melt into her. They pushed open the tent where the night stretched over the stoic poppies and still air. Sam held onto Peter, Peter held onto Claus, and together they jumped through the frame and played in the dim orange of the night, a dusty hollow that let Peter and Claus dance with Sam one last time as Peter pressed his hands to his mother’s image and whispered, “Release.”
In Green Bay, the Packers having packed their many bags and departed for warmer shores, we simmer in our northern solitude, a stew of negative temperatures and sooty islands of leftover snow, bleak under gray skies, tracked flat across yard after yard by postal boots, speckled with commas of frozen dog dung and the occasional V-patterned whimsy of invisible rabbits snuffled up from lacy ice. Hard to imagine that, deep down, beneath this frozen despair, this muscle- and fist-clenched waiting, tulip bulbs already warm and stretch, getting ready for their annual uprising. -- And as if in promise, the sun appears a clear, cold sky, outlining the bare branches of the maples, and in two quick flames a pair
of cardinals flashes out from the top of a tree and dives, waking the two-whit-whit-whit

of an unseen robin, signaling reluctant spring.
Swoosh out of the birth canal from Celestial Ocean into sights of lights, sky, mother and/or father. A deluge of things to learn as separate: robins, June bugs, heartbeats. Ribbons, blue, yellow and pink, streaming like paddlefish. Even before the school-slew, a deluge of ABCs, cascade of computer buzzes and buttons, and swat of dragonflies. Our first society of mine-not-yours: riverbanks, brothers, barges of bullies, cold water and church.

Then, the ancient pedagogical drench, lining up for lunch, p.e. and sex—lockers, fragrant with books and apple cores. We re-discover Missouri, the names of her ruined tribes: Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, Fox, Kickapoo. Schools of buffalo puffed up like permanence, the river sludge of trappers, Spanish and French, Lewis and Clark, the muskrats, minks and raccoons, all before noon and the cherished-most playground—the whimsy of boys and girls sparkling under St. Louis Sun. Do you love me or love me not?

Then, the dark Missouri washes into Big Muddy. A thousand currents flood into jazz. Do we bicycle across Chain of Rocks Bridge, twirl in the watershed of Root 66, or belly flop into this surge of longing? Becoming aware, separate, distinct as the
Mississippi, conscious of one’s thighs in the thrill of growing up and swimming away. Finding a way and not finding it: the Spanish explorers’ extravagant, Río del Espíritu Santo (“River of the Holy Spirit”) or the Sioux’s humble Ne Tongo “Big river.” The confluence pulsing at night. The first slurry of love, a river rising.

Its boom and blast mosquitoing under the stars into the swim of families and babies. Dogs. The terrible joy. Oh, the insouciant, heedless days: sitting in the sun, mama’s sunflowers, a cool drink. For a short time, this fountain. And too, the freezing temperatures, deep waters. Miasma of cities simmering with liberals and librarians, tea parties, and mad hatters. You may lose your mother, your father, your only love.

Too quickly the family gathered at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river. Just yesterday, a million years ago. Out of this vortex of learning and forgetting, we lonely tributaries swirl into hovering river, swelling in love or for want of it. Into the un-separated celestial sediment we go: Mark Twain’s mustache, Sacagawea’s beaded belt, canoes. Into the real and authentic, muddied and beautiful, river. Oh river, the river. The river, oh.
SAMANTHA hid bits of her soul under old sweaters. Powder, lipstick, and perfume—she hugged these items. She peered out of her closet, glancing at the locked bedroom door. Makeup was for women, and Samantha was not one yet.

Samantha stood in front of a mirror, hoping to mask the face she hated. Pimples dotted the square features that her mother called handsome. Samantha wanted to be beautiful, not handsome. She knew what everyone was saying about her at school. They were only whispers and stares, but they dragged her down into a grey, hollow place. Samantha applied the foundation. Every blemish faded, and she forgot about the gossip that tarnished her.

She brushed the burnt-red blush onto the apples of her cheeks. Warmth spread across her stone face. Her languid blood began to simmer with life.

The lipstick was Pink Whimsy. It glided across her lips, and the edges curved up into a smile. Now, she was pretty.
Last was the perfume. Samantha stared at the vial. The fragrance of orchids, jasmine, and something sweet danced across her mind. She wanted the mist to chase away the musk and loathing that clung to her. Samantha’s hand inched towards the perfume.

Below, a door slammed. Samantha froze. Her pulse quickened and her thoughts soured. Samantha remembered when the floral scents had wafted through Samantha’s door and crept through the house. To her mother, the perfume was a wicked, choking miasma. She had followed the scent and found her child all dolled up. Samantha remembered her mother’s twisted face.

She listened to the creaking downstairs. Sweat dripped from Samantha’s armpits.

“Sam, I got off early.” Her mother’s voice flew up through the walls, and she added, “We should get cleats today. I’ve got some time now. Where are you?”

“In my room, getting dressed,” Samantha said with a deep voice that cracked through her dry throat.

Footsteps tapped up the stairs. Samantha’s hands trembled as she replaced the caps and lids on the makeup.

Words cut from her memory, “What the hell is going on? Is that makeup? Look at me. Are you wearing makeup?” She placed the items into a box. “Is this some sort of joke?”

Samantha looked back at the mirror. Everything looked wrong. She blushed, her stomach turned, and she considered herself a monster. “No son of mine is going to prance around wearing make up.” The footsteps stopped at the door. Samantha grabbed a makeup wipe, and scrubbed her face. “This is sick, unnatural. Wash it off now. You look like a freak.”

Samantha’s mother knocked on the bedroom door. “Samuel,”
she said. How long does it take to get dressed? Don’t make me come in there.”

The wipe was stained with vibrancy. Sam looked again at the mirror. Her face was almost drained of the reds and oranges and pinks. She scrubbed again until no more color could be removed.

“Samuel!”

“Almost ready.”

“Open the door.”

Sam exhaled a long breath into the box and clasped the container shut. Everything that had felt natural and good was locked away.

“One,” said Sam’s mom.

Sam stumbled to the sweaters in the back of the closet. The soul was buried.

“Two.”

I am a normal boy, thought Sam. I am a normal boy. I am a normal boy.

“Three.”
Carnivorous Air
Kristin Procter

Her small fists squeeze the breeze.
She evacuates her eyes, empty.
I want to woo her with the whimsical wind,
the twinkle of blossoms descending and
the flutter of wings.
*It’s faeries, I whisper.*

She stands unmoved—
unmoving.

Nerves fixated on the frequency of fear,
an evolutionary adaptation
gone haywire.
She smells the miasma of hunger,
the simmer of saliva on steamy breath
a predator poised to pounce,
in the first gusts of spring.

Panic saturates her flesh,
and dissolves her bones,
even the air is carnivorous.

Besides, aren’t I always telling her
how tasty she is?
Of Like Minds

Alan Whiteside
AS a teenager, Tanna feared nothing.

She grew up in the shadow of a tomato-packing plant in a hazy neighborhood that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be residential or industrial, ratty apartments sandwiched between rusty warehouses, the warm stink of tomatoes slipping over everything. On long afternoons after cutting school, she outdid the other kids by turning wild flips on rollerblades, skateboarding across the rooftops. They’d watch with clenched teeth and a slow sucking in of breath as she lifted through the air, landing always feet first. And once—only once—she flew across the dusty railroad tracks behind the cannery, dove to safety just before the train crossed, its heat like a clap in her face. The cab clipped her heel, rewarded her with a bruise like a purple souvenir.

Looking back years later, she’d place the blame on the train episode: the starting point of her transformation into a woman who trembled at everything, as if the clip on her heel shook something loose inside, stirred jagged pieces that rattled in
her chest like shards of glass so she couldn’t breathe. Her fear simmered even after Stephen was born. She quaked at the wail of police sirens and grating arguments from neighboring apartments, spent long nights wondering what the future had up its sleeve. And in recurring dreams, Stephen sat on the railroad tracks, the engine looming closer as she made a running leap to push him out of the way, knowing as her feet lifted from the ground that she was too late.

On a November afternoon when Stephen was five, she listened through the open kitchen window, unloading plates from the dishwasher. He played outside at the edge of the woods of their new home, chatting with Sammy, his make-believe friend. Betcha I can throw better than you, he said. Watch me. He picked up a baseball and hurled it towards the trees.

Sometimes they intrigued her, these one-sided conversations, but mostly they concerned her. Maybe it wasn’t best for him, living out here in the boonies. Maybe he’d be better off going to public school instead of being homeschooled. Maybe she never should have left his father.

She closed the dishwasher and stepped outside, realized that Stephen’s voice had trailed farther away, up the hill behind their cabin and into the forest.

Sammy, we’re not supposed to go this far, remember? We’ll get in trouble.

His words were barely audible. She lunged down the steps and scanned the thick expanse of black oak, shadowy now in the late afternoon.

Stephen? she called. It’s late—time to come inside.

No answer. White tufts of fog unfurled slowly down the
hillside, dimming the low sun into a sad, unseeing eye. A cool tingle crawled up her arms.
Stephen?
She heard the underfoot crunching of dry leaves within the tangled foliage. Branches trembled. She sensed him drawing nearer. A ripple of laughter, eerie and unfamiliar, drifted through the woods.
Get in here right this second, she said.
In an instant, he stepped back into daylight, his eyes downcast and secretive. Dammit, Sammy, he said. I told you we’d get in trouble.

Things like that—profanity—where did it come from? How did it enter the life of a five-year-old whose only world was Mack and she, this cabin and these foothills?
Late that night, when they were all in bed, she talked to Mack.
I heard Stephen swearing today. I heard him say dammit.
His shrug pressed against her arm in the darkness.
I’ve heard worse.
But where did he pick it up? Not from me. Not from you.
Probably heard it on TV.
Not unless Sesame Street hired a new scriptwriter. It scares me.
You worry too much.

She added this to her mental list of things to puzzle over, like the missing can opener normally residing with cooking utensils and spare keys in a drawer below the microwave. Last week she reached for it while rushing to start dinner, irritation rising at her empty grab into the drawer. She searched every shelf, every
corner of the kitchen, shoved odds and ends aside in a rising clatter. Heat travelled up her neck.

Mack, did you take the can opener?
Negateevio.
Stephen?
Nope.
Mack shuffled into the kitchen, removed his black-rimmed glasses for a close inspection of the can, opened it with the swift stroke of a chef’s knife.

Mom always used to say that the best way to find something is not to look for it, he said. Just wait for it to find you.

Later, over plates of steaming spaghetti, Mack and Stephen shared jokes.

What happened to the ghost who got lost in the cemetery? asked Stephen.
I give up.
He was mist.

Mack responded with his best Scooby Doo laugh and the two of them whooped for a solid minute, shoulders shaking, eyes wet. Tanna barely listened as she twirled a fork in her pasta.

And sure enough, the can opener reappeared the following morning, right there, next to the knife sharpener.
Sammy must have borrowed it, Stephen said.

Days later, Tanna stepped outside into a crystalline morning for a bowl of beans from the storage shed. She braced herself against the frosty blade in the air that signaled another winter coming. Mack had bundled up in a lumberjack coat and headed into town, the truck loaded with rocking chairs that he’d finished for a local furniture dealer.
They’d known each other since childhood: he was one of the neighborhood kids who’d witnessed her stunts back in her fearless days. She’d always loved the upward tilt of his eyebrows when he spoke, the way it drew his slate-colored eyes so wide you knew you were looking straight into his heart. Last spring, when he came to patch the roof, she invited him to stay while he prepared for his contractor’s licensing exams later in the year.

Tanna hugged her arms against the cold, surveyed the red treetops against a dazzling turquoise sky. This ramshackle six-room cabin on a full acre had belonged to her grandfather. When he died two years ago, the property and a modest annuity were his gifts to her, guilt-gifts really, compensation for being one of the many adults in her life who’d never paid her much bother. Their quiet new world of simple prospects wasn’t perfect, but it drew her, whispered promises of a safer life for the boy.

She turned to the weather-beaten storage shed where they stored dry goods. The sliding door screeched on metal rails, and she heaved herself against the handle, forced it open, grunted at the effort. Inside, sun streamed over sacks of dry goods beside her grandfather’s lopsided cardboard boxes containing God-knew-what. She scooped some beans into a bowl, turned to leave, pulled the door hard. It refused to close completely. She cursed softly and made a mental note to ask Mack to fix it.

That evening they sat at the dining table among a pile of Lincoln Logs, constructing the house that Stephen said they’d live in when they had a lot of money.

This will be my bedroom, he said. I’ll have a basketball court just outside my window where Sammy and I can shoot hoops.

Cool, said Mack. Can I have a game room with a big screen TV and a pool table?
Sure, said Stephen. What about you, Mom? What do you want in our house?
How about a hot tub?
Ooh yeah, murmured Mack, casting her a sidelong smile.
And a helicopter, said Stephen, so we can make a quick escape if anything goes wrong.

That weekend, while Stephen practiced writing his name, Mack worked on weather-stripping the windows and Tanna painted the entryway. She headed to the shed for an old box of paintbrushes, thrust herself against the door, stumbled when it slid right open.

Thanks for fixing the door, she said once back inside. It opens like new now.
Mack kneeled over his tool chest looking for a drill bit.
Door?
The shed door. I didn’t think you’d get to it so quickly.
He stopped, looked up at her quietly.
What’s the matter? Tanna’s mouth went dry.
I haven’t even looked at it yet.
She followed him outside, watched his fingers on the handle easily sliding it back and forth.
Maybe it wasn’t sticking as bad as you thought, he said. Maybe it’s this cold spell. You know how things shift when the seasons change.
Stephen came running outside with a plastic hammer, pounded it against the shed, his small face wrinkled in concentration. Tanna and Mack’s eyes met and they walked inside in silence. She stood a long time at the back window, watched the leaves fall, saw how winter would soon suck the life out of
everything.

*Something’s wrong with this place.* Her body grew cold.

A stubborn disquiet shadowed her. She tried dismissing it, busied herself unpacking her grandfather’s boxes on the chilly shed floor, blew the dust off, uncovered them one by one. Outside, wind whipped twigs across the ground, rattled the walls. Mack, unusually quiet, worked beside her unearthing old photo albums, stacks of plates, broken tools. They created piles: things to keep, to toss, to sell. They discovered unlabeled black-and-white pictures, presumably of long-lost family, one bearing a resemblance to Stephen, the same reedy black hair poking up on his head.

In a shadowy corner, they found a small blanket spread across the floor, hidden by a yellowed stack of newspapers.

Where did that come from? she asked.

What?

That blanket.

I don’t know. Most likely been hiding there, covered up in all this junk.

She kneeled, brushed her hand across the thick wool, followed its blue pattern with her fingertips. She bent more closely, studied the depressions in the fabric, its furrows hinting at the imprint of a reclining body, a head here, legs there. A dark miasma emanated from its folds, like a shadow rising up to meet her. She backed away, grabbed Mack’s arm.

Someone’s been sleeping here.

Tanna, that’s ridiculous. That blanket’s probably been sitting there for years.

No—you *know* it hasn’t.
Slowly, the shed walls closed in on her, drained feeling from her legs. She tried calling for Mack, felt his arms catching her before she slipped into cool whiteness.

That night, she dreamed of someone entering their room, settling on the edge of the bed where she lay wrapped in the blue blanket. In the gloom she made out his eyes, strangely askew, the faint outline of a gaunt face.

So this is where you sleep, he said, his voice a rough whisper, skin opaque in the moonlight. He took a slow look around the room, placed tapered fingers on her forearm.

You know I can find you in the dark, don’t you? I could sneak in here and you’d never hear me coming.

Who are you?
Blue lips parted into a smile. You don’t know?
He seemed pleased, tightened the grip on her arm, his face drawing closer, breath like stale coffee. You really don’t know? he asked.

She awoke, chest pounding, fought to break loose before realizing it was Mack gripping her arm, shaking her awake. He flicked the lamp on, spoke softly.
Hey, it’s all right. Just a bad dream.
The lampshade cast an amber circle on the ceiling. She struggled to recover her breath, eyes darting about the familiar contours of the room, the battered vanity in the corner, photos lining the walls.

Mack, there’s something in this house.
That sounds so crazy, Tanna, I don’t know what to say.
It’s true. It’s like some stranger found his way inside. Don’t you feel it? That blanket in the shed, the door fixing itself, Stephen
swearing. How do you explain all that?

He rolled onto his back, eyes turned towards the rafters. Lamplight highlighted thin lines across his forehead. He sighed.

I think there’s a logical explanation for all of it. I think the only stranger in this house is the one you’ve created in your head. It’s not good for you and Stephen, living out here, cut off from everything. I know you want to protect him, you want a better childhood for him than we had, but this isn’t the way to do it.

They lay quietly, listened to pine branches blowing against the windowpane. Rain flowed down the glass in inky rivulets as if seeping into the walls. She listened to the smooth cadence of his breath.

You know, he whispered, pulling her towards him. Sometimes I lie here remembering. I think about the old neighborhood, and the cannery, and that awful tomato smell in the summer. I remember skateboarding with you in the parking lot, the way your body spun through the air. You were so beautiful, I wondered sometimes if you were real. I used to ask myself: Where does it come from, that boldness?

He turned towards her, tired eyes tracing her face. Now I look at you and I wonder where it went.

She covered her face, took a long breath, for an instant remembered herself as he did: the flap of her t-shirt as she sailed across the pavement; how the world went quiet when her feet lifted off the ground; her eyes wide open as she spiraled inside a kaleidoscope of rust and dirt and clouds and sun—a place she’d have stayed in forever if gravity had allowed it; and finally, touchdown, the ground gentle and alive beneath her feet.

I remember, she said.

I don’t have all the answers, Tanna. But I think my mother got
it as right as anybody—the way to find something you’ve lost is to stop looking for it. Just trust that it’s still there and it will find you.

A week later they drove to town to enroll Stephen in school, the morning unusually warm. The road stretched ahead in fine detail as if they traveled through a magnifying glass: gray tangled Manzanita bushes, light reflecting off roadside boulders. Mack drove one-handed as Willie Nelson crooned over the radio. Stephen sat in the backseat humming along, a small hand on the school bag he’d packed three days earlier.

At the schoolhouse, they followed the secretary down a long corridor, walls a bright patchwork of art projects. The hum of classroom life drifted into the hallway as they passed a progression of doors: guitar strings strummed *Oh Susana*; high voices recited times tables; a man’s voice gently chided someone for speaking out of turn. The sounds blended into a warm pulse that ushered them to the kindergarten classroom. The teacher greeted them at the door, a gray-headed woman in nurse’s shoes, her face a gentle arrangement of folds and creases. Children’s voices bubbled inside as she placed a hand on Stephen’s shoulder and guided him into the room before Tanna had a chance to say goodbye.

The door closed. Mack took her hand, squeezed it, and they walked back to the truck.

Spring came early that year, bringing a gentle agitation of light and air and soil that splashed yellow buds across the meadows. Shoots of grass grew so tenderly that on dewy mornings they glinted like silver when the sun hit them just right.

Stephen grew two inches. He mastered the ABCs, shapes, and
counting to one hundred. A tow-haired boy named Elliot became his best friend. He mentioned his imaginary friend less and less, until Sammy was no more than a pale memory.

Mack sailed through his licensing exams, started a heating and air conditioning business in town, quickly developed a good reputation. Over the years, he bought his own shop, employed a small crew, built a comfortable livelihood.

Tanná’s journey back to her former self took a long time, the way thawing ground escapes winter’s deep-freeze one inch at a time. But her new fearlessness was not the brash sort, not the kind that once propelled her across railroad tracks. It was a quiet mettle, the kind that matured her into an engaged mother and partner. In time, she connected with other school moms, got to know folks closer to town, helped Mack run the business.

For their tenth wedding anniversary—Stephen was a sophomore by then—Mack bought a lot at the end of a red clay road near town with a creek running behind it, built the house of their dreams, with a hot tub and a game room and a basketball court.

But no helicopter pad, laughed Stephen—who’d ever want to escape a place like this?

They locked up the cabin, too occupied to think about it much, though Mack stopped by every few months to check on things. After Stephen left for college they sold it to a flashy car dealer from the city seeking a weekend getaway.

The day she surrendered the keys, Tanná arrived early, strolled through each empty room.

That strange, murky season of her life seemed dreamlike now with the passing of time. She thought about the cruelty of fear, how it shows you faces in the dark that don’t exist, evil in
discarded blankets and a child’s innocent whimsy. How it hunts for the weakest part of you, starts a slow nibble, then watches as your best hopes flow out.

She stepped through the back door, gazed towards the misty woods, took a slow restful breath. In the distance, deep in the trees, she thought she heard children playing. Their laughter swooped down the hillside and rushed at her like a great bird, strong and free.
Web and Light
Carolyn Guinzio
Hiking up the trail to the top of Mount Woodson, she squats to tie her shoe, and the sudden movement spooks a pair of Mourning Doves from nearby sagebrush. I spot a coyote silhouetted against the dawning sky on an adjacent ridge, glance back to nod her attention up and am startled at the speed with which it disappeared. There is never a moment captured without loss, never an eye-blink opening to the same light. We continue, but stop when I stumble on a loose rock, and a brown miasma of termites simmers outward over the soft sand. Although we continue to a thin chip of granite extending like a giant’s fingernail off the peak, the mind stops here: here wild purslanes bloom crimson in the warm October morning; here lovers kiss purple on an oak-shaded overlook; here the phone hums and I learn of my grandfather’s passing, the clouds always shift in one direction; here a Blue Warbler’s whimsy zee-zee-zeeeee as I ascend through green shoots sprouting from the fire’s ashes.
Horace Meant Pluck Not Seize
Kierstin Bridger

Some say the world will end in fire
Some say in ice.
--Robert Frost

1.
And what of the time before spirits?
   Only Earth in its fury
   of tectonic unrest

where no ghosts yet stirred
when robes of knowledge
had not yet been knit—

only the surge and flex of land,
impulse and churning,
sulphuric miasma,

seams of molten currents
resolving to an ashen landscape
deep, thick, and powder gray.
2. 
Ash plume—
a feathered pen to redraft history
more dense than pages of snow—
its flight a thousand messengers
linking land with land,
sharp wings of descent fashioned
from bolts of volcanic rage,
transported by wind and storm.

3. 
We’ve come to count on seasons,
these orbits and astrologies.
Say _eleventh century_ to me and I will only blink.
Whisper _ice age_ and I will ask which;
every one spiked with second chances.

4. 
And though we know it’s bad form
to talk about our vanities,
our fading raven luster,
it helps to study deep time.
Searing particles crashing
at impossibly fast speeds,
building a magma formed Earth
which will reinterpret herself,
dress and undress,
over and over
though we fill her pores
with islands of ink-smudged refuse
and ill-bred fumes.
This blue planet will ice
and thaw and freeze again.
Never forget her miles
of untapped gold and anthracite
which remain hidden
in honey-dense rock,
lodged in the deepest veins,
her darkest reaches.

5.
Tell me again what physics
posits us both here and there
and all the places in between?
We believe spirits occupy gaps
of those who came before.
These spectral few bound
in and out of eras
their burdens growing less penetrable
as they move through lifetimes—
ghosts of illegible alphabets
their runes of underground tunnels,
written in root and rhizome—
who scrawl in ether, dispatch
in quantum postcards home.

6.
We are all born of tumult
only mycelium know
the mythos of the ages.
Growth and burgeoning follow white burial and burn while Earth in her whimsy makes no apology. We listen first for whispers, then the roar of revolution.

7.
If you feel the restless simmer of innumerable quanta in motion, ask what is the larger fiction, the idea of life as we know it or demi-gods as children? These patterns aren’t balsam puzzles or literary canon. We can’t think our way out. While some pine doom, others cry seize the day.
They Have a Mighty Need
Thomas Matern

I.

In April I walked the streets, takeout in hand, inhaled the filthy miasma of diesel fuel, cinnamon, charming sewage on every corner.

II.

This land, barren if not for ten-story banks, dying trees, gyro carts, flooding rivers, left the Pennsylvania consciousness, rejected by progress long ago.

The grown play the lottery, smoke outside gas stations, buy groceries when storms brew because they fear the unknown, think dairy holds the key.

The youth drive SUVs with four-wheel drive up mountainsides, and drown in beer
near fires, blow lines of one or another powder off rocks, stumble into front doors. Tension simmers in their chests with rebellion.

Give me that euphoric stench of murky water flowing over shopping carts, siding torn from farm homes upstream. The juggalos setup camps on embankments, smoke college weed in metal pipes, yell lyrics at the crows overhead.

Time only exists when it runs out.

The rock musicians, failures at their own craft, carry spoons in back pockets, shake hands with strangers hoping for a dollar or a cigarette, they have a mighty need. In the early evening of springtime Fridays, they smack silver on thighs in percussive patterns, whimsy of another time glints through heavy night in their hysterics.

III.

On corners I wait for wind to blow. Instead, I feel a passerby’s request for change brush my face as sunlight beats an oak tree littered at the base with cigarette butts and empty cans of beer.
A mattress sits in the alleyway, cars drive fast, smoke floats, strangers die, records appear in the stones near the mineshafts of lives half-lived, forgotten in the heaviness, in the mist, the patterns, free-flowing complacent disaster of my city.
On the Way to Church
Andrew Kasey Genova

Stopped at the traffic light, between the hospital and street divider, I the whimsy in a pair of green work boots with yellow soles. The perfection of rubber, intelligence of cleats, and the ghost hands, which left them on the lawn—I feel them. The soil wedged between sole grooves. The un-washable grease oiling dry hands, under-construction in my thoughts. Boots! So, handsomely forgotten, casually avocado—right here on the grass: reliability, protection, work. If only this in the miasma of the world, so weary, haunted, and aching. If only this—a balm of boots, an art of task. All my life is this way, walking and driving in the wordless world of the momentary things unpeopled: cast off shoes, houses hiding their inhabitants. My visiting brother from a city, simmering with hardhats, boots, and heels, on holiday in my Indiana home, once asked, “Where are all the people?” Here is the church...here are the empty boots. And, the garden hoses beside them, hospitals, and the smudge of orange paint on this riot of grass, softly warning. The light is green. It’s killing me.
“ARE you awake?”

I am but consider giving Carrie a muffled snore. She’s going to want to talk. She’s going to want to go over what happened again, and I just can’t hear it one more time. Every time she brings it up, it’s like I’m back there. I’m in that warehouse. I’m covered in dirt and blood and my voice is hoarse from screaming. I’m convinced I’m about to die.

Carrie went through exactly what I did. She ran down that hallway with me at the end. Her childhood streamed out behind her in white-hot flames and black ash, same as me.

Carrie thinks the only way she can move past it is to dissect it piece by piece. She wants to stare it in the face until it no longer scares her, like watching a horror movie frame by frame and trying to spot the wires for the flying creatures or the places where the edits don’t match up.

I just want to pretend it never happened. The scars will never fade, but after five years I’ve gotten so used to them that I don’t
even see them anymore. Moving to a town two hours away helped. No one knows us here. I don’t have to answer questions or face the looks people give when they know we are *that* brother and sister—the ones who made it out.

I want the time in that warehouse to become nothing more than an empty spot in my memory. There are other things in my childhood I don’t remember. Like losing my baby teeth. They came out of my body with blood and pain, but I don’t remember the actual instances where each one fell out. Something so painful at the time simply vanished from my mind to be replaced by something else. Why should what happened be any different? Just fill the hellish hole of memories with shovelfuls of dirt until it is completely covered and invisible.

Until you step on it.

Then you can feel that it’s weak, that there is something different about that spot. That’s what Carrie does when she brings it all up. She burrows into my freshly filled-in pit, exposing it all again.

I want to be a good brother and help her, but I don’t know if I can. As I sit up and invite her in, the familiar question screams in my head: how can I help her when the only way is to let her remember things I’ve tried desperately to forget?

***

Carrie watched for me from the window again. I’ve told her she doesn’t need to, that whether she waits there or not I’ll always come home to her. She does it anyway, slipping away just as I climb out of my truck so I won’t see her, but the curtains are
gapped where she stood.

When I enter the apartment she’s in the kitchen making dinner. It’s been pasta every night since she burned the chicken a month ago. Filling the house with a miasma of charred flesh and oil, the olfactory whiplash sent her screaming into a corner where she huddled, her face at once a scared little girl and a haunted woman. Now she only cooks food she can boil or microwave. I’ve considered picking up overtime at the store just to have extra money for takeout. I can’t do that to Carrie though. I leave her alone too much already.

She scoops heaping portions of noodles from the simmering water into bowls, slathering them with butter, salt, and cheese. Carrie never uses red sauce. In fact, there’s nothing red in our apartment.

Red is the color of rust in rooms whose metal doors have no handles.

Red is the color of eyes after days of crying for help that never comes.

Red is the color of recording lights flashing from cameras taking in your every wrong move until it captures your last.

People say that when death comes for you, your world fades to black. But Carrie and I know that before you beg for that welcomed blackness, the last thing you see is red.

I take my bowl and sit, ready for my daily inquisition.

That’s another difference between Carrie and me—I can’t stand being cooped up in the house, and she can’t bring herself to leave it. We don’t have a television or computer; the screens bring us both back to things we’ve watched and can’t unsee. I am her sole connection to the outside world. Normally I can ride out Carrie’s questions. Sometimes I even embellish a little just to
entertain her. Tonight, though, I just don’t have it in me.

“How was work?” she asks before I’ve even taste my first
forkful of food.

“Fine.”

“What did you do?”

“Stock. Deliveries.”

“Where did you deliver?”

“Around.”

“Around where?”

“Jesus, Carrie, I don’t know. Around.”

Carrie tried to work when we first moved here. I got her a
job at my store, one of the few places in town that would hire an
eighteen-year-old without a high school diploma. But it fell apart
fast.

I saw it happening, watched as the customer held up two
tubes of lipstick.

“Which color looks best, Risky Red or Whimsy?” the customer
asked harmlessly.

“I-I don’t know,” Carrie replied, tugging nervously on the
strings of her blue apron. Her eyes searched for me, finding me
as I scurried down the stock ladder. But the woman was already
stepping closer to her.

“It’s okay, you can be honest. I don’t want to pick the wrong
one.”

I knew what would happen next. I knew the words she would
use and what they would do to Carrie.

The woman held the lipsticks up to my sister’s face. “Which
one? You decide. Pick.”

Carrie’s face contorted with panic as she pulled on her hair
and screamed, “I DON’T KNOW! I DON’T KNOW! I DON’T KNOW!
PLEASE DON’T MAKE ME!”

Right now Carrie looks like she did after she ran from the store that day and I found her sitting outside, still and withdrawn by the filthy dumpsters, her legs pulled against her, her mind reliving every decision she was forced to make in the warehouse, every choice she got wrong.

“I’m sorry,” she said then and now, the words filled with more meaning than the sum of their letters.

“I know,” I say. “I’m sorry too.”

We sit in silence after that, the puddles of butter congealing over our untouched dinners.

***

During the day I can blink away the images that want to play across my eyelids like a movie screen. I can distract myself with work or card games with Carrie. Nighttime is trickier. I learned the hard way that pills and booze don’t work. They put you in a sleep so deep you can’t claw your way back out when the bad things come to bury you. It’s best to go in clear-headed, calm your breathing, slow your heart until your body gives in to its instinct, its primal need to shut down. On those nights I don’t even force my eyes closed. I just let the room darken by increments as my lids get heavy, and the next thing I know, it’s time to wake up.

Those are the good nights.

The bad nights are when the room never darkens. Hours pass and my eyes dry, but the switch never flips. That’s when Carrie, sensing my wakefulness, will appear in my doorway and ask me to talk. I’ll head to work the next day bleary-eyed and raw,
jittery from compensational caffeine and the effort of wrangling memories back into their cages.

Then there are the nights when the nightmare finds me, as if following a trail of blood-soaked breadcrumbs to my room. Tonight is one of those nights.

I’m back in the warehouse, of course. Where else would the nightmare dare to bring me? I can hear the cries of the others echoing down the hall, their pleas answered only by more screams. I want to turn my eyes away from the monitor. Making the choices is easier when I don’t have to see their faces, bear witness to the consequences of my decisions. But in my dreams I’m always guiding Carrie so I have to look.

I have to see if this is the day I kill her.

******

I gasp awake, sweat-soaked and shaking. In the weak morning light the Carrie from my nightmare sits alone in the middle of a dark room, legs pulled up to her chest, rivulets of blood from her wounds smearing into streaks as she hugs herself close. Her fear-stricken face fills the screen of my mind, the camera’s red light flashing on her cheeks like a blush.

I force away the last of the dream so it can’t follow me into the waking world. I lie against my damp pillow and wait for Carrie to come to my doorway. Carrie rarely sleeps. When the sun goes down the ghosts of the past howl in her ears, hurling their accusations, laying blame at her feet like a doormat she must step on before crossing the threshold into sleep. Most nights she doesn’t make the trip. She is always nearby when I wake up. But
this morning I’m alone.

    Panic jolts me out of bed.

    I rush to Carrie’s room. Her bed is empty, the sheets whorled at the center like a cotton fingerprint. The floor is littered with paper. Each is filled with words written by a frantic hand then scratched out so hard the pages are ripped. They look like a child’s attempt at paper snowflakes, except these are spattered with tears and smudged ink.

    Running to the kitchen I call for Carrie but find only silence. The drawer where I keep the rent money is open, the cash gone. There is only one place that could lure Carrie away from the safety of the house; one place she believes holds the key to quieting the storm of torment in her mind.

    The world spins. My knuckles turn white as I grip the edge of the counter then grab my keys.

    “Goddamnit, Carrie,” I say into the soundless space.

    ****

    A Yellow Cab idles in front of the chain-link fence when I pull up. The driver leans against the hood, smoking a cigarette. He takes in my sleep-rumpled clothes and studies the half-circles of black under my eyes. He nods towards the empty back seat of his taxi.

    “You come for her?” he asks, his accent as heavy as the smoke he pushes from this lungs.

    “Yeah.”

    He shakes his head. “This place no good.”

    I take out my wallet but he refuses my offered cash.
“She pay one way and say go. I stay anyway.” He looks towards the burned shell of the building beyond the fence and shudders. “This place no good.”

He takes his last drag and crushes the butt out with his heel. “You take care of her now, yes?”

“Yes,” I say, exhausted by the burden of the word.

The driver slides behind the wheel and pulls away, battered ribbons of police tape waving to him in the breeze.

I scale the fence and drop to the other side. The impact sends a shiver through my body, a shiver that increases and spreads, the aftershock becoming fear. My teeth chatter and my vision blurs. I look down at my feet, pretending the cracked macadam under my shoes is just an ordinary lot. Breathing through my mouth, I deny my brain the chance to smell the fetid air of this place and remember.

But when I close the distance to the warehouse the taste of it finds me. Metal, ash, fear, and blood hit my tongue and explode like bombs of memory. They combine with the bile rising up in my throat to form a caustic mixture that will eat away at me from the inside out.

The entrance looms in front of me. Scorch marks coil up the sides of the building like thick black snakes. Just above the door is a dormant surveillance camera. The melted casing is twisted and misshapen from the fire’s heat. The lens is cracked; thin, transparent veins radiate from its center. I pick up a board lying in a pile of debris nearby and knock the camera down. I continue hitting it until the board is cracked and the camera is reduced to harmless bits of plastic.

My footsteps echo through the cavernous warehouse as I step inside. Carrie stands in the middle of the gutted space. It’s cold
but she doesn’t seem to feel it. She wears only her nightshirt; the thin bones of her shoulder blades poking out like the severed wings of an angel.

The dark hallway stretches out in front of her. When I come to her side, she doesn’t acknowledge me. Her eyes stare ahead, focused on something I can’t see.

“I hear them,” she whispers to herself.

“They’re all gone,” I tell her.

“I can help them.”

“It’s over, Carrie.”

“I won’t let them die again!” she screams. The words knock around the warehouse as if Carrie has summoned a hundred versions of herself to change what can’t be undone.

She runs.

I call after her but she disappears down the center hallway.

I watch, unmoving. The corridor holds the fingers of the past that wrap around my throat in the present, always waiting for the chance to strangle me. Following her will give them what they’ve waited for.

Then Carrie’s scream cuts through the silence. There is no thinking then, only instinct. I run down the hallway, the charred metal doors standing open, heat-puckered paint flaked and peeling.

I see them inside each room I pass.

I watch them die all over again.

*The girl younger than Carrie at a table covered with syringes.*

*Choosing the yellow one for her because it looked like the sun.*

*Watching the little girl convulse on the floor as the poison worked its way through her body and stopped her heart.*

*The blond boy reaching out, feeling his way around the pitch*
black room, his eyes pinpricks of light in the grainy green of the night vision. His terrified screaming as the hatch I pick opens and the starved rats come pouring out.

The boy with the strawberry birthmark on his arm. It flashes towards the camera as he slips the noose around his neck. The trap doors under his feet numbered, some with a stool to catch him others with empty space. Tears streak his face as he looks at the camera and waits for me to choose.

The camera. Always the camera.

In every corner, in every room, the camera had waited to record their final moments, the angle perfect to catch their bodies twisting in agony, their mouths screaming for help, their way out. Their eyes always finding the red light at the end. They had each stared into it, looking for the person guiding them from behind the lens, their hatred and anger overcome by the need for a witness, the small comfort of knowing they weren’t dying alone.

But we never were alone, were we? Even in front of the monitor there was a camera watching. How we chose, where we guided, the consequences of our decisions were recorded for the anonymous psychopath that set up the game we were forced to play. Every time I sat at the monitor I wondered—when the wrong choice was made and the victim of my failure lay dying, did the sick bastard get more pleasure from watching death or my guilt-stricken face?

I find Carrie curled up in the last room in the hall. Her bare feet are filthy with soot.

“I couldn’t save them,” she cries. “I chose wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong....” Her body rocks back and forth with each word.

The boy crawls into the doorway so quietly I almost don’t hear him over Carrie’s sobbing. Flames lick at his shredded clothes, his
face a gruesome mask of blistered skin. He crawls towards me, his blackened body leaving a gruesome trail of flesh and blood behind him.

I don’t know how many I left to burn the day the gas seeped from one of the horror rooms to fill the hallway with silent death. It only took one spark to ignite it. My screen filled with blinding light and my ears filled with screams. Then I was running. Somehow in the chaos I had found Carrie.

The heat scarred our lungs, the debris cut our bodies, the memories of what we’d seen and done seared into our brains, but I got her out.

I saved her.

But now I look over to where my sister lies still. Her tears have left her hallowed out, the empty space already filling back up with pain, a pain I can never take away no matter how many times we talk about it.

The charred boy watches me, his melted eyes glowing fire red like a recording light as he waits for me to choose.

Carrie offers no resistance as my hands encircle her neck. My fingers grip hard, leaving imprints on her pale skin. Carrie opens her mouth to speak, but the words are a choked whisper I can’t hear.

I watch Carrie’s face redden and know I’m truly saving her this time. She closes her eyes as my choice, my hands, guide her to sleep.
Traveling Man and the Dallas Skyline
Alan Whiteside
Let’s get to work, and eventually everything we do will come to mean something. What escapes me is the absolute unqualified nature of meaning, the miasma of tyranny it can never quite shake off. Like woodsmoke, like the sudden quick glint of steel in some feebly lit wayside cafe. It is evening, and we walk back hand in hand, lifeline against lifeline, crunch of dry grass beneath our feet singing to step. When I think of old photographs, I think of stained noses and blurred hairlines. I think of an impromptu giggle caught off guard, coke white sun streaming out through the sides of a fuzzy framed face. If I could name one emotion I’d like to feel in sleep, I would choose forgetfulness. We love with the might of an imminent force majeure, with the causticity of a painted volcano. Let’s talk frivolity tonight – I’m trying to unwind, Darling, do you mind? Keep the whimsy slant rhymes aside, let cold logic simmer down to a warped definition of deduction. Let me, for once, touch the moon with a perfect en pointe, raise my back to salutation of your skill of manipulation. The
ground beneath us is ash, nervous as a pack of scattered cards and I can fit fluently into the space of air left by your breath, like a jelly mould. A starfish without bones. This cornucopia of painted doors, vitamin pills, patent leather totes make me wonder if a year is a lifetime telescoped in twelve months. Lately, I’m beginning to wonder, too, if blood is only a leitmotif in our veins. Then there is the rest—anger, gratitude, denial, lust—the desire to make honey out of thin air. The other day I met a friend who swore she hated reading. Bibliophile t-shirt on her back—Just a freebie, she shrugged and proposed lunch. I laughed with my mouth like a gaping wound, with the abandon of a steam engine, my head thrown impossibly backwards.
Germ Theory of Disease
Lauren Yates

I.
The word “malaria” literally means “bad air.” People believed the simmering rot of it all would slink through the night into their open windows. They were too busy sleeping to ask if the mosquitos were nocturnal.

II.
The disease is still called “malaria,” though miasma is not its cause.

III.
When Christopher Columbus tried sailing to India, he ended up in the wrong place. He called the islands the West Indies, instead of acknowledging the mistake.

IV.
Columbus would probably approve of malaria and one-day sales. If alive today, he would be that guy that turns the heat up instead of putting on his jacket.
V.
These days, “whimsy” means “erasure.”
Go to the mall on Columbus Day weekend for all the tribal patterns you can buy.
Who cares whether they mean something as long as they are in season.

VI.
Each time you wash your hands, I think of “Pontius Pilate.” You will neither confirm or deny the theory. You have never been much a germaphobe anyway.
Silver Water
Carolyn Guinzio
THE narrow boat travelled up the river to the core of the rainforest, the water folding unto itself and rippling outwards. At violet hour, the woods thickened and a cobweb of black silk was laid like a grid over the mauve snakeskin surface of the water. The click-snap of the camera’s shutter sent a few nearby birds flying, their exotic yellow and blue plumage narrowing into black motes in the sky.

We’d been going now for a week, perhaps more. Time was hard to keep track of as we delved deeper into the rainforest. Our guide, a portly mestiço called Chef, was recommended to Pat Gunthorpe through a professor at the Indigenous Studies faculty in Belém. He had proven useful, if somewhat unreliable when it came to providing details and travelling long, torpid hours in the jungle’s oppressive heat.

“Anaconda. Mamba. Gators. Very careful, Doctor, we don’t want to lose you before we reach the Índios, uh? And you, Senhor Klump: eyes off camera, look first, then picture.”
Later, as we were pouring over the map, trying to make sense of the thicket, we heard a high-pitched shriek behind us, like a wounded capybara calling to his mate. Behind us, a tumbling black shape with fragmented crystalline drops glistened in the retreating light. Chef was up in the air. Still yelling, he dropped clumsily on the ground and ran toward us.

“You see it? A caiman, I think. Big. Six foot. My life... You see it?” His hands were trembling.

The myriad stars in the sky burned bright, a soft nocturnal diamond-studded tapestry that invited deep carefree sleep.

We were bivouacking in a small enclosure on the right bank of the river; Chef, still visibly distraught, was getting the fire going while we took out a few choice piranhas from the creel. There were few fish left: only the feeble and the young.

They would do.

“Tomorrow then?” Gunthorpe asked, not looking at any of us in particular, focusing instead on a group of alligators as they settled down over on the other bank.

“Tomorrow, or day after, difficult to say,” Chef said.

“You said you were there.”

“Sure, I was there. But land changes, markers shift. We wouldn’t want to be ambushed, certo? Slowly. We go slow. Once we’re there... Soon, now.”

The booted feet and t-shirted torsos of the tribesmen we met along the way signalled we were still too close to the urban areas. Chef spoke dialect, but mostly he talked in Portuguese, a language Gunthorpe was also familiar with.

“A lost tribe, Klump, imagine. A boy’s dream. I wouldn’t want anyone else getting those shots. What do you say?”

I’d met Gunthorpe at the Governor’s house during a reception
for the American Consul. He was a millionaire. And an explorer. He was here on pleasure, he said, not business. He liked the outdoors and had a great respect for the Indians. Next day we were both sitting on a helicopter to the heart of the jungle.

“You know, these natives, they’re too wild, like beasts. They’ll kill you without batting an eyelid. Too dangerous if you ask me,” said Chef, before being persuaded with a fistful of dollars.

The trees were unlike anything I’d ever seen, coiled and plaited, harbouring rainbow coloured creatures and birds – the canopy crepitating with life. Alligators and mating capybaras lined both margins; piranhas swam in the river, waiting for some meagre bloody scrapings. The scene was vaguely depressing: only three more creatures at the mercy of the river’s ebb. A pod of pink dolphins escorted us up the river. I watched, my eyes downcast, as their fins emerged and submerged in a synchronized march, the leftmost fin disappearing, a ripple in the water, then the next, and another, in precise Olympic fashion. When the rightmost dolphin submerged, the leftmost resurfaced on the other edge of the skein. There were seven. They’d been following us for days. Chef told us that the local tribes believed the dolphins had been close friends with the humans once.

“There was a time,” he said, “when Indians and dolphins travelled together in land and river. Not that I believe in these things. Just what they say. And we could talk to them too. Look at them now. Can you understand their words, Doctor? Mr. Klump?” He threw something at one of the dolphins and sneered as the pod submerged in perfect synch, like a team of swimmers at the Olympics.

“They’re a highly evolved species,” Gunthorpe said. “Their brains are more complex than our own, they’re very emotional
beings. They don’t forget.”

“Well, I’m glad he’ll remember Chef. Stop swimming around my boat. That’s what I say to them.”

At night, Gunthorpe and I slept in a mosquito net. Chef slept in a hammock fastened to the sturdiest sprigs of whatever tree was being used as a sunshade for our net. It’s the fragrance of the jungle I remember best, the sweet and nasty tang in the air. There were airborne bacteria scattered around, the nefarious kind, and I came down with jungle fever. The sounds were heightened by my fragile, simmering state: the rustling of the trees, the cricketing of the night crawlers, the nearby whistling of our dolphin pod. When one of the whistles shifted pitch, from a high searing sound to a low grumbling roar, like a man in anger, or a predator joining the hunt, I knew my fever was getting worse. There was a soft, incomprehensible, whimsical jabber floating from Chef’s hammock.

Sleep took time in coming.

The sun woke me, burning through the slits in the canopy, and resting over my forehead, sweat-wet and throbbing. Chef was eating fresh papaya and heating up the last of our coffee over a camping gas bottle. For a moment, as I opened my eyes and looked out, the view seemed odd somehow, translucent, the landscape not yet set, more like a projected image in the process of being focused. The night had been trying, and I was writhing in discomfort, my mind light, hazed, stray thoughts echoing meaninglessly inside.

Chef and Gunthorpe conferred a few feet off in Portuguese, just enough to fall outside my earshot, while my legs wobbled beneath me in my pathetic attempt to stand. I was a stone statue
teetering on matchstick legs, ready to buckle at any time. I leaned on the trunk of a tree, gripping one of its bulbs tight. And then light seeped in through the soft curtains hand in hand with a cold, soothing breeze, while white-robed men and women walked past. The ceiling glowed with a pale mauve light that flickered like the fluorescent tubes in public buildings. I stank of rancid vinegar and wanted to retch. As I forced the impulse downwards, back into the stomach, the wind shifted, carrying with it the bassoon timbre of Gunthorpe’s voice over a staccato shrill that was Chef. No. No far. Here, today. Mr. Klump. Mr. Klump’s ill. High fever. Crazy eyes. Should I ever know what it is you want, Chef, I’ll let you have it. Head back Mr. Gunthorpe. Certainly not. Mad Indians. Angry. Heard them last night? Those were dolphins. Precisely Senhor, my people know these things. So how is the patient doing? Mad savages. He’ll die, gringo. Stable for now. What about Senhor Klump? Tomorrow. First light. Please roll down those shutters, Ellie. Senhor Klump is squinting, his face so pale. I won’t waste any more of my time, Chef, and better not either. How do you feel, Senhor?

As I covered myself with the sleeping bag, sheets caressing my sallow skin, I was the river slit across by a painful and heavy schooner, my wrinkles rippling with the motion. The sun was still up, shining through the trees in shafts of golden darkness. Its rays had grown cold and piercing, and my body was hard and congealed. Gunthorpe wobbled over and gave me something to drink. I felt better, but my mind was still racing, refusing to lie still inside such a useless and weak frame.

Gunthorpe over me, a white tube the size of his head in one hand, honing in on its prey. For a moment I though of a giant UFO aiming its light shaft toward me, ready to pull me in. “How do you feel, Klump? Capable of picking up that camera?”
I certainly felt sturdier. I told him so and this was enough for him. Chef glowered behind his back, but they had obviously talked this through in advance, there was no to and fro, and Chef quickly set to picking up our belongings and loading the boat.

“We’re short on fuel. We should avoid using the engine. It’s better to move quietly anyway. Chef says we hit the Reserve today. Only a few miles.”

His excitement was palpable and worked on me like an over-eager Aspirin. He grabbed his rifle. My sweaty palms clutched the camera while my eyes scanned the landscape. The jungle was hushed. The only sound was the paddle on the water and the soft susurrus of wind on trees. It was noon. The shadows crowded around beneath the canopy. As the boat moved, droplets of water clung to my eyelids, giving much-needed relief.

“We’ll be there soon, Klumpie. You’ll see.”

We camped at sundown. The jungle was denser, and the air felt thinner and more rarefied. The foliage sheathed the land in emerald reeds, while the cicadas droned loudly, crushing my skull. A busy highway amok, with open trucks trundling heavily over the tarmac. The dolphins were singing again. We hadn’t seen signs of a human being in days. In my fever, I thought I heard the sound of nimble hands drumming on animal skin, to the rhythm of the dolphins’ lilt.

“Listen, Doctor, we go. Come back in a few weeks. With Mr. Klump so sick, the natives so restless—“

I could see Gunthorpe wincing in a disparaging way as he stooped to look at my face. Chef was pacing behind him, and glancing furtively every now and then back at the river. He seemed angry. Angry at me for being ill, angry at Gunthorpe for having talked him into such foolishness as a three-man expedition to
some godforsaken piece of land to see some long-forgotten naked Indians. His step was loud, and it echoed furiously inside my hollow head, growing louder and not fainter as he disappeared. I think I must have slept then, for the next thing I remember was Chef standing over me holding a cup with a black viscous liquid. It smelt like soil and bush. A green sheen under the light of the full moon.

“Drink, Senhor, it will be good for you. You too, Doctor. A recipe from my mother’s people: jungle vines for jungle fever.”

Gunthorpe whiffed and frowned, but took a sip nonetheless, enticed by its indigenous provenance.

“Yes. Disgusting, no?” Chef looked radiant. Happier than I’d seen him since we’d left his hometown. He laughed jovially, patting Gunthorpe on the back. “Very horrible, but good for you, Senhor. Now you, Mr. Klump; sweat it all out.”

I gulped the vile thing down, my legs still very feeble. I thought I’d have to retch. Gunthorpe’s skin was shifting quickly from burnt pink to acid green, running the gamut of all the shades in between. He was coughing, no doubt trying to get rid of the bitter taste. I reckoned I was undergoing a similar metamorphosis. I coughed and spat, but it was useless. I tried to get Chef’s attention, but the spitting seemed more urgent, and besides, Chef had walked over to the boat and was taking out his hammock. Gunthorpe leaned in, conspiratorially, his mood light and spry for once, seemingly recovered from his fit.

“We can’t be far now, Klump. Will you hold?”

“This drink…I think I’ll…”

“Yes, well let’s hope it works for you. Disgusting fucking shit if you ask me. Either way, we can’t be far. You heard them last night?”

Chef was waving at us from the river. I tried to lift my hand up to wave back, but my arm wobbled around, as if it had recanted from its previous position as my limb, and had now gone off on its own.

“Chef says it’s them. Which means we’re close. Very close now.”

“Pat, I—”

“Very close. Don’t you worry, Klump. We’re close. You’ll get your photos.”

I could’ve mentioned how little I cared for the photos, how I’d only tagged along because it seemed like an interesting proposition, how I figured, well, I’m here, so why not, but instead I said nothing. “Doctor! Senhor Klump!” Chef had his right arm upstretched and was all the way over by the river, pointing to a long, dark trunk of tree lying on the path. The trunk slithered in perfectly shaped s-coils like waves on a chart. As it moved, a long, moist slither, its black body shimmered in the dwindling light. Gunthorpe whispered, “Don’t move,” and his voice seemed the very texture of snake speech. But it was unnecessary; my body was frozen, too heavy to move. Chef stood laughing at a safe distance, watching it all play out.

As the anaconda approached — for that’s what it was, a long, black anaconda, about six feet in size — I glimpsed in her black-gemmed eyes, her primitive nature, but I could tell there was no harmful intent. As she slithered between my legs, the yellow black spots on her skin stood out against the dark green and black coils. The sinewy S gave way to a last point-ended glimpse of its exquisite leather. That’s when the drink hit me. I knew I had to
bolt, quickly, or risk retching all over the damn snake, which was sure to make it mad. To my surprise, I saw that Gunthorpe was already bent next to a tree, his head between his legs, his breath wheezing between gags. He looked old and fat as he retched in a blubbery mass of convulsive flesh and dry-heaves, a miasma of rotting, digested detritus rising from the vomit puddle. I believe I yelled something, but I can’t be sure, my mouth was permeated with an acrid, bilious taste and sweat drops were oozing down like honey. In this state, as I was, I felt a mysteriously kind and cool hand on my forehead and that somewhat eased the nausea until at last, when every last drop of vile liquid and undigested food was spilled, it disappeared again.

The stars were out.

I could see clearly, as if the sun was shining and the skies were blue. As if the stars in the sky were all shining as bright as the sun, billions and billions of warm fiery bodies shining over the jungle night. My body trembled and my mind took off in odd directions, thousands of neural connections made at once in what felt like a tingling orgasm all over my brain. I walked, but the landscape moved along with me.

“You there?”
“Klump.”
“You ok?”
“Ok.”
“What is this?”
“What is what?”
“What is this?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know?”
“I don’t know.”
“I don’t know.”
“Chef?”
A rumble in the jungle. A thump-thud stomping in the night. A light shining bright in the sky, a red star above us lighting the sky in its crimson hues. Chef gone, my speech slurred, indistinguishable from Gunthorpe’s own. My skin fit snugly over my bones and muscles.

“Where’s Chef?” Gunthorpe was panting heavily and his words were snarled, dragged out with great effort.

Meanwhile, the world had shrunk to within two feet of my tree and my puddle of crumbly vomit. It took a long time, or maybe no time at all, to cover the distance between our camp and the river. The skin surface of the water struck me again. I stooped down to drink, but the water was as thin and elusive as air, leathery smooth as it rippled in simpering waves.

“Where’s Chef, Pat?” It was my turn to put the question to Gunthorpe. My words, too, came out garbled, but he had no trouble figuring them out.

“Gone.”
“Gone?”
“Boat’s gone!” For a moment I glimpsed a raddled creature about to emerge from Gunthorpe and burst out. I could see the red protruding, threatening to rip his body in half, rupturing it at the seams. Knowing I was going mad, I closed my eyes and opened them again, but he was back to normal and the red creature seemed to have retreated. The boat was gone.

But then none of this mattered.

We felt at ease and in place. The sound of the jungle seemed to flow out of our own body, the green sap that nourished the
trees and plants flowing in our own veins. I saw my own features on Gunthorpe’s face. An abstract impression, like a Bacon portrait, rather than a faithful reproduction, but the eyes were my own. A mauve liquid pulsed under my skin, my veins cobwebbing in intricate fractal patterns. The same tessellated pattern ran over the water below and all over the soil and trees.

“What is it?” I asked him, or thought. Our minds were merging into a single entity that spoke with a jungle roar, a dolphin chant. Gunthorpe was standing fifty feet away, well out of earshot.

The skies were wild in whirling motion, and I could discern a nexus in the spiral. My body was numb, as if anaesthetised. And then the dolphins came out of the water. They jumped as they usually did, in their child-like games, but as they looped mid-air, they transformed. Their pink rubbery skin darkened, and the tails split in two, while the fin on their backs retreated with a rubbery pop. As they landed, effortlessly, naked, an assortment of female and male bodies convulsing into shape, one of them stepped forward. His stomach was dilated and set over his sculpted legs. His skin was swarthy but still retained a pink rubbery sheen; his hair, smooth and pitch-black, neatly cropped in the shape of a bowl. One red horizontal stripe was drawn along each cheek, and he was grasping a long blunt-edged lance, with a tip like a dolphin’s dorsal fin, on his right hand. The drums returned, louder, thumping like a heartbeat. *Tum-tum-tum-tum-tum-tum.*

A gasp for breath, a rising nausea dispersed with a belch. A belch resounding on and linking to Gunthorpe’s own. A belch that led me right in under his skin. There I was, looking through his eyes, as the Indians or dolphins faded away, like a dispersing cloud of dust. The trees danced, in shapes of green and amber. The dolphin calls echoed through the jungle, joining the beat of the drums.
Resting on a sprig, two white men below. And everything diluted, unfixed, our edges smooth and malleable, a billow of matter spiralling up to the sky, as all the ages went by, the trees dying and rising, mountains climbing and falling like sea waves. And then a light, brighter than day, up from behind the hill beyond. An edge of silver skirting a black rock. Gunthorpe. I. Not-I. I was the slither of silver and the black rock. I was the newly born trees, and the dead ones too. As she made its path across the sky — for it was the moon, and the moon was a woman — the strangest of all events came to pass. Out of the corner of my vision, a glimpse into a completely different world. A white-cuffed hand making its way toward me. Things oddly familiar, but which I could not place, or even recognize; voices coming through, crackled and distorted, as if played over a radio with bad reception, with hissed peaks and muffled depth. And a pair of eyes, hazel-green, peeking down the hole.

The moon was high up in the sky and dropping rapidly. A shiver stunted my body in shrivelled contortions. I was me, but where was Gunthorpe? My mind was still malleable and unreliable — ideas and thoughts eroding soil into silt.

“Pat?”

Scouring the camp, looking for him, at length I felt my mind returning to our world, to the jungle. Cicadas, crickets, and nocturnal birds. Rickety wheels rattling, intermittent beeps. Gunthorpe’s footprints leading off down towards the river and along the bank. The fever was gone — I knew that somehow — but my body felt strained and weak, as if I’d been awake for days, or years even. It was dark, but a purple line could be seen faint on the horizon. As I trundled on along the jungle path, my body so tired, my mind playing out the night within, clueing me in to the
experience from which I had so recently emerged, the night gave way to day. I raced on ahead to find Pat Gunthorpe.

I found his body contorted in a bloody heap on the bank of the river. It was Chef. His blood was still flowing out of the blade gash on his chest. I could feel the fever returning, furious and rampant, jubilant at finding such a weakened vessel. I faltered, and had to lie down on the floor, a few feet from Chef’s body. The boat was gone. Gunthorpe was nowhere in sight. The sun was up but my body was cool as a river spring, while my mouth was a desert, parched and dry; my limbs crumbled in cakes like dry soil.

Chef’s body gave off a very unpleasant smell as the day advanced. I tried to shout, rasping for someone, Gunthorpe, the Indians, the dolphins, but my voice was gone.

I was dying; I could feel the trees and the jungle soil retreating, a faint narcotic trace in the breeze. Leaves rustling and dancing, darker patches emerging from within. A tribesman. A flesh-and-blood Indian. Lance with a dolphin tip in hand. I grabbed for my camera — I had to try and get a photo – but I found the camera had slipped somewhere, or perhaps I never had it. I groped around for it, trying to find it among the white sheets, but it was gone, and so I lay there, within four bleached walls, blinded by the bright fluorescent tubes of the ceiling lights.
Summer Whimsy
Sarah Walters
Remember Mirabelle? On her twenty-fifth birthday, her mom gave her a Miata, which I in a flight of envy-fueled whimsy called her miasma. I thought it was funny.

We were friends, mostly, which mostly means I attended her worries, her fear of failing, her bitching ’bout bad boys who’d love and then leave her.

We tried to make love, we tried pretty hard, and a couple of times we sort of succeeded. But I wasn’t bad and with each new attempt, the flames we threw off grew decidedly dimmer, what might have been fire pared to a glimmer, the pot on the boil reduced to a simmer.
IT simmers beneath my bones the afternoon I discovered the pinball machine.

“Check it out!” I call over to Adam when my flashlight illuminates the faded neon graphics peeking out from underneath the stacks of old newspapers.

It was magnificent, I thought, remarkable, really, but Adam regards it with a raised eyebrow, a shrug of his slumped shoulders and returns to investigating a pile of old *National Geographic* issues. *Typical*, I think. It’s so typical that he can’t just appreciate that behind boarded up doors, underneath the wreckage of splintered wooden furniture, and crumbling drywall, this object of whimsy was hiding, waiting to be found. Waiting to be appreciated. To simply be enjoyed—to serve no other purpose than entertainment.

“It’s totally useless, and it’s heavy!” he reasons, and that condescending tone boils my blood. It’s a quiet rage that simmers, sending steam out of my ears and nose, and flushing my skin deep
red. I hate him. He is my only companion—possibly one of the last fellow humans on this Earth—but I can’t stand him. His stunted limbs and meaty fingers, the slump of his stupid, sludgy shoulders. The sound of his voice, his shallow laugh. Just a glimpse of his shiny, round eyes protruding from his gluttonous face tightens the knots across my shoulders, behind my ears, in the cavity of my chest where I’m pretty sure my heart is supposed to be.

My hatred is based more on circumstance than principle, but it burns slowly and deeply within me. It began the moment we first met. I found him cowering in the corner of a busted-up convenience store a few weeks after the last Good Day. The miasma of acrid death still hung in the air and I was still wearing my makeshift air filter on my back, breathing through a connected tube I taped inside my mask. Adam wore a mask back then too, when we thought the noxious stench had been the cause of the epidemic rather than an effect. When I saw him slumped pathetically in that corner, sneaking stale chips underneath his mask, I knew we had no choice in the matter of our companionship.

He sings old show tunes off-key, babbles on and on about fantasy football drafts (all football is now fantasy, I tell him), backwashes into our shared canteen—all a bitter reminder that he is not who I would have chosen in the Good Days, the days when time was priceless, and spending it with another was a valuable investment rather than just a desperate attempt to make time pass just a little faster.

He reminds me of that time I wasted, dozing in front of computer and television screens, fighting with the people I loved, playing pinball in dark arcades when the outside air was still clean and fresh. But the thing I hate most, as Adam begrudgingly helps
me drag that useless pinball machine back to our shelter, is that
someday he could be gone and I’ll be left all alone wondering why
I couldn’t appreciate what I had, when I had it.
MY grandmother and I shared a dark sense of humor, which may have been why I was one of few people she told her death was near. I guess she knew I would keep my mouth shut about it. She wanted to tell someone she was at peace, but didn’t want anyone fussing about keeping her alive any longer. She passed away peacefully a week later, grateful, I’m sure, for my discretion.

The wake was held where most of my family is from: Long Island, New York. So, you can read the rest of this story in whatever accent you prefer; think tan hairy chests with gold chains.

I walked up to my cousin, Brian, standing over the casket. “How are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Better than Grandma. She looks awful. If she saw this botched makeup job, she would rise up and die again.”

“Right? It looks like they gave her collagen in her lips and stretched her face out.”
“She looks like Beetlejuice.”
“Or the Joker.”
“She would have wanted a perm.”
“I know, right? Her hair looks like Al Sharpton’s.”
“She was more about the jerry curls than anything.”
“I wonder what they’re going to do with her wedding ring,” I said. “Do they bury her with it? Or take it off before the burial?”

After a hushed debate, we decided to avoid bringing it up to anyone because they would probably try to take it for themselves. Grandma had seven children; someone was bound to have a go at the ring. I knew Brian always wanted the wedding ring, and he deserved to have it because he took care of her for the last three years of her life. As time went on I felt more and more passionate about the idea of getting that ring for Brian.

If anyone found out, there would be a big debate over who got it because the ring never made it into the will. Uncle Roger and Uncle Bill would probably get in a fistfight. Aunt Rita would plead her case being the only girl of the seven. Uncle Paul would probably want it split up between the seven, or something like some guido version of the Lord of the Rings. It was too risky, we didn’t want to draw attention to the ring and start an awkward fight among my family.

Later that evening, over a bottle of gas station wine and a pack of Marlboro Reds, Brian and I decided to steal it right off her finger at the final viewing. It’s a whimsical idea, I thought to myself, but it just might work.

Such fantastic ideas usually sober up along with those who imagined them the night before; however, this was different. Brian woke up with purpose on the morning of the burial. It became clear this was going to happen with or without me, so I enlisted
myself to the task. To this day I still cannot decide whether my choice was driven by ideology or the boredom of three viewings and a burial.

We waited until no one was around the casket, then walked up and stood over her pretending to pray and grieve. This is where it gets weird.

There is no playbook for these kinds of things. I know well and good how to shoplift just as I know how to remove a ring from a person’s finger. But this was my dead grandmother who used to read me stories and made the best pot roast on the planet. Context and circumstance have their way of fooling human logic.

“So how do I do it?” Brian whispered.

“I don’t know, just pull it off her finger,” I told him.

“Okay,” he agreed, “I’m doing it now— I can’t, I can’t touch her, dude, it’s too gross. I can’t do this.”

“Alright, pussy, move over. I’ll do it.”

I hesitantly reached down and put my hand on her hand. Her skin was stiff, pasty, and colder than the air around us. As I put my hand on the ring, I could just imagine her waking up and grabbing my arm.

“Why would you steal from your dear grandmother?! I’m a poor dead helpless old woman! How could you?!”

Simmer down now, I told myself. Just get the ring.

I slid the ring off and handed it to my cousin. He looped it onto his necklace then dropped it into his shirt, simple enough. We thought the deed was done.

The problem was, she had been wearing that ring for 50 years, so in place of the ring, now there was a deep indent in her skin, like the way a tree consumes a fence over time. It was obvious the ring was missing.
Brian looked at me defiantly. “I’m not putting the ring back. Dude, I don’t care what happens. My wife is going to wear this ring someday.”

“What wife? You don’t even have a girlfriend.”

“Look at this face. I’ll find one.”

“Doubtful.”

“Oh, okay, you really wanna do this right here, right now?”

“No, relax, you are good looking.”

“That’s right.”

“And dumb.”

“Dude, I swear-”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Let’s figure this out. If people notice, it’s going to get really ugly in here. What if we just switch her hands so the ring finger is hidden underneath her right hand? I pulled the ring, so you switch her hands.”

We argued under our breath for a minute or so and then realized people were waiting to visit. The air was getting awkward and suspicious. I could feel cold sweat forming on my face.

“We need to do this now,” I sternly whispered.

We leaned over to make sure no one could see, and together switched her hands. Matt repeated “Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew…” under his breath. I lunged a quiet gag.

“I will haunt you for this!” said Grandma in my head. “After all I did for you! Stealing from your poor old grandmother!”

It was done. Brian had the ring. Grandma’s hand was hidden. I sat through the next several hours sweating through my suit, waiting for the burial. Finally she was put into the ground and we were free.

Three years later, we were having a family reunion on Easter. The kitchen was a miasma of Polish food: Borsht, cabbage, beets,
and potatoes filled the air. The six uncles and Aunt Rita were sitting around the kitchen table catching up on old times. My Uncle Bobby chimed in: “Hey, so ah, whatever happened to Ma’s wedding ring? Who ended up with that?”

Everyone in the room looked around dumbstruck. Jaws dropped. Then Uncle Bobby burst into tears. A debate ensued as to whether or not we should exhume the grave. I voted “yes” just to see the look on their faces. Meanwhile, Brian held his hand to his chest and smiled.

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The Easter ring debate was six years prior to 2015. To this day the ring is still dangling on a gold chain around Brian’s neck. He will give you the ring, but first you will have to steal his heart.
3Elements Contributors

**Apala Bhowmick** holds a degree in English literature and lives in India. She is a voracious reader and a devoted cinephile. As an undergraduate, she managed a poetry forum and edited two anthologies published by her college. She is a slightly odd *Homo sapiens* bestowed with the talent for striking up quick friendships with cats of all shapes and sizes.

**Stephanie Bolaños** is a native of Costa Rica but has resided in the San Francisco Bay Area for most of her life. She was a finalist in the fiction category at the 2015 San Francisco Writers Conference Contest. Stephanie is a member of Tri-Valley Writers based in Pleasanton, California. She lives with her husband and two small boys.

**Kierstin Bridger** is a Colorado writer and winner of the Mark Fischer Poetry Prize. She is editor-in-“sheaf” of *Ridgway Alley Poems*, co-director of Open Bard Poetry Series, and contributing writer for *Telluride Inside...and Out*. Her work can be found in the upcoming issue of *Fugue* and the 2015 *Lascaux Review Anthology*. Find her also at *Prime Number, Memoir, Thrush Poetry Journal, Mason’s Road, Pilgrimage*, and elsewhere. She received her MFA at Pacific University.

**Benjamin Broedel** is a writer, stand-up comedian, sketch writer, and actor originally from Baltimore, Maryland. His work focuses on social and cultural issues. He is currently working out of Bangkok, Thailand. benjaminbroedelcomedy@gmail.com.
Garrett Bryant lives in San Diego, California, where he teaches English and Creative Writing at San Diego State University. Garrett is an avid writer of poetry and micro fiction as well as a contributing editor of Poetry International and Locked Horn Press. He is also a co-founder of Poetic Youth, a community outreach and creative writing program serving underprivileged youth.

Gabriel E. Calle is a former Marine of eight years. He currently writes fiction concerning the effects of military duty and war on service personnel and their families. He is also a part-time poet and full-time daydreamer.

J. E. Fisher is Chicago-based author and Loyola University Chicago graduate who majored in English. She is a twin. She writes short stories, nonfiction, and whatever genre inspires her at the moment. She loves to travel and has visited a total of 11 countries, even living in Rome, Italy for 4 months. This is her first publication.

Andrew Genova’s poems have appeared in REAL, Tipton Poetry Journal, Maize, Homestead Review, The Caprock Sun, The Humpback Barn Collection, and others. He lives in St. Louis and teaches English composition at St. Louis Community College. Andrew, married to a Unitarian Universalist minister, has an adopted dog named Socks.

Gail Goepfert is a poet, amateur photographer, and teacher. Currently, she is an associate editor of RHINO Poetry. Her first chapbook, A Mind on Pain, was released by Finishing Line Press in early 2015. Her publications include Avocet, Ardor, After Hours, Caesura, Crab Orchard Review, Florida English, Jet Fuel
Review, Examined Life Journal, and Room Magazine. Twice she’s been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She’s always had a love of photography. Her photographs appear in print or online at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Olentangy Review, 3Elements Review, and Rattle.

Carolyn Guinzio is a Chicago native and graduate of the Milton Avery School of the Arts at Bard College. A writer and photographer, she currently lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas where she is the editor of Yew: A Journal of Innovative Writing & Images by Women. Her writing and visual work have appeared in Agave, Blackbird, Bomb, The Cortland Review, Conjunctions, Diagram, Drunken Boat, Fiction International, Flyaway, and The New Yorker. She is the author of the award winning debut West Pullman and her second book, Quarry. Her third book, Spoke & Dark, won the A Room of Her Own Foundation’s To the Lighthouse Publication Prize; her fourth book, will be published fall 2016.

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Alex Martello has written for a monthly English newspaper in Italy while obtaining a master’s in political science. He recently interned at a prominent DC think tank. In his field of study and in his writing, Alex is interested in issues of social justice.
**Thomas Matern** is a 2013 graduate of Wilkes University in Wilkes Barre, PA, where he majored in English with a concentration in writing. In addition to a senior capstone project, he has completed two collections of poetry, *Grey Matter* and *Tidal*, both of which were self-published through Blurb.com. He hopes to continue writing poetry as he attempts to balance real world professional commitments with lofty personal daydreams.

**Katie McElhenney** is a full time writer living in Brooklyn, New York. Focusing mainly on middle grade fiction and YA, she took a break to write a short story that actually gave her nightmares. You can find her YA novel *The Sea Thief* on Amazon. Follow her city-loving dog on Twitter @ScrapsMcClane.

**Frank Mundo** is the author of *The Brubury Tales*, a modern version of *The Canterbury Tales* set in Los Angeles just after the 1992 riots. His stories, poetry, and essays have appeared in dozens of journals, magazines, and anthologies in print and online. Frank has a BA in English from UCLA, where he also completed the Creative Writing Program.

**Molly Jo Nelson** is a recent graduate of Drake University with a BFA in musical theatre and a minor in writing. During her studies at Drake, Molly developed and directed two original one-act plays and served as a designer on several other productions. Molly has since completed a tour with Missoula Children’s Theatre as an actor/director and now resides in Des Moines, Iowa where she teaches both public speaking and etiquette and remains active in the local theatre community.
Ellen Noonan is a lecturer in the English Department at Northeastern University in Boston. Her poems have been published in University Reporter, Spectrum, and Beacon Street Review, with work forthcoming in Eunoia Review. In August 2014, she attended the inaugural session of the Ashbery Home School.

Kristin Procter lives and writes north of Boston, Massachusetts. She was born in Canada, but lived in Australia for seven years. She enjoys organizing MOM, which hosts open mics for motherwriters. When not writing, Kristin enjoys swimming and knitting unexpected items for her children, like a largemouth bass balaclava. Her poetry and prose has been included in Mom Egg, Chrysalis, and Zest, as well as in anthologies.

Alec Solomita has published fiction and poetry in Eclectica, The Mississippi Review, Southwest Review, and elsewhere. Most recently, his work has appeared in theNewerYork, Turk’s Head Review, MadHat Lit, and Truck. Several of his poems will be published in the forthcoming Fulcrum: An International Anthology of Poetry and Aesthetics. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Sean Sweeney currently works as a journalist in New York City. He’s covered basketball for the past five years and has been published in SLAM and Dime. His fiction and poetry has been published in Mind Murals. He graduated from the master’s program at S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in 2010. Before that, he received B.A. degrees in both Communications and English from Springfield College.
Ed Tato shares a birthday with blues singer Joanna Carter and radio station KPMC in Bakersfield, but can neither sing nor play a musical instrument. He reads in public regularly and enjoys few things as much as a well-spoken poem, though he’s often vexed by the finer points of poetic meter. He lives, for the moment, in Utica, New York. If you come by, he says to try the Utica greens featuring Utica red pepper. The locals swear by them, and rightfully so. His two poetry collections are available online or in various print journals.

Dennis Trujillo had a twenty year career as a soldier in the US army followed by a fifteen year career as a middle/high school math teacher. His new career is poetry – much more challenging than the previous two.

Monona Wali is a short story writer and novelist, and, in a previous incarnation, a documentary filmmaker and screenwriter. Her debut novel, My Blue Skin Lover, was published in the spring of 2014. Her stories have been published in The Santa Monica Review, Catamaran, A Journal of South Asian American Literature, and other literary journals. She was the winner of the 2011 Wordstock Short Story Contest judged by Aimee Bender. Monona is currently working on a collection of linked short stories about an Indian family. She teaches creative writing and literature at Santa Monica College and Antioch University and volunteers with InsideOut Writers, an organization that offers writing classes for incarcerated youth. Monona was born in Benares, India and immigrated to the US with her family as a young child.
Douglas Weissman is a graduate of University of San Francisco MFA program in Creative Writing. He enjoys the lyrical and the absurd, the gutter punk and the highfalutin’, especially when a capable someone is able to mix the oxymoronic styles and/or meanings.

Fabiola Werlang multitasks as a writer, translator, copy editor, actress, trustworthy friend, dedicated daughter, loving wife, and devoted mother of five cats. Born and raised in Brazil, she’s been a proud resident of Chicago since 2013. Her first book, The Organizing Girl, will be released in August by the Brazilian publishing house Peirópolis.

J. Alan Whiteside explores the interplay of content and design elements, such as color, line, shape, and texture. He focuses on details and abstractions that present as ordinary subjects; yet he reveals them as “treasures of visual engagement.” Whiteside recently won the grand prize in the State Historical Society of North Dakota 2012 Photo Contest. One photo is the cover art for a recently published book of short stories called Shadows of Men (Queen’s Ferry Press) and another image was selected for the juried exhibition Windows and Mirrors at PhotoPlace Gallery in Middlebury, Vermont. His images have been published in Forces Literary Journal, Frisco STYLE Magazine, and Floorboard Review. Five of Alan’s photos of the Dallas, Texas Fair Park were purchased by the Dallas Omni Convention Center Hotel for conference rooms and several other Dallas-related photos are on permanent display in the Dallas mayor’s office.
Lauren Yates is a Pushcart-nominated poet who is currently based in Philadelphia. Her writing has appeared in *Nerve*, *XOJane*, *FRiGG*, *Umbrella Factory*, *Softblow*, and *Melusine*. Lauren is also a poetry editor at *Kinfolks Quarterly* and a member of The Mission Statement Poetry Collective. She is currently a Poet in Residence with the Leonard Pearlstein Gallery at Drexel University. Aside from poetry, Lauren enjoys belly dancing, baking quiche, and pontificating on the merits of tentacle erotica. For more information, visit http://laurentyates.com.


Due July 31, 2015

Submission due dates are October 31, January 31, April 30, and July 31, for issues forthcoming January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one out of the three elements.

For multiple submissions, fiction is capped at no more than two stories per submission period. Poems are limited to five per submission period. In the event your material is accepted in another publication, we request that you withdraw your submission from 3Elements Review should you decide to publish your piece elsewhere.

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Mikaela Shea is in her thesis hours of her MFA at Columbia College Chicago and was recently a writer-in-residence at Ragdale Foundation. She has published stories in Midwestern Gothic, Copperfield Review, Waypoints Magazine, Foliate Oak, Hypertext Magazine, Paragraph Planet, Vagina: The Zine, Columbia College's annual Story Week Reader, as well as a children’s book at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Mikaela is currently writing a novel and is Editor-in-Chief of 3Elements Review. www.mikaelashea.com.

C.J. Matthews is a writing teacher from Des Moines, Iowa. She adores traveling, elegant food, bold red wine, and her two little dogs, Hercules and Hucklebee. Her recent work can be read in Spoilage Magazine, Cahoodaloodaling, and the Kind of a Hurricane Press anthology In Gilded Frame.

Parker Stockman is a writer, college writing instructor, and storyteller. He tells personal narratives with 2nd Story in Chicago, a monthly live literature event, and is featured on their website. Currently finishing his thesis for his MFA in Creative Writing—Fiction at Columbia College Chicago, he is at work on a novel. He writes a blog for his school’s program and works as a writing tutor. Parker plays rugby with and is the Vice President of Recruiting for the Chicago Dragons Rugby Football Club. He is excited to be part of the 3Elements family and hopes you enjoy the journal as much as he enjoys working on it.
Marlon Fowler is a Des Moines–based designer and web developer for 3Elements Review. He received his bachelor’s degree in Journalism with a major in Advertising from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Marlon enjoys all things technology, making websites “do things,” running, reading nonfiction, sports, movies, video games, and Chicago food. He would really like to learn PHP and get back to Paris. You can check out Marlon’s portfolio at www.marlonfowler.com.

Carol Roh Spaulding is co–author, with Kay Fenton Smith, of Zakery’s Bridge: Children’s Journeys From Around the World to Iowa (2011). A Professor of English at Drake University, Spaulding teaches courses in writing and American literature. She is the author of several award–winning short stories, including a Pushcart Prize, best story of the year in Ploughshares, the Glimmer Train Fiction Open, and the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction. Her new novel, Helen Button, tells the story of avant–garde writer Gertrude Stein and her life in Central France during World War II. Spaulding is also director of the newly–established Drake University Community Press. The Press produces attractive full–color, illustrated editions serving a community readership while providing students with practical knowledge of book editing and production using a cross–disciplinary and collaborative focus. She lives in Des Moines, IA with her husband, Tim, and son Jonah.
Kelly Roberts received a BA in English from the University of Iowa. After years of writing creative nonfiction, she decided to give fiction a go. Kelly lives in Iowa with her adoring husband, clever daughter and rescued wire fox terrier. By day she works in Human Resources, which provides her with more writing material than she could ever hope for. Cooking, reading and popping bubble wrap—one bubble, one row at a time—are her passions. Her work has appeared in Lunch Ticket.

Megan Collins received an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She teaches creative writing at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, as well as literature at Central Connecticut State University. Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including Compose, Linebreak, Off the Coast, and Rattle. When not writing or teaching, Megan enjoys reading, watching The Ellen DeGeneres Show, collecting miniature items, eating cupcakes, going on Netflix binges, and spending time with her husband, Marc, and her golden retriever, Maisy. Check out Megan’s work on her website, megan-collins.com.
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