

Cover Art by Claudia Wysocky



Ascendancy Vol. 1
ascendancymagazine.wixsite.com
[Ascendancy.bsky.social](https://ascendancy.bsky.social)
x.com/AscendancyMag

All works herein published in this edition belong to their respective authors, artists, poets, and creators. Ascendancy has reserved the right to publish these pieces with the consent of their creators, and does not take credit for their work. All publication rights have reverted to the creators upon the publication of this edition of Ascendancy, and all prior publications have been credited to their respective publisher at the end of this volume. This is a collaboration of many individuals to create something fantastic, wonderful, and new - but please respect the individuals that contributed to this.

Ascendancy - No. 1

Summer 2025

ASCENDENCY

No. 1

SUMMER 2025



Cover Art by Claudia Wysocky

Fonts used are Spectral and Times New Roman



Ascendancy Vol. 1

ascendancymagazine.wixsite.com

[Ascendancy.bsky.social](https://ascendancy.bsky.social)

x.com/AscendancyMag

All works herein published in this edition belong to their respective authors, artists, poets, and creators. Ascendancy has reserved the right to publish these pieces with the consent of their creators, and does not take credit for their work.

All publication rights have reverted to the creators upon the publication of this edition of Ascendancy, and all prior publications have been credited to their respective publisher at the end of this volume.

This is a collaboration of many individuals to create something fantastic, wonderful, and new - but please respect the individuals that contributed to this.

Masthead

Lauren “Prophet” Girod

Editor-in-Chief

Jamie Dicello

Social Media Manager

Jason Hawkins

Submissions Reader & Editor

Nico Houser

Submissions Reader & Editor

Morgan Shaver

Submissions Reader & Editor

Lauren “Prophet” Girod is a poet, artist, author, and narrative designer who received her BA in English from the University of Georgia with the intent to pursue further education in the study of video games. She serves as the current editor-in-chief for *Ascendency*. Her poetry has previously appeared in *Stillpoint*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *The Crawfish*, *Bardics Anonymous*, and *45th Parallel*. Her poem *I AM THE DEER AND THE DEER IS ME* was named an honorable mention for the 2024 Virginia Rucker Walter Poetry Prize. Her art has been in *Creative License* and on the cover of *Polishing Cloth*. When not scrying the realms of the internet, she can be found cuddling her cat and several leopard geckos. She can be contacted here: oracle.carrd.co

Jamie Dicello is a recent graduate of the University of Georgia with a bachelor's degree in English. She has had her poetry published in various literary magazines, and has presented her academic work at previous conferences - most recently at the 2025 *International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* with her work of *Fairy Tales and Fear: The Power of Identity in Delia Sherman's The Evil Wizard Smallbone*. She can be found in her personally curated library, connecting the dots to seemingly improbable curiosities and theories.

Jason Hawkins is a Creative Writing MFA Candidate and K. Leroy Irvis Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh with a genre focus of poetry. He received his Bachelor's in English with a minor in Japanese at the University of Georgia in 2024 as a Foundation Fellow. His poetry has been published in several magazines and his poem, *NIGHTSCAPE*, was an honorary mention in the 2024 Virginia Rucker Walter Poetry Prize. When he is not writing, he can be found discussing and appreciating the social commentary of Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale*.

Nico Houser is a recent graduate from the University of Georgia with a double major in Criminal Justice and English with a focus of Creative Writing and Medieval Studies. He is currently attending the University of Tennessee for his Masters in Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies. His work has previously appeared online and in print, with his genre of choice as fiction. He is open to all forms and appreciates the detail that others can weave within their writing. When he isn't writing fantastic works of fiction, he can be found going into depth about the intricacies of *Beowulf* with an ice cold Diet Coke.

Morgan Shaver is a recent graduate from the University of Georgia with a degree in English and an emphasis in Creative Writing. She has worked on several projects benefiting counties in the surrounding area of Athens, Georgia in the government and historical restoration sector. When she isn't studying poetry, she can be found with her family and her cat, Squidward.

Editor's Note

Dearest Reader,

Ascendancy was founded by myself and other (now) graduates from the University of Georgia with one goal in mind: creating a literary magazine to support fellow writers, poets, and artists alike.

It hasn't been an easy journey, and like this volume - filled with firsts. Having to learn the ins-and-outs of a literary magazine from start to finish has been nothing short of trial and error, and I personally appreciate every single person that submitted to us. Even if your piece wasn't a fit for this edition, I personally read every single word and took it in. So did our lovely assortment of people involved on the staff - we read, talked, discussed, and fought with deadlines to make this magazine work and finally reach print. I won't say it was straightforward either. I've learned so much of what it means to work on a magazine considering I've only ever submitted to them in the past, and this experience has been humbling and gives another level of appreciation to the ones that I and others on staff submit to.

In this collection, you will read stories from all across the world about firsts. Poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and art - all experiencing something for the first time, learning what it means to be a human experiencing human emotions and memories. Debuts, moments in the morning, preludes and first chapters. The old and the new. Published and unpublished.

Through trial-and-error and a variety of firsts, we've reached the point where you are reading this curated collection of pieces now.

That deserves its own thank you, reader. Thank you for taking the time to download the PDF or purchasing a copy to hold in your hands. Thank you for engaging with the numerous contributors and their pieces as we encourage you to seek them out and read their other works. Thank you for your support of the literary arts in a time when literacy is in jeopardy. Thank you for reading this.

Now, please enjoy the debut volume of *Ascendancy*. I and the others on staff hope you enjoy the beautiful collection before you. I hope you continue writing, reading, and ascending your own work.

Until our paths cross again,

Lauren "Prophet" Girod

Editor-in-Chief

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lauren', with a small smiley face drawn above the end of the signature.

Table of Contents

<i>Bud</i> by Cendrine Marrouat	pg. 6
<i>Prelude</i> by Madeleine Schneider	pg. 7
<i>WINTER DAWN</i> by Carol Coven Grannick	pg. 10
<i>Living My Protagonist Life</i> by Annelies Mohle	pg. 10
[unnamed haiku] by Amber Deamer	pg. 10
<i>100,000 Moments of the Life of XXX</i> by TK Hudson	pg. 11
<i>INSOMNIA</i> by Laura Cesarco Eglin	pg. 14
<i>Queen Bee</i> by Mahailie Griffith	pg. 14
<i>Praying to Sing Your Saddest Song</i> by Mahailie Griffith	pg. 15
<i>MAYBE MY FIRST CONVERSATION WITH MY MOTHER</i> by Carol Coven Grannick	pg. 15
<i>First Nephew</i> by John Swofford	pg. 16
<i>That Tightly Knotted Thing</i> by Andrew Reichard	pg. 17
<i>So What</i> by CJ the Tall Poet	pg. 26
<i>Under Construction</i> by Rowan Tate	pg. 26
<i>I MAKE ROOM FOR FIGURING OUT</i> by Laura Cesarco Eglin	pg. 27
<i>When Waiting is the Best Part</i> by Mahailie Griffith	pg. 27
<i>The Music Begins</i> by Erick Giovanni Monrrigo	pg. 28
<i>heart of the poet</i> by a. d.	pg. 42
<i>conception</i> by a. d.	pg. 43
<i>Breakup and Put Together</i> by Mahailie Griffith	pg. 44
<i>First Kiss</i> by Rowan Tate	pg. 45
<i>A meddlesome middle</i> by Akhila Kumaran	pg. 45
<i>If Time is Precious</i> by Christian Contreras	pg. 45
<i>Before Sunset</i> by Chelsea Allen	pg. 46
<i>Infinite Rise</i> by Ben Nardolilli	pg. 48
<i>A Dream</i> by Ramzi Albert Rihani	pg. 48
<i>Untitled</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 49
<i>Notes on Dressing for a Dance That Never Starts</i> by Rowan Tate	pg. 50
<i>Spotlight</i> by Simon Kaeppli	pg. 51
<i>(SOMEWHERE OUT OF SIGHT)</i> by Rick K. Reut	pg. 52
<i>It</i> by TK Hudson	pg. 54
<i>Do firsts always feel this quiet?</i> By Akhila Kumaran	pg. 59
<i>SOME KIND OF BIRTH</i> by Carol Coven Grannick	pg. 59
<i>The Freak Hope</i> by Ben Nardolilli	pg. 59
<i>Goodnight Grandma, I Love You</i> by Alex Mason	pg. 60

<i>Beginning Again</i> by Nathan Perrin	pg. 76
<i>We All Know</i> by Amber Deamer	pg. 77
<i>FOR GOOD MEASURE</i> by Laura Cesarco Eglin	pg. 77
<i>Untitled</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 78
<i>On My Morning Subway Commute, I think of Ensenada, Mexico</i> by Sean Sutherland	pg. 79
<i>LINEARITY</i> by Laura Cesarco Eglin	pg. 80
<i>The Good News</i> by Terry Trowbridge	pg. 82
<i>Adronitis</i> by Devahuti Chaliha	pg. 83
<i>Wormy Squirmy</i> by BJ Thoray	pg. 84
<i>renascence</i> by a. d.	pg. 101
<i>Life</i> by Ramzi Albert Rihani	pg. 101
<i>(BY AN ABANDONED ARCADE)</i> by Rick K. Reut	pg. 102
<i>Unfinished Exit</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 103
<i>Untitled</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 105
<i>The Volcano</i> by Sean Sutherland	pg. 106
<i>heartbreak for beginners</i> by Sarah (Ember) Bricault	pg. 107
<i>Soot</i> by Mann Sy Tha	pg. 109
<i>Imagine your world</i> by Sarah (Ember) Bricault	pg. 114
<i>adayinthecity25</i> by Edward Supranowicz	pg. 115
<i>Finding My Voice</i> by John Swofford	pg. 116
<i>God, As We Understand Him</i> by Nathan Perrin	pg. 117
<i>Clay</i> by Rowan Tate	pg. 118
<i>L'usurpateur</i> by Chelsea Allen	pg. 119
<i>Emerging Adulthood</i> by Rowan Tate	pg. 120
<i>Untitled</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 121
<i>Good that I don't remember being born</i> by Akhila Kumaran	pg. 122
<i>SOMEDAY MY BEES WILL COME TOO</i> by Annelies Mohle	pg. 122
<i>Someone Searches for How the Story's Ending Arrived</i> by Sean Sutherland	pg. 123
<i>imitation of grief</i> by Fray Narte	pg. 124
<i>First Line</i> by Paul Hostovsky	pg. 125
<i>Untitled</i> by Claudia Wysocky	pg. 126
<hr/>	
Author Biographies	pg. 127
Prior Accreditations	pg. 133



Bud by
Cendrine
Marrouat

Prelude by Madeleine Schneider

My alarm chirps at 8:15 after eleven hours of repose. The hotel curtains are pulled tight, with only a faint glow sneaking underneath. I'm still not entirely convinced that it's morning. My body insists that I'm seeing a trick of the city lights, that the world outside is quiet, that I still belong in bed.

My mind is a bit louder. It says *get up. It's time to start your day. It's time to start your life.*

I push the blankets down, rubbing away the crust from my eyes. Stumbling through the darkness, I reach the window. I'm forced to squint as I pull back the curtains to blue skies and a bustling day.

Below me is a new city, a new country, an entirely different continent from home. Opposite my window, I see the backside of an old church: stone walled, proud, positively European. Perhaps not that grand in the scheme of old-time buildings, but I take a picture and send it to my mom. She won't be awake for several hours.

Beyond the church, my new home awaits me. It's... somewhere. I'm too disoriented and directionally challenged to know if I'm facing the right way, but I have the address stored in my phone. I just need to collect my things, finish getting ready, and call a car.

The new flat is a couple miles from the hotel. *Flat* because there are no *apartments* here, also fewer *hellos* and *thank yous*. How long until I can say *hiya* and *ta* with a straight face?

Downstairs are new friends, the unspoken expectation that we'll become best friends, four American women with two years of adventure ahead. There will be degrees in the end, but I'm confident that those pieces of paper won't represent the true source of our education.

In the hotel lobby I find my companions looking equally sleepy and bright eyed, a contradiction, but the truth for all of us.

For me, the trepidation that I felt yesterday, waiting for my late airport departure, waiting to leave my family, my friends, my childhood bedroom, it's gone. In its place, I feel only amazement. I am in awe of the Scottish brogue that I hear all around me, my native language but somehow unfamiliar. This is a world just slightly different from my own: floor numbers starting at zero, looking the opposite direction when crossing the street, *c* where I expect an *s* and *ou* where I'd only write an *o*. Ahead of me, an unusual hotel buffet.

I construct a mountainous plate of Scottish breakfast: baked beans and fried eggs, tattie scones and grilled tomatoes. Vegetarian haggis? Sure, I'll try it.

The four of us chat about the week ahead. We'll check into our separate student housing and attend our initial program orientations. There will be welcome events to enjoy and areas of the city to explore. We'll meet up later to share notes on opening bank accounts and registering with the NHS.

The breakfast is hearty, filling our bellies with the first taste of Scotland. The coffee and tea drain toward empty, and our conversation shifts to hotel checkout.

Two of us will walk towards City Center, to the bustle of the Royal Mile and the student-filled streets near George Square. The third has a train to catch, traveling to another Scottish city altogether. We pencil in a weekend to visit her soon.

I spin my phone in circles trying to orient my blue dot. I'll be heading North, towards the waters of the firth.

My luggage is piled around me: two bags weighing just under the 40-pound, Norwegian-Airway maximum; a carry-on with a wheel that frequently sticks; and a backpack filled to bursting. I watch the car icon on my phone creep through city traffic. Picking up my bags much earlier than necessary, I almost topple over trying to squeeze through the sliding doors.

"You okay, Lass?" A man asks, offering his help.

My cheeks go red; although not because I'd nearly fallen. *He just called me Lass!* I want to giggle but manage to keep a straight face. Assuring him that I'm fine, I rotate my body and push through the doorway once more.

With a yank on my trailing suitcase, I burst onto the sidewalk. The sticky wheel jumps as it hits the cobblestone street. My lungs expand, taking in the yeasted scent of fresh oatcakes. The sunshine sparkles against Her Majesty's crown, embossed on a red royal postbox.

My car arrives a minute later, and the driver hurries to help me with my bags.

Edinburgh is welcoming me.

WINTER DAWN by Carol Coven Grannick

Winter dawn! surprising
as she covers herself
in purple-grey
shadowing naked tree shapes
bouncing slow-motion
as if in morning stretches
behind a curtain of moonlight haze:
surprising winter dawn.

Living My Protagonist Life by Annelies Mohle

Living my protagonist life.

I find myself securely in the epilogue.

It is January first,
and snow falls gently outside.

My husband comes by the couch,
to ask how the writing is going,
to kiss me on the forehead.

Yes, this is my happily ever after.

[unnamed haiku] by Amber Deamer

Early morning--

needles in my blanket

--cat's face.

100,000 Moments of the Life of XXX by TK Hudson

Introduction

Writing biographical material for anyone is a strict, and often painful, lesson in concision. Which moments in a life do you elucidate? Which do you mention only briefly? Which not at all? A life and its constituent moments are inextricably linked together, wound tightly. Thus, the biographer's dilemma.

The first step is research. One cannot write, certainly not credibly, likely not intelligibly, about a subject one does not know well. (Many of my colleagues, and legions of their admirers and readers, would disagree with that stricture.) It might begin mainly as a passing interest, of course, but serious writing (without erroneous mistake or incredible invention) requires serious research.

Next comes compilation and arrangement, an effort some might consider simple: Life begins at zero, ticks up, and ends, and should be written so. But any life is a series of interrelated events. One leads to another, in a cascade. Can you, for example, say that the beautiful, contrived, delightful writings of James Tiptree Jr. had nothing to do with her fear of sexual intimacy? Or that Alice Bradley's fear of sexual intimacy had nothing to do with a sexual advance by her mother on a return trip from Switzerland, or from her disastrous, and possibly abusive, first marriage? You see? Though Alice was always an artist, her writing, with its unique voice and style, might have taken a different tack if not for these events.

The life of such a person as XXX provides a similar challenge as Ms. Bradley, or any life of an excellent, extraordinary person.

Should I dig into their role in the Nixon Administration? Their implication in (and later exoneration from) the Watergate Scandal?

What about their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, how they persuaded certain political leaders and thinkers not to dismiss the whole movement out of hand?

The influence they had on artists of all kinds? Harlan Ellison wrote extensively about them. (Look closely, you'll find it.) Pablo Picasso made a beautiful sketch of them. (Sadly, the sketch was lost in a flooded basement in 2008.) Several pop and punk bands dedicated songs to them.

Each of these moments is relevant to the story of XXX. The story would not be truly complete if these moments were left out. But how much weight to give each moment. A chapter each? Even chapters of modest length would make this biography prohibitively long. (Clear two shelves on the bookcase, ma, I just bought a new book!)

A sentence, then. But if each sentence were ten words long (and that would be doing a criminal injustice to the life of anyone you might care to read a biography about, let alone XXX) that would be one million words, not including front and back matter. To put that into perspective, an epic fantasy novel tends to be around two-hundred thousand words. Imagine five of those stitched together, providing, at best, a brief summary of the plot of the novel: That is what a sentence each would be.

Even an itemized list, bulleted chronologically, using between three and seven words each could result in a volume as thick as the King James Bible. (Now, there's an idea. Two columns of text.) But, again, this would result in little, if no, more than a synopsis—the Cliffs Notes of a life, not the life itself.

So I, the biographer in question, made the artistic decision to include, at moderate length only, only the moments in the life of XXX which, to my mind, had a great and lasting impact on their life. Certainly I could, and perhaps will, write a separate volume, chronicling the life of XXX, from the view of the impact had on external change. But this biography—the internal—must come first.

So here it is: 100,000 (relevant) Moments in the Life of XXX.

Born Dec 3, 1933, Cyprus Bend, Iowa, to family of marginal, if sporadic, wealth. 9 lbs., 3oz. 16 inches. Named after paternal grandfather & maternal uncle (family favorite).

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

100,000. Died Oct 13, 2014, in family home in Cyprus Bend, Iowa, of tuberculosis (preventable but for distrust of vaccinations). Buried in family plot in Green Hill Cemetery, funeral attended by family and close friends. Contents of will not disclosed.

INSOMNIA by Laura Cesarco Eglin

It's 9 o'clock on a Monday and Tuesday
still seems far away. Breathing for
dreams
to help with deciphering
hours as a relative concept;
how long things last
as more
tangible. Understanding
through touch.

It's 9 o'clock on a Monday and Tuesday
resembles more time—a blur when one
day and the next, entangled for those
that live the night as
nouns, like hours
and smaller divisions:
beginning, middle or end.

Queen Bee by Mahallie Griffith

I felt the sting that comes with life experience.
A sweet girl in a sticky situation

So I built myself a strong exoskeleton.
Had a moment to run the colony and be the queen.

But what you learn later on is,
No matter how much stronger the hive,
When they're ready to move on
They kill her.

Praying to Sing Your Saddest Song by Mahallie Griffith

Pretty girl from a pretty world.

I wish that I could be more like you,
With a carefree finger that twists in a strand of sunlit hair.
Someone who's saddest song I would do anything to sing.

I'm not like you:
I don't see any high roads because I've been knocked too far below.
I'm in the shadows now.

Never had anything to fall back on.
Just a lifetime of rickety waves,
Situations that went in the worst of ways
A lot of shit that has made me not okay.

So I don't take risks. It's hard for me to live a radiant life.
I have to pocket all my sunshine for the baddest days.
Because they keep on coming.

MAYBE MY FIRST CONVERSATION WITH MY MOTHER
by Carol Coven Grannick

The rare event of conversation true and told
happened days before her death
unmoving and with eyes alone
she spoke of fear and need.
Unmoving and silent I heard her—
I don't want to die!—as they dove into my own
the delicate tangled ancient thread between us
loosened, whispered itself around melded hands.
I never told her what she did not give me.
I never said *Not good enough. Not right. Not love.*
Why would I, when the same grey fear held us close
for the very first time?



First Nephew by John Swofford

That Tightly Knotted Thing by Andrew Reichard

They were given a table that was reserved for someone else and told to keep an eye on the bar for spaces to open up. “If you don’t mind moving,” had said the hostess. “But you have until 7:30 before you’ll have to.”

Two menus were brought, and Casey was left in the center of the long, crowded room, the physical weight of their present singleness, their singled outness. Firing glances at the door, the bar, they tried to turn their chair an hour clockwise so that they could at least cross their legs to form a position of insouciant and unmistakably feminine dash in their sheer tights. But the chair didn’t budge, and so unprepared were they for this second surprise that they felt to have come right up to the point of having strained something in shoulder or back.

The light-loosening buzz of a drink could not possibly come soon enough. *Compose your posture, Casey dear!* What to do with their arms and eyes was a puzzle that their phone solved only long enough to reconfirm that Lydia had said she was on her way: her message of ten minutes ago. But they didn’t know how far she had to go or by what means through a city that was, to her, unfamiliar.

That very unfamiliarity was the most familiar thing of all, thought Casey. It wasn’t hard to remember the winded feeling of moving to a place where you knew no one, not even yourself. Of unpacking what little you had in an apartment you were seeing for the first time and far too quickly finished to turn pacing about the floors at an unusual hour, far from sleep, wondering why everything from floor creaks to distant sirens seemed hostile, personal, and why it was so important to plan out every detail of the following day and to absorb yourself in street-view maps, your anxiety crinkling in your head like the sound of someone digging

through tissue paper. And the ethereal, fatigued anonymity of *les jours d'après*, as if you'd come unlocked from reality, foreign to place and to self, like a stray streak of light.

It was from such sustained agitation—wherein they could do nothing and everything, even both at once, but nothing more moderate—that Casey had found that heedless sort of courage to step out on the street in a dress for the first time, their heart fluttering between fear and fascination, face a mask, screaming inside of themselves over the city-din to accept accept *accept*. Accept, they told themselves at every step: accept the thing as it is. Don't lie, especially not to yourself or to the spirit within you. After all, it was because of the Spirit. Because of that spirit that anything was possible, that everything that existed was meant to exist. The depth of that knowledge, and yet oh how useless language was! Even within oneself, to oneself, comprehension, *belief*, was wordless or it wasn't at all. He'd...they'd had something of these inexpressible thoughts at times before, stumbling here and there inside themselves, their resolve, their certainty—becoming fluid between the fixed lanes of openness and closedness, the currents pressing upon their features and gait—mentally stumbling at every second glance from every passerby whom they wanted to postpone on their way to wherever and make this one root thing immaculately clear: how useless a thing was language, you couldn't hope to communicate a single word in all its possibility. And no amount of words did justice to any form of reality. And it wasn't just then, when everything was still so new (the dress too, which was long and beautiful, printed with large white flowers over a deep purple background); they'd had this thought before, many times over, not essentially as a repeated proverb, a mantra, but as something that accumulates, taking on new phonics and layers each time it was brought to light.

They'd had no destination (that first time with the dress) in this new city, so they'd followed a providential sign to a park and sat on the edge of a bench, waiting for something to happen. Lots of people had passed by. The weather was resplendent, a light breeze. Pigeons lost interest in things. Eventually, goaded by the discomfort in their lower back, they stood up, self-consciously straightened the hem about their shins, and waded, as through a stream, back to the apartment, conscious of their sweat, their gait, the position of their wrists. The strangest thing of all—they'd thought later, with relief—was that no words had been exchanged with anyone.

"Excuse me?"

Casey was almost out of the seat before the waiter had asked them to move. Thankful, now, that the chairs were immobile (weird as that was), or they might have sent theirs crashing. They were made to understand, through their apologies, that two places at the bar had opened up.

"Oh, yes. Thank you." They could see the stools and were ready to be taken over.

"Your tote—can I get you started on anything?"

"Oh, thanks, yes." Turning to retrieve their handbag from where it was hanging from the chair they'd just left to find Lydia there.

"Casey, hello."

If they were speechless for a moment, stiff in an already formal embrace, it was merely because of the uneven stride of life, the thoughts of a moment ago swept away. Their need to rehearse every encounter was so often irreconcilable with life as it came upon them, and this at times seemed unfair.

“You look well,” said Lydia. By contrast to Casey’s befuddlement, she looked as though she’d been here a dozen times. Changes in light didn’t dazzle her. Dark rooms didn’t stop her in her tracks.

“You’re nice to say so. So do you.”

“Give us a moment, please. We’ll order soon.” Strangers didn’t astonish her with direct attention. She had on a three-quarter-sleeve jacket with unbuttoned cuffs over full-sleeve tattoos. Last time Casey had seen her, only one arm had been full.

“Did you have any trouble finding the place?”

“The Uber guy didn’t.”

“I haven’t done a lot of exploring myself, but I’ve been here a few times with...”

Casey was just now seeing how the establishment might have been a rung or two upscale for the purposes of welcoming an acquaintance—a friend of a friend, really—to a city they were far from familiar with themselves.

“What are they known for?”

“The G and T, I’m told.”

The waiter must have fancied his eye caught, and he moved up behind them where they sat at the end of the bar, standing closer to Lydia and speaking to her in a very different way.

Drinks ordered, waiter shooed, she turned purposefully to Casey and looked them in the eye. “Eve told me—”

“About my pronouns?” That, they had rehearsed.

“Yes,” she said, somehow conveying that there was nothing to explain if there was no desire to explain.

For the first time since entering the restaurant—maybe for the first time since arriving in this city—Casey felt that tightly-wound thing inside of them begin to relax. Lydia looked directly at them, ignoring the commotion, the maraca descant of the drink shaker, and Casey remembered an idea they'd come away from sleep with that morning or the one before—at some point a quiet insistence settled on them to let go of the idea that they could ever *get to the bottom of things*.

Lost in the spiraling tattoos on her nearest arm, Casey said, "Since you brought up Genevieve, I guess I can ask how she's doing?"

"Right," said Lydia. "I suppose we should get her out of the way."

The loosening retightened.

"I was the one who broke it off, so I suppose you can be mad at me, if you want. I know you two are close. I am aware that she's heartbroken, but she's also dramatic and will survive." At once, Lydia relented, and a laugh fled from her like a startled raven. "It was hard. Genevieve is a dear one." This time, the laugh was more genuine. "I know that sounded just like her; don't say it."

"I wouldn't," grinned Casey.

"But you know how it's impossible to be around her without starting to sound like her?"

"You don't have to tell me. I was completely under her spell!"

"Yea. Spell-binding. She was that." Lydia's hand had gone to one of the tattoos on her arm, near the elbow.

Gently, Casey: "But we shouldn't talk about her as if..."

"She's on the other side of the country?"

“I’m sorry; I should not have—”

“But she’s not why I’m here either. I mean living here. She’s not why I moved.”

Casey was about to ask about Lydia’s job, which Genevieve had referenced vaguely in her text to him, but was interrupted.

“Now, can I ask again: how should I refer to you? God, I just thought of it: your name is still Casey?”

They smiled. “Casey, happily, is a perfectly gender-neutral name. My enby friends are jealous. I-uh don’t know any of them in person,” they added, feeling that brutal loyalty to perfect truthfulness. “Anyway, I’m happy with ‘he’ or ‘they,’ anything like that.”

The drinks were brought.

Lydia turned to him, the reflexive smile she’d given the waiter fading. “But you prefer ‘they.’”

“If you’re comfortable with it.”

“You don’t have to be that accommodating.”

“I do if I want to get along.”

“But not with me.” Lydia, in the way she sipped her gin, with her mosaic elbow on the bar, gave an impression of such overwhelming solidity that Casey felt their heart expanding.

“There’s just a lot I feel like I have to explain to get to that point,” they said, eyes somewhat stinging.

Lydia asked what point.

What point? But now that Casey had said it, they didn’t really know. The point where there was no longer too much to say, no longer the weight of having not said it nor the

feeling of having to catch up with everything. The point where the honesty of a thing was no longer in question, its reality given, its sincerity evident, its uncertainty accepted. But they knew that there was no such thing as coming out on the other side of anything. How to explain? How to explain? And, first of all, why? Why this need to explain themselves? Casey was keenly aware of being within a process wherein the process itself was the point, a kind of perpetual threshold from which there was no ingress, egress, there was just everything that existed in a life, which was a process. But how could they compete with the platitudinous folk tunes, the nostalgia for antique filament light bulbs over their heads? How could they compete with their own *tote*? How could they compete by means of words added on top of one another, the inexpressibility of inexpressible thoughts? The more honest Casey was, the more intricate and tangled they became. *Sometimes I wish I hadn't ever learned anything about it or how to begin talking about it. I mean, not that I really know how to talk about it now, but I know the language, the right words, the ones that are acceptable...? And I use them too and then I always wonder if they're right or if there's better ones. It's better not to question it, right? But then I think that it was better when I was questioning. It was the questioning that drove me and the not-quite knowing, you know? Before I'd made any conclusions about it or tried to put it into words. I know it's absurd, but I sometimes think if only I could live in that state all the time. I know; it's absurd. It would absolutely be the death of me. But I must have loved those days when some deep place inside of me suspected something and was looking all over but I hadn't seen it yet. I was afraid of my shadow in those days. It was funny. I'd look in the mirror and go pale with horror because I knew. But I didn't know what I knew. And I must have loved it too, already knowing that I should trust it even though I was suspicious of everything, and overwhelmed. Then I'd already learned to*

accept it even before I knew that I had. But then once I realized I had, I wondered if I should, and so on and so forth.

At some point in the tonic-interpolated evening, Lydia had said: “You just want to be as you are. I’m like that too.” And was that really all there was to say? Did that untie the knot? Could there really have been nothing more coherent, better suited to the state of things, in this city and all elsewhere?

Then they were paying, separately, for their drinks, and Casey was chagrined. Had they let her talk at all, asked her any questions? What was this new job of hers, and what were her plans? How did she feel? What was she reading?

Casey must have realized—with embarrassment but without altering course—that they were talking to Lydia as if she were Genevieve. Genevieve, who would have made herself heard no matter what, would have talked over Casey until all their words were jumbled, excited, touching each other on the forearm for what either of them felt to be the *really critical remarks*, the *heart of the matter*, and laughing in perfect unison at slightly separate things. But here instead was Lydia, someone whom Casey hardly knew, though they somehow knew that there would be time for all these things later.

“Don’t breathe down my neck, please. I’m not into guys.” On Lydia’s opposite side, the waiter had returned their cards to the bar top and leaned in for a word before he suddenly became busy with very distant patrons.

“Or anyone right now,” she added as if to herself, though Casey allowed themselves some nudge of elation at the implication of her words.

As they stood to go, Casey’s eyes connected with the couple at the reserved table that the hostess had offered temporarily. The hostility, the disgust, was unmistakable. But at the

moment, with Lydia, this managed to be downright funny. It was hilarious. Outside, Lydia was laughing so hard she couldn't hold her cigarette still enough to light it. She passed one to Casey (who had never smoked in their life and wasn't about to), and they almost dropped it with laughing. It felt good to laugh, and it was just so funny! The disgust. And that waiter too. And his disgust. And what Lydia had said. And how she'd said it, her invincible deadpan. And that couple at the reserved table. And their faces, their disgust, their idiotic— And that woman's face and the man's when they looked at Casey, as if they'd never seen something so— And the waiter's. And these wonderful, ridiculous clothes! And the unwinding of things in the extravagant night that was unmistakably happening *right now*. And that Casey had sat, briefly, at their table, in one of its immobile chairs. And that those people would never know, never understand—

So What by CJ the Tall Poet

Resistance to intimacy
Recklessness became a high
Fathoming self-inflicted agony
As I ignore treacly vocal noises
Why is my miserable ballad sentimental
The behavior being displayed was recreant
Clandestine fabrication
Procedures outstretched
I now properly repose on marblewood

Under Construction by Rowan Tate

I have scaffolding in me like a skeleton,
furniture I do not know how to arrange
shoved into corners, stacked in the body's attic
to make room for what some people call the soul
but is only objects in space, the fragile stilt-house
of belief, in citizenship and color theory and
the moral underpinnings of a liberal economy,
vocabulary words for ideals we want to live in,
the way people think God thinks what they think,
but he doesn't do what the body does—tesseract
around the organs of a thing, steroidal with
webs of mothers and daughters remembering
so many things we have decided not to.
Language knows so many things we don't, tenses
curdling in the mouth of the world
like a forecast.

I MAKE ROOM FOR FIGURING OUT by Laura Cesarco Eglin

Pen to paper, like lies to lamp, or smile to symbolic.
Where does the moonlight shine through?
The phone doesn't ring for anyone. It calls
to itself.

I said I was a Leo, not a lion.

What would go into my autobiography
if not the milanesas I didn't have.

dislocation
fracture

What else is out of place?

The unexpected reality of absence.

Repetition of looking:

An image waiting for me to live in some form—
a blurring between the poem and the eye.

When Waiting is the Best Part by Mahaille Griffith

The chats before the movie.
The orchestra tuning instruments.
The breathe before a kiss.

Sometimes the waiting is the best part.

When there was no after, no memory, to hold on to and keep close to the
heart.

The Music Begins by Erick Giovanni Monrrigo

It's late in the evening as Luis completes another journal. He signs his name on the front cover in a black sharpie and then writes on the spine. He pauses for a moment, thinking of the perfect title, and writes: *An Old Man's Last Worries*, '17. Luis has always loved journaling. He has been writing down his entire life in words since he could remember, from colorful crayon scribbles of a toddler to the purposefully bold letters of his adulthood. He looks down at his journal as if he were holding a child.

"Someday, someone will make a great story out of you," he tells himself.

He rests the completed journal inside a bookshelf that he reserves for his newest works and strolls to his couch where dozens of journals are strewn about. He picks out a few out at random and decides to flip through them, reading through his life like flipping through reruns on late night TV.

The first one is an old journal embossed with the number '89, the starting year of their divorce. He sighs at the titles of entries, titles like: "*La Señora* is an Ogre," "90 hours of Life Removed in One Word," "Our 'son' *Guilt*-berto visits again." They used to seem funny—he'd thought himself clever then—but behind each entry a toothpick flies out and jabs his heart. The pages are heavy with resentment, and others hot with anger. Some pages have compressed his feelings for so long that as soon as he opens them, they scream.

"Close me *viejo pendejo!* *Apesta como un culo, hijo de...*"

He winces and shuts the journal, lays it next to the others beside him. There are stacks of journals all over his old brown home. They are laid out like miniature buildings squared away all over the living room, on top of dressers and drawers, inside cabinets, on the kitchen

table, the nightstand, six balancing dangerously on his old TV. They are stacked by the years and months. The journal he chose comes from his collection of '89 - '92: The Divorce Journals, but there are other titles around him; '77 - '80: The Golden Age, '94 - '97: Dark History, '66 - '71: Travels through Space and Time.

He glances at his old brown digital electric clock. The red face reads 11:06 PM.

"I'll need a new journal for tomorrow."

He opens a drawer in his bedroom filled with saran-wrapped journals as if they were fresh cuts of meat at a deli. He sniffs the crisp leather as it wafts through the air. A light blue journal catches his eye. It is the only one not wrapped. *I don't remember this one*, he thinks, *but might as well*. He takes the journal and leaves it on his polished wooden desk for the morning. He lays out a pen, pencil, and eraser like cutlery and wipes his hands, a job well done. Yawning, he heads for bed, taking one last glance at his morning setup. There's something that wasn't there before, a picture frame. *Was it there the whole time?* He looks closer. It's a photo of their wedding day—him and his then wife Esmeralda, smiling in a dancing embrace against a black and blurry backdrop of onlookers. The flash of the camera so bright that her dress was lit-up like a high-beam, glowing in the dim ballroom like a star. The longer he stares the more he hears the soft waltz—or was it a slow jam? —and sways with the music. He smells the honey of her skin, the thick juice of hairspray in her dark curls, the mothball mint smell in the fabric of her gown. He feels the humidity of the ballroom as family and friends danced all around them. He is there, in front of her, holding her soft and loving hands. Then, looking into her eyes—a violet-brown like *Flor de Jamaica*—he leans in for a kiss. He ends up kissing the picture frame.

"If only," he says.

It's the time of night in-between dreams and Luis wakes up completely. He lies there trying to fall back asleep but his mind starts to run, replaying the day before like an old film. It had been a good one. He took a long walk like his doctor had suggested and sat on his favorite bench at Rimrock park. He watched people; it was his favorite thing to do besides write in his journals. He'd stare at faces and imagine what they'd look like when they got older. He imagined what kind of job they worked, or how they sounded when talking, what faces they made during sex, or what lies they told themselves to keep on living. He'd see the fit ones run around the lake and was reminded of hamsters. It was funny. If he'd tried to run now his ankles would crumble. He wanted to tell them to stop running away from their ghosts, to face them before it was too late. Every once in a while he'd notice a beautiful woman and curse; if only he were young again.

Then he remembered Esmeralda and shame crawled up his spine. They used to come to this park and enjoy teasing the ducks swimming over each other in hopes of food. They would sit on this very bench stealing kisses and sneaking touches, getting turned on, secretly hoping people were watching. Marriage was the next obvious move when you're in Love, or so everyone said. They were so young then, running around each other. Then they weren't so young. Who knew Love was a job? One Luis wasn't cut out for. He reminisced about the next-day arguments, the threats of violence, the drinking. He remembered leaving every weekend, running away from her reasonable cries of support. He regretted the cheating. Then, when he discovered she was doing the same, reveled in it. It was a game of who could hurt more deeply. Eventually he won, and she left him. The years of resentment rushed past

him like an angry river, then came the waterfall. He almost fell into the memory he swore never to remember, almost saw himself seated at the foot of the hospital bed, when a duck approached him.

Quack said the duck.

“*Hola Pato*” he said.

Quack said the duck again.

“I don’t have food for you.”

Quack quack.

“Go away.”

Quack honk.

“*Amigo*, I don’t have nothing, *no tengo nada*. I can barely afford beans.”

Quack quack quack.

“*Solo soy un viejito*—I’m only an old man who wants to be alone. Okay? Beat it.”

“Wack” said the duck, “really wack,” and it waddled away to another bench.

He had lied to the duck.

He stopped by his favorite grocer on his way home, a hole in the wall *mercadito*, looking to buy some coffee and deli-sliced turkey breast. He had run out of coffee that morning and had to drink the sad substitute of black tea. The packets were old and tasteless, covered in a film of dust, trapped in her side of the cabinet for years. It occurred to him that he hadn’t opened her side in a long time. Inside were all the goods she liked: an entire carton of mixed teas, oatmeal and chia seeds, popcorn kernels, dried figs, gray chocolate chips that used to be black, and mugs with silly things written on them. Things like, “But First, Coffee

Tea.” She had crossed out the word ‘coffee’ herself with a permanent marker and wrote Tea with her signature twirls.

Why do I still keep her things? He wondered.

Walking around the aisles in his reverie he went straight for the coffee beans. Indecisive, he picked up two bags, Guatemalan and Colombian, and weighted them against each other. He sniffed them both – notes of cobblestone streets and an old lake, or hints of late-night dancing and giant palm trees. He chose the Central American option. The young woman at the register recognized him.

“Buenas tardes Señor Monte—how are you today?”

“A duck talked to me at the park” he said.

“That’s nice” she said, “Cash or card?”

He gave her the exact change and went home, ending his day.

Now he lies in bed feeling like there’s something amiss. He can’t figure it out. He thinks about the duck at the park—how curious, a talking *pato*—and in his daydream the duck says *You forgot the turkey, señor, and you lied to me ese. That’s messed up.*

“Damn,” he says and gets up out of his room. He sits back on his sofa with his journals and listens to the sleeping world outside.

The refrigerator hums. Crickets chirp outside. A dog barks in the neighborhood. A police siren, or perhaps an ambulance, trails off in the distance. A lone car speeds by his street leaving a whoosh of wind. And very far away, a train horn blows. It sounds as if it’s calling dreams, hollering for the last ride home.

His stomach growls.

Not a bad time for a snack, he thinks. He makes a grumpy grilled cheese (since he forgot the turkey) and makes it the lazy way: squishes two slices of American cheese in between wonder bread and stuffs it in the toaster hole. He places the toaster sideways to avoid disaster. His kitchen counter is clean except for the three journals on the stove's broken burner. He wants to move them away but hears some voice in his head, something telling him *Leave them there, they'll be fine. Besides, aren't you thirsty?*

He opens the fridge but finds old milk and pink lemonade.

"Too sweet" he says.

He digs through a cabinet and finds a box of *Flor de Jamaica*—Hibiscus flowers. He grabs two large handfuls of dried flowers and dumps them in a small pot of water, puts it to boil on high. The flowers overflow, almost falling out onto the open flame. They'll shrink, he tells himself. He wipes his hands.

"Easy," he says. He stares at the journal waiting for him.

"I think I have time for a short one."

He flips it open, excited to write about the duck, expecting to see the fresh blank pages like a cloudless sky, when he finds the journal completely full. Every page is lined with words, just not his words. The letters are too soft and round like flower petals, the slant tilted to the right. It looks like a woman's writing. Like Her writing. He flips to a random page and reads.

September 8th, Monday.

He is reading his journals again, this time from the Golden Age of his College Days. All these stories are so embarrassing. I didn't even know he was in a fraternity, but it makes sense. He can be bull-headed sometimes. I read over his shoulder but he doesn't see me. He is so glued to the past that he can't see what's in front of him. I have always been here, it seems, waiting for him to see my shadow against his pages. He fell asleep on the couch, and I turned off the light, though that took some effort to do. It's hard to grab things when you no longer have hands.

He flips several pages.

November 23rd, Wednesday

It was raining again today. I miss the rain. It reminded me of my life in el campo. I was five the first time I heard it. It scared me. My grandma's house was small and made of adobe, the floor was the Earth beneath us, the roof a hard metal sheet that banged alive with every drop of the rain like a mad drummer in the sky. I held my abuela tight and she told me not to worry—it was Tlaloc giving us a good pour for our hard work. Grandma took me outside and the drops of water were cold and hard. She laughed and started dancing this beautiful slow dance that made the water flow off her like miniature waterfalls.

She taught me the dance and we both played with the water and mud, splashing the color of our skin from the Earth back onto us—further cementing the Love we shared.

Luis is still reading his journals in the kitchen and all but ignores the rain. I go through the walls and stand out in our backyard trying so hard to catch his attention. I want

him to come dance with me, to teach him the dance my grandmother taught me for catching the rain like waterfalls. But he is lost to his memories, and I can no longer feel the rain.

Luis hears a creak behind him and jumps. He turns around. There is no one in his home. There are no sounds except the boiling of the water and the faint smell of toast.

“Esmeralda?”

There is no reply. He picks up the journal and reads some more.

January 2nd, Tuesday

Luis is singing in the shower like he used to when we were married. Even though he can't sing I still love his voice. I even loved his voice when we argued, or perhaps I only remember it that way. We argued a lot then. Do you remember? You wouldn't let me use the bathroom by myself. I had to leave the door open while I peed otherwise you'd come running in, screaming "Where is he?" You never hit me but I could feel the heat of your hands wanting to. I never cheated on you at home, Luisito. I don't know why you thought that. There was no one behind that shower curtain, no lover waiting under the bed till you went to work. Do you really think I would do that? It was much easier to have him pick me up afterwards. But by that time, you knew. By that time I knew too, about the women in the parks, at the hotels. How did it happen to us? Where did we go wrong? When did your singing fall and my dancing stop?

I know you must be angry about this journal. It wasn't easy, Luisito. I practiced holding a pen every-time you read. I wanted to talk to you one last time. I wanted to dance with you like we used to.

Do you remember our wedding day? How we danced together slow and soft and easy? You smelled good, like a pine tree in a desert. When I held you, I felt like I was floating away from all the people in the world. I remember crying on your shoulder. We were so happy then. I wish we could dance like that one more time.

“Me too” says Luis.

He feels a cold air sweep his neck, and the hairs over his body stand on edge.

“Esme?”

Another creak, louder and closer, like a footfall behind him.

A part of him wants to close the journal and run to bed, but another part, almost outside himself, says *Why not keep reading? Aren't you curious?* He ignores his sense of smell, his gut feeling that something is terribly wrong. He needs to know more. He flips towards the end of the journal.

April 16th, Friday

(Wasn't that yesterday? he thinks).

You haven't noticed yet, but that's OK. I've gotten really good at holding stuff now and have been moving things around. I threw out your cafe—I needed you to leave the house to prepare. We will almost see each other soon Luisito, I promise. Everything was planned. Don't you see? This is how it has to be. How it always was. How it happened.

Do you remember that night at the hospital?

Luis puts down the journal.

“I told you I would never come back to this.”

He feels a cold smoky hand on his own. A whisper from a shadow.

“I need you to remember.”

He sighs, picks up where he left off.

Tell me you remember the music.

Luis thinks back to the memory he has avoided for so long.

He is at the foot of the hospital bed warming her toes with his hands. Her feet were frozen and lifeless. It had been years since they had gone their separate ways but never remarried. He still loved her in a soft way, in the way he wished he had when they were married. Occasionally, her eyes fluttered as if trying to wake. The doctors and nurses came in less and less each time, busy with others who could still be saved. Luis had yelled at them, begged them to try more tests, procedures, anything to save his dying ex-wife. He held her hand and prayed to a God he hadn't believed in for a long time. She came around and woke up.

“You're still here?”

“Yes,” he said, “I'm not leaving.”

“It's okay, *Luisito*” she said, “there's no one hiding under the bed.”

They laughed.

“I wish we had stayed together” he said.

“Don't be silly. If we had I'd be dead sooner.”

They laughed again wholeheartedly, and then a silence fell on them.

“You know I forgave you long ago.”

“I did too.”

“If I could go back I would change it all. I would try again. I would be a better man.”

“I know one way we could go back.”

“How?” said Luis.

“We could dance.”

Luis smiled. She had always liked dancing, was really good at it. It was her legs that first attracted him to her all those years ago, those dancer legs. Now her legs were frail and weak.

“Don’t you hear the music?” she said.

“What music?”

“It’s so fun! So beautiful! We have to dance to it.”

She tried to lift herself up but couldn’t. She tried pulling herself out of bed and Luis had to stop her. The heart-rate monitor made scary noises and Luis had to call the nurse.

“*Mira*—Look at the moon! It’s the most beautiful moon I have ever seen. It’s the perfect place to dance.”

Nurses came in and gave her a sedative. She closed her eyes, the monitor relaxed, her breath deepened. Luis wiped the tears from his eyes. This was too much. He went out of the room and quietly sobbed in the hallway.

He sat at a bench holding his head in his hands. Why do these things happen? Why do we lose the ones we love? He stood up to look out a window and stared at the panorama of the city. He could see the lights alive below, cars and people going about their business. *I wish I was out there*, he thought, *away from it all*. He looked up at the moon. It truly was

beautiful—bright yellow and impossibly large. He thought he saw some speck on the window and tried to wipe it when he realized it was something outside, spinning in front of the moon. He squinted his eyes. The spinning thing got bigger, and then he screamed.

Esmeralda was in the sky lit up like a star. She was in her wedding gown, dancing slowly, swirling easily, laughing with someone in her arms that wasn't there. She looked at him then, and disappeared, floated up into the night like a balloon and vanished.

Luis ran back into the room only to find a nurse and doctor calling out the time of death—the heart rate monitor drowning out the noise in his mind. They didn't stop him from hugging her. They left him alone, told him they'd be back for the body, take all the time you need. He sobbed onto her dead shoulder until her corpse was covered in tears. In the morning they took her away, her body covered in salt.

He is back from his memories, tears fresh on his face. A dead white hand brushes his cheek.

“Why did you want me to remember?”

“The more you remember the more I can be.”

She sits next to him, her dark hair long and tangled, her body a pale ghost.

“This is the last page. You need to read it.”

He smells the burning bread, hears the hiss of burned-out water, sees the smoke gathering above his head. He wants to get to the kitchen and put an end to the danger, but she holds his hands and looks him in the eye. Her eyes are violet-brown like burned flowers.

“Read it,” she says.

Luis flips to the last entry. It is today's date.

April 17th, Saturday Night/Sunday Morning.

You sit in front of me reading my journal with fear in your heart. The bread is alight in the toaster, the flame reaching the top cabinet and burning the cupboards. The flowers you boiled are on fire too, and the ashes fly out of the pot like tiny stars onto the journals nearby, catching flame, and making a small bonfire. The smoke helps them float all over the house—onto the carpet, the curtains, the paper strewn across the floor. Every shred of your life is burning down, but you are with me. You are here holding my hand together again at last.

I know, I know. It's okay. It will all be over soon. We will take up our arms and hold each other tight when the music starts. Do you hear it? I told you it was beautiful. It was exactly like our night, the heat all around us, making us rise into the sky. We're floating away, Luisito. We're gliding up towards the golden moonlight and to forever. Are you ready?

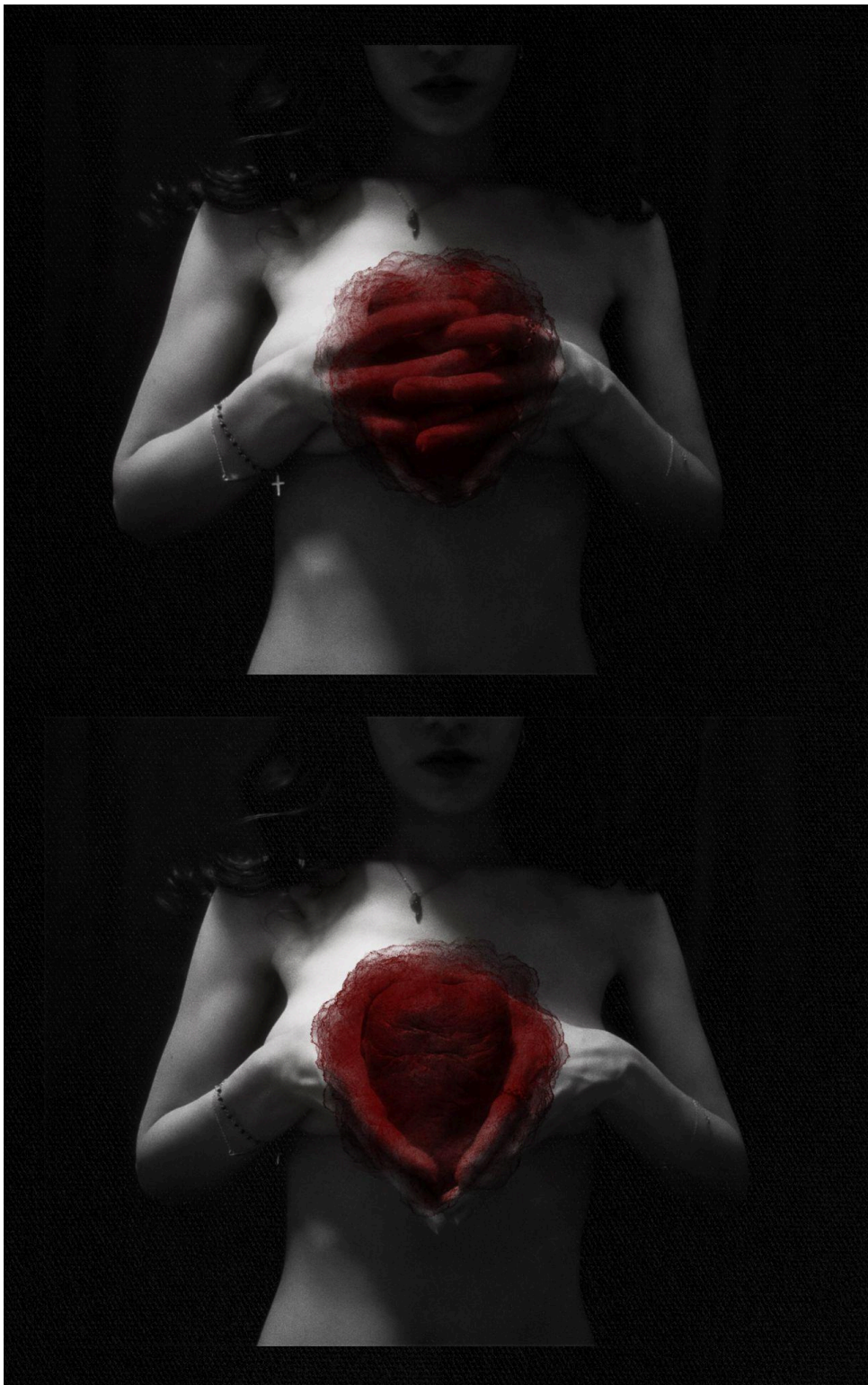
Luis finishes reading. He sees his beautiful wife adorned in a white gown, as young as the day he met her. They get up from the blazing table, her hands soft and real. The music begins. It is not the soft waltz at their wedding, it is not a slow song, it is something else entirely. A song within silence, music from underneath existence, something fun and easy that sways and spins. The sound of a lotus unfolding. They dance on the smoldering carpet in the living room, his city of journals ablaze like a pyre. The roof caves in. She hugs him as they float into the air with the smoke of their burning home.

The fire below rolls in its hunger. The heat guides them up and over the city-line, above the clouds, in front of the moon the night of her death. He smells the sanitized hallways in her hair, can see himself in the hospital window looking at them in shock. He

laughs. It's all so funny. They float on, higher still until he sees the Earth and Moon floating in space, dancing with each other in the universal spin. Further still, watching the Sun itself dance around a cluster of partners, solar systems hurling through space, galaxies revolving with one another. And even further, so infinitely beyond that every star is an atom, trading electron partners, weaving the fabric of reality itself. Luis can see it all. He is it all.

He looks at Esmeralda for the last time, her body and his spiraling into one. Her eyes, worlds in themselves, are the most beautiful things in existence. They kiss.

Everything dances.



heart of the poet by a. d.

conception by a. d.

the professor sits like god
contemplating the genesis. his museum
lies languished and unfinished, lacking its
central masterpiece still.
it is time — the hour is ripe.
he examines his intentions, his sensational repertoire
and all it contains.

a dip of his perfect cup, a *birth*.

an angel designed with his swirling
unanchored mind. precarious,
the professor obliges her to life
with a tilt of his mighty head.

his vision complete, he retires
to his seat once more as the angel, tireless,
dances for him, a solace for immortal eyes.

Breakup and Put Together by Mahaillie Griffith

Did I miss the sign?
When you were mine.
And when I was yours.

And I never knew,
This is the real you.
Or was it always true?
And in blind love I missed the clue?

Now you're with her.
Now I'm with me.
And in a reflection of a relationship I can see.

I found myself.
I lost a friend.

But in the end.

I'm more of me.
I'm not this girl you convinced me I had to be.

I've learned to praise myself.
Trust myself.
Love myself.

In hindsight 20/20.
The thought of you and me is funny.
And I shouldn't have wanted to know you then: I was wrong!
Because you wouldn't care to know me now: I'm too strong!

First Kiss by Rowan Tate

Being announces itself, unlanguage,
sharp and swollen like
mint in my lungs, teathed open
to make room for
lingering. The membrane
of reality trembles. God is
making and unmaking
the universe.

A meddlesome middle by Akhila Kumaran

If I were the first,
I'd finally know what it means to start—
not lie in between those two.
My name would be my own, not borrowed, not a mix.
Not a blend of what already exists.

I remain a mix of them always. Proportions of both his and her.
Her height and his colour. Her tone and his voice.

Can I ever start?
Did I ever start?
Where do I begin?

If Time Is Precious by Christian Contreras

- If time is precious, don't waste another day
- Go, therefore, work hard and don't delay
- Cause our life is too short, to squander away
- So, please, hold onto it and you'll be okay

Before Sunset by Chelsea Allen

She squinted at the stranger beside her.

He'd asked her how she'd met the love of her life. Strange as it was for someone who'd known her for mere minutes, sitting on that park bench, to ask, she thought it over for a while. Remembered vaguely being flattered by a spontaneous man like that, and chuckled. Blast it, why not? Her grey hair flagged in the cool afternoon breeze.

"Oh, it was years ago." She regarded the green patches of grass flashing from underneath the dead leaves. "His name was Ted. Met him on a plane to Florence. A perfect stranger, just like you." She tipped her head towards him jokingly. His jaws stiffened the slightest, but his gaze stayed on her.

"And wouldn't you know it," she continued, "it was his first time flying."

"No."

"Heh. Yeah, never flown before. Was dead scared of it."

She paused, trying to dislodge a stone lodged in the damp soil with her shoes.

"Why was he flying now?"

"Oh, his sister was getting married. There, in Florence ... I remember the flight. Every second towards takeoff inflated his anxiety like a balloon—he described it like that later.

Heh. And I was so terrible at comforting people. But then, out of nowhere, I found myself talking to him about all the bad dates I'd had. I bet I was annoying, but it worked. He was surprised he'd missed the takeoff."

"I bet you weren't annoying."

She regarded his features—the afternoon sun, like the flames from a fireplace might, softened his wrinkles so he appeared somewhat younger. "He asked me to be his date to the wedding, and—Where have I seen you before?"

His chest heaved when he inhaled abruptly and slid his gaze from her to the ground.

“You met him again after the wedding?”

“We—we roamed across the city for the weekend.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was small, almost disappearing into the rustling leaves overhead.

His gaze shot up to meet hers. A shiver ran down her spine as she searched his eyes and it came, like water that trickles through gaps between stones and then you remove the stones and it comes gushing out. She gasped.

“Oh, Ted!”

Her hands flew to her mouth as she shook her head. Tears pooled in her eyes. Ted took his wife’s hands into his.

“Oh, Ted!”

“It’s okay, Sara. It’s alright.”

He draped his arm across her shoulders and caressed her hair when she collapsed on his shoulders and silently wept. It was obvious he’d recited those lines over a thousand times now.

“Know,” she sniffled, and his hand stilled on her head, “that I’ll always love you.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Yes, Ma’am.”

She chuckled, sniffing. Wiped at her eyes and sat back up. Before them, the sun quietly dipped behind the trees.

Under a pink sky, a voice broke into her thoughts. “Let’s head home.”

She squinted at the stranger beside her.

Infinite Rise by Ben Nardolilli

A generation in this muddy country struggles to make the rest
See any other way out of a current abyss,
Option B looms as their god, they proselytize the basic existence of other answers,
I pray for their attempted moves across continents of arguments,
Part of a push to celebrate the moon as much as the sun

Whether their influence wins associates, or their theory remains
A cryptic probability, I cheer them on
As they fight against an aristocracy always flailing about to put up wall after wall
Of doubtful notions to restrict and keep them quiet, on the sidelines,
I sing of their struggle to make their message echo in between

A Dream by Ramzi Albert Rihani

A thought stays with me,
enduring while I'm asleep.
A dream kicks it out

It enters the brain,
locks the door
feeling solidly in control
as it dominates the house

A melody breaks the dream,
unlocks the door
and transforms the inside
refusing to leave

It's invited to reign
in joy and in sadness.
It reigns and reigns,
again and again, until
it becomes the dream.



untitled
by Claudia
Wysocky

Notes on Dressing for a Dance That Never Starts by Rowan Tate

he texts me. i know when i hear the phone vibrate that it's him. i have some otherworldly intuition for this shit. he wants to see me. i know it. but i want him to say it. i want him to ask me. he asks me. i am already getting dressed. this is a game i like to play. we meet in the same place we used to. hello, he says. how have you gone so long without messaging me? i say. i'm such a delight. he tells me how busy he is. and you chose to spend time with your greatest distraction? i know the look on his face. we sit on opposite sides of the bench in the lam shadow. amid our whiplash wit, he tells me how much he missed me, how grateful he is for this. i ask him how lena is. he tells me he doesn't know, they broke up two months ago. i told him i had known that. he tells me it had been a decision he made much earlier, in february, after we reconnected. i find it hard to believe him. to think of this as anything more than a game. i like the game. i am willing to play. to get dressed up, to meet at midnight, two devils flirting. but we've done this too many times for me to believe that any of this might be real. i think of how he looked at me from across the room, when i was sitting across from lena, the other girl, and told me he didn't love me. that he loved me as a friend. he is the kind of man that will say whatever he needs to say to get what he wants. and i am that kind of girl. this is the common theme: we are the same person. that's why it works. after several hours of saying things in which nothing is said, we walk each other to the split in the road. i see his eyes catch on my body. my lace bodysuit, lingerie, underneath a petticoat. does he wonder? does he know? i am wondering. i think i know. he opens his arms for an embrace before i go, one that feels almost territorial. i feel powerful walking out into the darkness. text me when you get home, he says. we both know i won't.

Spotlight by Simon Kaeppli

I remember sitting on a boat
cardboard railings and a quilted sail
a wave of expectant faces turning to me
in one swift motion
waiting for me to speak

I remain stubbornly silent
shrinking into my sequined cloak
I vaguely gesture, I think
my own interpretation of the scene
as the teacher narrates the prince's lines

A great fairytale adventure
with the shy child as the protagonist
in the stuffy classroom with the tiny chairs
filled with proud parents
there to see their Sea Creature #2

(SOMEWHERE OUT OF SIGHT) by Rick K. Reut

...to try to start anew
and maybe make some sense
out of what you knew
when you had your first chance
to see the shooting scars
on the face of the night
sky. You stare at the stars
somewhere out of sight.
The TV set of your mind
is heard inside your head,
making you push the rewind
button on the half-mad
recorder of your memory.
You try to put it on pause
where you once were me,
though I'm not sure I was
there at all. Just play
it back for me one more
time. Begin with the day
before the night before
there was nothing on
your mind except that fear
swallowing you at dawn.

Somewhere around here,
pictures on window panes
are painted with rainy days'
watercolors. It rains
in the vanishing rays
of the sun. One more night
changes the window view,
wiping it out of sight.
I'm not sure I'm you
anymore. Heavy rain
seems lighter than heavy wind.
You look at the window pane,
wondering who will win
the fight between night and day
if you can find a way...

...to try to start anew and maybe make some sense out of what you knew when you had your first chance to see the shooting scars on the face of the night sky. You stare at the stars somewhere out of sight. The TV set of your mind is heard inside your head, making you push the rewind button on the half-mad recorder of your memory. You try to put it on pause where you once were me, though I'm not sure I was there at all. Just play it back for me one more time. Begin with the day before the night before there was nothing on your mind except that fear swallowing you at dawn. Somewhere around here, pictures on window panes are painted with rainy days' watercolors. It rains in the vanishing rays of the sun. One more night changes the window view, wiping it out of sight. I'm not sure I'm you anymore. Heavy rain seems lighter than heavy wind. You look at the window pane, wondering who will win the fight between night and day if you can find a way...

It by TK Hudson

The line wound through the terminal and progressed slowly. Luckily, Alan had arrived early—several hours early—and was relatively close to the front. From where he stood—just behind a family of six—he saw the line split in two, each filing toward a podium and attendant.

He breathed a sigh and shifted his briefcase from one hand to the other. Slowly, very slowly. The oldest child in the family, a teenage boy wearing headphones and dark colors, glanced at Alan. He was sullen, and looked Alan up and down, smirked and turned back toward his family. Alan shrugged uncomfortably and switched the briefcase back to the first hand.

Couldn't they move the line any faster? Honestly, how long did it take to go through and X-ray?

When he finally got close to the end of the line, Alan, restless, for more reasons than one now, began to prepare to go through the X-ray. He set his briefcase down on the tiles—its metal feet clunked loudly—knelt and untied his oxfords, but didn't remove them, unknotted his tie, and removed his suit jacket and hung it on his arm. Then he picked up his briefcase again.

The family in front of him went down one alley where the line split, and Alan went down the other. Now there were only a handful of people ahead of him. He could hear the TSA officer at the podium asking her questions: "Do you have any liquids in your baggage? Where are you going today? Can you please step through the machine?" Alan tightened his grip on his briefcase.

"Next, please."

Alan stepped up to the podium, set down his briefcase, and handed his ticket and passport to the TSO.

"How are you today, mister... Dufresne," the officer said, bored, looking first at the passport, then the ticket.

Alan didn't answer, just glanced at the watch on his wrist. The TSO wasn't asking to be friendly, he didn't have to be friendly in return.

The officer checked the ticket, glancing between it and the passport, stamped both, and handed them back to Alan. "Please place your luggage into a plastic bin, then step through the X-ray." Still bored, she never even looked at Alan.

Alan laid his jacket in the plastic bin first, then his briefcase; shoes and tie on top of the hard leather shell; then he slipped his watch off his wrist and put it in, too. He patted his pockets twice and stepped through the X-ray. On the other side he grabbed his things, stepped into his shoes. Just as he put the plastic bin in the stack on the floor, an older man in a TSO uniform approached him.

"Sir, would you please come with me?"

Alan clenched the hand holding his briefcase. His heartbeat quickened and he suddenly felt short of breath. "I'm sorry, is there a problem?"

"Please follow me, sir."

Alan swallowed hard, but the officer wasn't moving, just watching him, so he followed. The TSO led him silently away from the terminal, through a set of doors he scanned his badge at, down a long, narrow hallway lined with doors and lit by strip lights on the ceiling. The TSO didn't say another word to Alan, whose breathing was shallow and fast now, until they reached a door, just like all the others, where he scanned his badge, held it open, and said "Inside, please."

Inside (please) was a small, beige room, lit by flickery lights, furnished with a stainless steel table and two opposing chairs. "Have a seat, mister..."

"Dufresne," Alan said. He sat in the chair facing the door, unbuttoned his jacket, and set his briefcase on the ground.

“And where are you going, mister Dufresne?”

“Buffalo.”

“New York?”

“Yes.”

“Why Buffalo?”

“I have family there.” Distant family. Family he had met only once, when he was seven.

“I see.” The TSO crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Mister Dufresne, do you know why I asked you to come with me?”

Alan shook his head jerkily. His throat was sweaty and his palms were dry—no. He cleared his throat. His palms were sweaty; his throat was dry as stale bread. “No, I, uh—ahem. Could I get some water?”

The officer stuck his head out the door, and a moment later Alan was drinking lukewarm water from a Styrofoam cup.

“When you went through the X-ray,” said the TSO, “something flagged. We need to get it taken care of before you can board.”

Alan’s throat practically closed this time, like he was going into anaphylactic shock. He reached convulsively for his briefcase before he could stop himself. “Flagged?” he said, voice choked.

“Yes.” The officer spoke mildly, musingly. “Any ideas?”

Alan clumsily patted his jacket. “Nope, nothing on me. Maybe your scanner is busted.”

“Maybe. Would you mind if I take a look in your briefcase?”

“My... briefcase?”

“Your briefcase, yes. May I?” Even though it was phrased as a question, Alan knew it wasn’t.

He lifted the briefcase slowly and laid it on the table, then pushed it across to the TSO. The TSO spun it around and flicked the locks. “Combination?” Alan gave the combination sullenly. He’d more than a little hoped the officer would give it back when it didn’t open. But the TSO rolled the dials and the locks clicked and sprang open.

Immediately the lid of the briefcase slammed upward, rocking the box back and forth, corner to corner. Six arm-thick, suckered, green, slimy tentacles burst out of it, unfurling like hideous bubble-tape, dripping noxious green ooze onto the table, floor, and TSO. They waved wildly, as blades of grass in a hurricane might, dragging along the ceiling and walls, and the trails of slime they left behind them fizzled and steamed, stripping the earth-toned paint from the Sheetrock.

As soon as the briefcase had opened Alan had fallen backwards out of his chair and scrambled against the wall. *It* was out; it was loose. He heard its voice—terrible voice—inside his head, a terrible stream of old, profane sounds—sounds he didn’t recognize as words or language, but still understood. It commanded him: *Take me home, mortal. Take me to my home.* Alan squeezed himself back into the wall, crying. It was out.

Then the tentacles rolled back up, drew back into the briefcase, and the locks snapped shut. Alan looked up through tear-filled eyes. The TSO was standing up, one hand on the lid of the briefcase. In the other hand he held a disposable water bottle with less than a mouthful of water left in the bottom.

“This flagged when your luggage went through the machine, mister Dufresne.” He set it down on the table.

Alan slowly got to his feet, then slowly righted his chair, then said, slowly, “Am I... am I in trouble?”

“Not at all. Please just make sure to dispose of all open containers of liquid before attempting to board your plane next time, and follow all TSA regulations. Now, I believe your plane is boarding.”

Alan gathered his briefcase and bottle hurriedly, thanked the officer, and made for the door. He stopped at the same time as his heart when the TSO said his name again, and turned slowly around. The TSO nodded behind Alan. “Please dispose of that now.”

Alan did. And he made his plane on time, and the connecting flight that took him to Maine. There he found a boat for hire and took the briefcase—the thing in the briefcase—out to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

It tore the world, the universe, and reality apart as soon as it got home.

Do firsts always feel this quiet? by Akhila Kumaran

The curtains rose; the lights blinding.
I stumbled through the first step, unsure and unheard.
The mike had stopped working.
But nothing bothered the empty crowd.
I wanted to bloom, but no gentle wind was around
And spring rushed through, eager for the next flower.

SOME KIND OF BIRTH by Carol Coven Grannick

The street fronting the balcony
is giving birth to a storm: too quiet
birds hold back songs. Grey deepens,
weighs itself down, hanging low
pressing most humans behind doors.
No invisible eastern sun licks treetops
from behind the building. The wind kicks
gently at first, then insistent. Stronger.
Branches respond, pulsating side-to-side
up, then down and finally the thunder
as if a complete surprise though
absolutely expected and delicate drops
test Earth's readiness. Lightning hits
and the sky cracks open.

The Freak Hope by Ben Nardolilli

Absent open steps, I still try to rise,
Endless shafts and constantly broken ramps later
I'm on the ground, confirming
Theories again and maybe making Newton proud
For practice, I step over and down
The edges of the gutters, careful to stay clean,
No use dragging the garbage with me
If a staircase, however grand, manages to appear
There has to be a backdoor to heaven,
A place where the fire escape meets the clouds,
I am willing to do a bit of climbing
As long as there is no altitude sickness on the way

Goodnight Grandma, I Love You by Alex Mason

Ring! Ring! Wuhzzat? Where is it? The phone's not where it should be—on the bureau, next to their wedding photo. Right now, there's a vase of wilted peonies in its place. Where did those peonies come from? Mrs. Jenkins stares at them, trying to remember...

Ring! Ring! "Jack?" She listens to the silent house. *Ring! Ring!* "Jack?! The phone!" No answer. She stands up, all five feet of her, balancing like a stack of balls in a frilly nightgown, gray roots bearing the weight of her brown bouffant like Atlas shouldering the whole wide world. Now, why did she stand up? *Ring! Ring!* Oh, that's right. She remembers now—Sandy had moved the phone from the bureau into the kitchen. 'So you can get to it from anywhere in the house.' That daughter of hers—so clever. She should really visit more...but wait, that means the phone's all the way in the other room! She'll have to hustle.

Ring! Ring! She leans on her walker like a jockey crouching on his horse, arms pumping, eyes narrowed. She's moving dangerously fast now; there's a light breeze in her wrinkles. But she'll never make it; she's only just now reached the bureau with the photo of her and Jack, and those strange, dead flowers. She takes a quick break, catching her breath and the eye of a young, handsome Jack, smiling inside the frame of their wedding photo. Why had she been mad at him that day? She can't remember...it's a good story though. Jack would tell it at dinner parties and get a big laugh. She used to hate it when he made other women laugh. She hasn't laughed in a while...

Ring! Ring! Wait, what's that smell? Ah, flatulence. Her toots propel her out the door and into the kitchen.

There's the phone, in its cradle. It's still alive—blinking and crying. Hold on dear, Momma's comin'! She grabs the phone like she's snatching a purse, presses 'END' instead of 'TALK,' and raises it to her ear. "Hello? Hello?" She stares at the little screen, but it divulges nothing. She presses buttons and listens to beeps until her hands get shaky and she slams the phone into the little basket Sandy attached to her walker. Why would a phone need a screen? Everything needs a screen these days.

She sighs, but there's no one around to hear it. What time is it? She loves to know. It straightens her out, like coffee first-thing. She checks the cat clock, clicking on the wall. Good Lord! Jimmy Kimmel's on. She'll have to hustle. Where are her glasses? She touches her face—check! The phone? She looks in her hand—check! There's a half-drunk glass of lemonade on the counter. No ice, but no time neither—Jimmy's waiting! She claws the glass, fingers on the inside, and plops down in the La-Z-Boy. Remote...remote. Where's the darn remote?! She twists left—not on the end table. She twists right—not on Jack's chair. Nothing ever seems to be on Jack's chair these days.

Wait! She remembers—she had needed the batteries, to put in the alarm clock. She struggles out of the La-Z-Boy and heads back to the bedroom. Her days are spent shuffling from one room to the other. What happened? They used to go out—they had even started going to church. Neither of them believed in God, but they liked the music, and the bright, hushed building. They haven't been in a while. Those sisters from Arizona, always in the front pew, probably whispering about why the Jenkins stopped going. Why *did* they stop going? It was Jack's fault, she's sure.

Mrs. Jenkins arrives in the bedroom. She picks the remote up off the nightstand

and places it in her basket. Somebody should throw those peonies out; they're dead.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Jenkins feels parched. She takes a detour to pour a glass of lemonade. On the fridge are old Christmas pictures that someone forgot to take down. A flare-up of guilt at Jack in his Christmas sweater, followed by a flicker of resentment. It's an emotion well-known to Mrs. Jenkins, but where does it come from? She'd rather not investigate, opening the freezer and scooping ice. But her brain likes to think about the things it doesn't like to think about. Jack settled for Mrs. Jenkins, and she never forgave him for it. She sighs, puts the ice scooper down. She resents him because she has no reason to. If he had only known...a smidge of smugness, some arrogance or something, then her resentment would feel justified, instead of this sick, hollow guilt. She struggles with the heavy pitcher of lemonade. She could never hide her faults behind his; he's like a transparent rug she tries to sweep all her dirt under. She resents herself, is the thing, but has nowhere to put it, as she is already full. She spills some lemonade and wipes it up with shaky hands.

Back in the living room, she puts her new glass of lemonade on the end table, next to her old glass of lemonade. She points the remote the wrong way and presses buttons at random. Nothing happens. She squints at the remote and sighs. Why so many buttons? Surely half of them are just there to make the thing look fancy. The big one at the top that says "POWER" looks promising. She presses it. And again. She presses it long and short, hard and soft, but the TV doesn't respond, like a bored lover. She shuffles up to the TV. She knows of the secret button. Kids these days, they know nothing of the secret button! She runs her fingers under the TV. She's close. Just a

little...there! The TV pops to life—a bright and vivid ball game. The crowd moans. Mrs. Jenkins’ fingers linger on the fuzzy screen, absorbing last drops of oxytocin. All this nonsense with the remotes and the screens—leave that crap to Jack. She’s a simple woman. She returns to her seat like a graduate walking off the stage. Not a big baseball fan, but Jimmy Kimmel’s over anyway. It’s kind of exciting, not knowing what will be on. Curated TV! Sounds fancy. She tries to squeeze some pleasure out of her day, to pretend she’s not just alone with a TV that she doesn’t know how to work. She leans back and promptly falls asleep.



Ring! Ring!

Mrs. Jenkins jolts. She grabs the phone off the end table. “Hullo?”

“Hello Mrs. Jenkins,” replies a foreign-sounding woman. “This is Ashley with Weebu customer support returning your call, I understand you are having problems with your television?”

How the heck did she know that? Mrs. Jenkins remembers watching a local news report about phone scams targeting the elderly. She narrows her eyes. “Mmm.”

“Yes ma’am thank you very much for your patience I am now ready to assist you in solving the problem with your television?”

Mrs. Jenkins looks at the TV, now playing a yogurt commercial. “Uh-huh...”

“Alright Mrs. Jenkins to start off can you please tell me is your television currently on or off?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Excuse me ma’am?”

“My *name*. How do you know my name.”

A pause. “Ma’am when you called yesterday you provided your address which was used to pull up your account containing your information.”

“I didn’t call you!”

Another pause. “Ma’am is this Mary Jenkins at 192 Little Rock Lane?”

Mrs. Jenkins’ eyebrows jump. “How the heck did you get this number?” She scans out the window for unmarked vans.

“Ma’am like I said you gave us the information the other day when you called.”

“That’s ridiculous. I didn’t call you! I’m calling the police!” Was that a muffled sigh coming from the other end?

“Ma’am perhaps it was someone else in the household who called. I see here there is also a Jack Jenkins listed on the account. Perhaps this person is the one who called?” “Jack called?” She asks softly.

“Ma’am unfortunately I do not have that information. It says only that it was this phone number that was used to make the call.”

Mrs. Jenkins removes the phone from her ear. “Jack? Jack!” Silence.

“Ma’am?”

Mrs. Jenkins stares at the phone in her hand, talking to her. “Hm?”

“Ma’am is there a problem with your television?”

Mrs. Jenkins stares at the baseball game. “No. Well yes,” she chuckles,
“y’know...yes. The darn...thing’s not working I don’t...know I can’t seem to get it
to...y’know...and I’m really not good at this kind of stuff my husband Jack he’s the one who
knows but I don’t think he’s here right now he must be out or something so maybe...” she
sighs, “ya, I don’t know.”

“Alright ma’am well if you want I could try and help you figure out the problem
right now?”

“Sure, sure.”

“Alright ma’am very good. OK so to start off can you please tell me is your
television is currently on or off?”

“It’s on.”

“Very good ma’am. Can you please press and hold the ‘POWER’ button on your
Weebu remote for ten seconds please?”

“Umm...hold on let me find the darn thing, OK here let’s see.

Umm...y’know...” “It is the big button located at the top of the remote

ma'am."

Mrs. Jenkins holds down the button like she's drowning a kitten. The silence is awkward so she starts counting. "8...9...10."

"Very good ma'am, now, do you see the Weebu logo on your screen?"

Mrs. Jenkins scans the baseball field for something that could be called a Weebu logo, whatever that is. "Umm...no."

"What do you currently see on your screen ma'am?"

"A ball game."

"Sorry?"

"Baseball. Wait, hold on, it's the, ah, the Braves, playing the Orioles."

"Very good ma'am. One second please." Ashley clacks around on a keyboard. "In Baltimore."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said they're playing in Baltimore, the ball game."

7

"OK thank you ma'am just one second please." More clacking. "How is your day going so far ma'am?"

"Fine, thanks." They sit in silence. "Any luck?"

“Yes ma’am thank you for your patience. Can you please confirm for me that there are batteries in the remote ma’am?”

“Of course there are! I’m not an idiot.”

“Alright thank you ma’am. One moment.” More clacking.

“Y’know, TVs used to be very simple. They didn’t have remotes or any of this other...stuff.”

“Yes ma’am.” More clacking.

“And they worked just as well back then. They’ve got all this new technology, and in the end, it’s even worse than before!”

“Yes ma’am. So I believe the problem is with your remote and not your television. I would ask you to please take your remote to your nearest Weebu store and they will replace it for you.”

Scammers! Dirty scammers! Mrs. Jenkins knew it. She leans forward in the La-Z-Boy. “Oh ya? And how much is *that* gonna cost?”

“It’s free, ma’am.”

“Oh.”

∞

Mrs. Jenkins jams the printer trying to print directions to the Weebu store, so she

copies them illegibly on a yellow legal pad, tears the paper, and folds it into her purse. Also in her purse: a damp mystery tissue, lipstick with lipstick stains on the tube, a nickel, smudged cheater glasses, a broken plastic credit card case, loose credit cards, a variety of dust and cracker particles, and the landline telephone. She tries going to the bathroom, gives up, and grabs a bag of nuts from the pantry, as provisions. She gathers up all the remotes she can find and puts them in a grocery bag. She tries going to the bathroom again, then she's ready to embark. Bundled in scarves and sweaters, Mrs. Jenkins shuffles past the printer, beeping and grinding miserably, out the door, and into the world.

She climbs behind the wheel of Jack's souped-up Audi. She crawls down La Saba, eyes peering over the big steering wheel. Her feet are numb from neuropathy, so she can't feel the brake or the gas pedal, but besides that, she considers herself a pretty good driver. From down low in her seat she can see rooftops and traffic lights. She used to know people in this neighborhood. Liza McLaughlin, her old neighbor with that horrid dog, both dead now from leukemia. Mr. Richards across the street, was it suicide? Something scandalous. And the mailman, whose name she forgot and was too embarrassed to ask, who always ended their conversations with "alright, now" and who walked with his legs so close together that his navy shorts looked like a navy skirt. Where is he? Where did he go? One day he was just gone, replaced by the lady with thick glasses and thick silver hair. It seems rude to ask. Hey, whatever happened to that mailman? The uh...black one? No, no, best to just leave it a mystery. Mrs. Jenkins disliked mysteries; they gave her strange dreams. But she disliked rudeness and social faux pas even more; *those* kept her up all night. Like back in the third grade, when Little Rudy had pushed her down the...or had he tripped her? He

had done *something* to her, something rude...little shit...with those bacon grease stains on his tee and that sneer clear up to his eyeball. That whole thing, when he pushed her off the playground, or tripped her at the playground, something at the playground...his friends laughing...*that* had kept her up all night and clear into the afternoon, forming revenge plots she would never act upon, like putting spiders in his desk or paste in his hair. She had sat behind him in Reading; he would always popcorn her, and he *knew* how she hated reading aloud...

She cuts off a Prius, who honks, snapping her back to the present. She has no idea where she is. She takes out the yellow piece of paper and studies the hieroglyphs. Ba! Who needs it? She crumples the paper back into her purse and continues on. It's over by the library, she's pretty sure. Where she had met Jack. She had thought he was a librarian. That blue and green flannel. He had laughed and helped her anyway. They were in periodicals, still hunting down her collection of Robert Frost poems when she realized he was flirting. Most men tried to show off how smart they were, so it was Jack's willingness to play the fool that caught her attention. Mrs. Jenkins replays that memory over and over as she drives around town. The smell of books, him whispering jokes, her trying not to laugh so loud. Mrs. Jenkins smiles. He was funny back then. Back when he still tried.

She blows through a stop sign scoping out the drug store where she yelled at that pretty pharmacist for not having the Lisinopril ready. No pretty pharmacists sighted, but she speeds up anyway, to be safe. Mrs. Jenkins had felt terrible after; the pharmacist was all choked up. But now she doesn't feel much, just wants to get that darn whatever-it's-called and go home! What's the name? She looks at the grocery bag in the passenger seat. Ah yes,

the Wubu store. Weebee? Something stupid. People are so stupid. Her father was stupid for marrying her mother, and her mother was stupid for having a kid. Jack's stupid for thinking everything will magically workout. But it doesn't just magically work out! That was Mrs. Jenkins in the background, complementing Mrs. Dickens' gaudy home so that Mr. Dickens didn't lay off Jack and consign them to the poor house. That was Mrs. Jenkins, guzzling yogurt and eggs so that Sandy wasn't born with eleven toes and a tail or something. And that was Mrs. Jenkins keeping her poor head on a swivel so that Jack didn't crash the car and kill them all! Mrs. Jenkins frowns recounting all the ways she saved their family from certain destruction, and all the times Jack failed to appreciate her for it.

It's getting late. The sun is speared by dead oak branches. She'll have to hustle. Where's she going again? She really should've written down directions; her memory is not what it used to be. All these buildings are new. Across the street is the Weebu store. It's dark, and locked.



Elevator music chimes softly from the landline, charging in its cradle. Mrs. Jenkins listens, pretending to dust. The music stops and she hustles over, but it's just the same grainy song restarting. She goes back to the mantle, running the duster over old books, including the collection of Robert Frost poems that Jack had stolen from the library for their silver anniversary. The old house settles with a long creak. "Jack?" No answer. Just the music, like a distant hotel bar. She dusts porcelain Victorian ladies, then a pair of foo dogs, then the dark

wooden urn containing Jack's ashes. It was a nice funeral. Beautiful flowers...peonies, she thinks. Dreary weather. She stops dusting but continues staring at the urn.

The music cuts off. "Hello Mrs. Jenkins?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Jenkins shouts at her telephone.

"Mrs. Jenkins?"

"Yes!" she hustles across the living room.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello, I'm here." She picks the phone up off the sideboard, out of breath.

"Hello ma'am this is Ashley with Weebu customer service. Thank you for your patience, how may I assist you today?" Mrs. Jenkins catches her breath. She looks back at the mantle.

"Hello?"

"Yes hello. I...um. Well...ahh...let's see. She turns away from the mantle, concentrating. "I need some help, yes. I—I'm not quite...sure. I don't know..." she starts choking up. "I don't know where my husband...my husband is. He's not...*here*." Her eyes well up. "And I just need...a little help. Do you know? Do you know where my husband is?"

"I'm sorry ma'am I don't know where your husband is. I'm just a customer service representative for the Weebu corporation."

"Oh. That's OK. That's fine. I'm sorry. So silly of me. I must be losing it."

"It's perfectly alright ma'am. Did you need help with something else today?" Mrs.

Jenkins looks around her empty home.

“Well...and let’s see so you...are...”

“I work for the Weebu corporation ma’am.”

“Uh-huh...” A long, awkward pause.

“We sell computers and TVs ma’am and we also have a wifi service. Are you having problems with one of your devices?”

“Oh! Well, yes I need to get the, um, thing fixed it stopped working the other day and I can’t figure out *why*, and I tried going to the *store* but it was *closed*, and it’s just been an unbelievably...” she sighs, “*difficult*, for me, I’m an old woman y’know and I can’t, I’m just not good at things like that, Jack always took care of things like that.”

“OK ma’am no problem I am ready to assist you today, can you please say again which device you are having the problem with?”

“Well it’s the phone, I mean the printer, I mean the TV!” Mrs. Jenkins points at the TV so that Ashley can see what she’s talking about.

“OK ma’am and what is the problem with your television?”

“Well it’s...it’s not working! I don’t know! I told you, I’m an old woman! If I knew what the problem was then maybe I could fix it myself but I can’t because I don’t *know*!” Mrs. Jenkins’ hands are shaking.

“Of course ma’am I understand. I will look up your account and see if I can help. Can you please confirm your address for me ma’am?”

“Y’know, I’d rather not.”

“Ma’am unfortunately I cannot pull up your account without first verifying your information.”

“Y’know, that’s all you people care about is getting little old ladies’ information! I’m sick and tired of giving out all my information every time I need to do anything! Y’know, companies used to help customers, not the other way around.”

“So ma’am if you have an account with us then we already have your address on file. This is just to confirm your identity, it’s actually to protect you from—”

“Oh, just shut up!” Mrs. Jenkins slams the phone down.

∞

Knock! Knock! Mrs. Jenkins is in the bathroom. “Yes?” she yells. “Who is it?” Another knock. “Yes! Coming!” She struggles with her pants. More knocking. She hustles over and unlocks the front door.

There’s a strange man in her doorway, wearing a hard hat and a bulky jacket. “Hullo, Weebu?”

“Huh?” They both look perplexed.

“Weebu? I’m here to fix your TV?”

“Huh? Did Jack call you?”

“I, um. I’m not sure who called. Is there a problem with your TV?”

“No, we’re fine, thank you. Not interested.” Mrs. Jenkins starts closing the door. “Oh, um. OK.” He checks an electronic device hanging off his belt.

She locks the door. Scammers. But she’s safe now, let’s unwind with some TV. The TV! She flings the door back open. The technician is walking to his van, ‘Weebu’ printed on the side. “Wait!”

The technician’s hard hat is tall in her kitchen. His boots seem misplaced; they belong outside. She escorts him to the TV, then runs and hides in her bedroom to listen through the wall. She can see his boots on her white carpet, see him laying down plastic sheets and getting out strange, sharp tools. She hears a thud—probably putting holes in her wall with a hammer, covering all her memories in a fine, white dust. Probably using her bathroom, calling his friends and laughing at her in strange languages.



Everything is quiet. Mrs. Jenkins peeks her head out. The walls are intact, and there’s no dust. “Hello?” She looks around, but nothing seems to be stolen. She turns the corner into the kitchen and bumps into the technician. “Oh!”

“Hey, sorry. Didn’t mean to scare ya.” Mrs. Jenkins has her hand on her chest. “Um, so you’re all set, it was just the remote. There weren’t any batteries,” he smiles sheepishly. “Oh.”

He picks up the remote and turns on the TV. “There ya go! Call us if you have any problems, alright?”

She nods slowly into the La-Z-Boy. He hands her the remote and heads out. “Wait!” cries Mrs. Jenkins. He turns around. “Uhh...well...do you have the time?”

The technician checks his watch. “About 1:30.”

“Thank you! Thank you.” He smiles and leaves. She can’t think of something else to say. The TV is playing some sitcom she doesn’t recognize. The front door thuds. “Jack?”

Beginning Again by Nathan Perrin

Brushing cobwebs off my memories,
I find a stubborn, glowing ember.

It's been some time since
I've seen that hidden glow.

I put pieces of my wreckage on the spark,
and watch the fire start slowly.

The cobwebs evaporate in smoke,
and I see the remaining damage clearer.

The flames dancing from the ashes
and surprising warmth remind me that

none of us are our failures, and
none of us are our worst moments.

The spark never truly dies.
The fire inside burns still.

We All Know by Amber Deamer

You run and fall
And the sudden shock of it all
Overwhelms you until

Someone can come
Check you for bumps
"Uh oh" your uh ohs away

And once they say
That you're okay
You're ready to run again

FOR GOOD MEASURE by Laura Cesarco Eglin

I write in some grey clouds. Always
needed at this time of year when
Houston can't let go
of summer. We wish there was an
equivalent for *florid* to spell out
the change in colors that autumn
suggests, and the multiplicity of
leaves. Maybe if we wrote more
letters. Maybe if we focused on
how heavy a cloud really is,
there'd be a breeze to move them
onto the city to see
the alphabet seasoned into real.



untitled
by Claudia
Wysocky

On My Morning Subway Commute, I think of Ensenada, Mexico
by Sean Sutherland

Under a glowing green and white striped umbrella, a tall wooden table stands with lemons and limes cut in half, homemade hot sauce in a clay bowl, and a large cluster of oysters covered in barnacles, roseate banded limpets, and dried green sea hair- all of it fossil-like and ancient looking.

I join three men. The owner of the stand between their jokes and stories tells me, “These three are the greatest wooden shipwrights in the country.” They nod. With nowhere we need to be, and nothing we need to do- all of us give over to the bright morning: a seagull’s call- a rusted echo, the fishing boat sounding its old school-bus horn as it leaves the harbor. We look up at the sky after we eat an oyster to savor the taste. Though, they flip the empty shells to inspect the insides which they must have done hundreds of times to watch the sky rinse the iridescence of an ocean sun shower in the pearly finish.

The subway brakes screech. I lurch sideways. The engines shut off, the air-conditioning exhales one last breath into silence.

For a long time, I do not know who I am, or where I am going, until the clink of shell against shell becomes the slow tick of cooling metal.

LINEARITY by Laura Cesarco Eglin

The tense for joy is not
on a timeline. The tautness
of tension sometimes can
make things brittle. And I
make sure the clothesline
is a bit loose. Let the wind
make it become the sky.
Much like what I do
to my skin and
wrinkles: declare the
full range of tenses in
this
letting go.

I find joy—so out of synch,
out of time. I wander
about, searching
where to pinpoint
the lines I can't break.
My hand grabs onto
the illusion that I can
have a grip on joy.

Segments as almost

lines, ongoing, and
mostly present.

The Good News by Terry Trowbridge

about the way the grass was being waves, how we broke the world after we made it
-A line from the poem "The Last Romantic" by John Ashbery.

We made the grass out of waves.
Later, we broke the news to a shepherd.
Not that we explained to him
the way that The Chaos was wrapped around The Firmament
and that the shepherd's people would one day call that "Gravity,"
just barely before they would learn how return the atom to The Chaos...

I am digressing. You see, I broke the news.
Later, I broke a seal. One of many.
I tend to think of them as one event.
One missionary on one mission.
My single mindedness about the way he sat in the grass
and the wind that moved the grass,
two attitudes of creation, sitting and waving,
the shepherd and the grass.

They did not bend in the gravity
but rather they bent in the wind.
The shepherd's people, they would end up believing that gravity was real,
more real, even, than the wind.
The wind, to them, would be just circumstantial.
Gravity, the them, would be universal.
The shepherd was just beginning to make the same mistakes.
To him, the orbits of planets, the movements of stars,
carried messages of destiny. He stopped listening to the wind.
That is why I had to break the news.
Trumpeting.

Adronitis by Devahuti Chaliha

From my safe sheltered cocoon in this life,
I break out so tentatively at last.
Brown culture had taught me to toil and strife,
To stick to my books and ambitions fast.

How long it takes to get to know someone!
I am too busy trying to be good.
Head over heart, no silliness or fun -
Like a strong independent woman should.

You come premature as a miracle -
In the luck of time and place, I had no
Fortune free to breathe, not a spiracle.
You will be with another, I bet so.

For within the time it takes to know you,
I will be left like dusk on morning dew.

Wormy Squirmy by BJ Thoray

Because he had become so enamored with Dolores, Gus failed to notice that she had turned into a maggot until one night at a party when she excused herself to go suck at the host's recently deceased pet bunny that was still out in the yard.

Gus tried to listen to her politely but excitedly explain the opportunity as his eyes hovered her body in the tight, little black dress she'd worn to dinner.

"It'll just be a moment. You sure you don't mind?"

It was still early days, and Gus believed her when she said it would only be a moment. It's not that Dolores had lied. This was relatively new for her as well, and she'd scarcely expected to spend as much time sucking and gnawing on the necrotic flesh as she did.

Gus had tried with the party. After she'd excused herself, he'd made small talk, fidgeted in a corner awkwardly, taken up a conversation with another well-meaning party guest, and used the toilet, but, after more than ten minutes, he went looking. He wasn't annoyed, just awkward.

Sure enough, she was out in the yard, on all fours, face tucked into what resembled a rabbit at the edges but was very much blood, gut, and rot as you moved inward. The rabbit's eyes were open. Dolores wasn't the only maggot there. She was sharing the carcass with two others, and it's likely this was a first-come, first-served sort of deal. She looked up at him as he stepped onto the grass and flashed him a toothy, blood-stained smile. He looked down her dress as she lowered her head back down, and then he found a spot to stand in the yard making small talk with someone whose date had also become a maggot while sipping a drink and watching his partner's feed. When she'd finished, she went to clean up. They chatted a bit with the yard folk then went back to his and made love. Gus fancied himself sophisticated, but the rutting itself was sloppy and passionate. Dolores wriggled and writhed under him; mouth open with flecks of rabbit viscera still on her human teeth.

“What makes a good lover?” Gus thought to himself after. He was less concerned with Dolores the Maggot than what being with Dolores reflected of him. Dolores stirred in bed and lifted her head up. They kissed, and she got up to go to the trash bin for her breakfast.

“Fascinating,” Gus thought.

Gus’ affection for Dolores had begun pre-maggot, and he briefly wondered if she was the same person or, more importantly, the version of her that Gus had fallen so hard for to begin with. He buried the thought and strolled into the office with a jolly gait.

“Okay, what if it actually looked like one?”

“You mean what if *he* or *she* or *they* looked like an actual grub?”

“Yeah?”

“Then I dunno. Guess I’d have to see.”

Gus found the conversation amusing. He got up to go to the breakroom, intentionally passing by their desks.

“Hey Gus, what do you think?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, Gus, would you get with that?” Andy chimed in.

“Well, gentlemen,” Gus said clearing his voice, “I’m not ashamed to tell you that I’ve been seeing a grub. Now it all began before that, but she’s wonderful.”

“What does she look like? Has she turned?”

“Oh, oh no,” he chuckled knowingly, “she’s very much in her feminine form.”

“So, she’s human?” Andy asked impatiently.

“Oh, yes, ha ha,” Gus said.

Shelly, overhearing their conversation, chimed in: “There’s this cute grub guy, but he’s different. I talked to someone who went on a date with him, and she said all he wanted to do was eat shit. Garbage too.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. That’s why I’m mostly going to house parties these days.”

“How long til one of us turns?” Jim asked.

“Or this office gets one?” Andy added.

“The sooner the better, I say,” Gus said. “We could use someone to eat up some of the shit around here.”

“What’s her name? Your lady?” Andy asked.

“Dolores,” Gus beamed. “We’d crossed paths and had been flirting. But this was the first truly romantic…”

“Aww, that’s adorable,” Shelly said. “I bet you two are so cute together.”

Gus thought about it. Everyone was curious about them at the party, and they did balance each other out in a way that Gus couldn’t quite put his finger on but, in his own way, felt truly deeply. The rest of the day wafted like a breeze. Before Gus knew it, he was going home for the weekend. Alice and he had plans to spend it together though she warned him that she might be darker, in mood, dress, and overall hue – it wasn’t her skin color, but the overall level of vividness that emanated from her body. She also said there might be molting.

Unlike other grubs he’d heard about, Alice didn’t have any problem functioning in restaurants. She knew, and they’d discussed, the contexts in which eating garbage was okay, and she was fine to continue consuming human food and liquor.

“Figure that,” Gus thought, “she’s getting the best of both worlds.”

“Do you spend a lot of time with others?” Gus asked at the restaurant that night.

“Mostly just when feeding. It’s still new. But, you know, there’s not that much of a group mentality to it because most people don’t want to be seen that way, you know?” she said.

“That’s interesting.”

“Some people are more open about it, but frankly, it’s just part of who I am. It’s something I like to do, you know, or that’s part of my life. But it doesn’t define me. Some people do try to make it their identity though, and I think that’s sad.”

“Do you like going to restaurants?” Gus wondered.

“It’s fun. You know, I’m used to it. Though it probably wouldn’t be my first choice if we were just going out now, but it’s our thing, right?”

“We can do other things. I mean, you still like human food, right?”

“Yeah, um, it’s fine,” she paused in thought. Her face lit up and she excitedly said, “but shit and guts and all that is so fucking good! It’s amaaazing! So good. Mmmmm.”

“Oh, huh.”

“And it’s good for the environment,” Alice blurted out.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Gus asked with concern.

“No, it’s okay. We can finish up.”

Through his channels, Gus had come to hear about another party that wasn’t just grub-friendly but actually human/grub co-centric. Gus hadn’t been sure what this meant, and having wanted it to be a surprise, didn’t dare mention it to Alice. When he got there, he understood. Various areas of the property had dead animals, rotten fruit, and assorted garbage.

Gus posted up with Alice on his arm, and they held a sort of mini-court in one part of the kitchen. It was only until one person brought up the basement that it all got interesting.

“You haven’t heard?” Willis whispered between the three of them.

“No,” Gus said, “do tell.”

“They have a basement full of the goods. Like a lair. Just waiting till all the mini spots are gobbled up, then the party’s really going to start.”

From then on, Alice was distracted while Gus still mingled and smarmed. Finally, she induced the moment they all knew was coming.

“Hey handsome, I’m going to go check out the snack piles.”

“Oh, um, okay,” Gus tried not to look plussed.

“Come find me in a bit,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

Gus flashed the circle a smile. Willis stepped in.

“Now that yours is gone man, take one of these.”

Gus took the nondescript pill and chased it down with his wine.

“What is it?” he asked.

“And this. Lean your head back. They work together. Trust me.”

Willis’ hand crossed Gus’ face. He grabbed his left eye and gently held it open. With his other hand, he squeezed a dropper into Gus’ eye.

“They feed. We see,” Willis said.

“See what?” Gus asked.

“You’ll see,” one of Willis’ friends, an ashy blond with an angry face and soft voice, giggled. “No, really, it’s great. You know, maggots respond to light and odors.”

“That makes sense,” Gus smirked.

“You’re going to see your world in a whole new way tonight.”

Figuring that time enough had passed, they went to look for their ones. They made it up to the second floor and were heading through the crowded hallway when Alice came running toward them laughing and out of breath.

“There you are,” she said, kissing him sloppily. She’d tried to have a wash but had left bits of shit and junk around her mouth in her frenzy. Gus told himself he didn’t mind. By the time they’d gotten downstairs and out to the garden for air, Gus was iffy on whatever Willis had given him. He felt slower, calm, sure, but also like he was underwater.

“Are you tired? Do you want to leave?” Alice asked him at one point. He knew, it was obvious, too obvious, that she didn’t want to leave.

“No way,” Willis said. “You can’t leave before we make it down to the basement.”

Once basement time came, Gus understood. Alice, to her credit, didn’t rush down, and she was still able to find a feeding point. She walked into the fray and then hunched herself on it, unhinging hooks from her mouth that Gus hadn’t ever seen or felt. As the feed grew, Willis and his crew guided Gus up the basement stairs. Before Gus realized, the whole area where they’d been standing was covered in maggots feeding.

The room radiated heat, and Gus saw one of the maggots in the heap stop eating, go limp, spasm then freeze. Before he could point it out, Alice was upon the body.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” the ashy blond said. It was. It truly was. It was a hypnotic symphony of movement, fetid and putrid and rancid. The moistness of the digestive enzymes secreting from them hung in the air as Gus, Willis, and the rest of the human lot gaped at each other in awe, transfixed in the wriggling and masticating of the stank tempest.

“It really is miraculous,” the ashy blond said.

“What’s that?” Willis said softly.

“This. Now. It’s like they just came out of nowhere, and now we have this,” they said.

Gus knew what they meant. The drugs worked. In the wriggling he saw colors and tones he'd never seen. He breathed in the smells of death, rat shit, pomplemousse, and despair. He saw man and creature merge, vegetarian turn cannibal, matter come to nothing in buzzes and bits.

Eventually, everyone in that basement was a filthy heap of mess and smell, the maggots covered in their oily, greasy digestives and the humans in sweat and grime caked on their skin. When it'd all been devoured and even the walls had been licked of mess, the humans picked their maggots up off the floor, spent and exasperated as they all were, and carried them home. Gus and Alice more or less spent the weekend in bed, except for showers and meals. She'd bring in some trash, and he'd order food or have the remains of the last takeout, and they'd sit on the couch watching their streams, alternately gobbling then nestling until they'd retire to bed.

That Monday, Gus returned to work and realized that the office now had its first maggot and then some. He walked into the kitchenette and saw a group of them at the table, gorging themselves on a spread of horrid rot, including banana peels.

"I heard they're a government experiment gone wrong," Andy said.

"My gran says they're god's wrath," Jim said.

"That's horrible," Shelly jabbed them. "They're here to work, just like the rest of us. Like you two are any better. They might eat shit but at least they're not talking it."

"Har har," Andy mocked. "Hey, Gus, how's it? Good weekend?"

"Yeah, it was great," he said. "I had a blast."

"What do you think the deal is?" Jim asked. "What causes some people to turn but not others? It's bizarre."

"I don't know," Gus said. "Maybe it doesn't matter."

"I heard it's epigenetics. Something has to trigger them," Andy said.

"Sure, Andy. Always with the epigenetics," Shelly rolled her eyes.

Gus went off to his desk but forgot to ask Shelly about the time report. Having doubled back, he caught them unaware.

“Finally, he has something that makes him not a total fucking bore,” Andy said.

Gus tip-toed backwards and went to the bathroom. He waited five minutes then found Shelly at her desk.

“What’s the deal with Andy?” Gus said. “He’s super negative.”

“You know some people,” Shelly said. She leaned in, “Between you and me, I think he’s worried. They’re so productive, and he’s a bit of a shit isn’t he?”

“Oh no,” Gus said. “If they sack him Jim might die of loneliness.”

They both chuckled. “I asked out that grub guy,” Shelly volunteered.

“Oh yeah? Congrats!” Gus offered.

“Thanks,” she said. The word trailed off, betraying her confidence.

“Did it not go well?”

“It didn’t then it did,” she said. “At first, he was reluctant, but he changed his mind. Like, he had to think about it in real time. But we had a date and it was good. Do they always seem kinda sad, or distracted, to you?”

“No. Not Dolores. She’s a ball of life. Have you seen him feed? I feel like that’s where they come alive.”

“Yeah,” Shelly said. “Just teeming with energy.”

“Hey, about that time report...”

Around lunch, Shelly and Gus went to the breakroom together.

“It reeks of trash in here,” Jim said.

“All these maggots are stinking the place up!” Andy added.

“Grub!” Gus shouted. “Call them grubs!”

“Actually,” said Kris, newly-turned and newly-hired, “the term maggot is fine. It’s a colloquial term anyway. Grub sometimes makes me feel like food, or bait.”

“But doesn’t it sound coarse?” Gus asked. “Like mean and dismissive.”

“Not to us,” Alex chimed in. “I guess that’s more of a human thing. I know that’s part of why grub has become more popular in some circles.”

“Sorry, what do you mean?” Shelly asked.

“It’s very close to a slur humans use,” Kris said. “You know what humans are like.”

“Personally,” Alex said, “I don’t care either way. We can understand that some humans feel uncomfortable with it. They’ve had the other word shouted in their face and screamed at them during violence because, you know, humans.”

“The politics of it,” Kris said, “are really up to you, or for you. That debate doesn’t affect us. Certainly, there are other issues about how we’re treated.”

“So, you really don’t care what you’re called?” Gus was in disbelief.

“Well, we,” Kris said gesturing to himself and Alex, “don’t speak for all maggots, of course. We’d like respect, and honestly, people can add disrespect to the nicest, kindest phrase. I guess it’s not an invitation to call us anything. If you’re going to call us something that’s not our names, we expect it to be done in a respectful, or at least neutral, voice.”

“Why is that on us?” Andy blurted. “Why should we have to tip-toe around you?”

“Not speaking disparagingly of someone just because you can is tip-toeing around?” Alex asked.

“Sometimes,” Andy said bug-eyed and defiant.

“That’s something an asshole would say,” Kris said.

“That’s offensive,” Andy said aggressively.

“But isn’t it part of you? Don’t you have pride in your form?”

“You know damn well what comes out of there!” Andy yelled. “You eat it after all.”

“That’s all we do,” Kris said defensively. “Eat your shit, clean up your garbage, cure your wounds, catch your fish. And then you turn around and talk about how dirty we are.”

“I know,” Alex said. “And I was watching TV the other day, and these people had lit someone on fire just because they were on the street. Then they expect us to eat it all up. That’s just wrong.”

“What’s it like – being you?” Shelly asked suddenly.

“Excuse me?” Kris asked.

“How much of you now has the you before. Are you still, like, Kris from last week but with more or like as this, or are you a new sort of...person?” Shelly continued.

“For me, I noticed the change during a period of blankness. I’d lost interest in a lot of my old hobbies. Maybe it was getting older. I’d had a slew of bad dates and felt like I was dumb for liking some of the stuff that I’d liked when I was younger. I didn’t feel right for a little, and then one day I was just so hungry. I kept eating and couldn’t get full. I kept craving really, like, piquant and zesty and then processed stuff. For weeks I just gorged on processed food. I guess I was lucky because cases were already being documented, but I woke up in the middle of the night just starving and went to the rubbish bin. Started biting into a sloppy take-out box. That was basically it,” Alex said.

“But you know that we don’t like those smells, yeah?” Andy said. “Like, it’s hard to eat around you.”

“Management said we could have breakfast in the breakroom. I guess it was a goodwill gesture. I don’t think we’ll be doing it every day,” Kris said. “This is just a new thing, I guess.”

“Well, I’m going to eat outside today,” Andy said. Aside from Jim, no one acknowledged the comment.

“They just did it so we wouldn’t be sore about the changes to our work plans,” Alex said bitterly. “Don’t worry. No one’s bending over backwards for us.”

“Huh? I haven’t heard about this,” Shelly said.

“They’ve started assigning us the more difficult tasks, the shit ones. They also want us to help reduce waste costs. On top of all of that, they’re making us be the bearers of bad news –telling people they’re getting sacked, doing the calls to cancel contracts. Shit no one else wants to do,” Alex said.

“Not here, but I have a friend who was basically fired after they turned, and instantly the repo people were calling and offering them a job,” Kris said.

“Wow,” Gus said. “I had no idea.” He paused then spoke again, “Actually, I’ve been dating a grub. She didn’t mention any of that.”

“Will you still go out when she fully turns?” Jim asked. His tone was curious and daring.

“If she fully turns,” Gus said. “We’re just having fun.” Gus’s feelings were stronger than he was letting on. He was hoping she might skip it or go straight to the next stage, maybe a butterfly.

Jim and Andy went out for lunch. Shelly and Gus waited for them to leave then left as well. Kris and Alex returned to their desks. Ten minutes later, they both received emails about a dumpster and were requested to join the others in the waste area.

When Gus got home, he told Dolores about the conversation at work.

“Isn’t that ridiculous. Some people are such jerks,” Gus said proudly.

“I guess that’s people,” Dolores offered. She was quiet.

“I’m going to post about this,” Gus said defiantly. “People need to know it’s not okay.”

“People?” she asked.

“I mean society. It’s not like that,” he said. “Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not wrong. It is exhausting. All the questions sometimes. It’s like, why do you all make such shit if you can’t deal with it yourself. What’s the point of all of this if you’re just going to make more?”

“Did you feel, like, bored or self-conscious before you turned?” Gus asked. After he finished talking, he realized that he was unsure if he wanted the answer.

“I guess I felt kinda dumb. Maybe lost. I had someone close to me abuse my trust. It just felt like one thing after another,” Dolores said.

“Do you ever worry about turning...into, like, you know...”

“I don’t think that happens,” she said. “I think this is it, probably. I mean, we haven’t seen anybody turn into a gnat or a fly or any of that shit. I think it’s a nice thought. Beautiful.”

“Beautiful?”

“Beautiful to become something else, something more than a universal symbol of decay and rot that simultaneously makes humans grossed out but also benefits them tremendously.”

“But you remember how you used to feel about maggots and flies, right?” Gus asked.

“But now it’s like I have an extra perspective. Or more perspective. If that makes sense. I mean, we all had the science, but now I experience it,” Dolores said.

“Would you change back? If you could?”

“I...” she stopped and looked to the side. She was deep in thought and remained silent for several moments. When she spoke again, she didn’t look directly at Gus. “...don’t know.

Sometimes I wish I just wasn't, but that's mostly because of other people. Sometimes I feel like the world I live in, or the society I live in, it just takes and takes, like I'm a separate class of creature that's there to be commented on. For other's benefit."

"Huh?"

"I don't know. I'm not explaining it well. It's like everybody talks about you, but no one wants to talk to you or ask about what you think. You're there to...feed something in them, like enable something for them. Like you, you're there to give them something to argue about. Not you, you know, but everybody."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. When I was 13, I had this bu—"

"It's crazy to listen to some people these days. They act like it's happening to them, like they're so amped up over something that isn't about them. And they say they want to listen, but whenever you do actually get to talk, they just nod and interrupt and assume they know what you mean without even listening."

"I mean, it affects us all," Gus said.

"Yeah, but not in the ways that you're all talking about."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gus felt offended.

"I don't know," Dolores stepped back from the proverbial line. "I didn't mean anything by it. It just feels more like we're just placards for you to talk about yourselves and how you feel and what your attitudes about maggots say about you. I don't know. I dunno."

They didn't argue that night, but Dolores stayed on the couch watching TV after he went to bed. In the office the next day, Gus was met with quite the surprise: Jim alone at his desk.

"Where's your other half?" Gus asked.

He pretended not to hear, but once he looked up and registered the comment, he said, "He's downstairs having breakfast by the dumpsters."

“No way,” Gus said.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I felt bad. I caught him nibbling something in his desk. He was really ashamed. But once I was like, ‘bro, just go feed’ he got some nerve. Hopefully, he’ll feel better after.”

“It’s always the ones you least suspect,” Gus chuckled.

“He needs our support right now,” Jim scolded.

“Oh right,” Gus apologized. “It’s just surprising after how he’s been talking.”

“Really? Right now? This shit?” Jim kept on.

Shelly walked by.

“Shel, did you hear?” Gus asked.

“Hear what?” she said.

“Guess who’s turned.”

“Who? What?”

“Andy’s a grub,” Gus exclaimed.

“I’m a maggot,” Andy said.

“Oh, um, I didn’t see you there,” Gus dialed it back. “Congratulations, man!” Gus slapped Andy on the back. It was obvious that Andy didn’t appreciate the gesture.

“What’s it like?” Gus asked avidly.

“What’s what like?” Andy was standoffish and uncomfortable with Gus’s attention.

“You know, the change?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It’s private,” Andy said.

“Oh,” Gus made eye contact. “I’m sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

It wasn’t a secret, to anyone anymore, that Andy didn’t think much of Gus, and, though he didn’t think about it much, Gus had always thought of Andy as a drag. Still, Gus hadn’t meant to prod. He was just excited and assumed Andy would be proud.

“It’s fine.”

“Thanks for being cool. I didn’t mean to...”

Andy looked at Gus’s face and saw genuine contrition.

“It’s alright. Really.”

“Oh, wow, it’s almost lunch,” Jim butted in to everyone’s gratitude. They all mumbled their exits and returned to their stations.

At the lunch hour, Gus surprised himself, couldn’t help himself, and, after seeing Andy take the elevator down to the dumpsters, followed him down at a distance. He walked through the metallic hall until he got to the entrance of the truck bay. The dumpsters had been moved even farther from the building. From across the parking lot, he could see the maggots squirming among several dumpsters. Their human forms sucked and wriggled at the waste and rot. One popped up and appeared to have clocked Gus. Gus looked down at his phone casually. When he looked up, more were poking their heads above meerkat-like. Gus turned around and left.

As Gus was leaving the office that day, he passed by his senior manager’s office. The door was ajar, and he could hear the manager yelling.

“So what? We’re not taking a complaint.”

“But...” the voice said. “Aren’t we entitled to some privacy?”

“You don’t know what he was doing down there, and even if he likes to watch, so what?”

“Then why can’t we use the breakroom?”

“Because of the smell! Do you want soap and water in your food?”

That night, Dolores declined to come over. She said she had to work late on a project.

Gus watched two episodes of his latest show, the gritty dystopian drama Trash City about a family trying to make it in a post-apocalyptic future where this particular community found shelter in a cave network carved into the nation’s largest garbage dump. After, he went on the socials and into his groups and found a grub/human bowling night with rumors of an afterparty.

Two days before the weekend, the government announced its Waste Reduction Initiative. It was voluntary. That was reiterated. But it involved relocating maggots to different areas with cash incentives to do lucrative but taxing, dirty work. As a result, interactions between maggots in these areas and the broader population would be less.

“How do you respond to claims that the pharmaceutical industry is working with the government to physiologically change people into new digestive services?” a reporter asked.

“That’s ridiculous,” a government spokesperson said. “We’re just as baffled as anyone else as to why that’s happened. We’re working closely with all industries to determine why and what should be done.”

Dolores stayed with him through the weekend. They went bowling and then to the party. At one point Dolores asked why he liked watching her feed.

“It’s a beautiful sight!”

“Even without the chems?”

“Of course,” he said then started to ramble. She wouldn’t look directly at him for the rest of the evening. On Sunday afternoon, she told him that she’d accepted one of the new positions. All she would say was that this was best for both of them, that this wasn’t healthy, that she needed time to understand her new self. The next day, Gus went into the office breakroom and opened a window. Later, at his desk, Andy and Jim approached.

“Hey, um, Gus?” Jim asked, clearly on Andy’s behalf.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Gus responded without looking up.

“Would you sign this petition?” Andy asked. He was holding a clipboard. He leaned forward and put a flier on his desk. “Us grubs have to walk ages to get to our canteen. They intentionally stuck it out further once the new guidance came in. We just want to have our dumpsters at the actual bay or near to it so we don’t have to spend half our lunch walking there and back. All of us, humans and maggots, barely have enough time for lunch as is.”

“Why don’t you take the new jobs?” Gus asked.

“I mean, this is my home. I like working here. I like my coworkers. It’s nice to have the option—” Andy said.

“Must be,” Gus interrupted.

“—but it’s not for everyone.”

“Every grub.”

“Right. Yes, that’s right,” Andy said.

“Look, I’m really busy right now. Maybe ask me later.”

Jim and Andy exchanged sad, worried looks.

“Oh, okay,” Andy said. “Can I leave a flier with you?”

“Sure,” Gus looked down again.

They placed the flier on the corner of his desk and walked away. Once they were out of eyeshot, he crumbled it and tossed it in the bin.

renascence by a. d.

1.

you were half dead and no longer dreaming.
consulting with defunct gods, fragile-boned lovers
only caressable through white cottoned hands.
a fleeting emotion upon the ceaseless
eyes of Alexander, perpetually unfluttering.
she penetrated your coffin of dust and parchment—
a wild light, blazing.
you could see through her skin that her soul was ripe
for picking. witnessed only by eyes unseeing
you touched her throat and her words
were no longer empty.

2.

away from your scholarly prison, sheltered
from the marble eyes of the dead.
she takes you out of your skin, an idol trapped
in a clouded niche and breathes onto you
and her breath is butterfly wings.
she parts the curtains of her body and beckons the exiled sun—
this mausoleum is now flooded with light
and your heart
is no longer empty.

Life by Ramzi Albert Rihani

In suffocation,
numbness rules,
waiting for the sky to clear

Fill me with air,
air so I can breathe and live
and then fill me with life

(BY AN ABANDONED ARCADE) by Rick K. Reut

...in the form of another year,
which you yearn for and fear
at the same time. This time
 rises on a high tide
of dreams before they fade
 by an abandoned arcade
reminding you of the best
times from your distant past.
Covered with morning rime,
 there is a river of time
where the year starts to
end and begin anew...

...in the form of another year, which you yearn for and fear at the same time. This time rises on a high tide of dreams before they fade by an abandoned arcade reminding you of the best times from your distant past. Covered with morning rime, there is a river of time where the year starts to end and begin anew...

Unfinished Exit by Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at

your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.



untitled
by Claudia
Wysocky

The Volcano by Sean Sutherland

In this town above the coast of Italy, it could be
any century in the last dozen.

And since the sea has no landmarks, and the moon
rises in silence over the hills each night
when a little weed shivers in the ancient wall
across from my balcony—something eternal is left
in these stone quiet mornings I belong to
as much as the tiny blue fish that gather at my ankles
or the half-sung prayers I hear at dusk.

Yet, all these tall days collapse as by a ship I round
the curve of a volcanic mountain at twilight.
There, towering above a darkening sea
while my knuckles whiten on the handrail— an eye
where there should be no eye. Its red and slow blink
sees me in its half-sleep, and I am a gnat whirled
across ageless oceans—ecstatic to be seen
by this black giant burning with creation.

Weeks later, home in New York City I describe
to two friends in a restaurant my return that night
with its seagoing clouds bright above mountain
and night ocean, as big as low-lit planets—
their chiaroscuro blanketing the Mediterranean for miles.
When I speak, I do not understand I am saying goodbye
to something vital—a lump forms in my throat.
Both friends look away. My tears loud enough to be
heard hitting the laminated menu. How impossible
to be seized by that kind of terror and beauty again.

It comes first thing in the morning,
and I don't mean when your alarm goes off, I mean
when you wake up for no *god damn reason* and the sky
is just the slightest bit gray and you think *well, shit*
because you know there's no way you're getting back to sleep.
And maybe you make yourself a coffee — because
why the fuck not, you're awake anyways,
and you sit at your computer and try to believe
that those extra hours are some kind of gift —
but they're not, because your brain has been sitting there,
all night, poking at the scab of him until all at once
it comes loose and then you're crying and it makes
no fucking sense because you're *over* that shit —
or maybe you're not crying — your mileage may vary —
maybe it's just that soul-deep knowing that you weren't enough,
and even though you *are* over him, you gave him your
baby heart, wiggled it free and stuck it under your pillow
like a tooth, never wanting it back but expecting something
better to grow in its place. And, sure, you'll have others, but nothing
will ever be as innocent and wholesome as that first baby heart.
You didn't realize you were giving him something irreplaceable.
Not that it would have mattered, you would have given him
your world if he asked for it, baby hearts are like that. And
sometimes you feel the ache of losing it, knowing
he didn't care to keep it safe and warm, and maybe that's on you —
he never promised you forever, but you had a baby heart
and *damn* if it didn't hope. In any case, it's gone now, and
they talk about it like it's a rite of passage.
First loves never last. And *fuck* that shit.
Like sure, maybe it's true, but what they *mean* is that
your grief means less because *we've all been there*,
what they *mean* is that the dull pulsing from the phantom limb
of a baby heart shouldn't wake you up at night, that you shouldn't wonder
why and *what could I have done?* And even though
you don't want him anymore, wouldn't take him back regardless —
maybe you even have someone you love and you feel *so damn guilty*
for thinking of him for a fleeting fucking second, but —

it still *hurts*, dammit. He stole a beautiful dream from you,
even if he didn't mean to. And so you sip your overly sweetened coffee
and watch the sky blush at the memory of all you did together
when things were good, blush in embarrassment, maybe,
at how naive you were. How trusting. And so you sit
at your computer and type the words that can't stay still —
because we all have the potential for a first time, a first love,
and even if you struggle to find a conclusion for the damn poem,
know that the words are worth it, that maybe this is nothing
but an ode to something long-dead, but if one person, anywhere,
wakes up before the ass-crack of dawn and feels seen —
maybe, wherever she is, your baby heart will look down on you
and know that her death was worth something.

Soot by Mann Sy Tha

On my way home from my shift at the local pizza place, I found myself walking in pace with a man. I didn't know who it was at first, having caught up to him from behind. I only saw that the man was covered in soot, as if he had emerged from the heart of Appalachia, or from cleaning at another pizza joint with an even worse oven.

I'd just gotten off my shift, filling in for someone who called out sick. The other person we had that day dropped out last minute over something else that was probably bullshit. Everything was bullshit to my manager though, he was the type who couldn't stick to just one grievance when he got going. First, it was the no-shows, then it was me, because it was my first closing shift and it showed. That was whatever though. I was actually pretty proud that I didn't lose it. Up ahead, I spotted the folded hourglass of a Diet Coke can. My foot brushed past. Didn't even kick it. If

there had been some ember flickering in my core it was easily snuffed out.

I didn't know why I felt such an immediate kinship with the man before me. He wasn't in uniform. I also wasn't aware of any other pizza spots around. I caught up because he walked slowly. He glanced back at me as I was about to pass, and I made sure my hands were languid and visible when a white smile greeted me.

"Reid!" he shouted. Despite the streaks of black against his skin, the coating that flattened his curls, I recognized my childhood friend Anthony. He was beaming at me, and in a rush I was smiling back at him.

"Reid? My guy, where you been bro?"

"Here the whole time, I should be asking you the same thing."

We were walking side by side now. Anthony kept on.

“How you been? Haven’t been getting into any trouble have ya?”

“Ah, I haven’t been,” I said. “Keeping my head down, haven’t done anything stupid in a while.”

“Yeah?” he asked, “I see that uniform! Mind slipping me a slice sometime?” “If I could slip anything it wouldn’t just be a slice of pizza, I’ll tell you that.” He laughed and swung his hand out as if to clap me on the back. In my mind’s eye I saw a cloud of black particles flying out onto my cheeks and all against my sides. Then his hand fell, following the arc of his arm, back the way it came to slap his thigh. Between street lamps still unactivated, I paused, wondering if a black cloud did puff out. It was on the cusp of winter, a quarter past 6 p.m, and the dimming light was weak. It trembled slightly, holding aloft, far from my eyes, like a poorly tuned magnifying glass, a grainy filter where edges become suggestions and any minutia was a smear, the mere impression of shadows in the dark.

Anthony was still chattering, talking all about the trouble we’d get up to when we were young. “Oh, and what the hell did we do to get Mrs. Ishee cussing us out? She wasn’t even teaching us that year, right? Was it seventh grade? No…”

The way he trailed off I figured he’d realized.

“Sixth, maybe,” I said. I didn’t want to leave him hanging despite myself. “Nah man, cause remember? That was the summer before I left.”

Unconsciously, my hand felt for my pocket. “Yeah? Why did you end up leaving by the way?”

“Fuck if I know, my parents couldn’t make up their minds right up until the day we moved. We didn’t even get a van or nothing, just tossed out half our shit and took like eight

trips for the rest.”

“Ah, crazy shit man.”

“Yeah, insane.”

“Can’t believe we survived that.”

“Yeah.”

We had been walking, I remember a fine sheen of sweat on both our foreheads that gleamed in the summer sun. We’d just hopped the wireframe fence, that was why Mrs. Ishee was screaming, and we were still laughing minutes out, caught up cracking jokes, when some guy almost ran into us. He was brisk and we barely dodged opposite ways as he cut through. Lightly jarred, but still laughing.

I remember the man’s neck, covered not in an even perspiration but a web of striations, the rivulets flowing down to contour his jugular. His hands were in his hoodie pocket and his eyes were a bit wide when we heard a tire screech. The man’s hands left his pockets and the sidewalk around us popped. Then we were running, our backpacks bouncing as the bullets ricocheted past from the street and I tripped amidst the shouts and revving of engines, my forehead slamming into the concrete. Everything rang so close and loud. When I looked up, Anthony was a dark silhouette rounding the corner. I couldn’t see his face. He didn’t look back.

I didn’t see him the rest of that summer. When he didn’t turn up the first week of classes I asked around and heard his folks had moved out up north, been planning to for a while. He’d never told me, and now he was telling me he had so many chances. He’d had eight opportunities, eight back and forths of escalating goodbyes, eight moments looking in the rearview mirror of his parent’s beat up Honda to maybe wonder, maybe think back on... maybe I was being harsh. The results were the same. I thought about that summer, how as far as I was

concerned we'd never meet back up, never face each other again, and I was left alone to contend with what remained. I didn't walk past that spot again. It was easy not to, that stretch of sidewalk wasn't an efficient route anywhere I wanted to go since. And if it was, what was another block? We were walking, I alongside him, veering off a couple blocks from my usual route. I realized that we were close to that cracked sidewalk, our route running a block parallel. It was dark and I wasn't scared. Shootouts were rare and no one was out for me. I knew that, just as I felt now this heated sense of inevitability. It was a feeling you carried within. One you grew up with, and its presence or void can always be marked.

That summer I became a furnace, one that continued to burn for years. I'd sent his afterimage, that stupid fourteen year old, all the hatred and resentment I could. It choked me. It burned itself out years ago, still incomplete, whatever was left blackened and insubstantial but downright carcinogenic. Whenever I felt that acrid burn in my lungs I scrubbed deep into the recesses, scraped all the stubborn, ugly bits off. I'd put in the work. It should've been enough. Anthony was looking at me from the side. "You alright, man?"

Why did he look meek now, his mouth shut as if he were leaving it up to me how I should react. I took a breath, felt the air expand in my lungs like bellows fanning the flame. I stopped under a light, and Anthony paused to look back at me. He was picking up more soot. It fell onto him, drenched his outline, obscuring him into just shadow. It covered him, piling up all on his shoulders and the top of his head, in the spaces behind his ears. In the growing silence, I really wondered how I'd known it was him. A shadow and an outline, words that should've come but wouldn't.

Anthony stood before me now. How was it that we had been talking this long, wrapped up in an immediate familiarity, and it was only at this point I felt I recognized him?

The street lights flickered. I felt the urge to shake his hand, to dap him up, to wring his neck, to shove him as we did when we were young and the streets glowed with new life.

without him in it.

At first, maybe, it's nothing
but being alone in the dark. But
the dark, she's an old friend,
one you've forgotten but
who welcomes you back with
the soft comfort of solitude.

You close your eyes and sink
into that sensation, feel
the warmth around you.

And for once you don't have
to worry that your you-ness
is showing. You can slough
the tension and the pressure
of being *just so* like shedding
an overly restrictive mask.

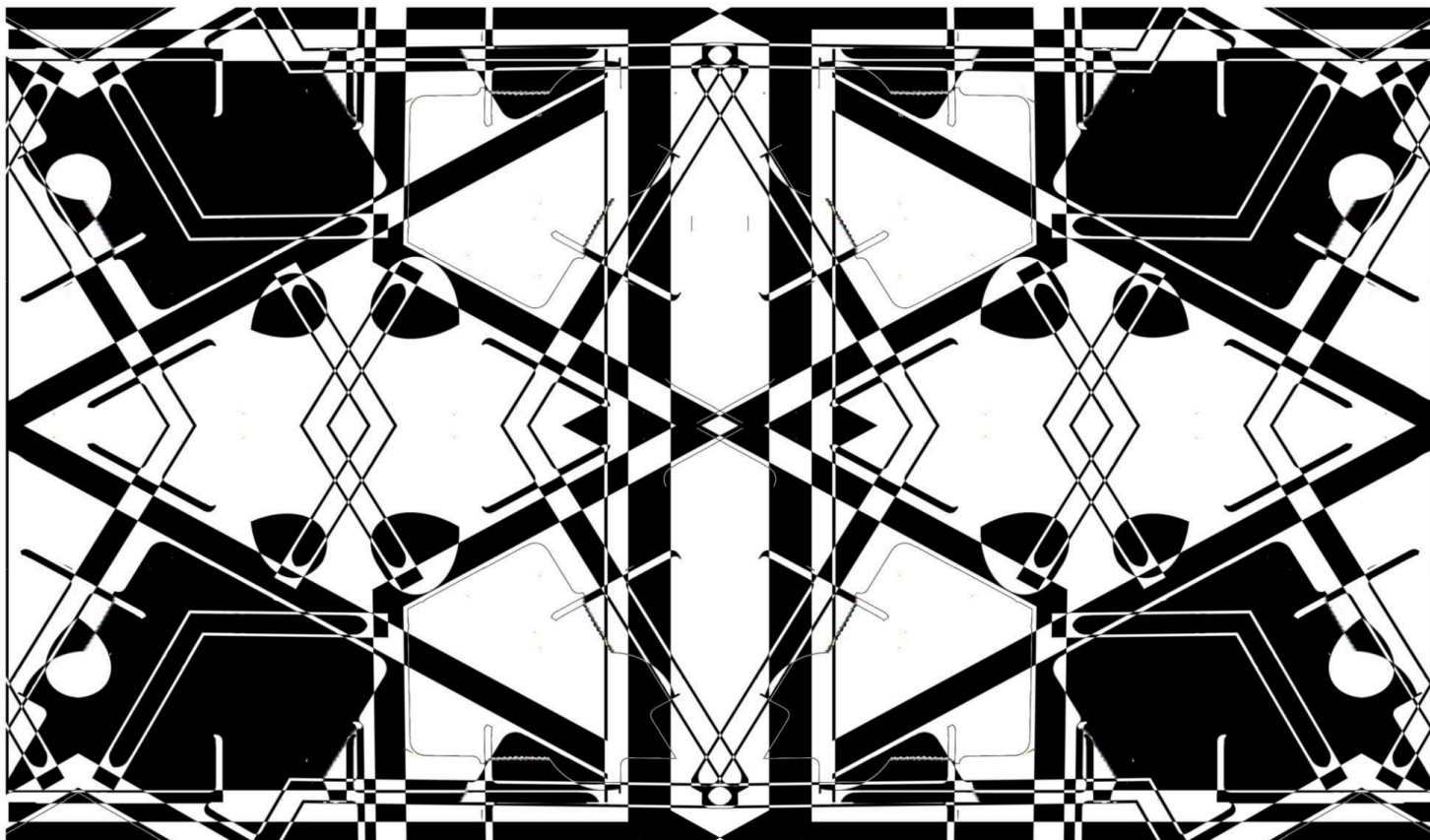
You can breathe again.

You can *be* again.

A cat butts his head against
your hand, another kneads
your chest — because of course
they have reclaimed you as their own.

They do not disrupt the solitude,
simply soften it around the edges.

You reach for the book next to you,
and pick up the story, waiting
right where you left it.



adayinthecity25 by
Edward Supranowicz

Finding My Voice by John Swofford

the first time I raced a girl, my muscles
opposed me (I have the slow twitch kind)
and she beat me by a mile;
It's no consolation, either, if you cannot
run a mile—I quit the world of sports,

and turned to love after a while.
I turned, also, to the sauce—
stories about my ancestors
made me want to be like them,

when I first learned, however,
that they were ruthless rakes to boot,
I felt that I'd been had—evil,
I know, had taken root.
there are two kinds of people in this world:

the doers and the storytellers,
and, should you ask, I'd save my skin,
and observe the state you found me in,
drunk and mocking my closest friends.

Forty ounces of beer, for that,
sure made the people laugh—
they were happy that I was acting out
they knew, all along, that I was disturbed

the men, now, that I am meant to be
do not resemble this reality;
I'm as clean as a whistle—the greatest
storyteller that, as a poet, I can see

God, As We Understand Him by Nathan Perrin

(Step Three from AA: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.")

I sip coffee and watch
the leaves change and fall.

The night before at the meeting,
a friend wondered if prayers worked.

I thought long and hard
about it this morning.

Yes, I *think*. Prayer works.
But not in the way we want.

And thank God for that.
If I got my way, I wouldn't be here

watching trees turn color, waiting to see
their resurrection in Spring.

Just like last night
talking to my friend.

I.

I step into the first girl like a cathedral long collapsed, spine arched in the undergrowth. Roots hover like a nervous system congealed in its flesh. In her chest cavity, where the saints used to live, I find her voice in a pewter chalice, tasted iron and hymns behind her teeth. My hands close around offerings turned brittle. God watches in silence for centuries. All these things you think he's saying. I leave barefoot, communion still in my mouth, trying not to look back in case the altar opens its eyes.

II.

I fall through the second girl like scaffolding, her room is ladders and rope, unfinished floors. Under construction. All of this hanging there. She says she doesn't know how to come down. How to unhook the years from her harness and let them slide down the beams. Don't look down. There's nothing to see. Time tightens its bolts, all its histories choked in the wrong throat, always building up. She sews the blueprints to herself, tattooing her skin blue with the diagrams of paths not taken.

III.

I drink the third girl like stagnant water, left too long in a glass by the bed. She steeps there—sediment, eyelashes, dust motes like sperm in dimlight. I swallow her slowly, let her sour under my tongue. She is thinking of her daughter, and her daughter, and her daughter, and her daughter. Genealogies before the mold set in. They don't remember her. She asks for a mouth. I have to rehearse the anatomy: red crescents, ripped fingernails, half-moons like the rind of a blood orange. She learns to speak again by listening to what survives.

L'usurpateur by Chelsea Allen

The piano riff you play, mama, twists my insides into grievous knots, but ears pressed to the soft, tickling grass, I am, as ever, immovable. The clouds are from a Monet painting, despite you, so are the water lilies. So am I. But today, in a disparate act, you don't free me. The riff loops, insatiably, and the colours – we drip. So I tear out the grass. Dig into the earth that's been housing your notes. They louden. They bring down the sky, burn out my flesh, snake around my bones, crack them. But still I dig. Still, I dig.

Emerging Adulthood by Rowan Tate

God catches on my teeth and gets stuck in my molars as I
go up the escalator through Bakerloo's esophagus, choked

up into the kind of Thursday with an unfinished
face. I want to ask my mother

why she made me, if she ever imagined
me collecting all my selves from the five o'clock shadows

that open in the streets like thighs, more out of instinct
than desire. The days

sit on me like sweat-wet sheets and
time watches me

taste the colors change in people's faces. I can feel
God's breath drying my skin, losing patience.



untitled
by Claudia
Wysocky

Good that I don't remember being born by Akhila Kumaran

No doubt it wasn't even dawn.
No stars watching from across the sky,
No angels singing for good old me.
And while I want to search for the start,
Before I was borrowed and passed around,
Every beginning feels borrowed still,
Every step—someone else's dawn.
Good that I don't remember being born.

SOMEDAY MY BEES WILL COME TOO by Annelies Mohle

sitting criss-cross applesauce,
a tickle in my basket—
a slight scurry on my thigh
I move my leg and gently sigh
only a blade of grass

sitting, safe, in my burrow
a light caress along my elbow
it feels like legs, it feels like feet
I look over, what do I see
a stand of hair below

if one day it arrives
a beetle, fly, or ladybug
I hope my hands are soft and wise
and my arms rug-ly snug

Someone Searches for How the Story's Ending Arrived
by Sean Sutherland

Summer afternoon. The house so still.
Red crab legs hang over a pot
abandoned at the table.

One on top, with claws raised
looks to the ceiling for rain.

Mother, sister, and brother have gone
swimming. An osprey flies in a straight line
too quickly for hunting fish.

How plentiful the flounder seem
the father and children fish for

with string wound around the crook
of their fingers to feel first their breath
pulse on the line before the pull.

The lap of small waves along the boat again.
Wind cuts through the warm iodine air

carrying the earthy fume of oak, and it is fall
sending notice when sister and brother
will enter the long drift of hours

where a bell rang and became years.
On the porch outside, pages of a book left out

turn faster, slow in reverse, then fast again
as if someone searches for
how the story's ending arrived.

imitation of grief by Fray Narte

my uncle died of covid-19; this is the first thing i know after not seeing him for weeks,
and that his body burned faster than it could heal.

auntie and mom and grandma, they now pray to a white god standing small behind my
tito's urn,

he does not speak our tongue, he squints as our deep brown skin blends perfectly
with the color of his urn in a sea of urns, none as lively as the next.

in my room, i wonder how all of his 200 bones can fit inside something so small.

how can the weight of his whole life not break its base?

tita and *mama* and *lola* pray to a white god every afternoon but he looks past,
walks past them, spares not a single sight at my uncle's urn.

somehow, so do i.

the prayers are just murmurs, indistinguishable, trapped inside the small hut;
they fester like mold in its neglected walls, carelessly renovated
with peeling wallpapers from shopee and election tarpaulins with wide-smiling
politicians.

from my room, i cannot hear my *tita's* cries, nor my cousins',
maybe they are all swimming inside the urn, well-kept away from me.

do i have space for all this grief?

when i have no urn to hold, i only have my chest and this idea of death, so immaterial —
it floats around and pokes my ribs, well-kept away from them, *i mourn too*, i want to say
but god forbid these words come out, admittedly laughable in their futility.

what have i lost to house this grief, well-stitched in my bones: a washed-out facsimile in
comparison,

small and intimate like my thumb ghosting over my pulse, yet as omnipresent as a god
with no name, no shape, no thin, definite neck for me to grab and strangle, in despair,
until it finally lets go of mine.

and so i write this poem as a sorry imitation of their mourning,
a borrowed echo of their grief

should i be hoping that it is?

First Line by Paul Hostovsky

In the end of days what you need is a good first line.
To distract you from the truth with its own truth.
The way pain can sometimes distract from pain.
The way beauty can sometimes distract from pain.
The way a good bedtime story can light up the dark
side of an entire planet, given a little room
with a bed in the corner, a few right words, a child
listening. In the end of days what you need is a good
beginning. Something hopeful and trembling like a tongue.
Something open and unselfconscious like a mouth,
while listening to the words, and the music of the words.
Something steeply rocking like a ship, or a sleep, heavy,
floating, viable, smelling of saltwater and infinite possibility.



untitled
by Claudia
Wysocky

Author Biographies

Sean Sutherland is the recipient of The James Dickey Prize for poetry for 2025/2026, awarded by Five Points Literary journal. He has had poems published in the literary magazines: Atlanta Review, The Florida Review, The Sandhills Literary magazine, Hypertext, The Sky Island Journal, among others along with the 30th anniversary anthology; The Writers Studio at 30, He was nominated for a Pushcart by the literary magazine Sleet in 2019. He was also nominated for a 2023 Pushcart Prize by its panel of guest editors. He is also published in an anthology titled, Poetry for the Actor- A Guide to Deeper Truth. Sean would like to find more time for camping in a tent!

Amber Deamer is a poet from Utah who has found a passion for poetry despite her love of math. She is currently working towards a BS in Applied Math with a minor in Chemistry. Her poetry has been featured in the broadside graffiti press Meow Meow Pow Pow under the title 'Please for the love of God someone tell me the name of this song' and can also be found in the Moonstone Arts Center Banned Books 2024 Anthology.

Simon Kaeppli is a scientist, educator, and writer. His work was published in Better Than Starbucks, Spark to Flame, Discretionary Love, Down in the Dirt, and Carmina Magazine, among others. He currently lives in Scotland.

Carol Coven Grannick is a poet and children's author, with publications in a variety of children's and adult literary magazines, and a novel in verse, REENI'S TURN, that debuted in 2020 from Regal House Publishing.

Ben Nardolilli is a theoretical MFA candidate at Long Island University. He writes poetry, prose, and the occasional political flotsam and jetsam. In his spare time, he likes to go to a law firm and edit documents related to asbestos litigation. Occasionally they pay him for this. Follow his publishing journey at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com.

Devahuti Chaliha is just finishing off her Neuroscience PhD, and can't wait to finally learn how to be a normal human. So she's learning how to adult, which now includes lugging along the postdoc extension of her project like a clingy child. Between gleefully experimenting on humans, she loves historical detective novels and logic puzzles. Her occasional escape tactics involve

singing, casting, graphic design, charity work, and literally flying away (on a plane). She watches horror movies for a laugh, and is equally merciless towards violators of human rights.

Claudia Wysocky, a Polish writer and poet based in New York, is known for her diverse literary creations, including fiction and poetry. Her poems, such as "Stargazing Love" and "Heaven and Hell," reflect her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions. Besides poetry, she authored "All Up in Smoke," published by "Anxiety Press." With over five years of writing experience, Claudia's work has been featured in local newspapers, magazines, and even literary journals like WordCityLit and Lothlorien Poetry Journal. Her writing is powered by her belief in art's potential to inspire positive change. Claudia also shares her personal journey and love for writing on her own blog, and she expresses her literary talent as an immigrant raised in post-communism Poland.

CJ The Tall Poet is an editor, poet, digital artist, and author based in Chula Vista, California who recently graduated from Cal State University San Marcos with a bachelors degree in Literature and Writing. Their writing has appeared in The Drabble, Shortkidstories.com, The Amazine, Backpatio.press, Fivefleas, Bardics-Anonymous, Nap-lit, Dadakuku, Coalition-works, Journal of Expressive Writing, End of the World Publishing, The Skrews Syndication, Redrosethorns, and elsewhere.

Mahaille (she/her/hers) is a writer based in New York City. She is a fan of the short and sweet prose and tries to find the space to joke around within her work.

Laura Cesarco Eglin is a poet and translator from Uruguay. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including the chapbooks *Between Gone and Leaving—Home* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Time/Tempo: The Idea of Breath* (PRESS 254, 2022). Her poems and translations (+from the Spanish, Portuguese, Portuñol, and Galician) have appeared in many journals such as *Asymptote*, *Zócalo: Public Square*, *Figure 1*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Copper Nickel*, *SRPR*, *International Poetry Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Timber*, and more. Cesarco Eglin is the translator of *Claus and the Scorpion* by the Galician author Lara Dopazo Ruibal (co•im•press, 2022), longlisted for both the 2023 PEN Award in Poetry in Translation and the 2023 National Translation Award in Poetry. She is also the translator of *Of Death. Minimal Odes* by the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst (co•im•press), which was the winner of the 2019 Best

Translated Book Award. Cesarco Eglin is the publisher of Veliz Books. More at lauracesarcoeglin.com

Sarah (Ember) Bricault has a PhD in neurobiology and currently works as a postdoc in that field. Her fascination with the mind and how it processes information often finds itself in her poetry, as do themes related to mental health. Sarah's work can be found in Brown Bag Online, High Shelf Press, The Poeming Pigeon, and elsewhere. For more information on Sarah, check out SarahBricault.net.

Christian Contreras resides in California. He is interested in music, hiking reading and writing poetry. He graduated in East Los Angeles College in 2019.

Nathan Perrin (he/him/his) is a writer and Anabaptist pastor in Chicagoland. He holds an MA in Quaker Studies, and is a doctoral student studying Christian Community Development at Northern Seminary. His doctorate work centers on creating a writing program for nonprofits and churches to use to help under-resourced communities process trauma. His work has been published in the Dillydoun Review, Bangalore Review, Collateral Journal, Esoterica Magazine, etc. His forthcoming novella Memories of Green Rivers will be released in winter 2026 by Running Wild Press. He is also a screenwriter for an unannounced indie comedy series. For more information, visit www.nathanperrinwriter.com

John Swofford is forty-six and lives in Rex, Georgia.

His poetry has been published in Blue Crystal Literary Magazine and Blue Villa Magazine.

His self-published books include a book of sonnets: The Infidel (2024) and two book length rhyming poems: The Absent Lover (2023) and The People of Eden (2024).

Ramzi Albert Rihani is a Lebanese American writer. He received the 2024 Polk Street Review first-place poetry award. His work has appeared in several publications in the US, Canada, UK, Ireland, India, and South Africa, including ArLiJo, Linnet's Wings Magazine, Chronogram magazine, Last Leaves Magazine, Poetry Potion, and The Silent Journey Anthology. He is a published music critic. He wrote and published a travel book, "The Other Color." He lives in Potomac, MD.

Terry Trowbridge is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for 2 poetry writing grants.

Rowan Tate is a creative and curator of beauty. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Fray Narte is a writer, researcher, and mental health professional from Iloilo, Philippines. Her works are featured in Kasingkasing Press, Alpas Journal, Aster Lit, and Astraea Zine. With bared teeth and an unflinching perspective, Fray's writing confronts personal trauma, reclaims womanhood and queerness, and explores the themes of loss, personal identity, and the grotesque facets of her femininity.

Akhila (35) identifies as a feminist researcher who spends her time studying the world around her which sounds better than a day dreaming wannabe poet. A resident of Kerala, she is an aspiring writer and poet, and enjoys the vivid colours of the storytelling world in all its forms. Her own palette includes a Masters degree in Applied Economics and MPhil in Inclusive Development and Social Justice. Her interests include reading as much as she can, gardening, given the weather gods permit and telling everyone about the world's cutest niece- hers' (Pronouns:she/her)

a.d. is drawn to the sacred, the profane, the mysterious and the mythological, which provides inspiration for her work. She is a Pushcart-nominated bisexual poet and visual artist, and her poetry is published or forthcoming in THINK, Anti-Heroine Chic, Aôthen Magazine, Sublimation, Spiritus Mundi Review, Culterate, PISSOIR! and elsewhere. Meanwhile, her visual art, mainly photography and self-portraiture, is or will be featured in SCAB, Welter, Audi Locus, Hominum Journal, Antler Velvet, Bleating Thing and other outlets. Tumblr & Twitter: @godstained

Paul Hostovsky's poems and essays appear widely online and in print. He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter.

Annelies Mohle is a writer and ESL instructor from rural Ontario. She attended the University of Guelph, where she studied English Literature and Creative Writing and was first published in student-run magazine, Kaleidoscope. She has since been published in fron//tera and Canadian Stories. She can be found on Instagram @jottingthingsdown.

Mann Chung Hak Sy Tha is a Cambodian American writer who spent his undergraduate studying English and Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia. He has read for the Fiction Writers program of the Oxbelly Retreat and placed second at the 2025 UGA Libraries Undergraduate Research Award for an interactive fiction adaptation of *Paradise Lost*. He adores indie games and finds great pleasure in collaborating with other creatives in addition to crafting his own narratives.

TK Hudson lives in the Midwest with his dog and three cats. He has spent more than half his life learning how to write, and how to write well; he is still learning how to do both.

BJ Thoray is a writer/editor active in the nonprofit and content creation spaces. BJ's stories have been published in *The Aesthete*, *Forum* literary magazine, *Rundelania!*, *Black Cat Press*, *Mobile Data Mag*, *Prosetrics*, and *Kosmos Obscura*. Originally from California, BJ is currently based in Belgium, less for the waffles, more for the surrealism.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet.

Rick K. Reut: The author was born in 1984, in the USSR. He studied philosophy at EHU in Minsk, Belarus, and literature at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia. For most of his life after graduation, he has worked as a translator and a tutor of English as a foreign language.

Andrew Reichard is an author who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Their short fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *The Collagist*, *Exacting Clam*, *Black Static*, *LUMINA*, *The Stray Branch*, and many others. Their first book, "*Vessel*," was published with Solum Press in 2023. Connect with them on Bluesky @drewreichard.bsky.social.

Erick Giovanni Monrrigo is a first-generation Latino born of Central American parents living in Los Angeles. He graduated from the University of California, Riverside with a BA in Creative Writing. He enjoys outdoor cafés and the smell of used bookstores.

Alex Mason lives with his grandma in Minneapolis, MN. He spends his free time staring out windows, speed-walking around freezing lakes, and worrying over the weight of a hefty tuxedo cat named Clovis.

If **Chelsea Allen** is ever taken on a date, she hopes it's to a Mozart concerto. Anyway, one can find her musings at <https://msha.ke/chelseaallen.com/>.

Madeleine Schneider is an author of fiction and creative nonfiction. Her work has been published in "Artists from Maryland" and "As You Were". She is a graduate of West Point and the University of Edinburgh. Beyond writing, she enjoys running, reading, and cooking elaborate vegetarian meals.

Cendrine Marrouat is a poet, writer, photographer, watercolor painter, digital artist, and the co-founder of Auroras & Blossoms and A Warm Cup of Cozy. She has authored, co-authored, and edited more than 50 books in several genres. She is also the (co-)creator of several poetry forms inspired by the Haiku and the founding editor of *The Haiku Shack Magazine*. **Website:** <https://creativeramblings.com>

Prior Publications

'Before Sunset' was published as *'UNTITLED'* by Chelsea Allen, India' in **Furious Fiction**.

'L'usurpateur' was published in **The Citron Review**.

Adronitis was previously published in **Coze, Curtin University student magazine**, 2024.

heart of the poet was published in **Bleating Thing Magazine**.

renascence was originally published in the **Querencia Press Summer 2024 Anthology**.

Soot was submitted in a Class Magazine - <https://minutedetails.org/>

100,000 Moments has been published by **Locust Shells Journal** in April, 2025

Winter Dawn was published in **The Dirigible Balloon**, January 2020.