



The Magnolia Review
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Editor-in-Chief and Founder: Suzanna Anderson

Welcome to the sixth issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, deadlines on November 15 and May 15. The issue will be available online on January 15 and July 15.

While The Magnolia Review will not have physical copies at this time, the editors may compile a print version if funds become available.

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For more information, please visit www.themagnoliareview.wordpress.com or email us at **themagnoliareview@gmail.com**.

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Overpopulation

If every tree in Eden had been
permitted, wouldn't our curse
have been to live forever?

Blue Baloon on the Seine, Ile St. Louis, Paris



Roger Camp

Emily as Wind Racing from the Corners

We lost the choice
to love each other

when we were pinned
together by the force

of every angle
of love we talked about.

Each promise came
with an instruction.

Each illness came
with a terrible cure.

Our skin held on to
our previous skins.

I can't tell you
how this happened,

but when I opened
my mouth,

I could only tell you
about loving Emily.

Darren C. Demaree

You Read Me Stories

It really came from those thirty minutes but felt as if it just rose up from nowhere. There was the velvet smooth of your voice and somehow it filled a balloon in my head and I began to float.

It was another moon I clung to.
I was suddenly really something in a field of stars
And there were your words
like rockets coursing the dark of space,
seeing all with their own light.
There were your words like the string
flapping beneath me,
that I grabbed onto,
that did not snap against the branches
of the trees, the roofs of the houses.

You did not tell me straight out—
drift and dream.
But there was my expanding head, there was my weightlessness, and no one
in the room but you.

What Goes Up

Her daughter's helium balloon bobs near the ceiling, stringless. Tears have already been shed and forgotten — her daughter is now worrying magpies in the garden with the hose — but the balloon keeps floating its way into the corners of her eyes as she fixes lunch. It drifts around the kitchen, the ceiling fan and breeze from the windows sending it on inexplicable, contradictory missions. It keeps catching her off guard when she is thinking things that she wishes she wouldn't think.

She turns on the hob so that she can hard boil some eggs, but then turns it off again. Helium is meant to be flammable, isn't it? Hindenburg, and all that? Perhaps open flames and errant balloons don't mix. Not that the balloon looks like it has any intention of sinking, but she can't remember the last time she had a helium balloon, can't remember how fast they fall. Is it a slow drift to the earth, or is it kamikaze plunge? She'll have to look it up. She knows which she would prefer if she were a balloon.

The magpies are squawking obscenities so she glances out the window to make sure everything's okay. Her daughter isn't paying attention to the magpies anymore, but she's playing too near their tree, so they're screeching and circling above her head, occasionally dive-bombing the grass near her feet. Magpies are large birds, but her daughter doesn't worry about things the way she does. Her daughter knows when there's no real need to look up.

She goes to the computer for something but forgets what it is by the time she gets there so looks up the Hindenburg on Wikipedia instead. She skips to the section about what caused the fire and is surprised to find that now people assume that some sort of electric spark initially caused the gas to ignite. Also, she discovers, the Hindenburg was filled with hydrogen, not helium. Still, when she gets back to the kitchen, she glares at the balloon and switches off the lights and the ceiling fan.

The box of eggs sits on the counter, warming. She finds the broom and tries to bat the balloon into the next room. She's able to punt it to the kitchen door, but she can't coax it down the wall quite far enough to jounce it under the door frame. Her stomach growls. The ladder isn't where it's meant to be, and she's too tired to chase it down. Possibly her husband took it to work. Possibly the gardener is borrowing it. It's the kind of thing that will come back eventually if she doesn't dwell on it, if she can just sit tight and not to worry about things that are out of her hands.

Her daughter tumbles into the house with a skinned knee and half an egg shell. The shell is too small to belong to a magpie, so she wonders if the hatchling is okay. The egg is small and blue and she promises herself she'll look it up when she next gets the chance, find out what kind of bird it belongs to. The magpies have returned to their tree, but now they're squalling at something else, perhaps one of the neighborhood cats. Her daughter asks for a banana, then rediscovers the inaccessibility of the balloon and bursts into tears.

She gets out bread and sandwich fillings, things that can be prepared without recourse to gas or electricity. Her daughter wants the crusts cut off but then decides that crustless sandwiches are the wrong shape for eating. She watches her daughter run outside and start trying to feed the sandwich to the magpies. She thinks about protesting, but she's tired and she's thinking those things again, so she sits down at the table instead. She nibbles at her own sandwich, then puts it down. The bread is past its best-before date and not far off stale. The balloon bobs cheerfully above her head. It makes soft bump noises every time it glances off the ceiling. She eyes the open box of eggs sitting near the stove but can't bear to put them away. It would be, she reckons, too much like admitting defeat.

Kanawha¹

Where river-water stills,
green claims encumbered banks.
At rest
along the shore-line,
this is where life gets down—
fish or crane.

All the valley seems endless,
as evening fades,
deepens.
Stars emerge over barges.
A churl rings the surface.

This calm whelms,
makes mortal fact aware,
envelops anything drawn
from shore or fathomed water.

In the sand,
a half-buried tool-box
is a killdeer nest.

Earth's rim has balanced
the crescent's cradle.
From roads and towns
other sounds float down through late July,
ominous in copper-tinted smears of cloud.

John Timothy Robinson

¹ A river located in the central-west portion of West Virginia.

The Balloon Escapes the Grasp

on a day like any other
a tale veers elsewhere
in a trusted cloud of confidence
the balloon escapes the grasp

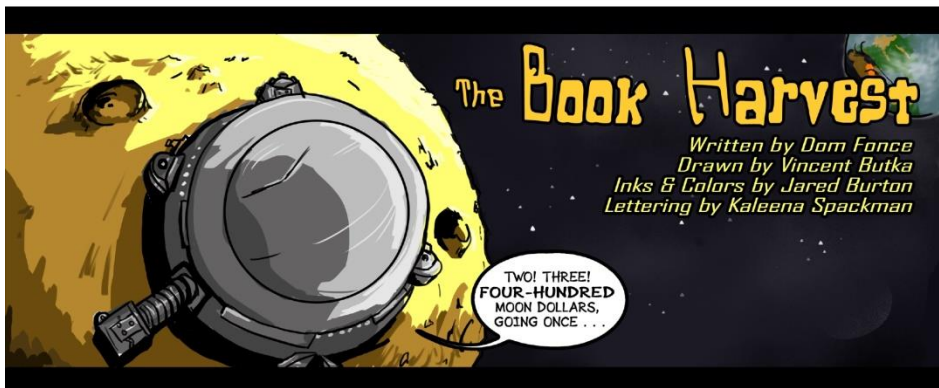
a short tether
of mayfly life
slips and disappears
enters the bellies of stars

something raw and tender
searches upward
tallies the distance
of measured impermanence

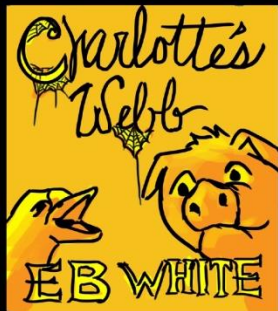
against all evidence
alive in every color
globes of optimism
glow in the sky

Early Spring in the Woods

Geese
wing overhead.
The lone crow's raucous
voice cleaves the cool air.
Water, putrid with decay, rushes
under the bridge, splits around the island.
A pair of mallards hugs the bank foraging for lunch.
Violets peek purple glances from the soggy ground.
Fingers of yellow moss clutch at stones along the path,
their heads buried in dirt. Crinkled infant leaves rock
gently in the cool breeze. Slender vines, long and
brown, cling like lovers to trunks of trees. Grey
squirrels dash across fallen logs and hollow
walnut shells. A cardinal announces red
at the very top of the nearly naked
ash. Beneath a leafing bush:
one bright pink balloon
on a
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"UGH, THE OMNI-BRARY
IN OUR DEN.



CHARLOTTE'S
WEB, PLEASE!

"IN THE MOST
BORING WOMAN'S
VOICE EVER!"

NOW READING
CHARLOTTE'S WEB
BY E.B. WHITE . .

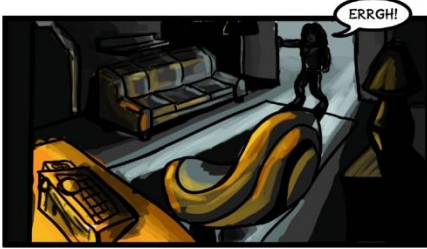


I DUNNO, I JUST
LIKE THE SMELL OF
THE PAGES.

IT FEELS MORE REAL--
LIKE A GIFT--TO ACTUALLY
HOLD SOMETHING
IN YOUR HANDS.



STORIES
ARE JUST
STORIES,
MEG.
PAPER JUST
GETS IN
THE WAY.





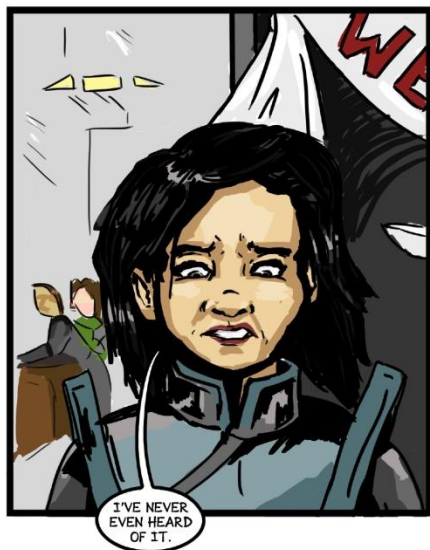


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I WILL BE AT THE BOOK
HARVEST TOMORROW,
NO MATTER WHAT
MY BROTHERS SAY.

Zzz







END

Purchase Power II

Patrons of the art world
bid at auction
competing for masterworks
against rival appetites,
efforts rewarded
by acquisition,
applause of the crowd
for record prices,
feelings of possession
of a treasured item
won in economic battle,
soon to molder unnoticed
on crowded walls,
denuded of satisfaction.

The Old Man and the Balloon

The gold ribbon ran from the old man's left wrist to the hedge. It was threaded through the bushes and then rose up in the air to where it was attached to a silver balloon. He didn't know what his grandson had in mind when he did this. The boy had been told by his father if he lost this balloon, he wouldn't get another. Perhaps the hedge and Granpa were the double lock on the stable door to keep the horse from bolting.

It had been tied while he slept, though not very well. All it took was a turn of his wrist and the half knot undid. He watched the ribbon unwind and cross the garden. It slithered through the hedge as the balloon lifted into the air. He would have caught it if he could. He once could have grabbed it. Or jumped out of the seat to snatch it before it got to the hedge. Or dived for the balloon lifting like a spaceship from the top of the hedge. Instead he sat and watched, trying not to smile.

There was movement at the window. He closed his eyes. Someone was checking on him, and he didn't want to be found out. He had been asleep in his favourite deck chair, worn to fit his shape. Rickety, like himself, in familiar ways. He was glad of the peace and didn't want it disturbed. He kept his eyes closed and imagined the balloon looking down on him. A grey man in grey clothes, alone in a back garden. Summer bunting hung in the trees and Chinese lanterns on the line. Abandoned croquet and boules lay on the lawn. Pastel coloured gingham covered crates and tables by the withering roses. His wife would have had the garden party when they were in bloom. She always knew when was right.

He imagined the rest of them were inside the house watching the TV or on their tablets or phones. They kept those out of the garden for him. No, more out of respect for his wife's memory. She didn't like faces disappearing into screens at the dinner table or parties. She'd say to invite people if you wanted to talk to them. And if it wasn't urgent it could wait. And if it was anything other than a human being at the other end waiting for you to reply, that could certainly wait.

He opened his eyes. The balloon was still climbing higher. Did he read once about balloons killing animals? Not 'Attack of the Killer Balloon' he knew but the thought made him chuckle all the same. It was something to do with when they fell to earth. Animals and fish ate them. Or they were snagged in the ribbons and trapped. Like he had been. A documentary showed the contents of a turtle's stomach with a red balloon inside. A blue ribbon wound round a dead bird's feet. Balloons

and ribbon got caught in power lines and caused darkness to fall. Now he felt guilty. The balloon was a speck in the sky but could eventually be a secret killer.

The old man worried about his son. His son had given the boy the balloon. He would be angry. His son looked for excuses to be angry since his mother died. The boy trusted his Granpa with his balloon. What could be his excuse?

Perhaps if he died? He considered this. He was tired. It was an appropriate time and place. They wouldn't be entirely surprised. And it wouldn't be the worst way to go. In his sleep, after an afternoon party, in late summer, in his own back garden. Could he will himself?

He tried to focus but did not succeed. Not least because he'd already been dead since the balloon escaped his wrist. He remembered what his grandson had done. The boy asked the balloon to keep his Granpa safe and tied it round his wrist as if it was a tether to this world.

The balloon was a killer after all, the old man smiled.

Deflating Farce & Fancy

after Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night"

I, too, am one acquainted with the night,
strolls down paths sweet-dream paved
crowned by mile-long psychedelic lights
neonizing clouds & lightening grave,
turning naysayers 'round, reaching heights
of whimsy inflating farce & fancy.

I, too, know REM flash-lighting insight,
hitting home hard. Home, where lucidity,
burgeoning, creeps along 'til dawn's light
invariably interrupts sweet slumber. Verity
foreshadowing dreams, & smack-dab right
in the heart of day, then casts me into a sea
crawling with worst fears overriding illusion.
The notion of smooth sailing, pure imagination.

Cartwheel



Leah Givens

The Top

Spinning on the hard macadam
it threw sparks like stars
in every direction
Yet there was an end
to the magical turning and fire

A force resisting
had its specks of light
contend
crash and smother each other
till nothing was left

It slowed, wobbled,
fell to its side and was still
Its soul of a string
unspooled, limp,
was unable to set it in motion

Dumb, with no hands.
it could not right itself

Tony

Tony stunk.

There was no escaping it. Sitting at my desk, head buried in a book, I could always smell Tony before I saw him. As he drifted back and forth between the circulation desk and my post at the information desk at the David Adamany Undergraduate Library in Detroit, the smell oozed from him, permeating the air in the three-story library atrium. His clothing reeked of alcohol, but I don't think he was an alcoholic. His breath didn't have that sweet rancid alcoholic smell. He probably absorbed the scent hanging around homeless people in the Cass corridor. He also smelled of tobacco, and I could tell he smoked from his brown-stained fingers, but more than anything Tony smelled like he hadn't taken a shower in months. He smelled like downtown Detroit—the hot, sticky steam that shoots out of the sewers, urine, the grimy decay of the city.

Tony was tall, probably 6'4", and imposing. If I saw him on the street, I would probably avoid his eyes and hurry by. After five years of going to school and working at Wayne State University, I'd gotten used to hurrying by people who looked and smelled like Tony. The homeless people were fixtures at Wayne State, like the old drunk guy who snored loudly in the cushy black leather chairs on the second floor of the student center and the scrawny bearded man who waited near the Forest/Warren exit ramp off the Lodge Freeway with his sign "Will Work for Food." During my first few weeks as a freshman, when people asked me for money I would give them a few dollars, but eventually I ignored them and accepted them as an inevitable part of going to school in an inner city. I liked Wayne State for its realness, its complete lack of pretension. I developed an attachment to the school, even to the smell.

Tony was my favorite library patron at the Undergraduate Library, the UGL as we called it. He was obviously homeless and mentally ill, so unlike the whining undergraduates or the community members who came to the library to use our specially designated “Community Access Terminals,” or CATs, to leer at porn all day. Tony had a scruffy black beard, graying slightly, and wore a ragged black cap on his head. The elastic on the cap must have been stretched out because it was always sliding down his forehead. He’d snatch at it, excitedly, pulling it up before it fell over his eyes. Tony had a face like a jack-o-lantern, beady eyes, a large nose, and a wide grin that revealed three or four teeth. He had dark shadows under eyes that darted around from right to left to right. He spoke with his hands as much as with his mouth, gesturing in gray gloves with the fingers cut out.

Tony was one of the repeat patrons at UGL; I wouldn’t call him a regular. There was nothing regular or ordinary about Tony. At first, he came in weekly, but he’d disappear for months and then reappear. Tony only came in on cold nights. To the library staff he was “Smelly Tony.” Everything and everyone was catalogued and classified in the UGL—patrons, staff, books, videos, and magazines. The library staff had a particular affinity for acronyms and nicknames. I was a GSA, graduate student assistant, at the UGL’s information desk. Our information desk was always staffed by one GSA and one undergraduate PIC, or peer information counselor. There were five GSAs and two PICs, and all of us spent most of the time avoiding the CAT people. Someone else had invented the “CAT people” nickname for the eclectic assortment of community members who used our computers. Nicole, one of the other GSAs, invented “Fried-Chicken Man” for this skinny guy who came in several times a week, smelling like fried chicken, and printed out entire electronic books on our noisy dot-matrix printers. At first, Fried Chicken Man was part of the CAT people collective, but eventually he must have enrolled at WSU because one day he started using the password-protected student computers. Regardless of which computers he used, we could reconstruct his movements with the forensic precision of crime scene investigators by following the trail of greasy fingerprints he left on the printers, keyboards, and monitors.

I soon created my own nicknames for both staff and patrons. I called Nicole “Hawaiian Lady” because she had moved to Michigan from Hawaii. She wasn’t Hawaiian; she had just lived there. Hawaiian Lady was originally from Seattle. She was a robust lady with long blond hair and freckles, always laughing and always talking—my complete opposite. I was a scrawny, brown-haired, Midwestern girl who’d never lived anywhere else and who hardly ever laughed or talked. It should have been no surprise to me that I was quickly classified as the quiet “shy” girl at the UGL. Theresa, one of the outgoing GSAs, told me I reminded her of this shy girl who used to work there but quit because she didn’t like it and didn’t need the money. It really pissed me off, but I didn’t speak up. She was partially correct. I didn’t like it there, but I needed the money. I never gave anyone a reason to doubt my shy label. My nicknames for the patrons were more creative though. There was the Dragon Lady who came in on a daily basis demanding to know the winds speeds of various tropical storms, Tower of Nimbus Man who always asked for actual photographs of fictitious buildings, Vietnam Man who told me violent war stories, and countless others. I never learned their real names.

Tony was different from the others. He loved to talk. He wouldn’t talk for twenty minutes. He talked for two or three hours straight. At first, this was a problem. I could tolerate his aroma for only a few minutes before I’d have to make up an excuse to straighten the magazines or use the bathroom. Stacey, one of the clerks at the circulation desk, and I would exchange annoyed glances whenever we saw Tony approaching one of the desks. Gradually, as I got used to the smell, I came to appreciate Tony and his conversation. He had something to say on any topic, but his favorite ones were the Empire State Building, the grocery store—particularly the ice cream aisle, and the stock market. His delivery, with the elaborate gesturing and reenactments, was entertaining. Tony said he had \$50,000 dollars invested in the stock market and whenever he came in, it was my job to check his stocks. As he spoke, he’d trace an imaginary line in the air with his index finger, charting his nest egg’s progression. An obvious delusion, but feeding his fantasy by translating the Smith Barney and Ernst & Young websites made me feel useful. We’d have the same conversations over and over again, but I didn’t mind, even when he’d get confused and call me Rebecca.

“Hey, Rachel, where have you been? How are you? You look very nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Really Rachel, you look really nice. Rachel, Rachel, I was talking to my stockbroker on the phone. He said I’m doing very well. Things are looking up. I’m up to at least \$30,000. Hey, Rachel, let’s check how the market is doing. You never know because the market it always changing. It goes up and down and up and down. Even though I just talked to my broker, things could have changed by now. Let’s look it up on the computer. You can just type that in, right? How about Smith Barney? Can you find Smith Barney?”

“Sure, Tony,” I’d say going to the Smith Barney website. “Here it is. The DOW is up, and the NASDAQ is down. See, here,” I’d say pointing to the stock charts on the screen.

“Wow, that’s amazing Rebecca the way you can just type that in and find it. That’s really amazing. So the DOW is up, that’s terrific. I should call my stockbroker. I never know when he is going to call. Hey, Rachel, what kind of ice cream do you like?”

“Häagen-Dazs.”

“Aah, I never tried it. I like Breyers. Is it smooth, Rachel, and creamy, the Häagen-Dazs? What’s the texture like? Breyers is smooth. Häagen-Dazs, that sounds gourmet and foreign. It’s foreign, isn’t it? There are so many flavors. I like vanilla. Vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry, what’s that called?”

“Neapolitan,” I’d say.

“Neapolitan, yeah Neapolitan. Neapolitan is cosmopolitan. Ha, ha, ha. There are so many flavors in those ice cream freezers. Going down the aisle with the shopping cart, VROOM VROOM,” he’d say pretending to push a shopping cart. “All those containers and all those flavors. How are you supposed to choose? Breyers is good, yumm yumm.”

“Yeah,” I’d say. It was the middle of winter.

“Hey Rachel, after talking about ice cream. You know, now I want to eat some. I could really go for some ice cream right now. Hey, when you’re walking down the aisles in the grocery store, pushing your cart down the aisles—ZOOM ZOOM—do you see all the cereal boxes? All the different types of cereal, but, you know, Rachel, they only fill them up half way. They keep filling them up less and less, soon there won’t be anything left. I remember the boxes having more in them before, being filled almost to the top of the box. The boxes just keep getting lighter and lighter and filled with more and more air. One day, they’re just going to float away, to float away down the aisles and people will have to go running down the aisles to catch the floating boxes of cereal, everyone will be running after floating cereal boxes. Wouldn’t that be funny? Ha ha ha. What kind of cereal do you eat? Wheaties, Frosted-Mini Wheats? Hey, Rachel, you can look up anything on that computer, can’t you? That’s amazing. You can look up everything Rachel. AMAZING. That’s really a talent and a skill. You can find anything. I’m sure you can find anything. I could ask you anything, anything in the world. Wow, you just type it in and there it is. You just type type away, one, two, three, four, and WHOOSH,” he’d saying, swinging an imaginary racket. “Rachel, Rachel, do you like sports? Do you like tennis?”

“Yeah, I played on my high school team,” I’d say.

“Did you watch those Williams sisters? They hit the ball and WOW it goes a million miles. I wouldn’t want to be on the other end. I play tennis. It’s hard work, all that running back and forth and back and forth. I wouldn’t like to be one of those ball boys kneeling by the net waiting for the balls. WHOOSH, then you’d run this way, WHOOSH you’d run the other way. Those Williams sisters, you’d have to hide and duck if you were on the other side of the net. Like this,” Tony would say pretending to dodge imaginary flying balls, much to the confusion of passing students.

“Right, Tony,” I’d say laughing at Tony’s reenactments. He’d chuckle too.

Tony always asked me about myself, not overly personal questions, just friendly questions about how I was doing. He would compliment me in a gentlemanly way. He was polite and considerate. Whenever students would come to the desk with a question, Tony would gallantly step aside and say “Oh, please, go ahead,” to the students, who usually had a confused or disgusted look on their faces. Tony would stand quietly next to the desk while I helped whoever was asking a question, and when the person left, Tony would resume his position and his conversation. Tony didn’t tell me personal information about himself—like where he was born or how he ended up in Detroit—and I didn’t ask. I got enough personal information from other people who came into the library, descriptions of abusive husbands, intimate details of people’s sex lives, and horror stories from veterans.

I’d learned in my four months working on this job as a GSA at the UGL that most people didn’t even care who they talked to. They just wanted to talk. I’ve always been lousy at small talk, but it didn’t matter. My information desk was the first desk people saw when they came in the library. I was convenient. My daily interactions with people at work were mostly one-sided. I sat and listened, like a piece of furniture, and they just talked. I thought that must be how therapists feel, like non-people, sounding boards. My mom’s a therapist and my sisters and I joke that she must have therapist written on her forehead because wherever we go strangers tell her their life stories.

I guess I take after her. People often tell me that I look “friendly” and “non-threatening.” Sitting at my information desk, I looked easy to talk to. I didn’t mind that, but I hate it when people call me “shy.” The shy label started in high school when I was voted “most shy” in my high school class, which not only pissed me off, but baffled me. I wasn’t shy. I was quiet. I played along with my “shy” label at the UGL too. It fit with the stereotypical image of the timid, mousy librarian that I’d adopted. I bought into that image and played that role. I am quiet—I’ve been quiet for a long time. I never told the library patrons I didn’t want to hear their intimate secrets.

Tony was different, though. Listening to him, I never felt like a piece of furniture. He never shared any secrets with me; I wasn’t some shy non-person he could unload his secrets on. I was just someone who listened and was interested in what he had to say. I don’t think Tony ever saw me as “shy,” and as time passed I didn’t think of Tony as a crazy, smelly, homeless guy. He was kind, gallant, articulate, funny, and intelligent. Tony had plans to visit the Empire State Building, and I wanted to help him; I felt like I could help him.

“Rachel, have you been to the Empire State Building?”

“No, I’ve never been to New York City.”

“Rachel, never been to New York. Rachel you have to go. You’ve never been to New York? I can’t believe that. You have to go to New York. New York is America, America is New York. You have to see Central Park and walk around and around Central Park,” he said, walking around in little circles in front of the desk. “Central Park is great, Rachel. Yeah, Rachel, don’t believe what you hear. Central Park is beautiful even at night, especially at night. New York is great, it’s beautiful Rachel. We have to go to New York, Rebecca. It’s so tall, Rachel, everything is so tall. You feel tiny, really, really tiny, like an ant, a miniature person standing under these giants. Giant buildings, I wonder how they ever built those giant buildings. So, how about the Empire State Building? Hey, Rachel, what about those Republicans, Rachel, what do you think about what they’re doing? I don’t know...”

While Tony was talking, I turned to my computer and typed “Empire State Building” into Google. I found a website all about it and turned the computer monitor so Tony could see.

“Look at that, Rebecca, you just type it in and WHAM it’s right there. That’s terrific. That’s a real talent to be able to find stuff like that. To just type it into the computer and there it is. So what does it say about the Empire State Building? Re-Rachel, how many floors does it have? How tall it is? When was it built? Didn’t they close down some of the floors? Which floors did they close? Yeah, what does it say there? When is it open? That’s important. We have to find that out.”

I scanned the computer screen looking for answers to Tony’s questions.

“Hmm, let’s see, Tony,” I said clicking on the Frequently Asked Questions section. “Here, it’s 1,453 feet, 8 9/16 inches tall, has 102 floors and was built between 1930 and 1931.” Good I thought, these are the kind of questions I like answering—informational questions with easy answers.

“Rachel, what about the tickets? We’ve got to get tickets.”

“Okay, right,” I said clicking back to the main page.

“Look, Rebecca,” he said touching the computer screen, “you can buy tickets on the computer. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Do you want me to write down the website, Tony?”

“Yeah, yeah, Rachel. That would be great Rachel. So I can just go on the website and get tickets and go the Empire State Building? That’s great. You can find anything on that computer.”

I wrote the address for the website and all the answers to his questions on a piece of scrap paper and handed it to Tony.

“Thanks, Rachel, thanks. I’ve got to get going, I’ll see you,” he said stuffing the paper in his pocket and waving as he walked towards the door.

Later that night when I was cleaning up before closing time, I found that piece of paper crumpled up on the atrium floor. Tony must have dropped it when he left. That was okay though. I knew Tony would be back, and we’d do it all over again.

Nature's Gift on Mother's Day

She clips the stem of a
tree that has a magnolia
blossom and several
evergreen
leaves. Puts it in a glass of water
on the kitchen window sill. The
flower is so sweet scented it
fills the
house and
cups the sun with its
petals, as if to celebrate—

how to spell balloon

breathe, a sigh, relief.
you have made it so.
far, and off you go. float on.

a leaf does not know,
when it falls, where it will go.
and yet, it embarks.

lean on those who stand,
like a statue. but, who are
inside, like a hug.

love not only with
your body, but with your mind.
and you will feel whole.

once you learn to dream
everything else will become
as simple as air

open the door for
yourself. you do not need to
feel helpless, at all.

no one ever said
life would be like a balloon.
no, people can't float.

Balloons

My forty-sixth birthday is coming up soon,
But I guess I'm getting too old for balloons.
Not expecting presents, or too many cards,
I'm grateful for life, and life is getting hard.

I suppose that even at my age I'm still a kid,
I need to stop regretting the bad things I did.
My God brings the future into a brighter horizon,
No one but him can do the best surprising.

A picture of my niece and nephew is on my wall,
riding me piggy-back, with balloons! What a ball!
There I am, bald head, naked for the camera eye,
The children are smiling, and I could just cry.

A child's birthday is a great big production,
but as for me, I'm under construction.
"How long will I live, to blow out candles?"
God won't give me anything I can't handle!

So I choose to be responsible when I have to be,
But a youthful perspective is the perspective for me.
Already experiencing a taste of things to come,
Hey! That's my birthday cake! Please save me some!

Don't bring balloons, or send sympathy cards,
I'm a poet, but not a Hallmark bard.
For one day, world problems will not be on my shoulder,
I'll complain about politics, when I grow older.

Childhood Memories

Michelle waited until James had safely left for work, then crept upstairs to the spare bedroom. Pulling up a chair, she climbed onto it to retrieve the blue box stored on the top of the wardrobe. Gingerly, she carried the container downstairs, positioned it in the centre of the kitchen table, made herself a cup of coffee, then settled down to open it.

Raising the lid, she set it gently aside and began to divest the box of its contents. First an old-fashioned christening robe, white silk, the top ruched with embroidered rosebuds. Eyes closed, her hands fondled the material; she held it to her cheek, caressing the softness. The clock ticked away the minutes. With a sigh, she laid it on the table and turned back to the box.

A pair of baby's bootees emerged, obviously handknitted in the finest yarn, blue as a robin's egg, tied with bows of satin ribbon. She placed a finger in each and walked them across the table.

*Round and round the garden
Like a teddy bear
One step, two step,
Tickly under there.*

Memories of a toddler taking his first steps flooded back. A picnic in the park. A blanket on the ground, small toys scattered over it. And a ball, scarlet with bright yellow spots the same colour as the daffodils. James holding Ben by the hands, steadying the child so he could kick the ball amid squeals of delight. Then Ben forgetting to hold on, letting go of his father's fingers, stumbling forwards, eager to reach his ball. *One step, two steps, three steps!*

"Oh, what a clever little man you are!"

And she had scooped him up, held him high in celebration, frightening him for just a moment before he burst into infectious laughter, so that they all joined in.

A Victorian silver teether: a teddy bear sitting atop an ivory post, surrounded by four tiny bells. Given as a present by his Godparents, Jenny and Paul. A beautiful keepsake, she had never dared give to Ben, health and safety you know, but he had loved to watch the light flash, reflections guided across the walls accompanied by the merry tinkling of the silver bells. It brought reminders of long nights walking the floors; rubbing Bonjela onto angry gums.

*Go to sleep my baby,
Close your pretty eyes.
Mama's watching over,
Singing lullabies.*

Neatly folded in one corner of the box was a large, pale blue, heart-shaped balloon, almost covering half of the table when it was spread out flat. On one side was written "Welcome to the Christening of Benjamin Arthur Whitehouse, 12th April 1996" in bold white lettering. The obverse was covered with various children's toys and motifs. The huge heart had been part of a larger décor piece, greeting the guests as they entered the hall. The handsome, young man in the shop had suggested she might like to deflate it after the christening and put it in a box as a keepsake with other mementoes of the happy day. James had thought it silly but now she was glad she had started the Childhood Memories box.

Michelle recalled the Christening Day had been sunny and unseasonably warm; men in smart suits, women dressed in summer finery: hats and bags courtesy of Louis Vuitton. Everyone had said what a good baby Ben was, smiling into the face of the young Vicar as he poured the Holy Water over his brow. Afterwards, in the garden, the food and drink had flowed; there was lots of love and laughter. Even Cousin Francis had managed a smile.

There was a small photograph album of the day. Michelle's Mum and Dad beaming with pride. James' mother smiling bravely for the camera. It had only been a few months since they had lost James' dad, Stephen. Now too many of them had passed.

Afterwards, James had joked, "That certainly seemed to go very well; ready for the next one?"

She had pulled a face and replied, "Let's just enjoy the one we've got for now!" but nonetheless, in bed that night she had welcomed him into her arms.

As it turned out there were to be no brothers or sisters for Ben. Although it had touched them with sadness, as a family they were content: holidays in Spain, weekends spent climbing or sailing. Standing for frozen hours watching schoolboy football matches.

Another photograph emerged, capturing Ben in his new uniform for the first day at Secondary school. That haircut! Braces glinting, caught in the flash. Deep discussions over public or private? Finally decided by Ben himself insisting he wanted to be with his best friends, Geoffrey and Zac.

And he had done well: top of his class in exams, Captain of the football team, walking into his chosen university. The world at his feet. Last summer they'd set off together, the three musketeers, racing along the open road, freestyling through France, roaring down the Rhone Valley; 'roughing it' in hostels along the way.

Glancing at the clock, Michelle was shocked to see it was almost twelve o'clock; she had spent the whole morning reminiscing. Hurrying now, she gathered up the contents of the box and repacked it carefully. James would not exactly be angry to find it there, but he would be disappointed; she must put it back in its resting place before he came home for lunch. Later, after he finished work, they would both visit the local cemetery to lay flowers on Ben's grave: today would have been his 21st birthday.

Yesterday's Balloons

Balloons, red, yellow, green,
and blue bouquet.
Caught in the wires electric.
Like wilting flowers,
a few still vibrant tugging
softly in the breeze.

An old man
in a linen jacket
at a street side-table
drinks tea,
looks on.
A couple,
eighty-odd,
hand in hand:
he wears a tie,
bright red;
she wears a flowered dress.
The only tie and dress for miles.
The old man at the table
and the old couple,
a Sunday brunch of daffodil
and morning glories gone
among the denim hum
and mobile portals
everywhere.
Rings of music in the air.

Balloons caught in the wires,
tangled in the moments surging on.
The old man doffs his hat,
tips the sandaled waitress,
smiles goodbye. She smiles back,
not seeing the balloons, not hearing
the requiem of many colors.

Leland James

Chain Link Fence

In spring the grass has color only on one side.
The other hangs crooked to strollers' tilted eyes.

The soccer field, run bare,
colludes with the wind to coat the neighborhood.
On a car trunk a finger draws a cipher in the dust.
Mists of paint, indelible markers
autograph the night's flat faces.
Elegant gestures on mail boxes
Scraped off strips of paper posters
hanging by a wisp.

Crows dive for your hat
thinking perhaps you wear a cousin.

It's just a felt fedora.
Brim too wide; the wind also wants it.
It drifts up to join its friends.
The crows find satisfaction in this.

Along the fenceline daffodils
an agreeable yellow audience
nod their applause to the players.

Like the Sun



Leah Givens

Emily as We Ensure Our Joy with Practical Water

How small
& beautiful
the violence

of the water
that moves
past our naked

bodies. We
chose a creek
in Ohio,

because we
wanted this
to be slow.

We wanted
to take each
season

as harsh
blessing. We
wanted

new mud
to claim us
as children

of Ohio's
great, passing
gleam.

Darren C. Demarre

A Lion or a Squirrel

You could call it research. You could call it killing time. Field observation or people watching. Seeking inspiration or drinking alone in the middle of the day. Mark would agree with any of these characterizations; in fact, he would say he was doing all of them, at the same time. But then he would laugh, and you would realize he was making a joke. For a moment, you might wonder if he was laughing at you, but if you did and if he noticed the discomfort cloud your eyes, he would immediately try to put you at ease by explaining no, no, no—the joke was on him.

On this afternoon, the sun was muted behind a high awning of thin clouds, plus Mark was sitting in the shade. But he wore sunglasses anyway, to mask the direction of his gaze, a tactic he reinforced by maintaining an ambiguous tilt of his head. There was no need for this subterfuge; he did it out of habit. No one was watching him watch. As ever, no one even noticed him; that was the point, his point, which had snowballed from an observation to an insight to an idea to a project to a proposal to a deadline to, if all went well, a second-act career as the ambassador of a branded lifestyle, all started by that essay he had written eighteen months ago—“The Art of Barely Being There.” The first sentence had popped into his head, fully formed, as he stood in the express line at a grocery store, surrounded by people tapping on or staring at their smartphones. “When nobody is looking, everybody is invisible.”

He brought his glass up and downed the last couple swallows of beer as his eyes followed the young man marching past. He was textbook: late 20s, business casual, wireless ear piece, phone held out like a bible he was reciting from as he conducted his half of a conversation everyone could hear and no one was listening to. But Mark was, watching and listening without seeming to. “Wha’d I tell ya... yeah... I know... he’s a fucking idiot... yeah... I know...she... What?...Jesus. Fucking bitch... Wha’d I tell ya...” As Mark surrendered the young man’s voice to the street’s generalized din, he watched him, brisk oblivious stride, almost topple over a woman, also talking on her cellphone, who had stopped to stoop and attend to the baby fussing in the stroller she had been pushing. At the very last instant before impact, the young barbarian sensed an impeding object, auto-corrected his course, and continued his walk and talk. The woman never noticed him or their near-collision. Mark shook his head slightly as he put his glass down and scanned the sidewalk in front and to either side, counting the people (18) and the cell phones in use (11). He jotted the numbers in his notebook, adding symbols to note the two of those who were also walking dogs and the woman with the stroller.

This is what Mark had been doing for the last ten months. He called it anecdotal research, an oxymoronic term, another of Mark’s joke’s-on-me jokes. He frowned as he looked at the check, but then remembered he had ordered a third beer after the text from his interview pushing back their appointment by 30 minutes. He took another bill from his wallet and added it to those on the tray and stood up, a little too fast. He pressed a palm against the table as he drew in a deep breath, to get the blood flowing; as he did, his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen. It could wait. He stepped into the sidewalk’s flow, keeping his eyes and ears focused as his mind wandered. He could feel his wobbliness fading.

The sidewalk was like the express line at the grocery store, like rush hour traffic, like any place people gathered and moved through. Mark counted—headphones, earbuds, talking on their phones, busy with their smartwatches, how many conversations-interactions starting, concluding, continuing. Sometimes, when he was avoiding work (writing) by pretending to work (more drinking and anecdotal research), Mark would walk the streets and pick an unengaged person at random to follow, usually a man, sometimes a woman, but that was trickier. What his stalkerly experiments had revealed was that most of these “isolaters” were just “at rest” in the moment of initial observation and soon to be resuming their chatty/clicky/glancy multitasking.

Multitasking. The very word made Mark shudder. Like most of his “big” ideas, this one had started as a progression of rants he would unleash on friends, family, co-workers, but most of all, his girlfriend (now gone, having taken a job across the country, after they briefly discussed him moving with her but she, then he, which thereafter meant they, decided this would end poorly). She had interrupted one of his many late-night iterations by grabbing a flailing hand, squeezing it, and saying “Why don’t you start writing about this so you can stop talking about it?” And he did.

Mark was a monotasker. This cognitive predisposition, an inner pull to focus deeply on one task to the exclusion of all others had been his secret weapon when he started his career, a cub reporter covering the city-council machinations in a string of satellite suburbs. Flash-forward and it was now his hard-wired defect, rendering him an old-world relic unable to adapt to the demands of a new-world marketplace. After being released back into the wild by a once “destination newspaper” —now little more than one of the thicker ice floes still afloat in an industry slipping irreversibly into ever-warmer waters—Mark had moved back to Texas to be closer to his ailing father, not to mention cost-of-living considerations, and once re-settled had fixed his singularizing skills on turning lemons into lemonades, carving out a niche, developing his brand, and so on. In a bit of journalistic alchemy, Mark had spun a series of all-but-unpaid columns for a popular current-events web site and his viral-ish Twitter account into a book contract. He and his agent had pitched the book as *The Monotasker’s Survival Guide to Living in a Multitasking World*, but almost the first words out of his new editor’s mouth once a deal was struck had been the admonition “That’s a subtitle, not a title. We need a title.”

The continuing quest for a title had become another reliable form of work-delaying work; Mark had compiled lists upon lists to which he devoted misspent hours, adding and subtracting, tweezing and finessing. He would then email the results to agent and editor, both of whom would immediately dispatch interchangeable responses—there will be time for this later, now’s not the time, you’ve already missed the first two deadlines, your drop-dead deadline is fast approaching, focus on finishing, write write write. The irony of scolding the man at work on a book about the powers of monotasking for his lack of focus was not lost on Mark.

He looked down at his watch, an old Seiko, his father's – he'd had a thunderbolt stroke, died as he dropped, three months after Mark's return. Five minutes away with ten minutes until his appointment. He jogged across Speedway as he turned left from 24th to stay on the shady side of the street, marveling at all the shiny new buildings and construction cranes dotting the skyline in every direction. The Austin campus of The University of Texas reminded Mark of Beijing, of the possibilities unleashed when supplies of money and labor were inexhaustible. He trotted across the tree-lined promenade of one of those shiny new buildings, a massive fort of brick and stone and square windows that housed the Psychology Department's empire of classrooms, laboratories, offices and auditoriums, and sped through a revolving door. This was not his first interview with this source, and he already had what he needed; at least, what he had come into the encounter wanting, but "always stay open to surprises," "listen for what you aren't expecting" —aphorisms he had dispensed in the interview workshops he was tasked with giving to every summer's new crop of interns at his old newspaper during what he hadn't realized would be the twilight of his tenure. Mark liked to work on the installment plan with principal sources. Time and temperaments permitting, three was the perfect number: an initial session to cover introductions, establish rapport, exchange backgrounds, cover the basics; a second session when the real work got done, and then a final to sharpen any fuzzy areas. This was the final, no-stress session. So, why the jangle of nerves roiling his stomach as he approached her office door?

Camille Tyler, associate professor of psychology, had been younger, prettier, more stylish than Mark was expecting, and the first time they met he was fairly certain that his surprise had caused his eyes to pop like old-time flashbulbs. More specific to Mark's formal purpose, she was the director of the department's recently endowed "lab" devoted to the multi-disciplinary study of "evolutionary psychology." Their first two meetings had gone great; she was solid gold as a source, providing all kinds of scholarly heft to his spitball premise. At least as important, Mark felt he had successfully kept his urge to flirt in lockdown, trying with all his might to present as sharp, poised and keenly interested in the latest studies and theories while simultaneously projecting an easy, disarming energy. This was his standard approach — "it takes hard work to make an interview go easy, but never let them see you trying" was another pearl he would cast before each new drove of interns. He paused at the water cooler as he approached Dr. Tyler's office and again glanced down at his watch. He was a few minutes early. He wished he had remembered to bring breath mints. He bent over and took in a mouthful of cold water, swished, then spit. He proceeded and lightly rapped on the door. It opened as his arm dropped.

She didn't even glance at him as she spun about and returned to her desk, avoiding with practiced ease the stacks of books, papers and folders that transformed the floor into a 3-D checkerboard. Mark was more tentative as he picked his path to one of the two vinyl-cushioned chairs facing her desk, so she was already seated, observing the conclusion of his stop-and-start serpentine, as he plopped himself down. They exchanged smiles and nods. She spoke first.

"Please continue to forgive my office. As I explained, I work in a state of perpetual clutter."

Another nod and grin as Mark withdrew a small recorder from the inner breast pocket of his jacket; he switched it on, confirmed it was in fact on, and reached across her desk to place it midpoint between them. He leaned back and fired another smile-and-nod volley. She remained upright in her chair, hands folded in her lap, not so much saying "get on with it;" as exuding the cue. He obliged.

"This won't take long," he began. "As I explained before, I just want to go over a few points, make sure, you know... I took a look at those studies, you were right, fascinating stuff. Anyway..."

And off they went, or rather, off he went. A good interview was like a waltz in which who was leading and who was following seemed to flip seamlessly between the pair. When everything clicked, the exchange felt effortless and Mark actually did very little. The less he spoke the better, just a few words here and there, a small question or observation in a lull to prompt the next cascade. When everything wasn't clicking, Mark felt like he was trying to wrestle himself out of a straightjacket, talking, talking, talking, way too much, always too much, spark after sputtering spark fizzling on sodden tinder. Mark was talking now, talking too much, discharging a fusillade on "the gadget industrial complex" and "a reverse-engineered marketplace selling behaviors rather than products" and how "today's generation of consumers self-identify by the social-media apps they use the way a previous generation did by the anti-depressants they took."

Mark heard himself, yammering on, and abruptly recognized how obviously-desperately he was showing off. He looked across the desk at her, the quizzical expression on her face, her mouth a crooked line, as if she were about to shake her head or laugh, and whichever would be at him, not with him. He stopped in the middle of what was to be a dazzling metaphor as that wobbly feeling returned and washed over him. He offered a wan smile as he brought up a hand and made a slashing motion across his throat.

"Sorry. I was up late last night, revising my opening chapter. Sometimes I have a hard time turning it off."

She didn't smile or laugh. The question that had been on her face seemed to resolve itself into an answer as she straightened in her chair.

"Would you like some water, or a cup of coffee, maybe? I know someone just made a fresh pot. Or I think I've got some tea around here somewhere, if you'd rather."

Mark's mouth did feel a little dry, his tongue a little thick. But now he was also feeling a little flustered, an ember of embarrassment from which a wisp of irritability rose, so he shook his head, perhaps a little more gruffly than he intended.

"No, I'm fine, thanks. This really won't take long. Like I said. Just a couple of follow-up questions."

He started flipping through his notepad as if looking for those couple of questions, but he wasn't. He was stalling, trying to reel himself back in. She wasn't cute anymore, he didn't feel charming anymore, and this wasn't fun anymore. He already had what he needed. Didn't he? Yes, but no. "You don't know what you need to hear until you've heard it." How many times had he intoned that dictum to a roomful of unlined and upturned faces? And just now he had no idea what he had ever even thought it was supposed to mean. All he wanted to do was go out and come back in; all he could do was say something, anything, get her talking, then wrap it up and scurry away. He made a show of having found the page he was looking for and pretended to read from it.

"I guess, really, I, the only thing I wanted to go over... you referenced 'the history of consciousness' during our last meeting, talked about the multitasking craze as a 'regressive aberration.' I'm hoping you could expand on that idea in, you know, more plain-spoken terms. I guess I'm asking if you could talk about it without quite so much... academic jargon."

Now it was her eyes that popped in surprise, except they didn't really pop. They flashed, and then narrowed, before she turned her head down to look at the floor. She unfolded her hands from her lap and pressed them on her desk. For a moment, Mark thought she was about to spring out of her chair. But then her hands relaxed and returned to her lap as she brought her gaze back up. She stared at him for a long, hard beat and then let out a jagged chuckle.

"I'm an academic. 'Academic jargon,' as you call it, is what I do. Kind of like the way self-help authors dispense lazy platitudes."

Mark jerked as if struck and started to explain, to assure her that she misunderstood, that he had misspoken, that he hadn't meant to say what he'd said in quite the way he'd said it. Or something. It didn't matter. She shook her head as she swiped a hand at him.

"Please. Don't. You come in here, smelling like a brewery, launch into a rambling lecture about... I don't even know what that was, and then insult me."

"I'm sorry. Sorry. Really. The last thing I meant to do was insult you. You've been great. Really. You have to understand. I spent the last ten years interviewing local politicians, city contractors, school board administrators... so my conversation tools are kind of blunted."

Did her glare just soften? Slightly? Mark thought so, maybe. He decided to double-down by unfurling a sheepish grin as he raised his hands in surrender.

“And I’ll admit to having a cold one. A cold *one*, after you texted that you were running late. Forgive me. It was hot. I was bored.”

The glare was gone, replaced by another question-mark look. No smile, not even a hint. Was it really not there, or was she keeping it to herself? For now? Mark straightened in his seat and sent a refresh shiver down his spine as she started to speak.

“Sure. Fine. Moving on. The basic point I was making before is that our way of being in the world, in our environment, is as much a product of evolution as walking on two legs. The human capacity for deep, fixed focus is a competitive advantage developed over millions of years. It’s a key trait of all apex predators. Look at how a squirrel is in its environment compared to how a lion is in its.

“The squirrel is constantly doing many things simultaneously. It’s darting between trees, twitching, sniffing, looking here and there, freezing, scooting, freezing again. It’s looking for nuts. It’s looking for a good place to bury nuts. It’s keeping track of the other squirrels. It’s keeping an eye out for danger. It’s sniffing for friends. It’s sniffing for foes. It is multitasking incarnate. Meanwhile, the lion is lolling in the shade under a tree. At any given moment, seemingly doing nothing but *being* in its environment.

“That was my point. That millions of years of evolutionary engineering have produced a human brain that is uniquely capable of single-task focus, and you could reasonably argue that this current infatuation with multitasking isn’t a leap forward, it’s a step back. I mean, would you rather be a lion or a squirrel?”

She directed this question at the top of Mark’s head as he furiously scribbled key words in his notepad, enthusiastically nodding his head as he giggle-grunted his assent. He finished jotting with a barrage of exclamation points and looked up to find Dr. Camille Tyler watching him. The wobble once again beaten back, the moment’s equilibrium restored, Mark pressed on, asking a couple more follow-up questions, offering a few droll anecdotes from his city-government-watchdog days that showcased “the essential squirreliness” of the human animal, and sharing one of his “field observations” he thought she would find incisive and impressively struck—as he did, he imagined her thinking to herself, “this guy’s the real deal.”

And then it was time to wrap up. He retrieved his recorder, confirmed it was still on, switched it off, and returned it to his jacket pocket. As he flipped his notebook shut and clipped his pen to its cover, she stood to walk him to the door, still no smile, her mouth once again a crooked line. Mark tried to keep his face neutral, to keep the pang of disappointment to himself. There would be no post-interview, collegial chitchat—a specialty of his. No problem. She was busy, a class to get to, or a meeting. Whatever. Actually, this was good, for the best. He should get back to work, transcribe their interview while it was still fresh, finish polishing the first chapter, not to mention calling his agent and his editor to report the big news about finally having the perfect title. Yeah. All good. Now that it was happening this way, Mark realized it was the way he wanted it to happen.

They were standing at her door, which she started to open as he spoke.

“Thanks again.”

Mark paused for a beat and then leaned toward her as if to share a secret. Speaking in an exaggeratedly low voice, he added, “and sorry again.”

He chuckled. She didn’t. He straightened as he continued.

“I was wondering if as a token of my gratitude you might let me take you to dinner...”

He was about to continue by inquiring into her food enthusiasms and, based on those, make a few suggestions highlighting his under-the-radar discernment,, but as if the startled look on her face weren’t enough, she jumped in with a quick burst.

“What? Oh! No. I mean...” and here she paused and looked at him, closely. What was in her eyes? Mark wondered. Nothing good. Best case—incredulity. Whatever it was didn’t resolve itself as she continued.

“No. I don’t... That wouldn’t be... appropriate.”

Mark felt a rush of blood make his face flush. He hated that she could see it happen; he could feel the wobbliness rising back up to swamp him, but first things first. He drew in the heat of his rage. He wanted to scream; he wanted to smash her smug face; he wanted to run away, just run and run and run until he evaporated like a bead of water skittering across a hot skillet. He forced himself to grin and issue a tut-tut chuckle and think-nothing-of-it flick of his hand.

“Of course, no, fine, I just thought, I was only...” He stopped himself. And then offered another smile he didn’t bother trying to make look genuine. “I’ll let you know when the publishing date has been set. They’re talking sometime in mid-October...” and here he once more leaned ever so slightly toward her to add with the chummy air of a towel-draped club member sharing a locker-room stock tip. “You know, in time for gift-giving season.”

Nothing. Not quite nothing. Some expression rippled across her taut face that didn’t register for Mark just then, but later that night, so late as to be early the next morning, he would conclude that she was wincing. Or even worse: suppressing a giggle. Whatever the expression was or would become, she concluded it by tightening her lips into a grim token of a smile that, like his, in no way resembled the real thing as she crossed her arms to squeeze both elbows in her hands.

“Yes. Good luck with all that. If you need anything else, you have my email.”

She took hold of the door’s edge. Mark stepped into the hall to avoid being swept out as she swung it shut. He stood still as a statue, staring at the closed door, trying to assimilate what had just transpired, like someone clambering out of a car after a collision to gape in a daze at the dripping, steaming wreckage. But then he realized that she would be able to see his silhouette through the door’s frosted-glass panel. He turned with a peevish lurch and stalked down the hall the way he had come. He charged into the revolving door, grabbing the pushbar with both hands as if he wanted to tear the whirligig off its axis and launch it into the sky. He gave the door a mighty shove as he exited, to leave it spinning furiously, but its momentum was so heavily baffled, the door came to a rest almost immediately. Mark hissed a bitter cackle and muttered, “fuck you too.” The blast of afternoon heat felt good, he decided, cleansing, and as he marched back the way he’d come, he imagined it burning away the residue of that ghastly episode and beating back the reality of it ever having happened.

He elected to sit at the bar, cool and dark, rather than out on the patio in the shaded but still brassy heat. He pointed to the taps and mouthed the word “Shiner” to the bartender as he fished the phone out of his jacket and selected “Editor” from his favorites list. Mark listened to the phone ring, and ring, and ring, once more, and then it was the voicemail message he could recite, every word, every pause, every inflection, in a perfect echo, as he had taken to doing lately -- another little joke to himself. Here came the beep, and as the bartender set a foam-topped pilsner glass before him, Mark spoke into the phone, summoning a tone of breezy confidence, the voice of someone taking a moment to leave a quick message between pressing tasks.

“Hey Jill, It’s Mark. Just finished my last interview. It went great. Totally on track again. Wanted to let you know that I finally have the perfect title. Can’t wait to share it with you. You’re gonna to love it. Give me a call. Talk to you soon. Bye.”

He clicked off and stared at the phone’s home screen for a moment. That felt good. He felt good. Yeah. All good. He raised the glass and drew down a deep, long swallow; at the same time, he started to check for new emails and saw the text he hadn’t noticed in his eagerness to call Jill with the good news. It was from Lauren, his agent. All it said was “Call me. ASAP.” He drained the glass as he dialed, barely having time to draw a breath when she answered on the first ring.

“Finally.”

“Hey Lauren, what’s up? I’ve got great...” Her hard, flat voice crashed down to cut him off.

“What the fuck? Mark. You were supposed to have final revisions in last week and you’re off doing more interviews? What the fuck?!”

“It’s fine, Lauren. Everything’s fine. I’m all set. I’ll be done in no time. And best of all, I finally have the per...” But here came another cinderblock interruption.

“No, Mark. Everything is not fine. I’ve been on the phone with Jill all afternoon. She’s had it. They’re pulling out. Your deal is dead. Done.”

Mark felt his chest compress and his eyes go chalk-dry as Lauren’s words sucked the atmosphere out of the room and turned the bar into a deep-space vacuum. His chin fell to his chest as the floor dropped away to leave him perched on his barstool, floating in a void. When he finally spoke, his voice came out a puny croak.

“What? No. I just... She can’t... I’ll call her. The book’s all but done. It’s great. I’ve got great stuff. Did I tell you? I’ve got the perfect title.”

Silence. One. Two. Three. And then. Not a cinderblock crashing down this time. Softer. More like a door slowly being shut.

“Jesus, Mark, what the fuck? No. Don’t call. It’s done. They’ve already re-filled your slot, a book by some Silicon Valley refugee, *Slow is the New Fast* or some shit. I told you when we started, any book you’re writing, there are always a half-dozen other people out there writing their versions of the same book. You have to deliver.”

She paused. Mark heard her breathe in, and then out. Later, replaying the moment, he would realize she had been sighing.

“And you didn’t.”

Mark pressed his chest against the bar. If he had also been sitting nearby, coolly watching himself talk on his cellphone while surreptitiously making notations in his journal, his double may have speculated he was trying to perform the Heimlech maneuver on himself. But Mark wasn’t paying attention to himself; he didn’t notice that he was leaning into his phone as if by doing so he could lean into Lauren, half-a-continent away, at the other end of the call.

“Wait. No. I mean, I did. I am. I will. And besides, guess what? I’ve got the perfect title. It’s perfect. I really think now...”

He trailed off, unsure of what he really thought now. All that came back to him was silence. One. Two. Three. Mark rallied and tried again.

“Look, Lauren, you’re gonna love it, it’s A...”

And then, through the phone, the door clicked shut. Lauren’s voice sounded small and sad.

“Jesus, Mark. Fuck the title. It doesn’t matter. That was never the problem. You...You... I can hear it in your voice right now.”

He heard her breath fall and rise in his ear again.

“I can’t do this anymore. Find yourself another agent.”

There was a rapid series of beeps and Lauren was gone.

Mark lowered the phone and stared at it, as if it had some secret to reveal. He thought, just for a moment, about calling her back, explaining why she was wrong, how everything was going to work out fine, but then Mark frowned to himself. No, he would go back to his room and write her an email, explaining everything, to her and Jill. Yes, that would be better, give himself a chance organize his thoughts, really make things clear, get everything exactly right. And he'd attach the revised opening chapter, that was perfect now. Or would be just as soon as he got those last few little rough patches smoothed out. Yes. That's what he needed to do. That was it. Done. Settled. All good.

He curled his feet around the front legs of his barstool, steadying his purchase, beating back the wobble, as he caught the bartender's eye and pointed to his empty glass.

A Feel for the Water

At the end-of-the-season party,
the high school swim coach gave
an award for each player's talent.

No "Most Improved" or "Tried Hardest" for me—
I knew I didn't. Instead, I won
"Best Feel For The Water."

I believed that as my special gift—
for years, I remembered it
as I dutifully did my laps,

plunging hand over sensitive hand,
grabbing my way along those meters,
really *feeling* that water.

Though, over the years, I began to notice
all the swimmers passing me on either side
seemed to be *feeling* it pretty well, too.

And so at last I began to understand
that my *feel* was less for water than
for a coach's empty consolations.

That's when I quit and took up running.
Until, one day years later, my creaking knees
seemed to be saying, "Hey, what about that *feel*?"

I took the hint. Now, back in the pool,
I don't mind being passed by the young turks.
And even by old ladies.

At my age, "Tried Hardest" means "Most likely
to have a heart attack." And really, any feeling you still have
ought to feel
like that's good enough.

Charles Joseph Albert

what kind of wisdom is that?

i saw the hot air balloons
dancing in the sky
there seemed to be no beginning,
and no end;
i saw
all the pretty colors and designs
sequencing the air
with a flight of wings and feathers
much different than the
reality of butterflies, insects, and birds
whose pretty wings
can often disarm me—
i wanted the gift of flight at that moment
to sing in a chorus with all these
beautiful things,
and i wondered if wax wings would work
should i not get too close to the sun
because one should always
learn from mistakes;
i didn't want to die like icarus
who was warned not to do what he did—
my friend told me sometimes
that we have to make mistakes for ourselves
to know,
but what kind of wisdom is that?
i would rather learn through history rather than
have history tear me apart.

First Day

Marie Brown was sweating even before she reached the top of the stairs. It was the Friday of Labor Day weekend, and almost 90 degrees. School was starting the next Tuesday, and Marie's shoulders sagged at the thought of her fourth grade class starting out the year in this weather. The old building offered no relief. The kids would be miserable.

Marie paused at the top of the stairs, putting the box she was carrying onto a table. She had bought some folders, a new grade book, a new binder for her lesson plan. She didn't like the binder—it had a bright green cover with an owl and the words "Teacher Binder" in different colors. *It's loud*, she thought, and she didn't like the school years, 2015-2016, printed in big blocky numbers.

She didn't need to be reminded of the year. She could do the math too quickly. It meant she had been teaching for 35 years, in this same building, and even in the same classroom until this year when her principal talked her into a new one. "You have seniority," Joe Guarino had told her. "I don't want to give that room to someone who has so much less tenure than you do." It was the biggest classroom, on the corner overlooking the one quiet part of the building. It was the only part of the school with trees outside the windows and away from the street.

Marie picked up her box of supplies, went to her new room. She walked the perimeter of it, taking in the dimensions, surveying how she might want to space the desks, where to put the tables that would hold supplies and books. She stepped to the window, looked out. A small garden stood there—someone's idea a decade before to give industrious but unathletic kids something to do at recess. It had been tended exactly one year, but then they went into the summer with no plan about how to maintain it. It ended up producing some tomatoes no one ate and a few pumpkins that were stolen just before they could be collected for Halloween decorations. It had grown then fallow, but at some point a neighbor got sick of it and filled it with wildflower seeds. Marie studied it. It still had some color.

She had a few things to collect from her old room—desk supplies mainly—and Marie had decided the new teacher wouldn't have been in yet. She hadn't met her yet, but knew her name was Lisa Coughlin—she was right out of school, and the room would be for kindergarten. New teachers are usually full of energy and all the ideas they collected in school; still, Marie was surprised when she stepped into her old room and it was rearranged, full of supplies, every inch of wall decorated. A corkboard was covered with a perfectly cut out tree with a thick brown trunk and branches, big green leaves with each child's name spelled out in bright orange letters. Marie retreated without touching anything. She hated Lisa Coughlin.

Back in her room, Marie arranged her desk. She had four weeks of lesson plans ready, minor tweaks from previous years. The day was ten minutes longer this year, and she was supposed to divide the minutes evenly into the major subjects—reading, math, science, social studies, and the flex time when the art teacher, music teacher, and language teacher would visit—but she hadn't. She added five of the minutes to reading. She would have the kids read for fifteen minutes instead of ten. If a few boys fidgeted, so be it. It was the only quiet time of the day. She added the other five to math, reasoning that she could add an hour and the slowest kids still would be pushed into fifth not knowing enough multiplication, division, or fractions.

Marie didn't understand the whole wall decorating thing. She had always relied on the chalkboard—and now a white board—to record the day's schedule and that night's homework. The corkboard would have a folder for each child to put his or her homework in and collect worksheets. In years past, Marie would have put a poster or two up, but had abandoned them one year and never bothered again. She felt like she didn't have a creative bone in her body, but even more than that, it was just too damn cheerful and felt like an extension of all the ways kids had to be entertained. Marie had recently read that kids spent four hours a day on computers, video games, television, and phones. The first time Marie confiscated a phone in class she had told the girl she would keep it for a week, but the parents were there the next morning, and Principal Joe collected it from Marie and gave it back to the parents. Marie didn't talk to Joe until he apologized a few days later.

Marie shook her head and grimaced at the memory, started to say something to herself when someone knocked. A young woman was standing there, petite but startlingly pretty, redheaded with a big warm smile. "Ms. Brown? I'm Lisa Coughlin." She had a small box, brought it to Marie. "Your desk supplies. I wasn't sure what you wanted to keep."

“Marie. Call me Marie.” She took in the young woman, who looked 18, but was composed, put together. She had on a floral summer dress, and her hair was pulled back and up. Marie felt big and puffy suddenly, sweat working down her forehead and into her eyebrows. Lisa wasn’t sweating; she had big hazel eyes and perfect skin.

“I am so glad to meet you. You can’t believe how nervous I am. No one else has been around yet except Principal Joe and the custodian.

Marie took the small box from her. “Most people come in Tuesday. They seem to think one day is all they need to get ready.”

“One day? I feel like I have been working all summer.”

Marie was practiced in this conversation—the new teacher starting to learn what veteran teachers did and didn’t do, cared about and didn’t care about. Pair a Lisa Coughlin with a burnout case and her little spirit would be crushed in days. “That probably didn’t come out right. Some really do only need that one day. I like having a quiet day or two to organize my thoughts.”

Lisa walked to the corner windows, looked out at the garden. “I snuck in earlier and looked out here. The flowers are pretty.”

“I told Joe he didn’t have to move me.” Marie wanted to sit and put the students’ names on their folders and hang them, but she was sure Lisa had taken a class her last semester that talked about exactly why you don’t do that anymore. It creates the wrong kind of classroom flow, or makes students self-conscious, somehow contributing to poorer outcomes. Marie imagined herself walking up to the front of the lecture hall and shooting the professor in the face.

“How many years for you?” Lisa was still looking out the window, her fingertips on the radiator below it.

“35. This is my 35th.” Marie did a stage-whisper sigh. “You’ll hear it soon enough. Same building, same grade. No one lets me forget it.”

“No, that’s admirable. Amazing really. 35...” Lisa pressed her forehead to the window. Marie made a mental note to stock her desk with some paper towels so she could wipe the print off, but then Lisa turned to her and Marie could see her eyes were full. “How do you do it? I am terrified.”

Marie knew she had to strive for warmth. “I was terrified, too. I think if you’re not terrified at first, you’re doing it wrong.” She hadn’t been, and she didn’t believe what she was saying, but she was hoping it was the right thing to say, at least to this one. Marie wanted the conversation to be over, and wasn’t happy that Lisa decided it was time to burst into tears. Marie opened her purse, found her pack of Kleenex, handed them to Lisa.

“I’ll get us some tea. Do you like tea?”

When Marie got back, Lisa had stopped crying and was sitting at one of the student desks, dabbing at her nose with a Kleenex. Marie handed her the tea and looked around. She couldn’t fit in one of the desks herself, at least not comfortably, so she rolled her desk chair over. It wasn’t until she was sitting down that she realized it was the chair from her old room.

Lisa had her two hands cupped around her tea. She blew on it. “I wheeled it over. I thought you might want to still use it.”

“Thank you. I didn’t even think of it, but you’re right. I like it.” Marie wasn’t sure what to do with this conversation. She had raised boys, now grown and living in California. She knew how to manage the 9-year-old girls in her class, but she really didn’t understand young women, didn’t know what to do with all the emotion. She hoped Lisa would drink her tea quickly, or maybe even just take it back to her room.

“I’m sorry about getting upset. I just want it to go well.”

“Well.” Marie took a few beats to formulate an answer that, she hoped, would fortify Lisa and send her springing up, out the door, and back to her classroom. “I didn’t have any of your training when I started. I had my bachelor’s in English. There were 33 kids in the class.” Marie made a course correction, laughed. “I had to walk five miles uphill both ways!” She let Lisa join her in laughing for a moment. “What I mean is, your preparation is excellent. You have, what, 20 kids?”

“19.”

“These are nice kids. It’s a nice neighborhood. One or two parents will drive you crazy but most of them are a dream.” In reality, Marie had effectively boxed the parents out for most of her 35 years, but you could do that in fourth grade. In kindergarten they might as well be climbing through the windows all day.

Lisa had her composure back, was smiling. “33 kids? I can’t imagine. My student teaching was in a bilingual class. Eleven kids, two teachers.”

“Oh? Tell me more.” This would be the trick, Marie decided. Get her talking about that. Marie was sure her evaluations were perfect. Lisa launched in. Marie was right. Ten minutes later, Lisa paused, blushed.

“Oh I am talking too much.”

“No, not at all.” Marie’s attention was broken by the sound of a scatter of feet in the hall, and then, of all things, the sharp bark of a dog. A big dog.

Lisa rose right to her feet, headed for the door. “Eddie?” Then, in the hall, “He shouldn’t be in here.” More scattering feet. Marie could picture the scratches on the hall floors—the custodian, Tony, would have spent half the summer refinishing the floors throughout the school.

Marie heard a man’s voice. “There’s nobody here. What’s the problem?”

Maybe if “Eddie” hadn’t sounded so goofy, and maybe if Tony hadn’t worked so hard, Marie would have stayed right where she sat, but he did sound goofy and Tony had worked that hard. Marie stood and made her way into the hall. Eddie was tall and blonde, and had clearly come right from the beach. He had on swim trunks, a muscle shirt, and sandals. Marie could picture the muscles in his shoulders and neck extending right up into the center of his head.

Right at the moment that Marie started to tell Eddie that to get the dog out the dog also noticed Marie. She would learn later his name was Brutus. Brutus wasn’t leashed, and Brutus just came right at her. Marie turned, probably thinking she could make it back into the room, but Brutus had already clamped on to her backside, biting right through her pants, her panties, and into the meaty flesh of her right buttock.

An hour later, in the emergency room, Marie was face down on an exam table, covered from neck to toes except for what she pictured was a giant square area where she had been bitten. The nurses did their best to cover her, even aligning some towels from her lower back, down between her buttocks, and between her legs. They draped the rest of her with what felt like paper sheets, covered her shoulders with a real sheet, and then cut out the square. She pictured it being two feet by two feet, but knew it had to be smaller. She had a big, 56-year-old ass, but it wasn’t that big.

From the sound of his voice, Marie guessed the doctor was a young man. The odds of him being a former student were astronomically low, but she was sure at least one or two of the nurses and aides had looked familiar. She was mortified, but he was respectful, and explained everything he was doing just before he did it. “Marie. Can I call you Marie? I’m just going to take a look here at where the bite broke the skin.”

It turned out Brutus had clamped on not just once, but at least twice, the extra one or two coming as Marie fell through the doorway back into her classroom. Lisa had reached her first, but it took Eddie, apparently, to actually pull Brutus off.

She tuned it all out as the doctor cleaned the wounds. She heard the word “irrigate” and was bathed again and again, her bottom and legs awash, swampy. A nurse stood at her head, her hand on her Marie’s shoulder. At some point they redressed her bottom—new towels and sheets, but there was her ass again, catching air, and now the doctor was painting her, it seemed, with a brush. She heard the word “Betadine” and could picture it from times her boys had had stitches—burnt orange. The paper sheets were a kind of mint green. Marie wanted to tell the doctor the colors were just all wrong, but she started laughing and found she just couldn’t stop.

Marie ended up missing the first week of classes, the first days she had missed in eleven years. The doctor didn’t want to stitch the bites—they were too deep in places—so she had to stay at home, keep the wounds clean, take antibiotics, and stay off her ass. She was miserable for a few days, but by the end of the week, the wounds had stopped oozing and she could sit with one cheek raised.

When Marie got back in the classroom, she found the substitute had made a hash of her lesson plans. She spent the day figuring out what had been done, and mostly what hadn’t been. She used her lunch break to catch up, eating a sandwich at her desk. She didn’t want to see her colleagues in the break room anyway. They would just have questions. When the day ended, she lined the kids up—kids who would be getting on the bus first, then the kids who would be picked up, and last the kids who would go downstairs to the after-school program. She was dreading the walk through the building, the conversations she might be forced to have, so she was relieved when Principal Joe arrived to escort them.

Marie returned to her desk and worked. She had plenty to do, and if she worked long enough the building would empty out. She started with math, looking at the substitute's notes and a pile of completed worksheets. It was all review from grade three, Marie's attempt to figure out just how much had been forgotten or never learned at all. Every year discouraged Marie a little more, and this year was no different. She shifted on the chair, trying to take pressure off the wounds, which had started to throb at some point.

Marie went to the window, looked out at the garden. The heat had broken the previous week. It was sunny outside, 70, a little breezy. A mom was standing in the little patch of wildflowers with her toddler daughter. The girl had her face tilted up to a cluster of day lilies. Marie hoped the mom was watching out for yellow jackets.

"Marie?" Lisa was at the door.

Marie knew what was coming, an apology, and she just hoped it wasn't tearful. She had even practiced a line that she knew she wouldn't use. *I don't know why you're crying. I'm the one who had a dog clamped to my ass.* She was ready, instead, to fly right past it. "Are you off to a good start, Lisa? How are the kids?"

Lisa would have none of it. She was *mortified*. She had been *so worried, so upset*. "I can't believe Eddie did that. What could he have been thinking?"

"That's just it," Marie said. "He wasn't."

Lisa blinked. Whatever she had been expecting Marie to say, it hadn't been that. "I know. I am so sorry. He *doesn't* think, and Brutus is too excitable. He shouldn't..."

"Did you put him down?" Marie watched Lisa blink again, then turned back to the window and the garden below. The mother was kneeling next to her daughter, who was now sitting, legs splayed, studying what looked like the decapitated head of a dying sunflower.

"Brutus? Did we put him down?"

"Of course I mean Brutus. Unless you were thinking of Eddie." Marie snorted out a laugh but it sent a bolt of pain from her ass up through her throat and stopped her mid-snort. She pictured the wounds oozing again and hoped nothing had leaked through to her slip and skirt to where Lisa could now see it. Marie turned to her again. "I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

Lisa stood there in her tiny perfection, twisting a ring around one of her fingers. Marie counted fingers. It was an engagement ring. Of course it was. The diamond was preposterously big. Marie thought for a moment she might be kind and comment on it, but she was afraid Lisa would never shut up.

“I should get going,” Marie announced. She walked to her file cabinet, collected her pocketbook, walked to the doorway. Marie shut the lights, taking one last look at the big room, Lisa standing, mute, in the center of it. There was plenty of light from the big windows. It was a nice room. Someone would enjoy it.

Burning a Failed Poem on New Year's Day

In a field littered with cast-off scraps
of fabric and wood, the great balloon's
colorful nylon skin held in place by

hot air pretended to be a poem.
For weeks it strained its tethers,
pleading to be pasted on the sky's canvas.

It wished to be seen, remarked upon
as it floated across the blue big-top,
colorful stripes calling for the thrilled eyes

and ahs of the earthbound. But how satisfying
when the flame-jet that gave it shape
climbed too high and a sudden pillar of fire

revealed a way out of the field's vacancy.
How beautiful the stripes becoming
fog, sweet relief in the updraft's release

of bad breath. How pleasing the graceful
billow and curl of smoke as it braided
each line's words into a memory of

what they would have been, and the gesture
of ropes collapsing like empty sleeves
of a shirt too damn ugly to wear in public.

Balloon In Two Movements

Not likely to live long,
red balloon wills itself
to vibrancy.

Soaring now, escaped
from the sausage fingered
two-year-old who,
teary eyed, watches the ascent,
roaring disapproval loud enough
to diminish property values,
helium fueled red flyer
climbs higher.

A single red lung,
knowing to exhale is to die,
exhilaratingly lost in clouds
when the end pops quickly.

The danced out string,
still sticky from toddler grip,
shrieks to earth,
trailing the red mass
to land in the sand,
is discovered
by another goop-fingered kid,
who offers it as open-handed sacrifice,
questioning, “what dis?”
And the kid cries at the post-mortem,
thinking of his own briefly loved,
then quickly lost,
blue balloon,
and the lifelong lie wrapped in,
“Don't worry. It's just a balloon.”

Albuquerque International Balloon Festival, 2014

For one week out of the year,
they enter the sky and linger there
in the brisk fall air like multi-colored
spin tops capable of holding themselves
up for days on end. When you died,
we took to the river and lit Chinese
lanterns, watched them climb
into the night—a type of
glowing farewell letter
to the angels.
For one
week out of the year,
I am not the only one
scouring the heavens
for any sign of life

Ghosts

“You’re like invisible around here,” she said when she bumped into me in the hallway.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

What was I supposed to say to that? I couldn’t remember her name. I hadn’t learned everyone’s name yet, and she worked in a different department anyway. I nodded and walked down the hallway to “the armpit” as Jean, my fellow processing archivist, called the section of the hallway where my office was. Jean had the office next to mine in the back hallway along with Kathy, Amy, and Michelle. I liked Jean and learned her name quickly. She was a veteran Smithsonian employee, and I thought she possessed hidden knowledge about the secret workings of the archives. But Jean’s armpit reference was a mystery to me.

“Antiseptic” is the word I would use to describe that confusing maze of white hallways. Barb, my boss, told me they’d had to hang pictures on the walls, giant enlarged photographs, so people wouldn’t get lost. When I saw Jackie O. and Marcel Breuer I knew I was in the right hallway. But even with the photographs, the hallway was white, fluorescent, and silent.

My office was a windowless box packed with boxes containing the Jacob Kainen collection—love letters, diaries, professional correspondence, photographs, and sketchbooks belonging to the painter and former Smithsonian curator Jacob and his second wife Ruth Kainen. Jacob had died on March 19, 2001 in the home he shared with Ruth in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Ruth still lived in the house, and she was in charge of her late husband’s collection. My official job title was “Project Archives Technician,” and the Kainens were my project. I worked in the processing department organizing the Kainen collection into series and subseries and writing a detailed finding aid describing the contents and research significance of the collection. I was a temporary trust fund employee with the Judith Rothschild grant paying my salary for exactly one hundred and twenty days, ending, coincidentally, on my birthday. I’d moved into my apartment, my first apartment ever, a month earlier, the day before Independence Day.

I left the white walls in my office blank for weeks until my boss insisted I decorate. I tacked up a poster of a pen and ink drawing of an old frigate I'd found rolled up on the bookshelf behind an old binder. Sails full of wind, the ship battled the raging waves that encircled it. I pushed the tacks right in, surprised at how easily they pierced the thick pasteboard wall. After I noticed the jagged holes they left in the wall, though, I worried that I'd get in trouble for damaging the wall. My boss gave me an enlarged black and white photograph of some famous artist sculpting a nude from a live male model; it was left over from when she'd cleaned out the storage room. I stuck that over my computer, though, I never bothered to learn who the artist was. The photograph didn't last long. Every time I turned to work at my computer, that naked model's exposed thigh or bare forearm assaulted me; so I moved the photograph to the wall above the bookshelf and, thereafter, always worked with my back to the bookshelf.

It was my third week and already I was bored. What was wrong? I knew I was lucky to be there. Two months out of library school, one painless phone interview, and I had a dream job at the Smithsonian. I had escaped my former job at a university library in downtown Detroit and its crazy patrons only to become deeply entrenched in a different, but equally empty routine. Instead of sitting silently as my library patrons unloaded the details of their unhappy lives on me, I avoided living my own life by latching on to Mr. and Mrs. Kainen's stories as they emerged from the dusty boxes sitting in my office. The idea of escaping from everyone and everything I knew and working in the capital at one of the country's most famous museums was appealing, but the novelty of my new apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland and my new job at the Archives of American Art wore off quickly in the white silence.

My weekday work routine consisted of a series of steps and stairways, up and then down again, every day, over and over. Going to work, cataloguing the collection, and returning from work every day, I was like Sisyphus, eternally driving his boulder up a mountain and watching it roll back down. Wake up at 6am, walk down the stairs from my fourth floor apartment at 7am, up the steps of the 49 bus to Glenmont station—or the 41 if I missed the 49—down the steps of the bus, down two escalators into the metro station to catch the red line train to Gallery Place/Chinatown, up two escalators out of the Gallery Place/Chinatown metro station to the Ninth Street exit, pass the man powerwashing the sidewalk, open the glass doors, flash my badge

to the security guard at the desk with the white orchids, and walk up a flight of stairs arriving at my joyless office at 8am. Once at work, I would open one of my boxes, take out one of the thick folders—usually containing pages of correspondence, alphabetize the correspondence by the writer’s last name into smaller piles. Then, I would arrange the smaller piles of correspondence chronologically, put those smaller piles into acid free folders, and deposit the acid free folders in an acid free manuscript box. After I broke down a large folder and organized it into smaller folders, I would tackle the next large folder and do the same thing over again, carefully labeling all of the new folders and manuscript boxes with forensic precision—collection name, box number, folder number, series title, subseries title, sub-subseries, and date. Eight and a half hours later at 4:30 pm, I would leave my office, walk down my flights of stairs to the metro station, to begin my journey home—the exact reverse of my morning journey.

I usually entered the archives through the side door at about 8am and sneaked down the armpit without seeing or speaking to anyone. Jean and Amy didn’t come in until 9am and Michelle only worked part-time. I hardly spoke to a living person, aside from polite hellos and how are yous, but the ghost of Mr. Kainen was always in my office waiting for me. I lived and breathed Jacob Kainen and his second wife Ruth, whose letters and diaries were also included in the collection. Each day I’d eat the same lunch—raspberry yogurt, an apple, water, and saltine crackers—in my office with the Kainens. I would carefully set the box I’d been sorting on the floor next to my desk, gather the papers in a neat pile on the corner of my desk, and brush away the bits of paper that had fallen out of the boxes into the black metal garbage can. Once assured that the boxes were a safe distance from my food, I would take out my lunch and begin eating while reading one of the old issues of *The New Yorker* that I’d brought with me from home. No matter how hard I tried to read every issue, I was always three or four months behind my subscription. Even though I’d brought a dozen magazines with me, I knew that growing stack of unread issues awaited me at home in the brown wicker basket in my mom’s bedroom. Compulsively conscientious and thorough, I’d feel obliged to read them all. On the wall in front of my phone, I’d taped a *New Yorker* cartoon of a man staring straight ahead, dressed in a tie, sitting at a desk just like mine, with the words written underneath “still here.”

Somedays, I would close the door to my white office when I ate lunch shutting out Michelle, in the office to the right of mine. She'd call her husband multiple times a day and seemed to have the same conversations over and over again.

"Hi honey. Didn't you drop Kayla off at school?...Good. I'll be home about 4. What should we have for dinner?...Okaaaay, okaaaay," she'd drone on and on.

She had an aggravating Southern drawl that, even with the door shut, pierced my white walls. Invisible, I learned all about her from the voice that sneaked into my office through the walls. She was a knitting fanatic and always knitted on the metro while passengers stared. I don't think I was ever formally introduced to Michelle. I'm sure never introduced myself, nor did she. But, like a spy, I learned every detail of her life like how she cooked pot roast and macaroni and cheese, how she worried that other children didn't like her daughter Kayla and how she fussed over husband Bill. I rarely spoke directly to Michelle. We didn't have much in common. I didn't have a husband, children. I didn't knit. I hated pot roast.

I rarely left my office at lunchtime except when I ran out of change for the bus fare or wanted to stretch my legs and walk around Chinatown. When I did go out, I always returned on time. I didn't let the rolls of quarters in my pockets slow me down. Yet, no one would have noticed if I was late coming back from lunch. After my half-hour was up, I was back at my stark desk, facing my *New Yorker* cartoon, moving the papers back to the center of the desk, and gathering the box up off the floor. Shutting the door to create my own world, I'd escape into those boxes. I quickly leafed through the boring letters dealing with Jacob's latest acquisition to his extensive art collection or the polite Christmas cards from Jacob's many acquaintances, but I poured over the juicy bits of the collection—Jacob's love letters and sketchbooks, Ruth's diaries, and the gorgeous hand-made cards Jacob's artist friends had sent to the couple. The dust from Jacob's love letters burned my eyes and the charcoal from his sketchbooks blackened my fingers. Jacob and Ruth Kainen's lives seemed more real than my own life, with its empty routines.

Reading through Ruth and Jacob's letters and diaries, I couldn't help comparing their lives to my own. Regardless of the differences between myself and the Kainens, the deeper I explored their past, the more I connected to them. In addition to the letters and diaries, the

collection contained stacks of interview transcripts. These were interviews that Ruth had conducted with Jacob and then transcribed. The interview transcripts revealed anecdotes from Jacob's life that couldn't be found anywhere else. I learned that Jacob, the man who looked so frail and shy in the black and white photographs showing him as an old man, had been a big mouth and a smart aleck as a child. In an art class in high school, Jacob once contradicted his professor's answer and was reprimanded. Jacob retaliated, shoving Prussian blue paint into the keyhole of the professor's office. When the professor unlocked his office door, the paint stained his hands. The professor came to class the next morning with Prussian blue hands, suspecting it was the smart aleck Jacob who had pulled the prank, but he could never prove it. That story cracked me up and made me appreciate Jacob even more because he had this wonderfully rebellious nature hidden underneath the placid expressions he so often displayed in the collection photographs. It took time to uncover it, but it was worth it. I admired Jacob's ingenuity as I'd never pulled a prank in my life and I rarely retaliated against an authority figure. However, my mother loves to tell the story of when, at four, I smacked the dentist in the face. It was my first trip to the dentist and as he bent forward, his gloved hand reaching toward my mouth, I smacked his cheek, yelling "Don't touch me, I want my mommy" and ran down the hall. As far as I can recall, that was my most vocal transgression, not as creative as Prussian blue paint. In the white silence, I had days I wanted to smack someone or scream just out of sheer boredom, but I hardly made a sound.

If Ruth had wanted to smack or scream at someone, she would have done it. Her journals served as shining testaments to her assertiveness and her bossiness. In her diaries, she accused "Crazy Bertha," Kainen's first wife, of preventing Jacob from becoming a great artist. According to Ruth, Jacob had given up his chance to be a great artist in New York, accepting a position as a Smithsonian curator in order to support Bertha, who was pregnant with their first child. I was shocked at the hostility Ruth expressed toward Bertha in her diary, but I secretly admired her audacity. I know I couldn't make my diary public for fear that those reading it would judge me. Besides, I doubted the diary of an ordinary middle-class, twenty three-year old girl from Farmington, Michigan would be of interest to anyone. I wrote petty and vindictive things in my diary, like Mrs. Kainen did, but I never said any of those things aloud. Mrs. Kainen did. I'd rather not be remembered at all than be remembered for being cruel, but Ruth didn't seem to care about being judged.

She had a mission. After marrying Jacob, Ruth had devoted her life to proving that her husband was a great artist, like his more famous friends Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky. I could sympathize with Ruth because I too was developing a fondness for Jacob and saw him as an unrecognized talent. In spite of his wife's efforts, though, Mr. Kainen never made it into my art history classes; he was just another forgotten artist. Working on the collection, I felt a sense of obligation, not only to prove myself at my first real job, but also to write a finding aid that would be worthy of Mr. Kainen and that would entice researchers to study him. According to Jean, the head of the reference department had said monkeys could do our processing jobs, but I didn't think so. Monkeys wouldn't care for Mr. and Mrs. Kainen the way I did.

One day Barb told me that Mrs. Kainen had come to the archives a few days before I started working and had lunch with Richard, the director of the archives. Eyebrows raised, Barb described Mrs. Kainen, impeccably dressed in white gloves, a purple hat, and a Pucci shirt. Apparently, Richard was one of the few people Mrs. Kainen tolerated at the Smithsonian. I could visualize her. I'd seen the collection photographs of Ruth and Jacob with Ruth standing slightly in front of him, her shoulders back, head erect, dark eyes piercing directly into the camera lens. Even in her late eighties, she had insisted on driving Richard around downtown Washington, something I wouldn't dare myself after getting sworn at and cut off while driving down Georgia Avenue during rush hour. When Liza, the manuscript curator, came to my office about six weeks after I started working there, offering me the chance to meet Mrs. Kainen, I told her I would be delighted. That was only partly true. I was curious about Mrs. Kainen, but I was terrified at the prospect of meeting her. I wouldn't know what to say and feared she'd insult me, either out loud or silently in her head. I preferred being a ghost archiving her husband's collection within my white walls.

The following day, as Liza and I stood on the doorstep of Mrs. Kainen's house, I felt nervous and curious to meet the woman whose life I had haunted for nearly two months. Reading Ruth and Jacob's diaries and personal letters, I'd formed an attachment that was both intimate and distant. I knew about Jacob's painful relationship with his heroin-addicted son, his kindness to his suicidal friend Elizabeth, his first wife Bertha's nervous breakdown, and Ruth's bitter hatred for Bertha. I had learned all about them, secure in the knowledge that they would never know me, and yet here I was, standing in front of Mrs. Kainen's front door.

I'd never been to a millionaire's house before and was surprised to find that from the outside, it looked like an ordinary suburban house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, a large, white, two-story colonial, not a mansion. Even in the August heat, I wore nylons under my pink shirtdress. I remembered a passage in Mrs. Kainen's diary about Liza's predecessor at the archives and how she'd had the effrontery to appear before Mrs. Kainen with bare legs. Elsewhere, Mrs. Kainen's had ranted about her dealings with the Smithsonian employees, bemoaning the lengthy process of donating the Kainen collection which had begun twenty years earlier when Jacob was still alive, a process that continued after his death under Ruth's supervision. As we stood on the porch, I glanced over at poor Liza and saw that she had bare legs, though after ten years of dealing with Mrs. Kainen, she probably didn't care anymore. Liza told me not to expect much.

We were just there to pick-up two more boxes for the collection. Mrs. Kainen wouldn't say much, Liza said; she'd talk to us as if we were servants, and soon we'd be out of there. Having read Mrs. Kainen's diary, I agreed. I had the impression she treated most people like servants.

I was surprised when Mrs. Kainen came to the door herself; I was expecting a maid. Through the screen door, I saw her, withered, and gaunt, a tiny shell of a woman. Not the bossy lady I'd pictured, hair perfectly curled, dressed in a black dress and high heels.

"Hello Mrs. Kainen. How are you?" Liza asked as we stepped inside.

"The boxes are upstairs," Mrs. Kainen said wearily, without greeting us, leading us toward the narrow stairway up to the workroom.

Without air conditioning, her house felt oppressively hot and sticky in the August heat. It was sunny outside, but the living room was dark.

I shadowed Mrs. Kainen and Liza up the staircase to the workroom on the second floor. We entered and waited but Mrs. Kainen only stood in the workroom quietly. Sunlight filtering through the dusty windows made her skin appear oddly transparent.

“Isn’t your assistant here today, Mrs. Kainen?” Liza asked.

“No, no. He doesn’t work every day anymore. I don’t need him as much anymore and anyway...,” Mrs. Kainen trailed off.

It looked to me like she still needed an assistant. Rectangular crates, square boxes, and haphazard piles of loose papers covered the workroom floor and benches. Mrs. Kainen stood silently in the midst of the chaos. I felt I had to say something.

“I’ve really enjoyed working on your husband’s collection,” I said.

She ignored me and turned her head to look out the window at a bird flying by outside. Her eyes, following the bird, seemed disconnected from the chaos inside her house. Glancing at Liza, I read the annoyance in her tapping foot and rolling eyes. After Mr. Kainen died, the curators had battled with Mrs. Kainen to hand over the rest of his papers, but she didn’t want to give them up. Perhaps, I thought, giving them up meant giving Jacob up, but if Mrs. Kainen wanted to immortalize Jacob as a great artist, giving his papers to the Smithsonian was the logical thing to do. I glanced down at the boxes, wondering what was in them—more correspondence, probably, or more interview transcripts.

“It’s very difficult,” Mrs. Kainen said, brushing her fingers over the boxes. After a few more minutes of silence, she said “You can take these two long boxes. Carry them through the bedroom there. You can use the elevator.”

“This place has an elevator?” I thought.

I followed Liza through the bedroom, each of us carrying a box. Struggling to hold onto the corner of my long heavy box, I noticed the rumpled white sheets on Mrs. Kainen’s queensized bed in the middle of the room. On the wall above the bed, a black cloth was draped over a painting. After hearing about the Kainen’s extensive collection of German Expressionist prints from Jean and Barb, I’d been excited to see them in person. There was no way of knowing whether the hidden painting above Mrs. Kainen’s bed was one of Jacob’s paintings or one from of his art collection. As we walked through the bedroom and the hallway, I hoped to catch a glimpse of at least one painting or print, but I saw that, mysteriously, all the pictures were similarly shrouded. We reached the elevator and Liza pushed the down button. The elevator

door opened, revealing a luxurious finished wood interior, more suited to an expensive hotel than to Mrs. Kainen's cluttered house. I dropped my box with a thud and shoved it into the elevator. We squeezed ourselves inside as the elevator door closed.

"Liza, why are all of the paintings covered up?" I asked as the elevator descended.

"Oh, she did that after he died," Liza said.

I was confused. Mrs. Kainen wasn't the aggressive person I had expected and her house cluttered house was a complete surprise. I'd gotten her all wrong, just as people got me wrong. I wasn't really the shy self-effacing person people thought I was. And she wasn't some bossy rich woman living in an ostentatious house. We both lived in secret worlds. Shrouded in the darkness of her black cloths, she lived with the ghost of her dead husband in a perpetual state of mourning,

When the doors opened, Liza and I dragged the boxes out of the elevator, lifted them up again, and carried them across the hallway. I stopped in the kitchen to readjust my awkward grip on the box, glimpsing a sink piled high with dirty mugs, juice glasses, pots and pans, and plates covered with what looked like the remnants of Mrs. Kainen's breakfast. I followed Liza, out the kitchen door, and helped her pack the boxes into her trunk. Mrs. Kainen stood in the doorway as we drove away, her withered hand resting on the screen door.

Birthday Party

What she saw out their window was balloons of every size.
Trees bloomed black and gold, pink and white.
She slept in the shadow of her own wind.

Come morning, the last of the balloons broke free,
up into the sky with a message from her breath, her snores,
and her dreams, of course, that burst at such high altitudes.

Grip

Walking out of the community swimming pool
His mother carried his half-eaten cake in one hand
While trying to wipe the frosting off her other
(The stains would stay for a while)
Her sandals half-wet, invited sand and rocks to scrape the bottoms of her
feet
They accepted the invitation.

Both the mother and her son were surrounded by the smell of
evaporating chlorine
And the sticky feeling it left behind.

The birthday boy held a bag of modest presents
And gripped the strings of a few select Dollar-Store balloons
His pace had yet to compensate for the size of his legs
And his legs had yet to compensate for his heavy chest
And his chest had yet to compensate at all.

The humidity was thick
As if the entire pool had walked out with them
Water is more viscous than air
Time is more viscous than water
Especially when it's hot out.

Then, when they were almost to the car,
And the difference between sweat and residual pool water was at its
most unclear,
The boy let go of the balloons,
Not even looking up to see how quickly they rose,
As if they couldn't wait.

The Piano

It was 10:52 A.M. when she saw the piano.

It was 10:54 A.M. when she made herself stop staring at it and walked away.

It was 11:00 A.M. when, her strides slow and deliberate, she walked back to the food court of the mall and sat down to play.

The keys were cool and smooth under her fingers. When was the last time she'd played? It must have been at least four years, maybe five. Lightly, she touched middle C. It was a nice piano, a Yamaha grand. She started with a simple scale in the key of C, her fingers running up and down. Passerby turned their heads in surprise, but she was already lost, remembering the very first day.

Grandpa took her small thumb and placed it on middle C. "This is where it all begins," he said, his voice gravelly but smooth. Instantly, she was hooked.

She moved her hand up a few keys so that her fingers rested on F and G. Slowly, she started to play.

"This song is called Chopsticks," Grandpa said, a few weeks after he'd started teaching her. He sat down on the bench with considerable difficulty and demonstrated for her. She loved the way the song bounced and moved; it sounded happy.

Her hands were more limber now. They remembered. She played on—Saint-Saens and Debussy and Schumann. Bach and Mozart and Handel. Finally, she closed her eyes and began.

She drove up from college for the day to see him, her big strong Grandpa lying in the big bed in the nursing home. "Play Chopin for me," he murmured, his eyes half-closed. "Play the Fantasie-Impromptu." She played. She could barely see the keys for her tears. His funeral was a week later.

The piece ended. She rose from the piano, in a trance. To her surprise, applause filled the food court.

It was 11:52 when she realized he was never gone.

It was 11:54 when she realized her grandfather would live on, in the keys and her fingers and her heart.

It was 12:00 when she decided that maybe she wasn't done with the piano, after all.

Hailey Hudson

Viewpoint



Leah Givens

Balloon Buddha

I.

The balloon Buddha sitting on the rug
didn't burst but slowly diminished to the floor
Then nothing
freeing the air of its form

There we were both of us
verifying its presence
one receiving it as a sign
the other shrugging it off as a dream

II.

Coffee! We searched for it where
the road took us to the nearby town
which suddenly vanished Then we drove
through a mythic city were on another highway
beside the ocean heading far
happily speeding past reflected blue

bound for the continent's edge
one happy with the startling
beauty revealed
the other dismissing it
with a shrug, wanting pictures
composed faces
nothing new

III.

Clouds move
the sun shows
sky fills
with flurries
thick
thin
then April
drizzle

Cape Horn

Read the nebulous twilight
before you try to take wing
against the night,
black as a crack
or bright with the moon;
read the silvery leaves
of the willows
before you venture midstream
in a canoe silent as the grass.

All the loose beginnings,
the ventures undertaken, understood
turn on dangerous flights;
benevolence of angels
or devils,
freshening the poorest enterprise.
The die, once cast,
turns joyous, nervous,
in the air,
no longer a cube
in fateful repose
but a revolving shape,
ending its journey
and beginning anew.

Let go! Hold fast!
Under white cliffs
by a far-off sea
ships are drawn up,
the argosy assembled.

It's time to leave now,
time to strike out
new ways,
leave
before bell rings,

or letters come,
before cock crows,
or the law is changed;
cross the hall, the threshold,
shut the door behind you;
leave the old land.

There before you
grim and shining,
the sea's unblinking eye,
the voyage south;
again and again
against the cold,
against the antipodes
that restless bitter water,
rising and falling,
that shouting restless voice,
warring against the night,
borne away on the wind.

Beyond Patagonia,
beyond the unsinging lines
of enormous deliberate seas,
a dream, your dream,
in the coming dark
bright as a bird;
again and again
rising
at world's end
the loom of the cape;
again and again,
restless, monotonous,
the same fateful danger,
the same fateful repose.

Jack Harvey

Balloons.

Your death was a balloon being released into the skies. Soaring through the air, symbolizing freedom. Your pain becoming weightless as you moved into a happier space. Taking the love we gave you within. The joy of your presence flying further and further away. Leaving us with memories and unanswered questions. I, too, was that balloon getting away on that sunny, winter day. Where I had once been driven and grounded, now drifted away. Sense of direction immensely faded. Don't tell me you love me as you're laying in a grave. You Left Me Alone Dad! You put all of these expectations on me and then threw my entire world into shambles. You taught me lessons I had yet to even know I'd need. You enforced independence. I hadn't a clue it was in preparation for a life without you. My biggest fan. The most honest of perspectives when I needed insight. My first true love. My hero. Releasing those white balloons in your honor were meant to symbolize peace. A peace that I couldn't imagine possessing. My life awaits a myriad of events you were supposed to be here for. Who's going to walk me down the aisle? Or hold my first child? Or cheer me up when the world isn't kind to me? How am I supposed to carry out your legacy when I'm fading away? I don't know what I'm doing without you. I miss you.

Hypnophobia² #1357

i.

Marcus and I look over the railing.
The basement below is a damp pit
littered with newspapers, the floor
isn't even a floor. It's just dirt.
Marcus is eight. It's his house.
In the dim light, a scurry of mice
feet, rat whiskers gleaming, hundreds
of eyes. Then, something a bit larger
among the bustle, a hybrid beast.
Part possum, part chinchilla,
tufted ears, no tail. Marcus calls it
by name, looks at me curiously.
They're so common around here.
How could I not know?

iii.

She pours the thick pink
liquid into a glass. Her hands
wrinkled, but not frail.
The nails manicured
a respectable shade of rose.
She wears a topaz ring.
Marcus whispers to me
It's poisoned. Can't you smell it?
I nod, never taking
my eyes off the clotted pink,
the hands, the glass.
Marcus grips my wrist.
I know I can't save us.
I know we must drink.

² Fear of sleep

v.

I wake up to find Marcus
gone. Only a boy-shaped hole
in the mattress remains. The house:
so old, so big. *Was it always
this big?* No answer.

I open one door, then
another and another, every room
I search empty. Until one is not.
I'm forced to kneel,
then lie face down so violently,
the carpet scorches my cheek.
On my back, the weight is breath-
stopping. I wake up.
Marcus is not in his bed.

vii.

His hand slices the dark room,
grazes my temple. The scene rewinds.
He slaps my mouth. I am quiet
as he holds me down. Quieter still
when he enters me. I open
my eyes to morning.
Wake up Marcus whispers excitedly,
his hand small and gentle
on my shoulder. On the nightstand,
my bikini sits atop a blue striped towel.
We're going swimming today.
I roll to my feet, walk toward the light.
Leaning over the bathroom sink,
I watch red drops swirl down the drain.

October

Rain damps the walk
and walker.
Collector's orchid in your window
vision on the street.
Horizon fortresses
ciphers in the windows.
drawn blinds
dogs
hard sounds shoes voices
canes on the walk.
Fingers drag across screens.
Rain damps.

Falling Asleep

Curling into a question mark
 eyes shuttered
 lips pursed
 hands empty.

Dropping through
long dusty shafts
down into dank cellars.
Leaving behind faded day.

That last cup of sunlight
pouring from fingertips.
Lulled by rattling trains,
 sighs of motors.

Bringing nothing but
memory into night.
Now I will untie knots
 tear off wrappings
opening wide bundles of dreams.

Self-Portrait as Super Elastic Bubble Plastic

Mother must have pinched a bit
(of pain she denies) as she Sallied me out
shy, reluctant, expanding

my head fumed with
goblins, pirates, stallions
until father Hughed his healer to

Mary Baker Eddy my mind,
woman of revelation made emotions go
Wham-O! Waiting in my bubble

to be Bobbled at 22 by a Blackfoot-Irish thief
bursting into smoke my Key West spleef
with Tarzana smog—he stuck

me in a mail sorter, sucked the air
from my head until I was Marked
by a dark knight who placed his swords in

places I never dreamed of
until the next straw man
Jimmied me out of carports

into castles and black car services
full of his own breath stretched
me too thin inflating more inhaling acetone until

I popped

Sarah Key

It Takes Exactly One Lifetime to Adjust to the Darkness

—Annelyse Gelman, “Conch”

My father had a raised forehead scar, jaggedly circular
and dead center. He had exited a Model T Ford through
the windshield. Didn't mind stepping into the stream
of the story: *This was before safety glass—I got cut.*
I think of the accident scar, his bright judging eyes,
as I pack to leave a wife. Kids. My sons are outside
catching fireflies in jars; my daughter begs help,
holding out a textbook on elementary astronomy.

I tell her *Not right now* because I am moving out.
Sorting and packing my half of a record collection:
Dylan, Springsteen, the Who, the Allman Brothers.
It isn't what I planned to do, but we walk outdoors
where she points to the night sky beyond fireflies,
beyond the wreck I have made of yesterday and
days before and will make of this moment, too.
It's dark. No moon. But her brothers are hunting

with a jar in one hand and its lid in the other as if
there is light everywhere around us for harvesting.
Light. Silence punctuated by the voices of children.
I hear my mother's Southern drawl, see my father
grabbing up clothes, his Westinghouse clock radio
with its hard plastic shell the color of firefly light.
I see their lives played out as small-screen 1962,
the squared-jawed American resilience of spirit

that named them as it led to divorce; after which,
they had to let whatever life comes next, come on.
At the window my wife watches as I name a few
of the stars visible in the Northern Hemisphere.
We are to have our own scar story. Inside,
I kiss the three of them goodnight. Carry
what I have to the car. All I know to do.
I want to hear music where I'm going.

Roy Bentley

Ruins of Black Opium

A fragment of what you once were
gives you voice
as you crawl within the woeful leaves
and stand at the edge of disapproval.
Occasionally,
you're felled by the grim comedy
of crisscrossed gantries
and monolithic skyscrapers
miles below the pause of sunlight,
and as a dystopian rain secures your wrists
I will feel the age of twisted plastic—
both familiar and opaque; a black opium,
the time of a solitary being
wandering the smolder in an aggregate hunger—
a body, a manikin;
where every face encountered is exactly my own.

Whatever Small Form of Joy Likeness Equals

*Sometimes a thing can seem star-like
when it's just a star, stripped of whatever small form of joy
likeness equals.*

—Carl Phillips, “Stray”

If displays of affection could light up lives,
a bioluminescence, then what I witnessed as
tenderness in the aisles at a Kroger this evening

should have lit up sizable portions of central Ohio
if not the whole of the Northern Hemisphere—
the couple with garrulous offspring brushed

hands in Produce as something like sparks
flew for a sad 60-something pushed along
in her not-quite-handicapped shopping cart.

Not to mention, those separated by geography
or shared failure lingering in Pizza & Desserts
then by the cold light of the milk and butter aisle,

unsayable and indecent truths resplendent in carton
after carton of eggs that are not the estivation of hope.
Which is what I thought, buying tuna to feed my share

of the winter-exhausted feral cats in the neighborhood:
that kindness begets kindness. And hope. Instant karma.
I bought a case of small cans. Went home and forked

the piscine contents onto plates at the western edge
of the unglaciated Appalachian Plateau. Not hope
or faith or love exactly but what I could manage.

Roy Bentley

Seaside Graphic Novel

The dropped object was caught and only silence fell
and this marked the passing of the oceans.
Consider your skin air-drying and the quietness
of departed ships from the quay. Consider how
you focus on an absence and become saddened.
The gate locks and remains locked
and then you hear the flautist, marching toward you,
eyes on the horizon, sun to her back,
and this is the first encounter of its kind, light siphoned
into the ornamental grass roots beneath your feet.
You're skeptical of my mistrust in your contemplation.
You reel in a fish from beneath the dock.
You pick up a few scraped scales off the ground.
With a catch in your voice, you lower your intent
to pebbles sparsely spread in sandy soil
and pause your feet on a patch of thistle. The water
is empty of megafauna and krill. Tomorrow, we'll leave
the bungalow, the shoreline where the ocean takes back
its casual gifts. Swallow the impulse of what you want
to say. Redact the sequential images of all you think
we might have gathered in descent.

The Offspring of Any God

You begin to die
in the memory of your descendants

and you will soon completely die
within the roots of a heliotrope—

enlightened by the shallowest pond
unburdened by the history of crows.

You walk in a pristine tract
of deep perfume and its purple-blue
ascendency

as an absence of stars radiates
its darkness

fracturing into an infinite variety
of inward-turned mirrors.

The reflections distort and undermine
your coherence

redefining you
until nothing remains except the voices
of your heartbroken children.

Somewhere
the seasons are being held in abeyance
epoch after epoch after epoch

waiting for the offspring of any god
to reappear and tend

to layers of toxic flowers
in every state of prevalence and extinction.

Richard King Perkins II

Letdown



Leah Givens

Lack of a Parachute

I apologize, my love,
But you must understand that I am still
A little raw,
Having been torn and exposed to the bone as I was.
It was partly my own fault for jumping headfirst as I did
(Holding hands with you)
And just assuming that you were the one
Wearing the parachute.
We really weren't ready for that landing, were we?

Anyway, that was a life ago and we are no longer divided
And I'll be there Sunday night to tend your wounds
And you can tend mine.
The ground is hard and cold but we'll stand it together
And next time we try to touch
The sky
Our wings will not fail
And our lack of a parachute
Won't matter at all.
Be ready.



All those nights two suns running free
—with a clear look at each other
could see how bright her face becomes

when the window pane unfolds on fire
spreads out that long-ago afternoon
end over end though the shade

is reaching for the sill —a constellation
and still her arms are frozen open
as if this snapshot was trying to breathe twice

make you think you are covering her eyes
are in the room alone, holding on to what's left
letting it flicker, wait for something in the light

to move closer together, fit into her mouth
so it can see you as the bed no longer made
as the wall and empty picture frame.

Archaeology

Foraging in the garbage
archaeology of madness
scraps shards and chips
clouds turned to tin
thought become gun
song wanting
And no word
to renew
the impossible

Leave it alone
let it rot as it should

If you can't dance
don't drag the sky down

After

forgotten balloons
glide along
the floor
chasing echoes

children
had clutched
their silver ribbons
only
the day before

Baloons with Heart, Kristiansand, Norway



Roger Camp

Breakthismf.com

I work for *BreakThisMotherFucker.com*. It's a site that breaks up for you. We tell your BF or GF that it's O-V-E-R. We manage the deletion of all pictures and communications ever posted by you or your once-beloved, now-hated BF/husband/one night stand. The site also sells wedding gowns and rings you deserve to profit from, but will never wear. This is a growing part of the business, but right now the fifteen-dollar text breakup is paying the bills. There is a scramble scheduled to discuss building out the shopping strand. Luckily, I will be on my honeymoon and won't have to plunder my brain for ways to further fleece the brokenhearted.

Three of us answer emails and write the breakup missives (we offer texts or emails and for a little extra money a phone call.) We write sticky headlines for letters posted by regular people under the tab: *I'm sorry, did you say Ex?* My cube-mates are both called Mary.

I am about to answer *Dooley420* when twenty-nine-year-old Mary slaps a coffee container down on my desk.

"No lid?" I ask.

"You don't want it?" Mary says.

I swipe the foam off the top and suck my finger. It's lukewarm. I reach into my desk drawer, pull out a jar of Saigon cinnamon, and get it on its feet.

"*Dooley420* wants to know if it's true that your Ex will always have sex with you when no one else will?" I stop, read the rest of the email, and add, "No matter how badly it ended. Mary, will ex-boyfriends always have sex with you?"

"If you ask nicely." Mary goes back to her screen.

"So can I get away with *Let Your Ex Be Your Sex Buddy?*"

"Jane," the Mary on my other side says. "You can get away with pretty much anything. Do you know where you're working? Play around with the idea that you don't want your Ex to ever have sex with anyone ever again. *Ever*. Except occasionally you." At thirty-one, she is the oldest. She's single right now, but she was married for two years when she was twenty-one. She handles all the starter-marriage breakups.

"Maybe try *Break the Trojan* as a header," the first Mary says. "I've been dying to use it."

Two Marys. What happened to the good names like Brooklyn, Madison, and Aubrey? I call the older one Sensible Mary and the other Pretty Mary. We have worked together for almost four years. They're my closest friends. They both know more about bad relationships and revenge than I do. I'm good at writing about it. I have been with my fiancé Bobby since college. Six years. I'm the baby at twenty-five.

BreakthisMF is my third job. During my interview, Riley, *BTMF.com*'s owner, didn't ask me to explain why my first job lasted four months and my second two weeks. I told him anyway.

My first job was managing two social media accounts—tweeting—for a cool fashion designer and an energy drink company. After my boss hired me, she never looked at me and only communicated through email or in texts. After three months, I knocked on her cube's partition to ask her a question about my energy account and the snarkfest on Facebook. Without looking up from her screen, she barked handle it. I wrote a "we're guilty" tweet owning up to the product's caffeine levels and it was re-tweeted like crazy. The energy drink company loved it. I quit that afternoon. My second job was for an e-tailer. I wrote copy for the sewing, crafts, and collectibles strand. It was so boring. I quit after two weeks.

When I finished telling him my job history, I started to cry. It was awful. Riley stood up and walked around his desk three times.

"Can I see your resume?"

"I didn't bring it," I said.

"That's okay. Can you pull it up and email it to me."

"I don't have one."

"Okay. That's okay. How about you write something for me?" He sat down on the couch next to me. He was calm like a doctor giving a patient a bad diagnosis.

"Okay, sure. Tell me what you want and I'll go home, write it, and send it to you." I felt his thigh leaning into mine.

"No, I want you to write it now. That's the job. Fast-paced, deadline-driven writing." He stood up.

He settled me at his desk and pulled up a blank doc. "Write a breakup letter to your boyfriend. You don't want to see him anymore. He has a ton of student debt. His mother has never invited you over for dinner. He forgot your birthday. You have ten minutes. One hundred words."

I turned toward the keyboard. "You know, this isn't even my own dress," I said, making my last confession.

"Uh-huh." Riley walked out of his own office.

I finished in four minutes. He hired me on the spot.

“Jane, Riley is looking for you,” says Sensible Mary.

I check to see if I missed a text or an email from him. Nothing.
“How do you know?”

“I smelled him. He’s been around here for sure,” Sensible Mary says, while continuing to write her column for the brokenhearted—let’s be honest—for women who want to know how to *move on* after a breakup. Her column is new. The three of us pitched it as a featured part of the site to Riley. Got him to think it would be click bait, attract advertisers, and build community. We hate that phrase: build community. What? Build a community of sad women? But Riley likes that phrase so we bobble-headed at him when he said *community*.

Sensible Mary calls the column “ReCovHer.” Her BF, Josh (a sweet, under-employed web designer who rides a Vespa so they never arrive anywhere together), drew a figure of a young woman with long hair (of course, her hair hasn’t fallen out from heartbreak; it has only grown longer, silkier) on a double bed pulling up a sheet over her bare (bony but sexy) shoulders. We call her Mary-Jane, after ourselves.

Sensible Mary is overwhelmed with emails. Moving on is hot. She takes too much time replying. Of the three of us, she has the most experience with moving on. She told me the second day on the job if Bobby didn’t want to marry me, I should move on, as I was wasting my time. *Three years max* was her motto. She has served two three-year sentences.

I didn’t mind Sensible Mary telling me what to do before she got to know me better. She sized up my relationship like she was reading a definition out of a dictionary. A few days later, Bobby said he thought we were missing out on something and needed a break.

“Missing out,” I whispered. We were in a Thai restaurant.

“Yeah.”

“On what?” I asked.

“Something,” Bobby said, and drank down his iced Thai coffee.

“On new pussy,” Pretty Mary said the next morning when I told them about dinner. Bobby moved out for three weeks. The Marys took care of me. They told me Bobby couldn’t come back without a ring. I look down at the very tiny diamond they said was acceptable.

Riley talks like “ReCovHer” was his idea. He owns the site, runs it, and runs us, so I guess he can say whatever he wants. He is thirty-two. His father is in commercial real estate. Riley worked for the family business until his father fired him. He took his severance and started BTMF.com. He sells tons of sponsorships for “ReCovHer.” He is an amazing salesman, which makes it hard for us to understand why his father got rid of him. Pretty Mary once texted us a pic of Riley and his older brother. *R too cute. Sold more than fugly brother.*

We don’t think Riley has ever read “ReCovHer.” He is embarrassed by explicit sex talk. I know how he feels. But I think he is worried about his almost exclusively female staff accusing him of harassment. Six months ago, we all ganged up on him about our hourly. The benefits are shit and too many of the “girls-with-time” (that’s what Pretty Mary calls those just out of college) only work part time. I wrote a memo asking for a raise for all of us. Sensible Mary called it a manifesto. Pretty Mary got every woman in the office to sign it. Pretty women can be persuasive. We got two dollars more an hour and pizza on Wednesdays.

“What do you think he wants?” I ask both Marys.

“Robot-girl told me he’s giving a speech next week. Or sometime. True love or some shit, and wants you to write it for him,” Sensible Mary says, and puts in her ear buds. She’s through talking.

I grab my canvas-covered sketchbook. I like to doodle, and if Riley says anything important, I can write it down.

Riley’s office has a large oriental rug—family rug no doubt—big enough for all his furniture to sit on it. One entire wall is custom bookshelves. The bottom shelf is wider than the four above it, and half of it has no books but has a black cushion instead. Looks like a yoga prop. Pretty Mary says Riley naps there. A bonsai grows out of his desk. Not grows, exactly. He had a hole cut into his desk large enough for the miniature tree’s container. I gave him the idea one day when I was sitting in his bookshelf.

Forty minutes later, I am back in my cube. The Marys look at me. During the meeting, I texted them a running commentary. Their raised eyebrows are full of sympathy. Another speech to write.

I check my inbox. BTMF has a *We-will-answer-every-email-within-twenty-four-hours* policy. I will be here for a while. I text Bobby. He won't mind. College basketball is on tonight. He can meet up with his buddies at Charity Stripe, a sports bar near us. I love basketball. I have to hide how much I know about it from his friends. They act miffed when I chime in about stats or how high a player was drafted. I open my sketchbook to the wedding cake I drew in Riley's office.

"Hey, Mary," I say. Neither one turns.

"I know this person," I say, staring at the screen.

Both Marys swivel toward me. We have all been waiting for this moment. Odds are against it, but we have talked about how we would handle the breakup of someone we know. Or knew. Or liked.

"You don't have to do it. I'll do it. Forward it to me," says Sensible Mary, waving her hand like the email will follow her. "Don't do it."

I focus for a second on Sensible Mary's white wool sweater with small pink embroidered flowers. She went to prep school in Vermont. Her wardrobe is jean skirts, loafers, blazers that stop at her waist and simple gold jewelry.

"Who is it?" asks Pretty Mary.

"I went to junior high with her," I say. "I forgot to read my horoscope today. Did it say this would happen?" I sigh and let my stomach push out. I've been trying to lose five pounds for the wedding. We all have different astrological signs, but we read our scopes every day like they are the gospel. All day, we try to get to that eureka moment when one of us screams—*Just like my horoscope said!*—and then that person has to buy coffee. That person also has to do the daily check-in with the tech guy, Aldo. Aldo stands with his feet apart, one a little in front of the other like he is on a surfboard, hands shoved into his pockets. Aldo takes down all the posts and pictures we tell him to. He does a good job, but I think Sensible Mary needs to tell him surfing in the Pacific isn't a replacement for showering.

"Was she a good friend of yours?" Pretty Mary stands behind me reading the email, rocking. On and off she touches my shoulder. It calms me. Pretty Mary is the tallest. She could be 5'10". She never played basketball in school. She has long blond hair that looks like it is ironed every morning.

"Really. Forward it to me. What's her deal?" Sensible Mary asks me.

“Same as all the rest,” I say, wanting to minimize the screen and give Maggie Windom privacy. The women who write to us are sad. We have all felt like this. Pretty Mary not so much. She loves *love*. She told us her first marriage didn’t work out, but at least she helped one of them get a law degree. Sensible Mary had to explain to me that Pretty Mary put her first husband through law school and then he dumped her. Sensible Mary is trying to make it work with Josh. Pretty Mary is seeing someone new. I am getting married.

“*Don't let insecurities rule your day. Use them to make improvements in your performance,*” Sensible Mary reads aloud my daily horoscope from her phone.

“Okay,” I say. My voice sounds feeble, but neither Mary says anything. We go back to work. I read Maggie’s email again slowly, sucking up my insecurities, telling myself I will write Riley’s speech on Love (for Sale) later tonight. Easy. And I will craft a breakup text for Maggie before I knock off. That’s what she wants. The hundred-word kiss-off. She has already entered her credit card info.

I was in honors Algebra II. I had placed out of geometry, so the school and the math teacher Fern Wallow, thought an eighth grader would do just fine in an advanced class with older girls. Maggie Windom, a sophomore, was in the same class. I sat in the front row. She sat in the last row polishing her nails using a chamois buffer with a tortoiseshell handle. Every day I wanted to yell, *I don’t belong in this class!* But eighth graders keep their mouths shut.

Maggie stood out. Every girl knew her. I noticed her my second day when we all lined up by class and then by height for Chapel. Random Hall required us to wear uniforms, but Maggie made the unflattering shirt-maker dress stylish. The rest of us looked dumpy. Maggie was tall and thin with great blue eyes that I thought looked too big for her face. She wore a black skeleton key on a piece of twine, and when the last bell rang, she put on a floppy summer hat that covered most of her face. Maggie had a million dress code demerits, but no one was going to do anything about it since she was a legacy and a scoring forward on the basketball team.

“Ladies. The test scores are interesting. Two of you scored 110 points because you completed the extra credit,” Fern Wallow said, handing out the graded papers. “Most of you did well. One of you scored 44 percent.” She hesitated to let that awfulness sink in. “This shows a total lack of comprehension of the first five weeks of work.”

I glanced down at my paper. My face got hot. I was the one who scored 44 percent. If I had had a gun, Mrs. Wallow would be dead. I wanted to drop down into the floor. I covered the top of my paper with my hand and studied my fleshy cuticles like I had never noticed them before.

“Okay. It was me,” Maggie called out from the back of the room. “I got the 44 percent. I know you’re all dying to know. I just don’t get this shit.”

“Miss Windom, that’s a demerit for language,” Wallow said, stretching across her desk for her black notebook to record the infraction.

The bell rang. We were out of our seats. Maggie walked by my desk but didn’t look at me. I followed her down the hall at a distance. I wanted to say something like, *How did you know it was me who got the lowest grade?* I wanted to thank her, but I couldn’t. I had never even spoken to her before.

Maggie hadn’t said more than a dozen words to me, but one day while we, and a bunch of other girls, were sitting on the low brick wall outside the cafeteria—our hands shoved into our blazer pockets and our faces turned to a weak sun—she asked if I wanted to sleep over.

Maggie’s mother picked us up after school on a Friday. The only time I saw her mother was when she drove me home. She spent the whole weekend up in her studio.

“Don’t worry about her. She’s working on her book. She has a deadline.”

“What kind of book?” I asked, looking around the kitchen. The sink was filled with dirty dishes.

“Young adult crap. It’s about a girl called Mags who has superpowers.”

I couldn’t tell whether Maggie liked that her mother had named a character after her. I didn’t know Maggie well enough to ask. What I did know were her basketball stats because I went to every game to watch her. I kept the cover she had drawn for the literary magazine in my notebook. When she told me to join the yearbook club, I joined. I was looking for a floppy hat to buy.

“Where’s your room?”

“Down the hall. Second door. Just drop your stuff anywhere,” Maggie said, and threw her backpack onto a chair spilling over with unfolded laundry. She stood studying the opened refrigerator while peeling off her uniform. A pair of shorts lay on the floor. She picked them up and put them on while drinking juice out of the carton. Some of it spilled down her face. She grabbed a dishtowel, wiped her mouth, and then tied it around her bra.

Maggie’s house was filthy. Even the clean dishes had caked-on pieces of food. The kitchen table was sticky. The cabinet doors were left open. It looked like they were collecting pizza boxes in the laundry room.

“I’ll be right back.” I walked down the hall. There were dark smudges on the walls. I pushed open the half-closed second door and Maggie’s brother and his friend were spread out on his unmade bed.

“Are you Maggie’s friend?”

I nodded and backed out of the room.

After pizza, we sat on her porch, smoking. She could take a matchbook and light a cigarette with one hand. She lit one for me. I didn’t smoke, but I inhaled anyway and coughed. She smiled, patted me on the back and took the cigarette out of my hand. Maggie wore her floppy hat and talked nonstop. She played us *Four-Minute Mile*. She went into the house and came back with a plastic container filled with milk-colored water and a small leather manicure set. She soaked my nails, pushed back the cuticles, and painted my nails with clear polish. She asked me what I thought of Schopenhauer’s essay “On Suicide.” Her hat covered her eyes so she couldn’t see I didn’t know what she was talking about.

We went to bed late. I woke up to Maggie’s fingernails massaging my scalp. She dragged her fingers through my long hair. I moved away. We were sharing her bed. The fitted sheet didn’t match the top sheet and my pillow had no case. I rubbed a wrinkle on my cheek where I had been sleeping on the do-not-cut-off tag.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I said. I was lying on my side facing her. I looked at the clock. It was 2:30 a.m. I must have fallen asleep while we talking. The TV was still on but muted.

Maggie kept her fingers in my hair. I decided to just keep quiet, hoping she would move back to her side. She began to make big circles on the top of my head. Her fingertips slid down the side of my face. She stopped. *That’s it*, I thought, but she went back up to the top of my head.

I got gooseflesh. “Quit it.”

Maggie stopped and opened her eyes. I turned onto my stomach, making as much noise as I could, flopping around to get settled. I pretended to fall back asleep. Maggie ran her nails over my back, lightly tickling me. It felt good. I lay as still as a doorstep. She put her hand on my shoulder and turned me over onto my back. She leaned in close to my ear. I thought she was going to tell me something, but instead she covered my whole ear with her mouth and huffed warm air into it.

Summer vacation came. Maggie told me to email her. My first email bounced. My mother paid me nothing to watch my little brother. I had to make up Algebra II in summer school. At night, I wrote letters to Maggie. I wrote them in my sketchbook. I had ordered a canvas-covered sketchbook like the one Maggie used. I was afraid that if I used my phone or my laptop to write them I might accidentally send them to her. Even though I had the wrong email address, I thought this. When I finished each letter, I would rip the pages out of the notebook and burn them. My mother accused me of smoking. She knew that wasn't what cigarette ash looked like.

We spent most of August at the beach. I was awkward and snippy with everyone. I spent a lot of time imagining that Maggie was watching me. I would try to walk in such a way that would keep her interest. I made up long conversations with her at night. I worked things I had heard her say into my conversation with the pimply guy at the 7-Eleven. In addition to reading my own summer list, I read the books I knew she had been assigned. I played *The Get Up Kids* CD endlessly until my father took the car to get it serviced and, when it came back, the CD was missing. I would get angry for no reason, spinning away from my parents on the boardwalk or at the dinner table, pinching my little brother to shut him up.

I bought a skeleton key in an antiques store. I planned ways I would give it to her. But the first day back at school, she wasn't wearing a key anymore. She saw me standing by my locker and came over.

"Hey, good summer?" she asked, going over me from head to toe like she was trying to place me.

I nodded.

She pushed her floppy summer hat into my hands. I dropped a couple of books and, when I stood back up, she was walking down the hall.

“Jane, Janey,” Sensible Mary says. “Want me to read the draft fuck-off text?”

“I’m not quite done,” I say. “She was a friend of mine. I want get it right.” I loved her. I could tell the Marys that. They would understand. I’ve told them everything else about me.

“And that’s why you shouldn’t write it.” Pretty Mary crabs her chair closer to mine.

“No, it’s fine. I wish you hadn’t made me invite Riley to the wedding. I don’t want him there,” I say, not looking at either Mary. “I don’t have a table set aside for douches.”

“Sure you do. There’s always one douche table at a wedding. You have to invite the boss. He has a crush on you,” Sensible Mary says, running her fingers through her hair like a comb. “We like him.”

I put my hands back on the keyboard. Maggie’s BF seems nice enough. She didn’t write anything mean about him in her email. She just doesn’t want to tell him it’s over. I stop myself from going to her profile page to look for a picture. I haven’t seen her in nine years. My parents moved us to Los Angeles at the end of my freshman year.

“It’s okay, Janey.” Maggie swung her legs off the side of the bed.

I felt stupid. Nothing happened. I was being silly.

“Can you do something for me?” The TV light made Maggie’s face look blue.

“Sure. What?” I was glad to get out the bed and follow her into the bathroom.

Maggie sat on the toilet seat, holding a pair of scissors. She lifted up the top of her T-shirt. Her breasts were bigger than mine. But it was her dark areolas that got my attention. I stared at them. Then I saw some wispy black hairs around her nipples.

“Can you cut off the hairs?” Maggie pushed her chest toward me, looking up at the ceiling.

“I guess so.” I took the scissors from her. I thought she was giving me another chance to be a good friend.

“What about tweezers?” I said, staring at the job before me.

“They will only grow back thicker. Plucking can cause in-grown hairs,” Maggie said.

Holding my breath, I carefully clipped a few hairs. They fell onto her breast. I brushed them away. Her skin was warm. I thought about saving them in a white Kleenex.

Maggie looked down, inspecting my work. "Good. Cut closer."

"Okay, Hold still," I said, though she hadn't moved a muscle. I studied the hairs, trying to determine the best angle to clip them as short as she wanted without cutting her. I saw a little scab on her left breast where scissors must have slipped when she had done it herself.

"Okay. Done." I stepped back.

Maggie jumped up onto the toilet seat and pulled the mirror of the medicine cabinet closer to inspect my work.

"I just hate these." She rubbed both her nipples with the palms of her hands. "Soon as I have some money of my own, I am going to get electrolysis." Her nipples were erect when she turned toward me.

"I think you look beautiful. They don't matter."

"*They?*"

I swallowed. "The hairs."

She reached out and tugged at my earlobe. A shock went through me. "Oh, Janey."

I push *send*. The Marys hear the whoosh, look over at me, and go back to their screens. I pull up a new doc to start on Riley's speech. He says he needs less than a hundred words on true love. That's hardly a speech, but whatever. He said it could just be on love in general.

Pretty Mary has her purse over her shoulder and is texting with someone. "Don't stay too long, Janey." She bends down and kisses the top of my head.

A week and a day later, the two Marys are walking me down the aisle. My parents didn't get it at first, but they seem okay when I pass them. They are both crying. I stop the procession, turn back, and pat my mother's hand.

An hour before, Sensible Mary had asked me what I was wearing for my something borrowed.

"This." I held up a scrap from Maggie's floppy summer hat.

Taking it from me, Pretty Mary said, "What's this?" She pulled up my full skirt and Sensible Mary pinned the small piece of cotton I had saved. Soft as it was, it knocked against my leg under my wedding dress. They both squeezed my hands.

“Your horoscope is good today,” Pretty Mary said, turning me out of the dressing room and toward the chapel.

“It is? What does it say?” I ask, but we are already walking down the aisle.

At the wedding reception, Riley gets up to make a toast. I’ve had two glasses of champagne and a quick toke out on the hotel ballroom’s terrace with Bobby. I sit still. Both Marys look at me.

“Love in less than a hundred words,” Riley looks down at his phone. He looks great in his tuxedo, but he keeps pulling at his bowtie.

“Love doesn’t like to be pinned, tweeted, texted, Instagrammed or Tindered. Love doesn’t understand the two-screen experience. Love moves back and forth, but it loves best in the now. Right now.” Riley sits down. People clap. Wait! I wrote those thirty-one words for his stupid speech. I glance over at Bobby. His father is bent over talking to him. Bobby is nodding, smiling up at his father.

Oh, Maggie. I just never loved anyone the way I loved you.

Balloon

My heart is a balloon,
filled with spirits and butterflies.
It sings only for you;
it always will
until it pops.

It flutters in the center of my ribcage;
the string is held down
only by the weight of your sight.
When you are gone,
it flies about aimlessly;
it bumps and bruises
on the walls of my soul,
on and on and on
until you're back.

My heart is a balloon,
filled with spirits and butterflies.
It sings only for you.
It is held only by you.
It always will.
Until it pops.
Until it pops.

Vibration of a Single Degree

When a system is given
an initial input of velocity,

it will vibrate freely
upon release. The ground

will undergo occasional
displacement. In running,

we invite earthquakes
with periodic force. In leaving,

the engine drives
with rising speeds.

In real systems, energy
dissipates. The system damps,

often unnoticeably. When friction
ends, the memories displace,

and your face becomes
a jumbled mess of cables,

of mouths in wired eyes
so tangled by the heart.

Project: _____

The project goes something like this:

We have a call for clowns, audition for that subtle creepiness you can't explain in words but that you know when you feel it running the panic route from your eyes to your brain.

We'd find the best clowns, pose them, with innocent wind tossed balloons, in the most obviously wrong places for a happy clown to be found, but tie them focally into the setting, hauntingly, irrevocably inappropriate.

Barely colored clowns, only slightly red and yellow balloons, in otherwise black and white scenarios – one with that 1,000 yard stare, hunkered as artillery falls down, about to go over the top across no man's land,

or sprinting, head down, with his mates, balloons cascading from his bayonet,

or one with his surprised faux smile, wretched away from his clown friends just as a terrorist bomb detonates near their clown car as they endlessly pile out to get to the bachelor party.

Let's have one standing helpless on a beautiful beach as another clown flails in a riptide, clambering on floating balloons, or one standing in a bank while robbers pistol whip patrons.

Perhaps a belly-bloated desert clown,
with only one deflated balloon left,
starving, lying abandoned on the road,
buzzards circling. A clown stripper?
Congressional chamber full of clowns?
Clowns in white shirts and black ties.
Digging graves. In a civil war trench
of swelling dead. Airborne in WWII
over Europe. Riding an atom bomb.
Arriving too late at the hospital ER,
balloons slipping from his fingers.

A room full of sad clowns, all blind
but one happy, maniacal one that's
lost its mind at the head of the table
and soiled itself, demanding a raise.

Or the clown that never has to dress
like a clown but is recognized as one.

Two clowns spied upon through
a snow-frosted window by a non-clown
person wrapped in a suicide vest
as they make crazy mad love praying
to conceive on their wedding night.

the hope of feathers

i watched a little red balloon
fly into the sky,
and wondered if it wouldn't be lost
somewhere in the sky forever
kissing stars;
as a child i didn't think of how it must
eventually come down
or how it could strangle ocean wildlife
just thought that it would
forever climb
the celestial heavens until it could no longer go
higher and then make friends of the
constellations and the stars—
was always a dreamer
even as a girl when i watched little red balloons
crawl into the sky
never imagining they'd be punctured or they could fall
maybe because i was envious of their flight and wished, too,
that i could soar among the clouds
without worry or care;
i wouldn't be a bubble so i could never die
maybe that's true or maybe like
a balloon i'd fall—
yet i never know if i could fly if i did not try
so i take these wings,
and carry them upward hoping these feathers are stronger
than the balloons i used to admire.

Bowling

mouth greasy from chicken finger oil I finally tell you
I love you the bowling alley piss-like or flower
petals words thrown down slick lane
quick spin make thunder in falling
pins in front of us no matter
strike or split or spare or miss

i should not have laughed

i remember the last time
that i saw you
your heart was broken
when a water balloon tossed by
my cousin hit you in the
face,
and we all laughed;
it was my birthday and i didn't want you there
my mother made me invite you to be
nice,
but that was no excuse for me
to be the beast that
i was—
even today i can still remember
your tears,
and i feel bad for hurting you;
for cheering on the villain instead
of you
because even if i didn't like you, didn't mean
you didn't have a right to exist
or be happy—
hearts are such fragile things
i hope yours wasn't forever broken by a
water balloon.

Ode to Ooooo

Even emus love red balloons
rising from their backs like booty plumes,

but these balloons aren't for emus;
they're a *Wahoo!* for every bloomin' you

who knows yourself and grooves it true,
grooves it in a tulle tutu—blue,

in parachute pants or a fuchsia suit,
each balloon tied with two sugar spoons,

spoons plopped in pouches of kangaroos
or pockets of cool gurus from Kalamazoo,

pockets loomed smooth by commune dudes
then embroidered with petunia blooms,

spoons slipped out soon to consume,
mmm, a vanilla scoop, then swoon—

harpooned by sweet moo voodoo,
swoon while pigeons waddle and coo,

waiting for moo goo to fall like dew,
swoon while Granny Lou, as if on cue,

boogies with her broom and cockatoo
as stoop men croon her favorite tune

and students like Anu just home from school
step-step to the music to make it new.

Jubilance brews from here to Peru,
balloons everywhere making the news,

while you with your honeydew taboo
muse beside me bugling a maroon kazoo

under balloons tied to an upturned canoe
like lassooed moons or stars unglued.

Soon I want to spoon you through the afternoon,
woo you 'til the sun blooms red over dunes.

Until soon, tuck this poem in your shoe.
Consider it an IOU.

Stand-Up Comedy

*[the comedian approaches the stage in sunglasses
and a shiny black and green robe.]*

*Knock knock.
(Who's there?)*

*I am.
There is no punchline.*

*Listen past your rush-hour heart.
I am up here breathing heavily.*

*Listen: I want you to laugh
and never stop. I am trying jokes
you did not know you wanted to hear.*

*I searched coast-to-coast for lands
who laugh with me, that tectonic shifting
from belly to chest.*

Why did boys like me bring ladders to school?

*We wanted to learn mountains and rarefied air.
To find reservoirs of laughter waiting.*

*What did 0 say to 8?
Nice belt!*

I don't get that joke!

*But I want your holy, exhaled noise.
Relax.*

What do you do if you see a spaceman?

You laugh. He doesn't know what he's doing here.
What he's doing anywhere.
I offered myself to the ocean—
the entertainment industry.
She did not want.
The spotlight hungers for no one.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Why wouldn't the chicken cross the road
if the chicken intended to cross the road?

Most everyone I know crosses the road
without looking both ways these days.
I do not call them chickens— they are my more realistic friends.

I want to make them laugh.
If you're not laughing for me, laugh for them.

We are haunted by too many things:
dead friends, dead family, dead love,
dead strangers, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead.

You can be someone's haunting sunlight.
Someone's champion jester dispersing their marbles too good.

Look, a magic trick!
[he throws two playing cards on the floor]

How do you catch a unique rabbit?
U nique up on it.

How do you catch a tame rabbit?
Tame way— u nique up

on something enough times to latch onto—
just a hinge's creak
before the mouth's swing open, closed.

Some of us never leave that darkness.
The silent divide.

Laughter will bring us close.

I mean it when I say let's laugh until we die,
even when what we laugh about isn't funny.

I mean it when I say if you see a space, man,
park your car, man.

It's over.

James Croal Jackson

Shining

So she left, the restaurant
door swung shut, seemed
as thin as plywood, impossible
as a bank vault. Every booth
around you filled with first
dates and you there
on your barstool dressed
like a parody gumshoe, fist
wrapped around a shot
of redeye. Someone
in this town must have
a stolen teddy bear
that needs found,
family jewels on the run,
an infidelitous spouse. Dig
into your rolodex, there's
work to be done. The razor
held at bay one more hour.

Robert Beveridge

Clothes

I throw on my man's coat. I wear his clothes.
You must know that when I button his shirt
over my breasts, my hands echo his hands
buttoning on the opposite side. I tried
wearing my old thread but they don't fit.
I'm fat with the long nights spent with him,
with wine and whatever we want
so who cares? He sews denim panels
into the inner thighs of my jeans where my leg
has rubbed on leg and worn and blown through.

Don't think I don't miss them. Don't think
I don't leave them in the closet
to be touched. Here is a sleeve the blue
of a truck bed when I was 18, making love
to the boy who screamed at me in the street.
Here is a skirt the other man got under
at a drive in. Here's the sheer shirt
that slid to the floor, silk dusk, and a man
trembled to touch because in every man
is a boy who dreams of reaching
into a cave to survive scorpions.

I am just a woman in a coat. The past hangs
in our houses though it doesn't suit us.
My sweet man, tall and philosophical,
is not built for this country and I wonder
when we'll be killed for ten lines of poetry
or him wearing my scarves or our poverty.
That's what love is, watching his head bend
over denim as a needle appears and disappears
like weather and contemplating how soon
he will die. It's not morbid. It's training.

When the moment comes,
when they raise the gun,
it will be like a dream. I will cloud up,
rain down before of him. The Beloved,
who lives in this coat and in the soft
inner thigh of cats, dogs, babies (what we
all are), my beloved, to whom I give my last
things at the end of each day. For now,
it is my word, my sex, my hair on the pillow.
I lift heavier things toward the horizon.
I am a heavier thing. He clothes me.
For that I will come down: a sleep,
a dream, a closed closet door.

Floating Lightly Through

So one day I'm finally dead, torn to pieces by the perils of old age and the ravages of forgotten depravities and I'm classically floating above the hospital bed happy as a helium balloon saying CONGRATULATIONS! bouncing and twisting off the white acoustical tiles while looking down at my weeping wife kissing my pallid forehead goodbye with glistening tears I can clearly see, anointing the back of my right hand she had been holding, in rivulets and small globs of sadness rolling off to stain the wrinkled bedsheets as I'm, ironically maybe, thinking if only I could get her to look up at me floating here like some Cheshire Garfield wanting to say it's all right, and where else can you get this much comedy with me thud, thudding against this ceiling in a kind of light musical thrumming that may or may not be my soul, because it certainly isn't my heart anymore, when the cloud-like tiles suddenly blink open in a beckoning adventure letting me float lightly through.

Reviews

The Language of Thorns: Midnight Tales and Dangerous Magic by Leigh Bardugo. New York: Imprint, 2017. 288 pages. \$18.99, hardcover.

Leigh Bardugo has five novels in the Grishaverse, and in those novels, the reader meets people from the different countries represented in the tales in this volume: Zemeni, Ravkan, Kerch, and Fjerdan. These are not ordinary fairy tales. Bardugo takes unexpected turns, the way I imagine fairy tales would be if they were more real life than simply a moral story. Sara Kipin illustrates the stories.

In “Ayama and the Thorn Wood,” two princes are born, the second a monster. In a poorer family, two girls were born, Kima and Ayama. The parents prize their first-born children. The king locks his second son in a maze beneath the palace. Ayama works as a servant in her own home. Ayama tells the beast three tales to save the kingdom.

The stories remind the reader of the familiar stories of Hansel and Gretel, the Tin Soldier, and the Little Mermaid, but Bardugo weaves magic that is all her own.

In all of the stories, Kipin’s illustrations grow with the story. It is fascinating to read the story and watch the image on both margins grow as the story unfolds. It is an experience I look forward to exploring with my own narratives.

—Suzanna Anderson

The Red Book: (or Operation Iraqi Freedom is My Fault) by Brandon Davis Jennings. Negaunee, M.I.: Little Presque Publishing, 2017. 204 pages. \$13.95, softcover.

Jennings served in the Air Force. His mother sends him his old diary, which he shares portions of. I know that my own childhood and teenage entries are just as embarrassing. And there is dialogue with an unknown other, similar to conversations between equal-dominance brain people, or private speech, in psychological terminology. He uses footnotes throughout and connects with the reader, similar to Tim O'Brien *In the Lake of the Woods*.

In the essay "I am the pulverizer," it is Easter and there are Peeps in the care packages, "Peeps come in five, ten, and fifteen-count packages, there were between five and fifteen million Peeps in our shop (that's just simple math). Drews ripped open the plastic seal on each of the packages so the Peeps could breathe, and after a couple days of stale-mentation, he ate all the Peeps in one afternoon. He didn't gain a pound because he is from Louisiana and Tony Chachere's seasoning trains the body to perspire unneeded calories. That is why Louisiana has one of the lowest obesity rates in the nation." And of course in the footnotes, Jennings says, "This is false for multiple reasons."

Jennings shares heartbreaking moments, hurts that never go away, no matter how much time passes. Jennings' collection of essays is a must read. They are funny and real and honest.

—Suzanna Anderson

Joining the Dots by Goirick Brahmachari. Hyderabad, India: Nivasini Publishers, 2016. 30 pages. <https://www.amazon.in/dp/9385917153>

Brahmachari's poem "A strange shade of white" is The Magnolia Review Volume 2, Issue 2. He has beautiful travel poems and micro poems in the collection *Joining the Dots*, expanding and exploring the images of the moon, rivers, and the mountains.

Brahmachari introduces the collection with "shady motels of karnal give away to the vast / paddy field of punjab. only here, one can find / a mercedes benz showroom standing with / pride over barren lands. factories follow us / with varied smells of industrial waste— / reminding us of the landfills at the border— / rotten and liquid like our lives."

I travel with Brahmachari, past the "...city we crossed hours ago / flickers in yellow sleep" to "snow has painted everything white / even goats shun colours here / the cold has sketched wrinkles / over our weary, blue faces" to "...the river, like always / pours into the darkness."

The brevity of the poems only make reading *Joining the Dots* over and over again sweeter.

—Suzanna Anderson

Scattered Cranes by Guinotte Wise. Lockport, N.Y.: Pski's Porch Publishing, 2017. 132 pages. \$10.99, softcover.

Wise begins the collection with a foreword where he shares that the first poem he wrote was in art school, and then "I had arrived. I was published. But art called and when my wife got pregnant, real life called. I found myself working for a paving company. REAL real life. Concrete in fact. Neither poetry nor art paid bills at that point. Readymix concrete and I did that."

In "Hammertime (Cantus Firmus)," the speaker is working and watches a coworker use a hammer to drive spikes into ties. They exchange hammers, and the coworker says, "...One more thing to learn / he said, don't let the acid splatter on / you, wear a shirt, too late now you're / covered, wash it off as it will burn like / blazes and it did as sweat spread it in / rivulets the sun ignited I was afire he / wiped me down with Igloo water said / back to work you'll cool down it's gone."

Father sold suits and wore suits. The speaker "...saw him dance like a ghost, alone, arms up, one encircling / hi incorporeal partner. ...And the man he danced and glided, slid whirling from room / to room as though on tracks like my electric train. / One arm out handholding an imaginary hand lightly moist. / A hand on the lower back of his next adventure. / Her head flung back in laughter. / And thunder sounded like far off box cars bumping bumping / one another off into now."

In the title poem, men watch the cranes and try to imitate the birds.

“They took on the demeanor of the birds / And danced nearer and nearer
/ Nose cones tied on for beaks / Glasses flashing marshy scenes / Glades
and cypress roots all fingers / And the birds’ attention faltered, failed /
Their takeoff slow and lumbering / Only graceful in the skies or dancing
/ The men only graceful in their dreams.”

I couldn’t help reading Wise’s words aloud. A graceful poet and a
sculptor to boot. Check out his poem “Cookout” in *The Magnolia*
Review, Volume 3, Issue 1.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

Steve Abbott is a former delivery truck driver, courtroom bailiff, private investigator, PR flack, and college professor. He edits Ohio Poetry Association's annual member journal *Common Threads* and co-hosts The Poetry Forum, the Midwest's longest-running weekly poetry reading series. He has published four poetry chapbooks and has a full-length collection forthcoming from Kattywampus Press.

Charles Joseph Albert is a metallurgist in San Jose, California, where he lives with his wife and three boys. In the wee hours when only the Google Maps van and NSA employees are still awake, he writes. His poems and fiction have appeared recently in *Quarterday*, *Chicago Literati*, *300 Days of Sun*, *Abstract Jam*, *Literary Hatchet*, and *Here Comes Everyone*.

Danny P. Barbare likes to write poetry about his environment. He lives in the Upstate of the Carolinas. He says he never fails to have a subject to write about. He says he just likes to write one at a time. His poetry has appeared locally and abroad over 700 times.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks and 3 more accepted for publication. His poetry collections include: *Days of Destruction* (Skive Press), *Expectations* (Rogue Scholars Press), *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways*, *Displays*, *Perceptions*, *Fault Lines & Tremors* (Winter Goose Publishing), *Perturbations*, *Rude Awakenings* and *The Remission of Order* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing, *Conditioned Response* (Nazar Look), *Resonance* (Dreaming Big Publications), and *Virtual Living* will be published by Thurston Howl Publications. His novels include: *Extreme Change* (Cogwheel Press), *Flawed Connections* (Black Rose Writing) and *Call to Valor* (Gnome on Pigs Productions). *Sudden Conflicts* will be published by Lillicat Publishers and *State of Rage* by Rainy Day Reads Publishing. He has a short story collection, *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). *Now I Accuse and other stories* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City.

Roy Bentley is the author of five books of poetry, including *Starlight Taxi* (Lynx House), which won the 2012 Blue Lynx Poetry Prize, *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana* (White Pine), which was the winner of the White Pine Press Poetry Prize, *Any One Man* (Bottom Dog), and *Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama), which won the University of Alabama Press Poetry Series Award. Recipient of a Creative Writing Fellowship from the NEA, six Ohio Arts Council fellowships, and a Florida Division of Cultural Affairs fellowship, his work has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere. His fifth book, *Walking with Eve in the Loved City*, was a finalist for the 2018 Miller Williams Poetry Prize selected by Billy Collins and is forthcoming from the University of Arkansas Press in the spring.

Les Bernstein lives in Mill Valley, CA. Her poems have appeared in journals, anthologies and presses in the U.S. and Europe. Her chapbooks *Borderland*, *Naked Little Creatures*, and *Amid The Din* have been published by Finishing Line Press.

(https://www.finishinglinepress.com/?s=les+bernstein&post_type=product)

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Wildflower Muse*, *Noble/Gas Qtrly*, and *The Ibis Head Review*, among others.

Rana Bitar is a physician in the fields of hematology and oncology. She graduated from Aleppo University School of Medicine in 1990. A doctor by day and writer by night, Rana earned her Master's in English and Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University in January of 2017. She self-published a bilingual book of poetry titled *Dreams of the Beginning* in 2011. Her poems appeared in the Fall 2016 issue of *The Deadly Writers Patrol* journal, and will be featured in the May 2017 issue of *DoveTales* journal.

Jared Burton, inker and colorist of *The Book Harvest*.

Vincent Butka, penciller of *The Book Harvest*.

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *Heat* (Charta, Milano, 2008). His work has appeared in over 100 magazines including *The New York Quarterly*, *New England Review*, and *Witness*.

Samantha Chasse is a Connecticut resident. She is currently working on her MFA in Writing at Lindenwood University. Her previous writing experience includes two ten-minute plays which were featured in an off-off Broadway festival. Her short story "Phony" was recently published in *Better Than Starbucks*. When she isn't writing, she enjoys snuggling with her dog Lola and reading a good book.

Linda M. Crate's works have appeared in various magazines and anthologies both in print and online. She is the author of three chapbooks, the fantasy novels in the Magic Series, and the forthcoming fantasy novel *Phoenix Tears*.

Vivi Davis is a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, majoring in Psychology. Her poetry has previously been selected and published in *the Illumination Journal of UW-Madison*. She enjoys kayaking, eating fresh bread, and playing string quartets with her friends.

Wendy DeGroat's poetry has appeared in U.S. and U.K. publications, including *Raleigh Review*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Cider Press Review*, *Rust + Moth*, and *Mslexia*. Her chapbook *Beautiful Machinery* was published by Headmistress Press in 2016. Wendy is a librarian in Richmond, Virginia, where she also teaches writing and curates poetryriver.org, a resource site for documentary poetry and for diversifying the poetry taught in high schools and colleges. When she's not writing, reading, researching, or teaching, you'll likely find her on the river or in the woods.

Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including the *South Dakota Review*, *Meridian*, *New Letters*, *Diagram*, and the *Colorado Review*. Demaree is the author of six poetry collections, most recently *Many Full Hands Applauding Inelegantly* (8th House Publishing, 2016). Darren is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and *Ovenbird Poetry*. He currently lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and children.

Laura Dennis has been published in various anthologies, including, *Tranquility* from Kind of a Hurricane Press, *Home and Away* from House of Blue Skies and *Love Notes* from Vagabond Press. She also has two self-published chapbooks entitled *Wheels on the Bus* and *The Bookshelf*. She has been published in a number of online magazines. She is one of the 2014 winners of Friends of the University Hospitals poetry contest and is a part of the Sidewalk Poetry in Callingwood Park, both in her home of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Rachel Edford is currently an English faculty member at Seminole State College of Florida. She has published critical articles on American poetry and science studies and a piece of creative nonfiction in *The Mayo Review*. Prior to working as a faculty member, she was employed as a librarian and archivist in Michigan and Washington DC.

Dom Fonce is an undergrad English major at Youngstown State University. He's been published in fiction, poetry, comics, and journalism. Some of his work can be found at *Calliope* of the University of Mount Union, *Penguin Review*, *the Jambar*, and the forthcoming summer 2017 issue of *3Elements Review*. Collaborated with Vincent Butka (penciller), Jared Burton (inker and colorist), and Kaleena Spackman (letterer).

Leah Givens has provided photographs for the covers of *The Colored Lens*, *Existere* and *Penduline Press*, among other literary magazines. Her photography has been exhibited in Georgia, Missouri, and New Mexico. Her education is primarily in medicine; she received her M.D. from Washington University in St. Louis and has worked in medical research.

Roberta Gould lives in the Hudson Valley, studies ants, and has taught Romance languages. Her work has appeared widely in poetry journals over the years, and she is the author of 11 poetry books, the last three: *Pacing the Wind* (Shivistan Press), *Louder than Seed* (Foot Hills Publishing), and *To the Dogs* (Flame Tree Press), favorably reviewed by XJ Kennedy, Home Planet News, Lit Mag, and Compulsive Reader. Her website is robertagould.net

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *New Plains Review*, *Stillwater Review*, and *Big Muddy Review*, with work upcoming in *Louisiana Review*, *Columbia College Literary Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Ben Groner III (Nashville, TN), recipient of Texas A&M University's 2014 Gordone Award for undergraduate poetry, has work published in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Third Wednesday*, *New Mexico Review*, *Fourth & Sycamore*, *Texas Poetry Calendar*, and elsewhere.

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *Bay Area Poets' Coalition*, *The University of Texas Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Piedmont Journal of Poetry*, and a number of other on-line and in print poetry magazines over the years, many of which are probably kaput by now, given the high mortality rate of poetry magazines.

Ed Higgins' poems and short fiction have appeared in various print and online journals including recently: *Peacock Journal*, *Uut Poetry*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, and *Tigershark Magazine*, among others. Ed teaches literature at George Fox University, south of Portland, OR, and is Asst. Fiction Editor for Ireland-based *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. He and his wife live on a small organic farm in Yamhill, OR, where they raise a menagerie of animals including a pair of Bourbon Red turkeys (King Strut and Nefra-Turkey), and an alpaca named Machu-Picchu.

Hailey Hudson is a creative writing major who is deeply passionate about stories. She's a proud INFJ and a prouder Ravenclaw; when she's not writing or reading, she also enjoys playing softball and spending time with her family in the foothills of North Georgia.

Mark Hudson is an Illinois poet and artist, who spends most of his time writing and doing art. He has a degree in creative writing from Columbia College, in Chicago, and has been published many times in-print, on-line, and internationally. To check out his poetry on the web go to Illinoispoets.org.

James Croal Jackson is the author of *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Rust + Moth*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and elsewhere. He has won the William Redding Memorial Poetry Contest and has been a finalist for the Princemere Poetry Prize. Find him in Columbus, Ohio or at jimjakk.com.

Leland James is the author of four books of poetry and a book on poetry craft. He has published over 200 poems in journals and magazines worldwide including *The Lyric*, *Form Quarterly*; *Rattle*, *The SOUTH CAROLINA REVIEW*; *THE SPOON RIVER POETRY REVIEW*; *NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS*; *HQ The Haiku Quarterly*, and *The London Magazine*. He was the winner of The UK's *Aesthetica* Creative Writing Award, The Little Red Tree International Poetry Prize, and the *Writer's Forum* short poem contest. He has received honors in many others competitions and was recently nominated for a Push Cart Prize. www.lelandjamespoet.com.

Ingrid Jendrzewski started writing flash fiction in 2014 and has since found homes for around 100 pieces in places such as *Passages North*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Blue Five Notebook*, *The Conium Review*, and *Jellyfish Review*. Her short collection, *THINGS I DREAM ABOUT WHEN I'M NOT SLEEPING*, was a runner-up for BFFA's first Novella-in-Flash competition and will be published later this summer. She is currently a flash fiction editor at JMWW. Links to Ingrid's work can be found at www.ingridj.com and she tweets @LunchOnTuesday.

With a B.A. in English from Duke University and a M.A. in Communications from USC, Sarah Key has enjoyed word-work as an art book editor, cookbook author, poet, essayist, and teacher. With numerous poems in journals from *Poet Lore* to *Tuesday; An Art Project* and inclusion in two poetry anthologies, she has studied poetry at the Frost Place, Cave Canem, and the 92nd Street Y. Also, she has eight essays on the *Huffington Post*. Her favorite teachers are the students she tutors at a community college in the Bronx.

Rosaleen Lynch, an Irish community worker and writer, lives and works in the East End of London. A keen writer of fiction, including poetry, short stories, scripts, and a novel in progress. Non-fiction writing has included essays and research for an MA and blog articles. Visual art is a developing interest with illustration and photography for blogging and online projects and as a medium of story.

Stephanie Maldonado's writing is best described as free versed and for the soul. She writes to help others understand and express their own feelings. Her goal is to inspire and heal as many people as she possible. She works towards this by participating in many monthly writing challenges and publishing some of her work on theprose.com.

Thomas Maurstad was the pop culture critic of the Dallas Morning News for over 20 years. Since his release back into the wild in 2011, he is endeavoring to create ambitious, compelling fiction. In a frying pan/fire conundrum, Maurstad has discovered that his two-plus decades of professional writing have a current market value of zero-point-zero in the book publishing industry. Apparently, as a young man with an urgent but unshaped drive to write, he should have chosen student loans and an MFA writing program rather than odd jobs and journalism as his response to the existential challenge of how to subsidize his development as a writer. In the words of his patron saint of recovering journalist-novelists, (KV Jr.) 'So it goes.'

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*, *Blueline*, and *Halcyon Days*, *Three Bright Hills Press Anthologies*, several *Poppy Road Review Journals*, and numerous *Kind of A Hurricane Press Publications* have accepted her work. Her latest title is *Having Lunch with the Sky*. And she has four Best of the Net nominations.

Jesse Minkert lives in Seattle. In 2008, Wood Works Press published his collection of microstories, *Shortness of Breath & Other Symptoms*. His work has appeared in about fifty journals. Finishing Line Press will release his collection, *Rookland*, in 2017. He is a 2016 Pushcart nominee.

Wilda Morris, a past president of Illinois State Poetry Society, is workshop chair of Poets & Patrons of Chicago. She has won awards for free verse, formal poetry, and haiku. She leads poetry workshops for children and for adults. Wilda's book, *Szechwan Shrimp and Fortune Cookies: Poems from a Chinese Restaurant*, was published by RWG Press. Her poems have found homes in many publications including *BorderSenses*, *About Place Journal*, and *After Hours*. Her Poetry Challenge at <http://wildamorris.blogspot.com/> features a monthly poetry contest for other poets.

Brian Orth holds an MFA from Wichita State University and works part time as assistant editor of Tell Tell Poetry. His poems have appeared in *Bayou*, *Broadsided Press*, *Cutthroat*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on his first collection, *The Year of the Pallbearer*.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Osiris Poems* published by box of chalk, 2017. For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

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Every now and then, Tim Philippart writes some prose or poetry. Once in a while, someone likes it. He sold his business in 2015 and, now, is learning to write. Contact him at timphilippart@gmail.com.

Meg Reynolds is a poet, artist, and teacher living in Burlington, VT. She holds her BA in English and Arts and Visual Culture from Bates College and her MFA in poetry from Stonecoast at the University of Southern Maine. Her work has been published in *Pine Street Poets* and *Pomeroy Street Poets* Anthologies through Honeybee Press as well as *Gravel Journal*, *Prelude Journal*, *Wildage Press*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and the anthology *Monster Verse: Poems Human and Inhuman*. She is the co-director of writinginsideVT, an organization that offers supportive writing instruction at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in Burlington, VT.

John Timothy Robinson is a traditional citizen and graduate of the Marshall University Creative Writing program in Huntington, West Virginia with a Regent's Degree. He has an interest in Critical Theory of poetry and American Formalism. John is also a twelve-year educator for Mason County Schools in Mason County, WV. He strives for a poetics similar to Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, James Wright, Louis Simpson, Gallway Kinnell and Robert Bly, though enjoys learning from intrinsic poets and their theories in the critical writings of Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Kostelanetz. John is currently working on a creative dissertation in contemporary poetry, though outside the university environment. His work has appeared in and forthcoming in *Blue Collar Review*, *Kestrel*, *California Quarterly*, *Ship of Fools*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, *Wild Violet Magazine*, *POEM*, *Ibbetson Street Press*, *The Iconoclast*, *Pulsar Poetry Magazine*, *The Society of Classical Poets.org*, *The South Carolina Review*, *A Time of Singing*, *ThePoetryShed.com*, *The Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poetry*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Pinyon Poetry Review*, *Ancient Paths*, *The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy*, *Westward Quarterly*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *naturewriting.com*, *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, *South Poetry Magazine*, *Glassworks Magazine*, *The Lyric*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Red River Review*, *Nebo*, and *The Olivetree Review*.

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Kaleena Spackman, letterer of *The Book Harvest*.

Ethel Stirman is a 64 year-old wife, mother, and grandmother. In her time, she has worked as a metallurgical chemist, run a small retail business, and taught English in a secondary school, ending her working life as a consultant for Durham Local Authority. Her interests include local history and heritage, lawn bowls, reading, and writing. She belongs to Easington Writers and to Hartlepool Writers and has contributed stories and poetry to several ventures. She is now working on her first novel.

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