



Issue 8

PENSIVE

A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts

Founded in 2020, *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts* is published by the Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service (CSDS) at Northeastern University, a global research university in Boston, Massachusetts, USA with a campus network stretching from London to Vancouver.

Pensive publishes work that deepens the inward life; expresses a range of religious/spiritual/humanist experiences and perspectives; envisions a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world; advances dialogue across difference; and challenges structural oppression in all its forms.

*Pensive: A Global Journal
of Spirituality & the Arts*

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Cover Art: *Conducting the Clouds*
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Northeastern University
Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service

We welcome you warmly to the eighth issue of *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts*. As you turn these pages, wherever you are in your journey as a reader, creator, or spiritual seeker, we embrace you as members of the *Pensive* community. This space is crafted for your exploration, and this issue is our heartfelt offering to you. Let the words and images resonate with you, providing challenge, inspiration, and solace for your spirit, along with the courage to navigate the path ahead.

For each issue of *Pensive*, we read thousands of submissions from around the globe, never knowing quite what to expect. We relish the works of emerging voices, alongside acclaimed writers and artists. Our editorial process is one of discovery, dialogue, and sometimes vigorous debate. We hope to form an experience of authentic community, so rare in our world today.

In this issue, we proudly present offerings from an exceptionally diverse group of contributors, each speaking the truths they've encountered. Taken together, these pieces form a tapestry of interweaving themes. Among these themes are the practices of mindfulness and contemplation; the spirit of gratitude; the mystery of family, relationships, and love; experiences of grief and loss, the diversities (and commonalities) of religious, spiritual, and humanist experiences; the shared vision of peace and justice in times of war and horrific suffering; and, finally, our spiritual engagement with the natural world. With these themes in mind, and in the face of the global tragedies we are witnessing, we invite you to discover sources of healing and hope, for as one of our authors observes, "The world aches for the gentle wisdom of morning light and a day that opens full of hope."

As we publish this issue in Spring 2024, we want to amplify voices that need to be heard and raise awareness of suffering too long overlooked by those of us who are privileged or afraid to engage. We are surrounded by horrors, witnessing climate catastrophes, creeping autocracy, and genocides that displace millions of innocent lives. As artists, learners, and agents of change, we are challenged to reflect on how to best turn our sorrow and outrage into action. Core to *Pensive's* mission is challenging structural oppression, and expanding our collective consciousness of oppressive systems fueled by nationalism, racism, and unbridled capitalism. We believe these realities must be acknowledged in our own artistic and spiritual spaces. The work for change is global, but it begins with the individual's willingness to seek liberation within their communities and beyond.

This journal is one small step toward building a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. With our global online readership, our issues reach many communities, where we hope they are carefully considered. Differences have existed since the beginning of humanity, while dialogue is all too rare in today's polarized world. The arts are a means of dialogue and action. We hope *Pensive* sparks meaningful conversations. Please enjoy this issue and let it serve as a bridge to connect with others and reflect together.

With heartfelt gratitude - and warm wishes of love, hope, and strength to all,

The Pensive Editorial Board

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Donna Baier Stein

Snippets from Dream Group, II

You begin with words on a grid.
A circle. Things being metabolized.
This leads to compassion, beauty,
a possible kidnapping.
There are books,
one of whose words is **Joy**.
Remember that whether
you feel full or empty
in the suit that is your body,
Presence is here
once you remove the cap.
A shaman may surprise you,
give you a gift. Words already fill
many pages, rising from other grids,
but you can make do with a scrap
of paper so long as it is blank.
It's fine if you don't have a ticket;
you can buy one on board.
There is much more
whether or not you remember.

Carson Cawthon

Starve the Flesh

I am twenty years old today
and I want a chocolate cake,

with the boldness to pick a fry off my boyfriend's plate,
and the audacity to tell my hairdresser I hate my haircut
instead of crying in the car.

But more than anything, I want to stop
fearing the depth of my desire.

I'm so tired of believing
it's impolite to be hungry.

I'm no hedonist,
just a girl with an empty stomach
and a mouth choked in prayer,
breathing and pleading,
"I shall not want."

Kelsey D. Mahaffey

The Way Out is Always In

You'll remember me.

Steady now—

find the heartbeat first.

It's the same as yours.

Tread lightly. Your only job
is to place one foot
in front of the other.

The path is there. Feel it?

Move forward and breathe.

When you are hungry, eat.

When you are thirsty, drink.

When you need forgiveness,
ask. All will be provided.

You've forgotten. Rise and fall
your feet, your lungs—
there, then there.

You have nothing

to fear. Be grateful, and do not worry
with walks of others.

Keep to the silent way.

When you lose the path,
listen. Like a womb,

the center is always calling.
There will be obstacles.
Say yes.

Palms open & toes spread,
let them come—
darkness and light.

The shadows simply rise
when you turn away from the sun.
Remember? Stillness speaks
if you let it. The winds will leap to
cradle your face leaving you

empty as a newborn. Rest. Now,
show others.
You were never anything less than
light.

Sophia Lisa Salazar

Pirouette

Turning lessons from a former ballerina.

Well, maybe that's overstating it.

I was a ballerina from the ages of four through fifteen.

Regardless, I did learn how to turn or, in the nomenclature of the ballet world, pirouette. To spin constantly en pointe.

Stand tall, lift the leg, arm out, place the other leg behind and bent at the knee, turned out at a right angle, then spin. At the same time, turn the head and spot a distant mark as a destination. All performed in one fluid movement.

Again.

Turn your head, mark your spot, focus. Right arm and right leg reach out with a lift then land en pointe. Lift your left leg behind you, bend at the knee, turn at a right angle to the body and spin. Your head and neck spin at the same time, snapping around, eyes landing on that same distant spot, maintaining your balance and alignment.

Again.

A perfect pirouette.

And isn't that the way we move forward?

First, we spot a distant goal, our eyes, our head, our neck engaged. One side, our better side, reaches out towards that distant future, then our weaker self comes along, a tad resistant, at right angles and bent. We throw ourselves around with enough centrifugal force to twist the body's motion to its opposite, our head and neck snapping our body back around, advancing us towards our destination.

To turn, to pirouette, is to move forward in circles, like the earth spins around the sun: the earth's gaze constant yet ever-spinning, seemingly advancing yet really spinning in a lazy ellipse, waxing and waning around the sun.

And the moon follows its own journey. Its eyes focused on the earth, revolving through its phases to never land on its destination, spinning helplessly in a never-ending loop, never to land on earth's distant shores. Earth and moon in a frustrated, endless loop of unrequited yearning: each to always see its destination only to never reach its desire. Gravity eclipses all other desires to become a single, driving force.

A galaxy of pirouetting planets spinning helplessly around their unattainable desire. Like idolators before their distant, unmoved god, who is consumed with its own self-feeding energy. All movement, all energy, burnt in an effort to reach an unreachable desire.

But maybe that isn't true.

Maybe at one time the sun flung out its own leg and its own arm and threw its head around with such force that parts of the sun broke free and pieces of itself came into being: casting out Earth, moon and planets. The sun pirouetted and became a galaxy. The planets aren't looking forward towards the sun; but back whence they came.

With time will the gravitational pull to our older, mothered selves become weaker?
Will the trajectory of our orbits loosen as gravity lessens?
Will we then break free from this helpless pirouette to become our own
self-emolliating star, consumed by our own desires to become a black hole, falling
within ourselves, self-consumed?

I cannot believe that we all face self-destruction, alone, unfulfilled.

What is our destination? To turn madly in never-ending loops?

Or will the loops become slower, straighter, longer, until we stop spinning all
together, floating in a sea of tranquility, enveloped in space, serene, still, pulsing
with the rhythmic thrum of life, side by side with other stilled planets sparkling in
a sea of stars?

Heavenly bodies, serene, still, constant, with a steady, burning blue glow.

All our stars pulsing with an inner beat in synchrony with the sun.

Alive. Alone. Together.

Susan Jackson

The Car Window

I didn't want to be the one
who left the car window open
last night. As temperatures dropped
to near freezing (the way they do
in the mountains)
a car in the driveway could have been
alluring to an animal agile enough
to climb in through that window.

You're on edge my husband
told me. But the more precarious
the world feels the more the need
to be precise in the measurement
of all things: coffee beans
with a spoon. A timer for
the grinder's spin to create
the perfect texture somewhere
between powder, sand and dust.
The purity of the water, the warmth
of the milk. It's all just mapping
infinity really.

Who is it who looks like me
watching me never knowing
what to do next. But we're all
just witnesses, right? We try
to believe the small stories
of our experience matter,
the open car window,
the lost baby.
That's why I write.

Jane Salisbury

Finding a prayer

I am in the soup, as we all are. The world is frayed. Everything is scrappy and dirty and lost. People I love have been sick and run ragged, and I have so little to give that can help them. Too many friends have left this earth before their time. I fear for myself, too, living with an undiagnosed daily difficulty with breathing. Though I am looking out for the moment into a garden of spring leaves, four old roses budding in a riot of green, a robust oakleaf hydrangea, all the hardy geraniums and hellebores and daphne and hosta trumpeting their presence, the rosemary at the study window so excessively hearty that I must hack it back, the Labrador violets running riot, all alive and alive with perfection and cells and growing, though this is all mine, I am looking for more, more consolation, more assistance, more peace.

“Find a prayer,” my friend Janine said. “And chant it every day many times. I do, walking on the treadmill, boxing at the gym, walking the dog. Memorize it and recite it many times. It worked for me.” She could see that I was on the struggle bus. What worked for my friend, after a lifetime of choosing one spiritual path after another, was this, this Buddhist vow, chanted over and over. In part, it reads:

I vow to affirm what is:
If there's cost, I choose to pay.
If there's need, I choose to give.
If there's pain, I choose to feel.
If there's sorrow, I choose to grieve.

When burning, I choose heat.
When calm, I choose peace.
When starving, I choose hunger.
When happy, I choose joy.
Whom I encounter, I choose to meet.
What I shoulder, I choose to bear.
When it's my birth, I choose to live.
When it's my death, I choose to die.
Where this takes me, I choose to go.
Being with what is, I respond to what is.

This practice brought an end to her mental suffering, decades of psychotherapy, a stint here or there in the hospital. Buddhism is what she relies on, in part, to carry her through living with Parkinson's, a disease she is too young to have. She told me to find a prayer.

I search partly because I want to live peacefully with time and with age. I turn death over in my mind every day: what I will lose and what my own people will lose and what will happen to all the dross and books and papers and too much of everything in this house, and how I should leave a clean and tidy exit. What incantation or praise or petition can carry me through that? I have heard an idea many times in slightly different forms: there are really only two prayers, "help!" and "thank you." But among even just those two, there are thousands and thousands. Which is the one I need, to repeat at the side of a grieving friend or to rock my grandson to sleep or indeed, to soothe me in the grocery store and the car and walking on the bluff in the early morning and while I chop the onions and wash the dishes and fold the towels?

First I consider the guardian angel prayer, one that every Catholic child knows, from the pajama years:

Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here,
Ever this day be at my side, to light, to guard, to rule, to guide.

What would be wrong with heading straight back to the very beginning of prayer, the first one I knew? It is pretty good, after all. I said it thousands of times with my two brothers when we were young children. We knelt in our pajamas, scuffing into the front bedroom in our Dr. Dentons, and rattled off a few things, starting with the prayer of the guardian angel and ending with a short recitation of

blessings for everyone in our family. Unlike many Irish Catholic families, it was a short list: two aunts, two uncles, seven cousins, four grandparents. But like the Pledge of Allegiance and the Preamble to the Constitution, though I knew the guardian angel prayer by heart, I never stopped to consider it. That angel, that guardian dear, that angel is committed by God's love to be with me, to do that angelic job, to be with me. Whether or not I believe there are angels does not matter. The idea that there is a big invisible winged person next to me, who has been commissioned to protect me, is powerful, especially for a small child. No child really understands the world, and for that matter, neither does any adult, so it is a fine idea that you are assigned a guide just for being alive.

When I was older, in the valley of despond in adolescence, I was reading, as was everyone else, *Franny and Zooey*, one of J.D. Salinger's novels about the precocious and melancholy Glass children. Franny found refuge in the Jesus Prayer, which echoed the kind of phrasing I heard as a child. The word "sinner" sets many people's teeth on edge, but not mine. The Jesus Prayer is short, just one sentence, and like a mantra:

Lord Jesus Christ,
have mercy on me,
a sinner!

I can give in to the idea that I am a sinner, that I can lay aside the hope that perfection is even remotely possible. The mind is eased to read and to think and even to say those words quietly. It would not ease everyone's mind, especially if one had been harangued painfully and cruelly about sin as a child. But I was not.

However, maybe because the times are so confounding, I need words that are more mysterious, more contrary, more contradictory, less formulaic, exasperated and haunted as I am. I hunt around.

Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century Benedictine composer, writer, musician and scientist, finds me, as she does many women like me, women hanging on by our fingernails to Catholicism, looking for good and beauty in the world. Her prayer is this:

I, God, am in your midst.

Whoever knows me can never fall,
Not in the heights,
Not in the depths,
Nor in the breadths,
For I am love,

Which the vast expanses of evil
Can never still.

It is not unlike the acceptance of all things in the Buddhist chant which steadies my friend. Hildegard evokes a world of wholeness, where all is one, all is to be accepted, where love is everywhere, in the form of God, or vice versa, or whatever. I can memorize this in a minute or two and never forget it, but I must say the word “evil” in each repetition. Do I want that word on my lips every few seconds? Maybe I only want goodness.

In my searching through books of prayer and old journals and scraps of paper in my desk, I kept running across this one, the prayer of Saint Ephrem, translated variously, but always attributed to this 4th Century monk, who is, unusually, venerated in a wide swath of Christian traditions, east, west, high and low, and particularly in the Lenten season.

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me a spirit of despondency, sloth, love of money, and idle talk.

But give to me, your servant, a spirit of sober-mindedness, humility, patience, and love.

Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother, since you are blessed to the ages. Amen.

What appeals about this prayer, and why it is a traditional prayer for many, I think, is the simple appeal to God to make me better. Make me kind. Take away my faults. Come on, Lord and Master of my life, take it all away and give me all the good stuff. Amen already. The Lord and King and Master stuff is not fashionable or feminist now, but the rest is a model for living. Perhaps a scintilla of rewriting and it will be just right.

I have a friend of more than forty years, who has had more than her share of trouble in the last few years, cancer and more cancer and surgery and more surgery and fear upon fear. Joan lives alone, but has a great many friends, a devoted daughter and two small grandchildren and has done hard work as a public guardian and social worker for years. We share the same silly, unsophisticated sense of humor and can get hysterical within two minutes of meeting up; in the same way, we can fall almost immediately into a ponderous and tearful conversation about death and life and the soul. Sometimes we go directly from one of these states to the other in the space of seconds. In one of these roller coaster chats, my friend recited this prayer to me, which was her mantra during one particularly frightening recent hospital stay.

May you be held in
compassion
May your pains and
sorrows be eased
And may you be at
peace.

She told me that she had been planning her own funeral there in the hospital. And that this prayer was in it. I note that it is about “you”, all of you, from someone, Someone, anyone, who wishes for your sorrows to be eased, for you to be at peace. “May” is the word that steers us towards a time of compassion, no pain, and peace. She was imagining wishing this upon those of us gathered at her funeral, conferring this “may” from beyond the grave.

I am drawn to any poem or prayer or chant or song that begins “May...”. When I was twenty-four, I left the world I had known, the familiar Pacific Northwest and went to live in a small village in western Alaska, in the Yukon River delta, hundreds of miles from the nearest road. I lived there for two years, working as the librarian in a boarding school for the mostly Yup’ik students who, if they wanted to attend high school, had to board (most of the villages did not have high schools in those days). I learned something about their lives, but much of it remained a mystery. Yup’ik people are quiet, hard-working, and able to see things invisible to outsiders, like how to find in a white landscape, traveling on a frozen river, exactly where the trail to the next village forks, or where the Arctic fox is running along on the snow-covered tundra. I still keep in sporadic touch

with two students I knew there, students who are now gray-haired themselves and surrounded by grandchildren. What I saw and still admire was their close observation of the world, the ice, the snow, the wind, the children, the shore and the water. And the need not to be afraid, because there is too much that is fearsome.

One day, I was poking around in the school library where I worked and ran across a slim book of Yup'ik poems. Perhaps the word "Eskimo" was used to describe some of these poems then, a word which lumped distinct ethnic groups together and is seldom used now. My library was small, but along one side it was all tall windows which looked out on the airstrip and the Andreafsky River and beyond it, on hundreds of miles of tundra. The endlessness was like a drink of water to me, like breathing freely.

I stood there reading those poems, which read like prayers to me, and something struck me that has stayed with me in the forty years since. I wrote these two down in the commonplace book I kept, where I used to handwrite every poem, passage or prayer that I wanted to keep. I read them in the still-adolescent rounded hand of the twenty-four-old girl I was then, in bright blue ink.

The first is this prayer, a gentle plea, beginning "May...", which captures me. I am accompanied by my own breathing, reminded that a song comes from my own breath and is available to me, when I am afraid or worried.

May my song healingly
Breathe through my throat.
May my little song
Dispel from my soul
My great worries.

And the other is this grateful rumination, to humble me in the face of the greatness, not just of the world, but of the whole universe:

And I think over again
My small adventures
When with a shore wind I
drifted out
In my kayak
And thought I was in danger.
My fears,

Those small ones
That I thought so big
For all the vital things
I had to get and reach.
And yet, there is only
One great thing:
To live to see in huts and on journeys
The great day that dawns,
And the light that fills the
world.

When I think of the rising waters and the warm winters and the typhoon that just last spring washed away a few of the coastal villages where some of our students lived, I find these poems. I evoke them for my long-ago friends to keep fear away, or at least to name it. Our worries and our journeys are so small, and the light will fill the world as the Arctic winter wanes. We small people in a vast world need these simple cadences and this reminder of our place in the cosmos. I have held these Yup'ik words in my mind, as prayers, as chants, as whistling in the dark, longer than any others. They step beyond any definition of a deity or a religion. There is no need for all that. Now I need only my song, my breath, and the light filling the world.

When I lived in Alaska, I walked beside the Andreafsky River, not far from where it meets the mighty Yukon River. For years now, I have walked along the bluff above the Willamette River, not very far from where it meets the Columbia River. Walking down the road towards the place where the two rivers meet, my little song will dispel from my soul my great worries.



Jim Ross

Stained glass window (one of two) by Victor Wolf Deniau in Chapel of St. Roch, Noailhac

Donald Mace Williams

Entrance

Whoever you are: When evening comes, step out
of your room there, in which you know all things;
just before the Distance lies your house:

Whoever you are.

And with your tired eyes, which can barely free
themselves from the much-trodden threshold there,
you gradually raise up a dark tree
and place it near to heaven: alone and spare.

And you have made the world. And great it is,
and like a word that in the hush ripens on.

And as your purpose comprehends its mind,
your eye with gentle love shall set it loose . . .

Bruce Baker

eat slowly she said

eat slowly she said
so I turned away
from the bobbing heads shouting BREAKING NEWS
to consider the sleek shiny salmon soaring upstream through rushing waters
now finely sliced and draping my bagel
with a splash of capers and onions

Phocas

The Breeze That Makes Us Sing

I walk drunkenly among the waving wild flowers at the mercy of a breeze and feel almost whole except that I have not yet turned into living water though some streaking ribbons of it poured from my face this morning in my own helpless tears and you best be naked now, little hidden bird singing from above, not from wantonness or any pang of lust but because the Lord loves you exactly as you are, which is maybe why a runny nose is my one true nature and destiny or maybe reeling dance partner of this same wafting of breeze that touches my whole body as if to marry me with stars as I am a middle-aged bride with a three-day beard and tendonitis in both elbows from too much casting but I am fishing even now for eternity in these parabolae of verse or maybe just one long delirious sentence that feels its way in the lovely dark of not-knowing and a vast mystery that's just another cool breeze and another so much it's almost unbearable and yet another like a sucker punch whose impact is softer than a kiss on the beloved's forehead before dying or after the latest miracle of lovemaking and what buds and blossoms will I gather here to place ever so delicately over my right ear like a teenage girl or even woven into my thinning hair circa the gobsmacked moment, stunned anew and always by the love of one woman and the shamelessness of men as W. S. Merwin once wrote and one does not talk of such things but remains in a blessed state of dumbfoundness dripping like a nearly lightning struck tree after a thunderstorm and a fish rising in a silver stream half a childhood away where I went once to weep in gratitude and the stream smiled

back at me to somehow let me know that even a clod like me is loved though my sins are legion and are stacking up even now in a dismal warehouse with forklifts racing around to place them in toppling droves as vast as empty plane hangers but still I walk and stumble among the flowers who know what offering and surrender are and how good it is to lilt and to swoon under the stark mercies of the sky and a thousand other innocent virtues of which I sense but somehow cannot put into words and the tears keep falling, they keep rolling along and abiding as if to turn me into a human river of praise and lament and a no-look pass down the court and diagonally, sideways across and maybe, just maybe little hidden singing bird we are brother and sister after all, broken creatures looking for our dented harmonicas among the waving ferns turning to golden now at the end of summer and always that one cricket chirping at twilight near the woodpile and the memories of growing up on the Plains where there was nothing but wind and sky and the shattering, terrifying sense that God is everywhere, that He is, She is, They are the wind and the little hidden bird and even the arthritic fingers that pen these words and I am happy and thrilled to walk thus drunkenly among the wild flowers for they teach me how to wave and open my arms to everyone and everything or is it, can it be, that there is no space between us, that all of us are one, that all of us are holding hands at a rock concert with no intention of going further, just holding hands with a stranger as we jump around singing, as we move our feet to dance, as we race down a hallway in second grade or in a wheelchair in a retirement home, that we still have a giddy in our step, a moonwalk, the ability and willingness to kiss the ground a few thousand ways like Rumi once wrote of, that we are kissing even now the miraculous spine of the one we love the most who lies sleeping naked beside us, that this is a piano, too, of great romantic melody and silly beauty, that our very fingertips are meant to graze those we love with utter adoration and amazement as our breath is taken away for a moment that she is next to me, that he is next to me, that the sky is next to me and Lake Michigan, that you can even write it down with the same fingers that traced her spine rung by precious rung, that we are moving even now under a tunnel of the most astonishing trees that seem to droop and stagger from wonder, that their very leaves are cheering us on as we race down the winding road with the top down singing silly love songs like Paul did back in the day, that there is a glass of wine waiting for us when we arrive whenever and wherever we arrive though I hope there's a little northern Michigan in it and a few cherries, that I will go out and buy you whatever tube of lipstick you want or a wiffle ball to play

catch, that our very breath is like the slow moving wings or a heron or the blur of a hummingbird at the feeder, that we must always and mercifully just go to where love bids us, that we have no clue where that it is and it doesn't matter, that we are an entire forest when we love like that, that we are a forest now, that we finally know how to touch and hold beautiful things, that none of it will ever be taken for granted again, that we are breeze-worthy and dying even now into the radiance of an awe of every human face and that even the clouds are full of mercy before they give quiet, almost silent way to a gentle rain that falls on us even now in so many endless drops of grace.

Dick Westheimer

You and the Oak Speak in Words I Can't Understand

for Debbie and the 300 year old oak

The oak sits across our property line
on the border of our neighbor's field.
It's tagged with hot pink tape
tied to a surveyor's stake marked "clearing line."
We have seen these words before,
down the road at the old Caswell place,
now sold, where the county made way
for a sewer line. They slashed and chipped
and hauled away shaggy hickories
and tulip poplars tall as the stars (my kids said).

We grieved for those old ones
and now these: the oak and her sisters,
towering over the fence row—
gods and goddesses of the fields and forest
and the path you walk every day.

Today, you kneel, lean your ear
to her furrowed bark, and listen:
You hear the sweetness flow down
from leaves a hundred feet above.
You hear the whispers of the sisters:
the nearby oak and beech, their roots
beneath in subterranean embrace.
You hear the dozer tracks clack

and I hear you cry, stand, arms aloft
like the limbs above as you give thanks
in words known only to you and the tree.

Robbie Gamble

Knead

In my mother's hands
these are the elements:
flour, water, yeast, salt
all else is embellishment.
How many loaves in a lifetime
of baking with these hands
too twisted now to knead any more,
but I learned well at her side:
stretch, fold, press, turn:
elemental dance of hands and dough,
over and over and over and dust
the countertop with flour, keep
dough from sticking, the rhythm
that rocked from her heels up hips
into her shoulders and down
through forearms into capable
hands, full weight of her body
leaning into this living substance
becoming elastic, becoming
leavened, and a pinch should feel
as firm as an earlobe, soft
as a toddler cheek, growing
into loaf, into food, into staff
of life, and she is growing ancient,
growing stiff and I have taken
over at the countertop
to stretch, fold, press, turn
over and over and over and teach
my children who are growing too,

keep the tradition alive, the embodied
rhythm of generations, to knead
this dough from our heels on up
through our hands into the promise
of bread, the promise
to feed each other,
need each other.

Pip Ridley

Long Love

What does it mean to love someone so long
That you experience their gaze in every shade?
Knowing the subtleties of each eye-movement
You could dance to them
Moving closer together, then further away
In a shimmy step, shimmy sway

Understanding the complexities of each sigh
You could write music to them
You mimic their musicality
And live their reality
Sometimes even in hiding, behind the sofa

What does it mean to experience their gaze in every shade?
You live in their shade and are happy in it
You shade them in turn
And you are their sun, when called upon
Even un-summoned
Rising always in the East, setting always in the West
Dependable and dependent
Indispensable yet independent
To illuminate their worst and their best

What does it mean to know their underbelly and their overarm
Intimately?
To drown in their charm
Immediately?
Even whilst rolling your eyes at it

What does it take to know their myriad ways?
To observe them in every phase?
The moon waxes and wanes
You are locked in a tidal embrace

How does it feel to fill your days with their face?
With their voice
Their rhythms, like your own heartbeat
Measure out the time which exists between you
Your own dimension
A vortex, where all is change
Yet nothing changes
Day by day, week by week, year by year
Still here

What does it take to fill a house with love?
Fill it until the windows break
And you say, "Who needs windows?
Let the rain in, because we have love
Let the sun in, because we have love
Let the clouds in and let the doubt in, because we have love
Let the others in, let them all in, let everyone in, because this house is full of love."

Holly Payne-Strange

Two Sunflowers

The ground was uneven,
as I sauntered through the sunflower field,
Happy to be lost for a while in its soft,
Repetitive beauty.
Earth sings with a bumblebee hum,
A smile of time and something more.

My wife is transitioning from male to female.
She smiles with a budding pride
As she tries on dresses,
And embraces a new name.
Her voice is changing too,
A veneration of discovery.

It's so nice
To see beautiful things
Grow.

Sri Lal

Brief Thread

This life, a brief thread
to string moments

like pearls or trinkets.
With a last breath,

we can count
nothing as our own.

Why measure now
the weight of loss, gain,

praise, or blame—
no more than rice

to be nibbled at by rats.
The wind is strong today.

The departure of any love
is to be expected. Still,

the sudden flight of the *kokila*
shakes the fronds of the *amla* tree,

her fruit bitter when ripe.
How long will you stay

so far from me? I do not know
how many times I have rubbed

the sandalwood beads of this *mala*
and whispered your sweet name.

Caleb Coy

A Forthright Account of a Brown Dog's Repercussions On the Heart

I don't expect anybody to fully believe the account of the brown dog and how it came to be in my life. I have always had a sour temperament, so it goes against my nature to wax sentimental about a canine. Even more than people, I hated critters of every kind. I could not warm up to their furry hides for the life of me. It was a pinching satisfaction for me to spend time alone more often than not, and the gnawing relief granted from my isolation only served to bring out the most annoying traits in any living thing. To those who owned domesticated pets, and therefore aggravated my allergies to the fiercest degree, I had the bitterest regard. Otherwise I considered myself a true gentleman owing little to a frivolous and saccharine society.

I lived to be in my thirties without a wife, or even an amiable relationship that could lead to me having one. Only one woman ever overlooked my disposition enough to take a liking to me, but her fondness was not returned. It wasn't because of her parakeets, her beta fish, her guinea pigs, or even her cat that I gave the woman no chance. She lived down the road and her pestering at my single life slowly evolved into what some might call a friendship. She had a dark brown mutt that troubled me from the start.

This dog—Po, she called him—was the most hideous thing that man had ever laid eyes on. But in the dog's defense, this woman constantly reminded me of the old maxim of the dog's friendship to mankind, allowing me to interpret the

word “friend” in the broadest of terms. So she believed that their sole purpose, hunting and sniffing being parenthetical, was to emulate the companionship of humans as a gift from the God.

Po was my bane. When his owner would come around, the dog would leap on me with both tongue and tail wagging, pressing its muddy paws on my pants with insensible passion. He did this when he was not christening my belongings with his own urine.

The drama played out for months as the woman, menagerie and all, became more affectionate towards me. Po himself must have known how easily irritated I could become, as every time he saw me he leaped on me with more fervor, pushing me to threaten him with a kick in the stomach. That woman only felt entertained by these exchanges, and found somewhere in her the nerve to find my frustrations adorable. I could not stand the mutt, yet for some unknown reason could never find it in myself to strangle it. The more I drank alone in the house, the more I would imagine ways to put the dog down. But alas, I am no monster.

I was forced to pass by her house one day and noticed that Po had not run up to greet me, although I had expected him to.

Returning from a walk around the neighborhood one day, I found Po in my garden, lying with his large head sunk over his dirty paws, as if waiting to take a picture of my reaction to my uprooted cabbages. I took hold of his back fur, snatching him up with one hand, touching him for the first time. Rather than growl or snarl as I expected him to, he gave a feeble yelp and squirmed. I dropped the dog and it took flight through the yard down the sidewalk. I instantly chased the thing down the walk, every fiber of my body bent on bringing vengeance upon his furry hide.

A smashing noise like a hundred cannons resounded behind me, and drove a wave of heat against my back, knocking me to the ground. There was no reason for this to happen, for my world to erupt in fire so quickly. Po himself leaped and squealed, turning around completely as the explosion echoed down the neighborhood. I lifted my head and turned around. A smoking right angle of charred wall stood among the flaming rubble where once my house.

Through some fluke or another, my house had exploded. There was no other word for it. Events like these do not simply happen in our lives and are inexcusably concocted, yet here I stood, yards away from half my former domicile.

The only fault had to be on the dog.

I brought myself to stand and got hold of the mutt around his waist with both

hands. As I glared into his eyes, Po, without hesitation, let out another whelp, one that unmistakably sounded like my name being called out. Its glazed eyes reflecting my own as I grasped at the reality that I had just lost my entire house. Despite having been drowned in drinking for the day, I was struck with an abrupt state of sobriety. I was now staring at the eyes and snout of the sole creature responsible for drawing me away from my own obliteration. I had retained so much hatred over the years that at first I had an itch to kick the brown dog, and yet the feeling of infuriation gave over to mere frustration. And thereafter, staring into the gaze of the pup in the aftermath of the explosion, a spark of pity erupted within me, so much that in that moment I empathized with the suffering of all creatures, above and below. This was more shocking than the combustion moments before, and it quickly receded into the aspiring smoke.

After the mysterious accident, which turned out to be due to a gas leak within my house, I became even more embittered toward anyone who still had shelter, companions, friendship—all things pleasant. I was adamant in my refusal to be comforted. I didn't need any help. I found myself a new house, and tried to return to my old lifestyle. I drank, I watched television, I woke myself up snoring at night. Nobody could lecture me if I didn't let them in.

For what reason would a man turn away something good, other than for the very reason that due to past experiences he becomes pessimistic—yes, even antagonistic—towards any altruistic behavior directed towards him? Such was the prevailing attitude in my life not only before the incident, but afterwards as well. Despite that primal inclination to respond warmly to the kindness of another, I had built up within me, as men sometimes do, a hardness of the heart that directed all my ways. And so when any kind soul approached me offering some kind of counsel or aid in my misfortune, I turned them away with insensitive language perhaps not meant for the more tender of heart. Yet I acknowledge that there was a longing to reach out and connect with someone else, one that crept up every so often, although I had always been able to extinguish it with drink. To embrace something living—to accept the gift of compassion for its own sake—this foreign yearning only grew since I had stared into the dog's eyes and heard it say my name. I tried to have patience with myself as I began to acquire this latent sensitivity.

Days after the explosion, I went to the house to inspect the remains. What was left of the structure appeared as nothing more than charred black fragments, and a wide radius of burned chunks of furniture sat around a mound of black and

grey ash. A gust of wind stirred the topmost layer of residue into my eyes, and I staggered back, stumbling until I tripped and fell into a heap of rubble. I stood up and wiped the ashes from my eyes, rubbing them profusely, compounding the stinging. I cursed as tears gushed out of my eyes to wash out the sandy powder.

When I finally opened my eyes, before me was the distorted shape of my garden at my feet, gray ashes having settled on the uprooted vegetables. Among the mess, some of which had been attributed to Po messing about, the rest of which being due to the force of the explosion, I couldn't help but notice a small pit in the dirt, a deep hole that had broken up from among the cabbages. What was curious about it was the small tuft of fur protruding from the soil at the bottom of the pit. Upon closer examination, I yanked the thing from out of the soil and pulled out a small plush dog, covered in soil and having two buttons, one green and one blue, for eyes.

This I had uncovered: A brown, plush dog, with half an ear missing, was among the cherished items given to me by mother before my parents had split apart, before my father died an embittered man. Long before I inherited his house, he had taken the dog and hidden it from my sight. Denying that he had done so, he died having never told me where he had hidden it. Whether it had been in the house all along and had been blown outside in the explosion, or he had buried it in the garden long ago—I had no recollection. What bothered me the most was that I could not imagine the hole having been created by any natural or accidental method. Surely my father had buried it and the eruption of the house had forced the soil to surge upward and expel what had not already been dug up by the dog. Another tear formed, clearly a result of the remaining ashes in my eye. I brushed it away and put the plush dog in a bag full of curious salvage.

As profound an impression all this made on me, I pushed the memory of it into the same corners of my mind in which the memories of my mother resided. I supposed that they would never resurface again, because they hadn't in such a long time. Still, it wasn't long before I realized I could not rid myself of these lingering sentiments. The more they struggled for air, the less control I had over their containment. Behind my own back I began to build up an immunity to the people and critters whom I spent time around, hardly noticing how much less acidic my personality was after having found the old stuffed animal.

Following an afternoon trip to the liquor store, one that had once again become routine, although not to such a desperate degree as it had been before, I spotted something brown strutting across the sidewalk. I stopped short and

saw this dog circle a municipal tree by the curb, searching for a place to leave her mark. When she did, she turned and looked at me with the most dignifying look. I quickly set down my bag of spirits and approached the dog. Upon closer examination, I noticed that it had one green eye and one blue, much like the plush toy that I had stowed away in some corner of my new house. Not only that, but she was of the same color, light brown, having no collar, and covered in dirt. When she was done she jumped up on my arm and sniffed at my face with her snout. Thinking that this stray could use a caring master, I took her home, forgetting the assorted spirits I had just purchased, and gave her to the one woman I knew would take her in. She received the dog with the utmost thanks and immediately gave it thing a bath. I was relieved to get the dog off my hands, but I began to visit the woman more often to see how this new dog was getting along with Po.

I didn't expect to have any further feelings regarding the situation between us, but I began to grow, much to my own dismay, quite jealous. The dog I myself found in the street was now hers to care for. In small bounds, these feelings of resentment grew, and I didn't know whether they were directed toward the woman or the new dog, whom she decided to name Virginia. My intentions were to avoid the woman and any of her pets, but I couldn't prevent myself from stopping by her house in the evenings. It was weeks before I made any show of affection toward either of her two dogs, but over time I started to pet them ever so gently, and even speak to them in a softer voice, as I have seen others speak to children.

What made Virginia most adorable to this woman was her heterochromatic condition, the non-matching of the green and blue eyes that made its gaze so odd. I hid from her the coincidence of the dog's likeness to my old stuffed animal, in part due to its implausibility, but also for the very reason that I would have to admit to ever owning such a thing. I dared not connect to her with the sense of pure humanity I felt growling in me, much to my stoic chagrin.

Nonetheless, to encourage such behavior Po and Virginia clung to me like sucklings to their nursing mother. I must remain honest. I was not anxious because I loathed the return of long-buried feelings, but to explore the reason would have only brought more pain. I had almost stifled these feelings when the woman told me about something unfortunate. In a violent scuffle, another dog bit off half of Virginia's ear. After consoling her and helping her treat the dog, I immediately returned home and retrieved the old plush dog from the back of my

shed. As I had thought, the stuffed animal did indeed lack half an ear, and some cotton was poking out from where the stitches had come loose. What kind of warped instrument was influencing such conditions to haunt me? Much to my frustration, I could not arrive at a sensible conclusion.

At this time I recognized the selfless concern I had been harboring, however deeply hidden it had been, for those around me. It reached the point where I felt I had to act in some way because of these feelings, yet the only thing it did was deprive me of sleep at night, and keep me from focusing on any task during the day. I drank less, feeling compelled instead to find something to do—anything, some hobby to keep my mind off the recent events. Even the numbing buzz of alcohol had failed to smother the painful longings. As I bowed to the pressure of these constant, tugging aches of the proverbial bosom, I couldn't help but open up and cherish the very presence of levity that mere acquaintances brought. I experienced pleasant moods often, and secretly thought about having company over from time to time. However, I never dared to show any of it on the surface, for fear of breaking the expectations those in my life had set concerning me. The dissonance wrought by such continued behavior made me sick, and it appeared to others as if I hated all of them even more than ever before.

One day I went over to the woman's house to bring her some vegetables from my new garden, under the excuse that I simply had too many for myself. It was when she opened the door that Po sprung out from behind her and leaped at me, causing me to spill the entire bag of carrots, tomatoes, and cabbages all over her front porch. I fell head-over-heels, as the saying goes, dropping backward and banging the back of my head on the porch rail. Po and Virginia found this an appropriate time to hop on my chest and begin licking my face. Despite the embarrassing frustration which I had just experienced, I swiped at their faces with what can only be described as a childish giggle. I wanted to respond in anger, yet all that escaped from my mouth was a command to get off muffled by what I can only describe as an aggravated chuckle. As the woman began to pick up the dropped vegetables and call her dogs off of me, I intended to playfully grab hold of one of them and kiss them despite their mischief. It was in that moment that the woman seized me by the shoulder and looked into my eyes to see if I was all right. Arrested by the careful look in her eyes, I moved in and gently placed a kiss on her lips. She yelped in surprise, and afterward we shared gasp of sorts between us. This exchange made even less sense to me than the prior explosion of my house.

My harsh exterior now beginning to melt, it was not long before I began to date this woman. We took the dogs on walks together, me with Po and her with Virginia, and sometimes vice versa. On some nights she cooked me dinner, on others she simply came over to give me company as I watched the television, bringing with her, of course, the dogs. By far the most fulfilling thing was walking Po and Virginia through the neighborhood.

This continued for months, and I adapted myself with a new lifestyle, gradually abandoning alcohol and maintaining better hygiene, as if some spirit of better living had taken hold of me. All the work I did to make myself presentable to her was not unnoticed. Although she appreciated my efforts, she reminded me constantly that she had taken a liking to me before I had ever cleaned myself up. Seeing as how she had all these years surrounded herself with such an unkempt zoo, I believed her every word. I felt all the more better for myself and for her as well.

My spirit was dampened, however, when I discovered one day that both Virginia and Po had disappeared. It had happened during the night, I was told, and after a whole day's search they were nowhere to be found. Our first thought was that they had been stolen, but we were resolved to search the whole town for them nevertheless. Our best efforts turned up nothing. The self-esteem and well-wishing for others that I now had in my personal inventory was beginning to fade, and it was like swallowing entire cubes of ice. With each day the dogs failed to show up, I found myself going longer without sleep.

Days passed, and I was tortured by the thought of what could have happened to the dogs. They were not even mine, and yet I was deeply disturbed by their absence. My insecurities returned, and I refused to be counseled by the one person who had grown on me so much.

A short while later I made a discovery in my basement I had to share with this woman who had crossed far into my life. I asked her to accompany me inside my house, and took her down into my basement, which for a moment made her a bit uneasy. As our feet creaked on the wooden steps and we descended, I couldn't keep myself from giggling in anticipation of what she was about to see. Unable to restrain myself, I gave in and let the snickering continue, itching to go ahead and tell her.

"I wanted to show you something," I told her, "and I think you'll be surprised." Thinking to myself of revealing the more astonishing and relieving secret, I instead reached for a high shelf and retrieved the old plush dog that had

brought back so much of my past. “This was given to me—it was my mother’s and she gave it to me when I was young;” And then, awakened by the commotion, something in the far corner of the basement let out a high-pitched yelp.

I could not hide it from her any longer. We followed the sound to the corner where I had hung a felt green curtain up around a dog pin. Hearing once again the childlike call, this time joined by others like a gathering of little mice looking to hide from the dark, we opened the curtain.

Only those who have shared such a weakness for the astute fidelity of canines can believe what had occurred. To those of whom I speak, you then know well a man can derive lasting pleasure from caring for one of these astute creatures. They are among the few animals, and in my view the only on earth, that can selflessly give themselves to you, appealing to the heart in a most irresistible fashion. At times they can even eclipse the loyalty of man himself. These perceptive animals have an odd way of bringing out the kindness in us, however surprising it may be.

Thus it is to my own shame I must admit that years previous I would have rid my house of this discovery without hesitation. But there before us were Po and Virginia, their bodies curled around the three little brown balls of fur, under my care. These newborn pups had found their way into my basement and nested beside the heater. Their whining had seduced me to acknowledge the very change that had occurred in my me. I had unearthed my affectionate heart and displayed the darling evidence of my transformation before the woman I knew I wanted to marry. If it weren’t for the dogs, she might have pressed me about having children together.

Jerrice J. Baptiste

Soeur Belle

*"Because the woman I love lives inside of you,
I lean as close to your body with my words as I can..."*

- Hafiz (Persian Poet, 1320-1389)

She strolls the aging aisles between the shelves. Her feet feathered sound inside. She listens for the slow rattle of the mustard-colored front door in its frame, only sign of trade winds outside.

Her index finger color of apricot slides over textured old spines. At her hip bone, rests Hafiz. Her hazel eyes smile. She pulls him forward, tucks his golden honeyed skin under her robust arm. From a high west window, a sunray beams through empty slot.

She wiggles adjacent books to fill in the gap. Whispers rush in as front door opens and salty sea air with pubescent feet padding to chairs of La Salle de Lecture ready to hear Hafiz's words, *"I will always lean my heart to your soul as close as I can."*

Soeur Belle quickly slides the book into a canvas bag. Scent of waves of her jasmine skin approach. Her aroma floats through patterns of light & shadow in our library room.

Freckled hands sneak the hidden mystical scritta pages into my backpack to become one with my soul in my late sweet sleep in the night.

Seated, her deep sigh calms us as sea wind still blows beyond. I close my almond shaped eyes. Heart melts with her soprano French voice greeting us, *"Bienvenue bien-aimés!"* Girls in pink pleated uniforms sit, shush each other.



Christopher Woods

Vase with Flowers

Rowan Tate

learning how to say my mother's name

how little i know
about love, about the way bread
rises, about how grass grows wild and
tangles its roots with the trees'. how little
i am under the sleeve of god, this bowl of
oranges knows him better than i do.
i want to apologize to great questions for
my small answers, to distant wars for my crying
over food, i want to apologize to all the humans
i didn't know how to love because i
didn't how to love myself. i am picking flowers
and i am picking at my wounds,
i am not beautiful but i could be: there is so much life
all over the place.

Barbara Crooker

The Table

Pierre Bonnard, oil on canvas, 1925

All the pleasures of the table, spread out
on a white linen cloth: one hard roll
nestled in a napkin, smear of butter
on a plate, grapes in a wicker pannier,
pyramid of lemons in a woven basket.
And Marthe, Bonnard's wife, in the corner,
her faced turned in shadow. Each object
is bathed in radiant light. It's momentary,
this snatched capture of food, wine, sunlight,
beloved partner, but doesn't the transience
add to the pleasure? Looming behind her,
the dark blue door of the future, where
all of this has vanished. . .

Echo Guernsey

Someday Soon

In my memory, it's Christmas Eve at my grandparents' salmon-pink ranch house, nighttime falling upon this island made of peat soil, held together by the root systems of towering gray pines, veiled by the mist rising off these marshy waters. The house sits along the California Delta, a series of tendrilled waterways that span from the Central Valley in the east to the San Francisco Bay to the west, which explains why the barking of a stranded juvenile sea lion echoes through all this fog. He followed the fish and now can't find his way out. Though I am barely six and my fantasies should be purely sugar plums, I am instead troubled deep—and all I want for Christmas is for this one so lost to safely make his way back home.

Within the salmon-pink house, Judy Garland spins despondent on vinyl, on the verge of collapse over *faithful friends so dear to us*, who tonight, as my grandmother tells me, *will be near to us once more*. I am hoping that this is true for the sea lion, too—that he will *someday soon* be with those who love him best, because I know he is not loved by many humans along the Delta. More times than my pudgy fingers can tally, I've sat on the dock of my grandparents' decaying and also salmon-pink boathouse, helpless as fishermen harass these creatures, throwing beer cans and worse, screaming that these "pests better FUCK OFF!" I do not yet know what "fuck" means, but I sense already that it's a definite violence.

The Christmas tree is festooned in adornments like jewels from deep in the belly of the Earth, ornaments that together tell the story of our world—of penguins and reindeer, holly boughs and mistletoe, of polar bears and of

the past prevalence of lead-based paint. These delicate beings who spend most of their lives caged in bubble wrap and tissue, on the top shelf of a closet beside my grandmother's hatbox, are brought out once a year to remind us of the fragility and resilience of the life systems of our planet, twinkling starbright as Judy Garland twirls on in the corner, warning—*if the fates allow*, we will remain together—but only *if*.

I spent the day following a black lab named Kirk around the island with my grandfather, who always walks slowly, hands clasped behind his back, never forgetting to look down at the little ones like me, though occasionally he lifts his gaze and squints up at the sun, telling me that by now Santa is well on his way. At the tip of the island, Kirk spots something down by the rocks and makes a turbulent dash, but my grandfather has tamed him exceptionally well and is able to stop Kirk before he reaches the shoreline, where the sea lion is barking in a desperate stance of self-preservation, inky sweet eyes probing and wild with terror. I ask my grandfather if I may go down to the river to offer him tenderness and a few dog biscuits.

"It's a wild creature. Dangerous. Can bite you—gobble you up, even!"

But to me, the sea lion looks exactly like a wet dog. "Where is his family?"

"Back in the city, probably shopping. Or seeing the big tree."

I squat down in the grass and try to level my eyes with the sea lion. His gaze darts from dog to grandfather to the Delta, then repeats. I stay squatted. My eyes follow the sea lion's sightline until, at last, he settles his midnight stare squarely on me. Who I'm met with—dusky orbs locked into mine—doesn't appear dangerous, but a soul frightened and very far from home.

Out of instinct, I begin to crawl slowly toward him, but my grandfather scoops me up, hollering for Kirk to follow us inside where he says there is Christmas fun to be had.

Before dinner, I decorate sugar cookies with my grandmother, Jane. And though my Rudolph looks far more like a wooden chair than a mammalian being, my art loving grandmother admires my cookies as if each were a Basquiat. She is so very proud, pinching my grandfather who can hardly feign marvel at my truly demented aesthetics of winter.

It's getting late now and my grandfather lifts me into his arms as we start upstairs, my grandmother just behind us. We pass under an oil portrait of a woman one hundred years dead—my four times great-grandmother, Lucinda.

My cousins claim that her eyes follow, comparing her to a relic from some haunted place, but I am not afraid of Lucinda for I know and love her—just as I know and love all of our dead.

*

The women in my paternal bloodline are touched by powers of mediumship. Many were adherents of the religious movement known as Spiritualism, which is predicated on three truths of existence—that life after death is a fact, that there is communication between the Earth plane and the world of spirit, and that spiritual phenomena are governed by Natural Laws available to all who take the time to learn the ways of mother Earth. My ancestors utilized various tools of divination, which can still be found pushed back deep in the cupboards of my grandparents' home—pendulums, planchettes, even a rusty old trumpet.

Séance was and endures as a verb in our family, though my grandmother's way was less formal than generations past, relying solely upon the instrument of her heart to commune. She taught me to see the signs most miss, to listen for messages too often unheard. And she introduced me to spirit young because she never wanted my ability to frighten me, but instead, hoped that I would remain always open to receiving the visions, warnings, and faint aromas of Cypress trees which cued that her own grandmother, Mamie, was among us.

Mamie and her husband Francis lived in the town of Paradise in northern California, a place my grandmother visited often when she was a girl, just as I visited her in my childhood days. Closing my eyes, I imagine them there together, my grandmother so small, climbing trees in the sun, tucked into bed and calling forth the ancestors by night to tend fragile tethers between the seen and unseen of our world.

Francis died in 1946, Mamie in 1963. And in 2018, the town of Paradise burned to the ground in the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history.

*

We're in the blue and white bedroom, once my aunt's, where I always sleep when I stay at the salmon-pink house. My grandfather checks the windows, ensuring against a draft. When all is latched, he does one of his waggish little jigs, forever playing the clown, then leaves my grandmother and me in the amber glow of the bedside lamp. Back then, I do not realize that he is off to weigh his losses while he brews iced chicory coffee, same color as the peat soil and just as gritty, too. Making the coffee and counting the dead is his nightly ritual, so that

come morning, after a restless night's sleep, he will be able to muster the energy to attend to those still here. He does not, like Jane, believe in divination, so he merely counts instead of communing.

"Who should we contact tonight, Echo?" my grandmother asks as she tucks me in deep.

"Hmmm... Bomp!" Bomp is Francis' nickname. "Wait, um... no, let's call Mamie. I really need her help."

"Oh, she will be so happy to hear from you, especially on Christmas Eve."

I've chosen Mamie because I know well that she is an animal lover. "Hi great-great-grandmother, Mamie. It's me—Echo! Happy Christmas Eve. Did you have pudding? Okay, I was very good this year—"

"She's not Santa Claus," says my grandmother.

It is true that sometimes, in all this divination, I confuse the ancestors with the mythic—the spirits jumbled with the talking rabbits, like Peter in his blue blazer, Mamie and Lucinda walking roads of yellow brick, arms linked with the Tin Man and Cowardly Lion as the Emerald City of Oz appears just beyond that field of opium poppies.

"Do you have something specific you want to ask?"

I nod. "Okay, so Mamie, tonight there is actually a sea lion outside. He is sad and far from his family. I want to help but my grandpa says the sea lion will bite me if I get too close. Mamie, can you help him get home? He won't bite you, because you are a ghost and you are dead, too, so it won't hurt even if he does bite you—" I glance up to my grandmother and whisper-ask so only she will hear, "It won't hurt if he bites Mamie, right?"

"No, she doesn't feel things that way."

"But can she swim?"

"She can float."

"Okay, So, um... Mamie. The sea lion lives in San Francisco Bay. Can you take him back there? Please, help!" This is the level of devotion that my child's mind imagines beings both flesh and spirit abide by in the universal cause of the protection of our living world.

It just barely registers with me now that my grandmother is crying, keeping her face in profile, wiping tears discreetly—she seems to know something I do not. About the sea lion? About Mamie? About failed measures of devotion to life here on the Earth plane? Or perhaps she is thinking of her own mother, who died when my grandmother was thirteen. Or her father, who is dead, too.

Her sister, gone a few Decembers past. Or her son, my uncle Richard, who will be taken some years on into the future.

As always, just before turning out the night light and kissing me on the cheek, my grandmother sings “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”—it’s her invitation for spirit to visit us while we sleep on this special night when the veil is tissue paper thin.

*“Someday soon we all will be together,
if the fates allow...
Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow...
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now...”*

I don’t know what “muddle” means, but I can tell that it weighs heavy. That this thing of *muddling* is a lot to bear.

Now, it’s time for bed and my grandmother Jane takes me in her arms, draws me in close, and makes me believe that never again in my life will I feel alone. She tells me she loves me, turns out the light, and whispers that I should get to dreaming because Santa Claus will be here soon. And though I know this should be enough, should be plenty to make me feel safe, to make my heart feel full—it is not—because down by the river, I can still hear the sea lion and his barks have become more frantic, forlorn pleas for benevolence from someone, anyone.

I let my grandparents rest while I sneak downstairs and climb up onto a creamy sofa, long as a ship, press my cheeks against the frosty window to see if he’s still out there on the rocks. But I cannot find him in the boggy mist that has enshrouded the island. All is dark, the sounds of the night stilled to silence, aside from the static left by Judy Garland’s departure.

“Hi, Mamie. It’s Echo again. Are you coming soon? It’s very late now and I’m sleepy, but I can’t go to bed because I know he is scared. Please help us, Mamie.” Waiting for a reply from the spirit of my great-great-grandmother, I doze off.

*

I have always known that if I were to have a daughter, I would name her Jane. Sometimes, I even dreamed of raising her in the salmon-pink house along the river, my grandmother’s ornaments twinkling forevermore on the tree. And just as my grandmother did for me, I would teach my Jane to perceive beyond the mind for the presence of spirits along the Delta—for the flickers, the whispers, the sudden smell of Cypress trees from Paradise long before it burned. I would teach her also to heed the rhythms of all who inhabit the Earth, for there is much

to portend if one nurtures the more subtle faculties of looking and listening to our living world.

Taking my daughter in my arms, drawing her close in immortal love, just as my grandmother did with me, I would say to her, “Jane, consider that everything around you is your kindred. You must always remember this, my sweet girl—that every single being who lives has love to give and that every single living being needs love, too. We are bound to each other, Jane, through the ages. All the humans, the animals, the plants, the rivers—every being who has died, every being who goes on living—has a message that can guide you, can save you even, just as you can save them in return. All you must do is stay connected to the spirits of the Earth.”

*

In the salmon-pink house, I’m ripped wide-eyed from my slumber by a rumbling that rattles the windowpanes. In a family of duck hunters, I’ve heard that sound many times before, but never so close—I wet myself on my grandmother’s sofa. With the whole of the world flipped on its head, I hide under the dining room table, which in my memory, is now covered in cobwebs, maggots in the dumplings and the spiced apple rum swimming with tadpoles. As for the cookies I spent the day frosting, no longer are they compositions of beauty, but picked apart by rats and roaches, who scamper across my legs as I stay hidden.

From under the table, I’m calling on spirits for comfort—on Mamie and Santa Claus and Scarecrow—but none manifest. I am alone. Though it’s cold and dark and my body trembles, I make my way outside, across the lawn, and toward the edge of the island, down to the rocks along the shoreline. But it’s so difficult to see anything clearly in the expanding mist.

“Mamie, Mamie!” I try to whisper through clattering teeth. “Did you guys make it back to San Francisco? It’s dark out here, please walk with me.” I’m leaning into the river when something grabs me by the nightshirt and tears me back. It’s my grandmother, Jane, and there is real fear in her eyes and I start to cry because I have real fear now, too—I cannot find the sea lion. She pulls me close.

“Don’t cry. We just want to keep you safe. We want to keep everything bright and warm for you, always.”

My grandfather shines a light around the yard, through the fog, in which I swear I do hear whispers harsh like warnings. The flashlight’s beam casts down to the rocks, illuminating the bloodied head of the sea lion, his brains spilled, his body limp, which maybe I see.

My grandfather quickly diverts the light and reprises his role of the dancing clown, because what else can you do? “Better get back to bed before the reindeer start to clatter.”

But the quickened beat of my heart tells me Santa Claus is too late.

*

I sometimes still dream of having a daughter who I would name Jane, but for my husband and me, the question is no longer merely what do we dream of, because there are consequences and truths, both known and unknowable, of arriving a child to the Earth at this moment, in this haze of denial and grief occluding our collective ability to see and hear the infinite warnings.

When my grandmother and Mamie visit me now, they portend a future that, down in my bones, I know is the truth. One doesn't have to be a soothsayer to deduce the reality of the abyss over which our planet is perched. These are darkest nights, in haunted hallways, spirits moaning as loud as they can, setting off the fire alarm, trying to wake us up to the horrors afflicting the whole of existence, every last descendant upon the Earth, human and more-than. What a painful thing to be an ancestor in the realm of spirit, peering through the scrim and seeing your loved ones so busy rearranging the deck furniture while the ship goes sinking fast.

*

In the morning, I present to my grandparents my conspicuously-detailed theory as to how-why-and-when Kirk the black lab piddled on the cream sofa, which they pretend to believe. While our family—my aunts, uncles, cousins, father and his new bride with whom he will have my sister soon, my brother two years after that—drink their gin fizzes and run amok in cheery splendor, my cheeks stay pressed against the window, hoping to spot the sea lion. And though my grandparents know well that he was shot in the head—likely by a fisherman claiming the trout of the Delta belong to him and him only—though we all three saw the wasted whiskers, they want nothing more than for my world to be peaceful. And so, they assure me that my barking faithful friend is back home now, with his family, having a grand feast and opening his presents which include a red scarf that will keep him warm until springtime returns.

“Speaking of which,” says my grandfather, “what’s that there under the tree? It says, ‘For Echo, love Santa Claus.’” But I want nothing to do with Santa, who has long been presented to me as the most powerful man on Earth and yet when I

called for him to come to the defense of life, he did nothing. This night has shown me plainly that Santa is no longer a force for me to believe in. And I am starting to understand that this is a world of separation and mounting losses. I see now that my grandparents are lost, too, and that they have a need to give me all these comforts because it alleviates some part of the void over which they are dangling. All this merry brightness allows them to pretend that, in the end, we will all surely find our way back home.

Clinking the icy dregs of his gin fizz, my uncle Richard asks, “Who pissed on the sofa?”

“The dog!” My grandparents answer in a unison far too adamant to possibly be the truth. Uncle Richard shrugs, seeming unconvinced, but he also doesn’t seem much to care because someone is pouring him another drink.

*

This December, I will be back in my grandparents’ home, though my brother is the one who lives there now. Years ago, he sat in my lap at our uncle’s funeral, crying out just as the lost sea lion had cried along the shoreline all those Christmases past, when I was still a girl. But now we are both grown. Now, my brother is a fisherman.

And though I will never have a daughter who I will name Jane, sometimes, late on the eve of Christmas, as the mist rises up off the Delta, I can almost hear her running down the hallways. Can nearly smell the cookies she has baked, admire the misshapen polar bear she has crafted from sugary flour and spent the whole of the afternoon frosting.

When the dead visit—my grandparents now among them, both having passed at home in the salmon-pink house—I imagine her, my Jane, held close in their arms, just on that other side, so barely beyond my reach. Yes, she is right there, playing fetch with a black lab and for as hard as it is not to have her here in my arms, so much of me, almost all of me, knows that she is right where she belongs, in the only place—that realm of spirit—where I can be assured she will stay safe in the days ahead.

My grandmother taught me from a young age that without the dead, I would not be alive, but I know also that without the living, I will not be alive much longer. Honeybees and oysters and every last lifeform allow me to stay here on the incarnate side of the infinitesimally thin veil. Tending our connections is critical to survival, this I know. Fostering communion between what is obvious

and what is obscured creates balance between the Earth plane and the world of spirit. In this age of environmental collapse, the interdependence of ecosystems both seen and invisible is becoming ever more evident. We are all inextricably connected.

All around us, there are visions and warnings. The rhythms of the natural world imploring to be perceived, for their distinct voices to be heard. As Spiritualism and wisdom traditions far more ancient, too, teach us about the animacy of our shared world, connection is available to each and all who take the time to look and listen closely.

As the nightlight is extinguished this Christmas Eve, just as my grandmother did, I will sing softly of *faithful friends who are dear to us*. It is tradition. It is communion and a prayer that as the losses go on accumulating, I will forget nothing and no one. Not the people I've loved, the animals who have shaped my soul, the trees who have sheltered me, the honeybees and the oysters, the sea lion on the river crying out for safety in an unsafe world, my dream of a daughter named Jane. But I will also not forget all the life who is here, hanging on, who needs tending and tenderness now. And so, I will sing of *muddling through somehow*—tears down my cheeks same as they slipped down my grandmother's. *Muddling* is a promise that I will keep going, that I will push *through, somehow*, guided by the grace of the ancestors, guided by the graceful rhythms of the Earth, guided by the truth that we will be—and always have been—so near to one another.

Deborah Leipziger

Poem for my Daughters

A cento based on lines from *Libertie* by Kaitlyn Greenidge

I hope that I have made you brave,
you in the world, responding to me,
the song I made.
A daughter is a poem.

You in the world, responding to me --
a daughter is a psalm,
kind but not too kind.
The song I made.

A daughter is a psalm.
What freeborn thing
can bear to be loved as much as that?
Write something for me.

What freeborn thing
you in the world --
A daughter is a poem.
There is bravery in being a mother.

You in the world, responding to me.
Being a mother means being someone's god, if only briefly.
Kind, but not too kind.
A daughter is a poem.

Being a mother means being someone's god, if only briefly.
And you cannot understand what I have given you,
all I have given you
to prepare you to fight.

And you cannot understand what I gave you.
You in the world, responding to me,
I hope that I have made you brave.
A daughter is a poem.

Rebecca Leet

The Weight of Water

Each day I cup my hands
and thrust them into the river.
Its green-brown color – dense and deep –

prevents preview
of what may settle in my palms.

The water moves with languid attitude on some days,
silent and slow as a sleep walker.

On others it races, tumbling over itself,
churning angry white froth as far as my eye can see.

Those days seem to come more and more often.

My cup is no smaller
than when my fingers were straight and strong.
But its capacity seems less.

Water flows out more quickly
as though its weight

has become too great to bear.

Wally Swist

Casida del Llanto

*He cerrado mi balcón
porque no queiro oír el llanto,
pero por detrás de los grises muros
no se oye otra cosa que el llanto.*

*Hay muy pocos ángeles que canten,
hay muy pocos perros que ladren,
mil violines caben en la palma de mi mano.*

*Pero el llanto es un perro inmenso,
el llanto es un ángel inmenso,
el llanto es un violín inmenso,
las lágrimas amordazan al viento,
y no se oye otra cosa que el llanto.*

-Federico Garcia Lorca

Casida of Weeping

I have shuttered my balcony,
because I don't want to hear the weeping,
but behind gray walls
you can't hear anything but crying.

There are very few angels that sing,
there are very few dogs that bark,
one thousand violins fit into the palm of my hand.

But crying is an enormous dog,
crying is an immense angel,
crying is a colossal violin,
tears suffocate the wind,
and you hear nothing but the weeping.

Michael Salcman

A Poem's Last Gift (Perhaps)

It's only a toy you pull on the ground
It has a lip that goes clack against the axle
And a face like a duck
It makes promises with a sound
You pull on the string and it follows along
From one room to the next
From birth until the end of your life.

It might be a bomb that never explodes
In the middle of the night
Or the song of an entire nation
It means everything and costs nothing
Or means nothing and costs everything.

It never grew up while you were growing old
And its song kept you as young
With a breath of your own
And after you're gone may turn the light on
In the corner where you had been reading.

Laura Grace Weldon

Military-Industrial Complex

I am six years old, riding my bike
in an era when daylight hours screeched
and whooped with children at play.
I stop and stare as a long line of heavy
vehicles, not cars, not trucks either,
groan by on Wooster Road. They're the color
of boiled spinach. Their headlights menace.

I have never seen vehicles of war before,
not even on TV, but ancestors inside me
who were bombed, starved, gassed, shot at
speak up and say GO.
I do, gasping with fear,
legs urging my pedals forward,
sure everything will suddenly go wrong.

I fling myself inside.
Tell my mother we have to
call daddy home,
shut the windows and doors, hide.
She smiles, wipes her hands on a towel,
says we're safe. Says they're only practicing.
For what, I want to know, *for what*.

Allisa Cherry

Grief, Displaced

Before the city cleared away the descanso
from the bent street sign on Lombard,
it shimmered with plastic roses
and silver tinsel, swelled with stuffed bears
hugging satin hearts and so many
deflated mylar balloons
cantillating in the wind. Now
the naked pole tilts toward the street
and I'm not sure where I'm supposed to go.
The only place left in the city
where I still sometimes said a prayer for the dead
is gone. Last winter, the traffic fatalities
piled up until it was the worst we'd seen in years.
Another symptom of the housing crisis
one report stated. Every day a landlord
shakes a building out and hikes the rent.
A few nights ago, a median
filled with RVs and tents went up in flames
after a cook fire threw a spark.
And this morning, my daughter confessed
that she thinks she might believe in God
as if she were ashamed of her longing.

But ever since she once told me
I don't want to be alone in the dirt
I secretly hoped faith was a thing
that skipped a generation. Like her curly hair.
Or my mother's approval—which waited
impatiently for my daughter to arrive
so she could finally admire
some part of me. Where will I go now
to remember my mother?
I miss her so much
I pile all my shining trash
by the side of the road for her.
I miss her so much
I move around the city
scratching and peeking
under every bright scrap of paper.



Rana Heidarzade

Untitled



Lory Widmer Hess

To the Mountains

Every morning, when I look out of my bedroom window, I see a crack in the world.

The steep, tree-covered mountain wall that runs perpendicular to my view, obscuring the horizon and extending as far as my vision reaches to left and right, has an opening in it. It's shaped like an asymmetrical "V," with overlapping diagonal slopes that pull back to reveal the next fold of mountain above and behind them, and come to a point below, directing my eye back down to earth. In the midst of a massive heap of rock which blocks my view of the sky, slowing the arrival of sunlight each day, it offers a possible way through to other layers of existence. An interruption. A gap.

This is the Combe Grède gorge, a well-known feature of Switzerland's Chasseral National Park, in the midst of the Jura range of mountains that straddles the northwest border with France. I'm not a native of this country, but have come here, like many emigrants, through marriage and for work. We moved from the US four years ago when, after we'd been together for more than a decade, my Swiss husband got a job in his homeland.

We framed our move to the public as a chance for our adolescent son to experience the other side of his heritage, an adventure we chose as a family.

While that was true, it would never have happened if our former life hadn't collapsed. Something that seemed solid and permanent had shifted and cracked; a gap had opened up, and we'd waded through the rubble into this new life.

Unlike my husband, I had no ties here, nothing in my blood calling me home. No kinship with this mountainous land — or so I'd thought. I didn't know that the cracks inside me, which had just been shifted and eroded and tumbled down in an avalanche of disturbing force, would find expression in a symbol that met my gaze every morning, calling me on a further journey. There was a difficult slope I had to climb, before I could reach the place of spaciousness and light.

On many winter days, fog and clouds conceal the further view through the Combe Grède, turning it into a cold white arrow pointed at the heart of our village. But when the sun starts to coax away layers of obscuring mist, it becomes a dream-landscape, with a higher, purer land beckoning through the veils. Watching this spectacle, I remember how when as a child I came to the end of the Chronicles of Narnia I longed to go "further up and further in," how I closed the book with tears in my eyes, because I could not reach the ring of mountains that surrounded the shadowlands. The real world of spirit and truth, from which the shadows fall.

"To the mountains I lift up my eyes," sings the psalmist. "From whence does my help come?"

Mountains are nature's fortresses, lookout points where we distance ourselves from our enemies, scanning the landscape for threats. Strong places that we shore up further with defensive walls and castle keeps. There's one of these in our valley, a couple of towns over: an ancient curve of tower wall, crumbling at the top. When we first moved here and started to explore the paths through the forest, it acted like a magnet on our twelve-year-old son, who insisted on climbing it when I wasn't looking, and laughed at my anxious calls for him to come down.

He's always been a climber, a scaler of precarious structures and impossible rockfaces, who trusts in his ability to tell the difference between solid and slippery. My own sense of safety has been much harder to establish. I prefer secure constructions, fortresses that have no holes in them, no cracks or gaps.

But when we lock ourselves for too long in the fortress, life can't get through. The defensive structures are not the help; they are only meant to keep us safe until help arrives, from a source that is stronger than stone.

From what strong place issues the relief for an embattled soul? How will reality come down into the place of illusion, through the concealing clouds? *My help comes from the Lord, the Lord who has made Heaven and Earth.* Before there were mountains, there was the Maker of mountains. And though mountains are barriers, they are also bridges, places where heaven touches earth. When we lift up our eyes to the highest point we can reach with our earthly vision and pray for help, something might come to meet us there.

*

The cracks in my life started early. Each time, I toughened up around and against them. The fortress got stronger, and getting out became harder.

I don't even know how this crackdown began; it's lost in the years before I had conscious memory or a clear sense of self and other. My remembered narrative begins at the age of seven, when my family moves from northern California to Seattle, a seismic shift that seems to destroy all my comfort and security.

Crack.

The other girls in my new class giggle and look sidelong at me. I decide that they are making up a secret code and talking about me. I won't try to be friends with them any more. I find a hideaway in the blackberry bushes that surround the school field. I crouch there amid the thorns, a princess armed with pride and guarded by loneliness.

Crack.

My own body becomes an enemy, sprouting hair and knobby protruberances, shifting into new forms. I'm horrified by the blood, the smells, ashamed by my fear of the lust which is on everyone's lips and in their eyes. Physical closeness causes me to drift apart from my muscles and bones and watch them from outside as they do things I don't want to do. I don't feel love or desire; mostly, I feel numb.

Crack.

In graduate school, as I'm student-teaching a class of third graders, I am so nervous that I black out during a lesson, unable to see what's in front of my face even as I'm walking around and talking about the multiplication tables. The children yell and run around the room, but I don't even notice. When the teacher who is mentoring me asks what happened, I can't admit the truth; I say I just didn't know what to do.

Crack.

Each crack divides me further from my real self, my real experiences and thoughts. I am barricading myself in the heights, while the life and growth is taking place somewhere else, down in a body I am afraid to enter into.

I find ways to hide and pretend, to do well enough, to escape scrutiny so that no one will tell me I need help. I can't allow myself to know I need help, because that would destroy my fortress. I know it is not right to be so numb, but I don't know how to stop. If I melt, I might drip away to nothing, like the Wicked Witch of the West.

*

To climb up through the Combe Grède, you turn left from our house and walk past the last few scattered houses and farms of the town. You come to a rocky streambed that is sometimes dry, sometimes flowing with water, depending on the season and the conditions above. At the moment it's strewn with huge machines that are ripping back layers of stone and gravel and putting in bulwarks of concrete, to try to contain the floods that rarely, but destructively, come down from the mountain at times of storm and snowmelt.

Past these ugly signs of human intervention, you enter the trees, tall, silent presences that climb the mountain with you. Bright, translucent leaves of beech and maple are slowly replaced by darker shades of pine. Soon the rocky sides of the gorge are higher and closer. You twist and turn through them, sometimes on metal or wooden platforms that have been built out from the rock. There are a few metal ladders to climb where no path could be built. At other places, the rocks

recede and you climb through majestic forest vistas, where elves and hobbits could conceivably lurk.

After about an hour, you bump up against the mountain, where a concave rockface rises nearly sheer to a plateau at the top. Here there is usually a trickle of water coming down from above, caught by a pool and then descending further towards the floodworks. It's a good place to stop and rest and look around, seeing where you've come from and where you still have to go.

From here, the path zigzags back and forth up the steepest part of the climb, edging carefully up the rockface, with sturdy wooden railings or metal chains to keep you from falling off. After a moderately strenuous workout, you come out to a flatter area of woods and fields and pastures. Trek through this, dodging cowpats and the occasional cow, then make the final climb up one more ridge to the Chasseral Hotel, a place to rest and refresh yourself while you enjoy the splendid view. (The Swiss mountains are full of such conveniences.) A little further on is the Chasseral itself, the highest peak in the area. As well as being a lookout point, it's been crowned with a communications tower that points even higher into the air, invisibly shooting messages and data far and wide.

The Combe Grède is on the north side of the mountain slope, and so it is sheltered from the sun, always relatively cool and moist. Plants adapted to this shady environment grow here, and especially in the lower part the trees and rocks are covered with moss and lichen. In the spring, there's a big crop of Bärlauch, the garlicky green that the Swiss love to harvest and cook with during its brief appearance. Throughout the summer, various varieties of wildflowers appear, evanescent drifts of yellow, white, blue.

It's a magical place. All the street noises from below quickly die away, and you feel immersed in a green, shadowy world, surrounded by birdsong, smelling the damp earth. It's a way to enter into the rock, but not an enclosed cave, still open to the wind and to the sky. In the heat of summer its shady coolness is no doubt why many people choose this way to make the climb. But it is also full of life, quiet, slow-growing life that seems untroubled by all the chaos reigning elsewhere. When I climb here, even if I start out tired, I usually feel revitalized by the time I

get to the top. The life seems to collect and concentrate itself here, and to impart itself to those who pass through it.

It's a feminine place, too, with its crevices and its dripping water, its soft mosses and rounded rocks. It reminds me of the feminine qualities I need to accept and appreciate in myself, difficult as that path has been. Of how it's all right, sometimes, to step out of the sun and simply grow, slowly, quietly, not making lots of noise and bustle, but just welcoming what wants to come in and climb up through you.

*

I was in my thirties, disgusted by my inner coldness, before it happened. A man fell in love with me, and though I wasn't in love with him, I liked him. I trusted him. I liked feeling chosen, as though I might be good for something after all, in spite of being so numb. My body didn't feel desire for his, but at least it didn't run away, and I was able to stay with it and not black out. I pushed my body to come together with his, to close the crack that severed me from love and community and connection with life. We were married.

I had a child to please my husband. He was the one who said he wanted to have a family with me. He hadn't wanted it urgently — just maybe someday — but when I got pregnant, he was excited and supportive.

That changed after the baby arrived.

The baby changed everything. I couldn't wall myself off in numbness any more. Nursing him was so painful, I finally asked for help from a lactation consultant. She showed me how to get into a better position so at least I didn't feel like my nipples were being chewed off each time the baby tried to feed.

But he still wasn't feeding well. I knew this. I knew his diapers were not wet enough. But I didn't tell anyone. If something was wrong with the baby, it meant something was wrong with me. And I could not admit that. It would shatter all my defenses.

Fortunately, his feeding trouble was discovered by others — he wasn't gaining weight — and a state of emergency erupted, a confusing quest to find out what

was wrong and how to repair it. I was plunged into a chaos of expensive machines and awkward devices and worry that there wouldn't be enough milk. I had to put the baby down to use an electric pump several times a day, breaking our connection rather than strengthening it as the milk was produced. I was given conflicting advice by different people — you must pump during the night; no, you need sleep — and didn't know what to believe.

I was tortured by sleep deprivation, it was true. A hungry baby is hard to soothe, and mine cried inconsolably before going into an exhausted doze, then waking up again after what seemed mere minutes. My anger and impatience increased as my reserves of energy were depleted. I found myself having to put my child down to scream and hit things.

I wondered about the cause of the problem, but nobody could ever explain it; whatever the reason, he never did learn to latch on. I couldn't pump enough for him, and had to supplement with formula. After eight months of this exhausting routine I gave up, knowing I had failed at a mother's main task: feeding my child. I couldn't even love him, as any normal person would. He was a responsibility that had been handed to me, that I would do my best to fulfil, but forcing myself to love a bundle of insatiable, impossible demands was beyond me.

Postpartum depression was something other people had. What I had, I knew, was a shameful deficiency I could never reveal to anyone. I could not let them know about my inability to love, or I would be cast out forever, into the outer darkness.

I couldn't hide what was outwardly visible — my body had been bared to the world in the process of birth, and my breasts had become the subject of public debate — but I could hide my feelings and thoughts. I could cover up the terrifying abyss in my own soul, which sucked away all pleasure and comfort, and left me clinging to a thin barrier, like a railing holding me to the cliff.

Keeping up appearances was the only thing that prevented me from falling.

My husband didn't know what had happened to me. He didn't understand, and he judged me for my weakness, my incapacity. When he came home from work

and found unwashed diapers and no dinner on the table, the hard fury in his eyes was like a slap. While he never physically harmed me, his judgment flung me into the pit of self-loathing I'd already prepared for myself. He could be tremendously warm and accepting, so that I melted into his embrace, but also hard and unyielding as stone, shutting me out completely.

I noticed that he would never, ever apologize when I was upset about something, but gave me the silent treatment and waited for me say that I was sorry. I always did, and was always welcomed back, so long as I didn't question this rule. I lived for the moments of approval and connection, and waited out the angry, critical times, in my own fortress of silence.

Years went by. Slowly, as our child survived, and grew, and showed more of himself, I was able to take delight in his becoming. If that was love, then I loved him. I was certainly moved by the courage of this small person who had come to me, trusting me in spite of my incapacity, and asked me for a place through which he could come to earth. Only a part of me held back, worried about doing something wrong, still obsessed with my own failure. I was unable to conceive a relationship in which judgment played no part, and so a space grew up between us. Not a full estrangement, but a gap, a space of uncertainty, of not-knowing.

No one else saw what was behind the fortress walls. To others, we looked like a normal, happy family. But change was coming, when the truth would overturn appearances.

Our son went to school, where he could not focus. He always seemed to be thinking of something other than the task he was supposed to be doing. His teachers talked of laziness, and of learning disabilities. I looked at them blankly, maintaining the wall.

My husband and I went to work in a community caring for developmentally disabled adults. And I found my own teachers.

*

Our new home was in the Monadnock region of New Hampshire, where solitary peaks—Monadnocks in the language of the local Native Americans—lift up their proud heads above the general hilly landscape.

Each human being is a mountain, a solitary peak, a Monadnock. We are the mountains that would be pulled up and thrown into the sea by faith, if we had enough of it.

But we are not ready to swim in the sea of life. We hold ourselves hard and separate, hanging on to our identity, clinging to the rocks that make us feel secure. We try to forget that the hardest matter we can imagine will at some point be shaken and fall into dissolution. Making ourselves into mountains may not be the ultimate solution to the threats that assail us.

It was there, though, that I learned how to stop being a mountain, and to fall into the sea of my helplessness. Six years of working with people who did not hide their disabilities, who didn't pretend they were not in need of help, shook the foundations of my fortress. I couldn't care for them without admitting that I had parts that were in need of care, too. And I couldn't struggle to understand their baffling methods of non-verbal communication without starting to hear voices inside me that had long been ignored and denied.

They told me that I had hurt my own child.

I was still hurting him, by my refusal to seek help for my own pain.

My volcano of suppressed anger was destroying us both.

The voices told me something else, too. They told me that I wasn't useless and incapable of love or caring. I could be a caring person, and I was needed. I was important. The people I cared for did not cast me out and reject me because I had flaws and weaknesses. They bore with my weaknesses, and revealed their own, while also offering their strengths. Together, by doing for one another what we could not do for ourselves, we could become whole.

They lived what I read about in the Bible and heard in church: the love that closes all gaps, heals all wounds. It's not a pretty, sentimental love, but the ground on which we have our being, the reality that no one can survive without help. And I knew I wanted to reach the place of truth, myself, no matter what might have to fall away.

Shaken, I started to reach out at last, to friends, counselors, doctors, priests, spiritual directors. Once I started to admit that I could not hold up my life all alone, and that maybe I was worth the trouble of being supported through a process of healing, the avalanche started to roll.

I saw that my husband, too, with his cold, hard attitude, was only trying to conceal his own deep hurt and vulnerability. I pushed him to get help, too, but he didn't want to. He pushed back, and in a moment of fear, I forced him to leave our home, which was also our job.

I had caused an eruption that destroyed our life.

But once the gap had been revealed, it could be mended. Words I had never heard before came out through the cracks: "I'm sorry" and "Now I understand." Homeless and jobless, we could finally stop the pretense of self-sufficiency. Being in need of help was no longer a question.

I do not advise setting off an eruption as a means of healing. But in our case, it turned out to be the only way to bring down a prison of prideful concealment. The walls had to fall, before the light could get through.

*

After the eruption, we lived apart for a year; although I wanted to trust the miracle, it took time to be sure that the ground was really safe. When it was, we came here to the mountains, restoring our family, closing the gap. Only I soon discovered it wasn't the end of the avalanches for me, but the beginning.

My body was going through the transition of menopause, and many things didn't work they way I was used to. I developed allergy-like reactions, sneezing and rashes. The migraine headaches I'd had monthly for years became more frequent and irregular, as my periods stopped.

Medical investigation uncovered gallbladder disease and microbial dysbiosis. I had my gallbladder removed and dosed myself with probiotics. I changed my diet, challenging long-held habits of stuffing down emotions with food. The rashes went away, but the migraines were a moving target. Every time I altered

something, I would briefly feel better, but then a headache would strike and put me back in my bed, vomiting up bile, unable to hold down even a sip of water.

Now I was the one with the feeding problem. What was I really hungry for?

My son, now a teenager, had adjusted amazingly well to his new school, including several new languages, but he was still distracted and unfocused. His teacher, though, didn't talk about laziness and disability, but about trauma and recovery. I found that I wanted to tell her about what I had gone through after the birth, how I knew it must have affected my baby, and how much I wanted to heal that rift now.

She invited me to tell my story to the whole circle of teachers, so that they could better understand and support us.

On the day of the meeting, I had a migraine. I threw up in the bushes after our half-hour ride down the mountain to the school, but I was determined to go.

I sat in the circle of about twenty-five people and looked around. I thought of how fifteen years ago I could not have imagined myself telling this story to such a large group. I couldn't even tell it to my own husband, or to my closest friends. I was convinced that I could never, ever tell anyone how bad I was, how shamefully lacking in love.

Now, that didn't matter. It didn't matter who might judge me, or how. All that mattered was our beautiful boy and his future. If my opening up meant that his way could be made easier or lighter, I would do it. I held to the truth that my so-called "disabled" friends had taught me: we are part of one another, and we need each other. Admitting that need does not diminish us, but makes us stronger. And where human help is insufficient, weak and fallible as we all are, there is the divine love that will never fail us. Turning at last to that mountain of love had given me the strength to leave my fortress.

There was no sudden, dramatic change after our meeting, but a slow shift. As I continued to seek many kinds of support — physical, psychological, spiritual — and to learn from the wisdom of others, I found ways to live with my changing

body. I discovered that I could lean into its pains and discomforts instead of stiffening against them, and listen to its messages. Meanwhile, our son began to share what he had not when he was younger: how lost and uncertain he had felt, as if adrift in an abyss. How he still felt that way with people, in spite of all reassurances that he was appreciated and loved. I told him what I had gone through, and how I had found help. In our conversation, a new life of acceptance and understanding could begin to grow, released from the prison of silent shame.

I can never give him back those lost years when I was not really able to be there for him, but I can be there for him now, and offer him my most heartfelt love, a love that I owe to him. It was his courage in coming to me, unworthy as I was, that opened up my heart. I have to trust in God to fill in any gaps that remain, and continue the healing work of reconnection.

*

I walk up to one of my favorite places in the Combe Grède, where a huge beech spreads her motherly arms wide over a rough log bench and a fire circle. I hop over the gurgling brown stream and sit on the bench. It starts to rain — it's been raining off and on all day, that's why the stream is so full — but hardly a drop reaches me through those protective branches.

I want to pray. I get all tangled up in myself, telling God about what's wrong with me and how I want him to fix things. Then I stop.

I simply sit in quiet, and look up through the leaves, where a patch of sky is beginning to lighten, a promise of sun to come. I breathe.

In the stillness and coolness of the Combe Grède, in its emptiness that offers a place to enter and to grow, I encounter what I need to learn. I need to tame my fire and let it come to rest, let it cool and turn into rock and not fear being frozen or imprisoned thereby. The rock will be colonized by life, slow, patient, determined life that takes hold of it and transforms it and crumbles it into soil. This life will rise towards the sun and receive light and turn it into nourishment that fosters more life. Everything will die and become new.

Even if the sun is hidden, even if it's blocked out by the rocky shoulder of a mountain, life still has its way of growing. There is nothing to worry about. I only need to find my place, settle there, and sense how the sun is calling me.

I get up and walk back down the mountain, into my life.

I enter into the realm from which my help comes: my home, my family, my community. I turn toward the people through whom I experience the presence of God, not as a shadow, but as a revelation of eternal realities. In them, the rocky barriers that divide us begin to shine, to become transparent and show forth the love that created and connects us all.

Love will come, along the way.

Celeste Pfister

The Gift

An inveterate collector, I began early with a small book of blank pages bound in padded blue leatherette where I pasted holy relics of saints/illustrations of angels with glittered wings/sacred heart picture cards/virgin Mary keepsakes/Easter Sunday blessings/a photo of the pope/a 2nd grade scholastic award from Sister Ann/an illustrated first-communion prayer/and more. My album was nearly filled that ninth summer: heat waves and children idled on the porches of my Phoenix neighborhood. I overheard my parents talking about a family who lived two houses away—we did not know them well, and their children, Hattie, 6, and Henry, 4, were not my playmates. Occasionally Hattie and I passed each other roller skating up and down the sidewalk. My parents said Hattie lost her younger brother when the gun he had been playing with misfired, and though details were sketchy my shock and sorrow were sudden and strong and without thinking I offered my collection of religious mementos to her as though a book of sacred words and pictures could comfort her the way it did me as though in presenting my collection Hattie would know what I meant to say but did not have words for then. Neither did she. It was my mother who had plenty of words when she demanded I take it back. But I never did.

Mary Elliot

Consider Gaza

Consider the lilies of the field:

Shot strict towards the light, every morning new.

Asiatics, Trumpets; Stargazer, Corvara, Martagon -

Each epithet an answer to the random, to the statistical residue.

Shot strict towards the light, every morning new,

Consider the bodies unearthed from the rubble, names written on limbs -

Each epithet an answer to the random, to the statistical residue.

Others hang as fruit from the olive tree - tinsel, trim.

Consider the bodies unearthed from the rubble, names written on limbs.

Consider the body, broken for you and for the lilies of the field.

Others hang as fruit from the olive tree - tinsel, trim.

Children of God, perhaps, but the grief outlasts us, on and on.

Consider the body, broken for you and for the lilies of the field.

Asiatics, Trumpets; Stargazer, Corvara, Martagon -

Children of God, perhaps, but the grief outlasts us, on and on.

Consider the lilies of the field.

Steven Ostrowski

Stranger, and More Personal 68

We can only have one-way conversations with the dead.

Last night, though, my mother sang to me.

Strange song of the long road to an ages-old understanding.

She found every ordinary thing worth something extra-ordinary.
This is what I'm learning at last.

So I've been thinking about mistakes I made.
They dam up in the body. I'm ready for the burst.

Herself a child of life's woundings, my mother showed love by doing
and then by doing more.

I've come to think of God as a verb.

I miss her. I want to learn her ways of wonder.

Marge Piercy

Lost ones in waiting

I don't know why some days
the dead are close to me.
Memories swarm unbidden.
Gone voices tickle my ears.

Suddenly a forgotten meal,
a gesture, a laugh, a touch
brings back the lost one
and mourning resumes.

You think, how could I ever
forget that look, that smile
an evening our minds
touched and we glowed.

But we will forget again
and again. Then something
will bring it all back, briefly
a song lying in wait

that will for a time be stuck
in your brain like a burr.

Richard Collins

There's Something About Bamboo

- for Robert Livingston Roshi (1933-2021)

There's something about spun bamboo
— T-shirts and winding sheets, for example —
that's like mint on the skin.

One you slip on first thing in the morning,
the other you slip into in the end.

I used to think texture was the be-all and end-all
and I'm beginning to think so again.

Here and now. My teacher was a master
of many things, not of himself perhaps,
but he was never so much himself as in his garden
even more than when he was teaching Zen.

Above all he was a master of bamboo —
of its majestic height and its tensile strength
and how its roots burrow under earth's skin
without regard for property or propriety,
not unlike him, he himself, who still speaks
of the wonders of bamboo to me and now to you,
though his ashes rest in this
carved cubicle of an urn of strong minty grass.

- *My Zen teacher was Robert Livingston Roshi, who died in 2021 after a long decline. In his prime, he was a force of nature, as they say, a force to be reckoned with. A longtime member of the American Bamboo Society, he was a master gardener. His neighbors compared him with Nosferatu, because of his shaved head, his pointy ears, and the fact that he dressed all in black. I took care of him in his last four years. He is with me still, on the altar of the Stone Nest Dojo, in an urn of golden bamboo.*

Regina YC Garcia

Stars and Sin

Looking at stars is sin?
I am born in sin
I'm looking at stars to find myself
To find my way
To find an answer
To find the voice in the stars

Many of the righteous
Followed stars
Found Jesus
following stars
What a journey!
Looking at stars
to find their way
to hear That Voice
to see It clear

Mama Harriet looked at stars
Mama Harriet knew God
The God she knew...
you think that god is
your god, too?
Sounds good to say it
But Her God
was in the night air
and in her mind
and in those stars

Have you looked at
what happens
when you look at stars?
Looking at stars has
slowed death
Looking at stars has
saved lives
Not looking, though
Sometimes meant not living

Telling me not to look at stars
Telling me not to live
Telling me to lower my eyes
Telling me to hear your Jesus
Is my Jesus your Jesus?
My Jesus was born
under the stars
Ain't no sin in him

My Jesus was born under stars
Ancient books say that his star
shone brightly above him
Folks have walked for years
guided by the stars
But now messages from the stars
are devilish?

Stars worship God
even better than flesh
Line up and listen
better than flesh
I look at stars
That makes me sin?
I look at stars
Because I am born in sin
I look at stars
They are messengers
of Science and Salvation
because they know God
And I want God
to show me the way
And I want God
to keep me whole

John Jeffire

Let the Dead Bury the Dead

Each October the rusted, iron-framed dray was rigged to the massive gate hinges anchored into the stone wall that encircled the Krakowski Market yard. Onto it the men of the ward piled 50-pound grain sacks or brick courses it took two men to lift. Once everyone had settled and said their hellos, helped themselves to beer or whiskey, and caught up on the talk of the ward, those who wanted to compete would step between the long arms of the dray resting on the ground, face out toward the crowd, squat down, grip the thick handles, and then struggle until they stood erect, shoulders thrown back, the muscle in their necks popping, their bodies quivering under the load but a strained smile appearing beneath their sweat soaked foreheads. That, or they failed, allowing the massive weight to crash back to the ground, cursing as the steadily drunker men laughed, cheered the effort, and shouted for the next man to step up.

All the men put in one dollar and then cast side bets—Martinus Grushus, the keg lifter from the brewery, was the obvious favorite, but they also wagered on who would lose out in the very first lift or if this man would last longer than that. The man who dropped out third was given ten bottles of Mr. Krakowski's beer, a very nice and appreciated prize; the second man left standing received the same amount of beer but also \$5, a damn sight of money for a Saturday's fun labor; the champion took home the beer, but also two bottles of whiskey and \$10 for his efforts, a handsome pay-off, but not as handsome as the bragging rights as the ward's strongest man.

Riley had been working steady on the docks in the preceding months, wrestling crates onto the massive pallets carrying goods from the ship holds to the pier below. Often, he and the other stevedores and lackeys would engage in boxing matches—for money, of course—and he had taken home small fortunes betting on himself that allowed him to buy his wife Matilda a china tea set and all their four children new shoes. Some days he stayed extra time and loaded trucks with the goods delivered from the ships—sides of beef, lumber, you name it—and was given a small portion of the wares as a reward. He was not squat like Grushus but he possessed a raw-boned, veined power of someone in full manhood. Matilda was excited he would likely bring home \$5; she did not care about the beer. But what if he walked through the doors of their home with a crate full of beer bottles and whiskey and \$10 in his pocket? He would take her and the children to the beer garden and they would all eat steaks and Matilda would have a glass of champagne. More important, he would have enough to tar the roof for the coming winter.

The competition started with five sacks of grain stacked on the dray with a course of bricks. Around 15 men made the first cut. For contestants like Riley and Grushus, this was a mere warming of the muscles. After an hour and more sacks and bricks, they were down to seven men, then three, and then two, Riley and Grushus.

As he prepared for another round, Riley inhaled deeply. A pain darted behind his right eye. It wasn't liquor—he'd only had one quick touch before beginning. Last week on the dock, he had been in a scuffle with Nemcovsky, a block-headed Hungy who challenged him at the end of their shift. The Hungarians, Slovaks, Bavarians, Czechs, Austrians, and Poles—all thrown in under the name Hungy—were eager to see the man who had risen through their ranks challenge the Irishman, the current king of the docks. The battle was fierce. At the signal, Nemcovsky roared forward, launching haymakers from all angles, hoping to secure an early knock out, one of the blows catching Riley on the temple.

Riley staggered to the side and instinctually clinched his man, tying up his arms to smother his punches. In seconds, his vision cleared slightly and he found his legs. They broke the clinch, and Riley, head aching, neck seizing, and eager to finish, decided to pile on and rained down a succession of punches that had the Hungies stepping in to save their bloody, swollen man. Shaking slightly, blurry eyed, stiff-necked, pain rooting behind his right eye, Riley staggered home, at one point throwing up and losing his direction but grateful to be \$3 to the good.

Krakowski's yard flowed with hoots and sloshing tin cups. Riley strode forward, his temple throbbing but otherwise confident. After spitting into his hands, he dug his boots between the iron arms of the dray, squatted, his back straight and his eyes looking up to the now-dark sky. The air had cooled and torches been lit around the yard and the crowd was well into its pints. Riley burst upward, laboring only slightly, his head filling with blood. The cheering of the crowd became a muffler over his ears. His legs shook momentarily before he stood bolt straight, the crowd cheering in appreciation. The dray handles crashing to the earth quaked the yard.

Grushus was summoned to make his lift. His mates actually had to lead him to the dray, where he shook his head to clear the cobwebs. As he bent over to grasp the iron handles, he put a hand to the ground to keep from falling—the whiskey had him. Once in position, he swayed slightly but his eyes were closed, almost as if he had fallen asleep. Then he struggled up, not his usual cannon burst but the strain of a horse trying to pull a chained stump from the ground. Because he was so squat, he did not have to travel far to reach the upright position, but this was not the man who had won so many ward championships. He let out a wounded cry but willed himself upward, finally reaching a full stand before allowing the weight to crash down.

“Yah, yah, yah, you see, easy working!” he sputtered, his lungs heaving. The yard erupted in laughter, the men jocular and moved by the spirits. Riley called for a grain sack. This would put Grushus away. After it was thrown onto the dray, he made his way to his position. He set himself, the pain behind his eye jabbing him, his neck suddenly becoming rigid but his mouth forming a confident grin.

Riley put the pounding in his head aside—he was one good go from \$10. Grushus was drunk, he was old, his britches had gotten far too big. Riley took a huge swell of air into his chest and exhaled. He spit into his hands a final time, rubbed them together, and reset his feet. He crouched, his back a ramrod, and he looked up into the black sky. He controlled his breaths and waited for the proper sign. His head throbbed but he refused to feel it. A light-headedness started to set in he had never felt before but it was banished. He exploded up. The dray rattled, the men whooped and cheered. Riley bit down hard against his own teeth and willed himself skyward. The insides of his knees and elbows screamed, the blades of his shoulders flared out, the blood coursed through his head like a rabid waterfall. His legs straightened ever so slowly. In seconds, he only had to drive his hips forward into a line with his shoulders and the lift was his.

The men hollered, their voices again surfacing from the depths of the river. A rail spike suddenly drove into the back of his right eye and darkness began to assault his foggy vision. One more inch and he was upright. The spike drove and redrove into his skull, threatening to push his right eye completely out of its socket. His neck locked and he thought his teeth might break off from biting down so hard, but a half inch, a straightening of the shoulders, his heart hammering in his skull, unclenching his teeth just enough to let out a banshee cry, he was stock straight, the dray quaking in his victory.

Then darkness.

*

Doctor Filkins was gray and, along with his peculiar odor, he carried his leather doctor's bag house to house, spectacles notched on the end of his nose (which sprouted tufts of wiry hair on either side), accepting tea or whiskey and a meal from all he visited in addition to his normal fees. The Riley home was, in a word, modest. The large bedroom was for their four children, the smaller for the parents. There was a front parlor with a stuffed chair, a frayed couch, some vases and an ornately framed photo of George Riley and his wife Matilda sitting with their oldest child, Charles, a tidy kitchen, and a shed and outhouse in the back. Matilda's ceramic tea pot and cups set on a shelf her husband made and hung above the sink tub across from their Detroit Jewell stove. They had talked of building a bedroom or two onto the back of the house as the children grew.

They had dreams.

Father McNaughton had already come to read the last rites and left to tend to an emergency. That was days ago. Dock workers came to check on George, even the Hungies, and members of St. Josephat Church, all bringing bread, butter, milk, and sweet cakes for the children. "Riley's a strong one," they told her. "He'll come through it." The same bone coldness Matilda felt in the lightless gut of the ship she and George huddled in on their way from Ireland flooded through her.

George lay in their bed. He was feverish, one moment unmoving and the next, without warning, calling out wildly and scaring the crying children in the next room. At odd intervals he moaned and grimaced, seized in pain, and then relaxed, the air leaving his chest as he sank back into the bed. Both his eyes were black from the broken nose, but his right eye sagged down his cheek. The doctor peeled back his eyelid, felt around his throat, and examined the swollen, purpled bloating in his right temple.

“Well,” said Dr. Filkins, placing his stethoscope back in his worn bag.

“Will he...come through it, doctor?” asked Matilda.

“That, ma’am, is a matter of definition.”

She did not understand his answer. Did he mean her husband would recover, be back to work, lifting up the children when he returned from the docks as she readied his supper? Filkins looked Matilda over, waiting for her to speak.

“Doctor, he was fine, strong as a bear, and now...now, he’s like this. He’s hurting, doctor. What happen to him? Will he be his self again?”

“Mrs. Riley, first, let us consider the first question. Putting it in a way you’ll understand, your husband broke something in his head, probably deep in his skull, a vein, possibly an artery. The only way to know for sure is to bore a hole deep into his cranium to have a look see, but the process would certainly kill him. That I will officially rule out as a diagnostic option.”

Matilda looked down at her husband, whose lips were moving but no sound emitted from his mouth.

“Will he...will he get better? How long before he’s better?”

“You make many assumptions, dear woman. There’s no telling if he *will* ever be better, whatever that means.”

“Dr. Filkins, it mean I need to know. What can you do—what can I do—to help him? He must get better. We need him better.”

“I think it best not to get your hopes up, Mrs. Riley. I’ve done what I am able to do. What you can do is keep the cold washcloths applied to the swollen area and try to reduce the swelling. And there, you have two bottles of strong spirits, if his pain becomes intolerable, a brimming dose of that will help. In the meantime, if you can get him to drink, brew him tea and mix it with honey and lemon if you have any to keep him stable.”

George was talking to someone but not saying anything. His eyes were closed and he was sweating. She removed the cold cloth on his head, which was now warm to the touch, and dunked it back into the bucket of cold water at the bedside, wrung it, then reapplied it gently to the swollen area. As she did, she bent a bit lower and kissed his wet forehead.

“It’s quite the shame when these young ones decide to turn circus strongman to impress their lads. What profit such foolishness?”

“It profit \$10 and two bottles of whiskey and 10 bottles of ale, doctor, that what it profit.”

“It what?”

“That was my husband’s profit for playing circus strongman. It bring money home to the family. Same as boxing matches at the dock. He earn his money honest through the muscle and bone God give him. He got no shame in whatever he done.”

Filkins straightened his coat and cleared his throat, then tapped the side of his head.

“Now that I think of it, there are, I am certain, uh, other treatments you might wish to purchase, uh, pursue, some elixirs and medicinals I happen to be in possession of at this very moment, right here in my satchel. These are powerful concoctions, and very well could ease the onset of further, more dangerous symptoms and alleviate his present pain. Here, I happen....”

“I’m understanding what must be done, doctor. We won’t be needing any additional medicine. I thank you for what you done.”

She looked at her husband lying inert in their bed.

“Well then, if I am no longer needed, there is only the matter of my compensation.”

Matilda adjusted the cloth on her husband’s head. Filkins broke a grin.

“So, good woman, my normal fee is \$1 for the visit, assessment, and treatment I rendered. In this case, however, I would be willing to accept, uh, an alternate form of compensation if that would help you.”

Matilda did not like the smile on the doctor’s face. He was saying something but meaning something else. Her husband was in pain. He could not stand up or walk or speak. There was nothing to smile about.

“I’ll fetch a dollar.”

“Madame, I understand your finances and, again, if your purse is light, I could...consider some alternative methods of payment.”

“I said I’ll fetch a dollar.”

Matilda walked to the nightstand next to the bed and reached down into the top drawer and retrieved four bits.

“All I meant, good lady, was that I would be willing to accept, hmmm, one of those bottles of whiskey in exchange for my services. That, along with the reduced fee of two bits. Or....”

“Here,” Matilda interrupted. “We owe you four bits. We gonna need the whiskey but, here, and you can have the crate of ale for your trouble. We won’t need it. You’ll be blessed to have it.”

Filkins raised his eyebrows and tilted his head in calculation. He accepted the coins, taking Matilda’s wrist with one hand and removing the coins with the other.

“I’ll get your ale, Mr. Filkins,” she said, pulling her wrist free.

*

Sometimes even in sleep you understand something or are aware of something, able to see even when your eyes are closed. In the dead of night a week after her husband's mind broke, Matilda opened her eyes but somehow knew what she would see, the bedroom she shared with her husband swept in moonlight, the window open slightly to let in some coolness.

"Tildy?"

She could make out the moon of her husband's silhouetted head. He was awake. He had not sat up since the accident, but here he was, sitting up. She cleaned him and their bed when he messed, brought soup and tea and whiskey to his lips, applied the cold cloths, prayed each night and several times a day to Saint Dymphna. Was this a dream? Was he really returned?

"Georgie..."

"Tildy," he said hoarsely, reaching for her hand.

"My Georgie, you..."

"Tildy, darling, the money?" His voice was soft and rasping but clear, lovely music.

"The money?"

"Prize money."

"The prize money? Yes, yes, I got the money when they bring you home, they bring me the money and the whiskey and ale. Georgie..."

She could not finish her thought before the moon of his head sank back to his pillow. She got out of bed and paced to his side, where she lit the oil lamp.

His face glowed like a baby's. His eyes were closed again. The right one sagged as if carrying a heavy weight.

*

The grounds of Eloise. The hospital was the largest building Matilda had ever seen up close and ventured inside, five stories tall with two peaked turrets and a porch wide as Woodward Avenue, but there were also the smokestacks of the power house and a water tower that touched the sky, a farm with cows in the south field, and a trolley to port you anywhere you needed to go. Two other buildings were as large as the hospital, the poorhouse and the sanatorium, and they were joined by a firehouse, police station, post office, bakery, chapel, doctors' homes and a lake with a boardwalk, a complete city unto itself. Dr. Morton said there were almost 10,000 people—patients—here in all, and close to 2,000

workers and staff. He assured her that her husband would receive the best care possible and all that could be done for someone in his condition.

Her husband had “incomplete dementia,” a form of insanity whereby, for unknown reason, on strange occasion he could be lucid and communicate, but those brief moments would be rare and not to be expected on any consistent (and certainly not permanent) basis. He was, for the most part, what Doctor Morton called an “imbecile,” a bit more advanced than an “idiot” but well below a “moron.” The scientific terms jumbled in her head. *Only a miracle from God above would ever let him recover*, the doctor said sympathetically. It was best to make him comfortable. Keep him from harming himself or someone else. That was the humane thing to do. It was what God would want for her husband.

“Right this way, ma’am,” said the white-coated orderly, but after two years she could walk to George’s room blindfolded and needed no escort.

“Can you tell me...has he been eating?”

“Oh, he eats.”

“Has he been...well?”

“Well? Well as can be expected, you might say, I mean, all considering. He ain’t been a problem, if that’s what you mean.”

The orderly carried a night stick. She knew what he meant. On some visits, her husband’s face was bruised and his arms welted. Doctor Morton said he was strong and, at times, willful.

“There’s still a mind in there, and when he sets himself to it he can be a handful. But don’t worry,” the doctor assured her when she inquired about her husband’s wounds on a previous visit. “He’s fed and he’s bathed. He is receiving the best care that can be expected.”

After the aide unlocked the heavy door, they found him sitting in a chair facing the barred window, his mouth slightly open. Something in the far distance of the grounds had his interest. He did not move when Matilda pulled up a chair. Whatever he saw off in the distance locked his full attention.

Matilda found it hard to swallow, and her eyes began to well.

“Would you leave us be, please, for a spell?”

“I’ll be right close if you need me.”

The orderly patted his club and left. Matilda looked out the window, trying to see what her husband was seeing. Beyond the buildings, the fields stretched and then gave way to clusters of trees. She took his hand—it was warm and thick and twice the size of hers. The callouses were gone, only the milky scars of his

scraps on the dock remaining. She looked out onto the green fields, a goat or cow occasionally lifting its head. He used to be the one to take her hand. As they walked along the Detroit River and strolled through Eastern Market when they courted. When he proposed to her in Grand Circus Park. At night in bed when she was carrying their children.

“What you see out there, Georgie?”

His mouth began to move but no sound exited. He was balding now, and life in the hospital had created a softness about him. She held his hand tighter. He began to raise his other arm and point.

“That’s it,” she told him. His mouth continued to move, as if in some silent language he was explaining exactly what had captured his attention.

“Hooooo...”

His left eye widened and his right tried to lift. His mouth opened wide as he sat up in his chair, his arm extending into the distance.

“Yes, that’s it, Georgie, tell me.”

“Hooo...”

She looked out the window, following the length of his raised arm. The field was lush and green, the animals peaceful, the trees swaying to a spring breeze.

“Georgie, would you like to walk today? To go out where you’re pointing?”

He lowered his arm and, his neck fixed, he turned his entire body to her. The fog lifted from his good eye. Slowly, he nodded.

“Okay then, we’ll go for a grand tour.”

She stood, then laced her arm through his. He was too big a man to lift. He seemed to understand and used her only for balance. He pushed up from the chair, caught about halfway up, as if he forgot what he was doing, then finished his drive upward. She could swear he smiled.

“Here we go, darling.”

His walk was a shuffle. They left his room and made their way past a soiled man groaning on the floor. Yelling broke from rooms down the hallway but they moved ahead, pushing aside anything that might waylay their journey. They had to walk down a flight of stairs before reaching the outside doors. Once on the wide porch, they made their way to ground level. He descended the stairs the same way, left foot first, right following, slowly, carefully, left foot again, then the right. She held his arm, letting him do the work, careful not to pull or pressure him, until they made the sidewalk.

“That’s beautiful, Georgie. The children would be proud of you.”

He stiffened, pulling her arm and drawing her close to him. Something like a moan came from inside him. She reached to his shoulder with her free hand and patted him. They froze a moment before he loosened and they began their walk along the path.

On their way to the fields, his gait had lengthened, and she believed he held to her arm not for balance but warmth, closeness.

“Loove-ly.”

The word stopped her. It was his old voice, deep and certain. She had only heard it a handful of times since his accident. It lit something inside her, a small combustion of hope, followed by a dark blanket of reality. *His head is broke. Don't get your hopes up...incomplete dementia...imbecile.* These sweet clear moments would not visit her on any consistent or permanent basis.

She stepped in front of him and gripped his arms. He looked down at her, his left eye clear.

“Yes, Georgie, the fields are lovely, aren’t they?”

His good eye was a pool of spring lake blue.

“You.”

She began shaking. Words. Real words. *His* words. Why would she lose herself at a few words? She made do in his absence. She cleaned homes in the ward. She took in laundry from some of the families George had worked with on the docks. Charles looked after his brother and sisters while she was away. She returned home each night with some coins, bone exhausted, and made dinner. They no longer asked when papa was coming home. They still had the photo in the parlor to remember him by, or to think they remembered him.

Did *she* really remember him?

And why would she still visit Eloise? She was young. Yes, she had four little ones but she was still shapely. Many of the men in the ward, including smelly Doctor Filkins, gave her the eye when she was porting a basket of clothes or carrying the groceries home from market. But she was married. As long as her husband was alive, she was married. She was too old for the young men of the ward. She was too young for the old men.

She looked up to her husband. His good eye clouded. The sweet curl of his smile fled. He looked out at something in the field or the distant culvert.

He was gone. She was married. Her place was a place that was no place.

*

When the telegram arrived, she stopped her laundry and took a moment at the kitchen table. Was she sad? Or worse...relieved? She didn't want the answers. So the next day she took a carriage to Eloise. The Roundhouse was not really a "house" at all but the morgue, a temporary home for the dead before they were taken to the potter's field for burial.

A nurse with spectacles greeted her then escorted her to the back. It smelled of hard chemicals. A doctor and several orderlies were working away at a table on which the body of an old man lay.

"Doctor Dultlitz, this woman is here for identification."

"In a minute." The doctor gave instructions to two orderlies before turning to Matilda.

"And you are?"

"Matilda Riley."

"Riley. Yes, Riley, hmmm, large fellow, follow me."

They walked a short distance and the doctor threw back one of the many curtains. Before her on a metal table was an open wooden box. The wood grain echoed the china shelf George made her.

"Can you identify this individual? Is he your husband?"

She walked to the side of the crate, paused, then peered over the edge. It was George. His face was soft and white and round, a tuft of hair falling onto his forehead. Both his eyes were closed, finally, both thankfully closed.

"It's George."

"Very well then. I'm sorry for your loss. We do have a pressing schedule to keep today. Things tend to pile up around here, if you know what I mean. Miss Ludlow has some papers for you to sign and then you can proceed to the burial. Miss Ludlow, please take care of Mrs....of...this woman."

She rode the trolley to the field, where two orderlies watched over four patients, who were finishing digging the last of three new graves. They were nearly finished by the time the wagon brought out the box, which was accompanied by two others. She recognized George's because of the pattern of the raw grain.

"Well, ma'am, since you're the only person to come out today, we can do you first. Which hole might you want?"

The holes were all the same. There was no real choice. She pointed to the

middle one—it was closest to the wagon and would give George the shortest route to his rest.

“Very well then. Now, c’mon, you simps, you ain’t done yet. Let’s get this box here, yeah, this one...”

“My husband is in that box,” Matilda interrupted.

“What’s that? This box? You sure? If you say so. Okay, goldbrickers, let’s put a hoof to it, c’mon.”

Three patients dropped their shovels; it took a jab in the ribs from an orderly’s club to wake the biggest. Guided by the orderlies, they slid George’s coffin from the wagon and laid it across two ropes next to the hole she had selected. “Yesh, yesh, yesh,” whispered the stout patient. The smallest dripped spittle onto the lid. The wild-haired one sneezed and the toothless boy shook his head. The four stood across from each other and took hold of the ropes, lifted, and marched to the hole.

“Steady now,” said one of the orderlies. “You don’t want the club, do you?”

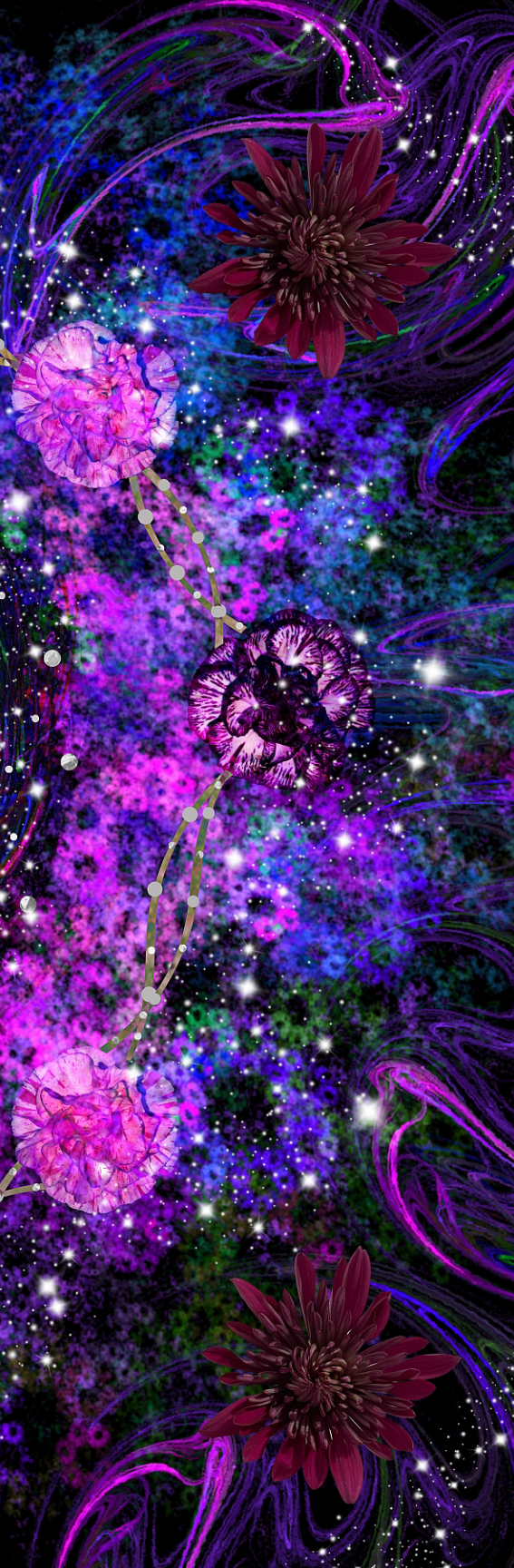
“Yesh, yesh, yesh,” whispered the stout man as they took position across from each other on opposite sides of the grave and slowly let out line, lowering the box into the ground. Once finished, the orderlies tugged and recovered the ropes, which they set up for the next coffin.

The four patients were commanded back to their shovels, the dirt at first pounding the roof of the casket like rain until it was covered. As the mound next to the grave disappeared and the hole filled, Matilda’s mind filled with walks along the riverfront. Grand Circus Park. Her wedding day at St. Josephat. The birth of each child. The images glowed like a picture show in the Majestic Theatre. As the final shovels of dirt were patted down on the swollen trench, she thought of a passage she had always heard from the scriptures. In the tale, the Lord tells a man to let the dead bury the dead. The Bible could not be wrong, but ever since she was a little girl she had always found the story queer. How could a dead man bury a dead man? How could a dead man do anything?

Standing next to her husband’s grave, she understood.

- for George Riley Meadows





Diamante Lavendar

Wreath Of Hope

Carolyn Chilton Casas

The Earthen Jug

A lifetime is like a tall, earthen jug
formed from a smattering of wet clay
by the hands of one who loves us,
fired at high heat until resilient,
sturdy and steady enough
to withstand
being jostled
by a clumsy gesture.
A vessel to simultaneously
hold who we were,
who we are,
and who we are becoming.
When thirsting for answers,
we can tilt the pitcher
to pour out our memories,
the joyful, the mundane, and the jarring.
We take needed nourishment
from the happenings that mold us.
We draw sustenance
from this container crafted with care.
Oh beloved, age-old receptacle,
I want to daily fill you with
the sweet wine of life, the everyday holy.

Eleanor Hubbard

Slouches toward Jerusalem

*“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” - W.B. Yeats*

My mission seemed so clear,
announced it with hearty hosannas.
Some said son of God,
only wanted to be son of man.
A human being, an anointed one,
no better than the least.
Instead, responses were mixed.
Some loved, others hated, most indifferent.
So, it is time I go to Jerusalem,
where God lives.
March. Healthy long strides,
my destiny comprehensible.
Stride. Purposefully forward,
what lies ahead crystal clear.
Plod. Move steadily,
mission vague, maybe I won't be noticed.
Trudge. Exhaustion prevails,
no more certainty, all appears murky.
Slouch. Nothing left.
I'm like a rough beast,
whose hour has come.
God, you called, I thought I answered.
now what? No, more what I want,
only what the crowds want.
Healer, you're bleeding, heal yourself.
Teacher, say the word, we're ready to fight.
Prophet, walk away from the cross, it's not for you.
Show everyone your power,
King of kings
Prince of peace.
Long awaited Messiah?
I sob, beloved son is enough.

Thad DeVassie

Intercession

Before she forgot who I was and how to speak, she told me about the recurring dream, the fear it instilled, the one I find myself dreaming for her, which has me here, as an intercessor, with the end drawing near. Bring about a great reveal, that what lies ahead would never warrant this ticking anxiousness, harbor a distress that runs counter to salvation's promise and goes unmet,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

that grace and forgiveness extended to one means needed amends with the other are overlooked,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

where down a gold-leaf alley I stumble upon a woman sitting on a stoop, looking left and right, babbling in tangled tongue, unable to find the diction, knowing this isn't how she imagined it,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

with him here,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

and I fail to recognize the woman as my mother, she in the form of her pre-mother self, a pre-abused self,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

and so I approach with due caution, sit next to her on the stoop, and hear uneasy whisperings of melancholy moving on the wind, like a snake inching its way over dead leaves, like a harbinger of future and fallen days,

(Lord, hear our prayer)

at which point she leans her head on my shoulder, hands folded and fidgety with muscle memory missing her rosary, and begins to weep, for eternity, for all eternity that eludes the call and desired response, a much-needed amen.

Julia Hjelte

The Day I Met My Reverence

The Day I met my Reverence, I was standing by the sea.
Dancing, walking, searching, that's when Kali came to me.

She showed me her compassion as she lapped up all the blood,
Alchemizing demons into everlasting love.

She showed me her discernment as she cut the muck away,
Leaving nothing but the truth 'neath the demons that she slayed.

She showed me her great wisdom in roaring out the pain,
Hissing, gnashing, clawing, laying out my anger plain.

She showed me of the Sacred where she chose to shine the light,
Redirecting darkness, drawing clarity from night.

She showed me intuition, what it's like to truly know
That the divine is deep inside me, fount of Knowing, overflow.

She showed me her kind justice in the way she held my stare,
Never turning from my pain, though it felt too much to bear.

And so in midst of heartache, confusion, fear, and doubt,
Kali granted me her Power to let all those untruths out.

No more smallness or rejection, no more self-abandonment,
No more fear of not belonging, nor of self-aggrandizement.

When I saw that I was her and also me and also you,
So came limitless devotion—foundation of my Truth.

And perhaps that's just the way, when the gods come down to us,
For there's no burden too great that cannot be borne with trust.

So go, you weary travelers, and give her your heart bare,
For she will hold it like a treasure, with the utmost, gentle care.

And yes, she will fight—with ferocity unequalled,
But she fights for your *freedom*, vanquishing all evil

'Til you recognize your worth in every budding flower,
That your Soul may finally rest in the seat of (y)our great Power.

Scott Hurd

Return to Nickel Mines

Most everyone loves a good forgiveness story. They give us hope for a world with a little less darkness and a little more light, where broken hearts are mended, shattered relationships are restored, and redemption triumphs over resentment. They can offer faith in humanity's fundamental goodness and a dose of inspiration when we've been hurt by another. That's why, seventeen years ago, so many were enthralled by the Amish response to a brutal mass murder that devastated their community. But at the time I didn't count myself as an admirer. I was more suspicious than I was inspired.

A lone gunman, Charles Roberts, had shot ten Old Order Amish girls he'd tied up in their one-room schoolhouse. Five of them died before Roberts turned his gun on himself. The country was shocked by this senseless violence toward defenseless children. But just as shocking was how the Amish community—including the victims' parents—immediately and publicly forgave the killer. They reached out to his family with sympathy, attended his funeral, and diverted donations they received from around the world to his widow instead.

The Amish were hailed as saints and celebrated as supreme exemplars of compassion and mercy. Their forgiveness of a gruesome, premeditated crime was heralded as a model for all to imitate. From pulpits and across the media, awestruck pundits and preachers lauded this community of professed pacifists.

Their story was the focus of numerous articles, essays, and books, and was adapted into a play, a movie, and even an off-Broadway musical- *Nickel Mines*- named for the Pennsylvania town where they lived.

In anticipation of the tragedy's tenth anniversary, I was invited to contribute to an e-book celebrating the community's forgiveness. I was honored to have been asked, as I'd written a book about forgiveness a few years before. But I was hesitant to contribute to this one. To begin with, I didn't want to idealize the Amish or appropriate their culture. That had already been done by the evangelical women who wrote the so-called "Bonnet Ripper" romance novels, which the Amish themselves find both puzzling and amusing.

I was also concerned that holding up this community's act as the gold standard of forgiveness would create unrealistic or impossible expectations, adding discouragement and guilt to the burdens of hurting people struggling to process trauma and pain. Those who felt paralyzed with grief or overwhelmed by anger might understandably resent immediate forgiveness being expected or even demanded from them. It's for good reason that forgiveness experts in the psychological world warn that forgiveness should never be rushed or compelled.

I felt conflicted. On one hand, I didn't want to challenge the sincerity of what the Amish did. Forgiveness and nonviolence are cherished Amish principles, and how they publicly responded to Charles Roberts' crime was characteristic of who they are and what they believe. On the other hand, I was concerned that not all of their community's forgiveness practices were benign, let alone admirable. I recalled reading somewhere that Amish men would demand apologies from women they'd raped for having tempted them to sexual sin. If true, such abusive victim-shaming would be a grotesque symptom of an unhealthily patriarchal and religiously twisted culture.

Part of me wondered whether their forgiveness of Charles Roberts was "real," or simply a performative act from a group for which submitting to cultural expectations is non-negotiable, and religious conformity the norm. I feared that some concluded they had no choice but to express forgiveness, whether they wanted to or not. Refusal might risk their being ostracized or even expelled from their tightly-knit, insular world. Those who separate themselves from the

Amish community are not generally allowed back in. And nonconformists can be demanded to leave.

I also wondered about their feelings. Days after their children were killed, victims' mothers were at the murderer's funeral, hugging and consoling his widow and their three children. Were they genuinely expressing solidarity with a fellow sufferer? Were they extending love to another whose life, like theirs, had been irrevocably shattered? Were they secretly seething with hatred and rage? Was their public display of forgiveness merely a show to placate a demanding deity, who they resented for having allowed such evil to happen? Were they barely able to face the world that day? Was it all of the above?

Later I would learn what the Amish felt, and that their choice to forgive didn't negate their grief. They shared their experience in media interviews years after the tragedy, which was uncharacteristic for a people resistant to pull back the curtain to the outside world. Survivors spoke of deep depression and a fear that made them hypervigilant. They exhibited signs of posttraumatic stress. There was profound anger and overwhelming sorrow. All of which was normal- and indeed to be expected- in light of the circumstances.

It's as if they wanted to reassure everyone that they were human. That their forgiveness story which enamored so many was not all sunshine and rainbows. That pain lingered and festered long after the wound was inflicted. That their hearts weren't immediately filled with peace and joy or gratitude for the privilege of witnessing to their faith. That assumptions about God were shaken to their foundations. That their public act of forgiveness was not the end of the story. That it was, in many ways, just the beginning.

I hope that the admirers initially enraptured by the Amish at Nickel Mines continued to follow their story after it faded from the public's eye. But I suspect many didn't, leaving them with a truncated view of forgiveness as a single heroic act that can look impossibly superhuman when facing circumstances for which an "eye for an eye" seems like a more natural response. And that's a shame. Because, with the perspective of time, the collective Amish experience is a sobering reminder that while forgiveness is a decision, it's also a process - a process in which feelings have to be felt, pain must be faced, and the decision to forgive might need to be made over and over again.

That's certainly been my experience of forgiveness. Maybe that's why I didn't immediately join the legion of Amish admirers. I needed to hear about their depression, fear, and pain in order to connect their forgiveness story with my own. I had to empathize before I could eulogize. No one I loved had been murdered, I'm grateful to say, but I had been dealt a massive betrayal that turned my life upside down and smashed my heart to pieces. As the author of a book about forgiveness and a self-proclaimed "expert" on the subject, I was challenged to live my own words in a way I'd never done before. I was consumed by anger. I was immobilized by pain. I was devastated by humiliation. I shook my fist at God. I nursed plenty of revenge fantasies. And I felt like a complete hypocrite.

Both the Amish and I were anguished over the wounds we'd been dealt. In that way, we were alike. Yet in another way, our circumstances were quite different. For them, the one who needed forgiveness was dead, and could cause no further harm. They had no opportunity to pursue justice, because the perpetrator had served justice upon himself. But the one I needed to forgive lived and flourished and, by necessity, continued to intersect with my life. I wanted justice, and none seemed forthcoming. At least not as I wanted it dealt out. And that filled me with anger.

I came to appreciate, however, that anger and forgiveness can coexist - at least for a while. If the ultimate goals of forgiveness include replacing resentment with peace and extending good will to our offender, what's required are perseverance, patience, and time while difficult emotions are processed. One step forward can be followed by two steps back - especially if the source of one's pain is unrepentant and causes additional hurt, ripping off scabs and rubbing salt in unhealed wounds - as I felt happened to me. I wanted to forgive. I wanted to experience peace. Yet my anger remained, and its source was frequently renewed. But was I not offering forgiveness to my offender? Only if I understood forgiveness in terms of its end, not its beginning.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And the first step in the journey of forgiveness is deciding not to retaliate, and committing to do no harm in repayment of a harm received. That's a step anyone can take - even when their anger is white hot. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate for his resistance to apartheid, confirms this in a book he wrote with the Dalai Lama called **No Future Without Forgiveness**. In it, Tutu assures his readers

that contending with anger is a normal part of the forgiveness process. Then he adds: “You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things.”

Initially I was taken aback by Tutu’s words. Like me, he is a Christian. And aren’t Christians commanded to love their enemies? Aren’t they supposed to hate the sin, while loving the sinner? Yes, and yes. But when our vision is clouded by pain, it’s hard to separate sin from sinner. When we’re hurting, we might see little to love in those who’ve hurt us, because they seem so unlovable. At times like this, love and hate can live side-by-side in our heart, like weeds and wheat in a field. These feelings of hate can’t be denied or ignored. But they shouldn’t delude us into thinking that we’re failures at forgiving. Because while hate is a feeling, forgiveness is a choice. And we can always choose to forgive, regardless of how we feel.

Perhaps Tutu was saying that we should be gentle with ourselves as we contend with powerful emotions, after having been broken by people who are broken themselves. If that’s what he meant, I agree. Such a perspective can serve as an antidote to fears that any response to an offense, short of what was witnessed at Nickel Mines, is inadequate or less than Christian. It’s true that, in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, the Amish embraced Jesus’ call to “do good to those who hate you.” They gave a powerful witness. But for others, as we stumble through our pain, sometimes the most good we can do, at first, is simply not to do something bad.

Sometimes I wonder if it’s more appropriate to say, “I’m forgiving you” than it is to say “I forgive you.” It may sound odd, given what we’re used to hearing, but it speaks to forgiveness as a process that begins with a single decision - a decision that might involve a heroic act, or a bitter struggle with restraint. Either is okay, and both can make the beginning of a good forgiveness story. Like that of the Amish at Nickel Mines.

I ended up contributing to that e-book about Nickel Mines, and I’m glad I did. Not just because their story speaks to the power and promise of forgiveness. But also because it helped me appreciate that no forgiveness story should end with its first chapter. The whole tale must be told. Otherwise, we’ll never know that what we thought was the journey’s destination, was just the first step on the road.

Richard Hedderman

The Great Horned Owl's Sermon

Nightfall. The Great Horned,
from his pulpit in the black spruce,
preaches his best sermon,
the one in which the mice

shall inherit the earth—
the ones struck blind
by the early morning light,
and the loaves and fishes

and whatever scraps remain,
are strewn upon the bare ground
for the scarecrows. “My heart,”
he tells them, “is a red turbine,

red as the armies of the east and
to those who have accepted sleet
as their savior, you whose cries
are heard among the bare trees

whose shadows on the snow
have left the faithful shaken
with fear, I tell you this:
you shall see the sky

charged again with the dark
symphonic clouds that once
delivered so much heavy rain
to Birnam Wood cloaking

our numbers as we drew blood
from the darkness, and broke the vast
silence of the Almighty.
Welcome to the night shift.”

Tim Dwyer

Prayer of the Nonbeliever

Ballyholme Beach

Standing on the esplanade,
I am less alone here
than I would be on the shore below,
where weekend bathers cluster.

An impressive list of missed futures
cycles through my mind.

What I ask for now:
a daily walk on this shore, scent of briny sea
lines in my notebook, shaped into a poem
another day of health, cancer still at bay

another day standing here,
loved by you.



Jack Bordnick

In Our Shadow's

Eryn Sunnolia

Crossing the Catawissa

My body tensed over the sandwich crumbs on the dashboard. “Here,” I said finally.

My partner whipped the car across the road, sky-blue kayak trembling on the roof, and we coasted onto a gravel path tucked between rows of lush trees. We’d chased the river through the windy mountain roads all afternoon, looking for the right place to stop. My body told me we’d found it.

Summer was relaxing into its encore, and Quinn and I were on our way home from a few nights swimming in Lyman Run Lake and sleeping in our tent pitched in a field of stars. But we weren’t stopping for another simple dip in the water: this stop had been carefully calculated. It had maybe been in the making for decades – or at least since I was eight years old and realized how looking at girls in the school hallway made me feel.

Or maybe it had been in the making ever since 1820, when my ancestors tried to cross this river to bury Catherine, a family member who had passed. In the binder of carefully collected family research my mom gifted me, I read how they wanted to bring her body to a cemetery near Ringtown, Pennsylvania so she could rest. Finding the river too “swollen with water and floating ice” to cross, they were forced to turn back and bury her in a grave near their home.

Officially, it was called Catawissa Creek but as we got closer we saw it was, indeed, more river than creek. Moments ago we'd been listening to SZA and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Past the din of cars rushing by on the back roads, by the water with our feet squished into the mud, we stepped into something more ancient, more somatic. Maybe this was exactly where my ancestors were when they'd tried to cross. The tingle up my spine told me it was possible.

This wasn't my first time trying to connect to my ancestors. I'd whispered to them under the moon, made them plates of food as offerings, lit candles for them on my small brown altar. But it was starting to become a way to belong myself to a family that wanted nothing to do with me.

Only a few weeks earlier, I'd gone to my parents' house to tell them what was unthinkable: I was gay, and I'd met the person I wanted to marry. I wanted to tell them because I loved them, and I wanted them to know me.

At 26, I was finally living the queer life that had felt unimaginable for almost two decades. In the Christianity I grew up with, queerness is a choice made by sick, sinful people who deserve either hate or help depending on who you ask. By fifth grade graduation, I quietly locked my feelings for girls into a dark box and went on with my life in the pursuit of being desired and loved by boys and men. I would never have known to label my feelings as queer, but even without the words to describe them I knew they were a ravenous, shameful thing.

"I don't have a problem with it, personally," I told my best friend on our clunky landline as she told me her great-aunt was gay, my body somewhere between kid and teenager curled up on the worn couch. "But the Bible says it's a sin, so. It's bad."

By the time I got my driver's license, I no longer believed in the god my parents gave me. It still took me until my early twenties to start identifying as bisexual. I was in a relationship with a cis man, and I told myself there was no reason to come out to my family.

But then I met Quinn.

We had our first date in the cold throat of winter. We shivered as the sun dropped low over the park, but neither of us wanted to leave. The connection was instant, the conversation easy. Something delicate and potent hovered between us.

On our next few dates we sat on their rooftop, hands sticky with sour injeras. Made collages on their bedroom floor, scraps of ruby and fragments of deep teal spread across the dark wood. Kissed in the kitchen, the hard edge of the counter digging into my hip. By our third date, I was certain about them, and certain that what was between us was worth being brave for. I couldn't keep them behind the dam that protected my family and I from each other.

Christianity made me a liar, taught me to shove everything unacceptable under creaky floorboards and hammer them down tight. But on the fourth of July I drove to my parents' house and pried up the floor.

"We love you, but we'll never support this choice," My mom sputtered over the noise of my dad's silence. Things quickly became what they would be: her slow but steady processing, his cut off. He wouldn't speak to me again for nine months.

I started dreaming of his death. He would be in a hospital bed, and I would come. Sometimes I was too late. Other times he would be furious with me for seeing him like this: vulnerable, exposed whittled legs, oxygen tube for breath. I woke up panicked and curled into Quinn's body, soft with sleep.

My root system was ripped up, and the loss was palpable and gutting at the same time I expanded into the queer love and queer life I'd never dreamed possible. My parents gave me an impossible choice between them or myself, them or Quinn. I made my choice. My responsibility wasn't to them to be who they wanted me to be. It was to myself, to be who I am. I was willing to unbelong myself to them to belong myself to this dream come true that had pulsed in my bloodstream for decades.

Without my roots, I was unmoored. Between our clashes over Christianity and politics, I hadn't been close to my parents since I was young – but they were still my home. I was a grown adult who went to therapy, and I still wanted them to like

me, to love me, to answer when I called. I broke the dam that allowed us to be in relationship. Never mind that it had been a lie the whole time; it was still what kept me tethered to my family.

In trying to be supportive, people told me I was better off without my dad. They said “fuck him” and told me to forget about him. But I didn’t want to harden into just my anger. I was angry, yes, but I was also heartbroken. Inside, I was holding many different versions of myself who just wanted to be loved by my dad, and they were all devastated: the five year old who danced to Whitney Houston with him in the living room after dinner, the eighteen year old who cried on his shoulder in the kitchen after a breakup, and every self in between.

The best and worst things that had ever happened to me braided together; sunset and tsunami. I journaled and laughed and fucked and stretched and cried. I looked at the stars and felt small. I tried to never be alone and I ate a lot of macaroni and cheese and I tried to merge with Quinn but they would not merge with me. All of it helped and didn’t. My grief was not a problem to be fixed; it was my new appendage.

I still wanted to reach, compulsively, for the phantom limb of my dad but I only touched air. If home was no longer the place I could go when I was heartbroken, no longer the people who had held me from the moment I came alive, what was it?

I needed to find a new foundation. I looked for it in my ancestors.

Between larger systems of oppression and a long family lineage of Christianity, I imagine none of my ancestors have lived queer and free since before Christianity. I don’t specifically know of any queer ancestors, but how could I? Queerness is in nature and so it must be in my bloodline, too. When I came out it was for me, but it was for them, too. That day, I walked out of my parents’ house like I had just lit a match.

At the Catawissa, I looked for what I was missing from my living family. Maybe at the river I could touch a deeper sense of home beyond my parents and their god. Maybe I could feel some of the unconditional love I’d hoped they had for me.

I wanted the people I came from to see me, and to celebrate the love Quinn and I had. I wanted to come from something older than my parents' fear and disappointment.

I know more than many about where I come from but I still don't know much: a spattering of stories, a list of names, a page of places. I know I come from lines of paper millers, coal miners, seamstresses, and farmers. I come from people who touched the earth and the earth touched them. I come from cabbage and tomatoes, stitches sewn by hand, prayers over dirt. I come from grief. I come from love.

But my connection with my ancestors isn't uncomplicated. They pass down a lineage of whiteness and Christianity as much as they do care and love. I have complex feelings about them and I don't know what happens when you die, but I like to imagine that death gives our spirits opportunities to evolve in ways they couldn't on Earth. Christianity, trauma, pain, and the inflicting of pain are in my bloodline. So is queerness, love, joy, and expansive spiritualities that existed long before Christianity. All of this is true; I hold it all in loose hands.

At the edge of the river, Quinn and I meditated on a slab of rock. Under the trees the air was thick and wet on my skin. It was here that my ancestors had tried to complete a grieving ritual of their own. Here, just south of the Wyoming Valley where my grandparents met. Here, in this water shaped by the coal industry that my great-grandfather spent his too-short life in, deep in the ground. I felt their presence as an undefinable cluster of energy, a pulsing and thrumming of connection.

I meditated, and I told my ancestors what I had lost. I bared my aching heart, showed them what was heavy. I realized I wanted to cross the river they weren't able to cross 200 years ago. Maybe it would help me process some of what I was carrying, too. Maybe the water would be big enough to hold us all.

Quinn stayed on the shore. There were some places they couldn't go with me. The river was deeper than I thought it would be. Colder, too. I felt wildly alone: just the water and the sun and me and all the people who came before me. The ancestors whose lives and deaths were marked by love, pain, war, exploitation, joy. The ancestors who lived their queerness and those who never could.

The water held my body like I hoped it would. I dunked my head under, came up dripping and clean. In the middle, it was deep enough that I couldn't touch the ground. The current was gentle but strong. I could let it take me, if I wanted.

I had always been afraid of water but at the Catawissa it became a container for the pain that was too big for my body. It was a connecting thread: my loss to my ancestors' loss. My aliveness to theirs. My love to theirs. I let the water rush in, let myself be changed.

Growing up asks this messy work of all of us: who are we, within and beyond the context of who and what we come from? What is home? Who do we belong to, and who do we want to belong to? And when grief is huge, how do we hold it alongside everything else that makes us come alive?

When my feet sank into the soft mud on the other side, I looked back at Quinn and saw my future. Our love, the life we would continue building together out of all the wreckage, with all of our joy and pain, whether my parents would be part of it or not. Everything it means to live a life, to build a home when the homes you come from don't want you anymore. We would hold it together as part of this interconnected web of spirit and body, of love and grief, of suffering and joy, of being alive.

"Grief changes us all so much," therapist Ashley Lagrange says. "It's really up to you to think about what ways you want to move with that change. What does it mean to move with your grief and still be an active participant in your life?"

Under my toes, the ground was fecund and full of possibility. I took a deep breath, and swam back where I belonged.

Lois Roma-Deeley

There Are Days When I Am Certain

and nights when I am not.

Will love save you?

Like raging torrents after days of rain

rip through riverbeds, city streets, mountain canyons,

sweeping away everything

into the hands of a jealous God,

there is this questioning belief.

We're both caught in the flood.

Climb onto my back. Hold on.

Rupert M. Loydell

The Shape of Things

"A place is the opposite of empty space. A place is where an event has taken or is taking place."

- John Berger, "Studio Talk"

It is the emptiness in which things happen,
the first appearance of snow this year,
the closest thing we have to home.

It is the space a work creates within itself,
the image of an empty room
without any windows or doors.

It is an act of resistance we do not yet understand,
a city where people fight each other,
refusing to accept someone else's rules.

It is a terrible prophecy of what might happen,
an aeroplane without engine or compass,
a country or nation insistent upon dying.

It is the angel of death whispering in a writer's ear,
the hammer or spanner used as a weapon of persuasion,
the lingering presence of the man we have just buried.

It is an old man's book for old men to read,
a pinch of wonder and half a dozen excuses,
a list of reasons why we should forget.

It is not night and it is not ignorance,
it is the interior from which everything comes,
trailing distance, full of affection, maybe even love.

Amber Stallworth

Ode to My Ancestors

Black History Month in A Place That Doesn't Celebrate

Can I really complain about being away from home?
Rome slowly enters my heart, but those who came before me,
with skin the sweetest juice you've ever had didn't have that luxury.
Ripped away from their lives, stripped of their identity
forced to assume a life so far from the freedom they once knew.
The firsts clinging to the remnants, a life never to be had again.
Some, the strong, the enlightened, the accepting, chose death
a better home than the one they were headed to.
Those who chose to persevere, never again knowing the peace
of roots holding them firm— this one's for you.

Lifetime after lifetime like driftwood at sea,
they are lost.
The only place these generations have ever known
feels foreign.
A strange pull, a beacon to a place unknown.
And those who braved that savage, diabolical, ruthless, barbaric, sadistic thing
and chose to find love, friends, happiness, family, faith, daring to believe in a future
were cut short.
Watching wives and children and husbands purloined
the home they'd managed to build annihilated.

Hundreds of years in the not-so-distant future,
that same gut-wrenching feeling of missing something attacks a generation.
One who's known home, who has an identity on this foreign land, who despite hardships
contribute to build a future worthy of the next generation.
In a time when those separated can reach in their pocket and discover the world.
Their world.
Like the north star leading our ancestors to freedom,
that pull leads us to yearn not for the future, but for the past.
One where we understood liberation. Not in the way they tell us
yet still hold us back, but in the way those first "African-Americans" felt.
Before the chains, before the oceans, before all they had were memories.

So yes, being in Rome, this city unlike any other,
has caused my heart a pain that I never knew.
But it's also a scene in my movie that I wouldn't skip.
And yet, during this month,
there's a yearning in my gut calling me home.
Calling me to celebrate every life that came before mine.
Calling me to celebrate the greatness of my people.
Carver, Chisholm, King, Douglass, Truth, Tubman, Wells,
Kobe, Jordan, Davis, Davis, Obama, Harris, Rhimes.
And to those whose names are lost to time, but whose lives allow me
to drink the same water, eat at the same table,
sit in the same classes, speak the same words,
walk through the same doors.
To be in the presence of the ones who truly understand
the essence and the lifeblood of home.

Sasa Aakil

Claiming, or I Too after Langston

Clay has a life of its own and I know this better than anyone
What better proof than the way this good earth cradles my feet when I walk
As if it knows that my hands spend most days crafting its kin on a potter's wheel

Someone scoffs at my grandfather's accent and
I chuckle for
He too is america
He is not stars and stripes or anthem
He is lost son of Canal Zone and Brooklyn's favorite nephew
He is bean pie, incense, oil, and concrete
and I know no truer thing to call citizen

Loam has a life of its own and I know this better than anyone
What better proof than the way the earth welcomes me home
As if it knows
that I came from it and will return someday too soon

Someone mangles my mothers name and
I wonder if they know
that she is named after god
And yes she too is america
She is not national pride or Independence Day

She is "Lift every voice and sing"
She is panama wind and georgia cotton
And the dust that blows in between

See dust has a life of its own and I know this better than anyone
What better proof than the way the land refuses to acknowledge borders
Simply sprawls and calls all the world it's own

Someone sneers at my hijab and yet I am content to know that
I too am america
I am not red, white, and blue.
I am no patriot.

I am hands, brown as the rich dirt I pray on
I am ancestors who bodies bent and broke to build all that we know
I am daughter
and friend
and lover of my home
and I have never found pride in flag or country but

I claim america
Through the land and the people who fill it
live on it
tend to it
The ones who come from every land in the world
and have nothing in common except calling this one home

The people who know struggle ease joy and pain
Who inspire movements and demand change
The ones who turn this land into tapestry of culture
color, language, and creed

This land has a life of its own and we know this better than anyone
What better proof than the way it pronounces our names
Calls us family and holds us close
Speaks to us of black blood and indigenous bones

We too are america

And I am only the earth that my ancestors tilled
and that was stolen long before
I am the constant mourning of plunder
and the renewal of every spring

I am the dirt the clay the rivers the rocks
I am not nation only land
And I am that with all of me

Alex Goutier

Magician

I'm a magician

When you grow up looking like I do, you've gotta be

I was born with my costume on nice and tidy
The hair curling out of my scalp, my nostrils a bit wider than you're used to, and
of course

Most importantly

The dark, dark skin that stretches across a frame, built thin enough to prove that
I'm not frightening

And tonight, every night, I am at your service

I am the illusionist
I hide my blackness in plain sight
The way I walk, the way I talk, distractions, leading your eyes away from the fear
you'd hold towards me

I'll hide my anger, desperation, exhaustion, pain, all behind the curtain
I'll move that clutter, I'll set the stage
cause I am here for your viewing pleasure

I am the actor

I use my pain to entertain
Cause why listen otherwise?

So you ask for my stories, my torment, my life
And when you're reminded
That it happens even when you're not looking, not listening

Then
Then
You'll ask me how I'm feeling

But I'll put on a show
I'll pick out your card with a wink and a flourish
I'll put in the skill and you'll still say it's luck

Because of what I am, not who

But I'll tell you, I've seen the luck of the draw
And I've seen my fellow performers get lost in the shuffle
I know what happens when I stop performing

When the illusion drops
When my nice white smile fades
When your eyes start drifting back towards that fear

You're reminded there's a man on this stage, not a show

And I'm not ready for my disappearing act

Paweł Grajner

Denial

(a response to a poem by Charles Simic)

*Playing with Flo's
All Stars, damaged souls
Set to the accordion, the clarinet,
The drum, and the conceit of broad humor.
The poet returns from Bosnia with a rock song
Raging against the scourge of nationalism:*

I've got these here ideas,
You've gone and left me here.
I've got these here ideas,
You've left me with these cares.

Lover, lover wait.

How many sisters have no brother,
Women mourning, more than two?
Will each build herself a sibling?
What materials will she use?

Is there silk to spare at market?
With what will the sister pay?
Precious stones she sold for food.
What will sister use for eyes?

Wood is fuel to stay warm with.
All her pearls, loved, were stolen.
Soldiers, leeches, they abound,
But eyebrows brothers do not make.

Lover, lover wait.

How many brothers have no sister,
Men in mourning, more than two?
Will each build himself a sibling?
What materials will he use?

Will he go and kill a pig?
Use its hide for her skin?
Will he break her neck from granite?
Drill the earth for her blood?

Will he melt an iron bar?
Forge his sister some new legs?
How many forests will he plow
Before replanting all her hair?

Lover, lover wait.

I've got these here ideas,
You've gone and left me here.
I've got these here ideas,
You've left me with these cares.

I've got this here idea,
You've gone and left me here.
I've got these here ideas,
You've left me with these cares.

Lover, lover wait.

Alison Davis

I Want to Meet You Again, There Where You Are

I.

In Egypt, you're a thirty-dayer or a forty-dayer,
depending on how long you fast. Ramadan is shorter
than Lent. Americans have little patience for the holy
mathematics of abstinence. We build houses for our cars
and expect the dessert to be decadent.

Unless we're on a diet or using the word "intermittent"
and once again divorcing science from the spirit.

II.

Fasting means
you have to eventually break
the fast. Otherwise it's starvation.

Fasting means
food when the moon is a bright belly
overhead. Otherwise it's famine.

Fasting means
your spirit feasts on what the body
holds already within itself, so close
to unbreakable fullness.

Fasting means
an angel or two in your bones,
the miracle of making space.

III.

This poem may be the only place you are asked
to know that inflation in Lebanon hit 123% in January.
The reporters have no fine similes or comforting
metaphors, and neither does the poet. At sunset,
the believers weep. Desperation is eating us alive.

IV.

In a compelling version of the truth,
the *dua* is a conversation
between the Lover and the Beloved
in which they both become Love.

Half-heartedness is a mask.

One way forward is to kneel in the sand, in the rubble
of what you expected your life to look like, and bow down.

A prayer is a world
in which the light is a Bakerwoman
with loving hands.

Grant me light upon light, here
in my open palms.

Jennifer L. Gauthier

Trinity

Did they sing more loudly that night?

Calling out to the humans
to take care
to mind the earth
and its delicate
balance
to consider the cost
and the lives to be lost?

It was their own Baghavad Gita
a funeral dirge
and a warning
in one long song
that swelled as
night fell over
the desert
scientists and soldiers
asleep in their beds or
tossing and turning
under the weight of their
decision, burning
in the summer heat.

Today the toads
wait underground
for monsoon rains
to dampen the desert
emerge
when muddy pools beckon
and scatter across the
bomb-scarred landscape
singing again
the same song
of warning
of regret
of pain and sorrow
with the voices of
those who have no
tomorrows.

On the other side of
the world
their relatives
asleep in their beds or
tossing and turning
burning, with the
memories of
fire and destruction.

They sing more loudly tonight.

Sebastian Koga

Leaving Aleppo

My foes taunt me, saying to me all day long,

“Where is your God?”

- Psalm 42

This is for you, Syria!
Only the cedar coffin
made to measure,
sprinkled with hyssop
and whiter than snow,

shoes over-large,
and wobbling on the feet
that once ran circles
around the Pleiades
and the schoolyard.
Deep calls unto deep,

and the rage of living
to the greater rage of
carving a headstone
for your child.

At the noise of your waterfalls
the mortar shells pick
their tempo, and the widow
does her washing
with pierced palms.

To be human is to love
— and to kill,
what is that like, Iblis?
All your breakers and
your billows are gone over me.

Georgia Riordan

ghazal for us all

What if we're pieces and parts of a whole—all of us?
Just cells for something bigger, made from the sprawl of us?

We might stand together and fight from here
but the war rages on, ignoring the wall of us.

Do we think that if it were our turn,
people would argue for the recall of us?

The earth's heart does not beat like it did before;
we've clogged it with the cholesterol of us.

How long before we shift our gaze
to finally see the full appall of us?

If you listen, you can hear the hospital singing:
inside, dying, there's the wailing call of us.

And I would give you anything at all
if you'll rescue me from the thrall of us.

Blake Everitt

Black Mulberry

In the tickling, shadow-lilted
vocations of lady ferns, we
see a mess of scrubbed bark
shimmer-scurry in stubbornly
unleafing gales of black mulberry,

But yesterday, the curl-of-shell
campion flickeringly untamed
above Monks Bay, brought me
the light napes, the muzzle
of mushroom's crushed
tenderness outlying the
fields of winter squash
near the Swainstone hedges.

And now the mauve tinder
swirl of tamarisk adjacent
to the sessile oak and sheer
white flamelet-stems of un-
numbered cyclamen, shows
the chequer-shaded wrist
of petals we saw in
fritillaries of Easter fog,
I think, in Salisbury.

I only walked for helpless
rage at Gaza's grief, intuiting
displaced light in split lichen.
In the shuffle of guelder leaves
before lucent beads redden,
I forgot the words, almost,
for collective punishment, for
concentration camp; for Shoah
and Nakba.

Charles Haddox

Waters of Texcoco

I.

Raise your whistle
to the onion moon.
A man weaving tule baskets,
another, bamboo
traps. Ducks
on Lake Zumpango
seek amaranth crests
in groves of tea.
Carp (death) on a stick.
Night calls.
Conches and reeds;
songs barred by the past.
The owls dance,
wings spread for tribute.

Hospice of aromas,
sweet corn, chili
fire, brine shrimp,
the fertility of the earth,
water sanctification,
that relentless hummingbird
with his laminated watch
and white fan.

II.

Chinampas, black amphibian
islands.

As a volcano's mouth
shares the ocean's cup,
there are hours of passage,

and drunken fruit-sellers
transfixed by song.

Streets embrace
the beacons and bodies
of ancestors welcomed
by these hollow hands.

Catch the rains
with a forest of scepters,
ahuehetes, altar builders,
and water to store
more children for spring.

III.

The days are markets, markets.
The stars, rotundas of salt.
Drowned stone vessels
and offerings of smoke
return to the fire
obsidian's thirst.

As the source of Tepeyac,
the waters give joy,
and will fully restore
an integral sky.

At last, the days are apples,
the sentinels, rain,
frogs and salamanders
my perpetual destiny.

Where the sun meets the building's sharp corner
when it carries on its back the noon of a lake,
there is a refreshing chastity,
as if the day invented geometry.
Cloudy water for the light to drink
from a celestial well,
or a muddy lagoon of glaucous cephalopods.
Place of stone, freshwater sea,
innocuous redemption,
pharmacy of angels and herders,
those remedial waters
and sun on the walls.



Cyrus Carlson

Fluorescent Yellow

Deidre Sullivan

Backyard Dancer

I asked the weeping willow
why he was so sad.
What was weighing heavy?
It must be very bad.

He said I have a secret.
They got my name all wrong.
My essence isn't sadness;
my branches bend to song.

What looks to you like weeping,
like I'm falling down inside,
is a framing and a greeting--
the weeping, a disguise.

I am a backyard dancer
poised and strong in sway,
arcing ever downwards,
the wind in my sashay.

See me bowing to the springtime
See me bowing to the sky.

I am bowing to creation,
I am bowing to the why.

When snow rests upon my branches,
the weight sends me off to sleep
I will bow down into slumber with
dreams for earth to keep.

Ben Macnair

3%

They say that a person,
and a Banana share 97%
of the same genetic material.
It is that 3% difference that leads to bones,
Teeth.
Hair.
Skin.
Opposable thumbs.
Inbuilt bullshit detectors.
Technology.
Music.
Science.
Art.
Trolls.
Film.
Pack mentality,
and the internet.
and that the closeness between a human
and a Chimpanzee is only 2%.

We share more with fruit
than we do with the snake
that tempted Eve,
and the DNA difference that leads to
handedness,
hair colour,
genetic disease,
and every other accident of birth
is miniscule.
Because if it was any bigger,
we would be Bananas,
growing on trees,
piled high in super-markets,
knowing that our fates
would lead to the satiation of hunger
in primates, that are so similar to ourselves,
that at the atomic level, only scientists
know the real difference.

Claudia Buckholts

Arguments for Faith

Silk scarves in rose, vermillion,
and green cover the windows, glowing
in sunlight until their colors fade.

Slats of light flicker up the wall.
On the threshold of winter,
crocuses murmur underground.

A rose clambers up a white trellis,
budless yet, leafless: only its thorns
persist in every season.

Arguments for faith do no harm
but they're useless. Does the sun
have faith in the earth

or does it shine on, oblivious?
Does grace surround us, invisible
a film over our eyes, but always present?

The sun powers its dynamo, radiates
even in the dark. We are children
of a single family, related to red rocks,

striped salamanders, gifted with tongues
like the grass. We are acorns falling
and the bitter bread they make.

Arno Bohlmeijer

The truth via a dia- or triologue

This bird in the yard hedge
looks right in my eye and says
“You’ve been very unpleasant.”

Yes, to the person who stays kind:
“Birds don’t know about desperate
times requiring desperate measures.”

But for ages it sits there at eye level,
so the message comes across alright.
A bird can unite earth and heaven.

Don’t make me confess further.

Emily Levang

Learning to Love the Sun that Shines in Minnesota

I was driving down 8th street on my way to a first date—a day date at a coffee shop because we’re both moms and 1pm is when there’s childcare. The snowbanks were four feet tall and the gray sky hung down to touch them. It was one of those days that feels like early morning all day, sleepy and heavy. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen the sun.

And that’s why, even more so, it struck me, stopped at that same stop sign I always stop at, that not only did I not hate all of this, but maybe, actually, my heart was opening here.

I moved back to my hometown, Duluth, Minnesota four years ago after fifteen years away. I moved here because of the water. Lake Superior is a sacred being. She defines this place, with icy blasts of blowing snow, rushes of life-giving spring rain, fierce storm waves. I came here to pray with the water and for the water.

And it’s been hard. Duluth winters have always pressed me down, dimmed me into a cut-out silhouette, with endless days of cold and gray, long nights and a pale distant sun. Always longing for sun. But I’ve also been in a spiritual winter. Facing old traumas that lurk in familiar yet unexpected places, confronting the hollow displacement of not feeling safe enough to be myself in the very place that made my bones.

And all this with no lifeline to spiritual community.

I paused my Yoga practice at the same time I came back here. I didn’t belong

in it anymore, wasn't sure if I ever really had. In one of the last classes I attended, I remember emerging from a sun salutation with little blue crumbles of my compostable mat stuck to black pants. My mat was decomposing real-time, and as I looked around the room of people whose ancestors were European settlers like mine, I knew my practice was disintegrating along with it.

I never fell out of love with Yoga. It just no longer felt right. Some of the misalignment was being queer in predominantly heteronormative yoga communities. But more so, it was that after years of trying, I could not find a way to be in right-relationship with the Yogic Tradition, as a white person. I grieved the awareness that I am, my own people are, so profoundly disconnected from our own ancestral traditions that we've gone looking for it elsewhere—and found it, but at a cost to the very cultures that share these gifts.

Who am I in Yoga, if I'm not in deep contact with my own ancestral traditions? A hungry ghost, I fear. Receiving but not in reciprocity, not giving back in any real way.

I had some vague hope that moving back to Northern Minnesota, where many Scandinavian settlers arrived, could be a bridge back to my own ancestral traditions. But instead, I found heaviness, density, like deep mounds of snow in January. Even when I found potential connections; a book about Runes or a teacher of Norse mythology, I felt no spark. It was like putting my hand up to a wall and pushing, over and over, never finding a doorway. I imagine this is collective trauma, I imagine this is also collective white shame. I imagine that healing on stolen land is not easy.

I have been privileged to learn from Anishinaabe teachers, whose land I am a guest on. They turn me toward our interconnection, and I work toward this daily as an activist. And yet again, I can't simply adopt their path, their practices. I have to face life directly.

So I've stepped outside of traditions. Bereft of spiritual community, instead I have cultivated a direct relationship with the elements. In the absence of tradition to guide me, I say "water, I love you." I say this to the water in the lake, in my glass, in my own body. And this love has rooted into the trees, the earth, the plants, the entire living world around me.

Still, I long for the holding, the transmission, the passing down of wisdom, that happens within a spiritual tradition. I've been existing in some space outside of that, not because that's what I want, but because that's all that has felt true.

Lonely, but true. And underneath some voice of internal pressure still says I *should* be reclaiming ancient ways. I should, at bare minimum, do a ritual on the solstice and the equinox. I should, I tell myself, but usually there is just this wall, closed doors.

Last year on the Winter Solstice, my friend Ariella Rahma invited me to gather for a ritual on Zoom. There is the memory of the time before—gatherings around a fire, bodies, breath. Zoom is a pale outline. But we live in different cities, and her invitation had the subtle glimmering of a doorway.

Each in our own spaces, we lit candles. Ariella invited us to speak to the light. Focused on the candle, I found myself sharing an experience in India many years ago:

As an initiation ritual, I bathed in the Ganga, emerging from her purifying waters in a state of vulnerable openness. I saw the sun, a round, yellow-gold ball of fire in the sky, emanating down onto me. I spontaneously began a sun salutation on the sand, my palms at my heart, utter devotion for this life-giving force. I raised my hands over my head. I opened my chest, to feel in every cell of my body, light filling me, living me. Each movement a wave of life being pulsated by love for the sun.

I felt for the first time what a sun salutation truly is. I felt the sun inside me. I knew the sun inside me, how my life was only because of the sun.

As I shared this story into the darkness of Winter Solstice, I became aware of a longing to cultivate my relationship with light, the element of fire. For so long I'd been deep in the watery worlds of myself and our collective, healing trauma and giving my love to the water. Now a new spark emerged, one that called for balance, for light, fire. It's ok to come out of these depths, and into the sun.

This was a doorway. But in the coming weeks I felt confusion about how to actually practice this. My lungs clenched cold inhales, Spring was so distant I didn't dare dream of flowers. I wondered, do I need to go somewhere else, to pursue this new longing? Do I have to go to some other place, where the sun is more direct?

What I had learned in Yoga, both philosophically and experientially, is that the sun is masculine, penetrating. That experience in India felt so far from what I was experiencing now—zero degrees, dark at 4pm. But I have grown wary of the idea that I need to go elsewhere, and I know that these relationships with the natural world take time to develop, like a new lover.

On the days when the sun did shine, I stood still in a place where the light could fall upon me. It was ok to be soft and slow like this.

And so that day in deep winter white on gray, on the way to the first date, I found my heart spontaneously opening here, expansive and tender. My Yoga teacher used to say (probably still does) that the heart shines like the light of 10,000 suns. I've experienced this in other places I've lived. But it had never been safe enough, here, to allow myself to be so revealed.

Soon after, I went to learn from Emma Day, a community herbalist and wise woman who was drawn here to Northern Minnesota by the sacredness of this land. Emma is a longtime practitioner of Norse spirituality, who bridges ancestral practices with what is alive here, today.

I've always known that my ancestors probably came here in part because it looks and feels like Norway, Finland, and Germany, and other Northern European places where they originated. This bioregion is so similar to the boreal forests of Scandinavia. I never really thought about how that in and of itself is a spiritual connection between us. Even though we were colonized so long ago we don't even keep track of the time before, we share some magic through the birch trees.

Emma shared about the Norse Goddess Freya, who is an embodiment of the solar feminine. This phrase, "solar feminine" was new yet felt familiar. Why had I never heard this before? I learned that in the bioregions where my ancestors came from, the sun is seen as feminine, embodying generativity, creativity, light, and love.

Sometimes words and distinctions can separate us from direct knowing of the world around us. But sometimes words and distinctions can actually open up direct awareness, bring clarity into view or validate a knowing. In this case, the words "solar feminine" suddenly shifted my entire experiential knowing of the sun.

I had always been taught that the sun is masculine. I had been taught this through traditions that originate where the sun is intense and penetrating. Places and traditions that are not from my own ancestry. I was mostly taught this in the US, by American teachers, completely out of context from the place-based Indigenous wisdom from which these teachings originated. There's so much I'm missing.

It was momentarily disorienting to realize that my own direct experience of the sun has been, to some extent, mediated through a lens that doesn't match my

actual place-based experience of the sun. And this opened up a whole new space within me, to relate to the sun in a more honest way. Not as I want it to be, but as it actually is, here.

After class, I went to the end of Park Point, a nine-mile-long sandbar that juts out into Lake Superior. I walked a mile down the center of the forest, on an icy trail through stands of birch, pine, and aspen until I found a packed down trail in the snow to bring me to the lake.

The shoreline was crackling ice, crunching like plates of glass under my feet. Where the open water met the frozen edge, ice caves bubbled with dark water sloshing in and out. Long crystalline icicles edged the cave entrances. Each wave created a swishing of water mixed with ice that sounded like crickets. The sun's soft warmth spread like a soft blanket over the sweet cold water, the ice formations, the tree-line of tall pines, and me. I felt the sun, and the blue sky, as a gentle shimmering, an interwoven embrace.

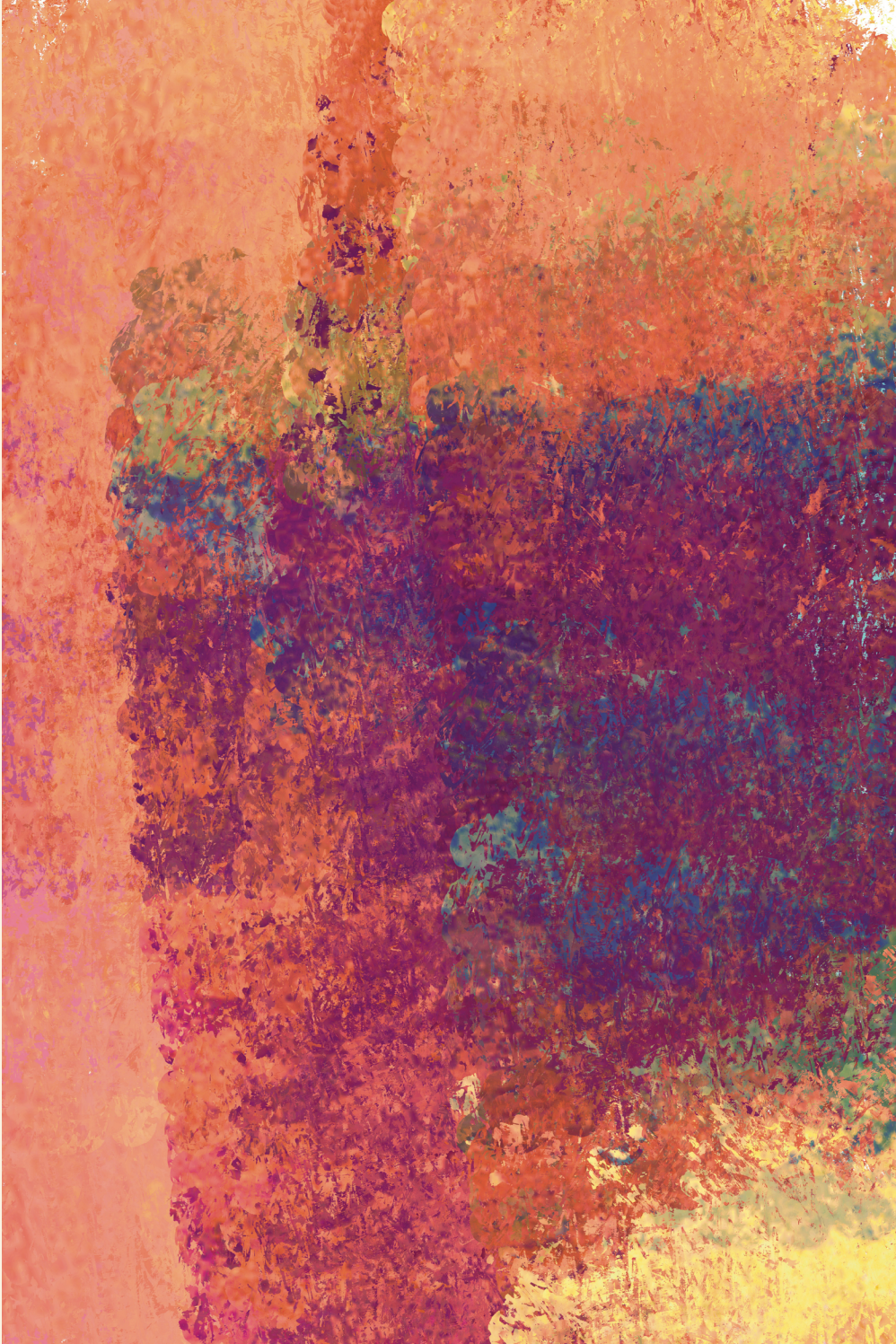
The same sun shines on India and Norway and Minnesota, and yet, we are localized beings. The sun shines differently here in Northern Minnesota. Specificity matters. I want to be awake to the specificity. I don't live in India. For a long time, I thought I would, and who knows, maybe I still will someday. But right now, I'm in Minnesota. And I sense how that specificity of sacred relationship with the animate world will heal the void left in generations cut off from our ancestral traditions.

This new awareness of the solar feminine is sweet nectar – to learn that my own ancestors had a different way of relating to the sun, based on the lived experience of their bioregion, a place much like where I am.

The sun comes out on very cold days. Only my cheeks are bare, but I stand receptive to the way the sun actually shines here, in the boreal forest in Winter.

Ultimately, I don't even know what "masculine" and "feminine" are; they break down in meaning for me. They are helpful, as distinctions, to the extent that they allow me to be more present with and connected to the living world. If I put my mind on the words too long, they become mush, they become nothing, they fall away and dissolve. They are all the same sun. And yet, as a queer person exploring gender, there is something liberating about the idea that something so fundamental to life as the sun, could embody this fluidity.

What really matters is that my direct relationship with the sun weaves me back into the greater whole. For this moment, the words "solar feminine" feel like a thread, tying me back through circles of time, to the ancestors who deeply knew the spirit of the land they inhabited.



Edward Lee

We Build To Be Found

Nancy Machlis Rechtman

Finding My Melody in the Midst of a Dissonant World

Today something unexpected happened
In spite of all the storms
Rampaging through the planet
And the ponderous weight of my worry and sorrow
When I'm a tree battered by a hurricane
About to crack
Because I know I can't bend anymore
Joy suddenly appeared.

It's a feeling that has been so elusive
For so long
But like a long-lost friend
It showed up this morning
When I remembered my melody
And danced to my rhythm
Releasing myself from the pain
Even if only for the flutter of a butterfly's wing
Or a drop of rain soaked up by the scorched desert sand.

I got lost in the wildness of the music
And I freed myself from the relentless demands
That have bowed my shoulders
With their force
So imagine my surprise
When I suddenly remembered what it feels like
To smile.

Lana Hechtman Ayers

Let Ruin End Here

- Danez Smith

Has there ever been a kinder
plant than the camellia?

Blooming at the slightest sign
of sunshine, however fleeting.

Offering its blossoms
like bouquets of compassion

on the bitterest of days.

There is such cruelty in this world.
And there is the camellia.

Its waxy green leaves
shine all year long.

Look upon the camellia.

Can you not see that even for
the deepest of our wounds

healing is possible?

And just as the camellia
needs soil to take root in,

a little light for warmth,
a dram or two of rain to drink

of this good, good Earth,
healing requires community,

all of us.

Freesia McKee

Env. Stud.

After all these days of trying to pay attention
I'm sick of assigning meaning—
that chair is a bird. Whenever it happens,
I attach a hum, a human sound
from the inside of my throat.

My dad says people think we are writing poems
about chipmunks and things, but the floormat
was a big rectangle of lichen. Curling. Mimetic.
Plastic. Grey. Rife with whatever it's captured

from the public's shoes. The shadow
of the chair is nothing to be afraid of,
and my eye is so thirsty for wanting
more.

More.
Now I remember what I wished
for when I woke—a chair more like a bird

and how to become parasympathetically
adjustable not like a temperature gauge
or the mangled ball-joint limbs
of a freakish Nordic doll with plastic hair

but like a chipmunk who throws itself
into the stump hollow of the nearest tree
as a rubber sole clips twigs.

Don't you love when a hawk flies
and makes a dark, moving spot
you can follow with your averted gaze?

You grew up and laugh now
when thinking what would happen
if you told your grandfather
that chipmunks are not a pest.

Most of all, think of what
those chipmunks are up to!

Wendy Jean MacLean

The World Aches for Gentle Wisdom

The loudest voice
cannot charm a robin into singing.
The hardest fist
will never be the most comforting
to a crying babe.
The fastest runner
is not the best traveler
under water.
We need leaders who honor
the stories of sunflowers
clearing the soil
after floods pollute the fields.
The world aches
for the gentle wisdom
of morning light
and a day that opens
full of hope.
This is the commerce of healing.
This is the economy of soul:
Enough to trust.
Enough to share.
Grace is ephemeral
and eternal.
Like the trail of a slug
that leaves its silver mark
on the day.
Like morning, and water
and a baby in its mother's arms.
Love is the only superlative needed.



Veronica Winters

magic tree portal

Contributor Bios

Sasa Aakil is a 20-year-old Multimedia Artist, Writer, and the 2021 Montgomery County Youth Poet Laureate. Sasa has been featured in the *Bethesda Magazine* for her work as Youth Poet Laureate as well as in the *Washington Post* for her work on the A Man Was Lynched Yesterday Project in 2020. She has been active in the DC art community since age 13 and is now pursuing a degree in Fine Arts at Howard University.

Lana Hechtman Ayers has shepherded over a hundred poetry volumes into print in her role as managing editor at three small presses. She lives on the Oregon coast in a town known for its barking sea lions. Her favorite color is the swirl of van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. Visit her online at LanaAyers.com

Bruce Baker recently retired from a long career practicing law and is now pursuing his lifelong passion for creative writing. He is enjoying his new life immensely and looking forward to a few good years of contemplating his time in time.

Jerrice J. Baptiste is a poet, author, founder and facilitator of Authentic Poetry writing in New York. She has been holding sacred safe place for self-expression through poetry, meditation, movement for children & adults of all ages. Jerrice's

poetry is forthcoming in *Wax Poetry & Art*, *Impsired*, *The Yale Review*, *Artemis Journal*, *Mantis*, *The Dewdrop*, *The Shambhala Times*, *Spirit Fire Review*, *The Banyan Review*, *Kosmos Journal*, *Lolwe*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *The Caribbean Writer* and others. Jerrice was nominated Best of The Net in 2022 by Blue Stem. Her poetry & songwriting are also included in the Grammy award nominated album, *Many Hands Family Music for Haiti*.

Arno Bohlmeijer is a humble winner of a PEN America Grant 2021, poet and novelist writing in English and Dutch, published in six countries in two dozen renowned journals and reviews, and by Houghton Mifflin. He is editor of *Universal Oneness: An Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems from around the World*, 2019. www.arnobohlmeijer.com

Jack Bordnick's interest is to create artistic, meaningful works of art that can be enjoyed by all peoples and cultures. Being a designer and sculptor has allowed him to share my professional experiences in a beneficial way for both business and community projects of this nature. He has been a successful designer and has over twenty years experience in design, fabrication, and installation of numerous and diverse projects of this nature.

Claudia Buckholts' third book of poems is *Travelers on Earth* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2023). She received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Massachusetts Artists Foundation and the Grolier Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Minnesota Review*, *New American Writing*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Southern Review*, *Verse Daily*, and elsewhere.

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract painter from the Midwest.

Carson Cawthon is a human first and a writer second. She enjoys exploring the intersection of Christianity and culture, most frequently through poetry. Her work has been published in Calla Press, *The Clayjar Review*, *The Opal Literary Magazine*, and *The Ivy Leaves Journal*.

Allisa Cherry was raised in the rural southwest of the United States. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Journal*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Maine Review*, *Nine Mile Magazine*, *Rust + Moth*, *High Desert Journal*, and *The Account*. She

currently lives in the Pacific Northwest where she completed her MFA at Pacific University, teaches workshops for immigrants and refugees transitioning to a life in the United States, and is an associate poetry editor for *West Trade Review*.

Carolyn Chilton Casas is a Reiki master and teacher whose favorite themes to write about are nature, mindfulness, and ways to heal. Her articles and poems have appeared in *Braided Way*, *Energy*, *Grateful Living*, *Odyssey*, *Reiki News Magazine*, and in other publications. You can read more of Carolyn's work on Facebook, on Instagram @mindfulpoet_, and in her first collection of poems *Our Shared Breath* or a forthcoming collection titled *Under the Same Sky*.

Richard Collins, abbot of New Orleans Zen Temple, lives in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he directs Stone Nest Dojo. His poetry and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Xavier Review*, *Urthona: Buddhism and the Arts*, *Think*, and *Shō Poetry Journal*, among others. His books include *No Fear Zen* (2015) and a translation of *Taisen Deshimaru's Autobiography of a Zen Monk* (2022).

Barbara Crooker is author of twelve chapbooks and ten full-length books of poetry, including *Some Glad Morning*, Pitt Poetry Series, University of Pittsburgh Poetry Press, longlisted for the Julie Suk award from Jacar Press, *The Book of Kells*, which won the Best Poetry Book of 2019 Award from Poetry by the Sea, and *Slow Wreckage*, forthcoming from Grayson Books. Her other awards include: Grammy Spoken Word Finalist, the W.B. Yeats Society of New York Award, the Thomas Merton Poetry of the Sacred Award, and three Pennsylvania Council fellowships in literature. Her work appears in literary journals and anthologies including *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*.

Caleb Coy is a freelance writer with a Masters in English from Virginia Tech. He lives with his family in southwest Virginia. His work has appeared in *Fourth River*, *Harpur Palate*, *Flyway*, *Hippocampus*, and *The Common*.

Kelsey D. Mahaffey rests her head most nights in Nashville, TN, but keeps half her heart in New Orleans. She needs music & nature like breath & water and walks the earth barefoot beside three humans and a bow-legged cat. Her work can be seen in *Writers Resist*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Minerva Rising Press*.

Alison Davis is an award-winning educator, author, and activist whose writing has appeared in numerous literary and scholarly publications. Alison is the author of *Wild Canvas* (Finishing Line Press, 2024) and *A Rare But Possible Condition* (Saddle Road Press, 2024). Although she holds degrees in literary studies from Very Prestigious Universities, she considers her willingness to be like Rumi and gamble everything for love as her greatest credential.

Thad DeVassie is a writer and artist/painter who creates from the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of three chapbooks, most recently *This Side of Utopia* (Červená Barva Press, 2023). He was awarded the James Tate Poetry Prize for *Splendid Irrationalities* in 2020. Find more of his written and painted work at www.thaddevassie.com.

Tim Dwyer's poems appear regularly in Irish and UK publications, including *Cyphers*, *New Irish Writing*, *Orbis*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. His chapbook is *Smithy Of Our Longings* (Lapwing). He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and is retired from a career as a psychologist in New York State prisons and now lives by the shore in Bangor, Northern Ireland.

Mary Elliot's writing has appeared in *Macrina Magazine*, *Academy Journal*, *First Things*, and the *Peabody Journal of Education*, among others. She holds a M.A. in Philosophy from Boston College.

Blake Everitt was born in 1989 and lives on the Isle of Wight. His most recent book of poetry is *The Grammar of Ferns* and his work has also appeared in a range of periodicals, including *Plumwood Mountain: An Australian Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics*, *Open: A Journal of Arts and Letters*, *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts*, *Hawk & Whippoorwill*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *The Dawntreader*, *The Poetry Village*, and Drawn to the Light Press.

Robbie Gamble (he/him) is the author of *A Can of Pinto Beans* (Lily Poetry Review Press, 2022). His poems have appeared in the *Scoundrel Time*, *Whale Road Review*, *RHINO*, *Salamander*, and *The Sun*. He worked for many years as a nurse practitioner caring for people caught in homelessness, and he now divides his time between Boston and Vermont. www.robriegamble.com

Regina YC Garcia, a descendant of the African Diaspora, is a poet, professor, and language artist from Greenville, North Carolina. She is widely published in a variety of journals and anthologies including the *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *The Elevation Review*, *Black Joy Unbound*, and others. She also does transitional poetry and artistic collaborations and has work included in the *Sacred 9 Project* of Tulane University (a musical and literary composition and performance), as well as the Mid-South Emmy Award winning PBS Episode of *Muse* featuring the documentary *The Black Light Project*, *The Firetalker's Daughter*, her debut book published by Finishing Line Press, was released in March 2023.

Jennifer L. Gauthier's poetry, fiction, and cultural criticism has been featured online and in print. She is professor of media and culture at Randolph College in Virginia, where she lives with her husband and son.

Alex Goutier is a fourth year History and Political Science student at Northeastern University with an interest in law and a passion for poetry. He's currently working on his PlusOne Master's Degree in Public History and planning on attending law school soon after. His works focus on themes he hopes his fellow students will find relatable: family, community, race, and anxiety.

Paweł Grajner is a writer and filmmaker working in Poland and the US.

Echo Guernsey is a former ethologist with a lifelong passion for conservation of the natural world and environmental justice. Her work has been published in *The Mindfulness Bell* and *Deep Times: A Journal of the Work That Reconnects*, among others. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Nature Writing from Western Colorado University. Beyond her writing life, Echo is a licensed funeral director and death midwife with a deep commitment to sustainable and equitable death care. She lives in San Diego with her husband and canine daughter.

Charles Haddox lives in El Paso, Texas, on the U.S.-Mexico border, and has family roots in both countries. His poetry has appeared in a number of journals including *San Pedro River Review*, *Infrarrealista Review*, and *Vita Poetica*.
charleshaddox.wordpress.com

Richard Hedderman is a multi Pushcart-nominated poet and author of two collections of poetry including, most recently, *Choosing a Stone* (Finishing Line Press), and his writing has appeared in dozens of literary publications both in the U.S. and abroad, and in several anthologies including *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare* (University of Iowa Press). He's been a guest poet at the Library of Congress, and has performed his writing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Formerly Writer-in-Residence at the Milwaukee Public Museum, he is currently the Coordinator of the Southeast Wisconsin Festival of Books.

Rana Heidarzade (b. 1999 – Tehran, Iran) is a multidisciplinary visual artist who mixes several different mediums like photography, mechanics, and video art in her artworks. Her artworks are about her personal life and her lived experiences. She said, "All of my artworks show my mental states at different times." She graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran with a degree in sculpture. She has been sculpting for about five years at her studio. Rana works with different materials like cloth, mirror, papermache, fiberglass, etc. Her sculptures and installations aim to examine the audience with the space.

Julia Hjelte is a writer, recovering perfectionist, and self-compassion and mindfulness coach. She graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in Creative Writing, which she uses every day she sits down to put pen to paper. When not writing, she's devouring fantasy novels, self-development books, and social justice pieces, hiking with her dog in mountains of the PNW, or snuggling up on the couch for some trashy reality TV.

Eleanor Hubbard is a retired Sociology professor from the University of Colorado in Boulder. She has one self-published book of poetry, *Emerging from the Flames: Poetic and Artistic Musings on Life, Spirituality and the Coronavirus*; which includes art by Pamela McKinnie, published 2021. Her most important values are family, faith and the future.

Scott Hurd is the author of five books, including *Forgiveness: A Catholic Approach*. Scott's books have won awards from the Association of Catholic Publishers and the Catholic Media Association, and have been translated into Korean, Polish and German. Recent essays and reviews have been published by, or are forthcoming in *The Examined Life*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *The Smart Set*,

Allium, Cleaver, KAIROS, Salvation South, Ohio History, Medicine and Meaning, Brevity (blog), and *Pembroke Magazine*, which nominated him for a Pushcart Prize.

Susan Jackson is the author of *Through a Gate of Trees* (CavanKerry Press, 2007), the chapbook *All the Light in Between* (Finishing Line Press, 2013), and her most recent collection *In the River of Songs* (CavanKerry Press, 2022). Her writing has been published in many journals including *Tiferet Journal*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and *Lips*. Jackson is grateful to the New Jersey State Council on the Arts for a fellowship grant. Jackson coleads a group in “Poetry as Spiritual Practice” each summer in Teton County, Wyoming.

John Jeffire was born in Detroit. His novel *Motown Burning* won the 2005 Mount Arrowsmith Novel Competition and the 2007 Independent Publishing Awards Gold Medal for Regional Fiction. Detroitier and former U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine called his first poetry collection, *Stone + Fist + Brick + Bone*, “a terrific one for our city.” In 2022, his novel *River Rouge* won the American Writing Award for Legacy Fiction.

Sebastian Koga is a Romanian neurosurgeon, medical researcher and poet living in New Orleans. He holds a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Oxford. He studies human nature from the inside out. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Member of the Royal Society of Literature, and Honorary Fellow of the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences. He has published poetry in *The Vanity Paper*, *Oxford Literary Review*, *Liminal Spaces* and online anthologies.

Sri Lal's writings have appeared in *Fiction International*, *New York Quarterly*, *Epiphany*, *Daedalus*, *Descant*, *Bangalore Review*, *Bombay Review*, *Bamboo Ridge*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Indian Quarterly*, and others. Their poetry has also been anthologized in *Before the Dawn* (Rogue Scholars Press, 2019), collected spoken word from Nuyorican Poets Café. They teach literature and creative writing in the English Department at CUNY's Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Diamante Lavendar lives in the Midwest US. She enjoys using art as a medium to explore the issues of life with a strong emphasis on spirituality. Most of her work is mixed media digital art which includes some or all of the following:

photography, fractals, drawing, painting, and digital art. Diamante's work has been shown in over one hundred exhibitions to date and has been published in over twenty magazines. Diamante's work has also been recognized in The World Art Awards, 2023, and The American Art Awards for seven consecutive years (2017-2023). Diamante's comprehensive website can be found at www.diamantelavendar.com.

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen*, and *Smiths Knoll*. His poetry collections are *Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge*, *The Madness Of Qwerty*, *A Foetal Heart* and *Bones Speaking With Hard Tongues*. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at edwardmlee.wordpress.com

Rebecca K. Leet has spent a lifetime across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, seeing the best of times and the worst. Like any hometown, it has shaped her poetry, which blends a journalist's eye and mystic's heart. She has been published in more than a dozen journals and anthologies, and on one city bus line. Her maiden book of poetry, *Living with the Doors Wide Open*, was published in 2018.

Deborah Leipziger is an author, poet, and advisor on sustainability. Born in Brazil, Ms. Leipziger is the author of *Story & Bone*, published by Lily Poetry Review Books. Her poems have been published in the UK, US, Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Israel and the Netherlands, in such magazines and journals as *Pangyrus*, *Salamander*, *Lily Poetry Review*, and *Revista Cardenal*. Her chapbook, *Flower Map*, was published by Finishing Line Press (2013). Deborah is the author of several non-fiction books on sustainability and human rights issues.

Emily Levang (she/her) is an essayist and poet living at the headwaters of Lake Superior, where her work envisions humans caring for our Earth-body. She is the Communications Manager for Waankam: People for the Estuary, a citizen-led Rights of Nature initiative. She has been published in *Ensia*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Braided Way*, *Querencia Press*, *Geez Magazine*, and others. She is a graduate of the Stonecoast MFA in Maine.

Rupert M. Loydell is Senior Lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride* magazine, and contributing editor to *International Times*. He is a widely published poet whose most recent poetry book is *The Age of Destruction and Lies* (Shearsman, 2023). He has edited anthologies for *Salt*, *Shearsman*, and *KFS*, written for academic journals such as *Punk & Post-Punk* (which he is on the editorial board of), and contributed to books about David Lynch, Brian Eno and industrial music

Wendy Jean MacLean's work is rooted in a lifelong engagement with mythology, scripture and contemplation. Publications include *Presence*, *Bearings Online*, *Green Spirit*, *Crosswind*, three books of poetry and collaborations with many composers. She is a spiritual director and minister of the United Church of Canada.

Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet and playwright from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @benmacnair

Freesia McKee (she/her) writes about place, gender, and genre through poetry, prose, book reviews, and literary criticism. Recent work appears in *Fugue*, *About Place Journal*, *Porter House Review*, and her newest chapbook, *Hummingbird Vows*. She is an Assistant Professor of English at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Read more at FreesiaMcKee.com.

Steven Ostrowski is a widely-published fiction writer, poet and painter. His novel, *The Highway of Spirit and Bone* (Lefora Publications), has just been released. A book of poems, *Life Field*, is forthcoming from Impspired Books.

Holly Payne-Strange (she/her) is a novelist, poet, and podcast creator. Her writing has been lauded by *USA Today*, *LA Weekly*, and *The New York Times*. Additionally her next novel, *All Of Us Alone*, will be a recommended read for Women Writers, Women's Books in December 2023. She has had her poetry published by various groups including *Door Is A Jar* magazine, *In Parenthesis*, *Dipity Lit Magazine*, and will soon be featured in *Academy Heart and Red Door*, among others.

Celeste Pfister has long been writing in the shadows of her roles including mother, physician, teacher, mentor, writer, artist, musician. She has taught

literary courses and had essays published in *Reunion* (Shodair Children's Hospital). She publishes a bi-weekly blog, *Creative Inspiration*, on topics of art and poetry. She lives in Venice, Florida where she paints and works on her first poetry collection and a memoir.

Phocas lives in central Michigan.

Marge Piercy has published 20 poetry collections, most recently, *On the Way Out, Turn Off the Light* (Knopf); 17 novels including *Sex Wars*. PM Press reissued *Vida, Dance the Eagle to Sleep*; they brought out short stories *The Cost of Lunch, etc* and *My Body, My Life* (essays, poems). She has read at over 575 venues here and abroad.

Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in *Your Daily Poem, Writing In A Woman's Voice, Impsired, Discretionary Love, Fresh Words, The Writing Disorder, Young Ravens*, and more. Nancy has had poetry, essays, and plays published in various anthologies. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She writes a blog called *Inanities* at nancywriteon.wordpress.com

Pip Ridley is a British national who teaches English and Yoga in the Netherlands. She has a bachelor's degree in philosophy and has developed a keen interest in and deep knowledge of Hindu philosophy over the years, particularly the Yoga Sutras. Pip believes that the pursuit of scientific knowledge is a spiritual practice, and hopes that the number of people meditating and engaging in (secular) spiritual practices will increase in order to benefit the Earth and her inhabitants. Her work can be found on her blog: pipridley.wixsite.com/microcosmic

Georgia Riordan (she/they) is an MFA student at Rosemont College with a Writing BA from Ithaca College. They write primarily within the forms of poetry, flash, and lyric essays and within the genres and cross-genres of horror, magical realism, and creative nonfiction. You can find all their previous publications on their website: georgiariordan.com.

Lois Roma-Deeley's most recent poetry collection is *Like Water in the Palm of My Hand* (2022). Her previous books include *The Short List of Certainties*, winner of

the Jacopone da Todi Book Prize (2017); *High Notes* (2010), a Paterson Poetry Prize finalist; *northSight* (2006); and *Rules of Hunger* (2004). Her poems have been published in numerous anthologies and journals, nationally and internationally, including Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day Series, *Post Road*, *Spillway*, *The Columbia Poetry Review*, and many more. She's Associate Editor of the poetry journal *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry* and is Poet Laureate of Scottsdale, Arizona. (2021-2024). www.loisroma-deeley.com

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in eight years he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid, interviews, and plays in nearly 200 journals on five continents. Photo publications include *Alchemy Spoon*, *Barnstorm*, *Burningword*, *Camas*, *Phoebe*, *Stoneboat*, and *Stonecoast*. Photo-essays include *DASH*, *Kestrel*, *Litro*, *NWW*, *Paperbark*, *Pilgrimage Magazine*, *Sweet*, and *Typehouse*. Recently nominated for Best of the Net, he also wrote/acted in a one-act play and appeared in a documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim's family splits time between city and mountains.

Based in Houston, **Sophia Lisa Salazar** has been a journalist, a lawyer then a digital marketer and always a frustrated artist. Graduating from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in English Literature, she has participated in numerous Houston-area writing classes and workshops. With a published essay in the online publication, *Re: Magazine*, her first published poem appeared in *The Socorro Chieftan* newspaper at the age of 8.

Michael Salcman is former chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland and president of The Contemporary Museum, a child of the Holocaust, and a survivor of polio. He has published poems in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Barrow Street*, *Harvard Review*, *Hopkins Review*, *Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Raritan* and *Smartish Pace*. Books include *The Clock Made of Confetti* (nominated for The Poets' Prize), *The Enemy of Good is Better*, *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems about Doctors, Patients, Illness, and Healing*, *A Prague Spring* (Sinclair Poetry Prize winner), *Shades & Graces* (winner Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize), and *Necessary Speech: New & Selected Poems* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2022).

Jane Salisbury is a writer, lover of the west, former librarian, and walker who has lived and worked in Portland, Oregon for a long time. Jane has lived in every western state including Alaska. Her days are spent in the garden, facilitating workshops for Write Around Portland and rambling around with her family. She has been published in *Street Roots*, *Halfway Down the Stairs* and *Ruminate*.

Amber Stallworth is a fourth-year music industry and communications student at Northeastern University. She is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she hails from one of the worst neighborhoods in the city. However, as a low-income black girl she's been able to take advantage of prestigious education her entire life which is where her passion for writing stems from. This passion led her to take up a writing minor. Besides writing, her passions include woodworking, music, and hanging out with friends. Her future writing goals include being a songwriter as well as writing a book. This poem is from her recent study in Rome and the Rome-inspired collection written there.

Donna Baier Stein has published a poetry book, *Letting Rain Have Its Say* (Kelsay Books), a chapbook *Sometimes You Sense the Difference* (FLP), and an award winning novel and two story collections. She is founder and publisher of *Tiferet Journal* and was a Founding Poetry Editor of *Bellevue Literary Review*.

Deidre Sullivan is writer who works in the field of cultural strategy and insights, often with a focus on semiotics. She divides her time between New York City and the Hudson Valley.

Eryn Sunnolia (she/they) is a queer, Philly-based writer. Their work, which focuses on transformation, desire, and healing, has appeared in *Well + Good*, *Insider*, *Tilted House Magazine*, *Salty*, and others. They're currently working on their first book. Find them at erynjohnson.com

Wally Swist's books include *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa for the 2011 Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition, and *A Bird Who Seems to Know Me: Poems Regarding Birds and Nature*, winner of the 2018 Ex Ophidia Poetry Prize. Recent poems and translations have or will appear in *Asymptote*, *Chicago Quarterly*

Review, Commonweal, New World Writing, and Poetry London. Shanti Arts published his translation of *L'Allegria*, Giuseppe Ungaretti's first iconic book, in August 2023.

Rowan Tate is an emerging Romanian songwriter, poet, and tree whisperer. Her work is visually fervent and deeply felt. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Laura Grace Weldon lives in a township too tiny for traffic lights where she works as a book editor, teaches writing workshops, and maxes out her library card. Laura served as Ohio's 2019 Poet of the Year and is the author of four books.

Dick Westheimer lives in rural southwest Ohio. He is winner of the 2023 Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, a Rattle Poetry Prize finalist, and a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee. His poems have appeared or upcoming in *Whale Road Review, Rattle, OneArt, Abandon Journal, Stone Poetry Quarterly, and Minyan.* His chapbook, *A Sword in Both Hands, Poems Responding to Russia's War on Ukraine,* is published by SheilaNaGig. More at www.dickwestheimer.com

Lory Widmer Hess lives with her family in Switzerland, where she works with adults with developmental disabilities and is in training as a spiritual director. Her writing has been published in *Parabola, Amethyst Review, Ekstasis, Solum Literary Journal,* and elsewhere. Her book *When Fragments Make a Whole: A Personal Journey Through Healing Stories in the Bible* will be published by Floris Books in 2024. Visit her website and blog at enterenchanted.com.

Donald Mace Williams is a retired newspaper writer and editor with a Ph.D. in Beowulfian prosody. His second book of poetry, *The Nectar Dancer,* was published in August 2023, and his iambic translation of "*Beowulf*" is due out on March 1, 2024, both of those from a small Texas press. His translations of Rainer Maria Rilke's poems have run in eleven magazines. He lives in Austin, Texas.

Veronica Winters takes her viewers to a mystical realm through figurative oil paintings and colored pencil art. In color, figure and symbols, the artist explores the interconnectedness and paints the relationship between mind, body and spirit, seeking to capture the secrets of the Universe. Born in Russia, Winters is Florida-based portrait artist, instructor, and author who is recognized for her

colored pencil drawing with the publication of books, *The Colored Pencil Manual & How to Color Like an Artist*. Veronica's art was published in numerous magazines and art books. She has a BFA from OSU and an MFA from Penn State, and studied art the GCA & the Art Students League in New York.

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. He has published a novel, *The Dream Patch*, a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *Heart Speak*. His novella, *Hearts in the Dark*, was published in an anthology by Running Wild Press in Los Angeles. His poetry chapbook, *What Comes, What Goes*, was published by Kelsay Books kelsaybooks.com. He has received residencies from The Ucross Foundation and the Edward Albee Foundation, and a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation. christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/f861509283

Robin Young, based in Borrego Springs, California, works in mixed media focusing mostly on collage and contemporary art making. Her focus on collage art using magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, jewelry, feathers, foil, etc. allows her to develop deep into the whimsical and intuitive.